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## Exploring Interpersonal, Sexual, and Moral Development of Offending Clergy

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Aaron Ghering

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2025

Abstract

Exploring Interpersonal, Sexual, and Moral Development of Offending Clergy

by

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MS Forensic Psychology, Walden University, 2011

BS Psychology, Kaplan University, 2009

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

February 2025

## Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of offender clergy through their childhood development. It specifically looked at the social, moral, and sexual development of these individuals. This phenomenological qualitative study provided insight into what, if anything, in their early moral, social, and sexual development could help shed light on their future behaviors and actions. Bandura's Social Learning Theory guided this study by providing an understanding of how social learning throughout development can influence the formation of social, moral, and sexual behaviors later in life. The data were collected from reviewing existing material from existing diaries, interviews, and previously published studies. The information was coded and analyzed within the context of the social, moral, and sexual development of the participants. The findings indicated a similarity in themes across most, if not all, participants. The relative themes included religious moral upbringing, authoritarian fathers, sexuality is immoral, special maternal relationships, and awkward social relationships. Ramifications for positive social change included the understanding of the circumstances that may help shape an individual's predisposition to commit these offenses while in positions of power. This will help form early intervention strategies and shift resources from reactionary to preventative measures.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my three children. Donna, Brock, and Tate, you three are my world. While this process was difficult and I am proud I completed it, it is not even close to how proud I am of the three of you. I hope you can look at this as a reminder that you can do anything if you stick to it and work hard. I love you all.

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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Background.....	2
Problem Statement.....	7
Purpose of the Study.....	8
Research Questions.....	9
Theoretical Framework for the Study.....	9
Nature of the Study.....	9
Definitions.....	10
Assumptions.....	11
Scope and Delimitations.....	12
Limitations.....	13
Significance.....	14
Summary.....	15
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	16
Introduction.....	16
Literature Search Strategy.....	16
Theoretical Foundation.....	18
Bandura’s Social Learning Theory.....	18
Sociomoral Development.....	19
Sexual Development.....	22



Prevalence of Abuse in the Church.....	25
Summary and Conclusions .....	26
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	28
Introduction.....	28
Research Design and Rationale .....	28
Research Tradition .....	30
Role of the Researcher .....	31
Methodology .....	32
Participant Selection Logic.....	32
Target Group, Sampling Strategy, and Size.....	33
Criteria for Sample Selection.....	34
Procedures for Recruitment and Participation .....	35
Instrumentation .....	35
Data Analysis Plan.....	36
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	37
Ethical Procedures .....	39
Summary .....	40
Chapter 4: Results .....	41
Introduction.....	41
Interview Sources.....	43
Demographics .....	43
Data Collection .....	44

Data Analysis .....	45
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	46
Dependability .....	46
Credibility .....	46
Transferability.....	46
Confirmability.....	47
Results.....	47
Theme A: Religious Moral Upbringing.....	48
Theme B: Authoritarian Father.....	48
Theme C: Sexuality Is Immoral.....	49
Theme D: Special Maternal Relationships .....	50
Theme E: Awkward Social Relationships .....	51
Summary .....	52
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	54
Introduction.....	54
Interpretation of the Findings.....	55
Theme A: Religious Moral Upbringing.....	55
Theme B: Authoritarian Father.....	56
Theme C: Sexuality Is Immoral.....	57
Theme D: Special Maternal Relationships .....	59
Theme E: Awkward Social Relationships .....	60
Limitations of the Study.....	60

Recommendations.....	61
Implications for Social Change.....	62
Conclusion .....	63
References.....	66

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

A social problem existing in the United States is people in positions of moral authority committing sexually deviant crimes. One such position of moral authority has garnered a great deal of attention: members of the clergy. In cases of clergy abusing their parishioners, these crimes are being committed against the people they are charged with protecting and teaching (Easton et al., 2019). Due to the reports and studies conducted in numerous countries, this problem does not appear to be a localized phenomenon, but a worldwide one (Dressing et al., 2021). As Calkins et al. (2015) stated, these offenders have an unprecedented level of access to their victims, and little is understood about their personalities or lives before they were ordained or committed their offenses. Perhaps, by understanding the emotional and psychological development of those offending clergy, we could gain some insight into this phenomenon.

Anderson (2015) examined clerical sexual predators from psychological, sociocultural, and moral-religious perspectives and found that it was difficult to explain why these individuals offend, which often made it hard to implement effective treatment strategies. Anderson also investigated the psychosexual development of these offenders, finding a certain level of sexual immaturity in many of them. The Anderson study helps provide context for establishing a baseline by which exploration of characteristics of those entering the clergy may help provide perspective to help predict these behaviors. Calkins et al. (2015) compared sexual offenders who victimized children with non-offenders to explore differences in developmental data. Calkins et al. looked at sexual

histories and habits, risk factors in psychosexual development, as well as the presence or absence of mental health issues. As with these studies, many of them focus on the personalities of the admitted or convicted sex offenders and provide no strong developmental or pre-offense information. By exploring the psychological and moral development of individuals prior to their appointment to clerical roles and their offenses, we may uncover information to help establish a baseline of moral development of those entering the clergy which we can use to anchor additional studies of clerical sexual offenders in hopes to better understand this phenomenon.

This chapter will highlight the background and the purpose of the study. This section will also state the research questions I sought to answer. Finally, this chapter will also discuss the limitations, assumptions, and definitions of terms found in this paper.

### **Background**

The issue of abuse in the church is not a rare or underreported problem; there have been numerous reports on abuse in the church. In France alone, it was reported that in a 70-year period (up to 2020) there were approximately 333,000 victims of sexual abuse at the hands of approximately 3,000 adult Catholic church members, over 210,000 of those were at the hands of clergy (NPR, 2021). In the United States, the Conference of Catholic Bishops commissioned John Jay College of Criminal Justice to study abuses by Catholic Clergy in the US between 1950 and 2002. The John Jay study discovered approximately 11,000 allegations of sexual abuse of minors at the hands of approximately 4,392 clergy (Terry et al., 2004). Approximately 4.5% of all clerics across multiple countries were alleged to have committed sexual abuse of minors; however, the

cover-ups make it almost impossible to determine accurate numbers (Dressing et al., 2021). Additionally, the research on the topic is considerable. Much of the peer-reviewed literature on the topic of abuse in the church examines the problem from many different angles. However, there is little research examining the pre-service, pre-offense development of the individuals who choose a life in the clergy. This is an important position to examine to help understand the social development and personalities of individuals who are drawn to service in the church. Understanding the individual before they are influenced by the position and all that comes with it might help provide perspective to the issue of clerical abuses.

D'Alton et al. (2013) reviewed the topic from the offender's perspective with a phenomenological study of clergy who had been convicted of sexual abuse and were enrolled in treatment. D'Alton et al. uncovered some preexisting psychosocial and psychosexual anomalies in their population. Although this study does provide context through the examination of clergy, it only looks at a few offenders in the identified target population, thus providing a narrow perspective. Additionally, Spraitz et al. (2018) investigated known abusers and attempted to classify the grooming techniques of these offenders, comparing them to those of sexual predators who were not members of the clergy. In this study, Spraitz et al. found that the offenders are similar in almost every grooming technique except that the clergy often use their religious authority as a coercive tactic. Another source compares offenders to non-offenders within the priesthood with respect to their dating histories, among other background information, before entering the clergy (Calkins et al., 2015). Anderson (2015) used a literature review to take a

multifaceted look at sexual offenders in the clergy and their rehabilitations to determine the interventions with the greatest efficacy.

While attempting to dispel myths surrounding sexual abuse at the hands of the clergy, Plante (2020) also used a literature review to address myths of causation. Among the causation myths discussed and challenged by Plante were mandatory celibacy, alleged homosexuality among priests, and scarcity of women in the priesthood. Also, another myth that was discussed and dispelled was the idea that individuals joined the priesthood with the express intention of gaining access to potential victims (Plante, 2020).

Looking further into causation and enabling factors, Dressing et al. (2021) argued that those clergy who were victims of sexual abuse had a higher rate of offending than their non-victim counterparts. Opportunity was listed as an enabling factor and there were marked differences between offenders and non-offenders on both the Static-99 and the Aggressive/Sadistic scale of the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory-III (Dressing et al., 2021). Although this information provides insight and context, again the findings surrounding this study only look at a specific set of offending and non-offending clergy. The conclusions are limited and there is no exploration across the broader offending population.

Armbruster (2022) examined not only causation of the sexual offenses of Catholic priests but also the perpetuation of the abuse. Armbruster hypothesized that the repression of sexuality as a taboo subject caused the offenders to not be able to express their sexual issues and desires, leading to the repression of thoughts and feelings that would manifest later through offending. Additionally, this repression of sexuality caused

the church and these abusive priests to refrain from using language, such as child abuser or pedophile, to describe their crimes, thus negating the severity of their transgressions and minimized their accountability (Armbruster, 2022). While this study did address some causation and enabling factors as well, the participants' lives prior to their joining the clergy were not examined.

Studies have also been conducted on members of the clergy who have not offended. Tamarit and Balcells (2022) interviewed 20 priests on their perceptions of the sexual abuse problem in the church. They covered such topics as the impact the abuse scandal has on the church, the culture of enablement, better screening and selection of future priests, and the morality and power of priests. There were discussions of the possibility of young men seeking the priesthood to cope with their feelings of sexual confusion or what they considered as deviant desires (Tamarit & Balcells, 2022). Tamarit and Balcells also explored potential causal factors such as clerical loneliness, having power due to being considered closer to God, and the widespread lack of Church control. The participants of this study provided a perspective of the abuse from a non-offender's position. This still demonstrates the gap of having no real broad insight into the phenomenon from an offender-clergy perspective.

