Special Issue: Overparenting: Consequences for Children and Families

JSPR

Journal of Social and Personal Relationships
2024, Vol. 41(2) 372–389

DOI: 10.1177/02654075231186443
journals.sagepub.com/home/spr
Sage

Helicopter parenting and first-semester students' adjustment to college: A self-determination theory perspective

Matt Shin[1] **and Elissa A. Adame**[2]

Abstract

In this study, we examined the relationship between helicopter parenting and first-semester students' (N = 211) adjustment to college. It was hypothesized that first-semester students who report higher amounts of helicopter parenting would also report higher levels of basic psychological need frustration and lower levels of educational, relational, and psychological functioning. Results of a structural regression model suggested that helicopter parenting had negative indirect associations with educational, relational, and psychological functioning through competence frustration. Helicopter parenting also had a negative indirect association with psychological functioning through autonomy frustration. No significant indirect associations were found through relatedness frustration. Findings from our study highlight the particular importance of both autonomy and competence needs as potential mechanisms through which helicopter parenting might negatively impact students' optimal functioning and well-being during their transition to college.

Keywords

helicopter parenting, self-determination, basic psychological needs, well-being, college adjustment

[1]Department of Communication Studies, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, USA
[2]The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

Corresponding author:
Matt Shin, Department of Communication Studies, West Virginia University, 108 Armstrong Hall, Morgantown, WV 26506, USA.
Email: ms00031@mix.wvu.edu

Introduction

As children enter emerging adulthood and learn to be independent, some parents remain overly involved in their adult children's lives, hovering over them to control and micromanage their behaviors. These parents are known to engage in helicopter parenting, which refers to a constellation of various parenting strategies and behaviors which are described as overprotective or over-controlling of an adult child (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011; Schiffrin et al., 2014). As LeMoyne and Buchanan (2011) highlighted, university officials have expressed increasing concern over the negative consequences of helicopter parenting. Given these serious concerns over what was once just a colloquial term made popular by various media (LeMoyne and Buchanan, 2011; Schiffrin et al., 2014), empirical investigations into the relationship between helicopter parenting and college student development have vastly grown.

A robust body of research in just the last decade has produced compelling findings demonstrating the negative impacts of helicopter parenting. For instance, helicopter parenting has been found to be negatively associated with college students' resilience (Hall et al., 2021), life satisfaction (Schiffrin et al., 2014), self-control (Love et al., 2020), psychological well-being (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011), adjustment to college (Darlow et al., 2017; Luebbe et al., 2018), coping efficacy (Odenweller et al., 2014), and general perceptions of self-efficacy (Darlow et al., 2017; Hwang & Jung, 2021). Helicopter parenting has also been positively associated with depression and anxiety symptoms (Luebbe et al., 2018; Schiffrin et al., 2014), depression or anxiety medicine prescriptions and recreational pain pill usage (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011), interpersonal dependency (Odenweller et al., 2014), dependent and avoidant decision-making (Luebbe et al., 2018), and burnout symptoms while attending college (i.e., exhaustion, cynicism, reduced efficacy; Love et al., 2020). Given these deleterious effects of helicopter parenting on college students' psychosocial outcomes, substantive research exploring the potential mechanisms through which helicopter parenting exerts these effects can help delineate why and how these effects occur. Knowledge of these mechanisms may ultimately help to shape parenting interventions which mitigate the negative consequences of helicopter parenting.

To guide the present study, we relied on propositions outlined in basic psychological needs theory (BPNT), a mini-theory within self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT is an organismic theory of human behavior and well-being which suggests that individuals have a basic psychological need to experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. SDT theorizes that social obstacles such as helicopter parenting can "affect basic psychological need satisfactions and frustrations, which to a large degree mediate wellness, vitality, and the motivational status of the individual" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 242). As Cui et al. (2022) noted in their systematic review of the overparenting literature, SDT is the most utilized theory in overparenting studies because it highlights basic psychological needs as key explanatory mechanisms through which overparenting can influence children's maladjustment. Therefore, using SDT, we investigated how helicopter parenting might impact emerging adults during the peak of a major transitional period such as the matriculation to college where many

children also transition to adulthood and develop a greater need for autonomy. Due to the overly controlling nature of helicopter parenting, we argue these types of parenting behaviors frustrate children's need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and therefore, produce greater detriments to college students' educational, relational, and psychological functioning during their first semester of college.

Parenting to Facilitate or Thwart Self-Determination

Self-Determination Theory

SDT posits that three basic psychological needs are essential for individuals to experience psychological growth, optimal functioning, and well-being: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). *Autonomy* refers to an individual's need to self-regulate their experiences and feel that they are acting out of their own volition (e.g., students choosing to attend college classes because they desire to do so as opposed to feeling forced to attend; Ryan & Deci, 2017). *Competence* refers to an individual's need to experience a sense of effectance and mastery while having opportunities to undergo optimal challenges (e.g., students feeling like they can handle the rigors of college courses while also expanding perceptions of their academic capabilities; Ryan & Deci, 2017). *Relatedness* refers to an individual's need to feel integral to a social context and is characterized by feelings of connectedness and belongingness (e.g., students feel cared for while also having opportunities to express care for others; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Together, these three basic psychological needs are theorized to be essential psychological nutrients—the failure to satisfy any one of these needs leads to psychological deficiencies and impairment (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

