Clergy sexual misconduct: Frequency and causation

Thaddeus Birchard

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ABSTRACT   *This article reports on a project whose purpose was to explore the cause of clergy sexual misconduct. It was confined to the behaviour of men with adult women. The data show that causation is attributable to six major factors: the human condition, the personal problems of the clergyman, the role of clergyman, the ecclesiastical organization, societal factors and outside factors. The results primarily locate the problem in neediness of the cleric, in ambiguity of boundary that comes with the role, and in the inattentiveness of the organizational structure. The article provides information on frequency of misconduct and there are recommendations for the minimization of such misconduct.*

Introduction

On 5 November 1997 a panel of ecclesiastical judges called for the deposition of the Rev. Clifford Williams. They accused him of adultery and leading a 'double life' within the Church of Wales, and recommended that he be "removed from the incumbency of his parish, expelled from the office of a cleric, and deposed from Holy Orders" (*Daily Telegraph*, 6 November 1997). According to the *Guardian* (8 November 1997), the Roman Catholic Church in England "could be forced to pay out millions of pounds to settle more than 250 claims for compensation from people who claim to have been abused".

Clergy sexual misconduct creates a breach of trust that offends against spirituality and thus against ultimate solace, purpose and meaning. This research is, therefore, particularly concerned with causation and seeks to identify the special factors that give rise to and exacerbate clergy sexual misconduct. A systematic examination of causation will also be of use to those working psychotherapeutically with cases of misconduct, and of service to the church and wider society by providing information as a basis for treatment and prevention. The research concentrated on causation for one further reason. I wanted to know what it is that drives this behaviour, the 'double life', and this private abrogation of public professions of faith and practice.

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Relevant literature

The literature on professional sexual misconduct in general is recent, scant and mostly American. The literature on clergy sexual misconduct is almost non-existent and within what little there is, there are few references to causation.

The first important work, published in 1989, is Marie Fortune's book *Is Nothing Sacred?* In my view, this book, and the lectures and articles written or influenced by her that followed it, are the most important contribution to research. Her influence has been increased through her foundation, the Centre for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence.

In 1991 two more significant books were published, both American: *Sex in the Parish*, by Karen Lebacqz and Ronald Barton, and *Sex, Priests, and Power* by Richard Sipe. The first is mainline Protestant and the second Roman Catholic. Two specialist journals have also devoted editions to misconduct: *Leadership* (Winter, 1988) and *The Journal of Psychology and Christianity* (Vol. 8, 1989). To be fair to the church, all the influential work is written by clergy and, in some cases, by clergy psychotherapists and it represents a capacity for internally generated criticism. There is, to date, no comparable work done on, or by, the church in the UK.

There are two books of interest to professionals working in adjacent fields: *Sex in the Forbidden Zone* by Peter Rutter (1989) and *Out of Bounds* by Jane Russell (1993). Rutter's book is a seminal document, widely known, and cited by many later authorities. He uses the phrase 'sex in the forbidden zone' (p. 11) to "describe any sexual contact that occurs within the professional relationship of trust". *Out of Bounds* is the only English work on abuse by therapists and is detailed and scholarly. It deals with all the main issues: definition, consequences, causation, typology, ethics and power.

Ethical considerations in the research

The ethical issues in this research were diverse and multidimensional and relate to the conduct of the research, the nature of the subject matter and distinctively to the subjects of the research. Clergy in our society are widely regarded as the carriers and interpreters of ethical authenticity. This project raised ethical issues in unsubtle ways. The implications of revealed clerical misconduct are public humiliation, censure, loss of employment, loss of future prospects and loss of tied accommodation.

The Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences has guidelines for maintaining ethical standards in research, especially around sexual issues, which were observed: Respect for Persons, Beneficence, Non-maleficence, and Justice (Ringheim, 1995). Personal information, when enclosed with surveys, was removed and stored 'blind'. No records were kept of survey replies. Computer stored data was outside the Data Protection Act. Confidentiality was assured and maintained.

