

Unchosen Path: Lived Experiences of Criminology Students Compelled by Family to Pursue the Course

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of criminology students in a university in Oroquieta City, Misamis Occidental, Philippines, who were compelled by family expectations to pursue the program. Using semi-structured interviews with twelve participants, the study examined how external pressures influenced their academic, emotional, and personal experiences. Findings revealed six cluster themes: emotional impact of being forced into a course, influence of family expectations on course choice, motivation and academic performance challenges, emotional responses to studying an unchosen program, academic, physical, and social challenges in the criminology program, and positive discoveries and personal growth.

The study concludes that while forced enrollment may initially hinder motivation and emotional well-being, students can gradually adapt, demonstrating resilience, personal growth, and evolving academic engagement over time. It is recommended that educators, counselors, and families implement supportive strategies that enhance student autonomy, foster emotional resilience, and provide opportunities for skill development and engagement. Such interventions can help students navigate academic challenges, balance familial expectations with personal aspirations, and maximize learning outcomes, even in unchosen educational pathways and diverse sociocultural contexts.

Keywords: criminology education, forced enrollment, student agency, resilience, qualitative phenomenology, family influence

INTRODUCTION

Rationale of the Study

Choosing an academic program is widely recognized as an important step in a student's personal and professional development. Nevertheless, some students enter a degree program not through personal preference but because of external pressures, particularly family expectations. For criminology students, such circumstances may create emotional and motivational challenges that influence how they engage with their academic responsibilities. When learners perceive that their educational pathway was determined by others, they may experience diminished motivation, weaker academic engagement, and difficulty developing a clear sense of purpose in their studies. Research in educational psychology highlights that autonomy and personal agency are significant factors influencing student motivation, persistence, and academic satisfaction (Chiu, 2021; Li et al., 2025). When students perceive limited autonomy in their academic decisions, their connection with the field of study and their learning environment may weaken.

Forced enrollment may be understood as a situation in which students pursue a specific academic program despite lacking genuine interest or voluntary choice. Such conditions often emerge from parental expectations, family traditions, or socioeconomic pressures that shape educational decisions. Studies indicate that the absence of choice in academic pathways may contribute to psychological strain, including increased stress, anxiety, and dissatisfaction with academic experiences (Siacor & Ng, 2024). Within criminology education, these challenges may be further intensified because students are required to engage with a specialized curriculum while

simultaneously dealing with personal uncertainty regarding their career direction. As a result, students who feel compelled to pursue a particular program may demonstrate reduced academic engagement and lower participation in classroom activities, which may ultimately affect their academic performance and persistence (Alé-Ruiz et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024).

Although the literature emphasizes the importance of autonomy and engagement in higher education, limited research has specifically examined students who enter academic programs due to external pressure, particularly in specialized fields such as criminology. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on general educational contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how coercion in academic choice influences students' learning experiences, emotional development, and identity formation over time, within professional disciplines. Moreover, the connection between forced enrollment, mental well-being, and academic adjustment remains underexplored. Scholars have suggested that exploring students lived experiences provides deeper insight into how individuals interpret and respond to challenges in their educational journey and how these experiences shape their academic identity and sense of belonging (Xia et al., 2025). Understanding these dynamics is therefore necessary to broaden perspectives on student engagement and academic adjustment in higher education.

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of criminology students in a university in Oroquieta City, Misamis Occidental, Philippines, who pursued the program primarily due to family influence rather than personal choice. Concerns related to student motivation, mental health, and retention continue to receive attention in international higher education research, yet the voices of students who experience limited academic autonomy often remain underrepresented. By examining how these students navigate their academic journey, this research intends to provide insights that may assist educators and policymakers in developing more responsive institutional support systems. Understanding these experiences not only addresses an existing gap in the literature but also emphasizes the importance of promoting educational environments that respect student agency and foster meaningful engagement, and consider how factors like gender, socioeconomic status, and prior academic interests shape student experiences in both local and cross-cultural contexts.

