

'I wasn't aware what it was I was suffering from': An evaluation of the impacts of the 'empty nest' on older adults and the potential implications for social work

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Abstract

This article reports findings from a pilot study exploring the experiences of the 'empty nest' or 'post-parental life phase' among older adults in the UK, which highlight implications for social work practice. Drawing on a survey of fifty-three respondents, predominantly aged 60 and over, the study situates the empty nest within a life course framework, recognizing how midlife transitions may shape wellbeing in later life. The research is located within the context of a rapidly ageing UK population and increasing concern regarding loneliness amongst older people. Rather than approaching loneliness as inherent to ageing, the study examines how social factors, such as living arrangements, relationship status, and prior life events, may intersect with the transition to post-parental life. Six themes are identified, and findings indicate that whilst some participants experience the transition positively, others, particularly those living alone, widowed, or single, report significant emotional distress, including loneliness and reduced sense of purpose. The article argues that the empty nest constitutes an under-recognized life transition with direct relevance to social work with older adults. It concludes by outlining study limitations, alongside implications for assessment, intervention, and preventative practice, and suggests further study in this under-researched area.

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Introduction

In the UK, life expectancy is increasing, with people aged 65 now predicted to live, on average, an extra twenty-one years by 2047, and over 600,000 people now aged ninety years or over (ONS 2023). This ageing population has significant consequences for health and social care, with the Government report, *Health in an Ageing Society* (2023) highlighting the importance of midlife, (defined as the period between 45 and 60), for the prevention of detriments in later life (Infurna 2021). Amongst these detriments, social frailty has emerged as a predictor of loneliness and adverse health outcomes in older age (Yamada and Arai 2023). Social frailty is defined as the loss of satisfactory social connection and is highly correlated with loneliness, potentially leading to vulnerability, loss of independence, physical and mental health issues.

Recent evidence demonstrates widespread incidence of loneliness in the UK, with approximately 3.9 million older adults in England, reporting this, an increase since 2021/22 (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2022).

Living alone is identified as a major factor in social frailty, and this period often begins in midlife, when children leave home. Additionally, rates of 'grey divorce', amongst older people, are rising, from 8,700 in 1991, to 15,275 in 2011, with accompanying social disruption (ONS). Single parenthood is also increasing, with one in four families in the UK now headed by a single parent, also more likely to be living alone once children have left. Research by Intergenerational England (2025) also shows a stark generational divide with regular contact between older and younger people decreasing rapidly.

Longer life expectancy, rising rates of single parenthood and divorce in later life all combine to increase the risk of social frailty, through reduced social contact and increased likelihood of loneliness.

The Campaign to End Loneliness (2024) definition of loneliness is grounded in Weiss's (1973) conceptual distinction between emotional and social loneliness, providing a useful framework for understanding the different dimensions of this experience. In particular, the Campaign's emphasis on loneliness as a subjective, emotional discrepancy between desired and actual relationships, aligns closely with Weiss's (1973) notion of emotional loneliness, defined as a profound sense of aloneness that can persist even when others are present. This is especially relevant to experiences such as loss of a spouse or partner, where the absence of a close attachment figure cannot be fully compensated for by broader social networks,

rendering it directly relevant to the experience of the empty nest. Whilst social loneliness, understood as the lack of an engaging social network, remains important, the focus on emotional aspects of loneliness highlights the depth and complexity of relational loss. This distinction is further reinforced by evidence from the [International Longevity Centre UK \(ILCUK\) \(2025\)](#), which identifies how older adults' emotional wellbeing may be disproportionately affected by loneliness, and exacerbated by ageism and stigma that limit both access to and uptake of mental health support. In response, adopting a life course approach, as advocated by the [International Longevity Centre UK \(ILCUK\) \(2025\)](#), allows for a more holistic understanding of how earlier life experiences may shape later-life loneliness. This perspective aligns with social work principles ([IFSW 2024](#)), which emphasize the importance of addressing cumulative life challenges to support wellbeing, thereby reinforcing the relevance of Weiss's framework in both theory and practice ([1973](#)).

Adult Social workers work with older people to maintain independence, wellbeing and autonomy ([BASW 2025](#)) and as the older population grows rapidly in the UK ([Fleck 2022](#)) it will be increasingly important to focus on the mental health of older people, as well as addressing concomitant challenges.

