

Research on the Individualized Dilemma and Social Support Strategies of "Empty-Nest Youth"

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Abstract: The acceleration of urbanization and the awakening of individualized consciousness among young people have driven the expansion of the "empty-nest youth" group. Their multi-dimensional individualized predicament has become increasingly prominent, covering areas such as real life, career development, social relationships, and mental health. Moreover, it is influenced by both macro social factors and micro individual and family factors, making it difficult for a single subject to break through. Social work, relying on the professional concept of "helping others to help themselves", through multiple paths such as macro policy advocacy, meso community support, micro individual empowerment and family system intervention, can specifically respond to the core needs of empty-nest youth, help them alleviate difficulties and achieve capacity building, and at the same time provide practical references for improving the youth social support system.

Keywords: "Empty-Nest Youth" Group, Social Work, Individualized Predicament

1. Introduction

"Empty-nest youth" is a relatively unique group among China's young people. Generally speaking, "empty-nest youth" refers to young people who strive in big cities, far away from their hometowns and relatives, living alone, lacking emotional support and having no family life[1]. With the acceleration of urbanization and industrialization in our country, an increasing number of young people have voluntarily or involuntarily chosen to become "empty-nest youth". According to the data from the seventh national census, the number of floating population in China was approximately 376 million in 2020, far exceeding 121 million in 2000 and 221 million in 2010, accounting for about 26% of the total population[2]. Due to long-term living alone, "empty-nest youth" have also encountered a series of problems such as fertility anxiety, interpersonal communication barriers, emotional management difficulties and economic scarcity. Therefore, studying the era characteristics and formation reasons of the "empty-nest youth" group and providing corresponding social support and policy guarantees on this basis is of great significance for doing a good job in youth work, helping the "empty-nest youth" group achieve a balance between life and ideals, and supporting young people to develop themselves and contribute to society[3].

2. Rational examination: The Era Characteristics of the "Empty-nest Youth" group

2.1 Life status: Busy running around and self-control coexist

Empty-nest youth often strive alone in cities, and their commuting time for work is usually quite long. As relevant surveys show, some empty-nest youth have to squeeze onto the subway or bus several hours in advance to go to work, and those who drive themselves often feel extremely anxious due to the flow of people and vehicles in big cities. Their residence is far from their workplace, and leaving home early and returning late has become a regular part of their life. To save time, it is quite common to order takeout or have meals in the cafeteria. It is also a daily routine to exchange work experience and discuss work difficulties during lunch breaks. According to the data from the seventh national census, there are a large number of one-person households in China, and the number of "empty-nest youth" has increased sharply.

In terms of housing, they mostly rent houses as their main way of living and move repeatedly due to job changes and other reasons. Most of the empty-nest youth come from rural areas or small and medium-sized cities. Their careers are in the early stages and their economic strength is limited. They

often rent small and poorly conditioned rental houses in remote suburbs or urban areas, and some even choose to share a house[4]. Despite their poor living conditions, in this space that belongs to them, they can freely arrange their lives, such as watching movies, doing yoga, and learning to improve themselves, enjoying the freedom of being alone. This busy and self-controlled lifestyle is a prominent feature of the lives of empty-nest youth.

2.2 Work situation: Opportunities, challenges and self-actualization are intertwined

Most of the empty-nest youth have received higher education and hold a bachelor's degree or above. They possess strong knowledge, vision and comprehensive qualities, which are the capital for them to stand firm in the city. However, in reality, they are confronted with numerous work predicaments. On the one hand, the working mode is monotonous and mechanical. Most people repeat mechanical work content day after day. Moreover, the division of labor and independence of work have led to a cold relationship between leaders and colleagues. This makes it difficult for them to recognize their own dignity and value, and their expectations for personal promotion space, salary and welfare benefits have gradually decreased.

On the other hand, some leaders, because empty-nest young people live alone and are single, do not need to worry too much about the balance between family and career. Therefore, they tend to assign more tasks to them, and overtime has become the norm at work, making the boundary between work and life increasingly blurred. Even so, empty-nest youth are full of dreams. They are eager to realize their self-worth through their own efforts and take root in the city. For instance, some empty-nest young people in the Internet industry, in the face of fierce competition, strive hard. With the accumulation of experience and the improvement of abilities, they can also get promotion opportunities or receive invitations from headhunters, constantly pursuing self-actualization in difficult situations.

