

Helicopter Parenting and Chinese University Students' Adjustment: The Mediation of Autonomy and Moderation of the Sense of Entitlement

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Research Article

Keywords: Helicopter parenting, Emerging adulthood, School adjustment, Autonomy, Sense of entitlement

Posted Date: May 30th, 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-2963373/v1>

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Abstract

This study examined the relationships between helicopter parenting and emerging adults' adjustment indices (school engagement, peer attachment, and stress) and the potential mediating role of autonomy and moderating role of the sense of entitlement in the relationships. Participants included 392 Chinese university students aged 18–23 ($M = 18.83$) who completed six questionnaires that assessed helicopter parenting, school engagement, peer attachment, stress, autonomy, and the sense of entitlement, respectively. The results showed that: (1) helicopter parenting significantly negatively predicted students' school engagement and peer attachment but positively predicted their stress; (2) autonomy mediated the relationships between helicopter parenting and students' adjustment indices; (3) students' sense of entitlement significantly negatively moderated the effect of helicopter parenting on their autonomy. These findings suggested that helicopter parenting can affect emerging adults' adjustment directly and indirectly by diminishing their autonomy in the collectivist culture. The sense of entitlement appeared to protect emerging adults from the detrimental consequences of helicopter parenting.

Introduction

Emerging adulthood (18–29 years old) is a period of life characterized by change, uncertainty, and exploration in many areas [1]. It has emerged as a result of increasing time before young people enter the workforce, marry, or become parents [2]. Many aspects of emerging adulthood can be seen in young Chinese people, especially those in higher education [3–5]. For example, China's gross college enrollment rate was 12.5% in 2000 but 54.4% in 2020 [6, 7]. The half-year turnover rate of university graduates was 33% in 2018 [8]. In 2019, more people (34.6%) got married between the ages of 25 and 29 than in any other age group [9]. Due to prolonged singleness, instability, and exploration, this period in life can be confusing for young people, making them more vulnerable to socio-emotional maladjustment and low life satisfaction [10]. Given the instability of emerging adulthood, parents continue to play an essential role when their children enter college.

It may be especially true for Chinese students seeking a university education. Many Chinese parents remain involved in their children's lives, such as academic and relational pursuits, although their children are living apart from them as they attend university. Parental involvement has the potential to be beneficial or harmful. Parental involvement, for example, in the form of warmth and support, has been positively linked to emerging adults' well-being [11]. However, overparenting, particularly in the form of helicopter parenting, has been found to threaten young people's academic and emotional well-being [12], even leading to becoming a "boomerang child" or "NEET" (i.e., not in education, employment, or training) [13]. However, the majority of research into the relationship between helicopter parenting and university students' well-being has been conducted with Western samples. More research is needed to determine whether helicopter parenting is a risk factor for well-being in China. As a result, the overall goal of this study was to look into the direct and indirect links between helicopter parenting and Chinese university students' adjustment.

Helicopter Parenting and Emerging Adults' Adjustment

Helicopter parenting refers to parents doing for their children what they can and should be doing for themselves [14]. In other words, helicopter parents engage excessively in the lives of their emerging-adult children (e.g., school work, personal relationships, and career preparation) by seeking to fix any difficulties or obstacles that their children may face [15]. According to separation-individuation theory, adolescence signals the start of a psychological change away from parental dependency and toward a sense of self that is different and independent from parents [16]. During family differentiation, parents must assist their children in balancing their demand for individuality with their need to remain emotionally linked to their family during the transition from adolescence to adulthood [17]. Individuals who attain this mix of independence and emotional links with families (i.e., differentiation) have better mental health, well-being, and social adaptation [18]. When parents get too involved in or meddle with their children's lives, the boundaries between individuality and connectivity become so blurred that children are unable to separate from the family, resulting in emotional, cognitive, and behavioral issues later in life [19, 20].

Helicopter parenting appears to have a harmful influence on the lives of college students as a form of overparenting. First, it may hurt college students' academic performance [21, 22]. Padilla-Walker and Nelson [22] found that helicopter parenting was negatively correlated with students' school engagement in a survey of 438 American college students aged 18 to 29 and their parents. Second, helicopter parenting may affect college students' social adaptation [23–25]. According to Darlow [23], who recruited 294 psychology undergraduates from a public university in the United States, overparenting detrimentally influenced students' social relationships with peers and teachers. Third, helicopter parenting may threaten college students' emotional well-being [26–29]. In studies conducted with undergraduate students in the United States, helicopter parenting showed positive correlations with indices of emotional distress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms [27, 30, 31]. Studies in Turkey [32] and Ireland [33] have similarly identified relations between helicopter parenting and anxiety and depression. The substantial body of evidence from countries rooted in individualism suggests helicopter parenting is a risk factor for college students' academic, social, and emotional well-being.