This article focusses on one potential challenge to wellbeing occurring in mid to later life—the empty nest, or post parental phase, which occurs when children leave home to gain independence, creating changes in the everyday routines of family life and the structure of households ([Kristensen et al., 2021](#)). Recent research into this life stage is almost entirely confined to Asia, with a literature search finding only one UK article ([Tosi and Grundy 2018](#)). Whilst findings on the correlation between mental health and the empty nest are variable, several studies have found that parents experiencing this post parental phase were more likely to show symptoms of depression and loneliness than those whose children remained at home ([Cheng et al., 2015](#); [Zhai et al., 2015](#)). The link to poor mental health is particularly significant given the rise in older people ([Fleck 2022](#)) together with people living alone in the UK, which in 2023, represented 30 percent of all households, of which 93 percent were people aged 65 and over ([ONS 2023](#)).

Despite the potential significance of this life stage and the associated mental health issues, there appears to be almost no UK research on the empty nest, and none within social work, with international research describing the experience as a 'sociologically unrecognized phase' of life ([Herzberg-Kurasz 2023](#)).

This lack of attention is particularly striking when compared with the abundant support given to new and expectant parents at the other end of the parenting cycle ([Shah et al., 2024](#)). Research on new parenthood suggests that major family life transitions can be associated with an increased risk of anxiety and depression for some individuals ([Shah et al., 2024](#)).

Studies have also found that interventions such as peer support, access to information, and opportunities for social connection can improve well-being during periods of adjustment. These findings may offer useful insights when considering how support could be developed for individuals experiencing the empty nest transition.

However, creating social connection amongst older people may be difficult, due, in part, to the public inconspicuousness of older women in western societies (Westwood 2023), combined with a reluctance to self-report, amongst older people due to fear of stigma and judgement (International Longevity Centre UK (ILCUK) 2025).

Older people, and those facing the empty nest phase are also not routinely monitored like new parents, which increases the likelihood of sequestration and consequent detrimental impacts on their emotional wellbeing.

All of these issues, including the general social invisibility of older women and the fear of stigma, may contribute to the lack of research on this phase of life in the UK.

Orgad and Rottenberg (2024) chart the rapid rise of the menopause from a similarly invisible and even taboo position in women's life stages, to an issue now receiving widespread media and academic attention. They argue that even within this increased visibility, there is a risk of framing the menopausal phase of life as a personal challenge which can be overcome individually, rather than an issue which exists within complex social and cultural contexts.

This article reports on a pilot study which begins to address the invisibility of the empty nest phase within research as well as the associated social and cultural contexts. The study used an online survey to elicit fifty-three responses, carried out in accordance with institutional ethical consent and using a convenience sampling method. The article discusses the limitations of the current study, alongside findings which show significant areas for further social work research. The impacts of the empty nest on different societal groups, including single parents and men, are all highlighted by this research, which also demonstrates the link between the empty nest, mental health and well-being. Over 26 percent of survey respondents suggested an urgent need for much greater support and information in this area and the article makes some preliminary suggestions for addressing this.

Experiencing the 'empty nest'

The term 'Empty nest' was first popularized by Dorothy Canfield in her 1914 publication *Mothers and Children* (Canfield 1914) with later studies making a distinction between those parents experiencing a fairly smooth transition to the empty nest as a natural phase of life, and those who

experience the more challenging 'empty nest syndrome', commonly characterized by identity crisis, depression, loss of meaning, isolation and a concomitant decline in mental wellbeing (Randhawa and Kaur 2021). A literature review, carried out for the research study discussed in this article, highlights a lack of research in the field leading to significant omissions and a general lack of evidence base. Like Canfield's original work (1914), early studies into empty nest syndrome focused almost exclusively on women, due to dominant assumptions about gender roles. For example, Philips (1957) explored the loss of mothers' identity as principal caregivers, finding that this was more likely to lead to negative mental health outcomes than in fathers, whose primary role was in the workplace. Later studies, during the 1970s suggested that mothers experiencing negative mental health symptoms following the departure of their children may have brought this on themselves through over involvement with parenting, and consequent subordination of their own needs (Williams 1977). Although this was a punitive finding in itself, the over emphasis on mothers also resulted in a continuing dearth of research on the impacts of empty nest syndrome on fathers. Back (1971) suggested that fathers may feel a greater loss than their female partners, as their primary economic role, in the workplace, prevented them from spending time with their children prior to their leaving home. Barber (1989) suggests that emotions of guilt associated with this may create severe difficulties for fathers adjusting to the empty nest, a finding emphasized by two television dramas screened during the 1990s, which showed the father figure experiencing a severe episode of mental ill health, when the 'the Empty Nest becomes a chasm' (McDonagh 2003). More recent popular media reporting quotes the celebrity chef, Gordon Ramsay, who was so distressed when his son Jack left home that he sat on his son's bed wearing a pair of his pants (Cripps 2024).

