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# What's the Payoff? Parental Well-being in Relation to Attachment, Interpersonal Goals and Parenting Style

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WHAT'S THE PAYOFF? PARENTAL WELL-BEING IN RELATION TO  
ATTACHMENT, INTERPERSONAL GOALS AND PARENTING STYLE

by  
Sherlee Q. Chandler

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
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Approved by

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ABSTRACT

SHERLEE Q. CHANDLER: What's the Payoff? Parental Well-being in Relation to Attachment, Interpersonal Goals and Parenting Style  
(Under the direction of Dr. C. Veronica Smith)

Certain relational frameworks such as attachment, interpersonal goals, and parenting styles either found their roots in or have been studied in terms of the parent-child relationship. What often happens, however, is that researchers focus on how these constructs may affect child outcomes, without studying how they may impact the parents themselves. The current study sought to apply attachment and interpersonal goals in a parenting context, examine how they relate to the helicopter parenting style, and test all three constructs as predictors of parental need satisfaction. Parents of incoming college freshmen (N = 122) completed a survey comprised of the Experiences in Close Relationships-Relationship Structures scale, Helicopter Parenting scale, Basic Need Satisfaction in Relationships scale, and an adapted version of the Parenting Goals Questionnaire. Results reveal a significant correlational relationship between anxious attachment and self-image goals. Multiple regression analyses reveal insecure attachment and self-image goals to be significant predictors of helicopter parenting. Attachment insecurity, self-image goals, and helicopter parenting are all significant predictors of parental need satisfaction. Implications for future parent-focused research are discussed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
METHODS.....	8
RESULTS.....	10
DISCUSSION.....	11
REFERENCES.....	16
TABLE 1.....	22
TABLE 2.....	23
TABLE 3.....	24

What's the Payoff? Parental Well-being in Relation to Attachment, Interpersonal Goals and  
Parenting Style

Contemporary parenting involves providing a large amount of time and attention to children (Musick, Meier, & Flood, 2016). At first glance, an increased focus on the child may appear to be a good thing. Extant literature, however, has found that helicopter parenting—a parenting style exemplified by increased child focus—is associated with negative outcomes in children, such as low well-being (Schiffrin et al., 2014) and less trust in their peers (van Ingen et al., 2015). Given these consequences, why do helicopter parents do what they do? Research regarding parental motivations and outcomes is scarce. The current study aims to examine how two relational frameworks—attachment and interpersonal goals—may relate to helicopter parenting in predicting need satisfaction of parents of incoming college freshmen.

**Attachment**

Attachment has roots in the 1960s, when psychoanalyst John Bowlby developed an interest in how early family relationships, specifically those involving the absence of a maternal figure, affected a child's conduct (Bretherton, 1992). He found that infants displayed certain behaviors signifying how attached they were to their mother figure (Bowlby, 1969). A later observational paradigm known as the Strange Situation (Ainsworth, 1978) assessed infants' reactions to being left by their caretaker and approached by a stranger. Three primary attachment categories emerged from observing their responses: secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-resistant. Secure infants were exploratory and were

## ATTACHMENT, GOALS, PARENTING STYLE & WELL-BEING

willing to be comforted at their caregiver's return. Avoidant infants were unaffected by the presence of the stranger and absence of the caregiver, and did not acknowledge their caregiver's return. Resistant infants were distressed by the stranger and the caregiver's absence, and were unwilling to be comforted at the caregiver's return. The behavioral patterns found in the Strange Situation were later discovered in adults (George, Kaplan, and Main, 1985). They were also determined to be intergenerational, with maternal attachment orientation being reflected in infant attachment (Fonagy, Steele, & Steele, 1991). Attachment is now studied as an overall relational framework (Hazan & Shaver, 1994) and is often studied in peer and romantic relationships. Researchers in the field have moved away from studying attachment categorically, and now measure avoidance of intimacy and anxiety of abandonment on bi-dimensional scales (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998).