However, research undertaken with participants from Asian cultural backgrounds shows that helicopter parenting may benefit emerging adults' well-being. Kwon [34] qualitatively interviewed 40 Korean American college students. Most respondents believed helicopter parenting harmed their personal growth but acknowledged that their parents' well-intentioned involvement aided their academic success and future career development. Lee and Kang [35] also looked into 562 unmarried emerging adults in South Korea, with 54.3 percent being college students. Participants who were overparented reported being more intimate with their parents and having higher life satisfaction. The researchers argued that it was due to the value of collectivist culture, which emphasizes parental and child interdependence. Although the limited work in Asian countries that reflect collectivistic values suggests that helicopter parenting might function differently, the picture just is not clear as there is also work showing that fathers' use of helicopter parenting in South Korea was negatively associated to college students' academic outcomes [36], and overparenting in Hong Kong was strongly associated with both egocentrism and positive

developmental outcomes among Chinese adolescents [37]. The conflicting findings underscore just how much more work is needed, especially in China, where the work on helicopter parenting is scarce.

Several factors highlight the importance of conducting further research in China. For example, the Confucius principle of filial piety is particularly prevalent in China. Parental beliefs and behaviors perceived as a threat to individuation in Western cultures may be perceived more positively in more collectivist cultures [38]. However, while collectivist cultures emphasize the close connections between parents and children, they also value individual independence and autonomy when children grow up. Thus, the presence of parental control during a time of individuation (i.e., emerging adulthood) may present a conflict for young people in a culture where honoring parents is valued. For example, controlling parenting (e.g., psychological control) negatively impacted young Chinese people with high filial piety [39]. Taken together, it is possible that, regardless of culture, if parents interfere or control the lives of their emerging-adult children, it will hinder their children's adaptation and development [30, 40, 41]. Indeed, the internal conflict between devotion to parents and striving for independence as emerging adults [39] may make helicopter parenting particularly problematic for Chinese university students.

Another reason to be particularly concerned about the role of helicopter parenting in the lives of emerging adults in China is due to the family structure that is common in China. Specifically, many families in China have only one child due to the one-child policy. Furthermore, many families in China now have higher financial resources as the economy has developed. Thus, with more resources and fewer children to focus on, many Chinese parents remain very involved in the lives of their only emerging-adult child with some becoming overly involved.

For example, an increasing number of Chinese parents accompany their children to university when they begin their studies. Some even rent or buy an apartment near the campus to stay with their emerging-adult children until graduation [42]. These parental behaviors have triggered a sizeable social discussion about the prevalence and implications of these types of overparenting [43]. Despite the rise in these types of parents' hovering behaviors, their impact within the Chinese cultural context has received relatively little empirical attention.

Taken together, the cultural (i.e., filial piety, collectivistic values) and demographic (fewer children, increased economic resources, and overly-involved parents) factors in China provide the conceptual context for studying the role that helicopter parenting may play in the lives of emerging Chinese adults. Therefore, the first goal of this study was to investigate the direct relations between helicopter parenting and Chinese university students' adjustment (e.g., school engagement, peer attachment, mental health) in their initial periods on campus.

Mediation of Autonomy

As well as exploring for direct associations between helicopter parenting and young people's adjustment, it would be necessary to examine how helicopter parenting may influence indices of adjustment indirectly. Drawing upon self-determination theory, people are motivated to grow and change by three

innate and universal psychological needs- competence, connection, and autonomy. In fulfilling these needs, individuals develop a sense that they can determine their behaviors and experience rather than be influenced or controlled by outside forces [44, 45]. Autonomy is an essential psychological need that must be fulfilled in order to enhance self-motivation and mental health [44, 45]. Indeed, the fulfillment of the need for autonomy in adolescents and emerging adults has been linked to indices of their adjustment, including academic adjustment [46], higher levels of self-control [47], and lower levels of negative emotions [48].

Given the importance of autonomy, helicopter parenting may be problematic because it creates an environment that restricts the development of autonomy in young people [28]. They are eager to gain more autonomy in decision-making in emerging adulthood [1]. Indeed, studies have shown that helicopter parenting reduces the autonomy of emerging adults [25, 49–51] and that the reduction in autonomy is what decreases emerging adults' well-being. For example, Schiffrin [52], employing 446 college students aged 18–25, found that paternal and maternal helicopter parenting negatively affected participants' well-being (i.e., anxiety, depression, and life satisfaction) by decreasing participants' autonomy, especially for females. Similarly, Cook [53] surveyed 637 American college students aged 18–25 and found that students' psychological needs, including autonomy, significantly mediated the relationships between helicopter parenting and their depressive symptoms and relationship competence. Taken together, if parents are overly involved in the lives of young people as they matriculate at the university (i.e., participate in or interfere with their children's campus life, press their children to comply with their standards irrespective of the children's needs and values), young people may experience difficulties in adapting to the university because of their disrupted autonomy.

