

NEGOTIATING IDENTITY UNDER MORAL SURVEILLANCE: A DESCRIPTIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF PASTORS' CHILDREN LABELED AS THE "BLACK SHEEP"

JOSEPH FLORENZ B. RODRIGUEZ ,
JANICE AURORA T. NAMOC

Graduate School and College of Arts, Sciences and Education,
University of Bohol, Tagbilaran City, Philippines
ORCID Joseph Florenz Rodriguez:

Corresponding Author: josephthegreat5@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Article history:

Submission: 25 Jan 2025

Revised: 7 March 2025

Accepted: 15 Aug 2025

Publication: 7 Sept 2025

Keywords - pastors' children, black sheep, phenomenology, social pressure, identity negotiation, coping mechanisms, resilience

Pastors' children (PKs) often hold a special place in society, facing strict moral standards, significant public attention, and family duties that can shape how they see themselves and affect their mental and emotional health. This study looked at the real-life experiences of preachers' children who saw themselves as the "black sheep" in their families and church groups. The

study used a descriptive phenomenological research methodology to examine how social pressure affects how people negotiate their identities, cope with stress, and make sense of their lives. Family Systems Theory, General Strain Theory, and Social Identity Theory influenced it. Six children of Protestant pastors from Tagbilaran City, Bohol, Philippines, were purposively selected



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and interviewed in depth using semi-structured interviews. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Five interconnected themes came to light: (1) moral surveillance and the pressure to be religiously perfect; (2) identity conflict between being yourself and playing the part others expect of you; (3) healthy and unhealthy ways of coping; (4) changing from a "black sheep" to your true self; and (5) seeing stigma as a way to grow spiritually and personally. The results show that constant demands from family and community lead to significant identity stress and emotional exhaustion. However, the participants cope with these pressures through faith, self-expression, autonomy, and thoughtful coping. Participants turned the "black sheep" label into a story of strength, truthfulness, and self-acceptance rather than seeing it as a sign of being different. The study contributes to existing literature by showing how pastors' children construct their identities within highly religious settings. It also stresses the importance of families and congregations practicing values that prioritize acceptance of relationships over moral perfection. These findings could help guide spiritual care, educational treatments, counseling services, and family-centered programs that help clergy families feel better mentally and find their true selves.

INTRODUCTION

Pastors' children, or PKs, have a special place in religious groups. They are expected to uphold the moral standards, spiritual discipline, and public image associated with their parents' jobs as ministers. These standards extend beyond the family and are reflected in how people in the church and the community see things. This makes everyone more visible and responsible. These kinds of standards might make people more religious and more likely to help others. However, they can also place significant psychological and social pressure on them, which can affect how they see themselves, their mental health, and their relationships with others.

Identity development in youth and early adulthood is a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between personal goals and social standards. Eriksonian and modern theories of development say that people build a strong sense of who they are through exploration and commitment. However, excessive external control can impede this process and lead to identity conflict (Ruiz & Yabut, 2024). In very religious settings, PKs often have to deal with having multiple identities, such as family members, group leaders, and normal teens who want to be on their own. When personal experiences do not align with what the community expects, these overlapping roles can make it hard to be real and to fit in.

Long ago, the phrase "black sheep" was used to describe someone who does not follow family or group rules and is then left out, misunderstood, or given a bad reputation. Instead of merely being a sign of difference, new research suggests that the black sheep identity involves complex processes of

social naming, identity negotiation, and resistance (Lerner & Lissitsa, 2021). People who are PK may be given this name when they do not meet unspoken or explicit standards of moral perfection, religious involvement, or job stability. Such events can make people feel alone while also pushing them to think about themselves and grow as a person.

It is well known that social pressure significantly affects how teens behave and develop mentally. Xu et al. (2023) state that behavior and self-concept are shaped by peers' expectations, family duties, and societal standards. In religious families, these stresses are often made worse by strict moral supervision and the assumption that kids will follow the ideals and good name of their parents' ministry. Researchers have found that children of clergy have higher stress levels, lower life happiness, and trouble balancing their own identities with the demands of their community (Wilson & Darling, 2017).

Family systems theory also says that you cannot understand a person's behavior without considering their family, because feelings, expectations, and relationship patterns are passed down from one generation to the next. In pastoral homes, the lines between private and public life are often unclear, which can lead to kids experiencing greater role demands and identity issues (Hardy et al., 2019). In the same way, strain theory holds that long-term exposure to socially imposed demands without sufficient coping resources can cause mental discomfort and reactions, both positive and negative.