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Criminology students who were compelled by their families to pursue the course, focusing on their motivation, emotions, and perceptions.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How has being forced to enroll in Criminology affected the students' motivation and academic performance?
2. What emotions do students experience as a result of studying a program that was not their choice, and how do these emotions affect their daily school life?
3. How do students perceive their family's decision to push them into the Criminology program, and how has this situation influenced their relationship with their family.
4. What are the biggest challenges you have encountered while studying Criminology?

METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of criminology students who perceived that their enrollment in the program was largely influenced by family expectations. A phenomenological design was appropriate because it focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their personal experiences. Through this approach, the study sought to capture the perceptions, emotions, and reflections of participants regarding the role of familial influence in shaping their academic paths. The method enabled a deeper exploration of how such expectations affected their motivation, challenges, and aspirations within the criminology program.

The study was carried out at a university in Oroquieta City, Misamis Occidental, Philippines, which offers a well-established criminology program. The setting was considered appropriate because the institution attracts students from diverse family, socioeconomic, and academic backgrounds, providing variation in participants' prior educational experiences and personal aspirations. This context allowed the study to generate insights relevant to the local educational environment while reflecting broader issues concerning academic decision-making among criminology students, including potential cross-cultural parallels in parental influence on student choice.

Twelve (12) criminology students participated in the study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that those included possessed experiences relevant to the research objective. Eligible participants were currently enrolled in the criminology program, between 18 and 25 years old, and had experienced some form of family influence or pressure regarding their choice of course. Individuals who expressed willingness to discuss their experiences openly were invited to participate. Selecting participants with these characteristics enabled the study to obtain detailed accounts of how family expectations shaped their academic decisions and experiences.

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by a prepared interview protocol. The interview guide contained opening questions that encouraged participants to share their initial thoughts about entering the criminology program, followed by key questions that explored their experiences, emotions, and perceptions regarding family influence on their academic choice. Concluding questions invited participants to reflect on how these experiences affected their views on education and career decision-making. Interviews were conducted in a private, culturally sensitive environment, and participants were informed about the purpose of the study and procedures involved. Informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was assured by removing identifying information from all transcripts.

Ethical standards were observed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning codes to participants and securing all collected data. A respectful and supportive interview environment was maintained to ensure that participants felt comfortable sharing their personal experiences.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using phenomenological reduction following the procedures outlined by Moustakas. The analysis involved repeatedly reviewing the transcripts, identifying significant statements, and grouping these statements into meaningful themes that reflected the shared experiences of the participants. To strengthen the rigor of the study, strategies consistent with qualitative validity criteria were employed. Credibility was enhanced through careful transcription, prolonged engagement with the data, and member checking of emerging meanings. Dependability was maintained by documenting the research procedures and analytical steps, while confirmability was supported through the use of verbatim participant accounts and systematic data organization. These procedures ensured that the findings accurately represented the participants' experiences and provided a trustworthy interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation. A longitudinal perspective was considered in interpretation, acknowledging how participants' emotions, motivations, and coping strategies evolved over time.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Emotional Impact of Being Forced into a Course

Participants reported strong emotional reactions when they realized that their preferred academic paths had been replaced by a program largely determined by family expectations. Many expressed feelings of disappointment, frustration, and emotional detachment upon entering the criminology program. Participants highlighted that feelings of anxiety and disconnection were most pronounced during the initial semester but gradually shifted as they developed coping mechanisms and sought peer and instructor support. Some participants felt that their personal aspirations had been disregarded, resulting in a reduced sense of autonomy in shaping their academic future. These emotional responses often manifested as sadness, resentment, and a sense of disconnection from the course during the early stages of their studies. Such experiences indicate that students who perceive their

academic choices as externally imposed may struggle to develop a sense of belonging within their academic environment.