Although there is emerging evidence [52, 53] to support the notion that autonomy may mediate the relationship between helicopter parenting and emerging adults' mental health and social adaptation, few studies have examined the potential mediating role of autonomy in the relationship between helicopter parenting and emerging adults' adjustment in the Chinese context. Therefore, the second goal of this study was to examine the potential mediating role of autonomy in the relationship between helicopter parenting and Chinese university students' adjustment, which included not only mental health and peer attachment but also academic engagement.

Moderation of the Sense of Entitlement

In addition to factors that might mediate the association between helicopter parenting and adjustment, there may also be factors that moderate the relationship between helicopter parenting and adjustment [24]. In China, one potential moderator may be the extent to which young people believe they deserve attention and resources. A sense of entitlement refers to the feeling that one deserves more and is entitled to more than others, including more attention, resources, and the right to positive outcomes. If one possesses a sense of entitlement it may play a rather significant role in one's life as it appears to be a stable and pervasive sense across most social contexts rather than simply a response to one singular special event [54, 55]. It is regarded as a critical component of narcissism [56, 57]. People with a higher sense of entitlement believe they deserve to have their needs and wishes satisfied regardless of their

performance. They are entitled to receive more valuable resources or benefits than others, such as higher salaries or special treatment [58]. In a study examining college students' sense of academic entitlement, which refers to one's sense of entitlement in the academic domain (e.g., believing they should get better grades than commensurate with their effort, believing they should get special treatment from teachers and schools), students with higher levels of academic entitlement experienced lower psychological well-being and poorer relationships with others [59].

It may be that young people come to develop a sense of entitlement when they have been the main focus of their parents' attention through their upbringing. Indeed, because of the small number of children in Chinese families (often only one child), some young Chinese people may come to expect all of their parents' focus, attention, and resources. Hence, it may be imperative to examine entitlement within the Chinese context. Specifically, because individuals with a high sense of entitlement believe they deserve attention and resources, they may perceive helicopter parenting differently than those with a lower sense of entitlement. Emerging adults with high levels of entitlement may believe that their parents could and should help them solve problems or provide support and that they also have the right to propose the request to their parents [51, 60]. In other words, emerging adults with high levels of entitlement may regard helicopter parenting as parental support. The sense protects their autonomy to some degree from the infringement of parental interference. However, for emerging adults with a low sense of entitlement, helicopter parenting may be perceived as an encroachment on their autonomy that might lead to a low level of environmental mastery [59]. In sum, the sense of entitlement may be protective in the relationship between helicopter parenting and emerging adults' autonomy. Thus, the third goal of this study was to investigate the potential moderating effect of the sense of entitlement on the relationship between helicopter parenting and emerging adults' autonomy.

Methods

Participants

With IRB approval and informed consent, we conducted a longitudinal survey at a university in northeast China. A total of 455 first-year students participated in three follow-ups, and 435 students responded to all the questionnaires of this study during the second follow-up. Participants who did not respond seriously were excluded. In the end, 392 valid data were obtained. The effective response rate was 90.11%. The participants included 316 females (80.61%) and 76 males (19.39%) between the ages of 18 to 23 ($M = 18.83$; $SD = 1.24$). Among them, 195 respondents (49.74%) claimed to be the only child in their family, and 197 respondents (50.26%) had siblings. Participants reported that 14.03% of fathers and 19.64% of mothers had a primary school education, 35.97% of fathers and 33.93% of mothers had a junior high school education, 23.22% of fathers and 28.38% of mothers had a senior high school or vocational school education, 25.51% of fathers and 17.60% of mothers had a college degree or higher. Like many Chinese university students, all the participants lived in the university's dormitories.

Procedures

The data were collected within one week in December 2019 when first-year students had started their first semester and lived on campus for three months. The participants were freshmen from two schools (mathematics and management) randomly selected in the university. Because the university's main goal is to train primary and secondary school teachers, most students are female. In addition to demographic information, participants completed a battery of self-report questionnaires.

Measures

Helicopter Parenting.

Helicopter parenting was assessed by participants using a helicopter parenting scale [22], which includes five items (e.g., "My parent makes important decisions for me"). The Chinese version showed good reliability and validity among Chinese university students [61]. Each item was rated on a Likert-like scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the items was 0.779.

School Engagement.

School engagement was measured using the School Engagement Scale [62]. The scale has 19 items (e.g., "Following the rules and adhering to classroom norms"), covering three factors: behavioral engagement (5 items), emotional engagement (6 items), and cognitive engagement (8 items). Each item was rated on a Likert-like scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the items was 0.915.

Peer Attachment.

The quality of peer attachment was measured using the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment [63]. This scale has 25 items (e.g., "I like to get my friends' point of view on things I'm concerned about"), containing three factors (communication, alienation, and trust). Each item was rated on a Likert-like scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the items was 0.946.

Stress.