Additional studies have been conducted covering the sexual grooming habits of offenders. Winters et al. (2023) explored grooming habits of offender-priests and compared those with multiple victims versus single victims to understand their tactics. This study was not conducted from the abuser's perspective or a cleric's perspective. This study focused on the victims to understand how their abusers groomed them. In



comparing victims of offenders who only have single cases versus those with multiple victims Winters et al. was able to highlight differences in behaviors to help with detection and prevention in the future. With this study, a completely different perspective was explored, that of the victim. However, there is still no focus from the perspective of offender-clergy.

Most of these sources look at the problem of sexual offenders inside the priesthood; they all help provide history, context, and insight. Unfortunately, all these sources look at the issue from a post-clerical appointment perspective. There is no exploration of the development of these offenders before they joined the priesthood. Additionally, many priests did not take personality tests prior to entering the seminary. The tests that were conducted in some of the studies listed earlier were conducted on participants after they joined the clergy and are not good examinations into their lived experiences during their development. With no good baseline data, there is little background information to review. The limited amount of pre-employment data creates a gap. The point in their lives at which these individuals started exhibiting their deviant tendencies is not clearly understood. Nor is it understood if this is a learned behavior, the result of being victimized. The presence of psychosocial or psychosexual anomalies, without the benefit of hindsight, is not available. This study is needed to help provide insight and context, which will assist in filling that gap. If more effective screening of the individuals going into the clergy could be employed, we may uncover traits or similarities between them and the traits of the known offenders. If we understood developmental

context of those offender clergy, it may help pave the way to understanding whether they were drawn to the careers or if the jobs themselves create an offending environment.

### **Problem Statement**

Reviewing the problem of members of the clergy committing sexually deviant crimes, there has been significant exploration of causation and possible reasons for the phenomenon. Rashad and Barron (2018) argued that this has been an issue with the church for centuries exacerbated by strict celibacy rules that repressed the natural sexuality of its clergy. Other research has suggested that the role itself comes with often debilitating mental health issues that go untreated. Isacco et al. (2014) argued that while increased attention has been placed on the mental welfare of the clergy, it has only been recently and primarily related to clergy involved in sexual abuse scandals. Another reason attributed to the growing list of causes could be proximity to a vast victim pool (Caulkins et al., 2015). The list of causes and potential reasons is long and provides context to the problem which helps us understand some of the motivations of these sexual offenders via hindsight. The offenders interviewed and studied have already been in their roles and have already been either convicted or credibly accused of sexual misconduct while in the clergy.

Very few, if any, of these studies explore the personality, morality, psychosocial, and psychosexual development of the individuals in this population prior to offending. The problem is that the current research does not specifically explore the psychological development of these offenders before they entered the clergy. Hence, this study will address this gap by focusing primarily on the development of individuals prior to holding

their clerical positions. By exploring the sexual and moral development of these individuals, we may uncover information to help establish a baseline of moral, social, and interpersonal development of those entering the clergy which we can use to anchor additional studies of clerical sexual offenders in hopes to better understand this phenomenon and help fill the gap identified in the current literature.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to use a phenomenological inquiry to explore the moral and social development of individuals identified as offending clergy. The data collection was derived from a meta-analysis of existing interviews retrieved from multiple archived sources including biographies, articles, and peer-reviewed studies. The information from these interviews was coded in such a manner as to explore the offenders' developmental experiences. It is the intent of this qualitative, phenomenological study to use the data collected during the interviews to explore the morality and development of those entering the clergy.

The additional intent of this study was to use the collected data from the interviews of those entering the clergy to help fill the aforementioned gap in the current literature. The results of the study will not only address the gap in the current research but might also help provide increased understanding of this phenomenon. By understanding the phenomenon, we may be able to take a more preventative position. The results of this study could also be used to inform future research studying different facets of this phenomenon as well as different offender populations.

### **Research Questions**

This study will attempt to answer two central questions:

- RQ1 – Qualitative: How do offending clergy describe their experiences with morality while growing up?
- RQ2 – Qualitative: How do offending clergy describe their intimate, interpersonal, and social experiences while growing up?

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

The framework for this qualitative study was based primarily on Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which was founded on the idea that children learn through modeling and imitation as a prime source of development (Berk, 2022). Bandura (1969) also argued that modeling plays a significant part in moral development as well. Finally, Social Learning Theory has also been applied to sexual development and gender identity (Berk, 2022). The concepts explored in this study aligned with this theory and helped to provide structure when designing the study and reviewing the data. Bandura's Social Learning Theory was also used to help explore the developmental morality of the offender clergy examined in this study.

### **Nature of the Study**

This study was conducted using qualitative methodology with a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research provides information via description, facilitating the exploration of problems centered in complex social environments (Walden University, 2013a). Qualitative study of the social, psychosocial, and moral development of offender clergy is the best way to explore the development of those individuals. This

study was conducted ensuring consistency with Bandura's Social Learning Theory. This may also help provide insight into the personal characteristics of the offenders. By addressing this gap in the current research, we may help provide context to the problem of individuals in positions of moral authority committing sexually deviant crimes.

The data for this study were collected from a meta-analysis of existing interviews in peer-reviewed literature related to offender clergy. Within the qualitative methodology, the research type was phenomenological inquiry. The perspective of the inquiry was by examination of existing information across multiple studies. The interviews examined came from clergy who were convicted, or confessed to committing, sexual assault while serving in a clerical capacity. Since this was a meta-analysis via content analysis, there were no original interviews conducted for this study. The existing information was collected and coded to explore the development of these offender clergy within the studies.

The information was collected using content analysis. Existing interviews were reviewed, and the data were extrapolated using Bandura's Social Learning Theory as guidance. Enough interviews were examined, approximately 10 to 20, in order to reach data saturation and address the research questions effectively.

### **Definitions**

In this study, the term *clergy* refers to groups of people who are ordained to perform religious or pastoral duties within the Christian Church (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

*Morality*: A system of beliefs or set of values relating to right conduct, against which behavior is judged to be acceptable or unacceptable (American Psychological Association [APA], n.d. -a).

*Moral development* refers to a person's creation of cognitive rationale of individual concepts of right and wrong, values, attitudes, and behavior through their lives (Kohlberg, 1981).

*Deviance*: Behavior that substantially departs from what is considered acceptable or common for a particular social group (APA, n.d. -b).

*Pedophilic disorder* is defined by the American Psychiatric Association (2022) as an adult who has a sexual desire for individuals who fall under the category of prepubescent children.

*Intimate*: State of interpersonal, emotional closeness, characterized by close, familiar, usually affectionate, or caring personal interactions. Parties involved have detailed and/or deep knowledge and understanding of each other (APA, n.d. -c).

### **Assumptions**

In this study, it was assumed that all participants had answered the original interviews honestly and truthfully to the best of their knowledge. Although it is impossible to guarantee complete respondent honesty, measures can be taken to help preserve the honesty in interview responses. Ravitch and Carl (2020) explained that one of the key tools to help ensure more honest and truthful responses is confidentiality and anonymity. With the information from this study coming from peer-reviewed research, the identities of those participants were protected during the original collection of the

previous studies. Additionally, since there are no active participants or interviewees for this study, no anonymity or confidentiality needed to be preserved as there are no participants organic to this study.

As this is a meta-analysis of existing research, it is also assumed that the original studies were conducted ethically in accordance with the originating overseeing body's guidance and approval. With this assumption, it is also reasoned that all data collected within those original studies was done ethically and morally, consistent with APA guidelines.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this study is centered around the sexual, social, and moral development of offending clergy. The best way to get the information necessary to satisfy this scope was by diving into the participants' lived experiences. Ravitch and Carl (2020) explained that the best research method to use to investigate a person's lived experiences is phenomenological research. I achieved this by extrapolating those lived experiences through the examination of existing interviews with studied offenders.

The gap in the current research is evident in that most of the exploration in this area has been centered around the offender's current psychological and moral position in life and does not explore offenders prior to entering the clergy. This study focused on the early life development of these individuals with regards to their moral, social, and psychological development. By exploring the cross section of the existing information, I hoped to gain insight into the development of these offenders as it relates to Social Learning Theory.

The results of this study could help future research by providing a baseline to further understand the personal characteristics and backgrounds of individuals entering the clergy. Additionally, although the result of qualitative research is contextually bound and is not considered transferable to other people (Ravitch & Carl, 2020), the study itself may be able to be used to explore populations with a similar social problem of power imbalances in relationships which yield sexually deviant crimes. Finally, this study could help provide a “before” picture to contrast to the “after” of the existing research.

### **Limitations**

The limitations, challenges, and barriers to consider are numerous. With all the information coming from the perspectives of the offenders, there was a risk of self-reporting bias (Creswell, & Creswell, 2018). This could be compounded considering the sensitive nature of the underlying topic. The potential for self-reporting bias as well as omission of information may have led to potentially dishonest answers in the original source material. Due to the potentially sensitive topics being explored, some members of the original samples may have been disinclined to participate truthfully. Reliance on the efficacy and ethical standards of the original studies should help reduce the risk of any potential bias. Additionally, relying on more than just one source of information should also help reduce bias of this nature.

Another potential issue was with the dependability of the study. To ensure the dependability of this study, I verified that the information was collected and transcribed accurately to help reduce error. I obtained all the information from the existing interviews and records and coded it all to help preserve the descriptive validity.



### **Significance**

The significance of this research is that it helps fill the gap in understanding via exploration into the social development offending clergy. This study is unique in that it focuses on the development of the individuals before they entered the clergy. Although this topic has yielded an abundance of research, much of that research has been focused on the current moral and psychological state of these offending clergy after they had committed their respective offenses (Anderson, 2015). If more was known about their earlier lives, maybe some of these offenses could have been prevented.

Abuse is seen as a horrible atrocity. When that abuser is trusted in society, someone looked to for moral authority and guidance, it can also add a level of betrayal, thus amplifying the intensity and impact of the offense (Easton et al., 2019; Guido, 2008). The results of this study will come from exploration of the offenders' development and provide insights into their morality, personalities, and social development. These insights could help provide deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

A greater understanding of this phenomenon might contribute to the policies involved in screening potential candidates for the priesthood. This information could also be transferable to other at-risk populations such as teachers and law enforcement officers. The results of this study could provide valuable context to the currently existing conversations on this topic, which will add to the picture. By helping us understand this issue better, we can positively impact social change by preventing future offenses. Prevention could help reduce the number of victims and offenders in our communities.