Research suggests that when students experience limited autonomy in decision-making related to career or academic paths, their psychological well-being and intrinsic motivation may be negatively affected. For instance, studies have shown that autonomy support plays an important role in fostering students' emotional engagement and academic satisfaction, whereas controlling influences from parents or authority figures may contribute to emotional distress and disengagement from learning activities (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Soenens et al., 2021). The participants' narratives reflect these findings, as students who perceived their course choice as externally determined reported uncertainty about their academic identity and reduced enthusiasm toward their studies.

Theme 2: Influence of Family Expectations on Course Choice

The second cluster theme highlights the considerable role of family expectations in shaping the participants' decision to pursue criminology. Students consistently described how parental preferences strongly influenced their academic choices. In many cases, criminology was presented by parents as a practical and stable career option, encouraging students to accept the program even when it did not align with their personal interests. Participants also reflected on how parental influence varied according to socioeconomic background, gender expectations, and familial norms, demonstrating the complex interplay between family priorities and student agency.

Financial dependence and the desire to maintain family harmony further contributed to their decision to comply with these expectations. These findings demonstrate how parental influence may extend beyond supportive guidance and become a decisive factor in educational decision-making. Previous research indicates that parental expectations significantly influence students' career development and educational trajectories. High parental expectations may shape students' career choices and academic pathways, particularly when students depend on family support for their education (Dietrich & Kracke, 2021; Ginevra et al., 2021). The participants' narratives illustrate how strong parental expectations may limit independent career exploration and reduce students' confidence in making autonomous academic decisions.

Theme 3: Motivation and Academic Performance Challenges

Participants reported challenges related to motivation and academic engagement after entering a course they had not originally selected. Many described approaching their studies with limited enthusiasm, perceiving academic tasks primarily as obligations rather than opportunities for personal development. Over time, some participants reported that developing structured routines, receiving targeted feedback, and engaging in peer collaboration gradually improved their motivation and performance.

Despite these initial difficulties, several participants gradually developed coping strategies that enabled them to persist in the program. Encouragement from instructors, peer interactions, and a growing sense of responsibility toward completing their education contributed to improvements in their academic engagement over time. These experiences demonstrate a process of adaptation in which persistence gradually replaces initial disengagement.

Research supports this pattern, suggesting that intrinsic motivation is strongly associated with students' academic engagement and persistence in higher education. When motivation is externally imposed rather than internally driven, students may initially experience lower engagement and weaker academic commitment (Howard et al., 2021; Froiland & Worrell, 2020). However, supportive academic environments and meaningful feedback from instructors can help students develop adaptive motivation and maintain persistence despite initial disinterest in their chosen field.

Theme 4: Emotional Responses to Studying an Unchosen Program

Another theme that emerged from the participants' accounts involves the evolving emotional experiences associated with studying in a program they did not originally choose. Participants described a range of emotions including disappointment, frustration, and self-doubt, particularly when comparing themselves with peers who

appeared genuinely interested in the criminology program. Feelings of envy and guilt were also mentioned, especially when reflecting on the sacrifices made by their families to support their education.

Despite these challenges, participants also described moments of pride and satisfaction when they successfully completed academic tasks or overcame program-related difficulties. These experiences indicate that emotional responses to studying in an unchosen program are dynamic and may evolve as students gradually adapt to their academic environment.

Previous studies indicate that students who perceive limited autonomy in their academic choices often experience emotional strain and reduced psychological well-being. However, the development of coping strategies and supportive academic relationships can help students manage these emotional challenges and maintain engagement with their studies (Guillén et al., 2022; Abulfaraj et al., 2024). The participants' narratives demonstrate how emotional struggles can coexist with gradual adaptation and increased resilience over time.

Theme 5: Academic, Physical, and Social Challenges in the Criminology Program

Participants also highlighted various academic, physical, and social challenges encountered while adjusting to the criminology program. Some students reported difficulties understanding legal concepts and criminal justice procedures, particularly when their previous interests were unrelated to law enforcement or criminology. The rigorous physical training requirements were also perceived as demanding, especially for students who had not previously engaged in structured physical activities.

