"Helicopter Parents", Higher Education, and Ambivalent Adulthood

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This article discusses a tension that is increasingly discussed in relation to higher education in the United States and the United Kingdom, regarding the level and nature of parents' involvement in their adult children's educational success and social development. The problem of the 'helicopter parent', who hovers over their older child's education and social life, is increasingly framed as a causal factor in young adults' struggles to cope with the demands of a university environment in which they live away from home, and are expected to exercise a greater degree of independence, self-motivation, and personal responsibility in engaging with their studies than when they were at school. This discussion is extended to the struggles that the 'Millennial generation' allegedly experiences in managing the pressure of work and life after university.

A thematic exploration of the literature on the problem of the 'helicopter parent' finds that this narrative is fraught with contradictions, particularly in the extent to which parental behaviours, practices, and expectations can be isolated from the wider cultural and institutional dynamics that implicitly or explicitly discourage young adults from aspiring to independence and adulthood. As such, criticisms of 'helicopter parents' both express, and evade engaging with, a deeper sense of uncertainty about the socialisation of emerging adults.

Key words: helicopter parents, intensive parenting, risk aversion, independence, higher education, students.

Introduction

In drawing up a 'typology' of the helicopter parent, Somers and Settle (2010, p. 19) define this kind of parent as '*a mother, father, or even a grandparent who "hovers" over a student of any age by being involved – sometimes overly so – in student/school, student/employer, or student/societal relationships*'. They state that '*the term "helicopter parent" was coined by Charles Fay and Foster Cline (authors of the* Love and Logic *parenting series) and was popularised by a* Newsweek *article (Zeman, 1991), which described such a person as "a nosy grown-up who's always around. Quick to offer a teacher unwanted help"*' (Somers and Settle, 2010, p. 19). Bayless (2013) writes that this term '*became popular enough to become a dictionary entry in 2011*', and that similar terms '*include "lawnmower parenting," "cosseting parent," or "bulldoze parenting"*'.

As I discuss below, the term 'helicopter parent' is often deployed in more general discussions about the 'over-protected' child and the distinctive character of 21st-century parenting culture. However, it is specifically developed in discussions about older children and 'emerging adults' (Arnett 2004, 2015). Bradley-Geist and Olson-Buchanan (2014, p.

314) explain that while '*[e]arly coverage of over-parenting focussed on parents of children in elementary, intermediate, and high school*', in more recent years:

> *[T]he discussion has moved to helicopter parenting in college and includes such anecdotes as parents writing term papers for their children or contacting college professors to argue about grades (e.g. Gibbs, 2009). Indeed, some universities now provide guidelines to staff for interacting with such parents (e.g. Carney-Hall, 2008; Keppler et al., 2005). Today, media discussion has started to focus on over-parenting of grown children in the workplace and includes examples from human resource professionals where parents have attended job fairs (in lieu of grown children), called to complain about a poor performance evaluation or even attempted to negotiate a higher salary for their children (Manos, 2009; Tyler, 2007).* (Bradley-Geist and Olson-Buchanan, 2014, p. 314)

The media debate about the problem of 'helicoptered' children in the workplace focuses on young people's alleged inability or unwillingness to work hard, take criticism, or make decisions. 'Career coach' Joyce E. A. Russell, writing in the *Washington Post*, sums up the problem as follows:

> *Today, helicopter parenting has gone beyond just the classrooms and schoolyards. It has entered the workplace as the millennial generation grows up and moves beyond college. I have heard many examples from work colleagues about parents who have been involved in everything from job interviews to performance coaching sessions.* (Russell, 2014)

The tenor of most reports about parents in the workplace is negative, spawning headlines such as: 'Helicopter Parenting Leads To Serious Workplace Setbacks' (Glazer, 2016); 'Five Reasons Why Helicopter Parents Are Sabotaging Their Child's Career' (Stahl, 2015); 'Helicopter Parents Are Raising Unemployable Children' (Sirota, 2017); and 'Helicopter

Parents In The Workplace: It Happens And It Needs To Stop' (Pollak, 2016). Helicopter parents, argues Sirota (2017), '*do too much for their kids, so their kids grow up lacking a healthy work ethic*', as well as '*basic skills*' needed '*to accomplish many of the workplace tasks expected of them*'; they '*over-protect their kids and deprive them of any meaningful consequences for their actions*'; and they '*protect their kids from any conflicts they might have with their peers*', resulting in grown-up children who '*don't know how to resolve difficulties between themselves and a colleague or supervisor*'.

