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# Too Close Yet Too Far: Exploring the Influence of Helicopter Parenting and Parent-Child Alienation on Autonomy among Emerging Adults in Lead City University, Ibadan

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## Abstract

*Emerging adulthood is a critical developmental stage marked by the transition to independence. However, there is limited research on how parenting dynamics influence autonomy development among Nigerian emerging adults. This study investigated whether helicopter parenting and parent-child alienation would be associated with autonomy in a sample of emerging adults at Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria (N = 432; aged 15 to 25 years, Mean = 19.89, SD = 3.16). Standardised instruments were used, including the Multidimensional Helicopter Parenting Scale (MHPS), Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA), and Adolescent Autonomy Questionnaire (AAQ). Hypotheses were tested using Pearson correlation and hierarchical multiple regression at a 0.05 level of significance. Results revealed that helicopter parenting and parent-child alienation jointly predicted autonomy ($F(9,128) = 12.26$, $R = .48$, $R^2 = .23$, $p < .001$). Independently, life goal autonomy ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < .001$), overprotection ($\beta = -0.28$, $p < .001$), and parent-child alienation ($\beta = -0.23$, $p < .001$) significantly predicted autonomy. Conclusively, over-controlling parenting and emotional distance between parents and emerging adults negatively affect their sense of autonomy. It is recommended that Interventions aimed at supporting the autonomy of emerging adults during their transition to adulthood should discourage over-controlling parenting behaviours and promote strong parent-child relationships.*

**Keywords:** ***Autonomy, Helicopter Parenting, Parent-Child Alienation, Emerging adulthood***

## Introduction

Emerging adulthood, typically spanning ages 15 to 25, is a critical developmental stage marked by a transition from dependency to autonomy, as individuals strive to establish independence and navigate complex life decisions (García-Mendoza et al., 2020). This period, distinct from both adolescence and full adulthood, involves psychosocial challenges and opportunities that are shaped by cultural, social, and economic factors (Dutra-Thomé et al., 2019). In individualistic cultures, the pressure to demonstrate independence is often intense, while in collectivistic cultures, the pursuit of autonomy is more intertwined with familial obligations and societal expectations (Botha et al., 2020). The socioeconomic status of emerging adults further influences their journey to autonomy, as those from wealthier backgrounds tend to have more access to resources, while those from less privileged backgrounds face additional barriers (Hwang & Jung, 2022). Moreover, cognitive maturation and emotional resilience, crucial during this stage, enable emerging adults to make more

independent decisions and manage the stresses that come with greater autonomy (Koestner et al., 2020).

In the Nigerian context, cultural values deeply shape parenting styles, often emphasising respect for authority, discipline, and social responsibility (Obidiegwu & Akpabio, 2017). These traditional values are sometimes in conflict with the evolving expectations of independence in a modern, globalised world (Akintan et al., 2018). The influence of Western ideals has led to a hybrid parenting approach, blending communal values with more permissive practices that emphasise individual success and emotional support (Bako & Syed, 2018). This shift has impacted the autonomy of emerging adults in Nigeria, with many navigating the tension between adhering to familial expectations and asserting personal independence (Asikaogu, 2018). The increasing prevalence of digital technology and economic uncertainties also complicate the pursuit of autonomy, as emerging adults face new challenges such as managing their digital presence and adapting to the demands of precarious employment in an evolving job market (Bao et al., 2023; Gong & Wang, 2023). Thus, the development of autonomy in emerging adults is a complex and evolving process, shaped by cultural values, societal trends, and individual aspirations.

The development of autonomy in emerging adults is significantly influenced by parenting styles, particularly helicopter parenting, which involves excessive parental involvement and overprotectiveness (Schiffrin&Liss, 2017). In helicopter parenting, parents tend to hover over their children, making decisions and intervening in daily activities to ensure success and well-being (Cui et al., 2019). Although the intentions behind this style are often rooted in care, it can impede the development of self-efficacy and independent functioning, leaving children ill-prepared to handle challenges or make decisions on their own (Darlow et al., 2017; Hesse et al., 2018). This over-involvement can lead to increased anxiety and stress, as children feel pressured to meet high expectations and struggle to manage the complexities of adult life (Aghadi, 2024; Jibril et al., 2022). Moreover, the emotional toll of helicopter parenting extends to the social realm, where emerging adults may face difficulties in forming healthy peer and romantic relationships due to their reliance on parental support and lack of independent social experiences (Hwang & Jung, 2022; Güçlü et al., 2022). This dependency creates a barrier to developing a robust, autonomous identity, complicating their navigation through societal shifts and the pursuit of autonomy (Koestner et al., 2020).

