

A Casework Study of Emotional Support for Empty-nesters in Rural China

—An Example from an Underdeveloped Village in Hunan Province

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Abstract: Population ageing poses an important challenge to China's social development and is a significant factor impeding social advancement. In recent years, the implementation of policies such as the rural Dibao project has improved the living conditions of rural empty-nesters. Due to the migration of many rural workers to urban areas, the traditional Chinese family model of old-age care has been weakened, resulting in a severe dearth of social support, particularly emotional support, for rural empty-nesters. Examining the emotional support of rural empty-nesters is essential for advancing rural old-age security, particularly geriatric social work. Based on the social support theory, this research employs the casework method in social work methodology, along with a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews. After investigating the emotional support situation of empty-nesters in Village S, Hunan Province, three representative rural empty-nesters were chosen as casework recipients and in-depth interviews were conducted regarding the status of their emotional support, the problems they faced, and their emotional needs. All three recipients lacked emotional support to varying degrees, according to the findings. This paper examines how the casework approach in social work can effectively improve the emotional support system and enhance the quality of life of empty-nesters in rural China by providing them with targeted services.

Keywords: empty-nesters in rural China, emotional support, casework

1. Introduction

China has the world's largest ageing population, but the phenomenon is more severe in rural areas than in urban ones [1]. The ageing of the rural population has brought unprecedented pressure and challenges to China's rural society, and the accompanying problem of rural empty-nesters has become an essential social issue that cannot be avoided in China at present [2]. Compared to the sixth national census, the seventh national census of China indicates that by 2020, the proportion of the rural population aged 60 and older in China's rural areas will be 23.81 percent and 17.72 percent, respectively, and the total number of elderly people aged 60 and older in China's rural areas will be 120 million [3]. China will confront the pressure of imbalanced population development for a very long time in the foreseeable future. China's ageing population is enormous, and the degree of ageing

is increasing. Most of the elderly in rural areas have been supported by their children through family old-age support for a long time. The family, as the traditional main provider of old-age support in rural China, has played an important role in providing financial support, life-care support, and emotional support for rural elderly. With the rapid development of urbanisation, however, many young and strong labourers from rural areas are migrating to cities and towns in search of employment, and many of them try to stay in the cities after entering them; most of them bring their spouses and children to the cities but leave their elderly parents in the rural areas. In this study, the term 'rural empty-nesters' refers to the group of elderly rural residents who do not have children to live with and care for them because their children have left for extended periods to work. In the context of an ageing population, many rural empty-nesters are forced to be so because their children have moved to the city to work; on the other hand, the rural areas have a relatively weak material base, and the old-age security services and socialised old-age services are insufficient, making it easier for rural empty-nesters to fall into poverty compared to city-dwelling seniors [4]. Along with the worsening of the phenomenon of empty-nest, many problems related to empty-nest also arise; rural empty-nesters face difficulties in terms of financial support, life care, and emotional support. Although there are many economic policies, such as the Dibao project, to support rural empty-nesters in terms of economic and life care, their mental health issues are rarely addressed, and the mental health issues of rural empty-nesters are more researched and more likely to be neglected than those of urban elderly [5]. Compared to urban empty-nesters, they not only have a low material standard of living, but also have many unhealthy psychological problems, such as lack of security, dissatisfaction in life, and heightened psychological isolation [6]. According to the results of the aforementioned studies, rural empty-nesters are more emotionally deprived than their urban counterparts and require more attention.