In these examples, the trope of the 'helicopter parent' reflects a wider cultural anxiety that young people are taking longer to 'grow up' than in the past, and that they are struggling to cope with the demands and responsibilities of adulthood. This is seen to be reflected in the attitudes and behaviour of current university students and young employees, who, it is alleged, often lack the desire or ability to cope independently with the demands of living, and studying, away from home. Claims about the problem of 'helicopter parents' present young adults' 'failure to launch' as a direct result of 'over-protective' parenting practices. But an investigation of the literature on this question reveals a more complex picture.

In a previous account (Bristow, 2014), I argued that parents are caught in a 'double bind', in which they are compelled to ensure their child's safety and success, yet criticised for failing to let their children 'launch'. In this regard, the '*backlash against overparenting*' (Gibbs, 2009) that has been described since the turn of the Millennium is itself informed by the central tenets of the culture of '*paranoid parenting*' (Furedi 2001), which assert that what parents do (or do not do) is of central and determining importance, and that any problems with what parents do (or do not do) should be measured by the (presumed) impact upon the child (Bristow, 2014). Below, I revisit the debate about the 'double bind' of parenting culture, by presenting a thematic analysis of recent literature that examines 'helicopter parenting' in the

context of higher education in the USA and UK. From this analysis, three main themes emerge. The first is situated within a wider rhetoric of '*parent blaming*', where the actions, behaviours, and emotions of a particular 'type' of parent is isolated as a causal factor in young people's struggles with the demands of university study and life. The second theme focuses on the problem of '*institutional infantilisation*', and the role played by the practices, processes, and expectations of the university in fostering a sense of childlike dependence by undergraduate students. The third theme addresses the wider cultural context of 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett, 2004, 2015), in which young people's aspirations to 'grow up' are tempered by *ambivalence.*

Context: Parental determinism and the 'double bind' of parenting culture

As a label widely used in the popular media, the 'helicopter parent' is identified with a general, and generational, approach to childrearing. It is associated with the generation of children generally known as the 'Millennials' – born in the last two decades of the twentieth century, when attitudes towards child-rearing underwent a radical shift. This shift, encapsulated by Furedi's (2001) concept of 'paranoid parenting', ushered in an era termed by Howe and Strauss (2000) as 'the era of the protected child' and 'the era of the worthy child' (p. 32). First, parenting became an activity to be organised around the principle of *risk aversion*, in which shielding one's offspring from every potential danger to their physical and emotional wellbeing became an overriding cultural imperative. Second, parenting became framed as an activity that should be practised consciously and diligently, with an eye to maximising a child's 'outcomes' with regard to health, education, achievement, and happiness. The US sociologist Sharon Hays coined the term 'intensive motherhood' to denote an orthodoxy according to which '*the methods of appropriate child rearing are construed as* child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive' (Hays, 1996, p. 8; emphasis in original).

The cultural consequences of 'paranoid parenting' have been subject to some powerful critiques. It is argued that the obsession with children's safety compromises their ability to play freely, explore the outside world, and take physical risks that are important for their social and emotional development (Furedi, 2001; Guldberg, 2009; Skenazy, 2009). Concerns about 'the over-scheduled child' reflect an anxiety that, by buying into the orthodoxy of 'hyper-parenting' – the idea that childhood must be intensively managed, optimised, and regulated – parents are damaging their children's creativity and self-reliance, as well doing harm to family life and their own well-being (Rosenfeld and Wise, 2001). The practical and emotional difficulties presented for mothers and fathers by the imperative to practise intensive parenting has also been explored, and grey literature is replete with semi-humorous accounts of the impossibility of rearing children in a situation of 'perfect madness' (Warner, 2006) in which the 'Mommy myth' (Douglas and Michaels, 2004) sets the bar for adequate child-rearing impossibly high.

Recent debates about the harm caused by over-protective, 'helicopter' parents to their child's development may appear to present a critical response to the orthodoxy of intensive parenting. Such critiques, however, are fraught with contradictions and simplifications. By focusing on parental anxiety and behaviour as the main threats to children's independence and resilience, they tend to evade the deeper social and cultural causes of contemporary ideas about parenting, and fail to address other cultural and institutional responses to the (presumed) needs and expectations of young people as they embark on the journey to adulthood.

