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Stop Hovering Over Me! The Effects of Helicopter Parenting on the Millennial Generation

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Introduction

Helicopter parenting was a term coined by Cline and Fay (1990) that describes parents who 'hover' over their children constantly. Since then, it has only become more prominent of an occurrence within family communication. Children who experience helicopter parenting often have high anxiety, low self-confidence and self-esteem, and decreased academic performance (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012) and these traits often carry through adolescence into young-adulthood. Studies have been conducted on the way these parents are communicating with their children, and even popular parenting websites are featuring the subject of helicopter parenting in their articles, informing their audience on how to "avoid being a helicopter parent" (Bayless, 2013). The way that parents guide and discipline their children influence their self-confidence and psychological well-being later in life (Buchanan & Lemoyne, 2011; Schiffrin, Liss, Miles-McLean, Geary, Erchull, & Tashner, 2014). Specifically, the millennial generation has received the brunt of this parenting style (Wiley, 2016) and its effects are manifested psychologically through the daily lives of my peers (Schiffrin et. al, 2014; Segrin, Woszidlo, Givertz, Bauer, & Murphy, 2012).

The role of family communication plays a large part in how parents adopt such 'hovering' behaviors (Reed, Duncan, Lucier-Greer, Fixelle, & Ferraro, 2016). However, the communication within a family is always changing, and that is what makes a family healthy and adaptable to life-changing events (Segrin & Flora, 2005). Change within a family unit are unavoidable, and as a result of such changes, stress forms. Stress in families can include anything from unpleasant interactions to things much larger in scope, such as a death within the family, a child graduating from high school, and children moving out of the home. Such events can lead to physical issues such as fatigue and irritability (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985).

Parents react to lifestyle changes within their families in multiple ways. As parents struggle to adjust to their child's newfound freedom away from the home, some engage in helicopter parenting behaviors, because they are trying to understand how to maintain an appropriate amount of control (Nelson, Padilla-Walker, Carroll, Madsen, Barry, & Badger, 2007; Reed et. al, 2016). This causes an increase in stress in their millennial-aged children, and has become a concern to university counseling centers and higher education administrators (Douce and Keeling, 2014). As much as 35% of college students reported that stress negatively affects their academic performance, and 41% stated that anxiety is their top concern (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2015).

The current study will explore how young adults are handling stress, how much stress is coming from parental influences, and how the behaviors of parents are impacting students and their lifestyle in college. The Family Systems Theory will provide a broad baseline for my research, and an explanation of how and why it relates to my current study will be provided. Then, I will explore Baumrind's typology of Parenting Styles to introduce the importance of how parenting affects children. A literature review on these parenting styles, along with helicopter parenting and family communication, will provide information on parenting behaviors.

Review of Literature

Family Systems Theory

Many theories explain how families communicate and how they build and maintain relationships. The Family Systems theory correlates with parenting and how what one person does in the family subsequently affects the other members, and can be applied directly to helicopter parenting and how that stresses the student. First, it is necessary to understand the history and inner workings behind the family systems theory. The family systems theory was

emerged from the General Systems Theory (GST), which was developed by Ludwig von

Bertalanffy (1968) following World War II.

The GST was eventually found to relate past academia-related systems (Whitchurch &

Constantine, 1993), and was able to be applied to both natural and social sciences. For example,

the inner functions of a washing machine, car radio, or a security system is comparable to the

relationship functions of a family. Just like the parts to a car, there are several different parts to a

family that contribute to its system as a whole and make it work and function well. Multiple

functions of the family make it complex, but enable the family to work cohesively together as a

system. The family is open; it takes from the environment and contributes back to it. As years go

by this provides all families with a past, present, and future, and changes are going to occur

often. These factors make the family ongoing and dynamic, and categorize the family as a

system (Segrin & Flora, 2005).

The family as a system is an ideal baseline theory to use for the topic of helicopter

parenting, because though it is broad in scope, it explains that each family member is affected by

another's behavior. Looking specifically at parenting, the systems theory plays a role; a parent's

helicopter behavior has a direct consequence on the child, such as anxiety and stress. (Segrin,

Givertz, & Montgomery, 2013). The most important takeaway from the systems theory is that

every action of a family member impacts the actions and lives of another. The way a parent goes

about aiding in the development of their child has a direct effect on the child not only in their

behavior, but in how they feel about themselves (Barton & Hirsch, 2016). Certain attitudes that

parents direct towards the child in youth, for example, anger or hostility, will manifest itself in

their child psychologically later in life (Klein & Pierce, 2009).