Studying the emotional support of rural empty-nesters is crucially important considering China's current severe ageing situation. On the one hand, many rural empty-nesters only rely on the material assistance and protection provided by the subnational government. However, due to the large number of rural empty-nesters in China and the existence of geographical differences, many government policies cannot be well implemented, so the intervention of professional social work can make up for the government's insufficient assistance and improve the social support system for rural empty-nesters. However, the casework approach to rural empty-nesters' emotional support research is chosen because many studies focus on the material aspects of old-age and medical care, and social work research is scarce. Professional social work intervention can help empty-nesters solve the problem of old age.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework: Social Support Theory

Cobb developed the term social support in the 1970s within the context of psychiatry. His research was the first to demonstrate that social support can provide emotional support to reduce an individual's stress, including formal and informal support in the form of material and emotional support [7]. Early proponents of social support rejected the global concept of social support in preference of a more precise conceptualisation of the concept and implementation of social support as socially embedded support and implemented support [8]. Some researchers have classified the functions of social support as esteem support, information support, social companionship, and instrument support [9]. From the perspective of the subject of social support, which includes both providers and recipients, the social network is the provider of social support, and disadvantaged groups are recipients. The fundamental goal of social support, from the standpoint of its purpose, is to assist disadvantaged groups in overcoming economic challenges, having no one to care for their life, and suffering from emotional loss. In accordance with recent research on social support in China, this study classifies the types of

social support as formal and informal support, with the formal social support network consisting primarily of the state, government, community, and other social groups and organisations, and the informal social support network consisting primarily of family, neighbours, etc. [10].

2.2. The Study of Emotional Support for Empty-nesters in Rural China

Bai et al. conducted a quantitative analysis of the impact of social support on the physical and mental health of rural Chinese seniors and concluded that social support does not promote physical health but has a significant positive impact on mental health, particularly in terms of emotional support, among rural elderly people [10]. Empty-nesters were more likely to suffer from psychiatric disorders and have a greater need for emotional support than non-empty-nesters, according to a cross-sectional study from Shanxi Province, China [11]. In addition, researchers investigated the subjective well-being of empty-nesters residing in rural areas of eastern China and concluded that they lacked access to adequate social services and personal care, resulting in lower subjective well-being [12]. Another study from rural western China found that loneliness is a negative indicator of personal life satisfaction and diminishes the effects of social support from family and the government; therefore, interventions are required to reduce loneliness among empty-nesters [13]. Other scholars have argued that due to the disparity between urban and rural development in China, rural elderly have become the most vulnerable group in terms of mental health problems, are more vulnerable to depressive symptoms, and require both formal and informal support [14].

In all, scholars' research on the emotional support of empty-nesters in rural China is primarily conducted from the perspectives of sociology, psychology, and medical science, and more research is conducted on the current situation of emotional support for the empty-nesters in rural China, the construction of a social support network, and the social policy system, etc. However, there is an absence of research on the practical experience at the micro level, and there are even fewer studies on the adaptability of these practises. Even fewer studies examine the emotional support provided by social work casework for rural empty-nesters. Consequently, this study uses casework to conduct a specific case study on the emotional support of rural empty-nesters in China to assist recipients in resolving issues of emotional support, to seek countermeasures from the social support network of children, community, and neighbours, and to assist rural empty-nesters in departing the plight of lacking emotional support from a new perspective.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Ideas

Based on the social support theory, this study investigates the empty-nesters aged 60 and older in village S, an underdeveloped village in Hunan province, through a combination of questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews. Through the survey, the study gained a thorough understanding and comprehension of the basic information of the empty-nesters in Village S (gender and age structure, cultural level, family and marital status, and current residence status, etc.), economic and living conditions (economic income and sources, and current status of life care), and emotional support status (including emotional support providers and current status of emotional support). Three representative empty-nesters from Village S were chosen as the case intervention subjects. In accordance with the concept of posing problems - analysing problems - resolving problems, the casework method in social work methodology was used to intervene in the study of emotional support for rural empty-nesters to investigate the current situation and problems of emotional support for rural empty-nesters. This study also uses the casework method to provide more targeted countermeasures to resolve the emotional support problems of service recipients.

3.2. Research Methods

3.2.1. Questionnaire Survey Method

This study compiled a list of empty-nesters in Village S with the aid of the local village committee's personnel. A questionnaire survey was conducted to collect basic information, life care, and emotional support of rural empty-nesters in the village, as well as to determine the current state of emotional support for empty-nesters.