Parental attachment, both as a trait and oriented toward one's own children, is a rarely explored facet of attachment theory. Though research focused on parent attachment and outcomes are scarce, studies that involve parent attachment insecurity do suggest negative outcomes for both parents and their children. First-time parents who scored high on attachment insecurity also reported high levels of depression in themselves across a two-year transitional period. Parents who scored high in avoidance reported their own depression as dependent on how much they felt that their child was infringing on their romantic relationship (Rholes et al., 2011). Parental attachment insecurity, though found to be unrelated to child substance use, was found to relate negatively to both self-reported and child-reported parental knowledge of said substances, indicating a lack of trust from child to parent (Jones, Ehrlich, Lejuez, & Cassidy, 2015). Children's perceptions of their parents' intimate relationships correlated strongly with their perceptions of parenting quality, and became a model of what they would expect in their own intimate relationships as adults

## ATTACHMENT, GOALS, PARENTING STYLE & WELL-BEING

(Einav, 2014). A direct association was found between attachment anxiety in parents and nonoptimal parenting styles, such as authoritarian or permissive parenting styles (Millings, Walsh, Hepper, & O'Brien, 2013). Considering these findings, research indicates that attachment is integral to the parent-child relationship, yet attachment research centered on parents remains a rarity.

### **Interpersonal Goals**

Crocker and Canevello (2008) proposed that motivations in relationships can be explained as two primary goals, described as compassionate and self-image. Compassionate goals are focused on the well-being and support of one's partner, being generally pro-social in nature. Extant research has found compassionate goals to be strongly predictive of positive behaviors such as growth-seeking and self-compassion (Niiya, Crocker, & Mischkowski, 2013; Kuncewicz, Niiya, & Crocker, 2015). They are related to successful social interactions and close relationships by predicting increased feelings of connectedness (Canevello & Crocker, 2017; Crocker & Canevello, 2008), and can even predict improvement in clinical depression or anxiety (Erickson et al., 2017). They are often studied as mediator variables explaining the relationship between positive predictors and outcomes; one example would be how compassionate goals connect individuals' relatedness fulfillment with satisfaction in romantic relationships (Hadden, Smith, & Knee, 2014). Another example would be its role in explaining how dispositional authenticity, often linked to positive intra- and interpersonal outcomes, is related to pro-social conflict-resolving strategies (Tou, Baker, Hadden, & Lin, 2015).

Self-image goals, by contrast, are meant to gain benefits for the individual, and not their partner, through upholding a likeable projection of themselves to the public. This focus on self-concern is associated with a lack of basic need satisfaction (Hadden, Øverup, &

## ATTACHMENT, GOALS, PARENTING STYLE & WELL-BEING

Knee, 2014), and other negative outcomes, such as less perceived belonging (Crocker, Olivier, & Nuer, 2009). Self-image goals also predict increases in psychopathological symptoms such as anxiety (Duarte & Pinto-Gouveia, 2015). In the context of college roommates, self-image goals were found to predict both increased relationship anxiety and increased avoidance across time (Canevello, Granillo, & Crocker, 2013).

Recent studies have begun applying interpersonal goals to a parenting context. The fact that this has only started recently is surprising, considering how a parent's motivation for involvement with their child relates to child outcomes such as perceived competence and self-worth (Grolnick, 2015). Likewise, parenting founded on autonomous motivation leads to reports of higher child well-being (Jungert, 2015). In terms of the Crocker and Canevello framework, Conti (2015) determined that compassionate goals in parents of autism-spectrum children predict higher parenting satisfaction, meaning in life, and efficacy. There has also been some research on interpersonal goals using paradigms separate from Crocker and Canevello's framework. Le and Impett (2015) found that communal motivation for caregiving positively relates to greater felt authenticity. More recently, they discovered that pursuit of goals related to the child's love and security predicted greater emotional well-being, while parent-centered goals predicted poorer well-being and relationship quality (Le & Impett, 2017). Despite these findings, there is still a distinct lack of research studying parental interpersonal goals and adolescent or adult children.