Stress was measured using a subscale of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21 [64]. Participants reported the severity of symptoms experienced within the last week. The stress subscale has seven items (e.g., "I felt that I was using a lot of nervous energy"). On a Likert-style scale, each item rated a score between 0 (did not relate to me at all) and 3 (applied to me very much, or most of the time). Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the items was 0.884.

Autonomy.

Autonomy was measured using a subscale of the Inventory of Basic Needs Satisfaction in General Scale [65]. The autonomy subscale has seven items (e.g., "I feel like I can pretty much be myself in my daily

situations"). The ratings for each item ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) on a Likert-like scale. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the items was 0.757.

Sense of Entitlement.

Sense of entitlement was measured using the Psychological Entitlement Scale [54], which includes nine items (e.g., "I honestly feel I'm just more deserving than others"). Each item was rated on a Likert-like scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the items was 0.907.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the structural equation modeling (SEM) software Mplus 8.3. First, we examined the direct effects of helicopter parenting on emerging adults' adjustment (school engagement, peer attachment, and stress, respectively). Next, we examined the indirect effects of helicopter parenting on emerging adults' adjustment (school engagement, peer attachment, and stress) through autonomy. Bootstrapping (iterations = 1000) was used to examine the values and significance of the indirect effects in the model. Then, we used latent moderated structural equations (LMS) to investigate whether the sense of entitlement moderated the influence of helicopter parenting on emerging adults' autonomy.

Results

Common Method Bias Examination

Harman's single-factor method was used to examine the common method bias because the participants reported the data all in questionnaires. This method assumes that common method bias is a significant concern when a single latent factor accounts for most of the covariance among the measures [66]. All the data were examined using confirmatory factor analysis. The indices of the one-factor model were unacceptable ($\chi^2 = 12296.829$, $df = 2484$; TLI = 0.399; CFI = 0.416; RMSEA = 0.100; SRMR = 0.123). The results indicated a mild problem of common method bias in this study.

Descriptive Statistics, T-Tests and Correlations

Table 1 shows the results for the descriptive statistics of all the variables. The independent sample t-test reveals no significant difference in gender and only child or not across the variables (seen in Table 2). The results of correlation analysis show that helicopter parenting had significant negative correlations with university students' school engagement, peer attachment, and autonomy while having positive relationships with stress and a sense of entitlement (also seen in Table 1).

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations of the variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Helicopter Parenting	2.12	0.66	-					
2. Autonomy	4.65	0.83	-0.26**	-				
3. School Engagement	3.32	0.62	-0.19**	0.49**	-			
4. Peer Attachment	3.65	0.61	-0.21**	0.57**	0.45**	-		
5. Stress	0.91	0.65	0.20**	-0.52**	-0.39**	-0.42**	-	
6. Sense of Entitlement	3.47	1.09	0.19**	0.12*	-0.08	-0.15**	0.19**	-

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2
Independent sample t-test of the variables

	Male(N = 76)	Female(N = 316)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>		
Helicopter Parenting	2.21 (0.64)	2.10 (0.66)	1.28	0.997
School Engagement	3.37 (0.63)	3.31 (0.62)	0.72	0.555
Peer Attachment	3.53 (0.62)	3.67 (0.60)	-1.78	0.826
Stress	0.94 (0.72)	0.90 (0.63)	0.42	0.134
Autonomy	4.51 (0.93)	4.68 (0.80)	-1.58	0.108
Sense of Entitlement	3.62 (1.19)	3.43 (1.07)	1.39	0.336

Regression Analysis

A latent variable regression model (Model 1) was established to test the direct effects of helicopter parenting on university students' adjustment (school engagement, peer attachment, and stress, respectively). The results showed that the model fit well ($\chi^2 = 2623.239$, $df = 1417$, $RMSEA = 0.047$, $SRMR = 0.074$, $CFI = 0.910$, $TLI = 0.902$). In this model, helicopter parenting significantly and negatively predicted university students' school engagement ($\beta = -0.194$, $p = 0.002$) and peer attachment ($\beta = -0.226$, $p = 0.000$) but positively predicted their stress ($\beta = 0.154$, $p = 0.009$).

Fitting Test of the Mediation Model

Then, autonomy was added to Model 1 as the mediating variable between helicopter parenting and university students' school adjustment to establish a mediation model (Model 2). The model also fit well

($\chi^2 = 3096.551$, $df = 1765$, $RMSEA = 0.044$, $SRMR = 0.077$, $CFI = 0.908$, $TLI = 0.899$). As seen in Fig. 1, the prediction of helicopter parenting on autonomy was significant, and the predictions of autonomy on three indicators of school adjustment were also significant. The indirect effects mediated by autonomy were examined with the method of bootstrapping (1000). From helicopter parenting to school engagement, the indirect effect mediated by autonomy was -0.187 , which was significant (95% CI = $[-0.299, -0.107]$) and accounted for 55.65% of the total effect (-0.336). From helicopter parenting to peer attachment, the indirect effect mediated by autonomy was -0.215 , which was significant (95% CI = $[-0.320, -0.126]$) and accounted for 60.01% of the total effect (-0.358). From helicopter parenting to stress, the indirect effect mediated by autonomy was 0.169 , which was significant (95% CI = $[0.096, 0.269]$) and accounted for 51.37% of the total effect (0.329).

