

Does Hovering Matter? The Effect of Helicopter Parenting on Adolescents' Suicidal Ideation

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ABSTRACT

Since parents are the prime source of a child's mental health development, the practice of inappropriate and impertinent parenting can lead to various psychological problems. Very few studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between parenting styles and suicidal ideation among Malaysian adolescents. The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of helicopter parenting on adolescents' suicidal ideation. The study also investigated the effect of ethnic and gender differences on the relationship between helicopter parenting and suicidal ideation. A sample of (n=183) adolescents (59 male, 124 female) were selected through the convenience sampling method. Data was collected using the helicopter parenting scale and the revised version of the Suicide Behaviour Questionnaire. The findings revealed that helicopter parenting is a significant predictor of suicidal ideation. The findings also demonstrated that Indian parents practise a higher level of helicopter parenting, followed by Malay and Chinese parents. Furthermore, the results indicate that suicidal ideation vary across genders and higher among Indian adolescents. The outcome of the study supports the proposition of Agnew's General Strain Theory, which stated that strains resulting from the external environment such as parenting coercion leads to suicidal ideation among adolescents. Overall, the findings redound to the expansion of empirical evidence concerning the phenomenon of helicopter parenting and suicidal ideation.

Keywords: *Helicopter parenting, suicidal ideation, Malaysian adolescents, ethnicity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Mental health crises that occur among adolescents is consistently becoming a growing public health concern in Malaysia (1). Notably, the phenomenon of suicide has given rise to a considerable number of studies in Malaysia. The rate of suicide is increasing exponentially, wherein, previous research indicated that approximately seven people committed suicide in one day (2). The last few years have witnessed a massive growth in studies on examining the suicide cases in Malaysia (2-5).

Suicidal ideation refers to an individual's thought about ending his/her life without any accompanying behaviour (6). More than seven percent of adolescents in Malaysia have thought about ending their life, and nearly half of them committed suicide successfully (7). Moreover, recent evidence indicated that suicidal

ideation is rising significantly among young adolescents (8).

1.1. Helicopter Parenting and Adolescent's Suicidal Ideation

Since suicidal ideation is mostly noticeable among young adolescents who are experiencing psychosocial challenges, it is monumental to explore the contribution of the family factor towards the problem. There are a number of factors contributing toward adolescents' suicidal ideation. Most studies revolve around individual level of risk factors, such as depression, loneliness, lack of motivation (4), substance abuse (9), and aggression (10). However, studies on the influence of social connectedness (parents influence) on suicidal ideation among adolescents are exceedingly scarce. Since adolescence is the critical phase of transition of a child which

associates tremendous development in their way of behaving and thinking (11), parents are among the most crucial elements in facilitating the transition by practising appropriate ways of parenting. Improper or maladjusted parenting may lead to various psychological issues among adolescents (12–15).

Research on parenting has drawn a considerable amount of attention. Apart from the three types of classical parenting styles (16), new elements of parenting categories have been introduced and widely studied, such as helicopter parenting (17) and tiger mother (18). Helicopter parenting is defined as the phenomenon where parents are overly involved with every aspect of their children's childhood development (19). Similarly, Cullaty (20) stated that helicopter parenting is the parent's over-involvement in adolescent behaviour by overriding their ability for problem-solving and decision-making skills.

A recent structured analysis focusing on suicide has proven that the role of parenting behaviour is crucial in suicide prevention (21). The analysis strongly indicates that helicopter parenting in specific, affects the self-efficacy of an individual which causes anxiety, depression, lower life satisfaction, and poor physical health (22). Research involving Korean college students has indicated that helicopter parenting has a negative correlation with students' emotional well-being, specifically on the internal locus of control (23). This means that students raised under the helicopter parenting behaviour have a low internal locus of control where they tend not to blame themselves or their abilities for events that happen in their life. Furthermore, Brigham Young University (2015), has confirmed that helicopter parenting depresses children because parents do everything that the children should do, which leaves the children not being equipped with life-management and problem-solving skills. The children suffer from low self-worth and engage in risky behaviours (24). They would be desperate to fit in socially, and this desperation ends up leading into depression, where suicidal thoughts are known to be one of the symptoms (25).

