Examining Sexual Grooming by Clergy: An Analysis of Diocesan Files from Winona

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**RESEARCH METHODS**
- Retrospective content analysis of 17 priest personnel files from the Diocese of Winona (MN).
- Deductive approach used to examine and text existing taxonomy of priest sexual abuse.
- Nathalie read and coded 4,266 pages of documentation to identify instances of sexual grooming.

**LITERATURE REVIEW – GROOMING PROCESS & EMPIRICAL FINDINGS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victim Selection</th>
<th>Access &amp; Manipulate Victim</th>
<th>Physical Grooming</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>• Perceived vulnerabilities (Lanning 2010; McAlinden, 2006).</td>
<td>• Offender is in a position of trust (Craven et al., 2006).</td>
<td>• Desensitize the victim through non-sexual touching, tickling, or wrestling (Winters &amp; Jeglic, 2017).</td>
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<td>• Low self-esteem or low self-confidence (Finkelhor, 1994; Olson et al., 2007).</td>
<td>• Isolate victim from family and friends (Lawson, 2003).</td>
<td>• Use of accidental “accidental” touching (Lang &amp; Frenzel, 1988).</td>
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<td>• Low-supervision family situations or parents with substance abuse issues (Elliott et al., 1995; Lang &amp; Frenzel, 1988).</td>
<td>• Isolation decreases feelings of social support (Christiansen &amp; Blake, 1990).</td>
<td>• These behaviors gradually progress to sexual abuse (Abel et al., 1998; Winters &amp; Jeglic, 2017).</td>
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- Grooming behaviors of clergy sexual abusers are similar to those of non-clergy sexual abusers (Terry, 2008) with the addition of abuse of power and respect (Spraitz, Bowen & Strange, 2018; Spraitz & Bowen, n.d.).
- Many grooming behaviors seem normal and do not appear to be ill intentioned (Lanning & Dietz, 2014). This makes them difficult to detect.
- Sexual grooming behaviors of clergy have not been widely studied until recently; the current study seeks to add new insight to what is already known.

**FINDINGS: TAXONOMY OF CLERGY SEXUAL GROOMING**

**ALCOHOL, CIGARETTES, & DRUGS**
- Documented in 5 files
- **Purpose:** Lowers victim’s inhibitions, exploits child’s curiosity, and builds rapport by engaging in taboo behavior together.
- From a newspaper article: “The priest fed (the victim) alcohol. ‘They’d get tanked up together…’ ...for a priest who knows there is alcoholism in a man’s family, to feed the young man alcohol was an abuse,” [a psychiatrist] said.

**FAVORITISM/SPECIAL TREATMENT**
- Documented in 4 files
- **Purpose:** Manipulate emotions (confusion, guilt, etc.) in order to gain control of the victim.
- The victim “wondered if he had been responsible because he might have liked all the attention. He knew he had a real desire to be liked and wondered if he was an easy target.”
- The priest “told [the victim] that he loved her.”
- “Can’t get used to losing you. No matter what I try to do, loving you is all I can do.” – sung by priest to victim.

**PHYSICAL CONTACT**
- Documented in 5 files
- **Purpose:** Lower victims’ inhibitions by gradually increasing physical contact that ultimately becomes sexually abusive.
- Under the guise of conducting a drug search, one victim reports, “My mother thought I had a problem with lying… It must be OK.’”
- “The priest said that the priest had to feel inside my pockets to make sure I had taken everything out…his fingers were rubbing against my private parts.”
- One priest told a victim that he needed to “check to see if [the victim’s] legs were growing symmetrically.”

**ABUSE OF POWER AND RESPECT**
- Documented in 9 files
- **Purpose:** Use standing as in persona Christi to elicit reverence and respect that essentially puts them above reproach.
- The victim was convinced the priest’s “actions, teachings, and instructions were those established by the Roman Catholic Church.”
- One victim wrote, “I thought, ‘well, he’s a priest and must know what he’s doing… It must be OK.’”
- “By confessing your sins to God through me you will be forgiven.” A priest allegedly said this to a young male victim after abusing him and blaming him for the abuse.

**ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS W/FAMILY**
- Documented in 5 files
- **Purpose:** Earn trust of family, especially parents, in order to gain access to victim.
- “My mother insisted it was a great honor to ‘serve the priest,’ lay out his robes on Sunday, etc.”
- “My mother thought I had a problem with lying – maybe if I spent more time with him I wouldn’t say those kinds of things about him.”
- [The priest] “became an ‘honored guest’ at the family’s home…and took vacations with the family.”

**GUIDE OF MENTORSHIP OR FRIENDSHIP**
- Documented in 7 files
- **Purpose:** Build a trusting relationship with the victim.
- “The priest had an incredible gift for engaging, affirming, and supporting young girls…especially attentive to those of us who were struggling with self-esteem.”
- “He pretty much wanted to know what I knew about sexuality…his purpose was to kind of educate me… I guess.”
- “I sent [priest] an email relating my hopelessness and asked for spiritual direction. Abuse occurred at the meeting.”

**OVERNIGHTS, TRIPS, OR SECLUSION**
- Documented in 12 files
- **Purpose:** Excludes child and decreases possibility of escape.
- “As to the allegation of fondling in his car, [priest] acknowledged that it was consistent with his modus operandii.”
- Several instances of trips to cabins or other out-of-state locales.
- The priests’ rectories and church sacristies also were the locations of frequent acts of abuse.

**GIFT GIVING**
- Documented in 6 files
- **Purpose:** Get victim to like and want to spend time with abuser.
- “He said…if I didn’t put up a fuss, he could put $15 in my envelope…He did put $15 in my envelope the next day.”
- “Stories of [the priest’s] expensive gifts to folks were quite common. Many did not know that he is a priest.”
- “[The priest] took her to get candy.”

**DISCUSSION**
- Accused priests from the Diocese of Winona used grooming techniques similar to those used by clergy and other general sex offenders, as documented in earlier research.
- Like offenders from Joliet and St. John’s, some priests used the respect they received as clergy to groom their victims and others in the community. This continues to be the key behavior in this taxonomy.
- These findings support research that established a taxonomy of clergy grooming.
- Overnight outings and nights spent at the rectory were prevalent in this sample; diocesan policy on these behaviors should be evaluated.
- Parishioners, parents, staff, and children should continue to receive training on abuse prevention and warning signs of abuse.

**FUTURE RESEARCH**
- Continued analysis of unsealed diocesan files of priests credibly accused of sexual abuse of minors.
- Refine the taxonomy, as necessary, with findings from future research:
  - New taxa? Separate elements of existing taxa into unique categories?
  - Develop a coding scheme to measure the behavioral tax of clergy sexual grooming.
- Re-examine personnel files from other dioceses looking specifically for evidence of grooming.

**DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE**
**Of 17 Alleged Offenders, 16 Used Grooming Behaviors:**
- 106 incidents of documented sexual grooming; average of 6.6 per monk with evidence of grooming.
- Range of 1-6 behavior types used per monk; average of 3.01 per monk.
- Mode: Use of 3 taxa (n = 5).