The focus on 'helicopter parenting' as the cause of young people's struggles to cope independently with the demands of higher education can be seen as a case in point. In

many developed societies, 'going to university' has come to be framed as an expected 'next step' from school for increasing proportions of young people. This can be explained in part as a result of the shift from 'elite' to 'mass' systems of higher education over the latter part of the 20th century (Trow, 1999), which has resulted in a prolonged period of financial dependence on parents, a later entry into the world of work, and what some scholars have described as the 'schoolification' of the modern university (Pedró 2001). [1]In the UK and USA, these trends have been amplified by processes of 'marketisation' and, in particular, the vision of the undergraduate student as a 'consumer', who pays tuition fees in the expectation that they will be able to purchase the type of course, the 'student experience', and (to some extent) the qualification that they want (Williams 2013, Collini 2012, 2017; Giannakis and Bullivant 2016).

In the UK and the USA, it is considered normal – even desirable – for undergraduate students to study and live away from the parental home, usually spending their first year of study living in designated 'halls of residence' or 'dorms' positioned on or near the university campus. Going to university therefore represents the first step to independent living for many young people, with all the social, emotional, and practical challenges this involves. An historical tension has existed regarding the degree of pastoral responsibility that universities have for these young people – specifically, whether undergraduate students should be considered as independent adults, or whether universities should be expected to operate *in loco parentis*. This tension is exacerbated by the trends described above, particularly in a context where safety, protection, and support have become part of a suite of services offered to, and expected by, the 'student consumer'.

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[1] Schoolification is a term most commonly used in critical accounts of early childhood education and care, where it is considered that such settings are exposing young children prematurely to the culture and practices of the primary school (Gaunt, 2017). However, it has also been deployed to describe changes to the culture and practices of the University in recent years, where an academic's role is increasingly conceptualised and regulated in a similar way to that of a schoolteacher (see discussion in Bristow et al. 2020).

In this wider context, the promotion of the university experience as a means to foster young people's independence coexists in apparent contradiction with an imperative to give the student consumer what they want, and to provide students with increasing pastoral support in navigating the academic, social, and emotional demands of higher education. Thus, critiques of the 'helicopter parent' tend to result in either the advocacy of a different type of 'intensive parenting' (Lee et al., 2014), which self-consciously seeks to balance the 'right' amount of support with the 'right' amount of letting go; or an institutional response, which seeks to usurp the role of the parent in favour of constructing young adults' dependence on the processes and practices of the university.

Parent blaming

The 'problem' of the helicopter parented-child is framed in terms of a particular stereotype of the kind of student engaged in higher education today – dependent, entitled, and unwilling and unable to withstand the pressures of the 'real world'. Meanwhile, the phenomenon of the parent who tags along to university open days, talks to their child every day, invests heavily (financially, emotionally, and sometimes intellectually) in the 'university experience', and thinks little of contacting college professors with demands to know why their child has not received the grade they apparently deserve, has now become a well-worn stereotype of the helicopter parent. In their account *Millennials Go to College*, Howe and Strauss (2003) write that:

> *Where once parents simply unloaded the station wagon at the start of orientation week, kissed good-bye and drove home, now they linger for days – fussing, meddling, tearing, and even ranting if they think their very special child isn't getting the very best of everything. When they don't get their way, they threaten to take their business elsewhere or sue.* (Howe and Strauss, 2003, p. 11)

In the published literature investigating the 'helicopter parenting' phenomenon, there is a general consensus that 'helicopter parenting' is something new and potentially problematic. However, there is much less consensus that kissing the kids goodbye and driving home would be the better response. Rather, studies tend to accept parental over-involvement as a new reality, and in examining its effects, attempt to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' forms of helicoptering.

For example, in their 'typology' of the helicopter parent, Somers and Settle (2010) distinguish five 'types' of helicopter parent: c*onsumer advocates*, who '*view college not as an educational journey but as a consumer transaction*'; *equity or fairness advocates*, who '*demand fairness for their children*'; *vicarious college students*, who '*missed out on many college experiences themselves and want to recreate those golden four (or five) years spent as undergraduates*; *toxic parents*, who have '*numerous psychological issues and are controlling, negative, and try at once to live their children's lives even as they "one-up" their children in the process*'; and s*afety patrol parents*, who are mostly concerned with their children's physical safety on campus. For Somers and Settle, only the 'toxic parent' – a type that has 'been written about extensively in self-help literature' – is deeply problematic. For the other types, they suggest that 'helicopter behaviour can have a positive or negative effect':