Through the theoretical lens, the relationship between helicopter parenting and suicidal ideation may be explained via the proposition of the general strain theory (26). The general strain theory has been widely used to explain various problematic behaviours. Agnew (26) explained the strain in several contexts such as an individual's inability to meet the desired goals (financial stability, social status, and self-autonomy), the loss of positively-valued stimuli (deprivation of love, loss of property), and the exposure to aversive stimuli such as verbal and

physical abuse. According to Agnew (26), strain resulting from an individual's life leads to negative emotional states such as depression, anger, and fear. He further added that individuals got involved in various deviant behaviours as an attempt to overcome their negative state of emotion. Based on this assumption, the current study hypothesized that helicopter parenting is one of the detrimental forces in an adolescent's development which leads to suicidal ideation.

1.2. Ethnic and Gender Difference in Suicidal Ideation

Comprehending gender and ethnic differences is a crucial element to consider when developing a gender-based and culturally-competent psychological intervention (27,28). Evidence postulates that differences across ethnicity influences the development of suicidal ideation (29) which indicates the need for attention. In a local context, difference in suicidal ideation among Malaysian adolescents across different ethnicities are visible based on the growing amount of relevant literature. Prior studies consistently documented that suicidal ideation were significantly higher among the Indian community (3,30,31). However, more studies are required to articulate this issue in order to initiate culturally adapted preventative efforts with distinct developmental timing for adolescents from different ethnic backgrounds.

Articulating the gender difference is one of the important aims of this study. Chan et al.(3) discovered that female adolescents are more vulnerable to developing suicidal ideation compared to male adolescents. Lewinsohn et al.(32) discovered that the risk of suicide attempts was higher among boys and girls during mid-adolescence. However, it has dropped among young women after age 18. Indeed, the findings on suicidal ideation often contradicts across genders. On the contrary, another study revealed that suicidal ideation was found to be higher among male adolescents compared to female adolescents (4,33).

Despite the recent attention on helicopter parenting globally, much less is known concerning the practice of helicopter parenting and suicidal ideation among Malaysian adolescents. Therefore, the present study was designed to examine the effect of helicopter parenting on adolescent suicidal ideation. As a secondary aim, the present study also investigated the difference between gender and ethnicity in practising helicopter parenting and suicidal ideation. The aim of this research was to test the following hypotheses: (1) Helicopter parenting is a significant predictor of

adolescents' suicidal ideation, (2) There is a difference in the practice of helicopter parenting across different ethnicities, (3) There is a difference in the levels of suicidal ideation among adolescents across different genders, (4) There are differences in the levels of suicidal ideation among adolescents across different ethnicities.

2. METHOD

A quantitative research strategy was implemented where the research approach was based on positivism. Data was gathered using a descriptive survey research method via administering a questionnaire. The participants of this survey were undergraduate students from a private college located in Kedah, Malaysia. There was a total of 320 students comprised of 198 females and 122 males. Krejcie and Morgan (34) table of sample size determination was used to identify the sample size for this study. One hundred and eighty-three (n=183) participants were recruited as a subset of the population by using a convenience sampling method. All of the participants were informed in advance about the purposes of this project, and gave their informed consent to participate in the survey. Their identity, as well as the names of the organisations they belong to, have been kept in strict confidentiality, thus meeting the requirements of the code of ethics of the university.

2.1 Instruments and Procedures

The present study utilise a questionnaire comprising of three sections to collect data. The first section requested demographics information such as gender, ethnicity and religious affiliation. The second section comprised of items with the linear scale format to measure the level of helicopter parenting developed by Lemoyne et al. (35). This section included ten items concerning the respondents' experience with their parents. Every item of this questionnaire contained the 5-point Likert scaling: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=undecided, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree. A higher score demonstrated a higher level of helicopter parenting experienced by the respondents. The researchers indicated Cronbach's reliability alpha of .746, which suggested that the scale used in this study has a good level of reliability. The third section comprised of the linear scale format to measure suicidal ideation. The Suicide Behaviour Questionnaire-Revised (36) was used to identify the risk of suicide among adolescents. The questionnaire comprised four items, namely: 1) Have you ever thought about or attempted to kill yourself? 2) How often have you thought about killing yourself in the past year? 3) Have you ever told someone that you

were going to commit suicide, or that you might do it? 4) How likely is it that you will attempt suicide someday? The researchers indicated Cronbach's reliability alpha of .724, which suggested that the scale used in this study has a good level of reliability. The research questionnaire was administered online (via Google Forms) to students who chose to participate in the study.

