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Parents' Involvement and University Students' Independence

Jane Lewis, Anne West, Jonathan Roberts and Philip Noden

Introduction

Going away to university has long been seen as a marker along the road to fully independent living for a group now termed 'emerging adults' (Arnett, 2000). Goldscheider and DaVanzo (1985) referred to living in a university residence as 'semi-autonomous' living. Indeed, the greater freedom and independence associated with living away from home is part of the authentic 'university experience' for English university students – albeit an experience which, as Holdsworth (2009) observed, has largely been an elite practice in the UK¹.

However, the extent of college students' autonomy and independence has been questioned. The term 'helicopter parents' was coined in the US to describe those who closely monitored their student offspring and who were ready to intervene at any sign of difficulty. Thus, Coburn (2006: 10), gives as examples of 'inappropriate interventions' a father who called at 11 pm to report a mouse in his daughter's room, and a mother who called to report a burned-out light bulb.

Wartman et al. (2008: 1) refer to a 'new level of family involvement', which does not fit with the personal history of today's educators. Nor does it fit, for the most part, with parents' own experience of going away to university, not least because new technologies – particularly mobile telephones – now enable easy contact between parents and student children. Considerable concern has been expressed about the effects of increased parental involvement on students. Media commentaries are dominated by the fear that students remain too dependent on parents, thus threatening successful transitions to adulthood. Research studies have suggested that significant dependence on parents may threaten educational achievement (e.g. Hofer and Moore, 2010). However, a higher rate of parent/student interaction can sometimes be positive, resulting in the child's better 'adjustment' to university (e.g. Wintre and Yaffe, 2000).

There is little research on the relationship between parents and students in the UK, and less generally on middle class students (but see David et al., 2003). Our exploratory work examined the interactions between parents and first year students living away from home at two English universities. The study investigated parental support across multiple dimensions - financial, emotional and academic. Findings relating to financial support and dependence are reported elsewhere. This paper focuses on parental involvement in 'non-financial forms of support'. It considers in particular emotional support (such as providing advice or a 'listening ear'), and also practical help (such as proof-reading essays, doing laundry or contacting banks and university authorities for their offspring). This kind of involvement required parents and students to be in regular contact, usually through mobile phone or computer-based communication, and often also through regular visiting. We explore the degree and style of the support that the students receive and ask how it is regarded by parents and students.

The next section discusses key concepts and salient literature. We then outline the research methods before presenting our findings. We conclude by exploring how far parents and students felt that the student had become more 'independent'.

Key concepts and literature

Our focus is on parental involvement: the support parents provide to their student children; how this is viewed by parents and students; and how far both parties feel that the student has become more independent.

The literature tends to be divided between the psychological, focusing on individual and relationship factors, and the sociological, which stresses the importance of family structures (e.g. parental separation and divorce) as well as other key variables (e.g. gender and ethnicity) and contextual factors (e.g. ill health).

Full independence is usually taken to mean self-reliance and the ability to care for oneself (Ryan and Lynch, 1989; Whittington and Peters, 1996). This necessarily involves economic independence, which few students have. The related concept of autonomy, defined in terms of self-governance and taking responsibility for oneself, alongside a degree of separation from parents and the family home (Wintre and Yaffe, 2000; Gillies et al., 2001), more realistically represents what students might achieve. Arnett (1994) found that for a sample of college students the most important criteria in making the transition to adulthood were individualistic and intangible: accepting responsibility for their actions, deciding on beliefs and values independently of parents and establishing a more equal adult relationship with parents – rather than more explicit role transitions (to parent, earner etc.). However, the markers of growing independence may be construed differently by parents and young people – thus parents may see independence in terms of freedom, but students more in terms of 'taking responsibility' (Gillies et al., 2001; also Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005; Holdsworth, 2009).