To the extent that social environments are supportive of individuals' autonomy, competence, and relatedness, individuals will experience greater well-being as a satisfaction of these needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, controlling contexts and events can disrupt basic psychological need fulfillment (BPNT Proposition II; Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 247), and might even lead to *basic psychological need frustration*. SDT scholars make an important point to differentiate between basic psychological need satisfaction and frustration within the theory. Low satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, of a basic psychological need does not necessarily imply need frustration (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). For instance, an adult child in their first-semester of college may not find attending a particular class to be very interesting, thereby providing little satisfaction to their need for autonomy, but it does not necessarily mean the adult child feels forced against their will by their parent(s) to be at school, which would characterize *autonomy frustration*. Similarly, an adult child in their first semester of college might find experience difficulty keeping up with college coursework for the first time, thereby providing little satisfaction to their need for competence, but it does not necessarily mean the adult child feels like a failure or has serious doubts about their abilities, which would characterize *competence frustration*. Likewise, an adult child might not feel close to any of their classmates as they start attending college, thereby providing little satisfaction to their need for relatedness, but it does not necessarily mean the adult child feels completely isolated from everybody on

campus, which would characterize *relatedness frustration*. To the extent which individuals experience basic psychological need frustration in their social contexts—beyond mere basic need dissatisfaction—individuals will experience increased ill-being and impoverished functioning (BPNT Proposition Ia; Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 242). In other words, according to SDT, individuals' basic psychological need frustration is the theorized mechanism through which controlling events can lead to ill-being and maladjustment.

While previous research has established negative links between helicopter parenting and students' basic psychological need satisfaction (e.g., Schiffrin et al., 2014), we argued that due to the overly controlling nature of helicopter parenting, helicopter parenting not only dissatisfies first-semester students' basic psychological needs (i.e., fail to provide opportunities for need fulfilment) but may actually frustrate students' basic psychological needs (i.e., actively compromise experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness). Basic psychological need frustration may be the underlying mechanism through which helicopter parenting impairs students' functioning and leads to their ill-being during their transition to college. Because college adjustment represents a key indicator of students' well-being (O'Donnell et al., 2018), we argued that basic psychological need frustration may play a crucial role explaining how parenting strategies can ultimately affect how college students adjust to college during their first semester.

College Adjustment

It is unsurprising that college adjustment is a key indicator of college students' well-being given its positive associations with desirable student characteristics such as resilience (Haktanir et al., 2018) and retention (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994) and negative associations with problematic behaviors such as alcohol-related consequences (e.g., failing to complete homework or suddenly passing out; LaBrie et al., 2012). Conceptualizations of college adjustment may slightly differ, but scholars of college adjustment generally agree that the adjustment process is comprised of multiple dimensions which at least includes educational (i.e., academic), relational (i.e., social), and psychological components (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; O'Donnell et al., 2018). *Educational functioning* refers to the degree that students are performing well in their courses, meeting their academic goals, and are satisfied with their academic performances. *Relational functioning* refers to the degree to which students are satisfied with their social relationships in college. *Psychological functioning* refers to students' state of emotional well-being since coming to college.

Previous studies have found evidence of negative associations between helicopter parenting and various conceptualizations of college adjustment (e.g., academic adjustment, social adjustment, attachment to college) for students across all class ranks (Darlow et al., 2017; Luebbe et al., 2018). However, the first semester of college represents one of most pivotal moments for collegiate trajectories (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). For instance, Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) found that college students' initial academic, emotional, and social adjustment during their first semester of college predicted later attrition. Because adjustment is particularly critical to first-

semester students' collegiate success, we sought to investigate the relationship between helicopter parenting and the full range of college adjustment outcomes during students' first semester of college. Because basic psychological needs are theorized by SDT to be mediators between social obstacles and maladjustment, we argued that students' perceptions of helicopter parenting would be positively associated with basic psychological need frustration, which would in turn would be negatively associated with their reports of college adjustment during their first semester of college. We posited the following hypothesis to guide our study (see Figure 1 for our hypothesized model):

> **H.** First-semester students' perceptions of helicopter parenting will be negatively associated with their educational, relational, and psychological functioning through the indirect paths of autonomy, competence, and relatedness frustration.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Upon receiving acknowledgement from the institutional review board, 211 full-time undergraduate student participants attending their first semester of college during the fall 2021 semester were recruited from communication studies courses at two large

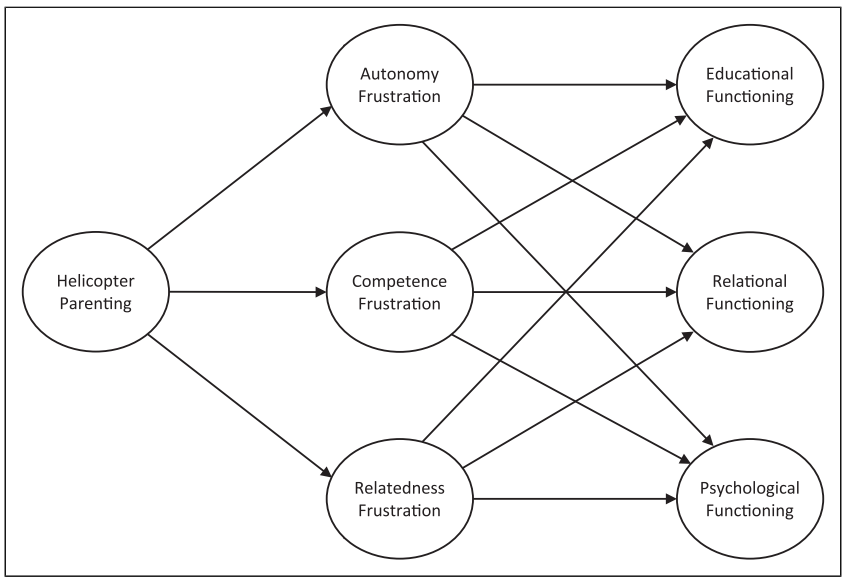

Figure 1. Hypothesized Structural Regression Model. Note. Disturbance correlations between autonomy frustration, competence frustration, and relatedness frustration, and disturbance correlations between educational functioning, relational functioning, and psychological functioning are not depicted.