2.3 Social mode: Virtual dependence and social desire coexist

Empty-nest youth have a strong need for social interaction. However, in reality, the fast-paced life, high transportation and time costs in big cities limit their social activities. "No money", "too busy" and "boring" have become common reasons for them to refuse social interaction. The social circle is relatively narrow, and the relationship with leaders and colleagues is indifferent. Besides childhood friends and classmates, there are few friends in daily contact.

To meet their social needs, most of them rely on virtual socializing, communicating with strangers through social software and playing online games in teams to reduce their sense of loneliness and neglect. Although virtual socializing has alleviated their loneliness to some extent, the joy online cannot fill the silence offline; instead, it has exacerbated the "social anxiety" of some empty-nest youth [5]. We should deeply recognize that the ultimate solution to problems in the virtual social space cannot be separated from practical activities in the real society. Because the Internet is not only virtual, but also has a profound reality hidden behind it. We should deeply recognize that the ultimate solution to problems in the virtual social space cannot be separated from practical activities in the real society. Because the Internet is not only virtual, but also has a profound reality hidden behind it [6]. In fact, deep down in their hearts, they long for face-to-face communication with others, hoping to make friends on the same level as their spiritual world and find emotional resonance in real life.

2.4 Mental state: Loneliness, stress and self-adjustment coexist

"Alone in a foreign land as a stranger", empty-nest youth return to their empty rooms after work, finding it hard to feel the warmth and company of home. When they are tired and confused, they lack someone to confide in. All emotional communication relying on mobile phones also adds a sense of distortion to their accounts. They often present themselves as "emotionally stable adults", reducing their worries about their parents and friends. Due to the different life trajectories and leisure times, close friends who can open up and chat freely lack timeliness and empathy in communication. This leads some empty-nest youth to kill time through virtual and short-lived entertainment methods such as watching TV series and online games.

Under long-term exposure to various pressures, empty-nest youth are prone to developing psychological disorders. Psychological problems such as depression and anxiety are increasingly haunting them. However, some empty-nest youth are also actively adjusting themselves. They are trying to break out of their psychological "empty nest" by cultivating hobbies, such as participating in

offline activities like reading clubs and mountain climbing, and seeking like-minded people in online communities. Under loneliness and pressure, they strive to seek self-healing and growth.

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3. Tracing and Attribution: An Analysis of the Conditions for the Formation of the "Empty-nest Youth" Group

3.1 Economic dimension: Imbalance in urban-rural development and the pressure of urban living costs

The imbalance in development under the urban-rural dual structure is an important economic root cause that gives rise to the group of empty-nest youth. The long-standing urban-rural development gap in our country has led to a high concentration of high-quality employment resources and industrial clusters in first - and second-tier cities and the developed eastern regions, while employment opportunities and career development space in medium and small-sized cities and rural areas are limited. This pattern drives a large number of young people with higher education to flow from their hometowns to big cities, forming a "one-way" population mobility trend and laying the spatial foundation for the "empty nest" state.

Meanwhile, the high cost of living in big cities has further solidified the living conditions of empty-nest youth. From the perspective of housing costs, the housing prices and rents in the core areas of first-tier cities far exceed the initial income levels of young people. According to the data from the "China Youth Development Report (2023)", in cities like Beijing and Shanghai, the proportion of rent expenses to wages for young people generally exceeds 30%, and in some cases, it even reaches 50%. To balance the costs, young people have no choice but to rent houses in the far suburbs or share a place with others, which leads to longer commuting times and restricted living conditions. From the perspective of daily consumption, the accumulation of hidden costs such as education and training, social entertainment, etc., forces young people to cut down on non-essential expenditures, further restricting their actual social interactions and the improvement of their quality of life. Eventually, they present the characteristics of a "busy and constantly on the go" and "unstable housing" lifestyle.

