

# Pastors' Daughters: Boundary Ambiguity or the Fishbowl Effect?

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## Abstract

*Many studies have shown that the family of clergy experience specific challenges, particularly in relation to the maintenance of boundaries between their private lives and the individual needs of each member of a clergy family, and the public pastoral roles of a church minister. In this paper we review this literature and ask a question: do the challenges experienced among clergy families in Western societies resonate with those of clergy families in Sāmoa? To explore this question we present the results of in-depth interviews with nine Sāmoan women who grew up as daughters of pastors of different denominations serving in both Sāmoan villages and in Sāmoan communities overseas. We conclude that culture plays a particularly significant role with regard to public expectations of the daughters of clergy in Sāmoan communities. Because the distinction between public and private life is less well defined in Sāmoan culture, the concept of boundary ambiguity has limited heuristic value in understanding the situation of daughters and families of village-based clergy although it may be more relevant to the circumstances of Sāmoan clergy families overseas.*

**Keywords:** Sāmoa, clergy, church communities, family, boundary ambiguity, gender relations.

## Introduction: The Challenges of Clergy Life

The challenges of clergy life have been widely researched by scholars in the fields of theology and psychology (for example, Blackbird and Wright, 1985; Lee and Balswick 1989; Morris and Blanton 1998; Ostrander et al. 1994). Studies of society and religion have attempted to conceptualise more broadly the social dynamics of family life as encountered in the context of pastoral ministry to include children of the parsonage (for example Lee 1988; Lee and Balswick 1989; Stevenson 1982). These studies look at the impact of public expectations and the social roles of the clergy on their families, noting as Morris and Blanton (1994) have done that stress resulting from the expected role and status of a church minister in the community is not just experienced by the pastor but also by his (and in some countries, her) family members. In this paper we extend these insights to the situation in Sāmoa, with a focus on pastors' children, and to pastors' daughters in particular.

In all Christian communities the clergy play an important community role in assisting individuals and families, as well as performing their religious office. Among these roles, pastors are expected to provide a model of a "Christian home" (Anderson 1998). In Sāmoa the mainstream churches (Congregational, Catholic, Mormon, Methodist) to which 72 percent of the population are affiliated do not ordain women (Samoa Bureau of Statistics 2011). The Catholic Church has married catechists in charge of all village-based Catholic congregations; the Methodist church appoints ordained pastors; and in the Congregational Church each village congregation chooses and appoints its own ordained pastor on a contractual basis. The Mormon (the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints) is led by chosen members of its laity and has no clergy. For over a century in Sāmoa, Congregational and Methodist pastors, and Catholic catechists and their wives have been specifically trained to fulfil the expectation that they represent an ideal of Christian marriage and family life in their communities (Schoeffel 2011).

The pastor himself (and in some instances herself) sees his “profession is not just a career of his choosing, but as a ‘calling from God’” (Anderson 1998:394). In Sāmoa the pastor is seen as a representative of God on earth while his wife is seen as the Christian model of ‘helpmeet’ (Genesis 2:18) and a supporter for her husband’s vocation (Proverbs 31:10-31) or as expressed in Sāmoan, his *faletua*, referring to the “house at the back” where all the domestic work is attended to. In the mainstream churches a man may not become a minister unless he is married. In Sāmoan cultural contexts most women who marry clergymen understand that their role is also a vocation, although it is not one that is formally rewarded. In the mainstream churches of Sāmoa, pastors’ wives wear distinctive dresses that set them apart from other women, marking their special status and earning them respect that is derived from the sacred status of their husbands.

But what of the pastor’s children? Unlike pastors’ wives, they have not chosen their role and most are born into it. Our question was whether there are cross cultural similarities between the issues faced by pastors’ children in Sāmoan and non-Sāmoan contexts, and the extent to which there were particular issues for the daughters of pastors in the Sāmoan context. This paper is by no means an attempt to criticise the churches or their pastors or church members; our aim is to contextualise the experiences of pastors’ daughters in comparison to analyses of pastors’ children in non-Sāmoan contexts, and to consider whether Sāmoan culture is a significant variable in the nature of the experiences.

