

In the shadow of performance and repression: the micromanaged child

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Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of overparenting by analysing behaviours associated with overparenting, such as obsessing over a child's achievements or weight, using Marcuse's notions of surplus repression and the performance principle. The literature on the micromanagement of children reveals a pattern, and motivations of overparenting, that can be understood in light of the Freudian concepts of repression and identity. By taking a closer look at the micromanagement of childhoods, parents can be interpreted as producers of surplus repression that concentrate the pressures of capitalism on their child. This paper proposes the term 'surplus-parenting' as a micro manifestation of surplus repression on a societal level as discussed by Marcuse. By using the term surplus-parenting, the author is able to articulate the consequences of surplus repression in the lives of the children and parents on this micro and macro scale. By questioning the motivations of overparenting, the concepts of the performance principle and surplus repression can be seen as manifesting in the parent-child identity.

About the author

Alissa Welman (she/her) is currently a Social Anthropology Honours student. Her research interests encompass a wide range of human interactions found in diverse contexts including parenting, family planning, and when facing death. Alissa intends to pursue her Master's degree in Medical Anthropology in the future, focusing on these dynamics of interaction when facing illness, infertility, and interacting with the healthcare system.

1. Introduction

The seminal work of Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilisation* (1955) provides a lens through which we can analyse and interpret phenomena in modern society. His appreciation of Freudian psychoanalysis and his Neo-Marxist interpretation of repression, as presented by Freud, shines a light on the day-to-day lives of the ordinary. In this paper, I will turn this lens to children, or rather the micromanagement of children. The term ‘micromanagement’ refers to a managerial style in which a person in power controls and interferes with the project for which they are responsible to manage beyond what is perceived as necessary, to the extent that it intervenes with the ability of the project to be completed. A business is ‘managed’, a project is ‘managed’, and a faceless group is ‘managed’, which leaves us with the predicament of how it is possible to ‘manage’ an individual, or a child, without implying control, manipulation, and excessive influence. In this paper, I investigate and situate the concept of repression in raising children and the micromanagement of their being. Using Marcuse’s concepts of the ‘performance principle’ and ‘surplus repression’, an analysis of overprotective and overinvolved parenting styles and the consequences thereof is presented. Reflecting on Marcuse’s perspectives and adaptations of Freudian concepts, his critique of capitalism, and the society it produces, gives us a better understanding of parents who micromanage their children and the childhood that it produces. I argue through this analysis that children are not free from the productivity and development-orientated power of capitalism, and that the system is rather mirrored in their activities, leaking into the most intimate relationships between parents and their children, leading to a premature internalisation of capitalist standards.

2. The performance principle and surplus repression

As part of the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse offered a critical perspective on advanced industrial

society as an oppressive structure that alienates the population that is living under it. Integral to the study of the emancipatory potential of humanity (or lack thereof), the Neo-Marxists called upon the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud to explain not only the lack of a revolution as predicted by Karl Marx, but the general repression experienced in humanity (Farr, 2013:10). However, Marcuse expands on the writings of Freud, highlighting that his theories of repression and the ‘reality principle’ only consider the biological instincts of humanity, which misses the nuance of context throughout history. To account for the socio-historical conditioning of instincts, Marcuse proposes the terms ‘surplus repression’ and the ‘performance principle’ (1955:42). Marcuse uses these terms to account for the repression of instincts that are necessary to work and socialise in a capitalist society – a repression that goes beyond the interest to preserve humanity and civilisation in the face of the scarcity of basic resources. Basic repression, as proposed by Freud, can be understood as the ‘necessary’ repression for human functioning in a society as a biological being. It is the repression of gluttony, greed, lust, or ‘primal drives’, necessitated by the reality principle, which calls for the containment of the excessive in service of reality, allowing for harmony and functioning (Freud, 1915:125; Marcuse, 1955:36). To go beyond Freud’s reality principle as the driving force for the internal/unconscious repression of the biological instincts, Marcuse suggests that the performance principle is the current manifestation of Freud’s reality principle. This performance principle accounts for the “competitive economic performances” that is necessitated by society, and surplus repression is the “social body” of basic repression produced by capitalist society (Marcuse, 1955:47).

Society presents us with moulds or characters that we are meant to play in the theatrics of everyday life. Whether that be a businesswoman, a supportive husband, a teacher, a shop owner or a banker; we are expected to play our part not only in the continuation of humanity, but in the reproduction of capitalism.

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The internalised desire for productivity and utilisation is where we face the performance principle, and surplus repression is its associate (Marcuse, 1955:50). We regulate ourselves to be highly functioning machines: show-up, sit-up, and do it with a smile, a life predetermined by work and labour. As highlighted by Marcuse, the effectiveness of the performance principle comes from its absorption into normality and the rationalisation of repressing one's desires (1955:48).

3. The micromanagement of children

The term 'helicopter parent' might be a familiar term and does a phenomenal job of painting a vivid picture of a parental figure hovering over every decision, activity, and milestone in a child's life. The term was first used in 1969 by Dr Haim Ginott, who described the 'baby boomer' generation as overly analytic in the well-being and development of their children (Shaki, Gupta, Yadav & Faisal, 2022:4753). Dr Ginott predicted that this correlated with a general overprotectiveness post-World War II and that this 'trend' is isolated to that particular generation of parenting (ibid.).