Additionally, parent-child alienation, characterised by emotional and mental distance, further complicates autonomy development. When parents are inconsistent or emotionally unavailable, children may feel neglected and unsupported, leading to confusion about their identity and self-worth (Aloia&Strutzenberg, 2019; Warshak, 2019). In such environments, young people struggle to build self-confidence and decision-making skills, which hinders their ability to navigate adulthood independently (Poustie et al., 2018; Wen et al., 2022). In contrast, low-alienation family settings, with open communication and emotional support, foster independence and responsible decision-making (Wang et al., 2023). Thus, both helicopter parenting and parent-child alienation impede the development of autonomy, emphasising the need for supportive parenting approaches.

The development of autonomy in Nigerian emerging adults is influenced by a complex interplay of cultural values, parental expectations, and socio-economic factors. Traditional Nigerian values emphasising family cohesion and respect for elders often conflict with Western ideals of independence, creating tension in young adults' pursuit of autonomy, particularly in career and lifestyle choices (Garutsa& Owolabi, 2024; Imo et al., 2022).

Helicopter parenting, common in South-Western Nigeria, exacerbates this tension, restricting personal autonomy by steering children towards conventional career paths, leading to dissatisfaction and career frustration (Uche &Onovo, 2022). The impact of this over-involvement, coupled with parent-child alienation, has been linked to reduced self-confidence, increased anxiety, and emotional distress (Buchanan &LeMoyne, 2020; Francisca, 2021). Despite the growing focus on these dynamics, there is limited research on how helicopter parenting and parent-child alienation predict autonomy in Nigerian emerging adults (Motunrayo et al., 2023).

**Current Study**

The current study seeks to examine the influence of helicopter parenting and parent-child alienation on autonomy among emerging adults in Lead City University, Ibadan. It is hypothesised that helicopter parenting and parent-child alienation will independently and jointly predict autonomy, with each parenting style contributing uniquely to autonomy outcomes. Specifically, it is expected that higher levels of helicopter parenting and parent-child alienation will negatively impact autonomy among emerging adults. Testing these hypotheses will contribute to expanding the body of knowledge on the impact of helicopter parenting and parent-child alienation on autonomy, particularly within the context of emerging adults in sub-Saharan African populations.

**Theoretical Synthesis**

This study is rooted in Deci and Ryan's (1985; 2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that optimal human development and well-being are contingent upon the satisfaction of three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. SDT suggests that when these needs are supported, individuals flourish; conversely, when they are thwarted—particularly autonomy and relatedness—development is compromised, leading to feelings of alienation, dependency, and impaired self-regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In the Nigerian context, this research examines helicopter parenting and parent-child alienation as potential impediments to these core needs. Helicopter parenting, characterised by excessive parental involvement and control, is understood to undermine the development of autonomy and competence (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2020), while parent-child alienation erodes emotional intimacy, thereby weakening the sense of relatedness (Barber, 2021).

Within collectivist societies such as Nigeria, emerging adults frequently navigate a tension between cultural norms emphasising filial obedience and their intrinsic psychological drive for independence, a dynamic elucidated by SDT. Empirical evidence from sub-Saharan Africa further substantiates this theoretical model. For instance, Kolyukh and Oragwuncha (2024) have observed that traditional Nigerian parenting practices often prioritise external control over the cultivation of autonomy. These dynamics suggest that understanding the interplay between parental control, emotional disconnection, and autonomy is particularly critical in non-Western cultural contexts. By applying SDT to these constructs, this study offers a culturally relevant lens through which to examine the autonomy development of emerging adults in Nigeria.