'Helicopter parenting' assumes intensive parental involvement, which research suggests involves a high degree of warmth/support, but also of control and the withholding of autonomy (Padilla-Walker and Nelson, 2012). Kloeppel and Hendry's (2010) study of parents' views about their children's transition to adulthood identified a group that was 'happy to let go', a group 'reluctant to let go' and a third large group that was 'holding on' and continuing to 'interfere' in their children's lives. However, much depends on the nature of parental support and how it is offered.

Kenny (1987: 26) found that first year students at a prestigious US university welcomed their parents' involvement, perceiving them 'as supporting independence and as being available as a source of support when needed'. More recent research has also stressed the importance of involvement that supports autonomy and encourages responsibility rather than exerts control (e.g. Cullaty, 2011; Koepke and Denissen, 2012). Similarly, psychologists have stressed the importance of 'secure attachment' for the achievement of independence and social competence, so long as the parents value these goals (Kenny 1987; Miller and Lane 1991; Sorokou and Weissbrod, 2005; Wartman et al., 2008). Indeed, parental support for students' adjustment to greater autonomy and freedom when living away at university is well-nigh impossible if there

is ‘emotional detachment’ on the part of parent or student (Koepke and Denissen, 2012). Thus it has been proposed that attachment provides a secure base for achieving autonomy (Wartman and Savage, 2008).

This literature indicates that assessing the importance of parental involvement is a complex task. Wider literature on intergenerational relations has focused on ‘solidarity’ and its ‘core elements of sentiment, structure, and behaviour’ over the lifecourse (Bengston et al., 2002: 572). It has also increasingly recognised complexity arising from conflict and ambivalence (Luescher and Pillemer, 1998; Connidis and McMullen, 2002; van Gaalen and Dykstra, 2006). Ambivalence is a central concept that crosses the disciplinary divide. Of relevance to the present study are the findings of Holdsworth (2004), that parents may withdraw certain forms of support from young adult children, feeling that they need to be ‘cruel to be kind’, and of Cicchelli and Martin (2004), that young adults may affirm both autonomy and dependence at the same time. As Pillemer et al. (2007: 777) have suggested, intergenerational relationships ‘revolve around sociological and psychological *contradictions and dilemmas* (italics in original)’. Much of this literature is quantitative, but Bengston et al. (2002) press for more qualitative work to understand the full complexity of intergenerational relations (see also Cullaty, 2011).

The literature on relationships between parents and their student children has tended to be focused on the children. Cullaty (2011:437) recommended that future studies should consider parents. This paper thus explores parental involvement - what it is that parents actually do with and for their student offspring, and how they feel about it. Karp et al. (2004: 358-359; 374) have identified the paradoxical task faced by parents as ‘attached individuation’ for themselves and their children - a balance between ‘distance and engagement’, a process of giving the child both ‘roots’ and ‘wings’.

Methods

Our sample, interviewed between May 2012 and May 2013, comprised parents and their children who had left home for undergraduate study at two long-established English universities². Students had completed two to five terms at university, were living away from home during term-time and had at least one parent who had been to university – the last criterion enabled comparison of parents’ experiences of leaving home with those of the students. Students and parents were approached through universities’ student services.

Our achieved sample was 29 dyads, 14 from one university and 15 from the other. All but three students were from professional family backgrounds (cf, Holdsworth, 2009). Parent interviewees were in six cases fathers, in 22 cases mothers and in one case both parents. There were nine male and 20 female students (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 HERE

58 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted separately with parents and students. Research of this kind presents particular challenges around the

confidentiality of data. Interviewees were informed that nothing would be reported to the other party in the dyad but that they may be quoted in academic papers and so it was conceivable that the other member of the dyad might identify the interviewee. In this paper parents and children are not explicitly linked and so the possibility of identification is further reduced.

There has been little comment on the issue of analysing multiple perspectives in families (McCarthy et al., 2010). In the present study each interview was analysed in the first instance as an individual case. Nonetheless, we found rather little divergence between the factual accounts of parents and students, although there were ‘silences’ with either parent or student failing to mention a particular episode that was salient for the other person. It should be noted that our wish to interview both parents and students might create a bias towards dyads that were relatively ‘close’, which in turn might affect the nature and extent of parental involvement.