2.1 Data analysis

The Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS, Version 25) was utilised to analyse the data obtained from the respondents. Firstly, a descriptive analysis was conducted to explain the features of the collected data. Secondly, a simple regression test was conducted to examine the relationship between helicopter parenting and suicidal ideation. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to identify the difference in the levels of helicopter parenting and suicidal ideation across different ethnicities. Finally, a t-test was used to examine the difference in suicidal ideation across different genders.

3. RESULT

Table 1 Demographic Profile

Demographic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	59	32.2
Female	124	67.8
Ethnicity		
Malay	9	4.91
Chinese	91	49.7
Indian	83	45.4
Residential Location		
Urban area	156	85.2
Rural area	27	14.8

Table 1 displays the demographic information of the respondents of this study. Based on the data, 59 (32.2%) respondents were male, and 124 (67.8%) respondents were female. This indicates that the number of female respondents was higher than the number of male respondents. The ethnicities of the respondents are as follows: Chinese (49.7%), Indians (45.4%), and Malays (4.91%). The data indicates that majority of the respondents of this study were Chinese while the minority were Malays. Referring to the data on the residential location of the respondents, 156 (85.2%) respondents were from an urban area and 27 (14.8%) respondents were from a rural area. This meant that the higher number of respondents were from urban areas.

H1: Helicopter parenting and adolescents' suicidal ideation.

Table 2 Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.609 ^a	0.567	0.362	0.33534

Table 3 ANOVA table

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	3.745	1	3.745	13.07	.000 ^b
Residual	51.872	181	0.287		
Total	55.617	182			

Table 2 represents the model summary of suicidal ideation. Based on ANOVA test in Table 3, the overall occurrences of suicidal ideation is significant [F (1, 181) =13.068, p < 0.05], with an R-squared of .567. The linear regression in Table 4 shows that helicopter parenting is significantly related to suicidal ideation. That means helicopter parenting is a significant predictor of adolescent's suicidal ideation. Therefore, based on the findings of this study, the initial hypothesis is accepted.

H2: There is a difference in the levels of helicopter parenting across different ethnicities.

Table 6 indicates the significant differences found in the levels of helicopter parenting across different ethnicities. The data revealed that the Indian ethnicity showed the highest mean score (M = 3.200, SD = 0.414) compared to the Chinese (M =2.871, SD = 0.447). ANOVA test analysis shows differences in the levels of helicopter parenting, F (3,179) = 5.935, p = 0.000. This finding suggests that there is a significant difference in the practice of helicopter parenting across different ethnicities. Therefore, based on the findings of this study, the initial hypothesis is accepted.

Table 4 Linear Regression

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	0.442	0.268		1.647	0.101
Parental	0.319	0.088	0.609	.615	0.000

Table 5 The comparison of mean suicidal ideation levels based on gender

	Male		Female		T-test	P-Value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Suicidal Ideation	1.351	0.508	1.423	0.57	-0.82	0.414

H3: There is a difference in the levels of suicidal ideation among adolescents across different genders.

Table 5 presents the findings on the levels of suicidal ideation among adolescents across different genders. Independent sample t-tests were used to examine the difference in the levels of suicidal ideation among male and female adolescents. Findings revealed that female respondents recorded the highest mean score (M = 1.423, SD = 0.573) compared to the males (M =1.351, SD = 0.508). The result of T-test analysis proved that there is a difference in the levels of suicidal ideation, t (181) = -0.819, p=0.414 across different genders. Therefore, based on the findings of this study, the initial hypothesis is accepted.

Table 6 Comparison of mean suicidal ideation levels based on ethnicity

Ethnic	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Df	F- Test	Sig
Malay	9	3.100	0.400			
Chinese	91	2.871	0.447			
Indian	83	3.137	0.417			
Total	183	3.006	0.449			
With Group				3	5.935	.000
Within Group				179		

H4: There is a difference in the levels of suicidal ideation among adolescents across different ethnicities.

Table 7 represents the comparison of mean score of suicidal ideation levels between ethnicities. The Indian ethnicity showed the highest mean (M = 1.445, SD = 0.630). Meanwhile, the Malays showed a low mean (M =1.000, SD = 0.000). ANOVA test analysis results showed differences in the suicidal ideation levels, in which F (3,179) = 1.383, p = 0.249. Overall, the findings indicated that suicidal ideation among adolescents varies across different ethnicities. Therefore, based on the findings of this study, the initial hypothesis is accepted.

