Supportive or overpowering? Entangled agency of young adults and parents during and after higher education in the U.S.A.

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This article explores high parental involvement in students' lives during and after higher education. While many higher education students lack parental support, from advice to resources, there are also experiences on the other side of the spectrum. Students and graduates may feel fated to certain trajectories whether through parental authoritarianism or more subtle compliance and inter-generational reciprocity. This article draws from 18 months of ethnographic research with 30 students and graduates from a high-profile university in New York City. The methodological focus entailed repeat interviews with individuals, talking about their lives, aspirations, studies, and their relationships with people and places. The article discusses intra-familial negotiation over subject and career choices and by association, over agency and the future of young adults. Cultural, classed, and psychological interpretations all indicate the uncertain boundaries between human beings as young people contest and absorb the influence of their parents.

Keywords: Aspiration, agency, higher education, university graduates, inter-generational relationships

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Introduction

American psychotherapist, Susan Forward (2002) has theorised forms of 'toxic parenting' that continue to ail her adult clients. Through multiple examples, Forward portrays different ways in which parents appear to have harmed and inhibited the development of their now-adult children. In some cases, 'toxic' parental behaviour persists across life; in others, their offspring are haunted by echoes of the past. One client, aged 60, reflected, "I'm a supporting player in my own life" (p. 51) in reference to the enduring psychic control of his deceased parents. Forward writes:

> Many people believe that once the controlling parent dies they will be free, but the psychological umbilical cord reaches not only across continents but out of the grave. I've seen hundreds of adults who were unflinchingly loyal to their parents' demands and negative messages long after their parents were gone. (pp. 50-51)

Such accounts demonstrate how agency may be entangled in complex relationships, beyond what the eye can see, and beyond conscious awareness. We also see evidence that parental influence can extend beyond age-based milestones in an adult child's life course, as will be explored in the present article.

'Toxic parents' (Forward, 2002) is a 'No. 1 *New York Times* Bestseller'[1]. While an intended non-academic audience insulates the book from certain critique, its popularity makes the ideas part of public culture, and hence a helpful starting point to engage the politics of parenting. Overall, the book is astute in hearing and theorising the impediments that can arise from, among other things, an "overdeveloped sense of obligation to… parents" (pp. 141-142). However, there is a problematic conception that Forward (2002) develops in response to her psychotherapeutic work, which I use as a springboard for the rest of this article. She writes:

> All parents control their children until those children gain control of their own lives. In normal families, the transition occurs soon after adolescence. In toxic families, this healthy separation is delayed for years—or forever (p. 54).

In the context of the controlling stories that Forward described, the sentiment is understandable. However, at least two issues arise. Firstly, the means and age for young people to 'gain control of their own lives' is highly ambiguous. Markers of apparent progress in adulthood such as higher education attendance, home ownership, or having children of one's own may benefit greatly from, or require, parental involvement. Recent scholarship emphasises how interdependence is a fundamental yet variously masked

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[1] Forward is a lecturer with a Ph.D. who writes books such as this one for a wide readership.

aspect of human existence (Martin et al., 2021). As will be explored, independence may be illusory if fostered by extended parental involvement (Zaloom, 2019). Another issue with Forward's claims above is that they do not stand up cross-culturally. As anthropologists have long argued**,** "normality is culturally defined" (Benedict, 1934, p. 72). Lancy (2022) surveys diverse, often seemingly cruel, or patriarchal parenting in the historical and cross-cultural record. Traditional forms of normalcy within many of these family and cultural contexts could indeed be considered 'toxic'. Forward's promotion of 'separation' as an ideal may be specific to her own cultural assumptions. For instance, scholars exploring psychoanalytic thought in India write, "In the West, autonomy and separateness are upheld as ideals to strive for, while in the East, premium is placed upon attachment and interdependence" (Akhtar and Tummala-Narra, 2008, p. 16). The present article investigates the membrane between generations during and after higher education. The social dynamics surrounding higher education (how it is funded, and who decides on the future) and the significance of culture (in which norms vary) contribute substantially to an ambiguity around notions of independence.