> *Positive results accrue when the 'hovering' is age appropriate; when parents and student engage in a dialogue; when the student is empowered to act; and when parents intercede only if the student needs additional help. We label this behavior positive parental engagement. Negative helicopter parents can be found in many settings, including educational, and are inappropriately (and at times surreptitiously) enmeshed in their children's lives and relationships.* (Somers and Settle, 2010, p. 19)

Fingerman et al.'s (2012) study of 'Helicopter parents and landing pad kids' is similarly ambivalent on the question of whether helicopter parents *per se* have a negative effect on their children. They begin by noting that '*[p]opular media describe adverse effects of helicopter parents who provide intense support to grown children*'; however, '*it remains unclear whether intense parental involvement is viewed as normative today and whether frequent support is detrimental or beneficial to the parents and children involved*' (Fingerman et al., 2012, pp. 880-1). This study found that parents and grown children alike found helicoptering 'non-normative' when it took the form of '*too much support*'; but that '*grown children who received intense support reported better psychological adjustment and life satisfaction than grown children who did not receive intense support*' (Fingerman et al., 2012, p. 880).

Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012) draw attention to the negative connotations of over-parenting in the title of their paper: 'Black hawk down?: Establishing helicopter parenting as a distinct construct from other forms of parental control during emerging adulthood'. These authors attempt to address the question of whether 'helicopter parenting' does indeed exist as a form of parental behaviour that is distinct from 'other controlling parenting practices' (Padilla-Walker and Nelson, 2012), and to examine its effects on children and emerging adults in the present day. They define helicopter parenting as '*a unique patterning of the basic dimensions of parenting*', which '*represents parenting that is high on warmth/support, high on control, and low on granting autonomy.* (Padilla-Walker and Nelson, 2012, p. 1178)

Padilla-Walker and Nelson's study suggests that, first, '*helicopter parenting' has indeed emerged as 'a distinct form of control in emerging adulthood*', and second, that this form of parenting '*was positively associated with parental involvement and specific aspects of the parent-child relationship including guidance, disclosure, and emotional support, as well as*

negatively related to parental autonomy granting and emerging adults' school engagement' (Padilla-Walker and Nelson, 2012, p. 1186). As such, the authors claim to provide '*some of the first empirical evidence that there is indeed an approach to parenting that reflects high levels of parental involvement in the lives of their emerging-adult children*', and that this approach is one that '*appears to be inappropriately intrusive and managing, but done out of strong parental concern for the well-being and success of the child*' (p. 1186).

Padilla-Walker and Nelson take care to emphasise that, while their findings suggest that helicopter parenting differs from psychological and behavioural control, '*it is not meant to suggest that helicopter parenting is necessarily positive*'. While this form of parenting may not be as 'destructive' as forms of '*controlling parenting in the absence of support*', they argue, '*the harm caused by helicopter parenting may be just as growth-inhibiting but via different mechanisms*'. For example:

> *[I]n emerging adulthood, if parents repeatedly make decisions and solve problems (with roommates, employers, professors) for their children, it would limit the children's opportunities to practice the skills needed to flourish in emerging adulthood, successfully take on adult roles, and in general, become a self-reliant individual.* (Padilla-Walker and Nelson, 2012, p. 1187)

In highlighting the combination of the negative effects of helicopter parenting (inhibiting growth) and the worthy intentions behind it (the provision of parental warmth and support), Padilla-Walker and Nelson confirm the cultural ambiguity that frames this phenomenon. In seeking to support their children in their personal and educational relationships and achievements, such parents are acting according to the logic of intensive parenting, which dictates that a child's success and happiness is directly related to the amount of highly-skilled, well-intentioned parental input. But the cultural validation attached to intensive

parenting conflicts with the imperative to ensure that emerging adults develop the skills and attributes necessary '*for success in marriage, careers, and adult social interactions*' (Padilla-Walker and Nelson, 2012, p. 1187).

The 'double bind' of parenting culture is clearly at play here. In a context where individual success is increasingly linked to educational attainment, parents who are not actively engaged in supporting their children in gaining the highest possible grades to succeed at the best universities find themselves implicitly fall short of the 'ideal' standards of intensive parenting. However, such engagement is also construed as potentially harmful 'helicoptering', which risks damaging their children's capacity to develop other important, 'adult' skills. Aside from the inherent difficulties for parents charged with navigating this fine line, the presumption here is that the impact of a particular parenting style or practice can be examined in isolation from other personal, cultural, and contextual factors that shape university students' expectations and experiences of growing up.