Contemporary studies continue to suggest that the mental health impacts of the empty nest phase are greater for women, although this remains contested, with a 2015 study reporting a higher incidence of depression in male empty nesters than in their female counterparts (Dennerstein et al., 2002; Zhai et al., 2015; Singh et al., 2023).

The literature review conducted prior to this study, also highlighted older parents as a significant omission within contemporary research on the empty nest. The majority of existing studies have focused on the mental health of middle aged people, which is significant, as the UK population is now ageing rapidly whilst people are also having children later in life, resulting in a considerable demographic of empty nesters over the age of sixty who are also less physically able at the time their children leave home (Park and Mendoza 2022). In their scoping review of those experiencing empty nest syndrome after the age of sixty, Park and Mendoza (2022) found that older empty nesters were also generally experiencing poorer mental health, rendering them a vulnerable group

lacking in social support and cohesion. This is significant, when viewed in the light of the International Longevity Centre findings which suggests that older people's mental health is generally neglected (2024) together with figures from the Office of National Statistics which demonstrate that of the 30 percent of households where people live alone, 93 percent of these are headed by people aged 65 and over (ONS 2023).

However, there is a link between older and younger empty nesters, with the Government report, *Health in an Ageing Society* (2023) suggesting that positive interventions which create connections in midlife, (defined as the period between 45 and 60), are vital for preventing social frailty in the older age group (Infurna 2021).

This can also be viewed theoretically through Erikson's (1950, 1959) life course framework particularly the stages of generativity versus stagnation in midlife, and ego integrity versus despair in older age. In midlife, individuals are typically oriented towards generativity, expressed through parenting, caregiving, and contributing to the next generation. The transition to the empty nest can therefore represent a significant disruption to this role, potentially undermining a key source of purpose and identity. If alternative avenues for generativity, such as community engagement, employment or social contribution are not established, individuals may be at increased risk of stagnation, characterized by reduced social engagement and emerging isolation. As individuals move into later life, Erikson's (1950, 1959) focus shifts to ego integrity, where reflection on the life course becomes central. Experience of loneliness, social frailty, and unresolved role loss from earlier transitions, such as the empty nest or relationship breakdown, may negatively shape this reflective process, increasing the likelihood of despair. In this way, Erikson's (1950, 1959) framework helps to illuminate how midlife transitions are not isolated events but form part of a cumulative trajectory, where unmet psychosocial needs may extend into older age, reinforcing the importance of early intervention and sustained social support across the life course.

However, lack of research in this area obscures the potential of early intervention particularly linked to certain demographics. For example, the population of single parents in the UK is now over 3.2 million, one of the highest numbers globally (Chavda and Nisarga 2023) with a rapidly growing group of single parent fathers representing 15 percent of the total demographic. Whilst there is minimal research exploring single parents' experiences of the empty nest, Dahl and Dahl (2013) describe single parents as facing the associated challenges of the empty nest alone, without the emotional, financial, and other support available to those in couple relationships. The research discussed in this article endorses this, showing that single parents living alone may be more vulnerable to poor mental health outcomes during the empty nest phase, than those still living in couples.

Cultural considerations also play a key role in parents' experience of the empty nest. Whereas in Western societies, children leaving home has traditionally been viewed as the natural outcome of successful parenting, this has not conventionally been the case in many Asian cultures where concepts such as filial piety have dominated (Zhang 2020). However, these traditional concepts risk being eroded by the ending of the one child policy in China and increased migration to other countries, leading to higher numbers of empty nesters in Asian countries with associated loneliness issues (Zhang 2020). China is also facing one of the most rapidly ageing populations in the world, potentially accounting for the extent of and interest in the empty nest population (Park and Mendoza 2022).

In the UK, loneliness has become so widespread that it is often described as the 'loneliness capital of Europe', driven by factors such as austerity, diminished community ties, and a marked rise in single-person households (Orr 2014). Scandinavian countries tend to report lower levels of loneliness, often attributed to strong welfare systems (Reine et al., 2024), whilst the US and Canada show similarly high rates to the UK, with a 2019 study reporting 23 percent in the UK, 22 percent in the US, and 20 percent in Canada (Denman 2019). Given these similarities, Hawkey et al. (2020) argue that shared risk factors between the UK and US mean research and interventions can be effectively adapted across both contexts, particularly to address loneliness during the empty nest phase. Returning to the UK context, Hartanto et al. (2024) extend this discussion by integrating Western and Asian perspectives, proposing a cultural framework to support mental wellbeing in later life, and highlighting loneliness in older age as an increasingly important focus for social work research and practice.