The analysis of the material for this paper takes the standpoint of the parent, but also reports students’ views of and responses to the support which parents provided.

Findings

This section first provides a description of the mode, frequency and content of parents’ involvement with student children. It then considers in more depth the differences in parents’ standpoints, together with the views of their children.

We asked about parents’ own experience of leaving home for university and parental involvement. All – except two South Asian parents who attended university abroad while living at home – suggested that not only had it been much more difficult to keep in touch (usually there was only a public pay telephone available), but that the normative expectation was that they would ‘get on with it’ and become self-reliant. Parenting styles, technology and norms have all changed in a short period. Closer contact is now usually expected by parents and children and is enabled by mobile phones and the internet. The struggle for parents wishing to support their children is, in everyday language, to achieve a ‘balance’ – a term frequently used in the interviews.

The major indicator of non-financial support was frequency and initiation of contact. These indicators, however, are not as straightforward as previous research indicates. First, even in intact families, the parent interviewed often had little idea as to how frequently the student contacted the other parent. Second, reports on both the frequency and the initiation of contact varied considerably between parents and students. Third, both frequency and initiation of contact varied over time, for example contact usually increased markedly at a time of student crisis and need (see also Fingerman et al., 2009). Only ten students had no crises during their first year. Crises usually concerned social relationships, but could also be about academic work or practical problems, such as stolen bags, bank cards or laptops (affecting six students).

The most important mode of contact was by telephone call and text. Facebook was used by a minority and there was sometimes reluctance to allow parents to be Facebook “friends”. Texts were more often exchanged with fathers and tended to consist of ‘keeping-in-touch chat’. Mobile phone conversations could be long or

short, and might encompass advice on practical matters (such as finding rented accommodation for the second year), support for academic work (for instance, talking through ideas), social difficulties, or simply ‘catching up’. Sarigiani et al. (2013) defined frequent contact as daily or two or more times per day, and Spence (2012) drew a dividing line between those in contact once a week or less, and those in contact more than once a week. While it was difficult to be sure about reports of contact, around one third of dyads were in contact on a weekly basis, another third multiple times a week and a final third daily. None was in touch on a less than weekly basis. In addition, most students visited home about twice a term and most parents also visited them at university once or twice.

We now consider differences in parents’ approaches. We explore, from the standpoint of the parent, how parents felt about their involvement in their children’s university lives. We also consider the style of that involvement – whether parents were directive or non-directive, and whether they strove to limit that involvement.

Only two parents, both mothers (28 and 29), reported providing little support:

The support I give is so limited.

...my ability to give her support has been not so good.

Both mothers, one divorced and one estranged, had chronic health problems. Both were emotionally dependent on their daughters and spoke of role reversal, with the daughter taking on the role of the mother, indicating ‘parentification’ (Peris et al., 2008; Castro et al., 2004). As one mother noted:

...she cooked, she...would bring home food, she worked, she supported me mentally.

Both mothers viewed their daughters as being independent. One was described as ‘feistily independent’, and the other as

living independently...we don’t see that much of her...she’s doing independence...very well.

Both daughters concurred; for one there was also evidence of emotional detachment (see above p.2):

I don’t feel like I need my parents any more.

The remaining 27 parents were involved with supporting their children in various ways. Four categories of parental involvement have been identified according to the degree and style of support and how parents felt about it:

- i. parents who want to be involved and are often directive (five parents);
- ii. parents who are involved and who might or might not be directive, but who feel ambivalent about their involvement (eight parents);
- iii. parents who are involved but strive not to be directive (four parents);

- iv. parents who want to be involved but who try to limit involvement and ‘hold back’ (ten parents).

These categories of involvement were based on what the transcripts revealed as most significant for each parent: how they felt in the case of the first two groups; the style of their involvement in the third and fourth groups.

(i) Happily involved and directive (parents 3, 5, 12, 17, 26)

Five parents were happily involved with their student children; contact was frequent and enjoyable. Parents also ‘directed’ the child when they felt it necessary. All were parents of daughters: three were mothers, one a father, and one was the ‘dyad’ in which both parents participated.