Institutional infantilisation

In *Millennials Go To College*, Howe and Strauss (2003) introduce us to the 'Millennial' student and their parents as follows:

> *Meet the new students. 'It's very rare to get a student to challenge anything or to take a position that's counter to what the professor says. They are disconcertingly comfortable with authority,' says Princeton sociologist Robert Wurthnow of today's new crop of college freshmen. 'They're eager to please, eager to jump through whatever hoops the faculty puts in front of them, eager to conform.'*
>
> *And, meet the new moms and dads – whom Wake Forest official Mary Gerardy aptly describes as 'helicopter parents', always hovering – ultra-protective, unwilling to let*

go, enlisting 'the team' (physician, lawyer, psychiatrist, professional counselors) to

assert a variety of special needs and interests. (Howe and Strauss, 2003, p. 11)

Howe and Strauss's definition of helicopter parents employed by Frey and Tatum's (2016) discussion of these parents' influence on millennial students' rapport with their instructors:

This suffocating sheltering extends students' adolescence and delays the

development of independence (Price, 2010), causing millennials to rely on their

parents for financial stability (White, 2015) and emotional support (Raphaelson,

2014). (Frey and Tatum, 2016, p. 359)

Frey and Tatum argue further that '*[e]ven in the midst of transitioning to college*', the '*constant, overbearing parental presence*' offered by parents '*"who assume participatory roles in their children's educational pursuits" (Elam, Stratton and Gibson, 2007, p.22)*' may '*affect students' relationship with their instructors*' and '*may ultimately lead to changing student needs, including a greater focus on the instructor-student relationship, and specifically, rapport*' (Frey and Tatum 2016, p. 359). For these authors, the chain of causality is clear. Besieged by the malign influence of helicopter parents and their effect on students, universities are forced to align their practices to meet '*changing student needs*'.

Howe and Strauss also talk of parents' willingness to enlist '*"the team" (physician, lawyer, psychiatrist, professional counselors)*' in support of their child's comfort and success (Howe and Strauss, 2003, p. 11). This is an important insight, as it acknowledges the wider cultural and institutional context in which 'helicopter parenting' takes place, in which a range of therapeutic strategies are employed to handle the problem of dependence but may, ultimately, exacerbate it.

While most critiques of helicopter parenting emphasise the stifling effect of parental concern, some have engaged with a related phenomenon: the way that some of the processes and practices of the modern Anglo-American university now operate to replace students' dependence on their parents with dependence on the support mechanisms offered by higher education institutions. Couture et al.'s (2017) study of 'Helicopter Colleges' examines the extent to which university practices and processes are increasingly organised around the principle that these institutions should act *in loco parentis*. The authors use Somers and Settle's (2010) typology of 'the over-involved parent' – consumer advocate, fairness, vicarious college student, toxic, and safety patrol – as the basis for a survey of student services practitioners '*to identify policies and procedures related to over-involved parental styles, as well as to examine practitioner attitudes toward these policies and procedures*'. The results, they write, '*suggest that changes in practices may be enabling or replicating some of the same "helicopter" parenting behaviors that were once scorned*', and that '*higher education institutions are beginning to "over-parent" their college students to satisfy both students and parents*' (Couture et al., 2017, p. 398).

Couture et al. note that '*Higher education officials have long implored parents to "let go" of parental tendencies to shield their college students from harm, to let them make their own decisions, and to let them fail a little*' – but, as Selingo (2015) writes, '*colleges instead are practicing a new version of "in loco parentis" – they are expected to be stand-in parents – and it begins as soon as students step foot on campus (Selingo, 2015, para. 4)*'. In a context where higher education institutions face pressure from student consumers to satisfy demands that college should be an easy and pleasant experience, selling high levels student support and satisfaction has become part of the way universities engage with students for the duration of their studies. However, as Couture et al. warn:

> *If institutions are doing too much for students, then they may be implying to students*
>
> *that colleges do not have confidence in students and this leads to dependence,*

which is exactly what higher education and student affairs professionals have been warning parents against for the past couple of decades. Students with overbearing parents are stifled and "feel that their basic psychological needs are not being met" (Schriffin et al., 2013, p. 7). We believe overbearing institutions can have a similar effect. Students need supportive, not over-protective families, just as they need supportive, not over-protective colleges. Put another way, students need faculty and staff who are nurturing (Sanford, 1958). (Couture et al., 2017, pp. 404-5)