Research design

This study employed a mixed-methods survey design, combining structured quantitative questions with opportunities for free-text responses. The questions asked are included as [Supplementary Material](#) to this article, for reference.

A very simple chi-square test was used to explore whether there were any possible links between participants' experiences and other survey responses, as a straightforward means of checking whether categories were related, or whether any pattern could be simply due to chance. Although this form of testing is commonly used with larger samples, it can still be applied to smaller studies like this one ($n = 53$), as long as the results are interpreted carefully and the expected counts in each group are not too small. A standard threshold ($P < .05$) was used to help identify patterns that were unlikely to have occurred by chance alone. However, because the study involved a relatively small number of participants and the

analysis was exploratory, the findings should still be interpreted with caution.

The design reflects the study's intention, not only to describe the empty nest transition, but also to situate it within a broader social and relational context that is relevant to social work practice. The results are therefore intended to highlight possible trends and relationships rather than to provide definitive conclusions, as befitting the limitations of the sample.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- How do survey participants describe the empty nest phase of their lives?
- What specific challenges (if any) do survey participants associate with the empty nest?
- What opportunities (if any) do survey participants associate with the empty nest?
- Is there a relationship between previously challenging life events and the experience of the empty nest?
- How do survey participants view the terms 'empty nest' and 'empty nesters'?
- What support (if any) is available for those experiencing the empty nest and its aftermath, and how effective has support been for survey participants?
- Do survey participants identify any particular forms of support or information that would be beneficial in assisting empty nesters?

A literature review undertaken using CINAHL, and covering the past fifty years, identified 159 studies, of which 93 (58 percent) were conducted in China. The remainder were distributed across India, Iran, Malaysia, Canada, and the United States. Only one UK-based study was identified (Tosi and Grundy 2018), and no results were returned when combining 'social work' with 'empty nest'. A supplementary SCOPUS search yielded 917 results, again with no UK representation. These findings, consistent with Park and Mendoza's (2022) scoping review, point to a significant geographical and disciplinary gap, particularly within UK social work literature. The relative absence of attention to the empty nest within UK contexts is notable, given its clear intersections with ageing, family change, loneliness, and transitions across the life course, which are all central to contemporary social work practice. This notable absence also provides the rationale for the present study, which seeks to contribute to UK-based evidence.

Ethical approval was granted by the host institution. A survey comprising twelve substantive questions and four demographic items was developed using Microsoft Forms, with optional free-text responses throughout. No identifiable data was collected.

Data was gathered between 27 March and 31 May 2025 via distribution, with the necessary permissions, to the research section of the online chat forum GransNet. This site was launched in 2011, when it was described as 'a new dawn in grey power' (Woods 2011) and is currently thought to have over 300,000 members, including both women and men, over 50 (Gransnet 2025). The survey link was also distributed through both personal and professional networks, using a convenience sampling technique (Golzar et al., 2022), with a total of fifty-three responses received.

Descriptive findings

The sample was predominantly older, with 68 percent ($n = 36$) aged 60 or above, including 7.5 percent ($n = 4$) aged over 80. Most participants (74 percent, $n = 39$) were over 50 when their children left home, with 81 percent ($n = 43$) reporting children aged between 20 and 30 at the point of departure. A majority (62 percent, $n = 33$) described experiences of 'boomerang' children returning to the parental home, indicating that the transition is often non-linear and extended, rather than a discrete life event. This in turn may disrupt adaptation to the empty nest.

The sample was largely female (90.5 percent, $n = 48$) and predominantly married (66 percent, $n = 35$), with smaller proportions identifying as divorced ($n = 5$), single or separated ($n = 6$), or widowed ($n = 5$). All participants identified as White British, with the majority residing in England. Whilst reflective of GransNet, this demographic concentration limits the transferability of findings, particularly in relation to ethnically diverse or socioeconomically marginalized groups, including those who are digitally excluded and who are frequently the focus of social work intervention.

Exploratory inferential analysis

Inferential analysis was exploratory and interpreted carefully due to the small and specific limitations of the sample. Analysis suggested an association between prior adverse life events, for example bereavement, relationship breakdown, or caregiving responsibilities, and more negative accounts of the empty nest transition. This finding is of particular relevance to social work, as it points to the cumulative impact of life course adversity, suggesting that the empty nest may function less as an isolated transition and more as a point at which existing vulnerabilities are intensified.