Two sets of accounts provided by a father/daughter and mother/daughter illustrate well this group. The father had not relished his daughter’s departure for university:

I feared ... we [would] drop her off and she’d reappear ten weeks later... we might get the odd email and phone call if we were lucky, but no, it’s been far more interactive....

This father was delighted that his relationship with his daughter was relatively unchanged. The location of the university – only 20 miles from the family home – was ‘pretty perfect’; this enabled the father to see his daughter occasionally on his way to work and to help her with any ‘crises’. He described how he had to ‘rescue’ his daughter twice, the first time during her first week away when she felt lonely:

I literally had to... ring up, cancel the business meeting, cross platforms, jump on the train straight back...

His wife also left work early. They calmed their daughter and planned the best way of ‘reintroducing’ her to the university.

In the case of the mother/daughter, the mother worked from home and was in frequent contact with her daughter:

she just wants a cuddle really... so it’s doing that over the phone.

She had also contacted the university to ensure that her daughter was allocated an *en-suite* room because of her health problems and, on several occasions, to resolve problems around the lease on her daughter’s second year rented accommodation. The mother explained her actions largely in terms of her own personality:

...a lot of it is how I am... I like things to be right... and I wouldn’t like her not to have the best life she can...basically I work my life around her I suppose.

Like the daughter with the involved father, the student in this dyad initiated a significant proportion of the telephone contact and did not hesitate to ask her mother’s

advice on everyday matters, such as preparing a leek for cooking. The mother also sent her back to university after visits home with prepared food.

Such practical support was also important for a South Asian mother, who expressed constant anxiety about her daughter's diet and other matters:

...you keep worrying... is she eating bad...did she get up on time, how is she managing everything...I think of her all the time... Did she remember her umbrella?

This daughter returned home at weekends and also took food back with her. The mother and daughter were in contact more than once a day.

Most parents in this group could also be directive. One mother described her relationship with her daughter as 'close' and 'protective', but when the student phoned up crying in her first term, the mother told her that she must 'stick it out until Christmas', although at the end of the term she suggested that the daughter should perhaps leave because she seemed to be 'suffering'.

The parents who were interviewed together sought to be non-directive and 'bite their tongues', but this was difficult. They too had told their daughter not to leave in the first year:

No, don't pack it in... Just stay with it... this is quite normal, really. Just stay the course.

The students in these dyads did not seem disturbed by their parents' involvement, even when, driven by anxiety, it took quite extreme forms. One daughter recognised that her mother was 'a worrier' and appeared not to take all her advice; nonetheless she believed that things were going well, and she enjoyed snuggling up with her mother on the sofa at home to watch television as she had done before university.

Two female students confessed to exaggerating their problems to their parents - as one put it, being something of a 'drama queen'. The South Asian student saw her mother's behaviour as consistent with the family's cultural norms, and liked the constant contact with her mother. The two fathers in this group mentioned, unprompted, that there was a risk of 'over-parenting' among middle class parents, but nevertheless seemed to accept that parenting had changed and that parents were now more involved.

Parents in this group were highly involved with their student children and demonstrated continuity with earlier behaviour. Parents were directive; there was clear evidence of 'helicopter parenting' as described by Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012). All the students were female and all three mothers worried about their daughters, which often prompted intensive involvement. In two cases worry was exacerbated by daughters' pre-existing health conditions. None of the students resented their parent's involvement. All the students in this group came from intact families.

(ii) Involved but ambivalent (parents 2, 6, 7, 13, 14, 20, 21, 24)

Eight parents were intensively involved with their student children but wanted them to be less dependent or more responsible.

All were mothers and all but one had daughters. The group included both non-directive and directive parents (as with group (i), for example, three told their daughters to stay at university at least until the end of the first term), but were united by concerns about their children's progress towards independence, and about the implications of intensive involvement for the promotion of independence. Several also worried about the effect of providing support – financial as well as emotional – on their own lives. This group exhibited the most dissonance between the accounts of parental involvement given by parent and child, with a number of 'silences' (see above p.4) about particular episodes.