Parenting Styles

Parents must be able to guide their child in order for them to learn and grow. There are

three different parenting typologies (authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive) created by

Baumrind (1966) that have been identified that characterize how parents discipline and treat their

children as they develop. These styles are important to understand, because they provide the

baseline for how parents raise their children, and subsequently, how their children develop.

Authoritative parenting is "distinguished by (parents) setting high goals for their children"

(Akhtar, 2012, p. 555). These parents use goal-setting to set a precedent for their children – they

want them to be able to succeed on their own and dream big.

Authoritative parents emanate warmth and encourage the freedom of expression in their

households (Hart, Bush-Evans, Hepper & Hickman, 2017). Authoritarian parents display high

demands and low responsiveness. They have high expectations, but provide little in the ways of

feedback and nurturing. Lastly, permissive parenting is characterized by low control and demand

for a child's behaviors. This style has been found to hinder a college students' preparation for

college and the independence that comes with the college lifestyle (Barton & Hirsch, 2016).

The dimensions of warmth and control (or responsiveness and demandingness) are two

crucial elements in Baumrind's parenting typologies. Warmth is how a parent instills

individuality and self-assertion in their children by "being attuned, supportive, and acquiescent to

children's requests" (Baumrind, 2005, p 61). Control is categorized by how parents integrate

their children into the family, and how they discipline and confront their children when they

disobey (Baumrind, 1991). The combination of warmth and control displayed by parents has

been linked to positive outcomes for the child; a good social life, emotional stability, and

cognitive and academic well-being (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012).

Evidence suggests that authoritative parenting leads to the best outcomes for child care (Baumrind, 1971; Roopnarine, Krishnakumar, Mitindogan, & Evans, 2006). Children with authoritative parents are self-sufficient, confident, and overall have better moods than children with parents who displayed either of the other two styles (Brooks 1998; Segrin & Flora, 2005). Conversely, authoritarian parents raised children who displayed high levels of stress, decreased happiness, very low self-confidence. These children also have a harder time making decisions, and they ask their parents for more advice both academically and socially (Hart et. al, 2017; Trice, 2002). None of these parenting styles directly lead to helicopter parenting, but give insight into other types of parenting that contributes to a millennial's psychological distress (Barton & Hirsch, 2016). It is important in the understanding of helicopter parenting to regard the different parenting styles, because each one can have different effects on the child psychologically.

Helicopter Parenting

Helicopter parenting is not an official parenting type, but it has become increasingly significant in recent studies of college students over the past few years (Buchanan & LeMoyne, 2011; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Reed et. al, 2016; Schiffrin et. al, 2014; Somers & Settle, 2010; Vinson, 2013). These parents are identified as "over involved, protective (parents) who provide substantial support to their emerging adult children" (Reed et. al, 2016). Helicopter parents will strive to support their children in any aspect of their life, however, this will to support is far more enhanced than that of what a typical parent would offer to their child.

At the slightest indication of any source of stress or harm, the helicopter parent will rush to their child's side immediately, to the point where it could be considered overbearing (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). In addition, they are in seemingly constant communication with their child in the forms of texting, calling, or emailing. Interference in their college student's lifestyle

is typical of a helicopter parent, and they may even do so much as to call their students'

professors about a grade (Van ingen, Freiheit, Steinfeldt, Moore, Wimer, Knutt, Scapinello, &

Roberts, 2015).

The real cause for concern with helicopter parenting is when the parent continues these

behaviors past the child's adolescence (Buchanan & LeMoyne, 2011). As the child yearns for

more independence, the helicopter parent will do anything they can to pull them back in their

grasp. The struggle to "let go" is at an all time high, especially as the child enters college and

leaves the home for the first time (Nelson et. al, 2007). Contributions to the rise of helicopter

parenting, especially with the millennial generation, include demographic shifts, the change of

family units and parenting, technological advances, structural changes in society, psychological

shifts, the importance of education, and child safety (Somers & Settle, 2010).