Table 7 Comparison of mean suicidal ideation levels based on ethnicity

Ethnic	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	df	F-Test	Sig
Malay	9	1.000	0.000			
Chinese	91	1.212	0.388			
Indian	83	1.445	0.630			
Total	183	1.400	0.552			
With Group				3	1.38	0.25
Within Group				179		

3.1 Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the effect of helicopter parenting on adolescent's suicidal ideation. The hypothesis was that helicopter parenting is a significant predictor of adolescents' suicidal ideation. Results of this study confirmed that there is a significant link between helicopter parenting and suicidal ideation among adolescents. The findings indicated that young adolescents are more likely to develop suicidal ideation if their parents give them excessive attention on a daily basis. These results corroborate the findings of previous studies in examining the role of parents on adolescents' suicidal behaviour (22-23,37-39). Such discovery supports the current literature, indicating that helicopter parenting could lead to various challenges among adolescent children. Indeed, such parenting behaviour could prevent young adults from acquiring self-regulatory abilities, which is associated with wellbeing problems. Moreover, the findings of this study revealed the critical role of parents in nurturing young adolescents with good psychological wellbeing. This study demonstrates the importance of parenting and the need for further studies to explore other factors to predict adolescents' suicidal behaviour and identify ways to prevent it.

This research also discovered that helicopter parenting is popular among Indian parents. Since Indian parents uphold the dominant ideology of intense parenting by emphasising on their child's academic achievements (40), they tend to arbitrate their child's decision-making and problem-solving process to extreme lengths. Over time, the children will develop the feeling that everything they do should be to fulfil their parents' desires and they tend to lose motivation to succeed in life. Another critical finding

indicated that there was a difference in the occurrence of suicidal ideation among different genders. The finding of this study substantiates previous findings in the literatures (41,42). Higher suicidal ideation among female respondents may indicates the highest rate of depressive symptoms which subsequently elevated the emerging of suicidal thoughts (43).

Besides that, the results of this study indicated that Indian adolescents demonstrated a higher mean of experiencing suicidal ideation. The finding of this study confirmed the previous finding which found that suicidal ideation was higher among Malaysian Indian adolescents (8,44). Higher prevalence of suicidal ideation among Indian adolescents are predictable due to the practice of intense parenting and relentless efforts of overprotecting their children from failure. However, there is a relatively minimal sample size of Malay respondents, thus caution in interpretation is suggested. Therefore, further studies involving a sizeable fraction of the population from all ethnic groups is warranted.

The findings of the current study provide an important theoretical implication. The combination of findings provides support for the conceptualization of General Strain Theory (26). In congruence with the general strain theory, the findings indicate that sources of strain resulting from over-parenting can lead to suicidal behaviour. Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that the General Strain Theory bestows a useful theoretical model for researchers of adolescence suicidality and contributes to the literature on the theoretical framework of suicidal behaviour (45).

3.2 Conclusion

In summary, the present study contributes to the growing area of research by exploring the influence of parenting on adolescents' suicidal ideation, hence providing an insightful framework on planning appropriate strategies in alleviating the rising number of suicide cases in Malaysia. Besides that, the results of this study suggest several courses of action for school authorities and student counsellors to be aware of the influence of helicopter parenting on adolescents. Moreover, encouraging the practice of self-autonomy among adolescents is a vital part of nurturing self-reliance. The researchers are aware that this research possessed several limitations. Despite this, it is believed that these project findings could be the springboard for parents to reassess their style of parenting and comprehend the phenomenon of suicidal ideation among adolescents in Malaysia. The most important limitation is the number of respondents

in this study. The small sample size might not be transferable to the entire population of adolescents in Malaysia. Therefore, further studies with a larger sample size is warranted. Secondly, the current study employed the Pearson Chi-Square test, which only explained the relationship between the studied variable without indicating any causal effect between variables. Therefore, further study is needed to conduct a more detailed analysis to understand the relationship more profoundly. Thirdly, the data was based on self-reported measures; therefore, false or inaccurate responses from participants may have led to recall bias or reporting bias. All of these may have influenced the validity of the results. With the increasing prevalence of helicopter parenting within multiple cultures, more research is imperative to better acknowledge and communicate its effects to parents, students, and university administrators.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors made substantial contributions to this study. Samita Karunaharan contributed significantly in the introduction, discussion and revision of the draft; Charles Ganaprakasam analysed the data and drafted the manuscript; Tinagaran Selvarajah provided important guidance on the writing and made great contributions in the process of revising. All authors have read and approved of the final manuscript.

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