## Summary

This chapter has covered the social problem of those holding positions of moral authority in the church, such as clergy, committing sexually deviant crimes. There was a brief review of the literature that demonstrated the gap in the research that left out the exploration of individuals' early development before they joined the clergy. The research problem was stated that the current research does not specifically explore the psychological development of these offenders before they entered the clergy. This problem led to the two research questions related to the target population centered around how these individuals explain their moral experiences growing up, grounded by Bandura's Social Learning Theory of moral development, as well as the offenders' experiences with sexual and social development.

Chapter 1 also covered the nature, reasoning, and scope of the study. Critical and applicable terms were defined. When discussing the assumptions, scope, and limitations, the structural framework was set for the study as well as identification of threats to validity, reliability, and bias. Methods to address and combat these threats were also highlighted. The significance and contribution of this study will again hope to fill the gap in the literature and allow researchers to see a more complete picture of this population from beginning to end. The next chapter, Chapter 2, will highlight the literature reviewed for the study and further expose the gap which will be addressed.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

This study explored the social problem of clergy sexually abusing minors in their respective parishes. The purpose of this study was to explore the morality, social and sexual development, and personal characteristics of those individuals prior to them entering the clergy. In this qualitative study, I used a meta-analysis of existing interviews from numerous peer-reviewed studies to explore the moral, social, and sexual development of those offenders before they entered the clergy. The results of the examination of these interviews may help fill a gap in understanding the characteristics of pre-ordained clergy offenders. Focusing on the development of these individuals before they were ordained into their respective positions makes this study unique. The rest of Chapter 2 will highlight the literature search strategy, and the findings generated using that strategy. Additionally, the literature review has been organized to address the focus points of this study, the theoretical framework, sociomoral development, sexual development, interviews with clergy offenders, and prevalence of abuse in the church.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

Multiple academic databases were used to gather research; this yielded a variety of resources. Initially, I conducted searches through the Walden University Library using EBSCO Host, Thoreau, and PsycArticles. I also used Google Scholar to conduct additional searches. In all cases, the search parameters were focused on articles between 2015 and 2023, ensuring the use of the most current information. Additionally, the search focused on scholarly articles and peer-reviewed journals. The search terms were simple at

first, such as *sexual, abuse, church, clergy, OR priest*, yielding the results I needed for the problem statement associated with my study. The following search used terms, such as *church, priest, OR clergy, OR minister, morality, OR moral*. This search yielded results highlighting the moral foundation and positions of members of the clergy. Later searches included combinations of those terms to help round out the findings. I also searched to acquire research material for the theoretical framework of this study. Initially, I used the search terms *Bandura, social learning, and morality* to obtain material on Bandura's Social Learning Theory. I expanded the timeline in this search to include years in which Bandura conducted his research.

The last element I searched for was the interviews with clergy who have offended. The search terms I used were *interview, offender, or abusive, priest, or clergy*. I initially narrowed the search down using a time frame of 2015–2023, ensuring the most current information. I looked through print references as well as video references as part of documentaries to ensure I had a wide range of options to look at. These references will become more relevant during the results portion of this study, Chapter 4.

The various searches yielded the desired results. Information retrieved discussed the morality of priests; those priests either credibly accused of sexual abuse of minors or those priests who were convicted. The search related to morality among non-offender priests yielded enough information to build a good foundation. Upon further examination of these results, the gap widens. Few studies examined individuals' morality and sexual development before they entered the clergy. The appearance of this gap sets the stage for the current study.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

### **Bandura's Social Learning Theory**

The framework for this qualitative study is Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Bandura based this theory on the idea that a child learns primarily through imitation and modeling during their development (Bandura, 1969). The concepts explored in this study aligned with this theory and helped to provide structure when designing the study and coding and classifying the data from the interviews, and the interpretation of those results. In addition to general development, Bandura also theorized that Social Learning Theory played a role in the development of an individual's morality, sexuality, and gender identity (Berk, 2022). Considering these factors, I analyzed the data in this study through that lens to explore the role of Social Learning Theory in the psychological, moral, and sexual development as well as gender identity of these offender clergy.

One developmental area to which Social Learning Theory can be applied is the development of morality. Bandura (1969) found that when children were exposed to adults whose moral judgements and actions ran counter to their own, the children's moral judgment and behaviors could be modified through modeling. This phenomenon was upheld in further studies (Bandura, 1969). This suggests that during a child's development immoral influences could alter the morality of an otherwise moral child up to that point. Exploring offending clergy could reveal any evidence of this occurring in their own development.

Social Learning Theory has also been applied to the development of gender roles, sexual behaviors and the power dynamics that come from both gender and sexual roles.

In a few experiments, Bandura found that sexual behavior, sex roles, and gender constancy were all influenced through modeling as per Social Learning Theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1984). Additionally, the finding showed the sexual development of male children was influenced most heavily by same sex models (Bussey & Bandura, 1984). If male influences have a greater impact on the development of sexual behaviors and gender roles, then it is necessary to explore the life's experiences of offending clergy in case there is evidence of a male developmental model. Finally, Bussey and Bandura (1984) found that the models most utilized for development were the most powerful ones; the more perceived power a male influence had, the more impact they had on development. Aside from the theoretical foundation of social learning theory, there are other factors to consider in child development.

### **Sociomoral Development**

Many personality traits develop during childhood, including morality. Gazzillo et al. (2020) explained that children as young as 3 months start to recognize what we call morality by distinguishing antisocial actions and behaviors from prosocial ones. Gazzillo et al. explained that this phenomenon suggests the formation of empathetic concern for others and their well-being. The study also demonstrated how children develop a collective morality based on the behaviors and standards expressed in whichever group they belong to. The study also demonstrated that their life experiences both within that group and outside of it help shape and mold the individual's morality. Morality is formed early and is frequently shaped and molded during childhood to create the individual's

morality. When one considers the number of years in a person's childhood, several external factors are to be considered and explored.

Within the concept of moral development, there are specific external factors that help shape an individual into who they will become later in life. One such external factor is the importance of human interaction in the early stages of development. Narvaez et al. (2019) explored one of these facets of human interaction and the importance of human touch in early life. Narvaez et al. argued that more nurturing, affectionate touch in early life predicted social and moral thriving. Conversely, more frequent punitive touches in early life predicted more antisocial and immoral behavior later in life. In their longitudinal, three-part study, Narvaez et al. examined children who received more positive affectionate touch and those who received less positive and more corporal or punitive touch. Narvaez et al. also studied adults who self-reported one or the other compared to their current moral capacities. The study supported their hypothesis that positive touch during early development positively impacted individual morality; similarly, negative or punitive touch negatively impacted individual morality.

While an overabundance of corporal or punitive physical contact can lead to a decline in morality later in life, there are times when punishment is necessary to shape and promote moral behavior and values. Turiel and Banas (2020) hypothesized that we shape morality in children through rewards and punishments as responses to moral and immoral behaviors. Turiel and Banas found that children 4 to 5 years of age can form moral judgments related to focusing on the harm done as the result of an action rather than the rules involved. Shaping the moral behaviors within a child's developmental shell

helps transform judgments of right versus wrong in the child to a later understanding of justice and human rights (Turiel, & Banas, 2020). Again, there is a distinction between overuse of punishment, specifically as the only form of touch throughout development, and punishment to help shape behavior.

Blair (2017) upholds this line of thinking by stating that children judge moral transgressions by others as early as 3 to 4 years old without even having a context of applicable rules. During moral development, when a child commits a moral transgression against another and understands it is a bad thing, it helps them learn that the suffering of others is aversive. Those who did not learn this throughout their development through reinforcement may not improve their morality to a healthy state in adulthood (Blair, 2017). It is essential to explore the shaping of moral behavior throughout development to discover any situations which may shed light on the moral character of the adult.

Regarding the developmental shaping of social-moral behavior, there is a time in which the individual starts to create an internal system to correct any negative or immoral behaviors. In a study of 100 children across various age groups, Midgette (2018) found that the participants would begin to create their internal strategies for correcting their behaviors. Midgette also concluded that most children wanted to be better human beings and created methods to recognize and correct their undesirable behaviors and social or moral transgressions. This concept helps demonstrate that the shaping of behavior allows the individual to solidify their perceptions of right and wrong and develop a mechanism of self-correction to help them through life.



In a discussion of moral development, religiosity is a necessary construct.

Kohlberg (1981) highlighted the importance of religion in developing individual morality by demonstrating how vital reliance on God is for morality in the Christian faith. Since many, if not most, religions come with such an embedded moral code, this may prove to be a factor in the individual's moral development. Subsequently, considering the literature on moral development, it is crucial to explore the developmental environment to help gain insights into their moral development.

### **Sexual Development**

Another theme of this study is the exploration of each participant's sexual development throughout childhood. This topic proves to create one of the most significant gaps found after reviewing the available literature. After researching sexual development in the clergy and sexual offender clergy, many resources explored sexual development from the offender's perspective. Unfortunately, there was little to no information covering the development of the offending clergy before they entered the priesthood. This study used information uncovered while examining the interviews of offender clergy in hopes to gain insight into the sexual development of the individuals in question.