Age-related differences were also observed, with participants under 65 more likely to identify positive aspects of the transition (72 percent) compared to those aged 65 and over (54 percent). This may reflect differences in health, social engagement, or economic security, all of which are

established concerns within social work assessment and intervention. Similarly, married participants were more likely to report positive experiences (68 percent) than those who were single, divorced or widowed (45 percent), pointing to the potential protective role of intimate relationships and the heightened risk of isolation amongst those without such support.

Participants reporting 'boomerang' patterns described more ambivalent experiences, with 61 percent indicating mixed or fluctuating emotions, compared to 38 percent amongst those whose children left permanently. These findings challenge simplified or linear conceptualizations of the empty nest, suggesting a need for social work practice to recognize ongoing intergenerational dependencies, particularly in the context of housing and economic pressures in the UK.

A weak positive relationship was observed between perceived informal support and more positive experiences of the transition. Whilst moderate, this finding reinforces the importance of informal networks and raises questions about the visibility of empty nest experiences within formal support systems, where they are not typically recognized as a point of intervention and may also be stigmatized by dominant social narratives.

Qualitative analysis

Qualitative data was analysed using [Braun and Clarke's \(2021\)](#) six-phase thematic analysis, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how participants made sense of the empty nest in relation to their wider life circumstances. Notably, participants frequently framed the transition in ways that intersect with issues central to social work practice, including loss, identity change, relational reconfiguration, and ageing.

The qualitative findings also highlighted a degree of conceptual ambivalence around the term 'empty nest', with some participants rejecting it as deficit-focused, whilst others embraced it as an opportunity for autonomy. This has implications for social work practice, suggesting that the language used by professionals may shape how individuals interpret and respond to this life stage.

Six overarching themes were identified, each aligned with the research questions and supported by both descriptive trends and narrative accounts. Collectively, the findings suggest that the empty nest constitutes a significant yet under-recognized life transition within UK social work and wider society. Whilst not typically framed as a point of intervention, the evidence presented here indicates that it may represent a critical juncture for preventative and strengths-based practice, particularly in relation to loneliness, mental health, and life course transitions.

The six themes, which all corresponded to the initial research questions, are described in detail below.

Theme 1: relational loss

Among respondents aged sixty and over, the empty nest was experienced within broader later-life transitions, where social networks were often already narrowing due to retirement, bereavement, or declining health. Loneliness therefore emerged not simply from children leaving home, but from the compounding loss of daily relational contact, reduced social roles, and fewer opportunities for interaction. This pattern aligns with [Erikson's \(1950\)](#) later-life stage of ego integrity versus despair, in which individuals reflect on life's meaning whilst confronting loss and reduced social connection. Participants described a shift from busy, family-oriented households to environments marked by silence, particularly in the evenings, highlighting how temporal rhythms of later life can intensify feelings of absence. This was reflected in accounts such as:

From having a family about us the house suddenly became a very lonely environment

and

Being lonely as the house was too empty, too quiet.

However, Erikson's framework also helps explain variation in experiences. Those able to maintain meaningful relationships, develop new routines, or invest in alternative sources of purpose often reported fewer negative consequences. In Erikson's terms, these participants appeared better able to sustain continuity and meaning despite the loss of the parenting role, supporting movement towards ego integrity rather than despair. By contrast, participants whose social worlds remained heavily centred on their children appeared more vulnerable to loneliness when daily contact diminished.

Although some participants, predominantly those in long-term partnerships, reported few challenges, this may also reflect generational norms around stoicism and self-reliance. Within [Erikson's \(1950\)](#) model, such responses may represent attempts to maintain ego integrity by framing transition within a coherent life narrative. Presenting the experience as unproblematic may therefore reflect meaning-making processes rather than absence of difficulty. Relationship status remained significant, with partnered individuals generally less likely to report sustained loneliness, consistent with, although this was not universal. Even within long-standing relationships, the transition sometimes exposed shifts in relational dynamics, for example:

Finding conversation and connection as a couple, when for 18 years it has revolved around the children

For those living alone, particularly widowed, divorced, or lifelong single participants, the empty nest often represented a more acute rupture. The loss of children from the home marked the end of their primary daily interaction, increasing vulnerability:

I never expected to become a 'single' empty nester.

