

Module C – Susceptibility and Possible Causes of Sexual Abuse

For Seminaries, Parishes, and Dioceses

Research Explaining Susceptibility and Possible Causes of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests

Main Sources of Data

Reports presented to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops by the John Jay College Research Team, The City University of New York*

- *The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010, March, 2011*
- *The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States, 1950-2002, February 2004*

* The two reports are based on data supplied by 97 percent of U.S. archdioceses and dioceses on all clergy accused of sexual abuse of minors

Susceptibility and Possible “Causes” of Abuse

- Before examining factors that relate to sexual abuse, it is important to note that **no single “cause”** of sexual abuse of minors in the Catholic Church has been identified as a result of the John Jay research, nor is there a single cause in the general population
- However, it is critical to understand, for individual priests who abused minors, many organizational, psychological, and situational factors contributed to their susceptibility to perpetrate abuse

Susceptibility, 2: Three Necessary Conditions for Abuse to Occur

- There must be a **person who is motivated to commit the act of abuse**
- There must be a **potential victim**
- There must be a **lack of a “capable guardian”**

To reduce abuse, education of potential victims, potential abusers, and potential “guardians” is essential

Susceptibility to Sexual Abuse, 3: Limits to Identifying Abusers

- Although factors creating susceptibility to sexual abuse may exist, **this does not imply** that its presence makes it possible to either
 - identify specific “causes” of the abusive behavior, **or**
 - identify specific individuals who will commit acts of abuse
- Rather, it means that some factors may be associated with the abuse of children, though these are often multifaceted and complex; in some men, but not in others, these factors may interact and lead to a greater predisposition to abuse

Psychological Tests, 1

- Priests who had abused minors could not be significantly differentiated on the basis of psychological tests from priests who had not abused minors
- Behavior is thought to arise from a combination of factors including: biology, genetics, psychology, environment, and life experience
- **Nonetheless**, there are several personality-based risk markers for clergy sexual abusers that merit further attention

Psychological Tests, 2

Collectively, data suggest that the list of personality-based risk markers for clergy sexual abusers include the following:

Elevations on these MMPI subscales:

- Denial of Social Anxiety
- Authority Problems
- Persecutory Ideas
- Amorality
- Over-controlled Hostility

Other **possible** risk markers for sexual abuse of minors include:

Elevations on these MMPI subscales:

- Need for Affection
- Social Imperturbability
- Imperturbability
- Inhibition of Aggression

Note well: None of the primary scales show significant risk factors, and so any elevation on subscales should be interpreted with caution.

Behavioral Explanations

Clinicians and behavioral theorists observe the following impacts of childhood experience and learned behavior on adult lives

- If a youth or child is a victim of sexual abuse by an adult, his capacity for emotional attachment and sexual response as an adult may be impaired
- Early sexual experience is thought to have an influence on subsequent sexual behavior
- Low self-esteem and social isolation are considered to be associated with child sexual abuse

Intimacy Deficits in Priests Accused of Sexual Abuse of Minors, 1

- Intimacy deficits are weaknesses or difficulties in developing healthy emotional relationships with others
- Intimacy deficits increase susceptibility to deviant sexual behavior, due in part to lack of openness and honesty in relationships with mentors and peers
- In cohorts of priests ordained between 1940 and 1960, intimacy deficits were pronounced and sexual abuse of minors was most numerous

Intimacy Deficits and Psychosexual Maturity, 2

In a 1971 study of priests, a lack of an integrated psychosexual maturity was identified as a major area of underdevelopment in priests

- Uncertainty about sexuality affected their sense of personal identity and made it difficult for them to accept and deal with the challenge of intimacy
- Sexual feelings were identified as a source of conflict and difficulty; much energy went into these feelings or into the effort to distract themselves from them

Based on Loyola-Kennedy Study, 1971 (p. 50, *Causes and Contexts*)

Intimacy Deficits: Immature Emotional Development, 3

Emotional congruence to children or adolescents may predict abuse

- It describes the relationship between the adult abuser's emotional needs and the child's characteristics
- Immature emotional needs may be exacerbated if the abuser has low self-esteem and inadequate social skills
- Thus, abusers are more comfortable in relationships with children or adolescents

Intimacy Deficits: Immature Emotional Development, 4

- Many adults who abuse children have some level of sexual arousal to the children they abuse, either innate or learned
- Whether learned through conditioning and imprinting or poor psychosexual development, sexual arousal to children is a necessary component of the motivation to abuse

Intimacy Deficits: Immature Emotional Development, 5

- Some type of blockage or an inability to have emotional and/or sexual needs met in adult relationships may predict abuse
 - With **developmental** blockage, the abuser is prevented from moving into the adult sexual stage of development, termed internal blockage
 - With **situational** blockage, the abuser is unable to attain or maintain an adult relationship due to external factors, such as frustration from a relationship with an adult