Fitting Test of the Moderated Mediation Model

In Model 2, we added the main effect of the sense of entitlement on autonomy to establish the restricted model (Model 3.1). The model fit well ($\chi^2 = 3884.65$, $df = 2335$, $SRMR = 0.078$, $RMSEA = 0.041$, $CFI = 0.908$, $TLI = 0.899$). The value of LogL in the restricted model was -32613.960 . The full model (Model 3.2) was specified by adding a latent interaction item (helicopter parenting \times sense of entitlement) into the restricted model. The value of LogL in the full model was -32611.605 . Thus, $LR = -2 \times (\text{LogL}_{\text{restricted}} - \text{LogL}_{\text{full}}) = 4.71$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$. These results showed a significant difference between the two models, and the full model fit the data better than the restricted model. As shown in Fig. 2, in the full model, the effect of the sense of entitlement on autonomy was insignificant, and the regression coefficient of the latent interaction term was significant ($\beta = 0.147$, $p = 0.05$), which indicated that a sense of entitlement positively moderated the negative effect of helicopter parenting on autonomy.

A simple slope analysis confirmed the moderation of entitlement sense on the relationship between helicopter parenting and autonomy. The regression coefficient and its significance level for the effect of helicopter parenting on autonomy were calculated when the sense of entitlement had a higher score ($M + SD$) and a lower score ($M - SD$). As shown in Fig. 3, no matter whether the sense of entitlement was high or low, the regression coefficients of helicopter parenting on autonomy were all significantly negative ($\beta = -0.870$, $t = 0.173$, $p < 0.000$; $\beta = -0.423$, $t = 0.125$, $p < 0.001$); when helicopter parenting had a lower level, the autonomy of students with high entitlement is lower than the autonomy of those with low entitlement; conversely, when helicopter parenting had a higher level, the autonomy of students with high entitlement is higher than the autonomy of those with low entitlement.

Discussion

The three-fold purpose of this study was to examine the direct associations between helicopter parenting and Chinese university students' adjustment (school engagement, peer attachment, and stress, respectively), as well as indirect associations including the possible mediating role of autonomy, and the potential moderating role of the sense of entitlement. Results suggest that helicopter parenting may compromise adjustment in the transition to university in China, and this may happen because it harms

emerging adults' sense of autonomy. Furthermore, a higher sense of entitlement can partially protect young people's autonomy from the detrimental effect of overparenting.

Negative Effect of Helicopter Parenting on University Students' Adjustment

Confirming our hypotheses, the regression analysis results suggested that higher levels of helicopter parenting were associated with lower levels of school engagement, peer attachment, and mental health (i.e., higher stress) among Chinese university students. The results make essential contributions to our understanding of the impact of helicopter parenting on emerging adults' adjustment. Although the findings are consistent with many prior findings based on Western, individualistic cultures [23, 31, 67], this study demonstrates the problematic nature of helicopter parenting in young people transitioning to university in China. Thus, the findings add to the limited but growing work examining helicopter parenting in China. For example, a recent study on Chinese university students' depression also confirmed the negative influence of helicopter parenting [68]. Despite being in a culture that values obedience to parents (i.e., filial piety) and relationships with others (i.e., collectivism), the results are consistent with the separation-individuation theory that emerging adulthood is a time during which young people are making a psychological shift away from dependence on parents [16].

It may be that regardless of culture, if emerging adults think that their parents are excessively involved in, interfering with, or in any way overly controlling their lives, they may struggle, even if their parents are well-intentioned [34]. For example, it has been shown that when parents frequently solve problems for their children, children may decrease their academic motivation and be unwilling to participate in school activities [21]. Although causality cannot be determined due to the study's correlational nature, the findings add to this growing body of literature suggesting that helicopter parenting may be a risk factor in emerging adults' academic, social, and emotional well-being in many cultural contexts, including China.

Mediation of the Autonomy in the Relationship between Helicopter Parenting and University Students' School Adjustment

The results also provide important insight into why helicopter parenting may hinder positive development in emerging adulthood in China. Specifically, findings reveal that helicopter parenting indirectly affects university students' adjustment because it negatively affects their sense of autonomy. This finding is consistent with several previous studies conducted in Western settings [52, 53]. According to the self-determination theory, if people's need for autonomy is not met, their mental health and well-being will suffer [44, 69]. Overparenting cannot provide the condition to satisfy children's needs for autonomy and, therefore, undermines academic, social, and emotional adjustment. Indeed, young people with low autonomy are less proactive in communicating with peers and establishing connections [25] and have more problems with emotional adaptation and mental health [48, 70]. Also, there is evidence that young people whose parents frequently intervene in their lives are more likely to feel that they have no control

over their lives and have lower emotional regulation abilities [71]. When the findings from the current study are integrated with the extant evidence, it clarifies that an essential mechanism by which helicopter parenting interferes with academic, social, and emotional adjustment is via its negative impact on young people's sense of autonomy.