universities from the Southwest and the Mid-Atlantic regions in the United States. Recruitment and survey administration at both universities occurred using the same sampling administration process. Participants who volunteered for the study were directed to an online platform where they responded to a questionnaire about their parents' parenting behaviors during their first semester of college, global feelings of basic psychological need frustration, and their perceived quality of college adjustment. Students received minimal extra credit for their participation.

Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 23 ($M = 18.4$, $Mdn = 18.0$, $SD = 0.8$). Eighty-eight participants reported that they were living with their families at the time of data collection (41.7%) while 123 reported that they were not (58.3%). One hundred and twenty-three participants identified as cisgender women (58.3%), 83 identified as cisgender men (39.3%), one identified as a transgender woman (0.5%), and four identified as nonbinary (1.9%). Twenty-one participants identified as Asian (10%), nine identified as Black (4.3%), 19 identified as Latina/o/x or Hispanic (9.0%), 16 identified as Middle Eastern (7.6%), 141 identified as White (66.8%), and five did not report any racial or ethnic data (2.4%).

Instrumentation

Construct reliability for all measures were estimated by calculating coefficient *H* (i.e., construct replicability or maximal reliability; Hancock & Mueller, 2001) with 95% confidence intervals derived from 10,000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples using maximum likelihood estimation. Unlike other reliability estimates which are often used to assess unit-weighted composite scores—where each item is equally weighted—coefficient *H* represents the reliability of an optimally-weighted composite—where each item is differentially weighted based on its factor loading—and therefore, is better suited to assesses the quality of a latent construct itself rather than a composite scale score (Hancock & Mueller, 2001).

Helicopter Parenting. Students' perceptions of helicopter parenting were measured using Schiffrin et al.'s (2014) 9-item helicopter parenting behavior scale ($H = .821$, 95% CI [.771, .852]; $M = 3.106$, SD = 1.133). Response options ranged from (1) *strongly disagree* to (7) *strongly agree*. Example items included "My parents monitor who I spend time with," "My parents had/will have a say in what major I chose/will choose," and "If I were to receive a low grade that I felt was unfair, my parents would call the professor."

Basic Psychological Need Frustration. Students' global basic psychological need frustration was measured using three subscales from the basic psychological need satisfaction and frustration scale (Chen et al., 2015). Response options ranged from (1) *not true at all for me* to (5) *very true for me*. Four items measured *autonomy frustration* ($H = .873$, 95% CI [.828, .900]; $M = 2.607$, SD = 1.032; e.g., "My daily activities feel like a chain of obligations"), four items measured *competence frustration* ($H = .906$, 95% CI [.873, .925]; $M = 2.624$, SD = 1.136; e.g., "I feel like a failure because of the mistakes I make"),

and four items measured *relatedness frustration* (H =. 926, 95% CI [.892, .958]; M = 1.993, SD = 0.995; e.g., "I feel the relationships I have are just superficial").

College Adjustment. Students' adjustment to college was measured using the college adjustment questionnaire (O'Donnell et al., 2018). Response options ranged from (1) *very inaccurate* to (5) *very accurate*. Five items measured *educational functioning* (H =. 941, 95% CI [.915, .957]; M = 3.727, SD = 0.973; e.g., "I am happy with the grades I am earning in my classes"), four items measured *relational functioning* (H =. 913, 95% CI [.883, .933]; M = 3.423, SD = 1.045; e.g., "I have had a hard time making friends since coming to college"), and four items measured *psychological functioning* (H =. 859, 95% CI [.789, .891]; M = 3.476, SD = 0.993; e.g., "I have felt the need to seek emotional counseling since coming to college").

Data Analysis

We tested a structural regression model using a two-step approach in Mplus 8.8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) to test our hypothesis that first-semester students' perceptions of helicopter parenting would be negatively associated with their educational, relational, and psychological functioning through the indirect paths of autonomy, competence, and relatedness frustration. The first step was to conduct a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of our measurement model where each latent variable was specified to freely covary with each other. The second step was to conduct a structural regression model to test the hypothesized relations between latent variables while maintaining any model modifications made during step one. Global model fit for both models was assessed using a robust chi-square test, which is asymptotically equivalent to the Yuan-Bentler T2* test statistic (χ^2_{YB}) , standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) with a 90% confidence interval, and comparative fit index (CFI). Local fit testing was conducted by examining normalized residuals for absolute values exceeding 1.96 (Kline, 2016). To calculate the indirect associations of helicopter parenting with educational, relational, and psychological functioning through autonomy, competence, and relatedness frustration, 95% confidence intervals were generated using 10,000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples. See Table 1 for zero-order correlations between the unit-weighted composite scores in our study.