More recent research shows that religious teens and young adults constantly change how they see themselves in response to social labels. Barnes et al. (2021) found that people whose identities are condemned and can be hidden plan how to disclose their identities in order to stay true to themselves and avoid abuse. Also, Gómez-Restrepo et al. (2022) stated that artistic expression and useful social involvement are adaptive ways to cope with stress that help young people experiencing mental distress manage their emotions and stay strong. These results show that identity rebuilding is not just a reaction to stigma, but also a process of growth through which people redefine themselves and take back control of their lives.

Scholars are paying more attention to priest families. However, there are not many actual studies that focus on pastors' children who see themselves as "black sheep," especially in Southeast Asian and Philippine settings. Many studies have examined pastors' children as a single group, focusing on topics such as religion, family, and self-concept. However, Benjamin et al. (2023) argue that these studies do not examine how social naming, congregational standards, and identity negotiation affect people's lives. So, the emotional meanings associated with being called a "black sheep" remain poorly understood.

The purpose of this study is to fill that gap by looking at the real-life experiences of "black sheep" pastors' children in Tagbilaran City, Bohol, Philippines. The study does not aim to identify predetermined variables; instead, it seeks to understand how these people deal with social pressure, who

they are, how they cope, and how they make sense of their lives in overlapping family, church, and community settings. By showing these real-life experiences, the study adds to the body of research on identity development, religious socialization, family structures, and the mental health of young people. It also provides evidence to inform changes to spiritual care, teaching, counseling, and programs that focus on helping families.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND. This study is based on three theories: Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978), General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992), and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These theories explain how children of pastors navigate social and family pressures as they figure out who they are.

Family Systems Theory holds that you cannot understand a person without considering their family. This is because mental processes and behavioral standards are linked within the family system. Differentiation of self is the idea that family members seek independence while still feeling mentally connected to important people in their lives (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). For pastors' children (PKs), the pastoral family is both a private and a public institution. PKs' behavior is expected to reflect the family's character as a whole, leading to high standards and close moral supervision.

According to the General Strain Theory, people who are constantly under social pressure or have standards that are different from their own can experience mental distress, frustration, and a range of coping practices, some of which are helpful and some of which are not (Agnew, 1992). When personal goals clash with religious duties or congregational standards, it can cause problems in pastoral families. This forces PKs to navigate the tension between being true to themselves and fitting in.

Social Identity Theory also holds that people derive part of their sense of self from membership in social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Being known as a "pastor's kid" creates a socially created identity linked to moral duty and good behavior. People who do not live up to these standards may face shame and be called the "black sheep," which can lead to identity rebuilding and self-definition.

These different ideas give us a complete picture of how pastors' children's family situations, social standards, and religious identity affect their daily lives, ways of living, and how they negotiate their identities.

Related Literature. Children of pastors are in a special social situation in which they are constantly seen by the public and expected to do well. Religious groups often see them as extensions of their parents' work and expect them to be good examples of behavior and spiritually mature, no matter what stage of growth they are in. These standards might help with discipline and moral development, but they might also put a lot of stress on people's minds.

Social Pressure and Identity Formation. When people believe important social groups expect them to follow their rules, beliefs, and behaviors, they feel social pressure. Strong social norms can lead teens to change their behavior

to fit in or avoid judgment, making it harder for them to be themselves (Xu et al., 2023). Identity growth is most at risk when people are young or just starting to become adults. Ruiz and Yabut (2024) argue that striking a balance between being alone and being connected to others is an effective way to build identity. If someone outside the person stops this process, it could cause identity confusion and mental pain.

Pastors' Children and Moral Surveillance. Scholars often call the lives of children of religious leaders “fishbowl living” because members of the group are always watching and judging their behavior (Markham et al., 2014). This increased visibility raises the standard of perfection and limits opportunities for normal growth and discovery. Hardy et al. (2019) said that religious parenting has a big effect on how kids develop morals and puts more pressure on them to live up to community standards. These kinds of standards may make people more religiously devoted, but they can also cause role conflicts when people’s real selves do not match up with religious norms.

Coping and Resilience. Algorani and Gupta (2023) say that coping mechanisms are the aware mental and behavioral tools that people use to deal with difficult situations. It has been found that religious coping, artistic expression, physical activities, and social support can help teens who are having mental problems become more resilient. According to Gómez-Restrepo et al. (2022), engaging in artistic activities supports emotional regulation and mental health by providing healthy ways to express themselves. According to Paragament et al. (1998), religious coping through prayer, reading the Bible, and being a part of faith groups has also been linked to better emotional adjustment and less psychological suffering among young people.

