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A Qualitative Study of Pastors' Kids at Cedarville University: A Pilot Study

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Literature Review

- Pastors' kids, or PKs, have long been the subject of scrutiny, with two major stereotypes developed. The first is the model child, someone who does what they should and stays perfectly true to the faith they were raised in. The second being the wayward "prodigal son," who abandons their faith (Barna Group, 2013). As Christianity Today puts it, "We all know the stereotypes of the pastor's kid—either strait-laced do-gooder, or rebel hellion bound for drugs, machine-gun sex, and perdition" (2013). But are these stereotypes well founded, or are they an oversimplification of the differences in PKs?
- The Barna Group (2013) talked to pastors who had children who were at least 15 years old, to see what they could learn about "prodigal PKs". 40% said their child had gone through a period of significant doubt, 33% said their child was no longer involved in church, and 7% said their child no longer considers him/herself a Christian. These numbers are fairly representative of Millennials, where prodigals are measured around 9% of the population.
- Jeff Brumley (2012) gathered stories from various PKs, in an attempt to show how being a PK makes a child's life harder and more stressful. While many stories do demonstrate those concerns, many of them also contradicted his thesis. Another study examined the negative stereotype of PKs (Strange, K. & Sheppard, L., 2001). This study found limited support for the negative stereotype, but did show PKs experiencing more stress than non-PKs.

Research Focus

- The purpose of this study was to explore how growing up as the child of a pastor has affected these college students' perceptions of themselves, their lives and relationships, their future goals and spiritual growth.

Participants

- For the purpose of selecting participants we utilized the qualitative research strategy of purposeful sampling (Suri, 2011), in that we enlisted particular students who met the condition of interest to the study. All students on campus who met the criteria were emailed, and those that responded positively were then scheduled for interviews.
- Our interviewees were 10 full-time students at Cedarville; a comprehensive, conservative Christian Midwestern university. All participants stated their father was the senior pastor at their home church. These pastors had been in ministry anywhere from 7 to 32 years, and the size of congregations ranged from 190 to 500.

Method

- Participants were interviewed by individual members of the researcher team using *semi-structured interviews* (Alvesson, 2011). Specific questions were constructed based on the research of prior studies, and were asked of each participant. The students' responses determined the direction of follow-up questions. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed for purposes of analysis and coding.
- Our research team analyzed the interview data using an *open coding* procedure (Maxwell, 2012). We studied the transcripts line by line, looking for common words, phrases, and thoughts. As each new interview was transcribed, we would compare it to the previous transcriptions' coding, looking for common concepts and themes. After the individuals had processed the transcripts and coding, the group collectively examined each potential theme to determine if there was adequate support for it from the majority of subjects.

Results

Four themes emerged from students' descriptions of their current college experiences, in light of their PK status. Though these themes may also be found in most Cedarville students' experiences.

1. Assumption of Assumptions

PKs tended to assume that others assume things about them and about how they should act (i.e., not swearing, not participating in questionable behavior). While some of these assumptions were accurate, others were not so accurate and contradicted what other participants said.

- *"If I say I'm a pastor's kid . . . Then they'll say things like, oh, I guess I can't swear in front of you anymore."*
- *"They expect you to behave a certain way like almost like perfect, and sometimes . . . They expect you to be kind of stuck up."*
- *"I was held to this standard that I was the Pastor's kid that knew everything about the Bible and was the perfect kid as far as everyone else was supposed to know."*

2. Unchanging Fundamental Beliefs

Most of the students interviewed claimed that their doctrine, or fundamental Christian beliefs, had not changed since coming to Cedarville. However, the way they viewed things may have changed some.

- *"[The change] wouldn't be a change of belief necessarily, but more of what's emphasized."*
- *"No, not really [any change in my beliefs since coming to Cedarville]. Just a stronger foundation but not anything different."*
- *"I wouldn't say there are massive like, massive fundamental things [that I believe differently] but there's just been a lot that I've learned."*

3. Comfort in a New Church

All of the participants felt complete comfort in going to a church not pastored by their father.

- *I'm completely comfortable [not going to a church pastored by my dad], I don't really care."*
- *"I'm totally fine with [not going to a church pastored by my dad], I'm totally comfortable [at the church here]."*

Results, continued

4. No difference here

Being a PK at Cedarville is the same as being another student.

- *"There's a ton [of PKs] here. It's not looked down upon so it doesn't affect things."*
- *"I think that people forget that I'm a PK here. . . . It's so normal here."*

Conclusions

- Overall we found more differences than similarities. While a few themes emerged, we mostly found that our participants varied greatly in their views.
- Some of them enjoyed and took pride in being a PK, while others found shame in it. For some it strengthened their relationship with their father, and for others it hurt it. Some commented that being a PK helped their spiritual growth, while others said that it was one of the biggest hindrances to their spiritual growth.
- Some stated that having a pastor for a father was difficult on family relationships and specifically their mother, while others found it to be a unifying and growing experience for their whole family.
- In sum, our participants did not view themselves very differently from their non-PK friends in college, and said that for the most part it had no effect on them at Cedarville.

Limitations & Future Studies

Limitations:

- Our sample group was small – with participants self-selecting to be in the study. While we had over 100 students responding to the initial email asking about PKs, far fewer fit our parameters and were also willing to participate in the interviews.
- Our sample group was quite diverse. We had freshmen through seniors, single and married students, on campus and off campus students. Generally in qualitative research it is better to have a more homogeneous group of subjects.

Future studies:

- It would be interesting to take some of the freshmen responses and do a case study of them as they go through all four years here at Cedarville.
- In light of the different responses found, along with the very general overall themes noted, it would be good to further narrow the group of students interviewed. It appeared that freshmen were responding in a different way than seniors – who clearly demonstrated greater levels of both cognitive and spiritual maturity in their responses. Freshmen seemed to still be in the transitional stages of leaving home – which may have impacted how they process their experience here.
- As the results seem to indicate that PKs here may not be experiencing life and belief issues differently than their non-PK peers, it may be helpful to do a comparison study with non-PKs.