Parents want to see their children succeed, and the goal of a helicopter parent is no

different. However, their comforting behaviors may influence their children to have higher

dependence, rather than independence (Buchanan & LeMoyne, 2011). Their hovering behaviors

can make it hard for their children to learn how to make decisions on their own, and as a result,

stunt their growth and psychological development (Van ingen et. al, 2015). Children will then

"not learn to deal with the consequences of their poor decisions if their parents swoop in and fix

their problems" (van Ingen et al., 2015, pp. 7). In addition, children of helicopter parents have

also reported high levels of stress, depression, and anxiety, which only add even more pressure to

the struggle of the daily life of a young adult (Reed et. al, 2016).

Parent-Child Communication

Parent-child communication is one of the most important family relationships. The

communication that will occur between these family members will set the stage for the child's

development through adulthood (Arnett, 2015; Segrin & Flora, 2005). However, the parent-child

relationship becomes more unique when the child reaches adolescence, and then even more so

when the child enters adulthood; just as they are understanding how to navigate communication

with their parents, the parent is attempting to do the same (Segrin & Flora, 2005). The 'emerging

adult', a phrase created by Jeffrey Arnett (2004), is the period of time when a person is in their

early teens to late 20's. During this time, they are faced with a lot of changes: preparation to live

on their own and find a job, handle financial responsibilities, and move out (Arnett, 2015). The

in-between stage that these emerging adults are in puts a strain on their relationships, but most

significantly, the relationships they have with their parents.

        While emerging adults are experiencing changes, so are their parents. It has been found

that parents experience conflict with the transitional phase their child is going through, and they

struggle between the independence and dependence of their children and what they should or

should not do for them (Connidis & McMulllin, 2002). However, the frequency of parental

support is the underlying issue of helicopter parenting. Increased support can lead to overly

dependent children and low self-confidence. Some children show a need for enhanced support

from parents, which can include anything from finances to social support. Parents, in turn, will

give this support, but it can get to the point where parents are giving their children too much of it

(Fingerman, Cheng, Wesselmann, Zarit, Furstenberg, & Birditt, 2012).

        Communication is a much easier and more quickly gratifying process than it once was

years ago. The ease of cell phone use offers an opportunity for young adults to keep in touch

with their parents quickly and efficiently. Parents report that the relationships they have with

their 'emerging adult' children are better than they have ever been; the conversations are more

mature, they spend more time with them, and they have formed a friendship with them (Arnett &

Schwab, 2013). Having a quality relationship with a parent is integral to the emotional well-being and identity development of an emerging adult, during such times of transition and change.

Stress and Anxiety in College Students

As young adults enter college, they are faced with a plethora of changes; friendships, environment, social life, school work, peer pressure, and eating habits, to name a few. With so many changes happening at once, college students' stress levels rise, and often induce feelings of stress and anxiety. In the past decade, anxiety has surpassed depression in being the main reason why college students seek out counseling services (Reetz, Bersahd, Leviness, & Whitlock, 2016). In addition to learning to navigate the onslaught of changes in their lives, students have to learn to juggle their personal relationships as well.

One of the links to stress and anxiety issues in college students and parenting the type of parenting environment the child lives in as well as how the parent engages with their child (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). For example, parents who display high control are seen by their children as being intrusive and over-bearing, leading to increased levels of stress in the child (Urry, Nelson, & Padilla-Walker, 2011). As it has been studied, helicopter parents display high control over their children, especially as the child reaches emerging adulthood. The limitation of freedom and autonomy that the child feels from their parent increases feelings of stress and anxiety and is contributing to the 41% of college students that state that anxiety is their top concern while at school (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2015).

Self-Disclosure in the Parent-Child Relationship

Research Questions

Family life, and parenting, is a multi-faceted and ever-changing communication process. How the family works and focusing on specific parenting behaviors is vital to understanding why parents feel such a need to be so pervasive in their child's life. After the child goes to college, the helicopter parent still displays high over-involvement, and this effects their children both mentally and psychologically (Van ingen et. al, 2015; Reetz et. al, 2016). Regarding the family as a system, it is reasonable that children feel the effects of a clingy parent, as any action a person in the family does causes a reaction in every other person in the family (Segrin & Flora, 2005). The reaction does not have to be apparent or noticeable – it can be internal, and thus could be the reason behind some of the stress a student faces as they navigate the college lifestyle.