The review of available literature offered several different causal and correlating factors linking clergy and sexual abuse. Many of these factors are systemic and linked to the church itself. Ayodele (2019) found that celibacy often encouraged deviant sexual behavior. Anderson (2015) explained that factors such as the patriarchy of the church, the belief in the moral superiority of the clergy, and the church as an institution, as well as

the church's perception of itself as not being subject to secular authority, help provide an environment from which abuse can grow. Anderson agreed with D'Alton et al. (2013) that emotionally absent fathers and bouts with alcoholism correlated with clerical offenders. D'Alton et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative study consisting of interviewing nine priests or former priests who had admitted to sexually abusing children. The study asked the clerical offenders to describe their development. D'Alton et al. discovered two main themes: most of the participants experienced psychosocial foreclosure and psychosexual foreclosure. Psychosocial foreclosure refers to the hindering of normal social development, including interpersonal development or prohibition of friendships. Psychosexual foreclosure occurred in the participants in early adolescence and included sinful sexuality, secret sexuality, or bi-directional sexuality (suppression of sexuality completely; D'Alton et al., 2013). Delaying both social and sexual development can stunt healthy patterns of intimacy. It will be imperative to explore the psychosexual development of the individuals entering the clergy.

Other sources provided additional developmental factors linked to clerical offending. Calkins et al. (2015) conducted a study of 1,121 clergy members, in which they compared the developmental characteristics and upbringings of clerical sex offending clergy and non-offenders. In their findings, Calkins et al. discovered that those abused as children were six times more likely to abuse than non-offending clergy. Calkins et al. also found that clerical offenders were three times more likely to have no dating partners before entering the clergy and five times more likely to have a male dating partner before entering the clergy. Among other factors, Calkins et al. also

discovered that offenders were less likely to relate to youth and adolescents than non-offending clergy. Calkins et al. declared that being the victim of sexual abuse was the most significant risk factor in offending. While this study included non-offending clergy in its data set, there was no exploration of those individuals before being ordained, which is the primary gap the current study was intended to address.

Other studies have suggested these clerical offenders had previously explored sexual attraction to minors. A qualitative study of 15 self-identified pedophiles, Houtepen et al. (2016) found most of them admitted to pedophilic curiosity in adolescence. Houtepen et al. also discovered that this realization caused great psychological conflict in the participants leading many of them to commit sexual offenses during their development while trying to deal with their feelings. Additionally, over 70% of the participants admitted to consuming child pornography during adolescence. Another admission is that participants felt better when they disclosed their feelings due to the potential of others acting as safeguards; however, when they received negative feedback, it prompted them to act more secretively (Houtepen et al., 2016). This realization suggests that early detection followed by positive support can help the individual cope with their conditions.

During the rehabilitation of clerical sex offenders, understanding causal factors to aid in treating underlying issues is crucial. In her literature review, Anderson (2015) drew many different correlations between offenders and potential causal factors, both developmental and systemic. Systemic causal factors such as forced celibacy, the traditional patriarchal hierarchy of the church, the spiritual and moral superiority of the

clergy, and the proximity of the victims are listed as contributing factors (Anderson, 2015). In addition to these issues, there were developmental factors discussed. Anderson explained that the developmental trajectory of clerical offenders was very similar to non-clerical offenders. One of the specific developmental factors discussed is strict sexual upbringing. It was taboo to discuss sexuality in the home, or a prohibition of sexuality is like the psychosexual foreclosure discussed earlier (Anderson, 2015; D'Alton et al., 2013). Another developmental contributor is the parental relationship of the offenders during childhood. Abusive clergymen were more likely to have negative social relationships, emotionally absent or even abusive fathers, and markedly different relationships with their mothers than non-offenders (Anderson 2015; Anderson 2016). Since these data represent the exploration of offending clergy, there is still not a good understanding or exploration into those members entering the clergy before they are ordained and before accused or convicted of any offenses. The current study will explore the sexual development of the individual before either of these situations occur to gain insight into this phenomenon.

### **Prevalence of Abuse in the Church**

The literature highlighting the prevalence of abuse in the church did not reveal any significant gaps with relationship to the social problem or the research questions. The literature reviewed in this section was important to establish social problem itself, and the urgency surrounding it. By inspecting the prevalence of the abuse in the church, the threat is more clearly understood. Much of this information was discovered as public record on the internet.

Many countries have reports on record related to the frequency and prevalence of abuses within the church. In a study conducted by John Jay College of Criminal Justice, commissioned by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops a 52-year period was researched for abuse allegations. In this study, Terry et al. (2004) revealed 11,000 allegations of abuse at the hands of over 4,000 members of the clergy. Approximately 80% of these victims were between the ages of 11 and 17 years old.

NPR (2021) reported a different study that occurred in France. In this study it was determined that within a 70-year period, 1950–2020, there were 333,000 victims of sexual abuse at the hands of the clergy, with approximately 219,000 of these victims being abused by the clergy and the others by other adult members of the church (NPR, 2020).

To further illustrate the global reach of this issue, Aljazeera (2021) reported similar reports of cases in many other countries. Between 1950 and 2010 Australian authorities found 4,444 allegations of sexual abuse of a child at the hands of clergy that had been reported to Church officials. In Ireland, officials estimated approximately 15,000 child victims of sexual abuse between 1970 and 1990. Other countries were named as well, highlighting the global issue this has become.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The literature revealed specific background markers and events in the sociomoral and sexual development of members of the clergy accused or convicted of sexual misconduct. The research uncovered similarities in their backgrounds and, in hindsight, helped shed light on what could be considered risk factors or precursors to sexually

inappropriate behavior. The gap is evident because these cases pertain to the current personality and psychology of individuals after being ordained and after having committed offenses. There has not been a sufficient examination into the early development of these offenders. This gap prompts the exploration into the early development of these offenders in hopes to gain insight into the development of these individuals. This exploration will occur within the framework of many facets of Bandura's Social Learning Theory.

In addition to the moral and social literature, the prevalence of abuse was also considered. In this section, the volume of the offenses lends weight to the importance and urgency surrounding this topic. The literature shows multiple offenses reported and prosecuted across multiple jurisdictions and countries. This also suggests this problem does not reside in one culture or an isolated population but is a global threat. The next chapter will present how I collected the information necessary to close that gap in the research.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of offender clergy concerning their morality, social development, and sexual development before they were ordained or serving in a clerical capacity. The results of this study might help provide an increased understanding of the individuals who choose to enter a life in the clergy. This qualitative study used interviews to explore the morality and development of those entering the clergy to help address the gap in current research. Additionally, by expressing their developmental experiences and opinions, the participants could help provide valuable insight used as a basis for further exploration.

This chapter will explain the methods used to conduct this study and the rationale behind those methods. The design highlights the structure of the research as it relates to the research questions. Next, I will discuss the roles of the researcher in this study and explore the researcher's relationship with the participants. Within this chapter, I will explain the methodology used, which includes sample selection and source material. The methodology portion will also include the instrumentation, data collection methods, and data analysis methods. Finally, Chapter 3 will discuss the trustworthiness of the study as well as the ethical issues that could emerge.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

This study aimed to answer two central questions. First, how do offending clergy describe their experiences with morality while growing up? Secondly, how do offending clergy describe their intimate, interpersonal, and social experiences while growing up?

The design of the research will be such that the data collected can address those two central questions.

The phenomenon is people in positions of moral authority who commit sexually deviant crimes against the people they should be protecting and teaching. As Calkins et al. (2015) stated, these offenders have an unprecedented level of access to their victims, with little being known or understood about their abuses from a research perspective. Within that context, we have little to no comprehensive understanding of what set of circumstances within the individual creates this phenomenon. Are the individuals drawn to this career predisposed to possess personality traits indicative of sexual offenders? Do the social dynamics and inherent power of these jobs turn relatively decent people into sexual predators? Some studies have explored the correlation between personality and deviant behaviors and actions within these professions. In a recent study about clergy who had committed sexual offenses, Anderson (2015) explored the personalities and the contributing factors of these admitted sex offenders and attempted to understand their motives and apply the findings to the rehabilitation. Anderson delved into the minds of these offenders and helped to provide context for my current study. There are similarities in other studies, such as victim grooming between the sexual offenders who are members of the clergy and those who are not (Spraitz et al., 2018). Other questionable moral behaviors emerge with evidence of institutionalized cover-ups from non-offender supervisors (Donner et al., 2016; Wasserman, 2017). These and similar studies explored the minds and personalities of the offenders, while other studies investigated methods on how to predict these behaviors.



When reviewing nearly all these studies, a common theme presented itself. Most studies dealt with either convicted or reported offenders, meaning they had already committed the crimes or offenses. We simply do not know enough about the prior developmental histories of these individuals before they assumed their positions of moral authority. Calkins et al. (2015) scratch the surface with their work which compared data from abusers with data from control subjects who are not abusers to determine differences and correlations in historical and developmental data. While this study was a step in the right direction, it still fell short of examining the early development of the population before entering the clergy. There may be a reason why personality inventories have failed to predict the behavior; it could be because it was non-existent until after they entered a position of moral authority and power over other human beings. Considering this, we need to know more about the individuals entering this profession before they were possibly influenced by the environment or committed any offenses.

### **Research Tradition**

In this study, I used qualitative methodology, specifically phenomenological. Qualitative research allows us to understand via description, thus helping us explore problems centered in complex social environments (Walden University, 2013a). Studying the early social, sexual, and moral development of offending clergy is complex. Exploring such a complex topic justifies the use of qualitative methodology. Furthermore, this study does not intend to show correlations or relationships, which is another factor pointing to qualitative rather than quantitative study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) described phenomenological research as a strategy of qualitative inquiry

that uses individual engagement to collect information that conveys human experiences conveyed by the study participants. The information gleaned from the offenders highlighting their experiences throughout development will address the research questions, thus justifying the phenomenological inquiry.

The key constructs and explored phenomenon deal with personality types and backgrounds of the offending clergy. Content analysis was the qualitative method used to review previous interviews of offenders to gain perspective into the offenders' development. Keeping the study grounded in Bandura's Social Learning Theory, exploration focused on the constructs of early psychological, social, moral, and sexual development, thus establishing whether the participants had a healthy moral disposition before entering the clergy.