3.2.2. Semi-structured Interview

Since some of the empty-nesters are illiterate, this study employs semi-structured interviews, first visiting each respondent's home and completing all the contents of the questionnaire, and then, based on the understanding of the situation of the empty-nesters' emotional support in village S, selecting three typical cases and conducting in-depth interviews with them.

4. Result

4.1. Basic Information about Village S

S Village, in the southern part of Xinhua County, Hunan Province, China, has an administrative area of 102 square kilometres and a total household population of 68,107 as of 2022, of which 36,096 are male (53%), 32,011 are female (47%), 14,302, or 21%, are over 60, and 6,436 are empty-nesters (45%).

4.2. Basic Information about Empty-nesters in Village S

This study distributed 120 questionnaires to empty-nesters in village S in July-August 2023, and 115 valid questionnaires were recovered, for a questionnaire recovery rate of 95.8%, in order to gain a more precise understanding of the basic information and current status of emotional support for empty-nesters in village S. Empty-nester individuals whose Hukou location was in village S, who were over 60, and who resided in village S were the selection criteria for survey respondents in this study. Based on the theoretical framework of social support, the questionnaire and interview investigated the emotional support requirements of the empty-nesters by focusing on their basic information, life care, and emotional support.

4.2.1. Gender and Marital Status

Of the respondents, 65 (56.5%) were male and 50 (43.5%) were female; all the elderly individuals surveyed in village S were married, of whom 86 (74.8%) had living spouses, 29 (25.2%) were widowed, and there were no elderly individuals who had been divorced (see Table 1).

Table 1: Gender and marital status of empty-nesters in village S.

		Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	65	56.5
	Female	50	43.5
Marital status	Married with surviving spouse	86	74.8
	Married and widowed	29	25.2
	Divorced	0	0
	Unmarried	0	0

4.2.2. Age Structure

Among the empty-nesters surveyed in Village S, 65 (56.5%) were under the age of 70, 32 (27.8%) were between the ages of 70 and 80, and 18 (15.7%) were over the age of 80 (see Table 2). This indicates that there are more middle-aged and younger empty-nesters in the village.

Table 2: Age structure of empty-nesters in village S.

Age	Number	Percentage (%)
Below 70	65	56.5
70-80	32	27.8
Above 80	18	15.7
Sum	115	100

4.2.3. Status of Residence

Among the respondents, 62, or 53.9%, lived alone, whereas 53, or 46.1%, lived with their spouses. 23.5% of empty-nesters reside with their grandchildren (see Table 3). Due to the lack of educational resources in Village S, a lot of parents with children choose to transport their children to the city for education, so the phenomenon of intergenerational parenting is not significant to this study. Many empty-nesters in this study live alone and suffer from varying degrees of chronic diseases associated with old-age, as well as varying degrees of lack of life care support and emotional support.

Table 3: Status of residence of empty-nesters in village S.

	Number	Percentage (%)
Lived alone	62	53.9
Lived with spouses	53	46.1
Lived with grandchildren	27	23.5
Lived without grandchildren	88	76.5

4.3. Emotional Support Status of Rural Empty-nesters

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the present situation of emotional support in the daily lives of empty-nesters in Village S, this survey focused primarily on empty-nesters in terms of the current state of their emotional life (activities in their daily leisure time) and the providers and subjective feelings of emotional support. Regarding the current state of their emotional lives, 86 or 74.8% of rural empty-nesters spent their leisure time conversing with neighbours; 101 or 87.8% watched television at home; 49 or 42.6% did housework; 27 or 23.5% took their grandchildren to play; 12 or 10.4% participated in religious activities; and 20 or 17.4% played cards and chess (see Table 4).

Table 4: Emotional life status of rural empty-nesters in village S.