### **Helicopter Parenting**

Baumrind (1991) developed a framework of parenting styles based off parents' demands of and responsiveness to their children: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful. Research suggests that authoritative parenting, which balances warmth and boundary-laying, is the most globally effective parenting style, barring certain cultural

## ATTACHMENT, GOALS, PARENTING STYLE & WELL-BEING

contexts (Pinquart & Kauser, 2018). Authoritarian and permissive, taken out of those cultural contexts, are generally considered ineffective at best, damaging at worst. Both authoritarian and permissive parenting styles predict increased anxiety sensitivity in adult children, which then predicted anxiety symptoms (Timpano, Carbonella, Keough, Abramowitz, & Schmidt, 2015). Authoritarian and permissive parenting styles have also been found to predict adult children's emotional dysregulation (Nunes & Mota, 2017). In terms of parent outcomes, one study testing alternative parenting typologies found that intrusive parents, a group similar to Baumrind's authoritarian parents, reported high levels of depression symptoms in themselves (Heberle, Briggs-Gowan, & Carter, 2015).

Helicopter parenting (Clive & Fay, 1990) is a contemporary of Baumrind's parenting models. Sharing aspects of both permissive and authoritarian parenting, helicopter parenting acts as a unique brand of parental regulation that promotes positive parenting behaviors such as increased involvement, while also enforcing control (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). This warm but constricted method of caregiving can result in negative outcomes for the family, such as poorer quality communication and lower satisfaction for both parents and children (Segrin, Woszidlo, Givertz, Bauer, & Murphy, 2012). Adult children of helicopter parents report a decreased ability to connect with their parents (Segrin, Givertz, Swaitkowski, & Montgomery, 2015). Students who come from an overly involved family report both lower general and student self-efficacy, and lower quality connections with their peers (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2014; van Ingen et al., 2015). One study found that helicopter parenting can result in lower well-being in children of differing ethnic backgrounds (Kouros, Pruitt, Ekas, Kiriaki, & Sunderland, 2017). This is noteworthy when considering that a major argument against Baumrind's parenting types is its inapplicability to a variety of ethnic and cultural contexts (Heberle et al., 2015). One study of parental

outcomes revealed negative affect, such as anxiety and regret, being predictive of overparenting (Segrin, Woszidlo, Givertz, & Montgomery, 2013).

### **The Current Study**

The current study seeks to explore how relational frameworks such as attachment and interpersonal goals may connect with parenting style in predicting parental well-being. First, I hypothesized that both parent attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance would relate positively to self-image goals, congruent with Crocker and Canevello's study of interpersonal goals and relationship insecurity (2013). I also hypothesized that both dimensions of insecure attachment and self-image goals would positively predict helicopter parenting. Finally, I hypothesized that higher levels of insecure attachment, self-image goals, and helicopter parenting would be significant predictors of lower parental well-being.

## Method

### Participants

The study consisted of 31 fathers and 91 mothers (N=122) of incoming college freshmen at a large southern public university recruited via convenience sampling. Ages ranged from 30 to 73 (M=48.36, SD=5.95). Participants mainly identified as white (87.7%), followed by black (9.8%), Hispanic (0.8%), or multiracial (0.8%), while some chose not to answer (0.8%). In describing their children, participants reported on 44 males and 75 females (N=119), with three participants who did not report the sex of their child. Estimated total household income ranged from \$5,000 to \$800,000, with a median of \$127,500. There were no exclusion criteria for this sample.

### Procedure

Parents were recruited during an orientation event that allows incoming freshmen to explore ways in which they can become involved with campus organizations. Several members of my research lab agreed to assist me in data collection. Participants who approached our table were asked to complete a one-page survey about the parent-child relationship and parents' feelings about their children's transition to college. For the parents of multiple children, we asked that they specifically answer the survey questions with the child they accompanied to orientation in mind. After completion, participants were compensated with small bags of candy.