Across 2017 and 2018, I conducted 18 months of ethnographic research on the aspirations of students and graduates from a private university in New York City. I conducted the research for a Ph.D. thesis (Loewenthal, 2021) that answered the research question: 'What do university graduates aspire to do with their lives, and how are such aspirations produced, negotiated, and revised over time?'. The present article focuses on the latter parts of the question concerning how aspirations were 'produced, negotiated, and revised over time' with a particular focus on the role of parents in such processes. It emerged that there were uncertain boundaries between self and other and between parent and child in the formation and articulation of aspirations. This entanglement resonates with recent research and theory concerning the socially embedded lives of university students and graduates. Finn (2015, 2017) promotes a relational approach to the study of higher education transitions, arguing that 'agency emerges out of relational connections' (2015, p. 109). Zaloom (2019, p. 95) theorises an 'enmeshed autonomy' of graduates and parents in the U.S.A., whereby parental assistance in paying for college ties the generations closer together. Bregnbæk's (2016) research on university students in China explores the notion of an 'Oedipus project' (Brown, 1985), an existential necessity for young people to attain a degree of distance from their parents. Even as young adults

exerted such desires, there lingered an enduring sense that even 'singular selves' are inescapably intersubjective (Jackson, 1998, in Bregnbæk, 2016, p. 51). This article builds on these arguments and adds a fresh perspective by showing how agency was entangled in parent-child relations well into the latter's early adulthood in the context of financially prosperous families from an array of national and cultural backgrounds. At a socio-economic level, such involvement appeared advantageous for the young adults. Psychologically, it seemed to undermine their sense of self and to stifle the emergence of their own aspirations.

This article discursively engages with a corresponding question, if such parental involvement was experienced as supportive or overpowering. My intention is not to attempt to answer whether parenting actually tipped one way or another, nor to categorise parents as 'toxic', whatever their behaviour. As already implied, there is no normative answer as to how one should parent as such values are culturally dependent (Harkness et al., 2010, Lancy, 2022). However, moral discourses and normative questions do mediate family life as it is lived (Kuan, 2015). In this article, examples of inter-generational relationships raise philosophical questions about the politics of parenting. What might be considered healthy or not, helpful or not? How should parents relate to, or detach from, their children as they navigate early adulthood and make important decisions for their lives? The ambiguous sense of agency that young adults experienced through parental support fuels such questions. I first develop a discussion of relevant literature, followed by a methodology and four data sections.

Parents, culture, and the ambiguities of individualism in higher education

Differing cultural stances manifest in differing attitudes to a child's autonomy across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Lancy, 2022). An ensuing diversity of opinion on how to raise, relate to, guide, and let go of offspring contributes to political discourses around parenting. Chua (2011) wrote a book for a Western audience promoting an apparently Chinese style of 'tiger parenting' of hyper-involvement, harshness, and high educational standards. Chua declares that "in Chinese thinking, the child is the extension of the self" (p. 148) through which she culturally situates practices that smother young people's agency and appear cruel to modern Western values. These ideas have been

criticised by the likes of Deresiewicz (2014) who encourages student autonomy in the selection of college majors and career decisions. Also writing for a Western and non-academic audience, he goes to the other extreme of filial piety, "What do you owe your parents? Nothing. The family is not a business deal" (ibid., p. 122). Such contrasts form caricatures of Eastern obedience and Western individualism. While there is substance to such cultural distinctions, as already alluded to (Akhtar and Tummala-Narra, 2008), this is not to an extent that warrants an East-West dichotomy, or essentialist classification. Martin (2019a) warns against a "simple global separation" that assumes bounded individualism to exist in the West and an absence of autonomy elsewhere. He refers to long histories of relational conceptions of the self in the West. Equally, he refers to trainee psychotherapists in Bengaluru (India) who saw themselves as leaders in a tide of "individualism" in helping clients to reshape their relationships and oppressive aspects of culture (Martin, 2019b, p. 96). Salemink et al.'s (2018) attention to subjectivity similarly argues against patronisation of people in historically socio-centric societies who still have their own personal lives, issues, and desires. Martin (2019a) introduces a term that helps to frame this article, and the negotiation of agency within families, "the ambiguities of individualism" (p. 6). In childhood, there is more cross-cultural consistency concerning the authority of parents, as caregivers, over their children. From adolescence onwards, there is a significant grey area concerning who is responsible for whose lives (Danely and Lynch, 2015; Bregnbæk, 2016; Pina-Cabral, 2018; Narotzky, 2022).

