Uncovering the Behavioral Patterns of Sexually Abusive Clergy: An Integrative Review
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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE
Results from a content analysis of 17 personnel files of credibly accused sexually abusive priests from one of Minnesota’s Catholic dioceses identified trends in offender behavior and victim preference. This suggests that behavioral characteristics and victim preferences of sexually abusive clergy may not be unique; rather, they may be specific to a certain type of sexual offender.

Project Objective: To closely examine existing empirical literature on the characteristics of clergy sex offenders. And, identify how these characteristics may be indicative of the behavioral tendencies of abusive priests is from the Winona Diocese.

RESEARCH METHODS
• The Winona files were reexamined for indications of offender and victim characteristics.
• We used search engines, primarily EBSCO, to look for entries containing empirical information about abusive clergy. Our search terms included: “sexual abuse” “adoption” “clergy” “ephebophilia” “coping” “impulsive” “priest” “grooming” “alcoholic” “abuse” “victim.”
• 20 articles were incorporated into the review. We used 16 of the articles in our analysis.

THE AGE-GENDER GRADIENT
Bailey et al. (2016) validates a previously-proposed theory that a man’s degree of sexual arousal to various age groups follows an age-gender gradient. Men primarily aroused by one age-gender group will be secondarily most- aroused by individuals from the adjacent groups.

TERMINOLOGY
Recognized Terms for Sexual Preferences
Pedophilia: Sexual preference for prepubescent children
Hebephilia: Sexual preference for pubescent children
Ephebophilia: Sexual preference for adolescents
Teleophilia: Sexual preference for adults

How This Information Relates to the Winona Files
12 files document abuse of males; all 12 show that abuse occurred in locations such as the priest’s home, a social event, confession, or places of special privilege
4 files report a somewhat discernable age of the male victims, using terms such as “young man”
9 files display evidence of alcoholism
3 files show signs of familial alcoholism
1 file shows that the clergy member provided a victim with alcohol
Collectively, this data suggests ephebophilia

EPIPHOBILIA AMONG ABUSIVE CLERGY: WHAT IS KNOWN
CHARACTERISTICS
• Younger than pedophiles at age of first offense
• More sensitive to stress than pedophiles
• More likely than pedophiles to be investigated by police
• More likely than pedophiles to have a history of substance abuse
• More amenable to treatment than pedophiles because they suffer from less cognitive distortion and their sexual interests are more similar to teleophilia

COPING STRATEGIES
• Likely to engage in sexually abusive behaviors in reaction to stress
• More likely than pedophiles to use alcohol or drugs at the time of offense

CLERGY SEXUAL OFFENDERS: WHAT IS KNOWN
FACTS
• More likely to have male victims and older victims than nonclergy sexual offenders
• More likely to have a history of consensual relationships with males
• Often seek opportunities to interact with victims and victims’ families
• Abusive childhood experiences significantly increase the likelihood of perpetrating abuse
• Factors in upbringing such as a priest’s negative relationship with his father, an inability to form a definitive identity, and being forbidden to form desired relationships may predispose abuse perpetration
• Clergy who are dependent, avoidant, or obsessive-compulsive may demonstrate a need for acceptance
• Severe alcohol use and drug dependency is a characteristic of some offenders
• Of offenders who have been abused as children, some may have co-occurring alcohol and drug dependencies
• Not getting caught increases likelihood of abuse occurring again

THOUGHT PROCESSES
• May view themselves as victims after committing sexual abuse
• A survey of several clergy offenders revealed they were aware of their actions
• Some are unable to forgive
• Some believe that abusing males is not a violation of Holy Orders, whereas abusing females is a violation
• One study reported the thought process at various stages of the offense:
  Pre-offense: Likely to rationalize with reasons such as loneliness, sadness, and entitlement
  During the offense: Likely to entertain false ideals (i.e., feelings between offender and victim are mutual)
  Post-offense: Likely to reduce guilt by rationalizing the seriousness, being kind to “make up for it,” relying on God’s forgiveness, and attributing it externally (i.e., negative childhood experiences, it was victim’s fault)

DISCUSSION & FUTURE RESEARCH
• Data from the Winona files suggests ephebophilia. This poses the question of ephebophilic prevalence among such a concentrated population.
• Adolescents who are highly interactive with authority figures possessing ephebophilic tendencies may be at an increased risk for sexual abuse.
• Techniques of neutralization and their usage among clergy sexual abusers have been previously studied and are similar to the clergy sexual offender thought processes identified in this analysis.
• Tallon & Terry (2008) indicates that there are two types of offenders: generalists who have no preference in victim characteristics, and specialists who do have a preference in victim characteristics. Among offending clergy in the specialist group, ephebophilia is the most prevalent specialist type. However, the offending type most common among a clergy is a generalist offender.
• Ephebophilia is an understudied phenomenon and further research is needed to better differentiate ephebophilic offenders from other types of sexual offenders among the clergy population and the general population.

REFERENCES