Two mothers reflected openly on the sacrifices (including career progression) made for their children and what they had hoped they would be 'getting back'. One mother

would have liked to have received a little bit more and given a little bit less.

She believed that students should be more resilient:

...going to university, being taught nice things...it shouldn't really be that difficult...I suppose some of me is a bit...resentful....

Another three mothers had hoped that their daughters would be more like friends by this stage:

I'd always had this dream that I would have a daughter and we'd be friends when she grew up....

To a large extent the mothers in this group wanted their children to be less dependent and/or take more initiative. One mother provided a full range of emotional, financial and academic support. She was concerned that her son seemed unaware that he should take more responsibility: 'life's too easy [for him].'

Two mothers expressed some irritation at being expected by their daughters to be on tap:

...she gets really cross with me when I don't look at my emails – "But I sent you something". "Well, you know, I've been busy".

The other mother had been recently widowed and was endeavouring to make a life of her own. She did not want 'to intrude' in her daughter's life, but above all did not want her daughter to intrude in hers.

Yet virtually all these mothers found themselves behaving in ways that were unlikely to produce the independence they sought for their children. Thus one mother, although unhappy about her son's dependence, reported that, if he seemed 'down' in a 'phone call with her husband, she would immediately also telephone him.

Another mother described how she had

always encouraged my children to be really independent...I do have massive expectations....

Yet when her daughter's handbag had been stolen during freshers' week she had been 'on the phone for three days sorting it out'.

Most students in these dyads appeared rather happier with their interactions than the parent. One student acknowledged a degree of dependence which could not be indefinite:

I'm so, so close with my family...if I get stressed I do tend to run back to them...I need to stop depending on my parents for everything...I can't...be running back to them when I'm 40....

However most were much less concerned about apparent dependence on their parents than were the parents themselves.

These dyads consisted in all but one case of mothers/daughters. Two mothers were lone parents and both wanted to build their own lives. While they were closely involved with their daughters, these mothers - unlike the parents in group (i) - wanted to see change in their offspring, particularly towards greater autonomy and more adult relationships; four daughters were very emotionally dependent on their parents. However parents' behaviour did not necessarily encourage autonomy. This ambivalence is consistent with research by Cohler and Grunebaum (1981: 417), who found that some mothers of daughters 'resented incursions on their autonomy'. The student children generally appreciated their parents' involvement and sought them out, with some expressing a degree of anxiety about their dependence on their parents.

(iii) Involved but non-directive (parents 10, 15, 19, 22)

Four parents were happily involved with their student children, but strove not to be directive, seeking to be available when needed. Three were parents of daughters and one of a son: two were mothers/daughters, one a father/daughter, and one a mother/son. They generally recognised that a major transition was taking place in their children's lives which they saw as part of the process of achieving adulthood, and which they wanted to facilitate without being prescriptive.

One mother referred to leaving home for university as a 'rite of passage'. Her daughter had gone to university in the same town but was nevertheless living in a hall of residence. Contact was initiated mainly by the daughter once or twice a week, but she had evolved a pattern of going home for Sunday lunch. This mother insisted that she gave 'no sort of prescriptive emotional support', even though her daughter had asked for and received practical advice on medical ailments, on finding accommodation for her second year, and on dealing with a stolen bank card.

Similar behaviour was described by a mother whose son, while extremely entrepreneurial, experienced considerable psychological difficulties. She sought to play down the support she had given, but felt that telephone contact - often

amounting to 1-2 hours of ‘listening’ a day in the son’s first year – had been crucial. This mother felt keenly that, having ‘inspired’ her son to go to university, she had ‘an obligation to help’.

A divorced mother also lived in the same town as her student daughter. The daughter had health problems; she was living with her boyfriend, who gave her considerable help (as had the mother before university). This mother was the only interviewee to mention ‘helicopter parenting’, which she deplored. She tried to stand back: ‘they need to fight their own battles’. Nevertheless, she was closely involved with her daughter, seeing her at least weekly; unusually, they shared some leisure activities.