It is important to note that this finding was particularly robust for school engagement. The indirect effect of autonomy accounted for 55.65% of the total effect of helicopter parenting on school engagement, which is the highest among the three indirect paths examined in this study. It may be due to Chinese parents paying particular attention to their children's academic development [72]. Parents may need to be more involved out of hope that their children can quickly adapt to university life and lay a good foundation for their educational trajectories. Under this expectation, undergraduates may feel that they cannot plan their careers and complete their academic tasks independently, which may impair their self-efficacy [28]. In sum, in the Chinese cultural context that highly values educational achievements, helicopter parenting may be particularly problematic if it harms a young person's perceived ability to navigate their university experience independently.

Moderation of Entitlement Sense on the Relationship between Helicopter Parenting and University Students' Autonomy

The results of the moderated mediation model indicated that the sense of entitlement did not predict autonomy directly. In contrast, it positively moderated the negative association between helicopter parenting and university students' autonomy. On the whole, no matter whether a sense of entitlement was high or low, autonomy decreased when there was an increase in helicopter parenting. Comparatively speaking though, the extent of the decline in autonomy was lower for university students with high entitlement than those with low entitlement. This result suggests that a sense of high entitlement decreases, or protects somewhat, the negative impact of high helicopter parenting on emerging adults' autonomy in China.

One reason that a sense of entitlement may buffer against the adverse effects of helicopter parenting on autonomy is that emerging adults with high levels of entitlement may view helicopter parenting behaviors more positively. They may regard it as parental support or help [73]. In fact, in their mind, they may think that parents should provide them with instrumental, emotional, and information support and that they deserve to be treated well by their parents [51]. Although this mindset reflects their narcissism to a certain extent, it might help children maintain a perception of relative independence, feel less controlled by their parents, and maintain a higher sense of autonomy.

Another reason that a sense of entitlement may have acted as a buffer against the harmful effects of helicopter parenting is related to the measure. Work has shown that not all forms of entitlement are "bad," including exploitative and non-exploitative entitlement [74]. People with exploitative entitlement believe they can exploit others to achieve their goals without putting forth as much effort as others. They tend to

be perceived by their roommates as colder and more quarrelsome, disorganized and careless, and less reliable and determined [75]. In contrast, people with non-exploitative entitlement (the form examined in this study) believe they can achieve their goals without infringing on others' rights. They are potentially adaptive, reflecting a relatively stable sense of self-worth and healthy self-esteem [76]. They also tend to exhibit more excellent friendliness, higher goals, and more willingness to put in the effort [77]. Therefore, university students with high non-exploitative entitlement may believe they deserve better grades and more care from their parents. However, because they are willing to put forth effort as well, they may better utilize the help or support from their parents as they navigate their educational pursuits. Furthermore, because individuals with a high sense of non-exploitative entitlement tend to be more confident and active, they may experience their parents' intrusion into their lives without it ultimately diminishing a sense of autonomy as they navigate peer interactions and campus activities [78] and thereby experiencing fewer problems in school engagement, peer attachment, and mental health.

However, interestingly, when helicopter parenting was low, college students with high levels of entitlement had lower autonomy than their peers with low levels of entitlement. Thus, whereas a sense of entitlement appears to play a protective role against high helicopter parenting in China, it may be more of a risk factor for low autonomy when parents are not over-controlling. Students with high entitlement may perceive a lower level of helicopter parenting as not providing them the support and resources that they think they deserve. As entitlement is associated with an external locus of control [59, 79], it may be that college students with high levels of entitlement may complain of less support from their parents, blame parents for their failure, and, in turn, feel less autonomy than those with low levels of entitlement. The study makes a significant contribution by revealing that while a sense of entitlement alone is unrelated to autonomy, what matters is the unique ways in which helicopter parenting and young people's sense of entitlement interact to affect their autonomy. In other words, how young people may perceive their parents' behavior plays a significant role in the impact of helicopter parenting on the autonomy (and, in turn, the adjustment) of young people in China.

Implications, Limitations and Future Research

This study has implications for those working with first-year students on university campuses. Primarily, interventions conducted by psychological counselors and educators for those who may not be adjusting well to the university setting should address the complex interaction of parenting and self-perceptions (i.e., a sense of entitlement and autonomy). The findings of this study will also help parents adjust their educational philosophy and helicopter parenting behaviors, thereby promoting university students' school adaptation, peer attachment, and mental health.