### Measures

**Interpersonal goals.** An adapted version of the Parenting Goals Questionnaire (Conti, 2015) was used in this study. The measure includes the stem "*In your relationship with your child, how often do you want or try to...*", followed by 14 statements that were scored using a 5-point scale (1 = "never", 5 = "always"). The first seven items assessed compassionate

## ATTACHMENT, GOALS, PARENTING STYLE & WELL-BEING

parenting goals (e.g., “be supportive of your child’s unique abilities/interests”) ( $\alpha = .72$ ) while other seven measured self-image parenting goals (e.g., “avoid looking like a bad parent in front of others”) ( $\alpha = .73$ ).

**Attachment orientation.** The Experiences in Close Relationships – Relationship Structures (Fraley, Niedenthal, Marks, Brumbaugh, & Vicary, 2006) is a 9-item survey assessing parents’ attachment orientation toward their child; we focused on the scores for insecure attachment. Participants indicated how much they agreed with the given statements on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (“Not true at all of me”) to 7 (“Very true of me”). Statements measuring anxiety included six items such as “I’m afraid she/he may abandon me” ( $\alpha = .68$ ) while avoidance included three items such as “I don’t feel comfortable opening up to her/him,” with “she/he” referring to their child ( $\alpha = .68$ ).

**Helicopter parenting.** The Helicopter Parenting Scale (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012) is a 5-item measure of helicopter parenting. Statements included “I intervene in solving problems with my child’s teachers, professors, or employers” and “I solve any crisis or problem my child might have.” Parents responded to statements with answers ranging from 1 (“Not at all true of me”) to 7 (“Very true of me”) ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

**Need satisfaction.** The Basic Need Satisfaction in Relationships Scale (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000) measured parents’ perception of need satisfaction in the relationship with their child. In response to the stem “*When I am with my son/daughter...*”, participants answered how accurately the items described them (1 = “Not at all true of me”, 7 = “Very true of me”). Sample items included “I have a say in what happens, and I can voice my opinion” (autonomy), “I feel very capable and effective” (competence), and “I feel a lot of closeness and intimacy” (relatedness) ( $\alpha = .68$ ).

## Results

Hypotheses were tested using correlations and multiple linear regressions.

Descriptive statistics for study variables, including correlations, are presented in Table 1.

Means for compassionate goals and need satisfaction were relatively high. Means for self-image goals were mid-range, but skewed slightly toward higher scores. Means for attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety, and helicopter parenting were all comparatively low. These data reflect a sample of moderately positive, compassionate, secure parents.

Correlation analyses were conducted to assess the relationship between attachment and interpersonal goals. Results revealed that parental relationship anxiety correlates significantly with self-image goals, such that higher scores of self-image goals indicate higher anxious attachment. Relationship avoidance was correlated strongly with relationship anxiety, but was not correlated with either interpersonal goal. Compassionate goals correlated with self-image goals, but were not significantly correlated with either attachment orientation. These data suggest that my hypothesis was partially supported.

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine whether attachment and interpersonal goals positively predict helicopter parenting (see Table 2). Results reveal the model to be statistically significant,  $F(3, 118) = 8.74, p < .001, R^2 = .18$ , with self-image goals contributing the most to variance in helicopter parenting. Attachment anxiety and avoidance were both found to be nonsignificant predictors.

Finally, a multiple regression analysis was performed to examine attachment, self-image goals, and helicopter parenting as predictors of need satisfaction in parents (see Table 3). The model is statistically significant,  $F(4, 117) = 32.46, p < .001, R^2 = .53$ . Both anxious and avoidant attachment were found to be the strongest contributors to the variance in need

## ATTACHMENT, GOALS, PARENTING STYLE & WELL-BEING

satisfaction. Self-image goals and helicopter parenting were found to be nonsignificant, with the beta for helicopter parenting in particular being at zero.