The father with a student daughter insisted on being non-directive: ‘I am part of her life, but I am not directive’, and later:

I just don’t choose to make the space in my life to micro-manage my kids.

Unlike the very involved father in group (i), he refused to ‘drop everything to be with her’.

The students in this group confirmed that their parents did not seek to be directive and seemed happy with the parental support. One daughter expressed a common view:

I’m allowed to be emotionally independent...[it’s] like having a back-up. It’s like having a safety-net.

Parents in this group had made a conscious decision to ‘be there’ for their student offspring without being directive, albeit that the father acknowledged that he was acting as much in his own interests as those of his daughter. These parents were committed to supporting their children and, if necessary, helping them to see available options. There was no evidence of helicopter parenting. This group of parents did not experience the tensions that were common for parents in group (ii). How far this kind of involvement was a function of the students’ personality and capacity is difficult to determine, but there was little dissonance between parent and child accounts. Children felt both that they were becoming independent and content with the support provided.

(iv) Involved but ‘holds back’ (parents 1, 4, 8, 9, 11, 16, 18, 23, 25, 27)

Ten parents wanted to be involved and close to their children, but tried deliberately to ‘hold back’. Eight were parents of sons and two parents of daughters: there were two fathers/daughters, two fathers/sons, five mothers/sons (three of whom were divorced), and one mother/daughter. The preponderance of mothers and sons may reflect gender differences, with sons insisting on a greater degree of separation from home. The dyads in this group were the most likely to report the frequency of communication differently.

One father agonised over the degree of emotional support he should give his daughter. Reflecting on his own experience as a student, he stressed that he did not want his daughter to feel the same obligation to telephone or visit:

I...take the view that we should sort of back off a bit, really, 'cause I don't want her to feel...obliged

A second (divorced) father was proud of his daughter's achievements, but expressed similar sentiments:

I don't want to crowd her, I don't want to make a nuisance of myself...I want to let her find her way, but I want to be there to support her.

A third father would have liked to give his son more support:

...there's an element of - "Hey, I'm still your parent, I want to help, just because you can cope alone it doesn't mean that you should."

But he was content to act as a 'sounding board' for the son when he made his weekly telephone call. The other father with a son was proud and felt his son had taken to university 'like a duck to water'.

While the sons were content with the amount of contact with their parents, both daughters stated clearly that they wanted more. One, although describing herself as very 'independent-minded', was upset that her father had not visited her at university:

I feel like...they've just kind of let me go now, like, flown the nest...they don't really feel the need to...see me as much or...spend time with me.

The other recognised that her father did not want her to feel obliged to contact him, but wished that he would call:

... [they] didn't want to bother me and they don't want to make me feel like I have to ring home, sometimes I have to tell them that they're not bothering me, that they should just ring...

The five mothers with sons also felt that they should 'hold back'. This was felt keenly by the three divorced mothers. Thus one concealed from her son that she found his departure for university difficult:

I was conscious of making sure not to put that on him...I knew that it was important that I was fine. He didn't need to concern himself with me.

She pulled back from offering advice for fear that

he'll be annoyed because he's already done it, so I try not to do that.

This student had decided to repeat his first year without consulting his mother, as had the son of one of the partnered mothers, who described himself as 'fiercely independent'. These decisions had potentially significant financial implications for parents.

A South Asian partnered mother spoke of 'just waiting':

[we] say to him...we're here and available if you want to talk about anything...not mother him too much.

Her son returned home almost every weekend to get laundry washed and collect food for the week ahead, but preferred to keep any problems to himself.

All these sons wanted to assert their independence, but in different ways. One son in a lone parent family was aware of his mother's financial situation and how hard she had to work, and regarded it as his responsibility to 'push on through' any difficulties. But another admitted that he had 'coasted' in his first year and felt his mother should have pushed him more. However, he admitted that he would not want to take her advice and would find it 'annoying' if they were to be in touch more than weekly. Whereas many mothers in group (ii) felt that their daughters were too attached, in this group parents (mainly mothers) were aware that their sons wanted to pull away.