Despite its essential contributions, the study still has several limitations. First, this study employed a cross-sectional design. Although the structural equation model of latent variables was used to examine the relations between them, it was impossible to determine the causal direction of the associations. Thus, while using causal language in discussing the findings, the hypothesized directions were purely speculative. In the future, it is necessary to use a longitudinal design to explore the causal relations between helicopter parenting and emerging adults' school adjustment. Second, this study measured the

participants with self-reported questionnaires. Although we tested the data and found no common method bias, future studies should consider employing multiple methods and reporters to enhance the reliability of the results, such as parental self-report, peer evaluation, and behavior observation. Third, the participants were freshmen and finished the survey the fourth month after their enrollment. Future research should consider the effect of helicopter parenting on adolescent adjustment or examine the development of helicopter parenting and its related factors over time. These topics will help compare and discuss the nature of helicopter parenting and its complicated effects on emerging adults.

Summary

Prior studies have shown the negative effect of helicopter parenting on the adaptation of emerging adults in individualistic cultures. The present study examined the relationships between helicopter parenting and Chinese college students' adjustment indices (school engagement, peer attachment, and stress) with autonomy as a mediator and the sense of entitlement as a moderator. The results confirmed that helicopter parenting negatively affected Chinese university students' school engagement and peer attachment but positively predicted their stress. Autonomy mediated the relationship between helicopter parenting and university students' adjustment. Young people's sense of entitlement significantly negatively moderated the effect of helicopter parenting on their autonomy. These findings suggested that helicopter parenting compromised adjustment in emerging adults' transition to college partially due to unfulfilled autonomy needs. Furthermore, a higher sense of entitlement could protect young people's autonomy from the detrimental effect of overparenting.

Declarations

Ethics Approval: All procedures performed in this study were approved by the Ethics Committee of Liaoning Normal University and were in accordance with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent: Informed consent for participation and data publication was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent to Publish: This study is not a case study and the manuscript does not involve subjects' privacy, images, and any other things that need permissions from participants. This declaration is not applicable.

Competing Interests The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions: Wen Gao designed the study, coordinated the data collection and analysis, and drafted and revised the manuscript. Yaxian Hou participated in the research design, conducted the data analysis, and drafted and revised the manuscript. Larry J. Nelson conceptualized, supervised, and revised the manuscript. Yongqi Xu participated in the data analysis and drafted the manuscript. Lingdan Meng participated in the research design and data collection. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding: The research was funded by the Planning Project (DEA220351) of National Education Science in China with the title "The Effect of Overparenting on Adolescents' School Adjustment from the Perspective of Family-School Cooperation and its Impacting Factors and Collaborative Intervention."

Availability of Data and Materials The data of this study are available on the Open Science Framework website (<https://www.cos.io/products/osf>) via doi: 10.17605/OSF.IO/XJYRW.