Ethically valid participation in research is, by its nature, always voluntary. The participants have the right to be fully informed, in advance, of the sensitive and possibly intrusive nature of the material and it should be emphasized

that participants may ask to be further informed or to decline at any time in the process without deprecation of character (Kimmel, 1988). This ethical convention was secured by careful wording to provide clear choice, and by deliberate warnings in the covering correspondence, and on the headings of particularly sensitive papers. Questions were invited and freedom to withdraw at any time was clearly stated. The ethical criteria for dealing with sensitive subject matter were carefully considered and applied in this project.

Methodology

I used a methodological format known as 'Framework' exactly as promoted by Ritchie and Spencer (1994). It is 'social policy orientated' and designed to meet the "persistent requirement in social policy fields to understand complex behaviours, needs, systems and cultures" (p. 173). It was also chosen for its emphasis on causation and its application to the problems of organizations. This methodology was designed to identify the "form and nature of what exits", to "examine causes" and to contribute to strategies of response (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994: 174). It seemed ideally suited to answering specific questions, achieving results that could be used for policy development and contributing to the achievement of actionable outcomes. For all of these reasons, and especially causation, it was the methodology of choice.

'Framework' has five stages: familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation. Familiarization is the development of an overview of the subject before the process of sifting and sorting data and was achieved by the literature search and by professional conversations and personal reflection. From this process it was then possible, as the second stage of the process—"identifying a thematic framework"—to begin to identify the key issues and create provisional categories for the organization of incoming data. All additional incoming data was then evaluated 'for fit' in relationship to the provisional categories and stored in relationship to the categories. These categories and sub-categories were assigned index numbers, hence the term 'indexing'. After the data were analysed and indexed it was 'charted'. By this Ritchie and Spencer mean that it was "lifted from its original context and rearranged according to the appropriate thematic reference" (1994: 182). The 'mapping and interpretation' that follows is, in effect, the work of analysis and it involves the refinement of definition, the creation of typologies and the provision of explanation. Ritchie and Spencer further describe this part of the process as "piecing together the overall picture" (p. 186).

I analysed the data in the following way. I broke all the data into cognitive units and assigned each unit a code. I then added up the number of times each code appeared in each data-gathering exercise. This was partly a mechanical process and partly the application of subjective judgement. The result was a set of causative factors scored and ranked for frequency. These 'scores' represent the views of the participating clergy about what they believe causes sexual misconduct. For

TABLE I. Key to the assigned codes for the analysis of data from the interviews, focus groups and questionnaires

Human condition		Ecclesiastical factors	
Sexuality	4.1.1	Absence of institutional attention	4.4.1
Male sexuality	4.1.2	Absence of awareness training	4.4.2
Sexuality and spirituality	4.1.3	Absence of a Code of Conduct	4.4.3
Sin and lust	4.1.4	Absence of an adequate theology	
		of sexuality	4.4.4
The minister as an individual		Theological factors	4.4.5
Personal and sexual problems	4.2.1	Sexism in the church	4.4.6
Alcohol and drugs	4.2.2	Silence and secrecy	4.4.7
Stress	4.2.3		
Loneliness	4.2.4	Societal factors	
Sex addiction	4.2.5	Sexism in society	4.5.1
Erosion of personal spirituality	4.2.6	Clergy as a cross-section of society	4.5.2
Unhappy marriage	4.2.7	Societal trends	4.5.3
		Silence and secrecy	4.5.4
The individual as minister			
Power and charisma	4.3.1	External factors	
Functions of the role	4.3.2	Others as instigators	4.6.1
Functions of working practice	4.3.3		
Liminality	4.3.4		

manageability, I restricted research to clergy of the Church of England and to male to adult female behaviour (see Table I).