In the case of the remaining mother and daughter, the mother continued to express concern about her daughter, who had a history of depression, but gave much less support than when the daughter lived at home. The daughter no longer needed as much contact as she once did, but understood that her mother might want to talk to her:

I completely understand...they've got this daughter who's had problems in the past and she was thrown into this new situation... make sure she's alright.

There was no evidence in this group of helicopter parenting. Indeed the parents – mainly parents of sons - wanted to 'hold back' and to facilitate autonomy. Student daughters desired more involvement, but their parents' actions were conditioned by memories of wanting emotional and geographical distance from their own parents. Sons, however, wanted a greater separation from home. Both mothers and fathers acknowledged their sons' desire to assert their independence. Some parents, including the three divorced mothers of sons, would have welcomed more contact, but sensed that it would be counter-productive to suggest it.

Conclusion: Involvement and Independence

Virtually all the parents and students in our study were 'attached'. Many used the word 'close' to describe their relationships; 'close' has many meanings (Smart 2005), but within our sample indicated supportive and loving relationships. However, parents' involvement in the university lives of their offspring was driven by varied impulses. Several parents, for example, were worried about their child's welfare because of the latter's pre-existing health condition – albeit that they adopted diverse styles of involvement. The personality of the child and the tendency for parents and students to approach the issue of independence differently was also significant (Gillies et al., 2001). Most parents wanted to promote greater independence, while also remaining close.

Nonetheless parents differed in how urgently they wanted change in this respect, and in how far and in what ways they sought to promote independence. The 'happily involved/directive' parents (group (i)) exhibited no real anxieties. They wanted to be in contact with their offspring and to continue their relationships unchanged, which

often involved parental direction. The ‘involved/ambivalent’ parents (group (ii)) were by contrast anxious to see progress towards independence, but the scale and nature of their involvement could be inconsistent with this goal, indicating ambivalence. The ‘involved/non-directive’ parents (group (iii)) aimed to discuss options with their children, but endeavoured to let them make their own decisions, whilst those who ‘held back’ (group (iv)) tried to limit the initiation of contact to aid the transition to independence. Thus parents in groups (iii) and (iv) wanted change, but did not express the same anxiety or inconsistency as the parents in group (ii). For those in group (iii) being non-directive seemed more comfortable than for those in group (iv) who ‘held back’ to accommodate their children, especially sons who were pushing hard for independence, sometimes without much thought for the impact on their parents.

Gender differences in the sample were striking. It has been suggested that mother/daughter relationships may be different, exhibiting more attachment, relational (rather than individual) autonomy, and more dependence (e.g. Josselson, 1988; Holdsworth, 2007; see also Gilligan, 1982). Our sample is small but more female than male students relied heavily on parents, particularly on mothers. Sorokou and Weisbrod (2005) found that parents initiated more needs-based contact with daughters, even though daughters did not initiate more contact of this kind than sons. In addition, Proulx and Helms (2008) found that fathers were especially likely to want their sons to become more independent, but our findings suggest that some mothers, particularly when divorced, also consciously strive to enable their sons to be independent (group (iv)).

Some parents (in group (ii)) support the suggested importance of ‘ambivalence’ as an analytical category (Luescher and Pillemer, 1998; Connidis and McMullin, 2002; Holdsworth, 2004). However, the attitudes and behaviours of most parents were often purposeful. Mothers who expressed ambivalence often did so with regard to their own position as much or more than that of their offspring. While it is impossible to attribute more or less student independence to particular styles of parental involvement, the most ‘ambivalent’ parents in group (ii) were mothers, and they were the most likely to have highly dependent (female) children.