## Methods

### Research Design and Setting

The current study adopted an ex post facto research design, which is suitable for investigating causal relationships between variables without manipulating them. This design allowed for the observation of naturally occurring variables—specifically, helicopter parenting and parent-child alienation—and their relationships with autonomy among emerging adults. The choice of this design was informed by the ethical and practical limitations of experimentally manipulating parenting behaviours and psychological traits in a real-world university setting. The research was conducted at Lead City University, Ibadan, Oyo State, a private tertiary institution in southwestern Nigeria. The university was purposively selected due to its urban location, diverse student population, and institutional environment, which permits considerable parental involvement in students' academic lives—a phenomenon particularly relevant to the themes of helicopter parenting and autonomy. The university also provided proximity and ease of access for the research team. The target population consisted of undergraduate students aged 15 to 25 years, classified developmentally as emerging adults. A total of 432 emerging adults participated in the study, comprising 163 males (37.7%) and 269 females (62.3%), with a mean age of 19.89 years (SD = 3.16). The sample was diverse across gender, ethnic background, religious affiliation, marital status, level of study, parental marital status, and parental occupational class. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, focusing on individuals within the university who fit the age criteria for emerging adulthood and were accessible and willing to participate in the study.

### Procedure

Data were collected between February and March 2025. Participants were approached on campus and during departmental meetings, where the purpose of the study was explained. They were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and informed that participation was voluntary. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the administration of the questionnaires. To ensure a supportive and standardised data collection process, trained research assistants, who were master's students from the Department of Psychology, University of Ibadan, assisted in the recruitment and administration of the questionnaires. These assistants were trained in ethical data collection practices, participant engagement, and non-intrusive support during the completion of sensitive psychological instruments. Each participant was provided with an informed consent form, which detailed the voluntary nature of the study, guaranteed confidentiality, and assured participants that their responses would remain anonymous. Those who agreed to participate signed the consent form before being handed the survey instrument. The entire data collection process spanned three weeks in February 2025. Out of the 450 copies of questionnaire distributed, 432 were properly completed and returned, yielding a high response rate. The completed copies of questionnaire were analysed using appropriate statistical techniques to test the hypotheses of the study. Ethical principles such as voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were strictly adhered to throughout the research process.

### Measures

*Helicopter parenting*: This was measured using the *Multidimensional Helicopter Parenting Scale (MHPS)* developed by Hayley Love (2016). The 49-item instrument assesses various dimensions of helicopter parenting, including care, responsiveness, overprotection,

psychological control, behavioural control, involvement, autonomy support, and invasiveness. Participants rated each item using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all true*) to 5 (*Very much true*). Sample items include: "Is able to make me feel better when I am upset," "My parents eavesdrop on my face-to-face conversations with others," and "My parents ask personal questions that I don't want to answer." The scale has shown strong internal consistency across domains (e.g., α = .90 for Care, α = .95 for Responsiveness, α = .83 for Invasiveness), with an overall Cronbach's alpha of .88 in the original validation study. In the current study, this measure yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .79, indicating acceptable reliability.

*Parent attachment (Alienation)*: This was assessed using six reverse-scored items (items 8, 10, 11, 17, 18, and 23) from the *Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA)* developed by Patricia Crittenden. Items measure parental alienation and are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Almost Never or Never*) to 5 (*Almost Always or Always*). Example items include: "I get upset easily around my parent," "I don't get much attention from my parent," and "Talking over my problems with my parent makes me feel ashamed or foolish." Prior studies have established high test-retest reliability for the scale (r = .93 for parent attachment). In the present study, this subscale demonstrated acceptable reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of .82.

*Autonomy*: Adolescents' perception of autonomy was measured using the *Adolescent Autonomy Questionnaire (AAQ)* developed by Noom et al. (1999). The scale examines the ability of adolescents to assert independence and make decisions. It uses a 5-point Likert format ranging from 1 (*Very bad description of me*) to 5 (*Very good description of me*). Sample items include: "I find it difficult to decide what I want," "When I act against the will of others, I usually get nervous," and "I often change my mind after listening to others." The original validation study reported a Cronbach's alpha of .69. In the present study, the AAQ demonstrated improved reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of .79.