### **Discussion**

In the present study, the roles of attachment, interpersonal goals, and helicopter parenting in relation to parental well-being were examined. Overall, I found evidence suggesting that these constructs do connect in meaningful ways, and my findings hold implications for future parent-focused research.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that attachment insecurity would correlate positively with self-image goals. The results suggest that parental anxious attachment does relate positively to self-image goals, keeping in line with previous research (Canevello et al., 2013). This suggests that anxiously attached people, in wanting to maintain their relationships, emphasize goals centered on keeping up appearances in order to appeal to others. Regarding the parent-to-child relationship, this can be interpreted as anxious parents engaging in behaviors meant to ensure contact with their child as they leave for college, which may be intensified by their attending a college orientation event—the first step toward leaving. Contrary to prediction, avoidant attachment correlated with neither interpersonal goal, suggesting that avoidant parents may find connecting with their college-age child uncomfortable or difficult.

I predicted insecure attachment and self-image goals would positively predict helicopter parenting. The results partially support this, in that the model as a whole is statistically significant. However, although previous literature evidences anxiety as being strongly associated with overparenting (Segrin, et al., 2013), both correlation and regression results reveal no significant relationship between insecure attachment and helicopter parenting, so their placement in the model is redundant. Self-image goals are a far stronger predictor of helicopter parenting. Similar to the previous hypothesis, this could also be exacerbated by the orientation setting. Faced with the prospect of their child leaving, parents

## ATTACHMENT, GOALS, PARENTING STYLE & WELL-BEING

may increase their intrusive parenting behaviors in attempt to make themselves appear more appealing to their children, with the intent to maintain contact and connection after the nest is emptied (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009).

Finally, I predicted that insecure attachment, self-image goals, and helicopter parenting would all predict lower parental well-being, measured in terms of need satisfaction. The results partially supported this claim; when controlling for self-image goals and helicopter parenting, anxiety and avoidance accounted for most of the variance. This implies that for parents, even when considering motivations and parenting style, the state of attachment felt toward their child is the strongest predictor of their need satisfaction in that relationship. Given that attachment is an internal working model developed early in life and later mapped onto other relationships, this would make sense; attachment is a lifelong construct that remains relatively constant (Hazan & Shaver, 1994), whereas interpersonal goals and parenting style are both comparatively short-term. Thus, attachment may act as a baseline construct that relates directly to well-being, while other relational constructs stack on top of it to further increase variance. In addition, attachment insecurity is historically associated with lower need satisfaction and poorer well-being (Wei, Shaffer, Young, & Zakalik, 2005).

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study involves the method of analyses used. The significant correlational relationship between self-image goals and well-being disappears when regressed with insecure attachment and helicopter parenting. Such a change may indicate mediation. As I do not have sufficient knowledge of this analytical method, I decided to utilize multiple regressions instead. It is very likely, however, that a more thorough explanation could be found with mediational analyses in future research.

## ATTACHMENT, GOALS, PARENTING STYLE & WELL-BEING

A second limitation was the uncontrolled environment in which I collected data. Although this was the most convenient way to access the population I wished to study, in order to reach them I was forced to sacrifice the controlled nature of a lab setting. The freshmen orientation event was held outside, therefore we were unable to ensure that participants completed their surveys alone and without input from anyone nearby.

Related, a third limitation was the length of the measures used. While the Cronbach's alphas were decent, ranging between .68 and .79, they could have been stronger had we used longer measures. However, because of the open setting in which I collected data, I was forced to use shorter measures in order to fit all my content onto a single page.

Finally, due to the fact that correlations and regressions were used as the primary methods of analysis, I cannot claim causality with the results found in this study.

### **Future Research**

Future studies could benefit by replicating these results in parents of children at different ages. Given that emerging college students are nearing adulthood, the role of parent motivations analyzed in the present study may only be representative of a specific transitional period. Parents of a younger child may report lower levels of attachment anxiety and helicopter parenting due to the child's age and dependence on them, but for that same reason may score high in helicopter parenting behaviors. Thus, it would be fruitful to conduct a longitudinal study following parents and children throughout child development.