But a majority of parents (particularly in group (iv)) were, in a manner not dissimilar to that described by Karp et al. (2004), balancing support with ‘letting the student get on with it’ and encouraging autonomous decisions. However, ‘balance’ was difficult to achieve, regardless of the frequency and intensity of parental involvement, and regardless too of whether a directive or non-directive style was adopted. Thus a father in group (iv) spoke of the need

...to push the bird out of the nest at some point...the whole thing about being a parent is that kind of dynamic between dependencr and independence... your role is really to bring them up to be independent. ...there’s this push/pull all the time....The birds actually get pushed out of the nest and forced to fly...I do have a bit of that in me...saying you need to be independent...on the other side, I mean I’d like her to stay at home really.

This father, like most of the parents, wanted to ensure that his future relationship with his daughter would be better than his relationship with his own parents; emotional distance, if not complete detachment, had been the experience of many parents. But

most were uncertain how to maintain a close relationship with their offspring at the same time as promoting independence. In a world of easy electronic communication the task presented most difficulties for lone mothers, especially those with sons, and for mothers with daughters.

Students were generally more comfortable than their parents about achieving a degree of independence. In particular, 13 students felt that their relationships with their parents had become more adult; one student (in group (iv)) referred to having 'more authority' *vis à vis* his parents after his first year away. Establishing more equal relationships with parents has been suggested by Arnett (1994) to be an important criterion for college students in achieving adulthood.

Indeed, most students – even those who seemed objectively very dependent – cited examples of progress towards their own definition of independence (see also Gillies et al., 2001; Cullaty, 2011), particularly in terms of making and taking responsibility for their decisions. Thus, a very dependent student in group (ii) felt that he had proved he was 'capable of handling' himself by not giving up his course when he felt particularly 'low'. Even a very dependent female student (in group (i)) felt that she had achieved a degree of independence by making her own decisions about everyday living. Her mother was quizzical, albeit unconcerned:

...she keeps saying, "I'm managing my finances and this and that"...my husband and me keep thinking what's she managing, we are paying for everything.

For a student in group (iv), only if he spoke to his mother *every* day would he be unable to feel independent. Others talked about having to motivate themselves to get up for lectures as evidence of independence. Some young men, however, felt that coping with everyday tasks was not a valid measure: being 'independent-minded' was more important than doing laundry or cooking. Unsurprisingly, this was also the view of sons who collected food from home or who took laundry home to their mothers. For others, not needing to see their parents every day, or being happy when not living at home was sufficient evidence of progress.

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; nor did they share their parents' linear model of progress towards adulthood in which going away to university marked an important transitional stage.

Indeed the majority of parents expressed anxiety about 'the next stage' and whether the child would have to return to the parental home because of a lack of a suitable job or affordable accommodation. The two South Asian parents held a different perspective. While they recognised that leaving home was considered part of the university experience, they thought that one or two years of 'living out' was sufficient. Their student children shared their expectations of returning home. Unlike the other students, leaving home for university was perceived as a hiccup rather than part of the journey to full independence.

The sample for this study was comprised of parents and students whose pre-existing relationships were close, who were in touch with each other and who, for the most part, wanted to be. Parents tended to continue 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 face of their manifest dependence. Many of the students appeared to be reliant on their parents, exhibiting few signs of autonomy. The path to independence was likely to take longer than it had for their parents. But as Fingerman et al. (2012) have observed intense support can benefit young people in the transition to adulthood so long as it meets the young person's needs. Our study supports the conclusion that involved parental support does not routinely become smothering, 'helicopter' parenting.

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¹In 2010/2011, 69 per cent of English domiciled undergraduate students in full-time higher education institutions were known to be living away from home (House of Commons Debates, 2013-2014).

² Pre-1992 universities in England admit more students from advantaged backgrounds than post-1992 institutions.

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Table 1: Number of interviewees

	Daughter (N=20)	Son (N=9)
Mother (N=22)	15 (parents 3, 6, 7, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 20, 21, 24, 25, 28, 29)	7 (parents 2, 9, 11, 16, 18, 22, 27)
Father (N=6)	4 (parents 5, 8, 19, 23)	2 (parents 1, 4)
Mother and Father (N=1)	1 (parent 26)	