Results

We began our analysis by first testing a measurement model of our latent variables. Results of a CFA using robust maximum likelihood estimation (MLR) revealed that the measurement model fit the data acceptably: χ^2_{YB} (539) = 880.181, $p < .001$; SRMR = .065; CFI = .906; RMSEA = .055, 90% CI [.048, .061]. Following our initial inspection of global model fit, we conducted local fit testing by inspecting normalized residuals to identify possible sources of misspecification. Our examination of normalized residuals and modification indices revealed a pattern of residuals among the negatively worded (i.e., reverse-coded) items in the college adjustment scale. Because this pattern

Table 1. Zero-Order Correlations Between Unit-Weighted Composite Scores.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Helicopter Parenting	—					
2. Autonomy Frustration	.305 [.149, .441]	—				
3. Competence Frustration	.191 [.047, .333]	.564 [.447, .664]	—			
4. Relatedness Frustration	.244 [.089, .383]	.467 [.342, .582]	.510 [.400, .613]	—		
5. Educational Functioning	−.130 [−.266, .013]	−.264 [−.383, −.138]	−.350 [−.478, −.214]	−.167 [−.303, −.043]	—	
6. Relational Functioning	−.003 [−.145, .139]	−.310 [−.424, −.187]	−.413 [−.516, −.304]	−.354 [−.452, −.250]	.197 [.057, .331]	—
7. Psychological Functioning	−.145 [−.266, −.017]	−.507 [−.598, −.407]	−.568 [−.654, −.468]	−.341 [−.453, −.225]	.413 [.295, .524]	.464 [.337, .578]

Note. Brackets contain 95% confidence intervals derived from 5000 bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap samples.

exemplified established method effects (DiStefano & Motl, 2006) rather than a capitalization of some idiosyncrasy of the data (MacCallum et al., 1992), we deemed it appropriate to conduct model respecification by allowing the five negatively worded items in the college adjustment scale to load on an orthogonal method factor to address the negative wording effects.

After adding the method factor with item five of the educational functioning scale (i.e., "I have performed poorly in my classes since starting college"), items one and three of the relational functioning subscale (i.e., "I don't have as much of a social life as I would like" and "I have had a hard time making friends since coming to college"), and items three and four of the psychological functioning subscale (i.e., "I feel that I am emotionally falling apart in college" and "I have felt the need to seek emotional counseling since coming to college"), we conducted another CFA. Results of the CFA revealed acceptable global fit: χ^2_{YB} (534) = 819.461, $p < .001$; SRMR = .065; CFI = .921; RMSEA = .050, 90% CI [.043, .057]. Upon reconducting local fit testing after model respecification, there were only a few significant normalized residuals but none of which warranted further model respecification based on substantive rationale. Since we determined that there were no severe local fit problems, we continued to step two and tested our structural regression model.

To test our structural regression model, autonomy frustration, competence frustration, and relatedness frustration were modeled as parallel mediators between helicopter parenting and each of the college adjustment outcomes (i.e., educational, relational, and psychological functioning; see Figure 1). Because BPNT suggests that basic psychological needs tend to be intercorrelated (proposition IV; Ryan & Deci, 2017), we correlated the disturbances between autonomy, competence, and relatedness frustration. Results indicated that the structural regression model fit the data reasonably well: χ^2_{YB} (537) = 822.725, $p < .001$; SRMR = .066; CFI = .921; RMSEA = .050, 90% CI [.043, .057].

To test for indirect associations, we used maximum likelihood estimation to derive 95% confidence intervals using 10,000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples. Results indicated that helicopter parenting had a negative indirect association with educational functioning through competence frustration but not through autonomy frustration or relatedness frustration. Helicopter parenting also had a negative indirect association with relational functioning through competence frustration but not through autonomy frustration or relatedness frustration. Lastly, helicopter parenting had a negative indirect association with psychological functioning through both autonomy frustration and competence frustration but not through relatedness frustration. These results provide partial support for our hypothesis. See Figure 2 for a path diagram of significant paths and Table 2 for a full summary of parameter estimates.

Discussion

Findings from our study suggest that helicopter parenting may have negative associations with first-semester students' educational, relational, and psychological functioning indirectly through basic psychological need frustration. Specifically, results from this study

Table 2. Structural Regression Model Direct and Indirect Effect Estimates.

	Unstandardized			Standardized		
Path	Est	LLCI	ULCI	Est	LLCI	ULCI
Direct effects						
Helicopter parenting → Autonomy frustration	.240	.125	.393	.373	.201	.534
Helicopter parenting → Competence frustration	.150	.000	.312	.183	−.002	.351
Helicopter parenting → Relatedness frustration	.238	.072	.443	.313	.103	.492
Autonomy frustration → Educational functioning	−.052	−.333	.224	−.042	−.260	.180
Autonomy frustration → Relational functioning	−.008	−.277	.246	−.007	−.202	.200
Autonomy frustration → Psychological functioning	−.400	−.698	−.097	−.286	−.477	−.071
Competence frustration → Educational functioning	−.347	−.594	−.116	−.362	−.583	−.118
Competence frustration → Relational functioning	−.334	−.548	−.138	−.336	−.514	−.131
Competence frustration → Psychological functioning	−.506	−.733	−.296	−.464	−.641	−.272
Relatedness frustration → Educational functioning	.061	−.138	.293	.059	−.136	.273
Relatedness frustration → Relational functioning	−.165	−.365	.055	−.153	−.345	.055
Relatedness frustration → Psychological functioning	.092	−.131	.352	.078	−.112	.290
Indirect effects on educational functioning						
HP → Autonomy-Fr → Educational functioning	−.013	−.087	.053	−.016	−.107	.066
HP → Competence-Fr → Educational functioning	−.052	−.155	−.004	−.066	−.180	−.006
HP → Relatedness-Fr → Educational functioning	.015	−.027	.098	.018	−.033	.115
Indirect effects on relational functioning						
HP → Autonomy-Fr → Relational functioning	−.002	−.067	.066	−.002	−.078	.080
HP → Competence-Fr → Relational functioning	−.050	−.134	−.007	−.061	−.148	−.009
HP → Relatedness-Fr → Relational functioning	−.039	−.120	.004	−.048	−.133	.006
Indirect effects on psychological functioning						
HP → Autonomy-Fr → Psychological functioning	−.096	−.207	−.025	−.107	−.213	−.030
HP → Competence-Fr → Psychological functioning	−.076	−.182	−.005	−.085	−.191	−.006
HP → Relatedness-Fr → Psychological functioning	.022	−.026	.115	.024	−.028	.126