Intimacy Deficits in Early Childhood and Sexual Abuse, 6

- Intimacy deficits may be **caused** by early attachment disturbances that result in the inability to develop relationships in adulthood
- The **response** may be to try to overcome feelings of loneliness through cultivation of relationships with youth; these relationships run the **risk** of boundary violations involving inappropriate and unwanted advances because of the overall level of inexperience with such behavior
- Lack of experience with close emotional relationships may **result** in a lack of understanding of the harm to youth

Other Factors that Affect Susceptibility to Commit Acts of Sexual Abuse

- Priests who were **sexually abused as minors** themselves were more likely to abuse minors than those without a history of abuse
- **Pre-ordination sexual behavior**, either heterosexual or homosexual, does not predict later abuse
- Priests, especially those ordained before 1970, with **confused or bisexual identity** were significantly more likely to have minor victims than priests who identified themselves as either homosexual or heterosexual

Other Factors, 2: Stress and Abuse

Transition from seminary to parish life may induce high levels of stress in some priests

- These **situational stressors** can lead to higher levels of susceptibility to abuse, and though they do not “cause” abuse, they may serve as “triggers”
- These stressors also may lead to reactive behavior **to relieve stress**, such as high levels of alcohol use, which could in turn act to decrease inhibitions that allow abuse to occur

Theological Misunderstanding and Sexual Abuse

Priest-abusers managed their identity in relation to acts of abuse by using the image of “sinner-self”

- Their understanding of their fallibility (sinfulness) and the possibility of forgiveness in confession mean that, having received the Sacrament of Reconciliation, their relationship with God was restored, without reference to victims
- Often related to intense narcissism, only many years after the acts of abuse took place, did they come to understand the impact of their behavior on victims

Cognitive Dissonance, 1

Cognitive dissonance arises from **the disconnect** between

- the abusers' perception of norms of behavior, potential harms, and motivations for their own behavior, and
- the reality and the impact of their behavior

- This uncomfortable tension comes from holding two conflicting thoughts in the mind at the same time
- This undesirable state motivates a person to change his cognitions, attitudes, or behaviors to reduce or relieve dissonance

Cognitive Dissonance, 2

- How persons deal with cognitive dissonance differs. Individuals can adapt by:
 - Changing their behavior
 - Justifying their behavior by changing their conflicting cognition, or
 - Justifying their behavior by adding new cognitions
- Adapting by justifying or excusing behavior allows the behavior to persist

Progression of Risk Factors Related to Abuse

- **Early Factors**

- Victim of sexual abuse as a child or young adult
- Early sexual experience
- Low self-esteem and social isolation

- **Formational Factors**

- Intimacy deficits and lack of healthy emotional relationships
- Confused sexual identity
- Theological misunderstandings

- **Situational Factors**

- Inappropriate relief from stress, such as alcohol abuse
- Loss of support structures during times of transition

Some Controversial Findings in the John Jay Report

Celibacy and Sexual Abuse of Minors

Homosexuality and Sexual Abuse of Minors

Sexual Abuse by Age and Gender

Social Influences on Sexual Behavior

Celibacy and Sexual Abuse of Minors

- Given the continuous requirement of priestly celibacy over a long period of time, it is not clear why the commitment to celibate chastity should be seen as a cause for the steady rise in incidence of sexual abuse between 1950 and 1980
- This view is supported by the statistical observation that the vast majority of incidences of sexual abuse of children are committed by men who are not celibates

Homosexuality and Sexual Abuse of Minors, 1

- Homosexual orientation alone is not a significant predictor of sexual abuse of minors, a finding consistent with academic research
- Sexual abuse by individual priests was often varied – victims included both genders, and adults and youth of various ages
- Sexual experience – heterosexual or homosexual – before ordination predicts sexual misconduct after ordination, but with adults – not minors

Homosexuality and Sexual Abuse, 2

- **Most incidents of abuse occurred before the 1980s;** it was only after that time that homosexual identity became widely understood – both in society and within the Catholic Church
- In a 2001 survey, only 3 percent of diocesan priests aged 66 or older, who would have been seminarians in the early 1970s, reported the presence of a homosexual subculture in the seminaries they attended
- In the same survey, 40 percent of diocesan priests aged 36 to 55, who would have been seminarians in the 1980s and 1990s, reported that there was a clear homosexual subculture in the seminaries they attended

Homosexuality and Sexual Abuse, 3

Seminarians in the 1980s and 1990s did not go on to abuse in any substantial number, when a homosexual subculture was identified in seminaries

- 7.1 percent of abusers were ordained in the 1980s
- 1.9 percent were ordained after 1989
- Post-1980s incidence of abuse is at an even lower level

In contrast

- 40.3 percent of priests who abused were ordained in the 1950s and 1960s when the lowest levels of homosexuality in seminaries was reported