Parental attempts to guide young people and to shape their expectations and behaviours may be ongoing and may take different forms. Kajanus (2015) discusses "the urges and questions from worried parents" concerning the unmarried status of Chinese women who have passed the age of 30 and are hence culturally deemed 'leftover' (p. 100). For instance, the parents of 31-year-old Helen "constantly worry about her situation and urge her to get married soon" (p. 104). Further to parental pressures to reproduce biologically are those to (re)produce socio-economic status. Sweeping the world at present is a trend of orienting people of all genders towards economic productivity and such anxieties become absorbed in (higher) education (Markovitz, 2019). Chua (2011) discusses a parental concern about "family decline", also termed "generational decline" (p. 21), in which a child's socio-economic status does not match or surpass their own. Weeks (2011) argues that the "gold standard" of parenting is to equip a child with the

occupational means of reproducing or improving the parents' social and economic status (p. 6). Increased parental involvement in children's education and subsequent scrutiny of their aspirations tends to increase with social class. Ethnographies of education highlight what Demerath (2009) calls the "middle-class logic of personal advancement through education" (p. 19). Middle-class anxieties to produce competitive children lead to the figure of the "parent-manager" who oversees their busy schedules and drives their progress in homework and extracurricular activities (Kremer-Sadlik and Gutierréz, 2013, p. 130). Lareau (2011) investigated different parenting styles in the U.S.A. and theorised that working-class and poor families tend to aspire to an 'accomplishment of natural growth' in their offspring in contrast to more pushy and involved middle-class parents who practiced a 'concerted cultivation' of constantly shaping their offspring. Lareau (2011) conducted a follow-up study with twelve families approximately 10 years later, when the young people were ages 19 to 21. She argues that descendants from middle-class families "were treated as if they were still children", whereas those from working-class families were treated "as if they were grown" (p. 266).

While Martin (2019a) describes psychotherapy as "one of the key locations… for an exploration of the ambiguities of individualism" (p. 6), so too, I would argue, is higher education as different generations may simultaneously come together and move apart (Zaloom, 2019). Finn (2015) conducted a qualitative longitudinal study of young women from a town in Northern England as they traversed through and beyond higher education. Relationships with people, places, and institutions framed their lives in significant ways. Finn writes:

> "… the young women did not appear to be acting in isolation, 'deciding, shaping and choosing how to live' as dominant accounts of individualisation would have us believe. On the contrary, these stories reveal the ways in which agency emerges out of relational connections, feelings of belonging, yearning for co-presence and the embedded and reciprocal dimensions of family support." (p. 109)[2]

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[2] The individualisation thesis depicts, among other things, a move towards individualised biographies and a contemporary ideal of living 'a life of one's own' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Such a theorisation of agency emerging out of 'relational connections' is helpful for the conceptual framing of this article, and echoes in the stories that follow. Finn's (2015) research may indicate a pattern suggested by Kakar (2004), that as individualism gains appeal in the East, the value of commitment to others is being increasingly acknowledged in the West. Bregnbæk's (2016) ethnography of university students and graduates from two elite universities in Beijing (China) may also indicate Kakar's (2004) depiction. Through an existential anthropology, Bregnbæk (2016) explores "how young people struggle in various ways to experience themselves as autonomous people and try to come to terms with or distance themselves from the will of their parents" (p. 6). Higher education is here framed as a high-stakes arena in which a young person's future, and the perceived future of their family, are contested and defined. Such entanglement between generations is apparent in Zaloom's (2019) study of the financial dynamics of 'middle-class'[3] families as they put young adults through university in the U.S.A. Zaloom (2019) highlights the costs of college and its socio-economic significance in launching a child into a financially independent adulthood. Ironically, such attempts at independence invoke "intimate connection" and "extended financial assistance" from parents (p. 95). Hence, there develops a paradoxical sense of "enmeshed autonomy" (p. 95) in which financial debts accrued by parents cause reciprocal indebtedness in their offspring. My research builds upon theorisations from these studies. A previous article from this same research project introduced the notion of 'fateful aspects of aspiration' (Loewenthal et al., 2019) to describe situations where graduates feel pigeonholed or beholden to a future expected of them. Overlapping sources of constraint include subject specialisation, costs incurred, and parental pressure. The present article further investigates such tensions, exploring how agency spread across individual persons in ways that undermine connotations of individual autonomy. I now describe the research methodology before exploring four data sections.