There have been several studies done on helicopter parents and on millennials separately (Arnett, 2015; Fingerman et. al, 2012; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; Somers & Settle, 2010; Van ingen et. al, 2015; Vinson, 2013), but not many have been conducted on the relationship between helicopter parents and the psychological effects students have from such parenting. Thus, more information on how students are feeling on a daily basis and how they cope with stress will be valuable not only for future research on this topic, but for students and how to better deal with these parenting behaviors. Based off of these ideas, the following research questions have been formed:

RQ1: What is the connection between helicopter parenting and students' self-esteem?

RQ2: What are young adults' perceptions on helicopter parenting?

RQ3: How can young adults better cope with helicopter parenting behaviors?

Methods

We will be using a mixed method approach for my study. We will utilize surveys and interviews to gather information on the participants' relationships with their parents, and the stress levels of students. My interviews will help to uncover how millennials are coping with helicopter parenting. For this study, using a mixed methods approach would result in multiple benefits; it will provide me with a wealth of information, which will shed light onto exactly how millennials are feelings about parenting and how they are coping mentally and psychologically.

Surveys

The use of surveys will give me discernable data that can be utilized to explain or describe how a participant specifically feels, and to "compare or explain knowledge, attitudes, or behavior" (Keyton, 2015, pp. 147). For this reason, a survey is one of the best options to use to gather comparable data, and it is easy to get a mass amount of people to take part in it, so I will be getting a substantial amount of results.

The survey I am using (See Appendix A) is a slightly revised version of Parker's (1979) Parental Bonding Instrument. In using this developed survey, I will be able to determine the type of parenting my participants received. I also included Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, which will determine how millennials are feeling about themselves. I put the Self-Esteem Scale after the Parental Bonding Instrument on purpose, so that my participants will have their relationships with their parent(s) fresh in their minds as they consider their feelings about themselves. I will be handing out these surveys to young adults at Kutztown University in the Communication Studies department, and I will be posting this survey online and sharing it on my personal social media accounts and on the Kutztown Class pages, so that I can get as many

people to take part in it as possible. The wealth of results I will receive from the surveys will

give me enough information to use it as a generalization for college students and their stress as it

relates to their communication with their parents.

There are some limitations to doing a survey, which I will compensate with my

interviews. For example, being able to only test a few variables at a time restricts the information

I am receiving and makes it difficult to understand the full spectrum of communication

phenomena (Keyton, 2015), specifically family communication patterns. Because of such

restrictions on using a survey as a method, I am proposing a mixed methods approach, in order to

seek out the other half of the communication phenomena I am missing in my surveys.

Quantitative Analysis

This form of quantitative research gives me the opportunity to have a "greater measuring

precision" (Keyton, 2015, pp. 63) on my study. Because quantitative research designs rely on

deductive reasoning, I will be using Baumrind's Parenting Styles (1996) and the Family Systems

Theory to test my hypothesis that college students' stress and self-confidence are effected by

helicopter parenting. My surveys will be interpreted as a whole, as they are representing the

entirety of my population. To analyze and interpret my data, I will use descriptive statistics and

create a frequency distribution. I will calculate the mean, median, and mode to examine my data

and interpret conclusions from my surveys.

Interviews

Qualitative methods "preserves the form and content of human interaction" (Keyton,

2015, pp. 262). Being able to completely understand how each participant feels about parenting

and how parenting affects them psychologically is a process that is best done by holding

conversation and gaining raw information. Thus, interviewing will be the best way to uncover

the participants true point of view. My goal will be to interview students at Kutztown University

above the age of 18, or their parents who are willing to participate in my study. I plan on

gathering these students when I hand out my surveys in various classes throughout the

Communication Studies department, and by word of mouth.

　　　　Appendix B shows the interview questions I will be asking to students about their

attitudes on parenting and what kind of parenting they have experienced. These questions will

fill in the missing piece from the surveys I am conducting, and will give me insight into the

specific communication patterns that occurs in helicopter parenting situations. Field interviewing

is a great way to uncover very specific details about communication patterns, but there is little

structure to it (Keyton, 2015). The interview questions are supposed to serve as a catalyst for

deeper conversation, but there is a high possibility that it will not occur with every interviewee.