Identity Negotiation. Identity negotiation is the ongoing process by which individuals construct, revise, and affirm their sense of self as they interact with social expectations.

Barnes et al. (2021) found that individuals possessing concealable stigmatized identities strategically manage disclosure and authenticity to preserve psychological well-being.

Rather than accepting externally imposed labels, many individuals reinterpret difference as uniqueness and transform stigma into a source of resilience and personal growth.

Related Studies. Recently conducted studies constantly show that children of pastors face unique psychological and social problems because of religious demands and public scrutiny. Benjamin et al. (2023) used biblio-narrative therapy to look into the lives of children of preachers. They discovered that names like “pastor’s kid” often become inner identities linked to the need to be perfect, feelings of loneliness, and problems with other people. According to their findings, reconstructing a story can help people accept themselves and communicate better with their families. According to Wilson and Darling (2017), priest children experience much more stress and less happiness in their lives due to the demands of their congregations and limited opportunities to

express themselves honestly. Similarly, Kanco-Ackep (2024) found that many ministers' children feel significant pressure to continue in family ministry or to behave religiously, which can lead to identity issues and mental exhaustion.

Ndlovu-Bhebhe et al. (2024) examined the lives of pastors' children in Nairobi. They found that prayer, friendships, family support, and fun activities were the best ways for them to cope with the attention and identity strain from their congregations. Ingersgaard et al. (2024) looked at teens who lived with long-term illnesses outside of religious settings. They discovered that seeing perceived differences as part of identity, rather than as the whole person, helped people accept themselves and make positive psychological adjustments. Like the experiences of people who are called "black sheep," these results show that people who take social shame and turn it into personal authenticity can do it.

Studies on ministers' children who see themselves as "black sheep" remain limited, especially in Southeast Asia and the Philippines, even though there is more writing on the topic globally. Existing studies mostly examine religion, parenting, or self-concept in isolation. It does not examine how family standards, congregational monitoring, social labeling, coping techniques, and the negotiation of one's identity affect people's lives.

This hole shows how important it is to conduct phenomenological research that gives participants' words weight and explores what it means to them to be seen as the "black sheep" in religious families and groups.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A descriptive phenomenological research method was used to look into the real-life experiences of preachers' children who feel like the "black sheep" in their families and church groups. Phenomenology is a great way to examine how people understand, analyze, and make sense of their own experiences because it lets participants' own words, rather than established theories, be the primary source of understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The method allowed the researcher to examine how social pressure, identity negotiation, coping strategies, and personal realization affected the subjects in complex ways.

The study was conducted in Tagbilaran City, Bohol, Philippines, during the third quarter of School Year 2025–2026. The locale provides an appropriate setting because of its strong Christian influence and active Protestant communities, in which pastors hold highly respected social positions. Such a context creates an environment in which pastors' children are likely to face heightened moral expectations and greater community visibility.

Six key informants participated in the study and were selected through purposive sampling complemented by snowball sampling. Participants were required to be children of current or former pastors, be between 18 and 40 years of age, and either have personally experienced social pressure associated

with their identity as pastors' children or have been perceived as the "black sheep" within their family or church community. Variation in age, sex, denominational affiliation, and personal experiences was considered to enrich the diversity and depth of the narratives generated.

The information was gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with open-ended questions designed to allow people to talk about their experiences in a way that was both free and thoughtful. The interviews took place in neutral, private settings to protect the subjects' privacy and comfort. They ran between 60 and 90 minutes and were recorded on audiotape with their permission. After the verbatim recording, members checked to ensure that the participants' stories were accurate and to enhance the trustworthiness of the results.

The interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework. These steps were: getting to know the data, creating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the final narrative report. This methodical and iterative process made it easier to identify recurring patterns while still allowing the participants' real experiences to remain rich and complex.

To make sure the study was methodologically sound, it used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) standards for reliability. Credibility was built through long-term participation, member checking, and peer feedback. Reliability was increased through detailed recording of all methodological choices and analysis steps. Confirmability was maintained by keeping a reflective log and having someone else review the coding choices. Transferability, on the other hand, was improved by giving full descriptions of the study setting, participants, and surrounding conditions.

Every step of the study was based on ethical ideals. After being fully informed about the study's goal, methods, and subjects' rights, participants signed informed consent forms willingly. Privacy was protected through fake names and coded identifiers, and the researcher was the only one who could view the digital records and transcripts. It was very important to protect everyone's dignity, autonomy, and mental health during the study by following the ideals of respect for people, beneficence, justice, and data privacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Moral Surveillance and the Burden of Religious Perfection.