But what is right balance between support and nurture, and over-protection? Arguably, 'helicopter colleges' face a similar dilemma to 'helicopter parents' in this regard. The context of higher education in the UK and USA is one in which undergraduate students are increasingly considered to be, Furedi (2016, p. 186) argues, '*biologically mature school children*', to whom the university has a more significant pastoral responsibility than in previous eras. Undergraduate students both experience, and are expected to experience, the transition to independent living and studying at university as a challenging life stage. They attend open days and interviews with their parents in tow, and often demand help and concessions from academic staff as they struggle to cope with the demands of deadlines, friendships, and other features of university life. These interactions with academic staff reinforce the sentiment that students are engaging, not as independent, adult learners, but as children unable to cope with the demands of academic study. In this context, an institutional attempt to be 'supportive, not over-protective' will experience its own version of the 'double bind' of parenting culture: castigated both for neglecting their responsibilities to protect their students, and for failing to allow them to develop the requisite skills.

Ambivalent adulthood

The limitation of critiques of 'helicopter colleges', like those of 'helicopter parents', is that they often fail to address the wider cultural context of young adults' alleged 'failure to launch'. This is a context in which aspirations to independence among emerging adults already to appear to be ambivalent and relatively weak. Indeed, when psychology professor Jeffrey J. Arnett coined the term 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett, 2000), it was an attempt to provide '*a new term and a new conceptualization*' to make sense of the life stage experienced by 18-29-year-olds, who were '*neither adolescents nor young adults but something in-between*'; who were '*taking longer to grow up than young people had in the past, as measured by their entry to stable adult roles as well as their own self-perceptions of not-fully-adult status*' (Arnett, 2015, p. vii-viii).

What Arnett (2004, 2015) described as '*the winding road from the late teens through the twenties*' clearly takes in the experience of university as a hiatus between childhood and adulthood, during which time young adults are 'emerging' into adult roles rather that already assuming them. However, the reasons why young people today may be '*taking longer to grow up*' than in the past are varied and complicated, and cannot be explained as a direct consequence either of changing parenting styles, or the processes of the university.

In their UK study of 'parents' involvement and university students' independence', Lewis et al. (2015) note that while going away to university '*has long been seen as a marker along the road to fully independent living*', the '*extent of college students' autonomy and independence*' in Anglo-American societies has recently been questioned, by changing trends and expectations of parental involvement (Lewis et al., 2015, p. 417). The literature on this question '*tends to be divided between the psychological… and the sociological*' (p. 418), and indicates that '*assessing the importance of parental involvement is a complex*

task', with '*ambivalence' recurring as 'central concept that crosses the disciplinary divide*' (p. 419).

Lewis et al. draw on the '*paradoxical task faced by parents*', as identified by Karp et al. (2004, pp. 358-9), of managing '*"attached individuation" for themselves and their children – a balance between "distance and engagement", a process of giving the young person both "roots" and "wings"*' (Lewis et al., 2015, p. 420). Their own study, of 29 parent-student dyads comprising students from two UK universities, found that only two parents '*reported providing little support*': both were mothers with chronic health problems, one divorced and one estranged. Of the remainder, the authors identified four categories of parental involvement, '*according to the degree and style of support and how parents felt about that support*':

1. *Parents who wanted to be involved and were often directive (five parents);*
2. *Parents who were involved and might or might not be directive, but who felt ambivalent about their involvement (eight parents);*
3. *Parents who were involved but strived not to be directive (four parents);*
4. *Parents who wanted to be involved but who tried to limit involvement and 'hold back' (10 parents).* (Lewis et al., 2015, p. 422).

Lewis et al. conclude that most of the parents in their study '*wanted to promote greater independence, while also remaining close*'; however, '*parents differed in how urgently they wanted change in this respect, and in how far and in what ways they sought to promote independence*' (Lewis et al., 2015, p. 427). In this regard, this study '*supports the conclusion that involved parental support does not routinely become smothering, "helicopter" parenting*' (Lewis et al., 2015, p. 429). Indeed, 'involved parenting' can mean actively encouraging the development of independence among the emerging adults in the parent-student dyads.