The hope is that I will gather enough interviews that my other interviews will compensate for

ones that did not go as well. In addition, making sure my field notes and interpretation of the data

are as accurate as possible is another cause for concern.

Qualitative Analysis

　　　　Since the qualitative data analysis is largely reflexive (Keyton, 2015) it is up to me, as the

researcher, to uncover themes as I go from data analysis to data collection. As I reread my data, I

will first scan for broad themes, and then look over the data again to search for salient problems

or themes that do not fit. I would like to take a mostly emic view on my data analysis, so that I

can look through the lens of my participants when analyzing. I will be writing analytical memos

throughout my interviews and compare them to my notes during the interviews, to help with

additional suggestions of themes or potential biases (Keyton, 2015). The grounded theory will be

used for analyzation to develop codes and categories, and I will conduct a thematic analysis as I

look for "recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness" (Keyton, 2015, p. 338) within my interview

notes.

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Appendix A

Appendix A

Parental Bonding Inventory

This questionnaire lists various attitudes and behaviors of parents. As you remember your mother/father in your adolescent and young adult years, please indicate the most appropriate response category by circling a number on the scale. This survey should take between 5 and 10 minutes to complete.

	Very Like Me	Moderately Like Me	Moderately Unlike	Very Unlike Me
My parent(s)…				
1. Spoke to me with a warm and friendly voice.	0	1	2	3
2. Did not help me as much as I needed.	0	1	2	3
3. Let me do things I liked doing.	0	1	2	3
4. Seemed emotionally cold to me.	0	1	2	3
5. Appeared to understand my problems and worries	0	1	2	3
6. Was affectionate to me.	0	1	2	3
7. Liked me to make my own decisions	0	1	2	3
8. Did not want me to grow up.	0	1	2	3
9. Tried to control everything I did	0	1	2	3
10. Invaded my privacy	0	1	2	3

11. Enjoyed talking things over with me	0	1	2	3
12. Frequently smiled at me.	0	1	2	3
13. Tended to baby me.	0	1	2	3
14. Did not seem to understand what I needed or wanted	0	1	2	3
15. Let me decide things for myself	0	1	2	3
16. Made me feel I wasn't wanted	0	1	2	3
17. Could make me feel better when I was upset	0	1	2	3
18. Did not talk with me very much.	0	1	2	3
19. Tried to make me dependent on her/him	0	1	2	3
20. Felt I could not look after myself unless she/he was around	0	1	2	3
21. Gave me as much freedom as I wanted	0	1	2	3
22. Let me go out as often as I wanted.	0	1	2	3
23. Was overprotective of me	0	1	2	3
24. Did not praise me (r)	0	1	2	3
25. Let me dress in any way I pleased	0	1	2	3

Instructions: Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. If you strongly agree, circle **SA**. If you agree with the statement, circle **A**. If you disagree, circle **D**. If you strongly disagree, circle **SD**.

1.	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	SA A D SD
2.	At times, I think I am no good at all.	SA A D SD
3.	I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	SA A D SD
4.	I am able to do things as well as most other people.	SA A D SD
5.	I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	SA A D SD
6.	I certainly feel useless at times.	SA A D SD

7.   I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with   SA   A   D   SD

others.

8.   I wish I could have more respect for myself.   SA   A   D   SD

9.   All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.   SA   A   D   SD

10.   I take a positive attitude toward myself.   SA   A   D   SD

Thank you for your participation in this survey! ☺

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Family Communication, Parenting Styles

Main Question 1: Would you say you have a good relationship with your parents?

Possible follow up questions:

a.   Do your parents talk to you often while you're at school?

b.   Do you feel that you have 'independence' from your parents while you're at school?

c.   What was your relationship with your parents like when you were younger?

d.   How did your parents discipline you as a child?

e.   Did/do your parents value your opinions/ideas on different topics?

f.   Would you say that you and your parents disagree often?

Main Question 2: Now I would like to know a little more about you and how you cope with

stresses at school. What would you say is your main source of stress while you are here?

Possible follow up questions:

a.   What do you do to cope with stress while you are here?

b.   Who is the first person you go to when you are feeling stressed out?

     c.   Are you more stressed about your social life or your school-work?

     d.   Would you say that most of the time, you have a high self-esteem?