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[3] Zaloom (2019) defines middle-class families as those earning more than $50,000 per year – rendering them ineligible for low-income Pell grants – yet those who cannot pay for college outright (p. 202). This is a very broad definition. While those in my own study were often from wealthy backgrounds, this did not necessarily preclude them from withdrawing loans. The classification of 'middle-class' according to Zaloom's definition would hence be widely applicable to those in my own study. Speaking to an M.U. graduate, I once referred to M.U. students as 'middle-class'. He corrected me that 'upper-middle-class' is a more accurate description.

Methodology

I conducted an ethnography of the aspirations and transitions of students and graduates from a private university in New York City (here called Manhattan University or 'M.U.'). I collected data between January 2017 and December 2018, during which I was present 'in the field' for eighteen months. A popular aspiration for M.U. graduates was to move to Los Angeles, prompting two research visits there in August 2017 and March 2018. I obtained ethical permission for the research from my home university (in the U.K.), from M.U., and from each participant involved. Thirty participants were involved in total, all of whom were young adults in their early- to mid-twenties completing an undergraduate degree except for two participants completing master's degrees. Participants tended to come from highly advantaged backgrounds due to the university's cost, location, and relative lack of financial aid. I spoke with people with parents from the U.S.A., Mexico, Canada, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Nigeria, China, India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Australia, Italy, Germany and the U.K.

A person-centred conceptual framework emerged as most apposite to conducting research amidst such diversity. Strauss (2006) advocates the analytical strengths of a person-centred approach that "recognizes the importance of learned cultural understandings but does not take 'culture' to be a fixed entity assumed to be held in common by a geographically bounded or self-identified group" (p. 323). Far from rejecting or ignoring the significance of culture, person-centred approaches take seriously the intricacies through which different persons embody and interact with different influences and assumptions. Strauss (2018), for example, shows how two American sisters draw upon contrasting cultural models in their adaptations to adversity and unemployment. In doing so, she simultaneously emphasises the salience of guiding cultural frameworks in people's lives and the limitations of generalising people through macroscopic categories of culture or identity. Importantly, this nuance does not only apply in contexts of apparent or imagined 'Western individualism'. Chiovenda's (2020) person-centred study of men in Afghanistan shows their immense (internal) diversity and the ways in which they variously negotiate, internalise, challenge, and reproduce culture. I hope that the present article echoes this sense of culture being powerful but not totalising, and indeed subtle and subjectively variable.

Interviews with persons on repeat occasions emerged as the strongest means to study their aspirations. The interview context enabled discussion of intimate topics of personal significance that were far-reaching in subject matter (Hockey, 2002; Staples and Smith, 2015). These open-ended conversations on people's inner lives and social world conjured parallels with talking therapy (cf. Hockey, 2002). This intimate interview method was apt for eliciting insights into the research themes, especially given the publicly undisclosed nature of many young people's aspirations (Hart, 2012). Participants became interested in the project as a chance to make sense of their experiences and transitions. There were echoes of Irving's (2017) description of ethnography as "a shared experience or journey in which informant and anthropologist work together toward a set of questions in an attempt to generate new understandings about life and the world" (p. 72). Following up with people over time elicited a better insight into their lives as a whole and into how they changed. In the four sections that follow, I explore key themes concerning the entangled agency of young adults and parents, as articulated by four individuals. Themes of 'fatefulness' (Loewenthal et al., 2019) and family constraint iterated across the two years in which data collection took place and resonated in the ensuing analysis and write-up. I am cautious not to generalise too much. I do not make claims that the findings below are representative of students from the whole university. Indeed, one participant expressed distinct parental absence. The four sections reflect themes that occurred across my interactions with the 30 participants involved, while also being distinct to the persons concerned.

Findings

"I felt like I should basically kind of do what they wanted me to do"

Students and graduates from M.U. reported high levels of parental scrutiny over educational and career choices, often experienced as strings attached to significant financial support. Appadurai (2004) argues that "aspirations are never simply individual. They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of life" (p. 67). In U.S. higher education, considerable quantities of money are often involved, which may provoke various family involvement and dynamics of reciprocation (Zaloom, 2019). The section

below represents part of a long evening spent with Mary, Giovanni, and Paulo in June 2017, shortly after they had graduated[4]. The narrative focuses on Mary, a white American from Connecticut, who was involved in a creative internship and aspired to work in film:

> **Mary**: It used to be a lot more impactful, my parents', like, impression of me. Especially since they helped me so much with, like, paying for college, that I felt like I should basically kind of do what they wanted me to do. And so, my first couple of years at M.U., I was really trying to make something work that was – they like to say, 'practical' –
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> **Giovanni**: Riggghhtt. That's the big word. Practical.
>
> **Mary**: Practical, yeah.
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> **Giovanni**: Like, were they supportive of you?
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> **Mary**: Oh, I was fucking miserable. Like, I was gonna –
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> **Giovanni**: Cos your brother is a software engineer.
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> **Mary**: Well, I was gonna quit school at the end of sophomore [2nd] year. I was like, "*I'm gonna transfer and not do school anymore.*" And they were like, "*Okay, Mary, just do what – what makes this work.*"
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> **Researcher**: To the extent that they were not so pleased with Comparative Literature?
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> **Mary**: No, by that point, by the time I'd actually dealt with, like, declared a major, they were fine with it. But that's just because they went through the whole ordeal of me being, like, very, very miserable for two years.
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> **Researcher**: For general reasons?

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[4] In June 2017, Giovanni responded to an advertisement for a spare room in the apartment where I was living in Brooklyn. After moving in, he agreed to take part in the study, leading to an ethnographic ideal of proximity to one's research participants. The evening in question was initiated when Giovanni invited some friends (Mary and Paulo) around to discuss the research themes. Our time involved hanging out in the living room where we conducted a two-and-a-half-hour recorded interview, followed by further discussion on our rooftop, and then at a local bar while playing pool. Through Paulo, I met Luke who also features in this article.

Mary: Ummm –

Researcher: I don't need to ask specifically, I'm just saying, was it –

Mary: Well, they wanted me to do, I don't know, they wanted me to be like an engineer or somebody, something like that, or sciences. Or even like, Psych [Psychology] they wanted me to do. And I was like, "*You know I'm not gonna get a job with a Psych degree.*" But I just was not happy with any of that.

Researcher: These are familiar stories.

Mary: Oh, super. Like, everyone has this shit happen to them. Like, nobody in my entire family does anything creative. Like, either side. Anyone. So, the fact that I did something that was not, like, a science or politics or something like that was kind of unheard of.

Mary's initial obedience to parental wishes in response to their "paying for college" reflects a reciprocal dynamic described by Mauss (2002) and more recently by Bregnbæk (2016) and Zaloom (2019). The proverb, 'He who pays the piper calls the tune' helps to analogously convey the power implications of parents providing financial support and then wanting a significant say in their children's higher education. In Mary's case, such parental authority appears to have endured for a substantial time, only giving way due to her emotional distress and threat of dropping out of university. A vicarious career anxiety from her parents emanated into dutiful attempts to find a subject that satisfied all parties. Considering that no harmonious pathway was achieved, it is worth reflecting on this frequent difficulty for students and parents to find a consensus over a university subject with various factors to account for, from personal interests to academic proficiency to implied career. Mary and others in this research were able to resist parental authority over her university degree and future life, which may not be possible for other students, even with emotional distress. Across the research, parents attempted to usher their children away from the arts, towards imagined occupational and financial stability through perceived hierarchies of educational subjects. However, this was not unanimous. Parents such as those of Evelyn (see Loewenthal et al., 2019) and Luke, whom we now meet, sought to support their child's artistic dreams as much as they could. In such examples, we see inter-generational entanglement not simply as a transactional consequence of

parents shouldering debt (Zaloom, 2019), but as a social and psychological continuity of relationships from childhood (cf. Lareau, 2011).

"And then they brought up the thing of moving to L.A."

Luke's story indicates parental support of a child's artistic aspirations to the extent of them directing his artistic dreams. Luke grew up in New Jersey as the only child of Jewish parents. He studied Film and Television with an Animation focus, graduating in May 2017. Soon after, he moved to Los Angeles armed with his tablet on which he would draw and develop his illustration portfolio while applying for jobs and competitions[5]. Luke's parents supported him both morally and financially such as funding his living costs in L.A. and providing him with a car. Luke himself pointed out his parents' overwhelming support and offered an interpretation:

> I mean, both my folks, the reason they're so supportive is they are both kind of, like, failed artists, who never really went after, like, what they wanted to do. My mom went to college for art three times and ended up an account woman in advertising. And my father was a writer who really, like, wanted to 'write write', and also ended up writing in advertisement.