	Number	Percentage (%)
Converse with neighbours	86	74.8
Watch television at home	101	87.8
Do housework	49	42.6
Take grandchildren to play	27	23.5
Participate in religious activities	12	10.4
Play cards and chess	20	17.4

72, or 62.6%, confided in their spouses regarding emotional support and subjective feelings when they encountered difficulties; 27, or 23.5%, confided in their neighbours; 32, or 27.8%, confided in their children; and 28, or 24.3%, did not confide in anyone. When asked whether they frequently felt lonely and fatigued, or even depressed, 78 of them, or 67.8 percent, said they did, while only 13 of them, or 11.3%, said they had never felt lonely or bored (see Table 5).

Table 5: Emotional support status of rural empty-nesters in village S.

	Number	Percentage (%)
Confide in spouses	72	62.6
Confide in neighbours	27	23.5
Confide in children	32	27.8
Confided in no one	28	24.3
Frequently feel lonely or depressed	78	67.8
Sometimes feel lonely or depressed	24	20.9
Never feel lonely or depressed	13	11.3

According to the survey, empty-nesters in Village S lack emotional support. The survey revealed that empty-nesters in Village S miss their children's company, despite the fact that their children are frequently absent, there is little telephone contact, and intergenerational conflicts continue to exist between some children and the elderly. As a result, many empty-nesters experience loneliness, and a lack of happiness. In addition, empty-nesters need interpersonal, cultural, and recreational activities, but there are few recreational facilities like activity centres for the elderly in the countryside, and few organisations offer recreational activities for them. The most recreational activity for elderly people is watching TV at home, which makes them feel empty.

4.4. Casework on Emotional Support for Empty-nesters in Village S

This survey, with the assistance of the staff of the village committee of village S, selected three rural empty-nesters with prominent emotional support problems from the previous questionnaire survey respondents as the service targets of this casework research. These three elderly individuals have varying degrees of emotional support deprivation problems and share a certain degree of similarity.

4.4.1. Intake and Assessment

The main aim of this study's case-taking phase was to establish initial contact with service users and to comprehend their basic information. Through visits and interviews with the service recipients, their relatives, and neighbours, as well as the staff of the village committees, this survey gained a comprehensive comprehension of the emotional support situation of the service recipients. After compiling and analysing the survey data, the collection of information on service recipients was concluded; their basic information is depicted in Table 6.

Table 6: Basic information on the cases of empty-nesters in village S.

Case	Gender	Marriage	Age	Residency	Basic information description
No.1	Female	Widowed	75	Living alone	Her two sons and one daughter live and work in the city and rarely see her. She takes medication for rheumatism, arthritis, and other chronic diseases, has trouble moving her feet due to knee surgery when she was young, and relies on her two sons' 150 RMB monthly contributions.
No.2	Male	Married	68	Living alone	With one son and one daughter, both of whom are married and have families, the economic situation is quite favourable. The son rarely returns home because he works abroad, and his partner lives with him constantly because she helps raise the grandchildren; the old man does not approve of his son and daughter marrying when they start a family, and he and his partner disagree on this matter, so the family relationship is tense
No.3	Female	Widowed	70	Living alone	The son works in the city, and the daughter rarely returns from her long-distance marriage. Her connection with her grandchildren is strained because the daughter-in-law lives separately. She is introverted and avoids interacting with people. Her two-story bungalow had leaked for two years to her distress. The elderly woman has chronic rheumatoid arthritis and little financial support from her children.

In terms of emotional support, all three had varying support deficits at the individual level, the family level, and the social level (See Table 7).

Table 7: Status of emotional support for empty-nesters casework recipients in village S.

Case	Individual level	Family level social level	Percentage (%)
No.1	Inadequate health, limited mobility, interior isolation, and pessimism	Inadequate financial support has caused the elderly to live in straitened circumstances, as children are always away from home and the elderly lack companionship and care.	Due to their limited mobility and the fact that they live alone, local staff rarely visit their residences to solve their problems, and there are no social workers or volunteers to assist them; consequently, they have limited contact with the outside world.

Table 7: (continued).