Note. R^2 estimates for endogenous latent variables were as follows: Autonomy Frustration = .139, Competence Frustration = .033, Relatedness Frustration = .098, Educational Functioning = .130, Relational Functioning = .196, Psychological Functioning = .410. Bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (95%) estimated using 10,000 bootstrap samples.

indicate that helicopter parenting appears to have negative associations with first-semester students' educational and relational functioning through competence frustration and negative associations with their psychological functioning through both autonomy and competence frustration. This suggests that autonomy and competence may be the most salient basic psychological needs for students' optimal functioning during the adjustment to college. Notably, these findings mirror previous research which has found evidence for autonomy and competence—but not relatedness—as indirect paths between helicopter parenting and other well-being-related outcomes such as depressive symptoms and life satisfaction when basic psychological needs are modeled as parallel mediators (Schiffrin et al., 2014).

In examining the direct associations in our analysis, helicopter parenting appears to have significant positive associations, and modest effect sizes, with first-semester students' global feelings of autonomy and relatedness frustration but does not appear to have significant associations with their global sense of competence frustration. Specifically,

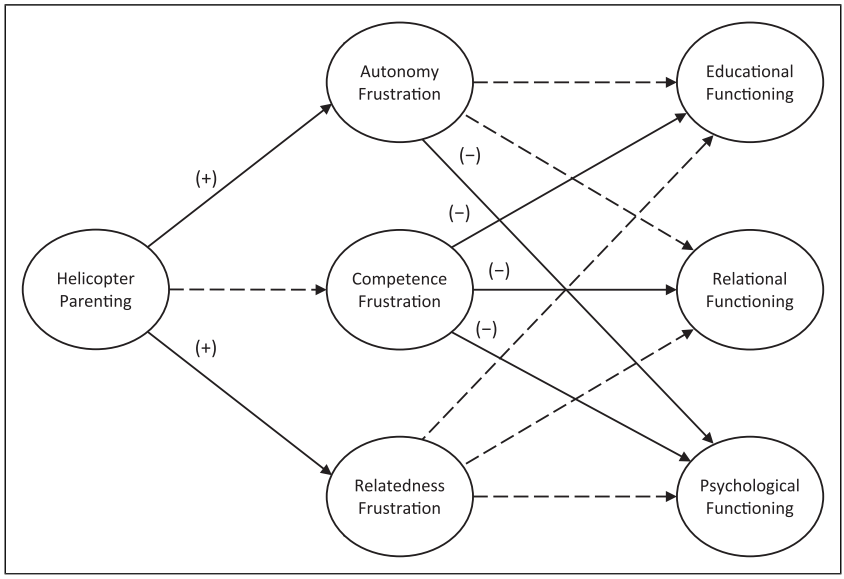

Figure 2. Structural Regression Model Results. Note. Disturbance correlations between autonomy frustration, competence frustration, and relatedness frustration, and disturbance correlations between educational functioning, relational functioning, and psychological functioning are not depicted.

model results indicate that students' reports of helicopter parenting were associated with 13.9% of the variance in autonomy frustration, 9.8% of the variance in relatedness frustration, and 3.3% of the variance in competence frustration, reflecting generally small effect sizes. Put differently, it appears that higher reports of helicopter parenting may coincide to a small degree with higher reports of global autonomy frustration (e.g., feeling like their daily activities are becoming more of a chain of obligations) and relatedness frustration (e.g., feeling more isolated from the people they wish to have relationships with) but not necessarily with competence frustration. This is somewhat surprising as previous researchers have found that helicopter parenting was negatively associated with students' general perceptions of self-efficacy (Darlow et al., 2017) and positively associated with burnout—which involves feelings of reduced efficacy in school-related accomplishment (Love et al., 2020). It may be that students' experiences of competence in college (i.e., a domain-specific competence) can be readily undermined by helicopter parenting behaviors, but these parenting behaviors may not necessarily frustrate adult children's sense of competence on a global level (e.g., feeling like a failure in their life).

We did however observe statistically significant negative indirect associations between helicopter parenting with all three college adjustment outcomes through competence frustration despite the nonsignificant direct association between helicopter parenting and competence frustration. Because competence frustration has strong negative association with students' educational, relational, and psychological functioning, the seemingly

trivial effect size between helicopter parenting and competence frustration might still have the potential to disrupt students' feelings of academic success, happiness with their social life, and emotional well-being. Therefore, we infer that among the three basic psychological needs posited by SDT, the need for competence might be one of the more salient predictors of students' optimal functioning during their transition to college.