Luke's talents represent a continuity of his parents' artistic ideals which they never successfully accomplished in a pure vocation, he says, despite various attempts. Their child's career may therefore represent a chance to live vicariously and to accomplish unfulfilled aspirations. Such a dynamic may, in fact, be the case for many parents, as the development of younger generations tends to offer some consolation to the perils of ageing and death. Marx (1964, p. 138) wrote that "Death seems to be a harsh victory of the species over the particular individual". For persons who become parents this harsh

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[5] I first interviewed Luke in Los Angeles in August 2017. In March 2018, his friend Paulo had also moved there. I interviewed them together in the broader context of an afternoon and evening of participant observation.

reality may be solaced, in part, by the victory of new life and a new body and biography that one can influence.

Luke had in fact started a job in New York City straight after graduating, yet had been encouraged to give this up in order to achieve a bigger goal:

> So yeah, [my dad] gave me a little talk. I got the kind of vibe that he wanted, like, he wished he had gone after a little bit of, like, a harder kind of writing, and didn't want me to fall into the same thing. So, I already had a solid job there [in New York]. And I think his fear was that I would do well at it. And then you end up getting a promotion and you never end up really, like, going out and making the TV shows you want to make.

There is an interesting ambiguity to the word "you" in the expression "you want to make". Luke states this about himself as a result of a talk from his father, indicating an unclear sense of authorship of his own stated dreams. In fact, the very idea of moving to Los Angeles to try to make it in Hollywood was not Luke's but that of his parents. He described an evocative scene:

> We went out to dinner. And then they sort of, like, very abruptly changed and were like, '*Luke, we've got something to talk to you about.*' And then they brought up the thing of moving to L.A. … I only thought about it for a little bit. Quickly, like, I sort of realised the only reason not to do it would be out of the fear of packing everything up and moving across the country.

There is a persistent sense of authority from Luke's parents, which he adheres to, as they make bold suggestions for his life and career. Luke's move to Hollywood has been produced socially (cf. Appadurai, 2004) and even paternalistically. The entangled agency here is slightly different from the 'enmeshed autonomy' described by Zaloom (2019) in her similar study. Luke's parents funding his life may contribute to his deference to their will. However, there also appeared to be other factors beyond financial. Luke exhibited a sense that parent-child relations may endure in their authoritative structure beyond arbitrary landmarks of independence like reaching an age or university graduation. Luke's parents did not let go of their child and continued to perform a role akin to that of

"parent-manager", such as performed by parents of younger offspring (Kremer-Sadlik and Gutierréz, 2013, p. 130). Luke expressed obedience and gratitude at the continued co-construction of his life and aspirations. His agency was entangled with that of his parents in an apparently harmonious manner. This sense that parents may psychologically maintain control over their adult children through the medium of support is further addressed through Denise's story.

"Wait, what are you saying you don't want to do your Ph.D.?"

Denise grew up in Texas where her Nigerian parents have settled. She was a 25-year-old second-year master's student studying Media, Culture, and Communication and contemplating doctoral study or else going into journalism or television. Denise described herself as from "the upper-middle-class" though she had still gone into $115,000 of personal debt for her master's degree (further to $5,000 for her undergraduate studies). Denise depicted a strong involvement from her parents in shaping her trajectory and her view of future options[6]. She referred to a time during her master's when she was speaking to her mother on the phone:

> My mom was like, '*Wait, what are you saying you don't want to do your Ph.D.?*' And [my dad] just, like, flew onto the phone and was just shouting for, like, maybe 10 minutes. And I was listening, '*Okay, well, okay.*' ... And I was like, '*I just don't know.*' And then we started talking about, like, Ph.D. application deadlines.

The effects of Denise's father "shouting", having not been on the initial call, had a considerable effect. A dialogue in which Denise voiced to her mother not wanting to apply for a Ph.D. resulted in a contradictory outcome of her discussing Ph.D. application deadlines with her father. This example demonstrates how Denise was not constructing her aspirations in a purely individual manner. Her story reveals entanglement to the extent

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[6] Denise and I spoke on four occasions over the course of this research. She referred to the therapeutic nature of our interviews.

that a distinction between her own desires and those of her parents is unclear. As in Finn's (2015, p. 109) theorisation, Denise's agency appears to be 'relational' and rooted in her family's input. As Denise has personally taken on the debt incurred, her filial deference is not explainable in the same way that Zaloom (2019) identified 'enmeshed autonomy' (p. 95). Denise, like Luke, appears attached and seemingly loyal to her parents' influence through cultural and family norms and means of continued communication.