No.2	His personal talent was great when he was young, he did business in his middle age, his profession was successful, and he was respected in the local community. However, as he grew older, he was at a loss for what to do; he felt useless all the time, his heart was filled with frustration, and he had a low sense of self-esteem. This person is characterised by diabetes, a lack of exercise, and a poor physical state.	Disharmony with family members	Isolated and distant from family members, with limited contact with neighbours and the outside world.
No.3	She is pessimistic, lives alone, is in poor physical condition, sleeps poorly and has difficulty sleeping. It is more difficult for her to integrate into social life because she is introverted, sensitive, calculating, and defensive in her interactions with others, and she prefers to stay at home alone.	She has lived alone for many years, with no family nearby and a fraught relationship with her daughter-in-law.	She rarely interacts with others, and many people in her neighbourhood are hesitant to communicate with her, resulting in challenges with her social integration. The greater the disconnect from society, the greater the isolation, helplessness, and anxiety, producing a vicious circle.

After analysing the current situation and emotional support problems in each of the three cases, this study determined that each individual had distinct emotional support requirements. In Case 1, the elderly yearned for the affection and care of their children, but their emotional requirements could not be met without the company of children. Moreover, because the elderly lives alone for many years and have little contact with the outside world, and because visiting neighbours is the primary form of social interaction and recreation in rural China, the elderly lack communication with their neighbours and peers and are unable to receive emotional support from them. In Case 2, the absence of harmonious relationships with their children and partners was the most significant cause of the elderly's lack of emotional support. In addition, the elderly does not feel 'needed', do not feel self-esteem, and have a low sense of self-identity in his old age, and lack affection and support from neighbours due to their withdrawn character. In Case 3, the elderly was introverted, had been separated from her offspring for an extended period, and her family relationship was not harmonious, which was a significant factor in her pessimism. Inadequate emotional support for the elderly was

also a result of the lack of recreational activities and limited contact with the outside world. In all three cases, chronic illnesses of varying severity were also significant contributors to pessimism and negative sentiments.

In general, the lack of formal and informal social support, such as the lack of family emotional support, insufficient neighbourhood emotional support, and weak emotional support at the social and governmental levels, are significant causes for rural empty-nesters' lack of emotional support.

4.4.2. Casework Interventions

This study clarified the intervention's goals in terms of the emotional support requirements of three empty-nesters and what they were comfortable with, developed a three-phase intervention implementation plan, and implemented the intervention in July-August 2023 (See Table 8).

4.4.3. Assessment and Closure of Cases

The casework intervention began at the individual, family, and social levels, taking into consideration the case's problems and requirements, and through the application of professional social work methodology, the case was linked to a vast array of formal and informal social support resources. During the duration of the intervention, the service programme was carried out with the participation of the service recipients, their families, and the rural community. As each intervention progressed, the emotional support of all three cases increased, thereby enhancing their family and community relationships and social support system. After the completion of the three phases of casework intervention, the intervention objectives were largely met, and the cases were successfully closed. Upon returning to the service recipients following the conclusion of the cases, it was discovered that the emotional support situation of the three service recipients had improved and that their life satisfaction had increased significantly.

5. Discussion

This study employs professional social work methods based on the framework of social support theory to solve the problem of a lack of emotional support for rural empty-nesters and conduct a series of comprehensive casework on them. This study reveals that there are still numerous non-negligible issues with the emotional support of rural empty-nesters, primarily involving the following factors. First, is loneliness. Empty-nesters typically experience loneliness as a result of their children's lengthy absence, which may lead to psychological issues over time. The second is a feeling of futility and insecurity. Some empty-nesters believe they have become a burden on their families and society, that they have a low opinion of themselves, and that they dread and resist the outside world. Thirdly, geriatric mental illness. Many empty-nesters suffer from melancholy, senile dementia, and other-nesters to meet their emotional requirements. The emotional support provided to the elderly by relatives, acquaintances, neighbours, and volunteers is also relatively limited. Most of the emotional support for the empty-nesters in Village S comes from their spouses, and although there are volunteers who carry out activities to care for the empty-nesters, the frequency is low and the long-term mechanism has not been established, so they are unable to provide the elderly with adequate and lasting emotional support.