### **Children of the Clergy in Non-Sāmoan Contexts**

One of the key issues for families of the clergy in Western and non-Sāmoan contexts has been described as “boundary ambiguity.” Boundaries can be defined as “invisible barriers that surround individuals and subsystems, regulating the amount of contact with others” (Nichols and Schwartz 1995: 214). In the context of clergy families it refers to the margin between the personal characteristics and aspirations of children of a minister, and the role attributed to them by virtue of their parent’s position. In the family context, it refers to the margin between private family life and their openness and availability to the community. Boundary ambiguity has been shown to characterise problems experienced by pastors’ children in many Christian communities (Blackbird and Wright 1985). They face expectations about their behaviour and their home life that would be considered inappropriate or even unthinkable if they were extended to the families of other professional people in a community (Lee and Balswick 1989).

The vagueness of boundaries between ministry work and family life has been shown to restrict “family only” time because it crosses many aspects of family privacy (Lee 1999; Lee and Balswick, 1989). Boundary ambiguity refers to dilemmas resulting from the intrusive expectation that clergy families are always ‘open’ and available to everyone, at any time. No private family time can be counted upon because they must always be prepared when people show up unexpectedly at the house, often late at night or early in the morning.

According to these studies, the maintenance of appropriate boundaries between the role obligations of the ministry and the minister’s family life is important for healthy, functioning family systems. Boundary ambiguity occurs when clergy families experience stress resulting from coping with high expectations, lack of family time, being in the public eye and loneliness from being in a sense an outsider in the community served by their parent (de Vries 1984;

Mickey, Wilson and Asmore 1991). As Nichols and Schwartz (1995:240) point out, “in healthy families, boundaries are clear enough to protect the separateness and the autonomy of individuals and subsystems, and permeable enough to ensure mutual support and affections.” When boundaries are firm and clear, they serve to protect the autonomy of the family’s subsystems and the entire family unit. When whole family systems are not protected by secure boundaries, the individuals within the system may be placed in vulnerable positions and may not have the opportunity to develop healthy patterns of relating and functioning (Nichols and Schwartz 1995). Stevenson (1982: 179) comments that:

*Clergy children are perhaps the most deeply affected of all the church's offspring by the values and structures of the church. Most of them are reared in homes owned by the church and set aside for their and their parents' use. They are more likely to be involved in the church's activities than other church-raised children.*

Another issue was that of high expectations. As Lee observed (1999) “ministers’ children are often expected to be better behaved and more spiritually mature than other children in the congregation their age”. Stevenson, in his study *Children of the Parsonage* (1982) discovered that pastors and their wives were deeply concerned with the effects of parsonage life and the existence of more stringent behavioural standards often applied to parsonage children. Reflecting on the tendency of some ministers’ children to reject the norms of piety and conformity expected of them, Anderson (1998) suggests that if the children of clergy had experienced more family time, less extra expectations and clearer boundaries between church and home, they would be more religiously committed and less rebellious. A study carried out by Darling, Hill and McWey (2004), which examined families of the clergy in US culture, highlighted how common it was for the needs of the pastors’ spouses and families to be unaddressed. The image of a fishbowl is attributed to life in the parsonage because the family of the clergy are scrutinized, evaluated, monitored and judged by the church community.

### **Pastor’s Daughters in Sāmoan Contexts**

Our analysis of the Sāmoan context draws on interviews conducted *talanoa*-style (Vaiolēti 2006) with nine women of different ages and denominational backgrounds who had grown up in clergy families in Sāmoan communities in Sāmoa (six) and overseas (three). By way of background, we note that the expected behaviour of all Sāmoan children is that they should serve and obey their parents and put the interests of the parents first. In this world view there is no boundary between the parents’ vocations and their private family life. A pastor, his wife and children all have roles determined by their status in the community and the expectation that they should be a model Christian family. Pastors are nearly always ‘outsiders’ in the villages where they serve, responsible for their spiritual welfare, and (as is expected) aloof from its politics. They and their families are expected to maintain a certain social distance befitting their sacred status. As one of our informants said of her experience in a village parish, “you are excluded from youth activities such as volleyball, and aside from church and Sunday school, you don’t mingle with the church members kids.” Another spoke of her loneliness:

*I’m the only girl in our family, so life as a pastor’s daughter often brought me to tears. It was hard to trust anyone and I often felt lonely because I was not allowed to be with my*

*friends. People always expected me to know everything and to do everything asked of me. In fear of my parents I couldn't express how I really felt about church members to anyone.*

Pastors' children must avoid any non-conforming behaviour that could reflect poorly on the calling of their parents. In a modern society where young women have opportunities and choices that their mothers did not have, pastors' daughters are still likely to experience more than usual social pressure to conform to a restricted female role. Sāmoan social norms are more permissive towards boys than girls, so that girls feel particularly obliged to avoid disappointing their parents and to protect their reputation, and to avoid being talked about by church members. As one young woman said:

*People always smile and approach you in a respectful way, but the extent of how much that smile is genuine is always questionable because many church members are such pretenders. The most stressful part of being a pastor's daughter is trying to live up to the many expectations that come with the role. People expect you to walk, dress, talk, sit or even smile in a certain way. It is sad that they don't expect such high standards from their own kids and expect that from us after all we are not saints.*

Other women recalled the restrictions of life and of parish scrutiny that creates what one referred to as an "anvil-like weight" in relation to the denial of personal aspirations:

*There were certainly many limitations especially in terms of what you can wear... Being a pastor's daughter not only limits what you can do, it makes you feel like you are stuck in a tiny highly guarded living space. Many times, the church members were stricter on me than my own parents. I didn't really have a problem with people visiting all the time as I like to serve guests. My parents knew I was a bit of a rebel and I know I am probably an example of a 'holy terror', but the biggest challenge for me was trying to live up to the expectations of people because in the end, people would always blame my parents for my actions.*

Several recalled the expectation that the pastor's daughter should be both knowledgeable and serve as a role model for other girls and young women:

*Not only is there an expectation to know everything about the Bible, there is also the expectation to know everything about our Sāmoan culture.*

*I agree that life as a pastor's daughter is not an easy one; you are expected to be a good role model for all the other girls in the church. People see your parents as sacred and holy and also expect that to reflect through their children. Being a pastor's daughter limits what you do, what you wear, where you go, and so forth; so where ever you go, you are silent all the way and you act in such a way to mirror the expectations of people. For me, regardless of what I wanted to do, I had to consider the fact that my actions would reflect on my parents and their ministry work, so I had to be well behaved at all times.*

Others referred to the ambivalence with which a pastor's daughter is viewed by the church community; there is a sense that because she is privileged she is obliged to conform to a set of very high expectations:

*While there is an expectation that in the community that the pastor's daughter should behave at all times as a virtuous angel, there is also the idea that she is spoiled and indulged, a potential holy terror. Accordingly, some parishioners wait hopefully for the pastor's daughter to make a wrong move, allowing them to gossip and publicly gloat over her perceived failures.*

Similar pressures were reported by two informants who grew up in New Zealand as daughters of Sāmoan ministers serving Sāmoan congregations. As one of them put it:

*Life as a pastor's daughter is never easy; firstly people judge your parents based on your behaviour so that was enough to make me realize I couldn't socialise the way I wanted to most times. You can never make everyone happy and no matter how well behaved you are, there is always a negative comment made somewhere. Growing up in a family with many pastors, we were disciplined from the early years to always be well behaved.*

The pastor's house belongs to the church congregation in the mainstream churches and the pastor and his family are expected to receive and welcome guests at any time. A high school student spoke of the demands on her time:

*Life as a pastor's daughter is a life full of hardships. The things I dislike the most about this life is that people tend to visit all the time and it is expected that I stay around to make tea, cook, clean, and make more tea until they leave. Most nights my study is disrupted because of these home visits and as much as I would like to tell the visitors to stop coming in the late hours of the night, I can't because it's not the way I was raised and I don't want to behave in any way that would be considered rude or disrespectful by members of our church.*