Aside from the three indirect negative associations that we observed through competence frustration, the only other significant indirect association found in this study was the negative association between helicopter parenting and psychological functioning through autonomy frustration. This may suggest that as students feel more externally controlled by their overly strict parents, they may be more likely to feel emotionally unstable and unhappy to be in college. Importantly, this indirect association as well as the indirect association between helicopter parenting and psychological functioning through competence frustration were both statistically significant. In other words, both autonomy and competence frustration may simultaneously work together in tandem to disrupt students' psychological well-being during their transition to college.

To further contextualize findings from this study, we note that participants in this sample generally reported experiencing low amounts of helicopter parenting behaviors as indicated by a mean of 3.106 when the mid-point of the helicopter parenting measure was 4 (i.e., the neutral or "neither agree nor disagree" response option). More specifically, 82% of participants had an average helicopter parenting score that was ≤4 and only 18% scored >4. Because low average reports of helicopter parenting appear to be common in samples used collected for helicopter parenting studies (e.g., Odenweller et al., 2014; Schiffrin et al., 2014; Schiffrin et al., 2019), individualized or targeted interventions for these small groups of students and their parent(s) may be more practical rather than implementing universal intervention strategies.

Practical Implications

The practical implication from our study is that parents need to be conscious of how their parenting strategies may be thwarting their children's basic psychological needs, especially their sense of autonomy and competence. It stands to reason that most parents of first-semester colleges genuinely mean well for their children, but as their oversight of their adult children remains or becomes increasingly excessive and controlling, this produces more psychological harm than good as children develop a greater need to be autonomous individuals (Schiffrin et al., 2014). Parents should evaluate their parenting strategies to identify ways in which their behaviors may inadvertently be frustrating their children's basic psychological needs and recalibrate their behaviors to reflect the three dimensions of *nutritive parenting* (i.e., autonomy support, structure, involvement; Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 320) rather than elements of helicopter parenting.

Parents should try to be aware of how their behaviors (e.g., pushing an adult child toward specific major or tracking their adult children's coursework) may be pressuring or forcing their children to behave or think in ways that conflict with their own growing desires and volitional interests, thereby frustrating their need for autonomy. Instead, they should engage in *autonomy-supportive* behaviors such as encouraging their children to

pursue their interests in college and allowing them enough freedom to make their own choices rather than having them feel as if their choices have already been made for them. In instances in which parents must be more directive, parents should strategically communicate their directives by incorporating rationale which takes into consideration their children's personal perspectives (Ryan & Deci, 2017). As a meta-analysis of parental autonomy support has illustrated, these types of autonomy-supportive behaviors have positive associations with many desirable school-related outcomes such as students' academic performance, autonomous motivation, executive functioning, positive attitudes toward school, engagement, and effort (Vasquez et al., 2016).

Parents should also be conscious of how their behaviors (e.g., monitoring their adult child's diet and exercise, contacting an adult child's professor about their grades, intervening in issues with their adult child's roommate) might be contributing to their child's feelings of disappointment and insecurity about their abilities, thereby frustrating their need for competence. Instead, they should engage in effectance-supporting behaviors that provide *structure* such as providing feedback that is informational rather than evaluative or overly critical, emphasizing mastery-oriented (e.g., learning the course content to develop new valuable skills) rather than performance-oriented goals (e.g., obtaining high grades and outperforming other students), and scaffolding demands and responsibilities to match their adult child's developing capacity and abilities (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Additionally, parents should engage in effective *involvement* to support their children's basic psychological needs. Involvement within the SDT context refers to the degree to which parents know and understand their children and communicate interest. Rather than devoting time to hovering or monitoring their children, effective involvement entails parents' investing time and resources to their children in ways that communicate caring, support, warmth, and concern (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This can take many forms such as parents affirming their child's experiences as valid, partaking in any activities or events that are important to their child, or demonstrating genuine listening when their child speaks about issues that are important to them (Ellis, 2002). Naturally as parents become more involved in this nutritive manner, they learn how to best support their child's functioning during their transition to college (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

It is likely that many parents may think that they already refrain from need thwarting behaviors, which frustrate their children's basic psychological need, and feel as though they are supportive of their children's collegiate endeavors. However, the very nature of helicopter parenting is that it stems from parents' good intentions. It can be difficult for parents to self-identify detrimental helicopter parenting behaviors—yet it is crucial for parents to be diligent in their self-assessment. Basic psychological needs are not only "theorized to facilitate more self-determined and high-quality functioning in the immediate situation, but they are also understood to promote the development of more effective self-functioning, resilience, and enduring psychological health for the long term" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 12). Therefore, first-semester students whose basic psychological needs are being frustrated by helicopter parenting practices may not only experience maladjustment and diminished educational, relational, and psychological functioning during their first semester of college but may be expected to experience prolonged detriments to their well-being as they continue through their time in college. It

behooves parents to be critical of their own parenting to identify ways to maximally benefit their children as they adjust to new academic and social contexts.

Limitations and Future Directions

While our findings highlight potential mechanisms through which first-semester students may experience impoverished functioning across educational, relational, and psychological domains as a result of helicopter parenting, our study is not without its limitations. Although we applied SDT to impose and test theorized structural relations between variables, due to the cross-sectional nature of our study, it is difficult to determine the exact causal relations between helicopter parenting, basic psychological need frustration, and college adjustment in our study. It is entirely possible that poor college adjustment early in the semester could lead to subsequent basic psychological need frustration or even increase students' perceptions of helicopter parenting later in the semester as parents feel like they must step in to help their struggling children to perform better in college. Therefore, future researchers might consider embracing multivariate longitudinal research designs to unravel the complexities of helicopter parenting and basic need frustration across longer lengths of the college adjustment process.