From Erikson's (1950) perspective, the absence of opportunities to replace lost roles may heighten risk of despair, particularly where alternative sources of connection are limited. The findings suggest it is not simply departure of children that shapes wellbeing, but the ability to maintain or rebuild meaningful social engagement afterwards.

Theme 2: identity and meaning

For respondents over sixty, the end of active parenting often coincided with other role losses, particularly retirement. This convergence intensified identity disruption as multiple long-standing roles diminished simultaneously. This reflects Erikson's (1950) stages of generativity versus stagnation and ego integrity versus despair, where identity is challenged when central roles recede.

For those with strongly child-centred identities, especially single parents, the empty nest could create a profound sense of loss, not easily replaced in later life, when opportunities for new roles may feel more limited. One participant stated:

Missing their presence, your whole routine changes... you feel replaced, you feel lost and alone. As a single parent you feel very bereft as your children are your whole focus.

Erikson's (1950) framework suggests that adaptation depends partly on whether individuals can extend generativity beyond parenting. Those who maintained purpose through relationships, hobbies, community involvement, or caring roles appeared better able to reconstruct identity after children left home. Continuing generativity acted as a protective factor, reducing the likelihood that the transition was experienced as loss of self. Conversely, where parenting remained the sole source of meaning, the transition was more often associated with stagnation and uncertainty.

From a life course perspective, this highlights that the impact of the empty nest depends not only on role loss but also on access to alternative identities. Those able to integrate parenting into a broader self-narrative were better positioned towards ego integrity, whilst others appeared more vulnerable to despair. Some participants also described active re-evaluation and meaning-making, suggesting opportunities for identity reconstruction in later life:

It has made me take a look at things I have disappeared over the years.

Theme 3: cumulative life events

For the sixty and over age group, the empty nest was deeply embedded within accumulated life experiences. Participants frequently linked their

responses to earlier or concurrent events such as bereavement, divorce, long-term health conditions, and past trauma. These cumulative experiences shaped both resilience and vulnerability, reinforcing that the empty nest in later life cannot be understood in isolation. Within Erikson's (1950, 1959) life course model such cumulative experiences form the basis upon which individuals evaluate their lives, influencing whether they experience integrity or despair. For example, caring responsibilities and health-related challenges intensified the transition: *'My wife's dementia diagnosis just at the point my (younger) daughter moved away made the experience more challenging'*.

Similarly, earlier experiences, such as lone parenthood, loss, or difficult family histories, continued to influence emotional responses: *'When I was 17, I had a baby that was adopted. I have carried this shame with me all my life'*. For some, strong prior experiences of independence or established social networks supported adaptation, while for others, a highly child-centred lifestyle made the transition more disruptive: *'Very close family... Made a bigger challenge to lose the children living at home as we lost the lifestyle/interests too'*.

Ongoing concern for children also remained significant, reflecting enduring parental identities beyond living together. One participant described persistent anxiety and attachment: *'I remember feeling bereft... I used to walk into her bedroom a lot... I did miss her... talking to her face to face'*. This continued emotional investment can be understood as a legacy of generativity, (Erikson 1950), extending beyond active caregiving into later life. This highlights how, in later life, emotional ties to children remain central even as practical caregiving roles diminish (Cripps 2024).

Theme 4: inequalities in support

Respondents over sixty reported limited access to formal support specifically addressing the empty nest, with most relying on informal networks where available. However, ageing-related factors, such as reduced mobility, smaller social circles, or widowhood, can constrain access to such support, exacerbating inequalities. Many participants felt that services did not recognize the empty nest as a legitimate concern in later life:

They do not understand the effects of your children leaving and leaving you alone.

Attempts to seek help were often met with generic or individualized advice, which may not adequately address deeper emotional or structural issues: *'I have googled the subject, but the advice is to volunteer and take up new hobbies... It is hard to talk to friends'*. Several participants required mental health intervention, indicating that for some, the transition can have significant psychological impacts:

I have had to be referred to the mental health services because of this triggering other mental health problems.

The lack of targeted support suggests a gap in recognizing how this transition intersects with ageing, contributing to unmet need among older adults and suggesting a need for further social work research.

Theme 5: stigma and expectation

A notable feature among respondents over sixty was the marked variation in how the empty nest was perceived and articulated. Whilst some reported distress, others minimized or rejected the idea of difficulty altogether. This divergence appears shaped in part by generational norms that emphasize independence, resilience, and emotional restraint. Expressions of difficulty may therefore be inhibited by fear of judgement or by internalized expectations about coping in later life.