While respecting the ministry of their parents, all those interviewed said the most difficult aspect of their experience was living in a metaphorical “fishbowl”. This places particular pressure on those who grew up in Sāmoan village manses. These, unlike manses in suburbs overseas, are in the public eye because the manse is usually located near the church and close to the homes of all the members of the church congregation belonging to the same village. All comings and goings by the pastor's family are open to observation by parish members. All our informants reported how closely watched they were and some described how they would try to avoid this:

*There were many moments when I had my hair pulled by my mother for jumping the window to go out with friends; I was still able to run off and enjoy my teenage years because my older sisters were able to cover for me.*

*I was an active sports player and would often jump my bedroom window to attend functions only to find that my parents would later be told about my adventures by people in our church. In my early twenties I started drinking and smoking but again everything was done in secrecy. Members of our church saw me as a disobedient problem child.*

Such restrictions on young women in the Sāmoan context are commonplace. The most scandalous thing that a pastor's daughter could do would be to become pregnant while unmarried. Protecting the virginity of high ranking girls is an ancient Sāmoan tradition, and, in the modern context, in mainstream protestant churches, a pastor's daughter is the highest ranking girl in her community. This would disgrace any Sāmoan family, but many times more in the case of the daughter of a serving pastor, who would have to apologise to his congregation, and in the case of some churches, would risk dismissal. Yet two informants reported that the counsel they received from their parents to guide adulthood was more spiritual than practical. Closely guarded daughters of the village-based clergy are often at greater than usual risk when they leave the “fishbowl” to go to university or other training, because they are so unaccustomed to personal freedom, as one of our informants put it:

*I didn't know there was a bigger world out there until I left home to attend university. I went from living a controlled life to living an out of control life. I didn't know how to behave at times.*

Another common theme in the narratives of our informants was the expectation that they will follow in their parents' footsteps. They noted the perception that the children of pastors should follow in the footsteps of their parents, sons becoming clergymen themselves, and daughters marrying clergymen. Pastors' children are usually, like their parents, well educated; some are high achievers, and in the modern world daughters, like sons have many choices and opportunities for careers and lifestyles. Many Sāmoan children envy the children of the pastors, seeing only the high status attributed to them, and the gifts of food and money going into their houses, but not the pressures of public scrutiny and lack of family privacy.

*My dad became a minister mostly because his father wanted him to become one. As the eldest of my dad's children, I ended up marrying a pastor partly to ease the disappointment my dad had in my brother for not wanting to follow his footsteps and partly because I wanted to carry on the family tradition. Now that I am a pastor's wife also serving [her father's] church, I am also hoping that one of my children would find it in his/her heart to also serve the Lord.*

Two informants who had lived overseas mentioned that they had felt neglected due to their parent's vocation:

*We moved from here to there, pushed to different baby sitters, as children we never had that mother and father relationship because my parents were always busy with the church. My parents at all times put the church and the needs of the church members before our needs and just last night I said to my husband that my relationship with my parents and siblings is very dysfunctional.*

*I experienced feelings of abandonment because of the lack of quality family time. The much needed parent-daughter relationship was clouded by the pressures of my parents' ministry and the guidance I received for adult life provided for a spiritual rather than a practical context. My parent's ministry determined every aspect of my parent's life and family quality time together; even on holidays there was always the stressful presence of other people to be considered.*

Reflecting on the positive effects, several informants reported that they enjoyed the public attention they received and the opportunities to observe and learn leadership roles.

*On a positive note, I have learned so much from the ministry. The leadership skills I acquired from the ministry have enabled me to be the confident leader that I am today. There are many qualities I apply to everyday life and work that were taught in the ministry and although there was little freedom and many sacrifices made, life as pastor's daughter is an unforgettable experience.*