The research tools

In addition to an extensive study of the literature and reference back to my own distinctive personal experience as a priest and a therapist, I used the following research tools: interviews, focus groups and a two-part survey.

The interviews were 'guided' or 'focused' (Bell, 1993) and were conducted to pursue the same areas of enquiry as the focus groups and the survey. They were with specialists in recruitment and training known to me personally—a clergywoman who is Dean of Women's Ministry in her Diocese and a clergyman in the Diocese of Oxford involved in the formulation of its Ministerial Code of Practice. Each interview was taped and lasted for about an hour and a half and informed the sequence, subject matter and the schema of the focus groups (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

The focus groups were conceived and constructed as "a carefully planned discussion in a permissive atmosphere to obtain participants' opinions on a defined area of interest" (Fink, 1995: 10). There were three groups on three consecutive days. The participants were self-selected from a pool of 73 male and female clergy living in central London. They were not apparently atypical of any of their colleagues. The first group had four participants and the second two groups had six

participants each, a total of 16 participants in all. I facilitated each group and followed the same schema for the interviews with each group.

The survey was a self-administered postal questionnaire using a scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree', with a second section for open-ended questions. It was sent at random and without regard to gender to 100 clergy out of the 25 000 listed in *Crockford's Clerical Directory 1995/96*. Forty-three out of 100 were completed and returned. Apart from a polite reminder and a fresh copy of the questionnaire, there was no follow-up of non-participants.

The survey was constructed around the concepts and ideas that emerged from the literature review and was designed to explore the views of the clergy about the causes of sexual misconduct. These were formulated into 23 multiple-choice questions. The last page contained five open-ended questions. The first of these was to ask the clergy to identify specific behaviours deemed to constitute misconduct. Two were designed to gain a view of frequency as well as causation. The final question invited respondents' views on the nature of the research project. The pilot of the questionnaire was submitted additionally to each person interviewed and each focus group member with the request to fill it in, and at the same time, to comment on the questionnaire for its intelligibility, clarity and comprehensiveness. On the basis of this feedback, the final schedule of questions was drafted and distributed. Triangulation was secured by the use of these multiple and different research tools and data-gathering techniques and has been a means of ensuring validity in the process of this research.

Results of the research

The data gathered from the interviews, focus groups and the open-ended section of the survey were analysed and presented individually and in composite form. Because of the structure of the multiple-choice part of the survey, the data from that section were analysed in their own right and have been presented separately.

Interview one

This interview was with one of the two women participants. The woman was the only participant to raise, as a central idea, the liminal nature of ministry. The concept of liminality, from the Latin for 'threshold', signifies the socially marginal status of religious functionaries in society (Turner, 1969). This idea is not further acknowledged in the data. In this interview there was an awareness of power, especially the imposition of male power. The importance of boundary ambiguity was pronounced. Virtually all the factors listed above were stated in conjunction with boundary ambiguity.

Interview two

This interview was with the clergyman from the Diocese of Oxford. He was the principal architect of its policy on clergy misconduct. He brought to the discussion

TABLE II. Analysis of focus group one

Code	Frequency	Significance
4.3.2	12	Boundary ambiguity
4.2.1	9	Unresolved personal and sexual problems
4.4.1	8	Ecclesiastical inattentiveness
4.2.4	7	Loneliness

Note: After the first four categories, the scores are matched or negligible.

the idea that some misconduct might be associated with male mid-life adjustment as well as more commonly with immaturity or the presence of unresolved personal and/or sexual problems brought into the ministry at ordination. He talked about men feeling "re-empowered by a new relationship". In addition to this distinctive contribution, the major themes that appeared in the course of the interview were abuse of power, meaningful consent, absence of awareness training, the protective value of a good marriage, role ambiguity, and recognition of the 'predatory female'. This participant suggested a connection between the ambiguity of the role and the nature of the unresolved personal problems.

