



The resilience status of empty-nest elderly in a community: A latent class analysis



Jie Zhang^a, Jing-Ping Zhang^{a,*}, Qiao-Mei Cheng^b, Fei-Fei Huang^c, Shu-Wen Li^c,
An-Ni Wang^c, Pan Su^c

^aXiangYa Nursing School of Central South University (Nursing Psychological Research Center of XiangYa Nursing School), Henan Provincial People's Hospital, China

^bHenan Provincial People's Hospital, China

^cXiangYa Nursing School of Central South University (Nursing Psychological Research Center of XiangYa Nursing School), China

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study was to examine the status and characteristics of resilience among empty-nest elderly in a community in China using exploratory latent class analysis (LCA).

Methods: This study enrolled 250 empty-nest elderly as the study respondents. General information regarding the resilience of empty-nest elderly was investigated using the General Information Questionnaire and Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, Chinese version, and we then used LCA and multivariate logistic regression to discuss the characteristics of resilience among empty-nest elderly individuals.

Results: Through the analysis, we found that the resilience of empty-nest elderly had obvious group characteristics and that statistical indicators can support the three categories of potential model. On the basis of the conditional probability on the various items of the questionnaire in each category, they were named “high resilience group,” “low pressure resilience group,” and “low resilience group,” and the proportion was 26.6%, 40.4%, and 32.9%, respectively. Further study showed that age, marital status, education level, relationship with children, and physical exercise had a significant effect on the high resilience group compared to the low resilience group. Gender, education level, relationship with children, and physical exercise had a significant effect on the low pressure resilience group compared to the low resilience group.

Conclusions: The resilience status of empty-nest elderly in communities can be divided into three categories. Each category had different characteristics of demographic information.

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1. Introduction

With increasing life expectancy, and declining fertility rates, the phenomenon of “empty nest” has become a rapidly rising trend among the elderly in the past decade and an important social issue that cannot be ignored in the aging process (Chen, Yang, & Aagard, 2012). According to the family development report in China 2015, empty-nest elderly had accounted for half of the total number of elderly individuals. The so-called “empty nest” refers to a household cycle phenomenon that the elderly couple (age ≥ 60

years old) or one person of the couple is left alone at home, because they have no children or have children who have been married or work away home for a long time (Chen et al., 2012). Recently, psychological health research of empty-nest elderly has received increasing attention, but with mixed results. As a vulnerable population, empty-nest elderly may experience many problems such as the restructuring of the life cycle; transformation of the family cycle; deterioration of physical health; and lack of emotional comfort, health care, and daily care, leading to further psychological issues such as absentmindedness, loneliness, depression, anxiety, pessimism, and others (Silverstone & Kandel Hyman, 2008). These problems encountered by the empty-nest elderly are called the “empty-nest syndrome.” Thus, depression and anxiety are the common and prominent problems encountered (Beutel, Glaesmer, & Decker, 2009). Previous studies showed that the psychological status of empty-nest elderly was worse than elderly who were not empty-nesters (Liu & Guo, 2008). However,

* Corresponding author at: XiangYa Nursing School of Central South University, 172 Tongzi Po Road, Changsha, 410013, Hunan, China.

E-mail addresses: zzuzhangjie@163.com (J. Zhang), jpzhang1965@163.com (J.-P. Zhang), sycqm2010@126.com (Q.-M. Cheng), pt860315@163.com (F.-F. Huang), lishuwen528@163.com (S.-W. Li), 280249740@qq.com (A.-N. Wang), 137891027@qq.com (P. Su).

the empty-nest stage was not necessarily harmful to empty-nest elderly's mental health, because some empty-nest elderly were not suffering from psychological problems (alone, anxiety, and others) when their children left them alone. On the contrary, they became closer to their children, more free to enjoy the life, make friends, develop their own interests, and enjoy life to the fullest more than before (van der Pas, van Tilburg, & Knipscheer, 2007). Richardson (Richardson, 2002) pointed out that psychological resilience plays a decisive role in the response of individuals under pressure and that it is the key factor in helping individuals to deal with pressure effectively, so resilience may explain why the empty-nest elderly showed different adapting performance.

