



Brief communication

Roman Catholic Clergy who have sexually abused children: Their perceptions of their developmental experience

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: There is a growing consensus in the research and theoretical literature that vulnerability to the perpetration of child sexual abuse appears to involve the offenders' early developmental experience. This study explored the perceptions of nine clerical child sex offenders in relation to their developmental experience.

Methods: Nine participants were selected on the basis of being priests or brothers who had sexually abused children. Participants were identified from a larger group of clergy who were currently attending or had previously attended an institution that provides therapeutic intervention for sex offenders and aged between 38 and 75 years. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to identify common themes in the participants' accounts.

Conclusions: Many of these themes are reflected in the existing literature but what appears to distinguish the participants in the present study is their experience of an ideology within clerical training that prevented remediation and compounded earlier psychosocial and psychosexual difficulties.

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Research to date on clerical child sex offenders has largely focused on the consideration of prevalence and incidence rates, psychopathology and personality features (Firestone, Moulden, & Wexler, 2009). However, there are a myriad of factors that converge in the development and expression of human sexuality (Burk & Burkhart, 2003), and in particular, the antecedents associated with child sex abuse perpetration in particular have received little attention in the research literature.

To date, some quantitative research has indicated differentiating factors for clerical and non-clerical offenders (see Plante, 2007; Plante & Aldridge, 2005), however the utility of quantitative measures in this line of research is debatable. This is due to the fact that quantitative measures offer a static representation of current psychological functioning, and do not offer insight on the possible developmental and environmental issues that may predispose an individual to sexually abuse children, which may be of integral importance (Haywood, Kravitz, Grossman, & Hardy, 1996). Taking this into account and in view of directions advocated by McCormack, Hudson, & Ward (2002), the present study aimed to consider clerical child sex offenders' psychosexual and psychological developmental experience as potential precursors to their later perpetration of child sexual abuse by use of qualitative measures.

Methodology

Participants

Participants were Irish males identified from a larger group of clergy who were currently or had previously attended therapeutic intervention for sex offenders. Eleven participants were selected on the basis of being priests or religious brothers

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who had sexually abused children. Exclusion criteria included: (a) having attended the service for less than six months and/or (b) to currently be dealing with significant issues such as impending court cases or recent bereavement. Potential participants were given a detailed written description of the study by their therapist and invited to contact the primary researcher by telephone should they wish to participate. Of the 11 prospective participants approached, nine volunteered to participate. The participants were three were religious brothers, one priest from a religious order, and five diocesan priests seeking treatment for perpetration of child sexual abuse (age range = 38–75 years). In terms of group characteristics and differences; generally, priests perform sacraments such as mass and confession, whereas brothers do not. The study was approved by the researcher's University Hospital Ethics Committee.

Method of data collection and analysis

In light of the research intention to elicit participants' honest perceptions of their developmental experience, semi-structured interviews were considered the most useful method of data collection (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected as the method of analysis for the interview data. IPA is an idiographic approach concerned with establishing broad research questions and consecutively understanding the plausible meanings that present within participants' expressed perceptions of their unique lived experiences; in other words, it offers insight into how participants make sense of their experiences. IPA involves the use of non-leading questions, which are most appropriate in explorative qualitative research, whereby great emphasis is placed on the importance of neither directly or indirectly leading or influencing participants' responses (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Questions in the interview schedule were derived from a thematic analysis of a random selection of 'life stories' retained on file in the institute attended by the participants. Life stories are an autobiographical account of participants' life histories completed as part of group therapy. One single 40-min interview took place between the lead researcher and each participant respectively. The interview focused on four areas and, more specifically, was guided by four primary questions: (1) Tell me about your relationship with your parents; (2) Can you describe your experience of puberty? (3) What was the attitude of your family/the clergy to sexuality? (4) Did your relationships change later in adolescence or after entering the clergy? Again, in line with IPA interview schedule recommendations, questions were open-ended and served as a guide only in order to avoid the shortcomings of quantitative methods, such as imposing a priori categories on participant responses, or failing to comprehensively detect participants' most salient accounts and themes. Further, the objective of the study was not to establish generalisability or representativeness, but rather, to present a 'snapshot' of what participants believed were developmentally important themes for them, in an effort to guide future research. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, all names were changed, and all further potential identifiers were altered or omitted where necessary. Interviews were audiotape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Results

The current study identified several factors common to the participants' reported developmental experiences and the inherent diversity therein implicitly challenges the notion that isolated uniformed variables act as singular causal factors of the development of child sexual abuse perpetration. As such, the factors identified as common to the participants of this study are considered as possible developmental antecedents, as opposed to isolated causal factors, within a multi-factorial model of the aetiology of child sexual abuse perpetration.

Analysis revealed that two higher-order themes, psychosexual foreclosure and psychosocial foreclosure, were pertinent for all nine men involved in this study. Foreclosure, in this context, refers to a process whereby one's development is hindered as opposed to arrested, where one fails to resolve the conflicts inherent in various psychosocial and psychosexual developmental tasks.

Psychosexual foreclosure

The analysis identified the shared major theme of psychosexual foreclosure during participants' adolescence and early adulthood. Psychosexual foreclosure refers to a phenomenon whereby the integration of the mental and physical aspects of sexuality is hindered. Analysis indicated that psychosexual foreclosure involved three constituent subthemes: secret sexuality, sinful sexuality, and bi-directional foreclosure.

Secret and sinful sexuality. All but one of the men recalled growing up in home environments where sexuality was not discussed. Further, eight men highlighted the nature of sexuality as "taboo" in the clerical training setting, and five men's reports indicate the prevalence of a culture fostering guilt and suppression about sexuality. For example, Liam referred to understanding sexuality as being "divorced" from life as a result of the secretive attitude towards sexuality in the family home:

I really thought that sex was separate and divorced from our normal life; the mind set that didn't integrate it in a healthy way. Its existence was never acknowledged and it became a very secretive thing. They were adults, and the environment they created didn't accommodate sexuality. (Liam)

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