**Results**

The data analysis for this study was conducted using hierarchical multiple regression to examine the relationships between helicopter parenting, parent-child alienation, and autonomy in emerging adults. To test the incremental effect of predictor variables on the outcome, the analysis began by entering the dimensions of helicopter parenting as the primary predictor in the first model. The second model incorporated parent-child alienation.

**Table 1: Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Showing the Independent and Joint Prediction of Helicopter Parenting and Parent-Child Alienation on Autonomy among Emerging Adults in Ibadan, Oyo State**

| Model | Predictors | β | T | P | $R^2$ | $\Delta R^2$ | F | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | Responsiveness | 0.03 | 0.60 | > 0.05 | 0.20 | 0.20 | 13.10 | < 0.01 |
| | Care | -0.01 | -0.25 | > 0.05 | | | | |
| | Invasiveness | 0.02 | 0.37 | > 0.05 | | | | |
| | Psychological Control | -0.20 | -3.01 | < 0.01 | | | | |
| | Lack of Daily Autonomy | -0.03 | -0.50 | > 0.05 | | | | |
| | Life Goal Autonomy | 0.25 | 4.48 | < 0.01 | | | | |
| | Overprotection | -0.33 | -4.69 | < 0.01 | | | | |
| | Behavioural Control | 0.06 | 0.91 | > 0.05 | | | | |
| **2** | Responsiveness | -0.02 | -0.47 | > 0.05 | 0.23 | 0.03 | 12.26 | < 0.01 |
| | Care | -0.00 | -0.08 | > 0.05 | | | | |
| | Invasiveness | 0.07 | 1.11 | > 0.05 | | | | |
| | Psychological Control | -0.13 | -1.86 | > 0.05 | | | | |
| | Lack of Daily Autonomy | -0.02 | -0.38 | > 0.05 | | | | |
| | Life Goal Autonomy | 0.24 | 4.47 | < 0.01 | | | | |
| | Overprotection | -0.28 | -4.01 | < 0.01 | | | | |
| | Behavioural Control | 0.05 | 0.86 | > 0.05 | | | | |
| | Parent-Child Alienation | -0.23 | -3.73 | < 0.01 | | | | |

*Source: Fieldwork (2025)*

Table 1 presents a hierarchical multiple regression analysis investigating the influence of helicopter parenting and parent-child alienation on autonomy among emerging adults in Ibadan, Oyo State. In Model 1, the dimensions of helicopter parenting (responsiveness, care, invasiveness, psychological control, lack of daily autonomy, life goal autonomy, overprotection, and behavioral control) significantly predicted autonomy ($F(8,131) = 13.10$, $R = .45$, $R^2 = .20$, $p < .001$), explaining 20% of the variance. Psychological control ($\beta = -0.20$, $p < .01$), life goal autonomy ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < .001$), and overprotection ($\beta = -0.33$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors.

In Model 2, adding parent-child alienation resulted in a significant joint prediction of autonomy ($F(9,128) = 12.26$, $R^2 = .48$, $R^2 = .23$, $p < .001$), explaining 23% of the variance. The $R^2$ change of 0.03 indicates a 3% increase in the explained variance with the inclusion of alienation. Life goal autonomy ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < .001$), overprotection ($\beta = -0.28$, $p < .001$), and parent-child alienation ($\beta = -0.23$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors, with higher alienation and overprotection negatively impacting autonomy. These findings partially support the hypothesis, which stated that helicopter parenting and parent-child alienation will independently and jointly predict autonomy.

**Discussion of Findings**

The findings revealed that helicopter parenting and parent-child alienation contributed to explaining the levels of autonomy in distinct ways.

The hypothesis that helicopter parenting significantly influences autonomy among emerging adults was supported. Specific dimensions of helicopter parenting, particularly psychological control, overprotection, and life goal autonomy, were critical in understanding how parental behaviours impact young adults' independence. Overprotective parenting was negatively associated with autonomy, reflecting that excessive parental involvement limits the capacity of emerging adults to make independent decisions and function autonomously. These findings align with prior studies, which assert that helicopter parenting hinders social and emotional development by reducing opportunities to learn from natural consequences (Motunrayo et al., 2023). Similarly, Obioha et al. (2024) noted that such parental behaviours can obstruct emotional growth and delay the development of autonomy. Life goal autonomy, a positive aspect of parenting that encourages the pursuit of personal aspirations, was a strong positive predictor of autonomy. When parents allow their children the freedom to explore and achieve personal goals, it appears to foster independence and decision-making capacity. This is consistent with the notion that parental practices which promote autonomy are positively correlated with psychological health in emerging adulthood (Brown & Okogbule, 2023).