## Conclusion

There are echoes in modern Sāmoa religious culture with that of the ancient past. Over the past 170 years the clergy in Sāmoa has replaced the sacred chiefs (*ali'i paia*) of ancient pre-Christian times. Today the clergy, particularly those of the long established Congregational and Methodist churches, occupy a residual status from those times which carries with it many privileges. In Sāmoan village parishes, where the mainstream Congregational, Catholic and Methodist churches predominate, the congregations have a responsibility to provide for their

pastor and in the Congregational church, this includes providing for him financially. As God's representative, the pastor often enjoys a higher standard of living in terms of the house and furnishings and even food provided for him and his family. In old Sāmoa the sons of the sacred chiefs (*manaia*) were permitted many liberties but not their daughters (*taupou*) who were expected to remain virgins until they made an important marriage alliance (Schoeffel 2011). Some echoes of those days linger on into modern times in relation to social expectations about the daughters of pastors; like the carefully guarded *taupou* of the olden days, their high status in their parents' church community obliges them to behave with virtue, dignity and circumspection.

The interviews show that the findings on children of clergy in non-Sāmoan contexts, resonates with the Sāmoan experience particularly in the case of women whose fathers served Sāmoan communities overseas. In both the Sāmoan and the non-Sāmoan contexts children of clergy have negative experiences which include the intrusiveness of the congregations served by their parents, the pressure of presumptive expectations that a pastor's family should display certain ideal behavioural and personality characteristics, the sense of entitlement among leaders of a congregation of their right to be critical of the personal characteristics and behaviour of members of a clergy family, and "boundary ambiguity" (Lee 1999). However we suggest that the concept of boundary ambiguity has limited application to understanding the pressures experienced by Sāmoan girls growing up as children of village-based clergy. We also suggest that notions of boundaries between 'private time' and 'family time' do not conceptually exist for most Sāmoans. Only the three informants, all of whom had lived outside Sāmoa referred to a lack of 'family time' or reported issues of parent-daughter relationships. Boundaries between public and private, between work life and family life are accepted in modern urban societies but are only gradually becoming recognised in Sāmoa among those who have experienced more individual ways of life than are common there. In terms of traditional Sāmoan attitudes, the concept of privacy and family time might be considered alien.

Most Sāmoans live in extended family households and live lives surrounded with extensive community interaction. As Shore (1982:136-141) explains the Sāmoan concept of "person" is defined only in the context of social relationships associated with the roles and status of each individual. The expected personality traits of individuals, as well as their behaviour are governed by their social roles.

Rather than the boundary ambiguity reported in studies of non-Sāmoan contexts, it was the lack of any boundaries at all that our informants from village-based parishes emphasised. Others spoke of behavioural expectations of pastors' daughters as being life-long, some saying that they continued even after their parents retired or passed away. This was emphasised by one woman who spoke of the burden of her parents' expectation that even though she was married and living in town far from her father's parish, she should look after several members of his congregation who needed a place to stay in town. Like several other informants she said she struggles with resentment about the obligation to do her duty to her father and his ministry, feeling, as she put it, that "... the calling of the father and the mother need not be the calling of the daughter."

Our small sample varied by age, geographic location, culture and environment but these were all of minor significance in relation to the common experience of these pastors' daughters. What was of most concern to them was parish scrutiny and expectations, of coping with restrictions and social isolation, especially in adolescence, when teenagers typically want to conform and be like others in their age group. The issue most reported was that high expectations, if not lived up to, would lead to criticism. This would reflect badly on the parents and could undermine their role and their status in their community. Their concern was the burden of duty to their parents to suppress their own wishes and the pressure of living up to expectations imposed on them by the church community. In comparison with the studies of non-Sāmoan experiences that we have cited, their narratives illustrate that while there are many common experiences among families of clergy in Christian communities, some are culturally specific.

In our *talanoa* we discerned that the daughters of clergymen who grew up in village parishes were more accepting of the social restrictions placed upon them. Although they referred to their exasperation with the performative demands of their father's vocation, and the "fishbowl effect", they were more accepting of the notion that the whole family shared the responsibility for that vocation. They accepted that they must play the expected role of a pastors' daughter, just as their mothers played their roles as pastors' wives. Women who grew up in overseas Sāmoan communities reported more stressful experiences; they had a greater sense of themselves as being rightfully distinct from their father's ministry, and a greater consciousness of "boundary ambiguity".

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