In addition, several participants described experiencing social discomfort when interacting with classmates who demonstrated strong enthusiasm for the course. These combined academic, physical, and social pressures sometimes intensified feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty regarding their place within the program. The findings indicate that the demanding nature of criminology education may present additional challenges for students who initially lack personal interest in the field.

Studies in higher education suggest that students' academic success is influenced by a combination of personal motivation, environmental support, and academic self-regulation. Students who experience misalignment between their interests and academic programs may initially struggle with engagement and performance (Benabou & Tirole, 2021; Richardson et al., 2022). These challenges highlight the importance of supportive learning environments that help students develop confidence and competence in demanding academic programs.

Theme 6: Positive Discoveries and Personal Growth

Despite the challenges associated with entering a course they had not initially chosen, many participants eventually identified positive personal developments resulting from their experiences in the criminology program. Several students reported that the academic and physical demands of the program helped them develop valuable personal qualities such as discipline, perseverance, teamwork, and leadership. Participants highlighted that these gains were particularly meaningful given the initial lack of autonomy in their course selection, and that over time, they recognized personal strengths that may benefit future professional and personal endeavors.

The structured nature of criminology training required students to manage their time effectively, collaborate with peers, and remain committed to completing demanding tasks. Over time, these experiences contributed to increased self-confidence and a stronger sense of responsibility. Although criminology was not their original career preference, participants acknowledged that the program played an important role in shaping their personal growth.

Research indicates that resilience and adaptive coping strategies enable students to transform academic difficulties into opportunities for personal and professional development. Resilience has been shown to positively influence students' well-being, persistence, and academic performance in higher education settings (Li et al., 2024; Steel et al., 2024). The experiences described by the participants suggest that while forced enrollment may initially lead to emotional and motivational difficulties, it can also foster personal development as students learn to navigate complex academic and personal challenges.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals that students compelled to pursue Criminology due to familial expectations initially experienced reduced intrinsic motivation, emotional strain, and a sense of disconnection from their academic path. These challenges manifested as low engagement, frustration, and self-doubt, yet participants gradually developed adaptive strategies that fostered persistence and resilience. A longitudinal perspective suggests that emotional adaptation, skill acquisition, and academic competence evolve over time, illustrating students' capacity for growth even in unchosen programs. Emotional experiences evolved over time, with students finding meaning and pride in small accomplishments, highlighting their capacity for coping and adjustment. Family influence was perceived as controlling, often contributing to tension and feelings of powerlessness, though some students negotiated a balance between respecting familial expectations and asserting personal agency. Furthermore, the academic, physical, and social demands of the Criminology program posed significant obstacles, especially for those without prior interest or experience. Despite initial reluctance, participants demonstrated notable personal and professional growth, including improved discipline, leadership, teamwork, and self-confidence, underscoring that unchosen educational paths can nonetheless foster meaningful development and preparedness for future challenges. The findings also highlight that students' experiences are shaped by socioeconomic background, gender expectations, and evolving academic engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To support students navigating academic paths influenced by family expectations, educational institutions should implement longitudinal mentoring, motivation-enhancing strategies, and individualized goal-setting programs to strengthen engagement and performance. Structured emotional support programs, such as stress management workshops and peer support groups, can help students manage negative emotions associated with studying an unchosen course. Families should be encouraged to involve students in career-related discussions, promoting autonomy while considering the students' interests, abilities, and sociocultural background. Instructors and facilitators are advised to provide adaptive learning strategies, practical exercises, and incremental exposure to demanding tasks to build competence and confidence. Finally, academic programs should integrate opportunities for leadership, teamwork, and skill development to maximize personal growth and transferable competencies, ensuring students benefit from their educational experience regardless of initial course preference. Future research could explore cross-cultural comparisons and longitudinal tracking to better understand how forced enrollment experiences evolve across contexts and over time.

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