Arguably the most striking finding of Lewis et al.'s study is the difference identified between parents' assumptions and aspirations regarding their children's independence, and those held by the students themselves. They write:

> *Unlike their parents, the students mostly* assumed *that they would continue to be 'close' to their families. They viewed the achievement of independence differently from their parents in two respects: they lacked the urgency that most parents felt about the need to become more independent; and they did not share their parents' linear model of progress towards adulthood in which going away to university marked an important transitional stage.* (Lewis et al., 2015, p. 429; emphasis in original.)

While parents in this study '*tended to hold fast to the ideal of a linear passage to full independence and were sometimes unsure about how to react to their children's apparent insouciance in the face of their manifest dependence*', many of the students '*appeared to be reliant on their parents, exhibiting few signs of autonomy*' (Lewis et al., 2015, p. 429).

If the attitude held by emerging adults towards independence is, as Lewis et al. suggest, one of ambivalence and even insouciance, this raises some important questions regarding the delineation of 'helicopter parenting' as a causal factor in young people's alleged 'failure to launch'. In their sample, the majority of parents did not conform to any of the helicopter 'types' identified by Somers and Settle (2010), in that they were at least as concerned to limit their involvement in their children's lives as they were to act as advocates on their behalf. Indeed, many of the parents were acutely aware of the need for their children to develop adult attributes, but were struggling to effect this in a context where the wider cultural aspiration to adulthood appears weak and conflicted.

The lack of a 'linear model of progress towards adulthood' is thus shaped both by a wider cultural narrative that struggles to give a positive content to what it means to be an adult. As Arnett (2015) indicates, '*many emerging adults are ambivalent about reaching adulthood*'. He cites a national (US) poll conducted by himself and a and his colleague, Joseph Schwab in 2012, in which 35% of 18-29-year-olds agreed with the statement, '*If I could have my way I would never become an adult*'. '*In part, this ambivalence results from a realization that adult responsibilities can be burdensome and annoying,*' Arnett (2015, p.322-3) suggests. But another source of ambivalence is that '*they associate becoming an adult with stagnation*': in this view, adulthood means '*the end of fun, of spontaneity, of personal growth*' (Arnett 2015, p.322-3). This may reflect the way that the meaning of adulthood is often presented in terms of a set of technicalities of competencies, which do little to inspire.

Arnett states that in a number of studies from across the United States, people consistently state the following as the top three criteria for adulthood:

1. *Accept responsibility for yourself.*
2. *Make independent decisions.*
3. *Become financially independent.* (Arnett 2015, p. 14)

In the literature on helicopter parenting, young people's transition to adulthood is similarly described in instrumental terms, as the acquisition of particular skills. For example, Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012) discuss the importance of emerging adults '*solving their own problems with roommates, making their own decisions about employment, and seeking their own help from professors*' in terms of gaining '*the experience and practice necessary to develop skills that are essential for success in marriage, careers, and adult social interactions*' (Padilla-Walker and Nelson, 2012, p. 1187). While such skills may, indeed, be necessary, they capture only a partial and contingent aspect of what it means to be an adult.

In particular, what is lacking in the presentation of adulthood as a set of employability skills is the aspiration, and reality, of independence.

Discussion: Parental determinism and the 'double bind' of parenting culture

In his critique of 'paranoid parenting', Furedi (2001) elaborates the concept of 'parental determinism' to capture how the cultural orthodoxy of child-rearing in the latter part of the twentieth century presented what parents do as having a direct, causal effect on their child's development, health and behaviour – for good or ill. According to this orthodoxy, if a parent feeds their child the 'wrong' food, or pays 'insufficient' attention to their activities and relationships, the child will develop unhealthy eating habits for life, or suffer from bullying, accidents, and emotional harm in the school playground. On the other hand, the logic of parental determinism dictates that if a parent does all the 'right' things – engaging with their child's school work, monitoring their emotional state for signs of upset, or feeding them a particular diet – the child will have a bright future.

The phenomenon of 'helicopter parenting' is clearly related to the orthodoxy of parental determinism, and its related practice of intensive, or 'paranoid', parenting. Were it not for the presumption that parental actions directly determine a child's success, safety, and happiness, there would be little traction among parents for the compulsion to retain a hovering, anxious presence over the everyday activities of one's adult child. Indeed, it is worth noting that the claims of parental determinism have been challenged by scholars in disciplines ranging from Sociology and Psychology to History, Anthropology, and child development.