This was evident in responses that explicitly rejected dependency narratives: *'I'm a mature independent intelligent woman... Being a mother/grandmother does not define me'*. Such accounts contrast sharply with those describing loneliness and loss, highlighting how stigma and social expectations may shape both experience and disclosure ([Herzberg-Kurasz 2023](#)).

The term 'empty nest' itself was also widely contested, with many participants finding it unhelpful or reductive. For older adults, the phrase may fail to capture the broader context of ageing, loss, and transition, and may even contribute to the marginalization of their experiences.

Theme 6: opportunities and constraints

Although challenges were prominent, some respondents over sixty identified positive aspects of the empty nest, particularly in terms of autonomy, self-reflection, and relief from caregiving responsibilities. Later life created opportunities for reassessing priorities and focusing on personal wellbeing: *'Freedom... I could concentrate on dealing with issues that had affected my well-being and heal'*.

For people in couples, the transition sometimes facilitated reconnection: *'Spending time to reconnect with your other half, as a person rather than as a co-parent'*.

Others noted practical benefits such as reduced household demands or financial relief, as well as a sense of accomplishment linked to children's independence, reflecting culturally shaped understandings of successful parenting ([Hartanto et al., 2024](#)).

However, these opportunities were unevenly distributed. For those experiencing loneliness, poor health, or limited resources, the capacity to

reframe the empty nest positively was constrained. Some participants explicitly rejected positive narratives:

In truth I can pretend to be positive by keeping busy, but it is not a positive experience.

Discussion

From a review of the literature, this study appears to be amongst the first of its kind to research the impacts of the empty nest on older adults within the UK. Whilst international research, particularly from Asian contexts such as China, India, Iran and Malaysia, has explored this phenomenon in more depth, UK-based evidence remains extremely limited. This may reflect prevailing cultural assumptions that children leaving home signifies successful parenting and independence. However, the findings of this study challenge this narrative, demonstrating that for some UK parents, particularly older adults, this transition can be associated with significant emotional and social adjustment.

The impacts of this lack of visibility and information are evident in the research, where participants experiencing isolation and poor mental health following their children's departure did not recognize what they were experiencing until the connection was made for them. Alongside a lack of available information, stigma was also perceptible, particularly among participants who emphasized their marital status and robustly denied any difficulties associated with the empty nest phase, stating:

I think you should be asking those who were unhappy (when their children left home) how much time they had expended on their children up to then.

This form of behaviour is highlighted by [Winter \(2000\)](#), who describes how women may harshly criticize and judge each other throughout the life course, reinforcing normative practices and generating stigma for those unable or unwilling to conform. This was reflected in participants who struggled to acknowledge their experiences or who were unmarried and therefore without a supportive partner.

The study also highlights gendered implications. In the UK, men's mental health remains a significant concern, with only 36 percent of men being referred to NHS psychological therapies and a higher risk of suicide ([Mental Health Foundation 2021](#)).

Given the high proportion of women in the sample and the frequency with which husbands were identified as sources of support, it may be valuable for future research to examine the support experiences of men during the empty nest transition. In particular, further investigation could explore whether some men occupy a primary emotional support role

whilst experiencing unmet support needs themselves. This should be regarded as a hypothesis arising from the present findings, rather than a conclusion of the study, which was not specifically designed to explore this issue.

One of the most significant findings relates to single people, who were most likely to report negative impacts, including isolation and mental health difficulties. This aligns with evidence from a government review indicating that single or widowed individuals are at significantly greater risk of loneliness and poorer mental wellbeing ([Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2022](#)). Given the high number of single-parent households in the UK, including a growing proportion of single fathers, these findings suggest an urgent need for further research and targeted support ([Dahl and Dahl 2013](#)). Survey responses indicate that single parents may face particular barriers in accessing already limited support systems.

International evidence reinforces these findings. In China, demographic changes associated with the one-child policy have led to increasing numbers of older adults living alone, creating significant mental and physical health challenges and pressures on social care systems ([Zhang 2020](#)). Cultural expectations such as filial piety and intergenerational living further complicate this transition ([Park and Mendoza 2022](#)). [Hartanto et al. \(2024\)](#) argue that cultural norms are a key determinant of outcomes for people experiencing the empty nest and call for more research focused on psychological wellbeing and support mechanisms.