Another limitation comes from our nonprobability sample. Sampling occurred at US institutions and was comprised primarily of cisgender women and participants racialized as White. Both these aspects limit the generalizability of our findings. Although there are many similarities in helicopter parenting strategies and its detrimental effects on students' academic and well-being outcomes, differences in cultural and gender identities may nuance some of the effects of helicopter parenting (Buchanan & Lemoyne, 2020; Cui et al., 2019; Jung et al., 2019; Kwon et al., 2017). In addition, future researchers should examine how other individual differences such as disabilities or socioeconomic status might also nuance some of the relationships between constructs measured in this study.

Future researchers should also consider the multidimensionality of helicopter parenting (e.g., Luebbe et al., 2018). As Luebbe et al. (2018) argued, helicopter parenting encompasses a wide range of parenting strategies and behaviors (e.g., rewriting school papers, intervening on a child's behalf with roommates, keeping updates on children's whereabouts), therefore, future researchers should seek to identify which dimensions of helicopter parenting are particularly detrimental to children's psychosocial outcomes. In addition, as more researchers are demonstrating (e.g., Hwang et al., 2022), it is possible that helicopter parenting behaviors can be further delineated into patterns of strategies to better illuminate the nuances of helicopter parenting. As observed in our data, first-semester students provided ratings across the full range of response options for every helicopter parenting behavior (i.e., a range of six on a 7-point scale for every scale item) but response frequencies differed across subsets of items. For instance, students in this study on average reported low ratings of certain helicopter parenting behaviors such as monitoring a child's exercise schedule ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.62$) or calling a professor about their child's unfair grade ($M = 2.50$, SD = 1.71). However, students in this study also reported higher average ratings on other helicopter parenting behaviors such as calling a child to track their schoolwork ($M = 4.22$, SD = 2.07) and expecting a child to regularly

call or text their parent(s) about where they are ($M = 4.35$, SD = 1.99). It is likely that some parents engage in very little to no helicopter parenting behaviors, some engage in many helicopter parenting behaviors, and some engage in unique combinations of helicopter parenting behaviors (Hwang et al., 2022). More mixture modeling approaches may spur additional insight as to how interventions should be designed.

Lastly, future researchers should also consider other parenting strategies and behaviors which boost, mitigate, or reverse the negative effects of helicopter parenting on children's psychosocial outcomes. For instance, some evidence suggests that children whose parents engage in helicopter parenting in conjunction with autonomy-supportive behaviors may exhibit greater life satisfaction or feel closer to their parents (Hwang & Jung, 2021). Such investigations highlight the complex nature of parenting and an exploration of the additive and interactive nature of different parenting behaviors has the potential to yield more focused interventions.

Conclusion

Helicopter parenting may disrupt first-semester students' adjustment to college by frustrating their basic psychological need fulfillment which in turn can negatively affects their educational, relational, and psychological functioning during the transition to college. Specifically, the two significant mechanisms through which helicopter parenting may negatively affect first-semester students' adjustment to college are autonomy and competence frustration. Parents should strive to appraise how their parenting strategies may be unintentionally harming their children's well-being and reassess in what ways they can be more supportive of their children's basic psychological needs—especially the need for autonomy and competence.

Authors Notes

Matt Shin (M.A., California State University, Fullerton, 2020) is a doctoral student in the Department of Communication Studies at West Virginia University. Elissa A. Adame (Ph.D., The University of Oklahoma, 2015) is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. A previous version of this manuscript was presented at the 108th National Communication Association Convention.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Open Research Statement

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the author(s) have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered. The data used in the research are available. The data can be obtained by emailing: ms00031@mix.wvu.edu. The materials used in the research are available. The materials can be obtained by emailing: ms00031@mix.wvu.edu.

ORCID iD

Matt Shin https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5747-6902

References

Baker, R. W., & Siryk, B. (1984). Measuring adjustment to college. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *31*(2), 179–189. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.31.2.179

Buchanan, T., & LeMoyne, T. (2020). Helicopter parenting and the moderating impact of gender and single-parent family structure on self-efficacy and well-being. *The Family Journal*, *28*(3), 262–272. https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480720925829

Chen, B., Vansteenkiste, M., Beyers, W., Boone, L., Deci, E. L., Van der Kaap-Deeder, J., Duriez, B., Lens, W., Matos, L., Mouratidis, A., Ryan, R. M., Sheldon, K. M., Soenens, B., Van Petegem, S., & Verstuyf, J. (2015). Basic psychological need satisfaction, need frustration, and need strength across four cultures. *Motivation and Emotion*, *39*(2), 216–236. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-014-9450-1

Cui, M., Hong, P., & Jiao, C. (2022). Overparenting and emerging adult development: A systematic review. *Emerging Adulthood*, *10*(5), 1076–1094. https://doi.org/10.1177/21676968221108828

Cui, M., Janhonen-Abruquah, H., Darling, C. A., Carlos Chavez, F. L., & Palojoki, P. (2019). Helicopter parenting and young adults' well-being: A comparison between United States and Finland. *Cross-Cultural Research*, *53*(4), 410–427. https://doi.org/10.1177/1069397118802253

Darlow, V., Norvilitis, J. M., & Schuetze, P. (2017). The relationship between helicopter parenting and adjustment to college. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *26*(8), 2291–2298. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-017-0751-3

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Plenum.