The qualitative methodology used was qualitative content analysis. This method of research involves reviewing existing oral, written, visual data to describe a phenomenon (Bengtsson, 2016). This involved the review of existing interviews with offending priests and other clergy to explore the phenomenon and address the research questions. The exploration of the data was conducted within the guidance of Bandura's Social Learning Theory in that examples of social learning will be highlighted.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the researcher, my role was primarily as a reviewer of information. Since this is a phenomenological qualitative study using content analysis to extrapolate the data, I explored existing content in the form of written and video interviews that had already happened. Therefore, I did not observe participants performing tasks or interview any live

participants, conducting a meta-analysis, or conducting correlation studies. However, just as if I were the interviewer, I transcribed the information then coded and analyzed the data. After coding and data analysis, I interpreted the results and reported them within this document.

As the researcher and study designer, I also ensured that I identified any ethical concerns or potential for bias and address them accordingly by reviewing and addressing any issues as they arise and keep this study focused on the research question and the facts of the study. However, to address some more common causes of bias, I employed the following tactics and mindsets: I did not work within my professional field, nor did I work within a familiar environment or workplace. I had no prior personal experience with the subject matter, nor had I been exposed to any acts of this nature that would impact my judgment in this area. I did not foresee the potential for any improper or unbalanced relationships between myself as the researcher and the participants as they were not live participants but rather participants of previous studies. In that there were no live participants, I did not have the burden of maintaining confidentiality or developing personal relationships with any of the participants providing the data.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

After identifying the phenomenon and aligning the research questions, the population and sampling method had to be determined. Unlike quantitative sampling, qualitative sampling relies on smaller sample sizes to deliver an operable data set (Patton, 2015). Since the entire population of candidates entering the priesthood is rather large

and widespread, participants had to be limited to a representative sample population.

Therefore, the study examined the appropriate target population to ensure the most applicable participants were selected and an adequate sampling size to reach the correct saturation of the data.

### **Target Group, Sampling Strategy, and Size**

I determined the proper sample size after selecting the target sampling population. The goal was to reach the point of saturation accomplished by sampling to a level of redundancy. Any additional data past a certain amount would be redundant and not needed (Patton, 2015). The analytical methods closely married the data collection to reach saturation without doing it prematurely (Patton, 2015). Saturation, or the point in the data collection where the respondents are not saying anything new, could theoretically be anywhere between 10 to 30 interviews. Saturation was monitored by paying close attention to the data while collecting it (see Ravitch & Carl, 2020). There is no general rule of thumb for qualitative sampling size for interviews (Baker et al., 2012). Therefore, there was no specific predetermined sample size, but sampling redundancy was expected to be achieved by at least 20 samples. This tentative number ensured that the recruiting process would sufficiently demonstrate transferability by describing the target population and the sampling strategies. Sampling in this manner provides context and will aid others to replicate the study, if necessary, which lends to dependability.

The use of redundancy sampling was justified in this study. Saunders et al. (2018) stated that reaching saturation is widely accepted and helps lend trustworthiness to the research. However, Saunders et al. warned the researcher to understand how saturation

works and utilize it to align with the research question and theoretical framework guiding the project. To avoid any pitfalls due to sampling redundancy, the study followed this sampling and analyzing method, remaining mindful of the data collected.

Due to the sensitive nature of this topic and the lack of access to the target population, I sourced participants via pre-existing interviews. The sample population included those priests and other clergy who had been convicted or confessed to committing sexual assault. Twelve interviews were selected from written, spoken, or video media. This form of sampling met the standards of content analysis and data were transcribed and coded just as if they were live interviews from active participants.

### **Criteria for Sample Selection**

The overall population of offending clergy is enormous and would be unmanageable; additionally, access to this population is limited, so the sample population of live participants is nearly impossible. For these reasons, sampling of existing interviews with offender clergy was a viable option. The sample size had to be more than one because this is not a study of a single case. The phenomenon represents an ongoing social problem and required more than one participant. Since the information this study explored focuses on the developmental experiences of a specific group of people (offender-clergy), this was labeled a phenomenological study (Patton, 2015).

Additionally, since this study aimed to explore a phenomenon and not verify a theoretical position, I used theoretical or grounded theory sampling (Patton, 2015).

Some participants were excluded and others included based on guidance from the theoretical framework which created the sampling population. The interviews or content

that were sampled needed to include questions and answers that reflect the participant's development and early childhood. The study included interviews from those people who were clergy and had committed sexual offenses while acting as members of the clergy. Conversely, the study excluded those clergy who had not committed any sexual offenses. Also, interviews of offender clergy who did not discuss their development or early childhood were not selected either. In addition to these criteria, I used other inclusion/exclusion criteria to select a viable sample size.

### **Procedures for Recruitment and Participation**

Participants were selected via their interviews by researching databases and searching for interviews of offending clergy and studies containing interviews with offending clergy. Interviews were scrutinized to make sure they met the criteria by addressing the research questions and kept with the guidelines of the theoretical framework of Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Interviews meeting the criteria were compiled until saturation was reached. If saturation was not achieved, more sampling would have occurred until it did. Ultimately, sampling redundancy was expected to be met by 10–20 samples. In the end, the sample size was 12 interviews.

### **Instrumentation**

There is no instrumentation as the interviews being sampled have already been conducted. No interview questions or questionnaires were created or piloted for this study. The interviews selected for this study had to meet the criteria of the study and were scrutinized accordingly. I reviewed written, recorded, or videotaped interviews to ensure

they contained the right information with regards to the research questions and Bandura's Social Learning Theory.

The interviews had already been recorded either in writing or via audio or video media. I transcribed any interviews that had not already been transcribed. With the guidance of the research questions and Social Learning Theory I ensured that the information provided in the content I was analyzing meets the needs of the study. Any interviews that did not meet the criteria were discarded.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis aims to turn the data into useable findings by pulling usable data from the bulk of the transcript (Patton, 2015). When considering a data analysis approach, I wanted to analyze in a manner that was as close to the data as possible in a phenomenological situation (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Since this was a phenomenological project, through content analysis, I learned from the life experiences of the participants in the existing interviews. I also wanted an approach and coding method that related to the nature of the study, research questions, and the answers I sought to my research questions (Saldana, 2016). With all this in mind, I chose an analysis plan that kept the data close concerning the framework of the study and research questions.

I constructed my coding around the framework and the research questions. Considering that I was exploring morality, sexuality, and development within the context of Bandura's theory, I focused on moral development, social development, and sexual development the individuals before joining the priesthood. Therefore, I aligned my coding decision with the framework and goals. I chose to use NVivo coding since I will

be coding the interview transcript from the interviewees' perspectives (Saldana, 2016). Related categories were also used and linked back to the framework and research questions. Ultimately, this variation of two different coding methods is called exploratory coding (Saldana, 2016).

I employed a combination of Word and Excel programs to record codes, then group them into categories and themes related to the research questions. At first pass, words and simple phrases that were relevant to the study were documented. Those words and phrases were then sorted into code words, categories, and themes within the framework of the study. Again, keeping within the framework of the study and the research questions helped ensure alignment.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

In this qualitative study, as with all qualitative studies, trustworthiness must be addressed. Trustworthiness is analogous to validity in quantitative research and describes the quality of the study and our ability to have confidence in the rigor of the research and the reliability of the study's findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). To ensure trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability must be maintained for the study to be considered reliable. While the goal in qualitative research is to be completely trustworthy, this will never be fully ensured in any qualitative study, but researchers must attempt to make it as close as possible through stringent processes (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

Credibility is the first element of trustworthiness to be considered. Ravitch and Carl (2020) described credibility in qualitative research as a state where the reality of the



participants' experiences is represented accurately in the study findings, and they likened it to internal validity. To help maintain credibility in this study, I used peer debriefing and thick description. For my peer debriefing, I consulted my fellow PhD candidates in my discipline to check the analytics of the study. I used thick description in my paper to describe as many of the contextual aspects of the settings and the study. Thick description helps translate observation and the field notes to add depth and not only address credibility but also ensure external validity or transferability (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

Along with thick description to help ensure transferability, I also used a reflexive journal. This journal helped document the details and processes of the study, to not only deepen my understanding of the process but to serve as a record to help the current study transfer to other populations (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Keeping a reflexive journal also helped inform the thick descriptions contained in the study. Additionally, a reflexive journal helped ensure dependability by providing a detailed plan and ensuring that the design was executed as laid out in the study.

The study was deemed dependable through the stability or reliability of the data. As stated earlier, the reflexive journal helped in this area as it can help reflect reasoning for and consistency of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). In addition to the reflexive journal, a comprehensive audit trail would also help ensure confirmability as well as dependability. An audit trail helps demonstrate confirmable data, ability for replication and confirmation, which all help ensure confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

Engaging in the activities listed above helped ensure validity and address any issues of trustworthiness. By keeping an accurate reflexive journal, using that to inform

thick descriptions, providing a comprehensive audit trail, and allowing peer review and debriefing, the study is more likely to be considered credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable. By ensuring these four elements are in place, we can improve the trustworthiness of this research project.

### **Ethical Procedures**

As with any psychological study, there were ethical considerations that, if not addressed, could lead to problems. Again, there were no active participants in this study; however, I still upheld anonymity of my participants even though they were parts of previously published information. I listed the participants as “Participant” followed by their specifically assigned number.

During the process, I ensured complete transparency in all aspects of the research to avoid any deception, or perception of deception. Additionally, remaining transparent during the entire process helped facilitate my accountability as well as improved the study’s credibility as one more way to ensure the accurate representation of the study.

There were no active participants in this study. However, I still maintained confidentiality as it is good practice. I only shared information from the study with the approved Walden University personnel. Interview recordings and full transcripts were not shared. Transcripts with any personal identifiers redacted may have been shared with my university faculty along with my analysis. The participant interview recordings and transcripts are kept in a file that only I have access to. The computers on which they stored is password protected and will not be left open to public view. The files are password-protected and the contents will be destroyed after the University permits me to

do so. This study should pose no physical or psychological risks as there are no active participants.