Key sources' real-life stories show that being a pastor's child is more than just a family role; it is also a social role that many people watch. People who took part in the study said they felt constantly watched for moral behavior, and that everyday actions were seen as signs of how spiritual and trustworthy their family was. This constant scrutiny made them feel stressed, worn out, and afraid of making mistakes.

One participant recalled,

"People expected that I should always act properly, think carefully before doing anything, and avoid mistakes..."

While another reflected,

"I was the model child in the eyes of many... everyone expected me to live up to that image."

These stories illustrate what Markham et al. (2014) called the "fishbowl syndrome": children of preachers are constantly watched, making it hard for them to be themselves and spontaneous. Instead of helping people become more moral, excessive monitoring turned religious standards into a means of keeping people in line. Family Systems Theory says that this happens because people see each other's actions as representing the whole family, so mistakes made by one person are seen as failures of the whole family (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

The results also show that moral expectations come from family, church, and society simultaneously. This makes it harder to figure out who you are because so many systems of responsibility overlap. This supports what Hardy et al. (2019) said: children's behavior becomes a sign of their parents' religious leadership, suggesting that pastoral homes often have strict moral standards.

Theme 2: Identity Conflict Between Authenticity and Expected Roles.

Another main theme that emerged from the talks is the conflict between being true to yourself and maintaining the faith identity you were born with. Many of the participants said they felt pressured to carry on their parents' ministry work, even though they did not feel called to or ready for the duty.

One person said,

"People thought I would naturally follow my dad, but I did not really know how to do it that way."

Another person talked about being given church duties at a young age, even though they did not fully understand what those duties entailed. These stories show identity tension that comes from roles set by others rather than goals people set for themselves. According to Social Identity Theory, the participants experienced a conflict between their own identities and the identities assigned to them by society (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Instead of freely exploring career options, they bargained away identities set by what the community expected of them.

Interestingly, the answers were very different. Some people fought these expectations by acting in ways that were against them, while others accepted them by giving up things they wanted and following the rules. No matter the approach, both reactions exacted high personal costs, such as limiting freedom and delaying the process of self-discovery.

The results back up Kanco-Ackep's (2024) remark that children of pastors often have trouble balancing the ministry standards they were raised with their own wants and goals for growth.

Theme 3: Negotiating Pressure Through Adaptive and Maladaptive Coping. Participants described diverse coping strategies that ranged from avoidance and rebellion to spirituality, creativity, and physical activity. For several informants, distancing themselves from church environments represented an attempt to reclaim autonomy and reduce emotional burden.

One participant admitted,

"I chose to rebel... maybe it was my way of showing that I still had my own identity."

Others reported temporarily escaping through social activities, alcohol consumption, or even self-harm, illustrating maladaptive attempts to manage accumulated stress. Conversely, several participants gradually adopted healthier coping mechanisms, such as reading Scripture, exercising, playing sports, listening to music, creating artwork, and spending time in solitude.

One informant reflected,

"I prefer to read books or the Bible, watch movies, or play games... after doing these things, I feel like I can work things out again."

These findings suggest that coping among pastors' children is developmental rather than static. Early responses often involved avoidance and emotional withdrawal, whereas later experiences reflected greater self-regulation and reflective practices.

The results are consistent with Algorani (2023), who conceptualized coping as conscious behavioral and cognitive efforts to manage stress, and with Çinici (2024), who emphasized the role of religious practices in promoting resilience among young people facing existential challenges.

Theme 4: Reconstructing Identity: From "Black Sheep" to Authentic Self. The most interesting result might be how the term "black sheep" has shifted from a sign of deviation to one of authenticity. Instead of internalizing stigma, some participants actively rejected publicly imposed definitions and rebuilt their identities by accepting themselves.

“Being different does not have to mean being wrong,” said one attendee. Someone else said with pride, “Being a black sheep is part of who I am.”

These stories show an important shift from relying on external validation of identity to cultivating sincerity from within. People who took part saw the difference not as a sign of failure, but as a sign of individuality and inner honesty.

This process is much like Barnes et al.’s (2021) idea of strategic identity management, in which people choose to accept or reveal stigmatized identities to define themselves rather than conform to social labels. Spirituality also played a role in rebuilding identity. Some of the people who took part saw weakness in religious ideas of grace rather than in failure. This helped them see their flaws as part of a positive spiritual identity.