DiStefano, C., & Motl, R. W. (2006). Further investigating method effects associated with negatively worded items on self-report surveys. *Structural Equation Modeling*, *13*(3), 440–464. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15328007sem1303_6

Ellis, K. (2002). Perceived parental confirmation: Development and validation of an instrument. *Southern Journal of Communication*, *67*(4), 319–334. https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940209373242

Gerdes, H., & Mallinckrodt, B. (1994). Emotional, social, and academic adjustment of college students: A longitudinal study of retention. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, *72*(3), 281–288. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1994.tb00935.x

Haktanir, A., Watson, J. C., Ermis-Demirtas, H., Karaman, M. A., Freeman, P. D., Kumaran, A., & Streeter, A. (2018). Resilience, academic self-concept, and college adjustment among first-year

students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, *23*(1), 161–178. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025118810666

Hall, E. D., Shebib, S. J., & Scharp, K. M. (2021). The mediating role of helicopter parenting in the relationship between family communication patterns and resilience in first-semester college students. *Journal of Family Communication*, *21*(1), 34–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2020.1859510

Hancock, G. R., & Mueller, R. O. (2001). Rethinking construct validity with latent variable systems. In R. Cudeck, S. du Toit, & D. Sörbom (Eds), *Structural equation modeling: Present and future—a festschrift in honor of Karl Jöreskog*. (pp. 195–216). Social Scientific International.

Hwang, W., & Jung, E. (2021). Helicopter parenting versus autonomy supportive parenting? A latent class analysis of parenting among emerging adults and their psychological and relational well-being. *Emerging adulthood*, *10*(3), 216769682110004. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F21676968211000498

Hwang, W., Jung, E., Fu, X., Zhang, Y., Ko, K., Lee, S.-A., Lee, Y. M., Lee, S., You, H.-K., & Kang, Y. (2022). Typologies of helicopter parenting in American and Chinese young adults' game and social media addictive behaviors. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *31*, 1030–1044. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-021-02213-w

Jung, E., Hwang, W., Kim, S., Sin, H., Zhang, Y., & Zhao, Z. (2019). Relationships among helicopter parenting, self-efficacy, and academic outcome in American and South Korean college students. *Journal of Family Issues*, *40*(18), 2849–2870. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X19865297

Kline, R. B. (2016). *Principles and practice of structural equation modeling* (4th ed.). Guilford Press.

Kwon, K.-A., Yoo, G., & De Gagne, J. C. (2017). Does culture matter? A qualitative inquiry of helicopter parenting in Korean American college students. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *26*(7), 1979–1990. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-017-0694-8

LaBrie, J. W., Ehret, P. J., Hummer, J. F., & Prenovost, K. (2012). Poor adjustment to college life mediates the relationship between drinking motives and alcohol consequences: A look at college adjustment, drinking motives, and drinking outcomes. *Addictive Behaviors*, *37*(4), 379–386. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2011.11.018

LeMoyne, T., & Buchanan, T. (2011). Does "hovering" matter? Helicopter parenting and its effect on well-being. *Sociological Spectrum*, *31*(4), 399–418. https://doi.org/10.1080/02732173.2011.574038

Love, H., May, R. W., Cui, M., & Fincham, F. D. (2020). Helicopter parenting, self-control, and school burnout among emerging adults. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *29*, 327–337. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-019-01560-z

Luebbe, A. M., Mancini, K. J., Kiel, E. J., Spangler, B. R., Semlak, J. L., & Fussner, L. M. (2018). Dimensionality of helicopter parenting and relations to emotional, decision-making, and academic functioning in emerging adults. *Assessment*, *25*(7), 841–857. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1073191116665907

MacCallum, R. C., Roznowski, M., & Necowitz, L. B. (1992). Model modifications in covariance structure analysis: The problem of capitalization on chance. *Psychological Bulletin*, *111*(3), 490–504. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.111.3.490

Muthén, L. K., & Muthén, B. O. (2017). *Mplus: Statistical analysis with latent variables, user's guide* (8th ed.). Muthén and Muthén.

Odenweller, K. G., Booth-Butterfield, M., & Weber, K. (2014). Investigating helicopter parenting, family environments, and relational outcomes for millennials. *Communication Studies*, *65*(4), 407–425. https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2013.811434

O'Donnell, M. B., Maples, L. A., Park, S. S., Nolen, J. P., Gibbons, A. M., & Rosén, L. A. (2018). The college adjustment questionnaire: A measure of students' educational, relational, and psychological adjustment to the college environment. *Journal of College Student Development*, *59*(1), 116–121. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2018.0009

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), 68–78. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Press. https://doi.org/10.1521/978.14625/28806

Schiffrin, H. H., Liss, M., Miles-McLean, H., Geary, K. A., Erchull, M. J., & Tashner, T. (2014). Helping or hovering? The effects of helicopter parenting on college students' well-being. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *23*(3), 548–557. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-013-9716-3

Schiffrin, H. H., Yost, J. C., Power, V., Saldanha, E. R., & Sendrick, E. (2019). Examining the relationship between helicopter parenting and emerging adults' mindsets using the consolidated helicopter parenting scale. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *28*(5), 1207–1219. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-019-01360-5

Vansteenkiste, M., & Ryan, R. M. (2013). On psychological growth and vulnerability: Basic psychological need satisfaction and need frustration as a unifying principle. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, *23*(3), 263–280. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032359

Vasquez, A. C., Patall, E. A., Fong, C. J., Corrigan, A. S., & Pine, L. (2016). Parent autonomy support, academic achievement, and psychosocial functioning: A meta-analysis of research. *Educational Psychology Review*, *28*(3), 605–644. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-015-9329-z