Yet the *critique* of helicopter parenting stands in a paradoxical relationship with the orthodoxy of parental determinism. In one sense, it is entirely congruent: suggesting that by practising a particular kind of parenting, which is supportive and nurturing without being over-bearing, and which encourages the development of independence and self-sufficiency whilst also being loving and warm, parents can (allegedly) skilfully nurture their child into becoming a functioning member of 21st century society. The practical difficulties of achieving such a finely-tuned balance are considerable, particularly in a context where a child's own reluctance to 'launch' into adulthood may make parental pressure to grow up appear as a harsh deficit of love and care, and where a young adult's educational, career, and relationship success or failure is seen to lie squarely on the shoulders of their parents. As such, the 'double bind' of parenting culture – which simultaneously criticises parents for parenting 'too little' and 'too much' – persists, through emerging adulthood and beyond.

However, the critique of helicopter parenting also seeks to *detach* young adults from their parents, by fostering a dependence on institutions that practise their own form of institutional 'over-parenting'. The phenomenon described by Couture et al. (2017) as 'helicopter colleges' are motivated by a number of conflicting imperatives. Universities in the UK and USA face significant market pressures to satisfy the consumer demands made by students and their parents; yet they need to uphold academic standards, and they are continually reminded of the imperative to turn out graduates that are skilled enough in the ways of adulthood to be 'employable'. Institutions operating in these conditions find themselves adopting forms of therapeutic governance that attempt to convince students that satisfaction and success can best be pursued through accessing mechanisms of institutional support and conforming to processes and procedures designed to develop 'resilience' (Furedi, 2016). In this regard, parents are positioned as problematic, because of a tendency to position care and concern for their individual child above the objectives of the institution.

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'Helicopter colleges' – like 'helicopter parents' – cannot step out of the wider cultural context of ambivalent adulthood. As institutions, universities may well be pushed into the same '*"helicopter" parenting behaviors that were once scorned*' (Couture et al., 2017, p. 398) by market and political pressures. But those working within universities, including academics, administrators, and those with a dedicated 'student support' role, face a more human predicament as well. If young adults arrive at university with a weak orientation towards independence, and a stronger expectation of entitlement and protection, this poses a challenge to the culture of adult learning that universities have traditionally promoted.

Simply adapting the academic and social practices of the university to engage with a more childlike undergraduate poses serious problems for the endeavour of higher education, both in its own terms and as a rite of passage into the adult world. Yet refusing to engage with the needs and expectations of young people as they arrive on campus, and blaming 'helicopter parents' for the alleged deficiencies of the modern undergraduate, evades the academy's own responsibility. The response, as we have seen, tends to be for the university itself to '*enlist the team*' in the form of therapeutic services (Howe and Strauss, 2003, p. 11), in an attempt to manage students' difficulties with growing up until the end of their college years, when they become the 'problem' of the workplace.

Conclusion

The debate about the problem of 'helicopter parents' raises a number of important issues, to do with young people's aspirations towards independence and their ability to manage the responsibilities of adult life. However, its narrow focus on 'the parent' avoids engaging with the broader cultural and institutional dynamics at play here. These include: the existence of a parenting culture that incites parents to protect their child from physical and emotional harm, and to take direct responsibility for their child's educational success (or failure); the role

played by the institutions of higher education in cultivating a sense of dependence on their own processes and procedures; and a wider cultural confusion about the meaning of adulthood.

A more constructive response to the phenomenon discussed in this article would be to reframe it as a discussion about the education and socialisation of young people, in a cultural context where the aspiration to adulthood is relatively weak. The focus on 'helicopter parents' does not capture this wider context: it presupposes a deliberate act of 'over-parenting' rather than acknowledging the subtlety of the relationships described by Lewis et al. (2015), in which parents and young people alike are navigating conflicting expectations and pressures around what it means to be an adult. That students do not share the '*linear model of progress towards adulthood*' (Lewis et al., 2015) held by previous generations – and, in many cases, their own parents – is not of their making: it is the result of a wider cultural ambivalence about the question posed by philosopher Susan Neiman (2014): '*Why Grow Up*'? If the institutions of higher education and the workplace are unable to offer a positive narrative of independence and responsibility that goes beyond the acquisition of necessary 'skills', it should not be surprising that emerging adults and their parents are struggling to find the answer.

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