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Figures

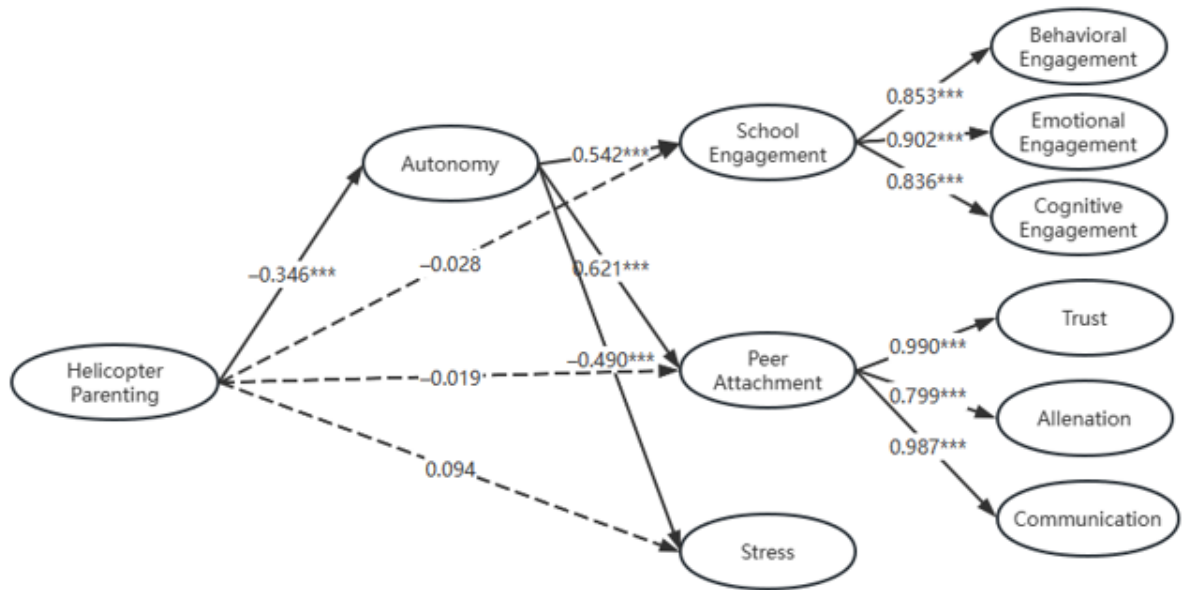


Figure 1

Regression coefficients of the paths in the mediation model

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

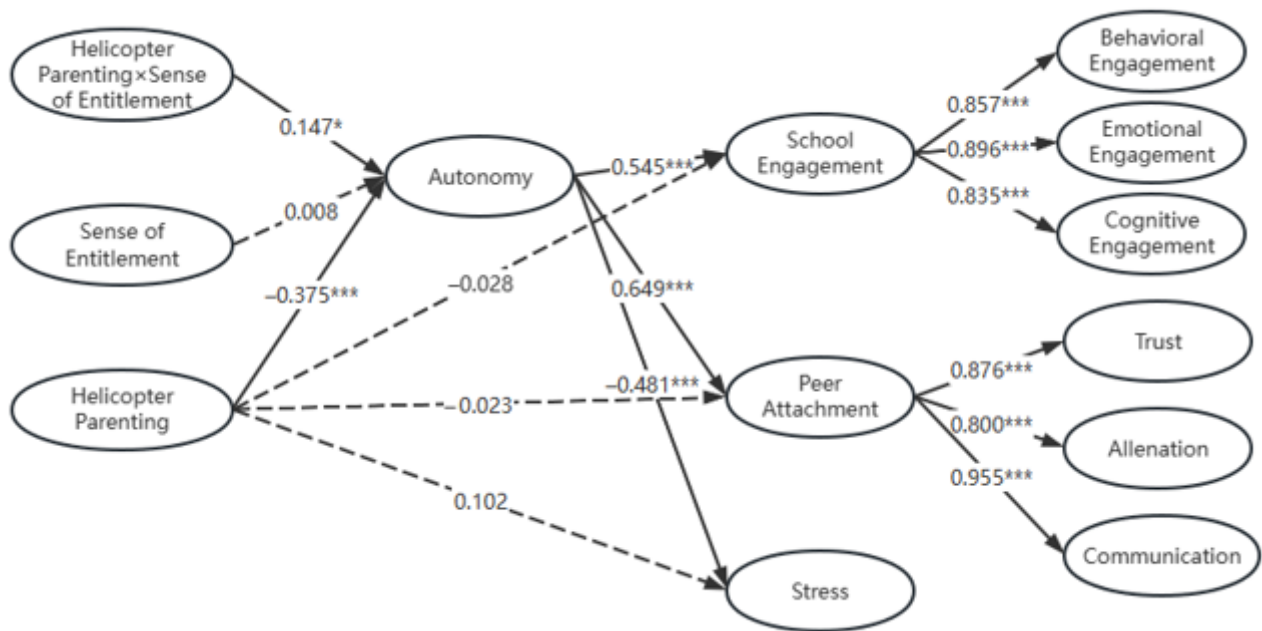


Figure 2

Regression coefficients of the paths in the moderated mediation model

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

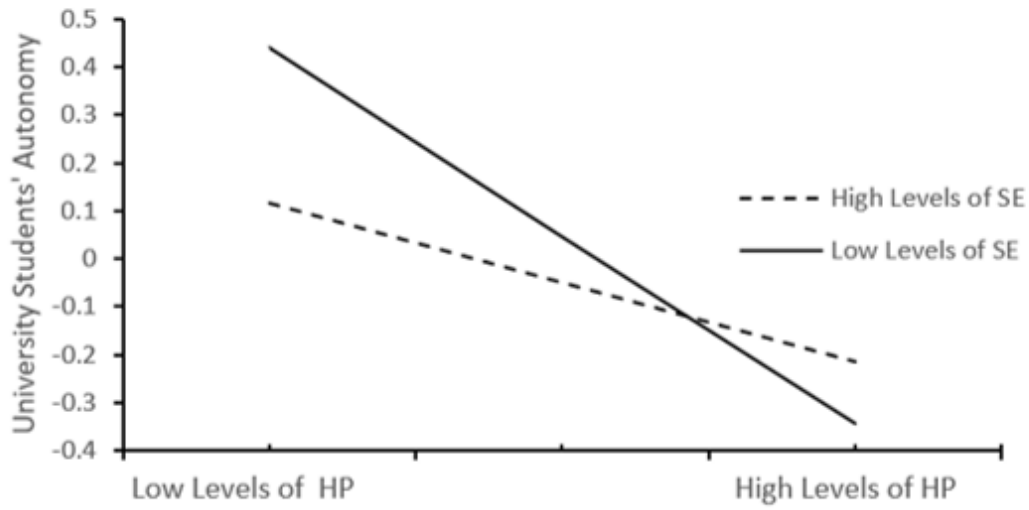


Figure 3

The moderation of the sense of entitlement on the effect of helicopter parenting on the autonomy.

Note: SE= Sense of Entitlement; HP=Helicopter Parenting.