Forward (2002) writes that "adult children of controlling parents often have a very blurred sense of identity. They have trouble seeing themselves as separate beings from their parents" (p. 54). Over the course of our interviews, Denise did present herself as a separate person with her own identity and ideas. However, there appears to be a highly permeable membrane between herself and her parents. They appear to have substantial influence over her, albeit in different ways. While Denise's father indicates authoritative and perhaps authoritarian styles of parenting, a more subtle though immensely powerful influence appears to resonate from her mother:

> [My twin brother's] used to getting into those arguments. He's like, '*I can fight about it all day. I'm not gonna do it.*' As opposed to me. I didn't even want to apply to M.U. My mom was like, '*No, I want you to go to New York. I want you to do this*.' And instead of me being like, '*I don't really want to do that*', I still applied. And for good reason, obviously. Everything turned out well. But I'm always like, '*Okay, mom. Okay. Okay. Okay. Mm-hmm. Sure. Yeah. Yeah.*' So luckily, it's not anything that I don't want to do. But if there's something that I'm really like, I really want to do and my mom was like, '*No*', I would be more inclined to be like, '*Oh, maybe I shouldn't do it.*' Or maybe I won't do it to keep the peace, or something.

Denise retrospectively interprets her decision to study in New York as being not her own, but the wish of her mother. In speaking of the powerful influence of her mother, she suggests that simple commands or statements of (dis)approval override her personal wishes to the extent that perhaps her mother is still in charge of her life. Such discourse further undermines connotations of an autonomous sense of self. There are similar

tendencies towards filial compliance in Bregnbæk's (2016) study of young adults in China, such as one participant, Gu Wei, whose mother chose his college major of Accounting and who generally did as his mother wished. In the last example, Grace demonstrates the extent to which parental support may be existentially overpowering.

"They just kind of feed me, and then force me to do whatever the f— they think I should do"

Grace is an only child from Shenzhen in China whom I met up with many times over the course of this research. She spent a period of her adolescence at a boarding school in Texas then studied Finance at M.U. Grace did not find the prospects of a career in finance to be interesting or inspiring. Nonetheless, her parents foisted significant pressures upon her. In December 2017, six months after graduating, she described her negative experiences of being fired from a graduate internship and having her parents come to live with her:

> So, I got fired in September. And I started looking for a job. And my parents were living here with me, and they were *really* worried. And they just tried to, like, kind of take over my job search process. And they, like, talked to *everyone* that they know to see if anyone can help me. And they, like, tried to plan for me. And they tried to, like, to summarise or help me learn from my mistakes. And I just, I couldn't take that anymore.

Grace had herself been "looking for a job" yet this was smothered by her parents' panic. Sounding the alarm, they spoke to "everyone" whom they could, speaking on their adult daughter's behalf even though this was unsolicited by her. While Grace could not stand the pressure of having her parents come to live with her and "plan for" her, they saw this intensity as being of "help". Any notion of boundaries of the self – however cultural – are not to be seen here.

Through inter-generational wealth and other forms of capital, stories such as Grace's are representative of an economically very privileged demographic. A question

that lingers is whether such intensity from parental expectation is privileging in a social and emotional sense. Grace reflected:

> Well, my family is probably the top, like, 2% or 1% economically in China. But I still think my life fricking sucks. I have, like, PTSD, I have to go to therapy, I can't even function, I scream and cry constantly at home.

From the same research study, I have previously argued that broad-brush characterisations of people as either privileged or disadvantaged may fail to account for qualitative aspects of adversity in people's lives (Loewenthal et al., 2019). While sympathies may be limited, it is significant to recognise that psychological well-being does not automatically accompany wealth or status. Those insulated from economic hardship or awarded with prestigious degrees may suffer in other ways including through family life, from parenting to relationships with parents. Ironically, parental pressures that produce the privilege of educational and career success may carry a not-so-privileging underbelly of social and psychological problems. Bregnbæk's (2016) research in China highlights this ambivalence around success whereby the winners of a competitive education system were often weighed down with pressure, melancholia, and a lack of perceived control over their lives.

In April 2018, Grace was incapacitated by emotional distress and was feeling suicidal. She perceived herself to be subject to a callous parenting style going back her entire life that did not account for her own agency or negative experiences. She reflected:

> I used to have parents. And now I just realise they haven't really been taking care of me all of these years. They just kind of feed me, and then force me to do whatever the fuck they think I should do. And doesn't really care what the outcome is.