Other Views Concerning Homosexuality

- Those who hold that homosexuality has a greater role in determining susceptibility to sexual abuse of minors maintain that the relatively high proportion of male victims (81%) implies that conclusion
- While homosexuality may be a factor, research cannot confirm the extent of the role it played in sexual abuse because
 - the sexual identity of most priests is unknown, so the proportion of those who have been accused of abuse and are homosexual is also unknown
 - homosexual acts are not necessarily committed only by those who identify themselves as homosexual
 - it is known that those with confused or bisexual identity were more likely to have minor victims than priests who identified themselves as either homosexual or heterosexual

Sexual Abuse by Age and Gender

Overall gender and age distribution of victims based on the
Nature and Scope data

Gender - Males = 81 percent
Females = 19 percent

Age - Under age 7 = 6 percent
8 to 10 = 16 percent
11 to 14 = 51 percent
15 to 17 = 27 percent

Pedophilia is a clinical diagnosis characterized by sexual attraction to prepubescent children

Ephebophilia is defined as sexual attraction to pubescent or postpubescent children.

Clinical diagnoses categorize the type of sexual abuse according to behaviors and not merely according to age. The percentage of priests who are identified as pedophiles is disputed by those who say that it should be higher than reported in *Causes and Contexts*. This view differs because of the definition being based only on age, often as high as 14.

Social Influences on Sexual Behavior, 1

Norms of sexual behavior were changed in the 1960s, for example

- The representation of sexuality was contested and the depiction of sexuality became more graphic
- Sexual behavior among young people became more open and diverse

These and other social changes can be understood as a new “valuation” of the individual person and fostered the exploration and pursuit of individual happiness and satisfaction, sometimes in the form of what we now understand as sexual abuse

Other Social Influences, 2

- Divorce rates, intergenerational conflict, sexual activity, illegal drug use, crime, and disorder were more prevalent
- Illegal drug use and criminal acts violate social and legal norms of conduct
- Sexual abuse of a minor by a Catholic priest is such an illegal act, completely opposed to the principles of the Church
 - The number of cases of sexual abuse by priests rose along with other types of deviant behavior in the 1960s
 - Soon after 1980 most of these social indicators declined rapidly, as did incidences of sexual abuse

Social Indicators of Deviance:

Rates of Change from 1960 to 1990

The national rates of increase of three indicators – divorce, sexual activity and drug use – correspond to the rates of increase in incidence of sexual abuse by priests between 1960 and 1980, and then subsequent decline between 1980 and 1990.

	Rate of change 1960 – 1970	Rate of change 1970 – 1980	Rate of change 1980 – 1990
Incidents of abuse by priests	200% increase	variable	72% decrease
Divorce rate per 1,000 persons	200% increase	110% increase	40% decrease
Pre-marital sexual activity / 20 year old women	70% increase	75% increase	not available
Illegal drug use / adults New marijuana users	200% increase	100% increase	60% decrease

Conclusion to be Drawn

These changes in social indicators do not mean that those patterns caused sexual abuse of minors by clergy; however,

- The changes in the 1960s created an environment where deviance was more common

In the mid-1980s this pattern began to change:

- Most States expanded their definitions of criminal sexual behavior
- By 1990 almost all States had passed legislation for mandatory reporting of sexual abuse of a child
- Sexual abuse has since declined

Some Key Findings - 1

- Priests with intimacy deficits and an absence of close personal relationships before and during seminary were more likely to abuse minors
- Low self-esteem and social isolation are associated with child sexual abuse

Some Key Findings - 2

- Abusive priests commonly created opportunities to be alone with minors, for example, in their rectory, during retreats and/or while on camping trips or travelling
- These priests often integrated themselves into the families of victims and then sought occasions to be alone with the children or with one child

Some Key Findings - 3

- Screening of potential seminarians is critically important since the outcomes of the screening can be used to identify other psychological problems not necessarily related to abuse of minors
- Because of the lack of identifiable psychological characteristics associated with potential abusers, it is very important to pay careful attention to organizational and situational factors associated with abuse

Some Key Findings - 4

- **No single “cause”** of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests has been identified as a result of the John Jay research
- Nonetheless, when individual priests abused minors, many organizational, psychological, and situational factors contributed to their susceptibility

Summary of Susceptibility and Causes

- Susceptibility and Necessary Conditions for Abuse to Occur
- Psychological Tests and Behavioral Explanations
- Intimacy Deficits
- Other Factors Affecting Susceptibility
- Controversial Findings in the John Jay Report
 - Celibacy and Sexual Abuse of Minors
 - Homosexuality and Sexual Abuse of Minors
 - Social Influences on Sexual Behavior

Discussion Questions

- What precautions should be taken into account when assessing possible “causes” or risk factors involved in sexual abuse?
- How can the results of psychological tests be useful in initial and ongoing formation?
- What factors possibly leading to abuse come into play at different stages of life?
- What situational safeguards might be put in place to help prevent sexual abuse?

Link to USCCB – <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/charter.cfm>

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