Future researchers can also study child variables in relation to parent outcomes. For example, consider gender: given American cultural and social norms, parents may express more attachment anxiety and helicopter parenting when daughters leave for college than when sons do. Similarly, parents of multiple children may report more helicopter parenting behavior toward the firstborn child and less with each subsequent child. Parents may report

## ATTACHMENT, GOALS, PARENTING STYLE & WELL-BEING

higher scores in self-image goals if they have anxiously-attached children, being more easily able to use them in improving their own self-image. Child attachment toward the parent may impact parental well-being. In essence, researchers should explore the many ways in which children affect the parenting experience.

Finally, given the link established between self-image goals and helicopter parenting, future research should further examine how interpersonal goals may interact with other parenting styles. Compassionate goals may relate positively to Baumrind's authoritative parent, the most effective parenting type with concurrent warmth and firmness (Pinquart & Kauser, 2018), while self-image goals may be predictive of authoritarian parenting. Alternatively, both goals could be studied relative to Heberle's (2015) six parenting groups, which share similar themes as Baumrind's framework but have been replicated in a variety of cultural and socioeconomic contexts.

### **Conclusion**

Attachment, interpersonal goals, and parenting styles have been studied almost exclusively with child outcomes in mind. Until now, few studies have considered these constructs in a way unique to parents. Past research has found parent-child attachment to be influential not only to the child, but the parents themselves; the same can be said of interpersonal goals. Though there is limited research on how parenting style may affect parents, extant literature provides enough detail on child outcomes to make one question why parents chose to raise their child in such a way. The present research has taken these concepts into account and drawn connections between insecure attachment, self-image parenting goals, and helicopter parenting in a way unique to parents. Ultimately, how parents relate to their children is predictive of their own happiness and well-being. That is something

## ATTACHMENT, GOALS, PARENTING STYLE & WELL-BEING

worth remembering as we researchers further expand the parenting literature, so as to better understand a significant, yet understudied population.

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## ATTACHMENT, GOALS, PARENTING STYLE & WELL-BEING

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## ATTACHMENT, GOALS, PARENTING STYLE & WELL-BEING

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## ATTACHMENT, GOALS, PARENTING STYLE & WELL-BEING

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Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics of All Study Variables*

Variables	M	SD	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5	6
Compassionate Goals (1)	4.27	.47	3.14	5.00	—					
Self-Image Goals (2)	3.48	.64	1.86	5.00	.30**	—				
Helicopter Parenting Scale (3)	2.80	1.13	1.00	6.00	-.01	.41**	—			
Attachment Avoidance (4)	2.90	1.02	1.00	7.00	-.13	.01	-.12	—		
Attachment Anxiety (5)	1.81	1.05	1.00	7.00	-.06	.22*	.09	.35**	—	
Basic Need Satisfaction (6)	5.62	.90	2.67	7.00	.12	-.18*	-.02	-.58**	-.61**	—

*Note: \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01*

ATTACHMENT, GOALS, PARENTING STYLE & WELL-BEING

Table 2

*Summary of Regression Analysis for Insecure Attachment and Self-Image Goals as Predictors of Helicopter Parenting*

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Parent Anxious Attachment	.06	.10	.05	.56	.58
Parent Avoidant Attachment	-.16	.10	-.14	-1.58	.12
Self-Image Goals	.70	.15	.40	4.62	<.001

*Note:* N = 121, R<sup>2</sup> = .18

ATTACHMENT, GOALS, PARENTING STYLE & WELL-BEING

Table 3

*Summary of Regression Analysis for Attachment Anxiety, Self-Image Goals, and Helicopter Parenting as Predictors of Need Satisfaction*

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Avoidant Attachment	-.37	.06	-.42	-6.06	<.001
Anxious Attachment	-.38	.06	-.45	-6.36	<.001
Self-Image Goals	-.11	.10	-.08	-1.08	.38
Helicopter Parenting	.00	.06	.00	.06	.95

*Note:* N = 121, R<sup>2</sup> = .53