Finally, these interviews are with confessed and/or convicted sexual offenders. The crimes being discussed have already been uncovered and prosecuted. There is little to no chance that any new criminal information will be uncovered that has not already been addressed in the original study or documentary.

### **Summary**

This chapter highlighted the methods that were implemented to conduct this study and that the research design is related to the study's theoretical framework. This chapter also demonstrated the relationship of the research structure, by way of the content analysis, interview sampling and data analysis. The researcher's role in this study was discussed as well as the researcher's responsibility to identify and mitigate any potential ethical issues or issues of trustworthiness. By following this design, data were collected and analyzed consistent with ethical and academic standards. Finally, following this design provided the most relevant data through content analysis to address the research questions.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

This qualitative study explored the personality and the moral, psychosocial, and sexual perspectives of offender clergy prior to their offending. This exploration was accomplished through the examination of archival material, specifically previously collected interviews of offender clergy. The interviews were reviewed and coded through the lens of the following research questions: RQ1 – How do offending clergy describe their experiences with morality while growing up? RQ2 – How do offending clergy describe their intimate, interpersonal, and social experiences while growing up? By using these research questions, the information should help understand the individual before they were influenced by the position and all that comes with it. That understanding will help provide perspective to the social problem of clerics in positions of power committing sexually deviant crimes against those in their charge.

The phenomenological information pulled from the offender clergy members' experiences regarding their early development prior to joining the priesthood may be beneficial in understanding the moral and social development of individuals identified as offending clergy. The information gained from these interviews was viewed through the theoretical framework of Bandura's Social Learning Theory to understand whether this could be considered learned behavior. The study will also help provide increased understanding of the phenomenon of the clergy committing sexual crimes against vulnerable members of their respective flocks. Through that understanding, vetting potential clergy can be done from a more preventative perspective. Finally, the results

could also be used to inform future research studying different facets of this phenomenon as well as different offender populations such as teachers or police officers.

The target population in this study was clergy convicted of sexual crimes while acting in their roles. Since I had no real access to these offenders, I used archival data from previously conducted studies, interviews, and diaries of offender priests. There were a total of 12 different examples; nine were interviews from prior studies, and three were from the diaries of offender priests. All of the cases were from priests who had sexually offended against minors while serving in the priesthood.

These archived phenomenological interviews were analyzed to examine the lived experiences of offender priests. Special attention was paid to their moral, interpersonal, intimate and social experiences growing up. The following chapter will address the findings from the comprehensive analysis of these interviews of the sex-offending priests. Additionally, the analysis of these interviews focused on other factors that may have influenced the priests' morality, and sociological development such as family structure, schooling, and other developmental environmental factors.

The information in this chapter will be presented in six major sections: (a) Interview Sources, (b) Participant Demographics, (c) Data Collection, (d) Data Analysis, (e) Trustworthiness, and (f) Results, followed by a summary. The first section will briefly discuss the interview sources and provide context to the analyzed information. The second section will highlight the demographics of the interviewees. The third section will explain the data collection and coding methods. The fourth section will clarify the analysis of the coded material and identification of emergent themes. The fifth section

will speak to the trustworthiness of the research, which will provide transparency thus strengthening the data. The sixth and final section will discuss the results of the analysis and provide a summary of the findings.

### **Interview Sources**

The 12 cases utilized for this study were collected from archival data. Two were from the diaries of pedophile priests. One was an in-depth interview of a pedophile priest published in the online journal *The National Catholic Reporter*. Two others were diaries written by offending priests and published posthumously by news organizations. The first of these two was contributed by the Los Angeles Times, and the second by the Bolivian news organization El Pais. Nine of the 12 samples were taken from participants' interview material contained in previous peer-reviewed study from the *International Journal of Child Abuse and Neglect*.

The data were reviewed to ensure that adequate information existed regarding the sexual, social, and interpersonal development of the participants before joining the priesthood.

### **Demographics**

The participants in this study included 12 men who were priests and who had committed multiple acts of sexual abuse against minors while serving as members of the clergy. These participants were either convicted of sexual assault, seeking treatment for their sexual crimes, or admitted to sexual assault in their respective writings, interviews, or diaries.

The participants for this study came from a few different countries including the United States, Spain, Ireland, Bolivia, Canada, and Belgium. Participants were either convicted of numerous counts of sexual assault on a minor, confessed in a diary, or enrolled in a sex offender treatment program. When referencing specific quotes and citations, the participant's name will not be used in this study. Instead, the word "Participant" followed by a corresponding number will be the only identifying factor. This method will be used to distinguish the experiences of specific participants. However, it should be noted, these studies, interviews, and diaries were all published previously, in some cases posthumously.

### **Data Collection**

This study was approved by the Walden University Institutional Review Board, # 04-18-23-0227276. Library and internet searches were conducted using terms such as "interview," or "diary." Then categorical search terms were used such as "clergy" and "priest" combined with "offender" and "sex" or "sexual" to round out the categories. These search criteria provided enough resources to conduct the study. Over 20 sources were reviewed. Sources that did not include information on the participants' childhood experiences throughout their development were not included.

The transcripts and diaries were analyzed keeping the original research questions in mind. How did the participants in the interviews and diaries describe their experiences with morality? Secondly, how were the participants describing their intimate, interpersonal, and social experiences while growing up? Through this lens, information was coded with regards to family demographics and childhood experiences.

While reading each sample, the information was pre-coded related to the research questions during a first pass. Pre-coding assisted to identify important information to be used later and primes the researcher to align with the study's purpose (Saldana, 2021). The relevant data were coded manually using Microsoft Excel after the precoding. Since the study material came from different interviews, diaries, and other source material; attribute coding was applicable to this study (see Saldana, 2021). Demographics, phrases, thoughts, situations, and general information were all jotted down as raw data and then assigned codes. Codes such as "sexual assault," "shame," "guilt," "sex education," and "parental relationships" emerged during the inspection of the source material.

### **Data Analysis**

After the data were coded, the codes were analyzed for the emergence of categories and themes. Themes often emerge during the initial coding and should be solidified during the first rounds of analysis (Saldana, 2021). After the themes and subthemes were documented, the resulting information was theoretically coded as this study stems from a grounded theory developing core categories to address a focused research question (Saldana, 2021).

Several steps were used to complete the analysis. The first step was to take the original data and create codes. When the themes emerged, they were grouped together in order to help define categories. I was careful to use the same language as the research questions to ensure the themes and subsequent categories were aligned with the research questions and the original social problem. Before conducting the analysis, I ensured that my personal feelings on the topic did not interfere with the analysis to help remove the



potential for bias. Finally, certain descriptions and quotes were captured, mainly during pre-coding, to give a voice to the descriptions and experiences of the participants of the study.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

In this study, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability had to be maintained for the study to be considered reliable and trustworthy. The following paragraphs will discuss each of these concepts and how they relate to this study.

Trustworthiness is notable when all of these criteria have been met.

#### **Dependability**

The first priority of trustworthiness for this study is dependability. To ensure dependability, the information was collected and transcribed to reduce error. Descriptive validity is preserved by obtaining all the information from the existing interviews, recording, and coding it. Providing this concise, clear description of how the data were collected will allow others to replicate the research process.

#### **Credibility**

The next element of trustworthiness is credibility. Thick descriptions were used by comparing the documented and coded information to the source material. This increases credibility and accuracy and helped to ensure external validity and transferability.

#### **Transferability**

In addition to the use of thick description, transferability was addressed using other methods. The sampling selection as explained in Chapter 3 of this study is

described in a manner so that it can be replicated. Also, the transferability of this study is preserved by using a reflexive journal. Using these methods provides transparency ensuring the context, procedures, and methods can be followed.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability was partially achieved by using a journal and audit trail. This demonstrated confirmable data, ability for replication and confirmation, thus helping ensure confirmability. Confirmability was further achieved by ensuring any personal bias of the researcher was not present in the study and therefore did not affect the data collection or analyzation.

### **Results**

During the data analysis process, five significant themes emerged reflecting the lived experiences of the participants. Regarding the sexual offending clergy used in this study, the following themes emerged: (a) Religious Moral Upbringing, (b) Authoritarian Father, (c) Sexuality is Immoral, (d) Special Maternal Relationships, and (e) Awkward Social Relationships. The uncovered themes gleaned from the significant statements of the participants were related to the research questions guiding this study:

- RQ1: How do offending clergy describe their experiences with morality while growing up?
- RQ2: How do offending clergy describe their intimate, interpersonal, and social experiences while growing up?

The first three themes, related most heavily to RQ1. Many of the participants had specific experiences related to their religious moral upbringing including the presence of an authoritarian father and an overall immoral perspective of sex and sexuality.

### **Theme A: Religious Moral Upbringing**

The first theme identified related to RQ1 was having a religious moral upbringing. This phenomenon highlights an early development in the Catholic church, with Catholic teachings and therefore a religious code of morality. All 12 participants reported coming from religious households and were active in the church from early ages. Participant 01 wrote in his diary that his parents were heavily into church, he was an altar boy by age 9, and that he wanted to be a priest as a child (Hanson, 2017). Participant 03 also reported living in a strict Catholic household and was an altar boy by age 10 (Los Angeles Times, n.d.). Most of the participants reported similar developmental trajectories during their childhoods.

With all participants growing up in religious households and involved in the church, their earliest experiences of morality were from a Catholic perspective. This morality, based on a Christian doctrine, led to some specific attitudes and environments that emerged as other themes within this study. The next two themes related to RQ1 involve the patriarchal dynamic in the house, and the moral views of sexuality during their early development and journey into puberty.

### **Theme B: Authoritarian Father**

The next theme to emerge related to RQ1 was growing up with an authoritarian father. In most of these cases, the father was a strict disciplinarian and often emotionally

or physically abusive. This goes beyond the idea of growing up in a patriarchal household but suggests a heightened level of stress from the paternal figure.