Parent-child alienation also significantly influenced autonomy. Higher levels of alienation were associated with reduced autonomy, suggesting that emotional detachment or strained parent-child relationships may weaken emerging adults' ability to make independent choices. These individuals may lack the emotional security and guidance that would otherwise support the development of autonomy. The present findings corroborate previous research, which demonstrated a negative relationship between psychological alienation and self-efficacy (Verhaar, Matthewson, & Bentley, 2022). This emotional gap likely makes it difficult for emerging adults to develop the confidence necessary for autonomous functioning. Emotional closeness with parents appears vital for fostering an environment where autonomy can thrive.

The significant influence of helicopter parenting and parent-child alienation in diminishing the development of autonomy underscores the urgent need for increased awareness and transformation of parenting practices. Overprotective and emotionally disengaged parenting, even when rooted in care and concern, can hinder young adults from forming independent perspectives, managing their emotions effectively, and functioning competently in real-world settings. This reinforces the understanding that autonomy is not solely an internal trait but a developmental outcome shaped through supportive and responsive relationships.

Given these insights, it is recommended that parent education programs be developed to enlighten caregivers on the importance of autonomy-supportive parenting. Such training should encourage a balanced approach, providing guidance while allowing room for independent decision-making, life goal setting, and emotional expression. Mental health professionals, social workers, and school counsellors should incorporate family relationship patterns into their support strategies to better address barriers to autonomy. Universities and community-based organisations can also offer workshops that help emerging adults build assertiveness, self-determination, and adaptive decision-making skills. Furthermore, family-focused interventions aimed at reducing parental overcontrol and fostering emotional closeness should be promoted by mental health practitioners and policymakers. These efforts

can create a relational environment that meaningfully contributes to the development of autonomy.

## Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

One limitation of this study is its dependence on self-reported data, which can be affected by social desirability bias or faulty recall, particularly when evaluating sensitive family dynamics. Furthermore, the research concentrated exclusively on participants in Ibadan, which restricts the generalizability of the results to other areas in Nigeria that may have different cultural or socioeconomic contexts. The cross-sectional design also limits the ability to draw causal connections between the variables. Future studies should aim at incorporating a qualitative or mixed-methods approach. Future research should aim to include more varied populations across diverse sociocultural contexts and investigate additional factors such as socioeconomic status, cultural parenting norms, and peer influences that could interact with the development of autonomy. Another area for further research is to analyse how digital parenting behaviours like social media oversight, digital monitoring, and screen-time limitations impact autonomy development in emerging adults. With technology playing an increasing role in young people's lives, studying the effects of online parental controls on emotional and functional independence can provide more understanding of autonomy growth in the digital era. Additionally, it is recommended that upcoming research looks into these dynamics across various Nigerian ethnic and religious communities, incorporates parental viewpoints, and assesses the influence of other psychosocial elements such as peer influence, socioeconomic status, and educational levels on fostering autonomy among emerging adults.

## Conclusion

The study revealed that helicopter parenting and parent-child alienation significantly influence the development of autonomy among emerging adults in Lead City University, Ibadan. The findings demonstrated that overprotective and emotionally distant parenting restricts the emergence of autonomy, limiting young adults' ability to make independent decisions and navigate life with confidence. Autonomy thrives in environments where individuals are supported in pursuing personal goals, expressing independent views, and managing emotional challenges within secure relationships. These findings carry important implications, highlighting the need to reassess parenting approaches, raise awareness among stakeholders, and design culturally sensitive programs that support a healthy and independent transition to adulthood. In essence, emerging adults need supportive external environmentsparticularly in the form of parental connection and autonomy-encouraging behaviours—to fully develop a stable sense of independence.

## Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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