The sense that Grace's parents 'force her' to do what 'they think' she should do without 'really caring what the outcome is' could be seen in terms of Grace's living conditions, too. As we sat on a bench in Lower Manhattan in May 2018, she cursed, "That!" pointing

up to the apartment that her parents have bought for her to live in. Grace's parents wanted her to remain in the United States to be eligible for a 'green card' visa and an ensuing life there. The circumstance of where she lives being determined by her parents on the other side of the world was a literal and symbolic expression of the lack of control that she felt in her life. Much like the prestigious career in finance which she had trained for, yet which she had no desire to embark on, Grace inhabited her high-rise room in New York City without wanting to actually be there. Grace's story encapsulates a sense that heavy-handed parental involvement may stifle the cultivation of a person's own aspirations.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has explored high levels of parental involvement in the lives of students and graduates from a high-profile university in New York City. Participants in the study were young adults from international and affluent backgrounds. Qualitative research with this group has provided a window into understanding the production of their aspirations. Parents played a significant role in supporting aspirations to the extent that they were often pulling the strings of their adult children's lives. Parental influence and authority were accepted, challenged, or more subtly absorbed in ongoing dynamics of interaction. Boundaries of the self were often uncertain. Such "ambiguities of individualism" (Martin, 2019a, p. 6) are evidenced in Mary's obedience to what her parents "wanted [her] to do", in Luke quitting his job on his father's advice to chase his (or his parents') dreams, in Denise's compliance to both her father and mother, and in Grace's fateful sense of having no authorship over her life. Searches for parental approval still loomed large for these young adults. There existed mutual senses of continuity from inter-generational relationships of childhood into early adulthood. This dynamic mirrors Lareau's (2011) findings among a similarly advantaged demographic, in which parents infantilised their young adult offspring through their continued involvement and monitoring of their lives. In my study, the parents of participants sought to influence and guide their trajectories through suggestions or directives. There was a tendency for parents to serve as gatekeepers to different avenues of early adulthood including the provision of financial support during and after higher education. Adult offspring demonstrated various forms of deference to parental will, which may be reciprocal, in part, to such support. In this regard, the findings echoed those from Zaloom's (2019) study, where financial support from

parents came with strings attached. However, not all entanglement could be explained by financial support. Cultural norms, classed anxieties, and psychological dynamics also explain this porosity between persons.

Different family and cultural backgrounds contributed to differing degrees of parent-child entanglement. There were different norms of inter-generational involvement and interaction during and after higher education. Culture was thus significant, though not in ways that could be reduced to simple taxonomies. Participants in the study had in common high levels of parental involvement, yet their families originated from a variety of countries around the world. Indeed, the entangled agency evidenced in the findings among families of varying identities challenges assumptions of autonomy in the West and dichotomies that imagine collectivism solely in non-Western contexts (cf. Martin, 2019a). A person-centred approach helped to engage the significance of culture in shaping different family norms and expectations without reverting to cultural essentialism (Strauss, 2006, 2018; Chiovenda, 2020). Classed and economic anxieties from parents traversed culture and undermined notions of young adult autonomy. Parental hopes and fears around social status and economic (re)production forged expectations that were imposed upon their offspring. This articulation of ambitious parenting contributed to a lack of letting go and a continuation of influence over adult children's lives. Parents perspired to help their children earn their way into success in a modern meritocratic manner that might also disguise the collective efforts behind the scenes (cf. Markovitz, 2019). Examples of such involvements include encouraging particular college majors (Mary), promoting postgraduate study (Denise), searching for employment on an adult child's behalf (Grace), or making strategic suggestions to orchestrate a career (Luke). Such dynamics all contributed to a significant grey area around notions of independence. Psychologically, we see evidence of vicarious anxieties and desires articulated by parents through their adult children. There were active and blatant attempts at structuring adult children's lives, as well as passive and subtle internalisation of parental authority. Entanglement arose in the processes via which children adopted their parents' perspectives and decisions into their lives. Agency thus spread across individuals and was not reducible to singular persons. To conclude, I quote Durkheim's (1982) description of child raising as "a continual effort to impose upon the child ways of seeing, thinking and acting which he himself would not have arrived at spontaneously" (p. 53). While likely

not the image Durkheim had in mind, it would appear that such child-rearing from "parent-managers" (Kremer-Sadlik and Gutierréz, 2013, p. 130) may continue well into a child's adulthood.

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