However, this over-involved parenting style is now more present than ever, hinting that the basis of this parenting style stretches far beyond the need to protect one's child from the harsh reality of war (Jiao & Segrin, 2023:651). The micromanagement of children or 'overparenting' is defined as the developmentally inappropriate involvement of parents in the lives of their children (ibid.:652). This can be seen in multiple facets of a child's life, from a parent obsessing over their child's eating behaviour to the over-involvement in the success of their child's studies. This type of parenting is seen in the parent that constantly calls the teacher about their child's grades and performance, the parent that enrolls their child in multiple extracurricular activities, or the parent over-contributing to their child's school projects. These acts go beyond what is necessary for the child to learn and grow. Instead, they function to instil a *standard* and *expectation* that the child must uphold and meet. Morin (2014) writes that one of the

first signs of over-parenting is a power struggle between parent and child. This is due to the obsessive control the parent seeks in the life of their child, disregarding the privacy and autonomy of their child, which is something the child innately craves. In their article, Shaki *et al.* (2022:4754) address the two core characteristics of helicopter parenting: (1) persistent information-seeking behaviours about a child's daily schedule and (2) intervening and inserting themselves into all their child's conflicts and activities.

Growing up with a micromanaging parent necessarily affects a child's idea of 'self-efficacy': "an individual's belief about their capacities to successfully achieve their goals and perform across a range of situations" (Jiao & Segrin, 2023:654). In other words, it influences a child's idea of their capacity to perform as an 'individual' outside of the parent-child microsphere. The correlation between this and a child's ability to function as an individual is highlighted by Jiao and Segrin (ibid.) when they introduce the concept of environmental mastery, which correlates with a child's ability to initiate and manage social events that they are confronted with in later life. This disruption in their "formation of instincts" is seen in children and the effect that this lack of autonomy has on them is detrimental to their mental health (ibid.:653). Child anxiety and depression as a result of overparenting mirrors the repression of instincts presented by Freud and later interpreted by Marcuse, which necessarily hinders the expression of instincts in children (1955:40). The performance principle created by our capitalist society encourages the internalisation of productivity and labour and is duplicated in the microsphere of the micromanaging parent and the child. In a Marcusean light, this parent wishes to shape and influence the well-being of the child resulting in an alienation of their own identity and their true place in society.

The interpretation of overparenting, however, is that it is benevolent in nature, as it is done in the name of care and "wanting the best for your child" (Jiao & Segrin, 2023:653). This leaves us to question *why*

parents feel the need to overparent and micromanage, and how these actions fit into wanting the 'best' for their child. It is in the nuances of 'best' that the theory of the Frankfurt School can be connected to this phenomenon, for the parent wants their child to fit into the capitalist system as easily as possible (Farr, 2013:7). It is the same capitalist system which is responsible for the surplus repression and internalised performance principle that the parent also experiences (Marcuse 1955:47). As the capitalist system promises ultimate freedom and fulfilment of all needs, so does the overparenting style promise ultimate success for children who will grow into adults in the capitalist society.

As discussed by Marcuse, the expenditure of energy to conform to the performance expected of you in society diminishes your ability to pursue individual desires (1955:49). I propose that this process has a domino effect: it is because the parent is a victim of the internalised performance principle and surplus repression in society, that they recreate it in the relationship with their child through the micromanagement of their being and alienating them from their true identity. In the case of the helicopter parent, this is seen in their over-analysis of their child's productivity and success. For the parent to function in a society that requires excessive labour, the parent must conform and internalise the dominant structures, utilising the same mindset in the relationship with their child. The parent deflects societal demands onto their child, such as the demands to conform and comply, as well as their experiences of alienation from their place in reality and an inability to be or become who they wish they were. This repression is normalised in society to the extent that it can be rationalised in the relationship between a parent and child, instilling the performance principle within the child *before* their timely confrontation with capitalist society. I propose the term 'surplus-parenting' to describe this consequence of the internal repressive structures within a parent.

Surplus-parenting is exhibited when a child's food is weighed before they eat, when their weight is monitored (outside of medical needs) to fit a physical and metaphorical mould, and when their future is not only chosen for them, but they are also given an automatic roadmap to that future. This internal structure speaks to the micro-manifestation of surplus repression brought about by the capitalist society in which the parent functions. It is seen when parents enforce or encourage a performance from their young children in line with the "competitive economic performances" that they, as parents, have internalised (Marcuse, 1955:47). By echoing the call to conformity raised by the performance principle in raising their children, parents emulate their own internal surplus repression. Surplus-parenting refers to the repression encompassed in the micromanagement of children and overparenting.

4. Conclusion

The seminal work of Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilisation* provides a dynamic lens through which we can analyse and interpret phenomena in modern society. By crossing the paths of Freudian theory and the Neo-Marxist foundation of the Frankfurt School we are able to shine a light on the experiences of parents micromanaging their children. Marcuse's concept of performance principle as an expansion on Freud's reality principle can be underpinned as the basis of human alienation and is exemplified in the over-analytic and controlling nature of overparenting. The introduction of surplus repression, building upon the boundaries of basic repression, as the internalisation of the performance principle, can be seen as an outcome of the current capitalist society dominated by labour and effective bodies. This reimagining of Freud's reality principle can also be exemplified in the relationship between a micromanaging parent and their child. By discussing this micro manifestation of Marcusean concepts, we are able to expand upon our psychoanalytic understanding of parent-child relationships, taking into account the social and economic reality of

modern life. The proposal of surplus-parenting highlights the importance of turning conceptual and theoretical lenses on the lives of children.

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