Resilience is an alluring and deceptively simple construct that is riddled with complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities (Kaplan, 2006). It has been argued that resilience is multidimensional in nature—and that it reflects a multitude of protective factors and adaptive processes (Bergeman & Wallace, 1999). Resilience refers to the idea that individuals can develop without significant manifestation of negative outcomes, despite the existence of risk factors in their life environment (Staudinger, Marsiske, & Baltes, 1993). Thus, resilience was defined as a good way for humans to adapt in the face of trauma, tragedy, threat, or other major stresses; in other words, it was a ability to rebound in face of hardships (White, Driver, & Warren, 2010). The scientific study of resilience began over three decades ago when developmental researchers began to notice positive adaptation among subgroups of children who were considered “at risk” for developing later psychopathology (Wright & Masten, 2006), wherein it is rooted in research with children exploring the relationship between exposure to risk and adversity and both positive and negative outcomes (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). The current studies also have documented the significance of resilience on adolescents and adults, such as young adults, (Campbell-Sills, Cohan, & Stein, 2006; Kong, Wang, Hu, & Liu, 2015) operating room nurses (Gillespie, Chaboyer, & Wallis, 2009), rural abandoned children (Yuan, Du, & Yang, 2015), spirituality (Atchley, 2009), and wisdom (Hahn, Cichy, & Almeida, 2011).

To an extent, it could be argued that interest in resilience among adults and older persons has also likely been driven by the Positive Psychology movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and is consistent with the notion of intraindividual plasticity. Currently, there are only a small number of resilience studies on the elderly resilience in adversity or trauma in China. For example, to investigate resilience factors that help Chinese older adults living alone cope with senses of loneliness, researchers conducted qualitative in-depth interviews among 13 older adults living alone in the community who did not show severe loneliness, and the results showed that the primary theme of resilience was found in cognitive competence, self and personality, and social relationships and that resilience played a significant role in helping the Chinese older adults overcome their high risk of loneliness (Lou Vivian & Ng Jimmy, 2012). In 2009, Zoe Hildon (Zoe Hildon et al., 2009) found that when facing health-related and psychological adversity, policies that offer access to protection and help to minimize adversity exposure should be conducted wherever possible, because they will promote resilience in older people. Other researches also consider that life satisfaction was strongly associated with resilience among older women (Beutel et al., 2009).

Liu (2011) (Liu, 2011) found that older people's psychological resilience was in the medium level. Resilience was a predictable factor of loneliness and the ability to cope with negative events among old people, that is, the higher level of resilience among empty-nest elderly and their higher subjective well-being. Regarding the psychology resilience and mental health of empty-nest elderly, there are several factors that affect these

elderly, and there are several researchers analyzing that gender and marital status are two key factors, but these studies yield different results (Bures, Koropecjy-Cox, & Loree, 2009; Liu, 2011; Yetter, 2010). Such researchers explore the fact that the causes of the mental health differences of empty-nest elderly are important, but these researchers do not answer the question whether the “whole” groups have different qualitative differences.

As previously mentioned above, resilience plays an important role in mediating the relationship between psychological stress and mental health, but there remain significant gaps in understanding regarding the relationships among these factors and their implications for practice and policy. Currently, the empty-nest elderly is considered as a whole and the emphasis is on the overall prevalence of resilience, which may obscure the heterogeneity that exists among them. To our knowledge, no previous study identifies subgroups of this population in relation to resilience and explores how these classes relate to, or are influenced by, their characteristics. The answer mode on various topics may be different, even if the scores of two individuals in the group were the same. The previous studies ignore the individual's differences within the group as a whole. Thus, it is necessary to explore the heterogeneous group differences of resilience among empty-nest elderly, which can guide the development of targeted interventions.

To address this need, the latent class analysis (LCA) was used to examine the subgroups of resilience among empty-nest elderly. LCA is a statistical method based on the answer model of individual items to determine the individual's potential in categories and to explore the proportion of each category accounted for in the whole group (Zhang, Jiao, & Zhang, 2010), which was applied to the diagnosis and classification of emotional and behavioral problems (Li & Xin, 2006; Wadsworth, Hudziak, Heath, & Achenbach, 2001). This classification approach based on the probability model can provide a more scientific method for the categorization of the psychological resilience of empty-nest elderly. It not only makes differences to the largest between the classifications and the smallest in classifications, but also examines the accuracy and effectiveness of classification using objective indexes. In addition, it allows us to look at the research objects from the perspective of individuals more objectively and reveal the essence of the problems.

The aims of this study were twofold. One was to analyze the characteristics of resilience among empty-nest elderly adopting the method of exploratory LCA, to seek the optimal model, and to explore whether there exists group heterogeneity, which is meaningful for developing targeted intervention according to different characteristics of the group. The other aim of this study was to explore whether there exists differences in demographic characteristic among different groups.

2. Study design and methods

2.1. Study design

This was a cross-sectional study that was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Central South University in Hunan, China.

2.2. Sample

With the convenience sampling method, 250 eligible elderly subjects were recruited from three communities in the capital cities of Hunan, Hubei, and Henan provinces in China during March through July 2014. Eligibility criteria were: 1) 60 years of age or older; 2) not living with any of their children together; 3) willing to participate; 4) having no diagnosed psychiatric disorders; 5) able

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