3.2 Social dimension: Industrial transformation and structural changes in social forms

The upgrading of industrial structure and changes in the job market have directly shaped the working conditions of empty-nest youth. At present, China is in a stage of transformation from labor-intensive to technology-intensive industries. The demand for specialized and refined division of labor in industries such as the Internet, finance, and high-end manufacturing has significantly increased. Although this division of labor model has enhanced production efficiency, it has also made the work content of young people tend to be "modular", such as the "screw-type" positions in the Internet industry and repetitive data processing work in the financial industry. This has led to a lack of creativity and a sense of belonging in the work process, and further triggered a crisis of young people's identification with the value of their careers.

Furthermore, the digital transformation of social interaction patterns has exacerbated the "virtual dependence" of empty-nest youth. The popularization of mobile Internet technology and the iteration of social media platforms have restructured the way young people socialize. Online socializing, with its advantages of low cost and high efficiency, has become the main way for young people to meet their emotional needs. According to the 2024 report of the China Internet Society (CNNIC), the average daily online social interaction time of young people aged 18 to 35 exceeds 2.5 hours, among which game socializing and interest community interaction account for 68%. However, the "weak connection" feature of online social interaction is difficult to replace the "strong connection" emotional support function of offline interaction. Instead, due to the failure of the "social compensation mechanism", it has exacerbated the deterioration of young people's real social skills, creating a contradictory situation

where "virtual dependence and social desire coexist".

3.3 Personal dimension: The mismatch between the need for self-actualization and the ability

The mismatch between the value pursuit of individual young people and their practical abilities is the internal reason for their falling into work predicaments and psychological pressure. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, after contemporary youth have met their basic physiological needs, their demand for self-actualization has significantly increased. They generally expect to achieve social value and personal dignity through career development. However, the "ability shortcomings" faced by young people in their early years, such as insufficient workplace experience, limited industry understanding, and lack of resource accumulation, make it difficult for them to achieve their career goals quickly. This gap between "high expectations and low reality" leads young people to lower their expectations for promotion opportunities and salary benefits, thereby generating anxiety.

3.4 Family dimension: Intergenerational concept differences and weakened family support functions

The differences in concepts among generations in a family have affected the life choices and psychological states of empty-nest youth. In traditional family values, "getting married and establishing a career" and "choosing a job nearby" are the mainstream value orientations. However, contemporary young people place more emphasis on personal will and career development. This conflict of concepts leads to some young people facing family pressure when choosing to live alone or work in a different place. To avoid conflicts, young people often choose to hide their life difficulties and present themselves as "emotionally stable adults", thereby losing the channel of family emotional support and increasing their psychological burden.

In addition, the geographical limitations of family support functions should not be ignored. Most empty-nest youth come from families in medium and small cities or rural areas, and their parents find it difficult to provide effective support in terms of employment resources and daily care. For instance, when young people encounter problems such as job changes or rental disputes, their families are unable to offer practical assistance in a timely manner and can only provide remote comfort through phone calls or wechat. This situation where "emotional support is abundant but practical help is insufficient" further highlights the "empty nest" state of young people, trapping them in a predicament where "loneliness, pressure and self-adjustment coexist".

4. The realization path of social work intervention in "empty-nest youth"

4.1 Macro policy advocacy: Building a youth-friendly social support system

Social workers need to play the role of policy advocates to promote the establishment of a macro support framework that meets the needs of empty-nest youth. On the one hand, in response to the imbalance between urban and rural development and the issue of urban living costs, empirical research can be conducted in collaboration with universities and research institutions, and the "Proposal on Balanced Development of Youth Housing Security and Employment" can be submitted to government departments to promote the implementation of the "Youth Talent Housing Security Plan"-such as expanding the supply of public rental housing and providing rent subsidies to eligible empty-nest youth. At the same time, it is suggested to improve the regional industrial transfer policies, guide high-quality employment resources to flow down to third - and fourth-tier cities, reduce the "one-way" population flow, and relieve the pressure of young people "empty-nest" from the source.

On the other hand, in response to the professional predicaments encountered during industrial transformation, it is necessary to promote the optimization of labor security policies. Through research on the work intensity and rights protection status of empty-nest youth in industries such as the Internet and finance, policy suggestions on "work-life balance for young workers" were put forward to the human resources and social security department. The restrictions on overtime hours and overtime compensation standards were clarified, and a "career development mentor system" was established to provide systematic support for young people in terms of industry cognition and skill improvement, and alleviate the crisis of career value recognition.