The casework approach in social work can effectively assist rural empty-nesters in reducing loneliness, enhancing self-efficacy, and resolving the issue of inadequate emotional support. Utilising scientific professional knowledge and skills in the field of social work can help address the problem of rural empty-nesters, provide targeted emotional support to rural empty-nesters, and improve social workers' understanding of rural empty-nesters. Additionally, formal, and informal support from

family members, acquaintances, and the community can provide rural empty-nesters with significant emotional support.

Table 8 Content of emotional support casework intervention for empty-nesters in village S.

Case	Phase I	Phase II	Phase III
No.1	Meeting with the elderly at home to find out her issues and gain her trust	<p>The study first requested the elderly's children to help financially. Each son sends her 500 yuan a month for living needs, and the daughter contributes 200 after coordination.</p> <p>Second, the author contacted community resources, the village committee, and village cadres to frequently visit the elderly to assess her requirements and provide prompt assistance. Third, connecting social resources with local medical staff and recruiting a hospital volunteer Chinese medicine doctor. The doctor provided free acupuncture and massage at her house for 7 days and subsequently visited the elderly every half month.</p>	<p>Self-esteem was boosted by psychological counselling for the empty-nester. Visit her at home and encourage her to phone her children more often; remind her children to call her regularly; and contact neighbours near the elderly and ask them to pay more attention to their well-being and visit them more often to interact in their free time.</p>
No.2	Ask him about his life, relationships, and living situation to alleviate his concerns.	<p>Strengthening family relationships and wellness. First, the senior receives psychiatric counselling to regulate his mood and establish a feeling of dignity while changing their view of their daughter- and son-in-law. Second, conversing with his relatives and urging them to contact him alleviated the elderly's loneliness. Third, taking the elderly to the doctor and reminding them to take their prescribed medications.</p>	<p>Connecting resources, interacting with others, and using his skills. Ask village cadres to encourage the elderly to frequent recreational activities and socialise more to lessen his isolation and increase his self-esteem.</p>
No.3	Interview the elderly individual to assess her health and determine her most pressing issues.	<p>The local committee was approached to get a cement craftsman to waterproof the house and fix the leak. Second, give her psychological counselling and convince her to accept her daughter-in-law. Third, ask the elderly's relatives to be more tolerant and communicate with her more often.</p>	<p>Encouraging the elderly to expand her social life, analysing existing problems with her, and identifying her individual strengths. It simultaneously improves the elderly woman's disposition and enhances her confidence.</p>

6. Conclusion

The problem of rural empty-nesters has become an essential aspect of geriatric social work due to the ageing of the population. The purpose of this study is to assist rural empty-nesters in obtaining emotional support by employing social work methods based on social support theory and casework method to intervene in their actual lives, to understand the status quo and problems of their emotional support, to enrich the social support network of rural empty-nesters, to improve the lack of emotional support effectively, and to provide empirical references for solving the problem of rural empty-nesters' lack of emotional support. The study also provides insight into addressing the lack of emotional support among rural elderly without children.

The following are the findings of this study. Casework can effectively address the emotional support needs of rural elderly without children. The casework intervention of emotional support for rural empty-nesters in this study has achieved certain results in resolving the practical problems of rural empty-nesters, which is beneficial for expanding the future service areas of social work. However, this study has limitations as well. There is still room for improvement in the intervention design and implementation due to a lack of theoretical and professional competence and limited research time in this study. There are also limitations in the casework approach in mobilising the social resources of rural empty-nesters, and a multifaceted intervention model would better serve rural empty-nesters. In addition, the research conducted in a single location and the programme design and implementation based on its findings do not reflect the actual situation in the entire country and are not applicable to all groups of rural empty-nesters; these are future research needs for this study. Lastly, this study anticipates that the government will increase formal social support for rural empty-nesters and link families, communities, and other multidimensional social resources to jointly construct and improve the emotional support system for rural empty-nesters.

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