All 12 participants described their fathers as emotionally absent and seven of them refer to their fathers as emotionally abusive. Participant 04 explained that his father was both emotionally and physically abusive to the point that he felt he had to protect his mother from him (D'Alton et al., 2013). Participant 03 described his father similarly in that he was an unemotional, alcoholic, with a temper who never gave out hugs or positive reinforcement (Los Angeles Times, n.d.). One participant, Participant 07, reported his father subjected him to “mental torture” (D'Alton et al., 2013).

### **Theme C: Sexuality Is Immoral**

The third theme related to RQ1 was the idea that sexuality and sex was immoral. All 12 participants reported that sexuality was immoral as was the idea of and manner of sexual thoughts or expression. Participant 08 reported that as a child it was considered a sin to have an erection (D'Alton et al., 2013). Participant 06 explained that sex was shameful in his family and talk of sex was considered taboo (Nunez, 2023). Many participants described similar if not identical situations regarding sex and morality in their households. Some were forced to go to confession if they were caught masturbating or even with an erection. Others reported not masturbating at all until they left their respective houses. This idea of sex being immoral uncovered an interesting subtheme.

The idea of shame and guilt that was expressed by many of the participants seemed to be described in the same examples of immoral views of sexuality. Participant 03 wrote that he remembered having wet dreams as a child and would wake up ashamed.

He would pray against having those dreams in hopes that he could escape that shame (Los Angeles Times, n.d.). A participant named Participant 10 similarly commented on feeling guilty after having wet dreams and explained that the guilt he felt at 13 years old led him to want to join the priesthood (D'Alton et al., 2013).

The last two themes related most heavily to RQ2. Many of the participants had specific experiences related to their relationships with their mothers. Additionally, awkward social relationships were also reported and may have influenced their social development.

#### **Theme D: Special Maternal Relationships**

The first theme identified related to RQ2 was the participants having a special relationship with their mother. Eleven of the 12 participants reported having a special relationship with their mothers. Five participants even reported a protective role over their mothers, protecting them from harm at the hands of their own fathers. At least nine of them reported parental conflict as contributing to their maternal relationships.

Whether there was domestic violence and abuse, or simple parental conflict, these men all had special relationships with their mothers. One participant, Participant 04, reported that since he was the eldest child, he felt forced to stand with his mother against his abusive, alcoholic father (D'Alton et al., 2013). Participant 03 explained that his special relationship with his mother was due to his father's absence and due to his father threatening to leave the family (Los Angeles Times, n.d.). Whatever the reason, the prevalence of a special maternal relationship is prevalent in almost all cases.

**Theme E: Awkward Social Relationships**

The last theme to emerge related to RQ2, and the last to be discussed here, was the report of awkward social relationships. All but one of the participants reported having a limited social life outside of their own families growing up. The main reason for these limited social interactions was the awkwardness reported by the participants for a few reasons. Ten of the 12 participants reported that close friendships outside of the family were frowned upon and in some cases forbidden. Half of the participants reported that social relationships were not allowed due to fear from their parents that they would turn sexual.

Participant 08 explained that close friendships were not allowed because his family thought he would not be able to give himself fully to God and that he was not allowed to walk with a friend more than once (D'Alton et al., 2013). Participant 03 explained that his sisters were his closest friends partially because his family moved around so much. However, Participant 03 also reported that any playmates he had outside of the family, the play would turn inappropriate. He reported playing doctor with a girl his age and pulling the pants of a boy down during play (Los Angeles Times, n.d.). Participant 01 explained that his family was so tied to the church that he had closer relationships to nuns and priests than children his own age. (Hanson, 2017). Participant 11 explained that he was not allowed to hang out with others his age because it would only be a matter of time before something inappropriate or sexual happened (D'Alton et al., 2013).

## Summary

This qualitative study explored the personality, moral, psychosocial, and sexual perspectives of offender clergy prior to offending. This exploration was accomplished through the examination of archival material, specifically previously collected interviews of offender clergy. The interviews were reviewed and coded through the lens of the following research questions: RQ1 – How do offending clergy describe their experiences with morality while growing up? RQ2 – How do offending clergy describe their intimate, interpersonal, and social experiences while growing up? The participants' information was analyzed, and five significant themes were identified, which are (a) Religious Moral Upbringing, (b) Authoritarian Father, (c) Sexuality is Immoral, (d) Special Maternal Relationships, and (e) Awkward Social Relationships. It should be noted that only two of the participants reported being sexually assaulted in their childhoods. While this was not a universal theme, it is still important information to help provide context and understanding into the participants' lives.

There were three themes relating to RQ1. The first theme uncovered was that of a religious moral upbringing. All participants reported being raised in devout Catholic households, which heavily influenced their moral views. The Church, the Bible and its teachings played a large role in the morality of these individuals. The second theme uncovered the presence of an authoritarian father in the house. Most participants described their fathers as strict at the least. However, the participants described their fathers as being often emotionally or physically abusive, contributing to a stressful upbringing. The idea that sex and sexuality are immoral was the third notable theme. This

was evident as most of the participants commonly reported that any form of sexual thought or expression was considered sinful and was often associated with guilt and shame. Some of them were so ashamed of their sexual thoughts, they prayed that they would go away.

There were two main themes that were more closely related to RQ2. This fourth uncovered theme, and the first to address RQ2 concerned the special maternal relationships reported by the participants. Most participants reported a close bond with their mothers. Often these mother/son relationships put the son in the role of a protector due to abusive fathers, general parental conflict, or the fathers' absence. This type of relationship does not represent a traditional nurturing mother and son relationship. The final theme discussed and the second related to RQ2 was the reporting of awkward social relationships. Most of the participants had limited social interactions outside their own families. Often the awkwardness would lead to the complete absence of social relationships. Some recalled this was caused by being forbidden to have extrafamilial relationships. The fear was that either it would prevent the participant from being closer to God or due to the fear of the parents or the participants themselves of these relationships turning sexual. Each of these themes was discussed in the context of the participants' upbringing and the broader implications for their later actions and perspectives.

Chapter 5 discusses the results of the study, the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and the implications of this study on positive social change.



## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to use a phenomenological inquiry to explore the moral and social development of individuals identified as offending clergy. The problem that this study examined was that the current research does not specifically explore the psychological development of these offenders before they entered the clergy. Considering this gap in the current literature and research regarding this phenomenon, it was crucial to investigate the lives of these offender priests to understand their lived experiences. It was important to understand the social, moral, and intimate or sexual experiences during their childhood development. This research study closes the gap and assists with increasing the knowledge of the developmental experiences of offender priests.

For this study's theoretical framework, I primarily utilized Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which was focused on the idea that children learn through modeling and imitation as a prime source of development (Bandura, 1969). Additionally, the Social Learning Theory has also been applied to sexual development and gender identity (Berk, 2022). The data for this study were collected using an analysis of existing interviews in peer reviewed literature and diaries of offender clergy. This inquiry was from the perspective of an examination of existing information across multiple sources. The data were collected and analyzed through the lens of the following questions:

- RQ1 – Qualitative: How do offending clergy describe their experiences with morality while growing up?

- RQ2 – Qualitative: How do offending clergy describe their intimate, interpersonal, and social experiences while growing up?

The participants' responses led to the emergence of five themes to address those research questions: (a) Religious Moral Upbringing, (b) Authoritarian Father, (c) Sexuality is Immoral, (d) Special Maternal Relationships, and (e) Awkward Social Relationships.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Participants in this study shared their lived experiences concerning their development during childhood. The data were collected looking specifically into experiences with morality, social, and intimate relationships throughout childhood. The findings provide an insight into understanding the experiences of these participants during their development of those traits. There were mixed results among the participants, with information covering a range of topics. However, there were five main themes that emerged with regards to the two research questions.

#### **Theme A: Religious Moral Upbringing**

The results from this theme provided insight into the type of household the participants grew up in during their development regarding their models of morality. Since all 12 of the participants grew up in religious households, it stands to reason that they were introduced to morality from the perspective of the Christian Bible. Additionally, most of the participants reported being active in the church, often being altar boys themselves. This suggests that their moral upbringing was reinforced at church

as well as at home. Many went to Catholic school, which further reinforced morality from a religious standpoint.

While the idea of growing up in a religious environment is seemingly benign on its own, it can be more impactful when it is fully explored from a moral standpoint. It then becomes even more influential when this religious morality is placed alongside the other themes that emerged in this study. Kohlberg (1981) argued that religious morality was the equivalent to Level 2 in his stages of morality in that they base their morality on gaining approval and obeying to avoid punishment. This does not allow for a more advanced or abstract development in internal morality. These participants were taught to obey their parents, their God, and their clergy as the utmost authorities of morality. This could have a hand in teaching impressionable, developing children how powerful and revered parental figures and clergy were, which will be even more impactful as they, themselves, joined the priesthood.

### **Theme B: Authoritarian Father**

The next theme that was identified was related to growing up with an authoritarian father. As previously stated, there were numerous accounts of the participants growing up in strict households governed by strict fathers. Participant 03 explained that his father was so strict that if he got in trouble at school, his father would give him twice the punishment that the school administered (Los Angeles Times, n.d.). All participants described their fathers as emotionally absent and most of them described their fathers as emotionally abusive. Participant 05 expressed that his father put his family through hell and spent much of his time trying to find ways to undermine all the

members of the family (D'Alton et al., 2013). Finally, many of the participants expounded on their fathers' emotional absence by reporting how they rarely if ever received physical or emotional affection from their fathers. This was summed up by Participant 03 who explained his father never gave out hugs or positive reinforcement (Los Angeles Times, n.d.).