4.2 Middle-level Community Services: Building an "embedded" youth support platform

Relying on community social work service stations, a three-dimensional support system of "space+activities+resources" is constructed to solve the social isolation and living difficulties of empty-nest youth. In terms of spatial construction, efforts should be made to promote the creation of "youth shared Spaces" in communities, setting up functional modules such as shared kitchens, self-study rooms, and sports areas, to reduce the living costs and social barriers for young people. For instance, shared kitchens can solve the problem of "difficulty in cooking" for young people, and at the same time, activities like "cooking salons" can promote neighborhood interaction and reconstruct offline social scenarios[7].

In terms of service supply, "stratified and categorized" community activities are carried out: in response to social needs, "interest community" activities (such as reading clubs and outdoor hiking) are organized, and the "group work" method is adopted. Through ice-breaking games, theme discussions and other sections, help young people build trust relationships. In response to the shortcomings in life skills, a "Life Skills Enhancement Workshop" has been launched, covering courses such as household management and healthy eating. Taught by professional social workers and volunteers, it aims to improve the self-care abilities of young people. To address psychological stress, a "Community Psychological Service Corner" has been established, with the introduction of psychological counselors to provide one-on-one counseling and group guidance, thereby alleviating feelings of loneliness and anxiety.

4.3 Micro-individual support: Carry out "empowering" case work services

In response to the individual differences among empty-nest youth, case work methods are employed to provide "personalized" support. During the demand assessment stage, from the perspective of the "ecosystem theory", a comprehensive analysis of the economic status, career development, social networks, family relationships and other systematic dimensions of young people is conducted to identify the core predicament - for instance, some young people experience career anxiety due to the gap between "high expectations and low reality", while others fall into psychological distress due to conflicts in family concepts.

During the intervention process, an "empowerment" model is adopted: for young people in career predicaments, assistance is provided in formulating "career development plans", linking vocational training resources, and enhancing their competitiveness in the workplace. For socially isolated young people, "social skills training" is adopted. Through role-playing, scenario simulation and other methods, their real social skills are improved. At the same time, they are guided to participate in community activities and gradually expand their social networks. For young people with significant psychological stress, "cognitive behavioral therapy" can be applied to help adjust negative perceptions (such as "I can't integrate into the group") and establish positive coping styles.

During the follow-up stage, a "long-term support mechanism" should be established to regularly visit young people, evaluate the service effect, and promptly adjust the intervention strategy to ensure that young people can continuously receive support and achieve the transformation from passively accepting help to actively self-developing.

4.4 Family system intervention: Building a bridge for "intergenerational communication"

In response to the intergenerational differences in family concepts and the weakening of support functions, family social work services are carried out to reconstruct the family support system. On the one hand, community can organize "intergenerational communication group" activities, inviting empty-nest youth and their parents to participate together. Through group techniques such as "family narrative" and "role reversal", help both sides understand each other's values - for instance, let parents know the youth's need to "pursue self-actualization", and let the youth understand that behind their parents' "worries" lies care. Ease conflicts of ideas.

On the other hand, community can provide "remote support and guidance" for families: for families living in different places, through online "family counseling courses", teach effective communication methods between parents and young people (such as "nonviolent communication" skills) to reduce misunderstandings in remote communication; At the same time, it links up the community resources of young people's household registration areas to provide daily care services for their parents, alleviating the psychological burden of young people who are worried about their parents being left uncared for,

allowing them to focus more on their own development. In addition, through the "Family Support Hotline", immediate consultation services are provided to families to solve sudden family conflicts and confusions, and strengthen the "emotional support" function of families[8].

5. Conclusion

Social work not only emphasizes "people-oriented" principles but also highlights "harmonious coexistence". By transforming the historical context, it extends the service scope of developmental social work, showing a strong concern in balancing individual freedom and social integration. In terms of professional adaptability, it can effectively solve many social problems faced by "empty-nest youth". Enable "empty-nest youth" to achieve "empty nest" but "not empty heart" in urban life.

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