Support, or the lack of it, emerged as a central theme, with over 26 per cent of respondents calling for more information and greater social provision. As highlighted by [Park and Mendoza \(2022\)](#), the growing population of older empty nesters is associated with increased risks of frailty, falls, and conditions such as dementia, alongside mental health concerns linked to loneliness. These findings suggest a clear role for social work practice, particularly with older adults. A life course perspective is essential, as participants frequently linked their experiences to earlier life events such as bereavement, adoption and dementia diagnoses.

This study therefore has important implications for adult social work practice. Although the empty nest is not routinely recognized within assessment or intervention frameworks, it represents a significant life transition that can affect emotional wellbeing, identity and daily functioning. Within the UK context, it may intersect with assessments conducted under the Care Act (2014), particularly where loneliness, depression or reduced functionality emerge. The Care Act's emphasis on prevention and early intervention corroborates recognition of the empty nest as a potential trigger for support needs.

The findings also identify groups who may require targeted support, including older adults living alone, widowed or single parents, individuals with prior trauma or loss, and men with limited social networks. A life course approach ([Erikson 1950](#)) suggests the value of anticipatory support,

including raising awareness of this transition before children leave home, integrating it into pre-retirement planning, and encouraging the maintenance of social roles and networks. Where negative impacts occur, social workers might facilitate access to peer-based community support to address structural contributors to loneliness.

Looking ahead, the NHS Ten Year Plan (Gov.UK 2025) prioritizes prevention of physical and mental illness, providing a platform for developing interventions at the empty nest stage. The appointment of a Minister for Loneliness (Davies 2023) may also support policy-level recognition of these issues.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample was drawn from Gransnet, resulting in a predominantly White British, largely female cohort, with only five male participants. This limits the generalizability of the findings, particularly in relation to cultural and gender differences, as well as the experiences of those who are digitally excluded. This is significant, given evidence that older adults from the global majority may have reduced access to local support networks (Hayanga et al., 2021), emphasizing the need for culturally informed frameworks (Hartanto et al., 2024). Additionally, research suggests that older men may form fewer meaningful social connections and rely more heavily on partners or maladaptive coping strategies, potentially increasing vulnerability during this life stage (Ratcliffe 2024).

The use of Gransnet as a recruitment platform may also have resulted in the over-representation of individuals from relatively higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Access to, and engagement with, online forums requires digital literacy, internet access, and available leisure time, which may not be equally distributed across the population. Consequently, the experiences of individuals facing greater socioeconomic disadvantage may potentially be underrepresented within the sample.

The dominance of married participants also introduced bias, and the survey design did not fully capture the impacts of the 'boomerang generation', where adult children return home intermittently (Tosi 2020).

Furthermore, the study relied largely on participants retrospectively reflecting on their experiences of the empty nest transition, which in some cases had occurred many years previously. As a result, responses may have been affected by recall bias, with participants potentially reconstructing or reinterpreting past experiences in light of subsequent life events. Whilst these reflections remain valuable in understanding how individuals make sense of the transition over time, they may not fully reflect participants' feelings and experiences at the point the empty nest was first experienced.

Despite these limitations, the study engaged fifty-three participants and highlights significant issues that begin to address the UK evidence gap. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the empty nest is a complex, under-recognized transition requiring greater attention within social work

research, policy and practice. An intersectional approach, considering gender, relationship status and cultural context, is essential, particularly in light of the UK's ageing population and the increasing relevance of this life stage.

Conclusion

This study makes an initial contribution to a UK evidence gap on the empty nest or post-parental transition in later life, highlighting its relevance to social work with older adults. Whilst not universally negative, the findings demonstrate that for some individuals, particularly those with limited support or prior vulnerabilities, the empty nest may contribute to loneliness, identity loss, and mental health challenges.

The study is limited by the sampling strategy, specifically the use of the GransNet online forum, where participants were mostly married and all from White British backgrounds. However, significant issues, for example the visibility and cultural worth of older people in UK society, together with understanding of the issues facing the rapidly growing population of single parents, as well as difficulties experienced by men and people from different ethnic backgrounds, were all exposed by the study, which also illustrated the link between the empty nest phase of life and significant issues with mental health.

Consequently, findings from the study underscore the need for greater academic and policy recognition of this life stage, as well as within social work, together with development of targeted, preventative interventions and increased research focusing on diverse and specifically at-risk populations.

As the UK population ages, understanding and responding to transitions such as the empty nest will become increasingly important in promoting wellbeing, independence, and social inclusion in later life, thereby avoiding one participant's description: '*Loneliness is the killer*'.

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Supplementary data

[Supplementary data](#) are available at *British Journal of Social Work* online.

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