According to Bandura (1977), a lot of social learning in development is the result of the observation of behaviors and actions of others in day-to-day environments. These participants were exposed day in and day out to very negative male role models. They observed strict, controlling, emotionless, and often abusive examples by the most important men in their lives. Bandura also noted that reinforcement was not necessary for learning to take place, and that anticipation of reinforcement was enough to influence the solidification of the learned behaviors in the observer. Although their fathers rarely or never offered reinforcement to their children, the children may have thought that by being silent and repressing their actions and emotions their fathers would approve of them. Finally, Bandura explained that modeling was primarily responsible for the development of morality in children, which can be impacted heavily by the observation of moral examples rather than what was verbally conveyed. In short, if a parent is telling a child to behave a certain way, yet acting in a completely different manner, the observation of those transgressions could be learned and imprinted more readily than what was taught.

### **Theme C: Sexuality Is Immoral**

The third theme uncovered is the idea that sexuality and sex and any manner of sexual thoughts or expression is immoral. In the houses the participants grew up in,

erections, erotic dreams, and sexual talk were all considered taboo and sinful. Some of the participants reported praying to remove the sinful thoughts just to feel some sort of relief from the guilt and shame. Participant 01 stated that his sexuality was fused with shame and self-loathing (Hanson, 2017). In other cases, like that of Participant 10, he claimed that shame and guilt drove him to want to be a priest at an early age (D'Alton et al., 2013). As discussed in another theme, this idea of sexuality as sinful even impacted the social relationships the participants had during childhood.

Not only were sexuality and sexual thoughts frowned upon at home, but they were also considered sinful by the church. The Bible teaches that lustful thoughts alone are as sinful as the actions (*King James Bible*, 1769/2008, Mat. 5:28). It further states that evil and thoughts of sexual immorality defile them (*King James Bible*, 1769/2008, Mark. 7:20-23). This could have reinforced the shame and guilt the participants felt knowing that even the mere thought of something sexual could ruin the souls of these young developing men. Bandura (1977) explained that anticipated consequences alone could motivate behavior. Real consequences observed by these individuals were also a factor. Participant 03 recalled a story of his sister who wore a skirt to a skating party, their father went and got her, brought her home and ripped the skirt off of her then tore it up (Los Angeles Times, n.d.). Social Learning Theory explains that an observer witnessing a model being punished as the result of prohibited activities is enough to impact the observers' behaviors. Considering all of this, it is understandable if the participants repressed any normal sexual behavior due to the anticipation of shame from the church and/or punishment from their authoritative, often violent fathers. With shame and guilt

being so intricately tied to sexuality, it is not hard to see how this impacted the participants' interpersonal relationships during their development.

#### **Theme D: Special Maternal Relationships**

The fourth theme, and the first to relate to RQ2, deals with the participants' reported relationships with their mothers. This speaks directly to their interpersonal and social relationships. Nearly all the participants reported having a special relationship with their mothers. Some described themselves as the protectors of their mothers. Others developed special relationships for other reasons. Participant 03 gravitated toward his mother out of fear of his father abandoning him (Los Angeles Times, n.d.). While the causes for these special maternal attachments differ from participant to participant, the resulting relationship is still the same.

With parental relationships being among the first examples of social interaction for developing children this is extremely important. When juxtaposing this special mother-son relationship with a coexisting negative father-son relationship some definite differences are apparent. Initially the mothers provide emotional shelter from the father's abusive and controlling behaviors. Simultaneously, sons believe they must protect their mothers from the sons' fathers. This is not reflective of a normal mother-son relationship. Bandura (1977) stated that social learning is more concrete when the models and messages are not ambiguous. These extremely different relationships and different messages and reinforcements from the mothers and fathers could very well add ambiguity to the development of these participants.

### **Theme E: Awkward Social Relationships**

The last theme, and the second relating to RQ2, is that of awkward social relationships. The reported awkward social relationships of the participants could be a result of some of the other factors discussed previously. The participants expressed shame and guilt due to the fear of something inappropriate happening between themselves and close friends. This led to them not having many age-appropriate social interactions, if any at all. Participant 08 recalled not being allowed to walk home with the same person more than once a week (D'Alton et al., 2013). This is just one example of the forbidden age-appropriate social interactions experienced by most participants. Some reported having closer relationships with adults such as mothers, nuns, and clergy.

The awkward social relationships or prohibition of age-appropriate social experiences could lead to arrested emotional and social development. Age-appropriate, peer relationships are necessary to provide more learning models and therefore enhance social learning during development (Bandura 1977). The absence of normal peer relationships during development could lead to a lack of social models to help enhance social learning.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While this study explored the personality, moral, psychosocial, and sexual perspectives of offender clergy prior to offending, there were multiple limitations in this study. First, all participants were gained by analyzing previously conducted interviews or previously published diaries, and no access to live participants. This issue means that I could not ask participants a standardized set of questions relating to the specific research

questions in the study. Similarly, follow-up questions or clarifying questions could not be asked. Without having specific, standardized questions to ask, there may be a different intent in the participants' responses than there would be if they were asked specific standardized questions.

The second limitation is related to the lack of specific questions. There was no way to determine whether the participants were sexually assaulted as children. While all of them reported some form of emotional or physical abuse at the hands of their fathers, only two participants reported being sexually assaulted during their childhood. Even though there was not enough information, it is still important information to gain further insight into these participants. Lastly, the information from the participants was all gathered after they had been priests, and after they had committed their acts of sexual assault. This might lend itself to hindsight bias. The participants may have been trying to explain or mitigate their behaviors instead of merely exploring them from a neutral perspective. It would be beneficial to look at those joining the clergy who have not committed any crimes to explore their development as well.

Despite these limitations, this study does provide an in-depth look at the development of offender clergy from moral, psychosocial, and sexual perspectives. It is useful to learn how social learning and family environments helped shape the participants' personalities and future behaviors.

### **Recommendations**

There is a need to recognize how an individual's development impacts his behavior later in life. There is especially a need to understand how moral, social, and



sexual development influence the later behaviors of offending clergy. The importance lies in being able to recognize developmental red flags that may warrant some type of intervention. The leader of a church is afforded inherent respect, trust, and a level of power that places them between their parishioners and God. An understanding of developmental warning signs may help lead to better screening procedures or better-informed oversight to help mitigate the incidents of sexual deviance in these individuals.

The participants all highlighted specific elements of their moral, sexual, and social development that were similar in most or all cases. For this group of participants, there were noted similarities. Furthering this investigation on the impact of social, sexual, and moral development on later behaviors is imperative to gain more context and background into this phenomenon. Researchers should continue to gather more information via lived experiences from different groups. There should be firsthand interviews from live offender clergy. There should also be similar interviews from those entering the clergy who are not offenders. This would be beneficial from a comparative standpoint. Finally, it would be helpful to conduct similar studies in different groups with similar social problems such as teachers or police officers. This might help explore different environments to understand if there is any transferability across careers that report an imbalance in power structure.

### **Implications for Social Change**

One element of positive social change attributed to this study is to identify uniformed markers which could help us understand an individual's predisposition to commit these offenses in positions of power. It is imperative to understand the

environments and conditions that can help produce individuals who enter the clergy and then commit these offenses. The results of this study will provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of offender clergy during their childhood development. These results also provide insight into the moral, social, and sexual development lives of offender clergy.

Since this phenomenon occurs in many communities across the world, the results can help these communities by providing a better picture to the social learning environment that contributes to the formation of offender clergy. Communities will be better able to create screening tools to help identify these elements so interventions can be proactive rather than reactive. Additionally, these cases cause psychological harm to their victims. By reducing cases of clergy committing sexual offenses, communities can be more psychologically healthy. This could also help restore trust in the church and repair the relationships between the church and the communities they serve.

### **Conclusion**

Understanding the developmental factors that contribute to the creation of offending clergy is important for many reasons. After childhood development parental rules and guiderails are replaced by societal ones (Bandura, 1977). When they leave their parents and go straight into the clergy, they are not socialized outside of their authoritative, religious upbringing. Those repressed sexual feelings are still there. Bandura (1977) suggested that with the lack of traditional punishment, self-criticism replaces the previous punishment or fear of punishment. The idea was that self-criticism reduces anxiety brought on by the unsavory behavior (Bandura, 1977). If these

individuals are only accountable to themselves for transgression, there is nothing external to hold them accountable.

Another concept regarding the development of morality is that of displacing responsibility. Bandura (1977) believed that in the absence of a punitive authority to point out and sanction unsatisfactory conduct that an individual will displace their responsibility in the wrongdoing. Linking this to self-censure, it can become easy for an offender to deny personal responsibility, therefore justifying the behavior in question. Participant 03 expressed this type of thought, stating that he convinced himself it was a legitimate game he was playing with his victims (Los Angeles Times, n.d.).

The literature review revealed gaps in the scholarly research on the moral, social, and sexual development of sex-offending clergy. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences and development of offender clergy during their childhood. This problem led to the formation of the following two research questions: How do offending clergy describe their experiences with morality while growing up? How do offending clergy describe their intimate, interpersonal, and social experiences while growing up? Reviewing the information provided by the participants through the lens of Bandura's Social Learning Theory provided some insight into this phenomenon.

The purpose of the clergy is to help shepherd their flock of parishioners in a safe, trusting, and enriching environment. The results of this study helped shed light on developmental precursors which might have laid the foundations for these offender clergy to prevent them from doing that. The noted similarities of the conditions of the

moral, social, and sexual development of these participants helped set the stage for their future transgressive behaviors. Taking these issues into consideration, better screening procedures can be implemented to help identify the potential for deviant behavior.

Perhaps specific assessment tools can help identify these factors. Early detection can lead to early intervention. Career counselors can be employed to help guide clergy through their journey into the priesthood. Specific measures could be enacted to ensure that there is little to no one-on-one exposure that would put at risk clergy in volatile situations.

Training and education of the clergy could be enhanced to address these issues and bring them into the light.

Clergy are like any other human beings, they are fallible. The difference between them and other humans is they are in positions of moral superiority and authority over a very vulnerable and easily influenced group of adults and children. It is imperative that these clergy are set up for success so they may perform their duties safely and without incident. Addressing this issue will help improve the trust in the clergy and the Church by providing a safe, protected place to worship for all parishioners.

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