An individual said,

“I understand I am not perfect... but God never gives up on me.”

These kinds of stories show that faith is more than just a religious practice; it is also a way to rebuild your identity and your mental strength.

Theme 5: Reframing Stigma as Spiritual and Personal Growth. The final theme demonstrates that participants ultimately transformed experiences of exclusion into opportunities for growth, autonomy, and meaning-making. Several informants described the “black sheep” identity as a turning point that encouraged self-respect, independence, and clearer personal values.

One participant shared,

“I realized I should not live my life based on what other people expect of me.”

Another observed,

“Being a black sheep made me street-wise... I learned how to survive.”

Rather than viewing adversity solely as a psychological burden, participants interpreted their experiences as catalysts for maturity and spiritual development.

These findings align with the concept of post-traumatic growth described by Fayaz (2025), wherein adversity becomes a source of meaning, resilience, forgiveness, and personal transformation. Likewise, Ruiz and Yabut (2024) emphasized that identity autonomy contributes significantly to psychological well-being, particularly when individuals define themselves in terms of internally generated values rather than external expectations.

Collectively, the findings extend Family Systems Theory and General Strain Theory by demonstrating that although pastors' children experience chronic moral surveillance and identity strain, they actively negotiate these pressures through coping, self-reflection, spirituality, and autonomy. The "black sheep" identity, initially experienced as stigma, is ultimately reconstructed into a narrative of authenticity, resilience, and self-determined growth. This reinterpretation highlights the dynamic nature of identity formation. It suggests that supportive family and congregational environments should prioritize relational acceptance over moral perfection, thereby creating spaces where pastors' children can develop authentic identities without fear of judgment.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological inquiry reveals that the experiences of pastors' children who identify as the "black sheep" are characterized by continuous negotiation between externally imposed expectations and internally constructed identities. Family, church, and community collectively function as systems of moral surveillance that shape behavior, self-perception, and relational experiences. While these expectations often generate identity conflict, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of isolation, they do not uniformly result in maladjustment or alienation. Instead, the findings demonstrate that pastors' children exercise agency in responding to these pressures through diverse, evolving coping strategies. Some initially employ avoidance, rebellion, or emotional withdrawal, whereas others gradually develop adaptive mechanisms such as spirituality, creative expression, physical activity, and reflective practices. More importantly, participants reinterpret the "black sheep" label from a symbol of deviance into an affirmation of authenticity, individuality, and resilience.

The study supports Family Systems Theory by illustrating how family and congregational dynamics shape identity formation, while General Strain Theory explains the emotional consequences of prolonged moral expectations. At the same time, the findings extend Social Identity Theory by demonstrating that stigmatized identities may become sources of empowerment through self-acceptance and meaning-making. Ultimately, authentic identity development among pastors' children emerges not through conformity but through the integration of personal autonomy, spirituality, and relational acceptance. Creating environments that embrace imperfection, encourage open communication, and recognize individual differences may therefore promote healthier psychosocial development and strengthen family and faith communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several practical and scholarly recommendations are proposed.

For pastoral families, open and non-judgmental communication should be cultivated to create emotionally safe spaces where children can express doubts, aspirations, and struggles without fear of moral condemnation. Parents are encouraged to balance spiritual guidance with autonomy-supportive parenting that recognizes individuality rather than perfection.

For church leaders and congregations, expectations imposed upon pastors' children should be reconsidered. Rather than viewing PKs as extensions of pastoral leadership, churches should foster inclusive environments that allow young people to develop their identities naturally while receiving grace, mentorship, and emotional support. Congregational programs promoting mental health awareness and relational care may reduce identity strain and stigma.

For educators, counselors, and helping professionals, school- and community-based interventions should integrate identity development, emotional resilience, and values formation while recognizing the unique experiences of youth from highly visible families. Counseling services may incorporate narrative and strengths-based approaches that enable individuals to reinterpret stigmatizing experiences as opportunities for growth.

For researchers, future investigations may employ longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to examine how identity negotiation and coping strategies evolve across developmental stages. Comparative studies involving pastors' children across different denominations, cultures, or religious traditions may further illuminate how socio-cultural contexts influence identity formation. Quantitative studies may also validate the thematic model identified in this research by examining relationships among moral surveillance, identity conflict, coping mechanisms, and psychological well-being.

Finally, theological institutions, pastoral associations, and faith-based organizations may use these findings to design family support programs that emphasize authenticity, compassion, and psychological wellness, recognizing that resilient ministry families are nurtured not by unattainable perfection but by grace, understanding, and healthy relationships.

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