Focus group one

The smallest of the three groups, it began almost immediately with an emphasis upon misconduct as the 'abuse of power'. Here the 'ontological' nature of the clerical role was considered. This is the theological idea that ministry is not about function but is an indelible state of being. In my experience, this idea has a powerful hold on ministerial self-perception and further obscures the distinction between professional and non-professional relationships. An emphasis on loneliness in this group may reflect the proportionally high number of single men in the group (see Table II for an analysis of the composition of this group).

Focus group two

The group refined the idea that misconduct is a product of 'blurred boundaries'. There was confusion in trying to define the difference between a professional and non-professional relationship and greater confusion, even conflict, on the subject of appropriate touch. Of special interest was the experience of two men, both recently widowed and remarried, who testified in clear terms to their experiences of the 'predatory female' and the problems of romantic and erotic projection. This factor runs through the experience of all participants in the survey. The emphasis on stress in this group may well connect to the fact that two of the group members had had recent bereavements (see Table III).

TABLE III. Analysis of focus group two

Code	Frequency	Significance
4.3.2	11	Boundary ambiguity
4.2.3	7	Stress
4.3.1	6	Power and charisma
4.4.1	6	Ecclesiastical inattentiveness

Note: After the first four categories, the scores are matched or negligible.

Focus group three

One young member of this group had recently married a member of his congregation. Neither he, nor the group, delved into the premarital content of that relationship, but it was taken for granted that this courtship and marriage were not in any way misconduct. One of the recurring themes that came up in this group was the idea that sexuality and spirituality are closely connected and that sexual misconduct is partly a factor of that connection. The connection was made in this way: "The gospel is something to do with love, and a longing to love and to be loved, which from time to time must spill over inappropriately".

Unlike the other two groups, this group emphasized the impact of societal change on the attitudes and behaviour of the clergy. As with the other groups, there was recognition that part of the responsibility for misconduct lies with the ecclesiastical structure and the absence of safeguards in church organizations. The consciousness of 'societal trends' may well reflect the younger age range and the 'thinking and writing' character of this group (see Table IV).

The open-ended survey questions

The third page of the survey provided space for participants to note what they believe to be 'main cause' of misconduct. The data collected here are somewhat

TABLE IV. Analysis of focus group three

Code	Frequency	Significance
4.4.1	13	Ecclesiastical inattentiveness
4.3.2	11	Boundary ambiguity
4.3.1	6	Power and charisma
4.5.3	5	Societal trends

Note: After the first four categories, the scores are matched or negligible.

TABLE V. Analysis of open-ended survey questions

Code	Frequency	Significance
4.2.4	6	Loneliness
4.2.1	5	Unresolved sexual and personal problems
4.1.1	5	The human condition (sin, sex)
4.2.7	5	Bad marriage

Note: After the first four categories, the scores are matched or negligible.

different from those gathered from the interviews and the focus groups. The views are more evenly spread and they lack the kind of swell that occurred in the course of discussion. This is because the scoring for 'boundary ambiguity' and 'power and charisma' were often an assigned score given to the contents of conversations that revealed boundary ambiguity, rather than conversations that discussed boundary ambiguity (see Table V).

The combined data

In addition to an intuitive and reflective analysis of the information gained from all sources, I added together all the scores to produce a cumulative summary of results. This weighing and counting produced a hierarchy of causation. Although this is a crude device, it gives an indication of the relative importance of causative factors for misconduct that can be compared with other sources of data (see Table VI).

TABLE VI. A view of causation: the combined data[a]

Code	Frequency	Summary
4.3.2	58	Boundary ambiguity
4.4.1	40	Absence of institutional attention
4.2.1	30	Individual personal and sexual problems
4.3.1	28	Power and charisma of the role
4.2.4	26	Loneliness
4.2.3	23	Stress
4.6.1	23	Role as an object of projection (attractiveness to women)
4.4.2	21	Absence of awareness training
4.4.1	18	The male libido
4.4.7	17	Bad marriage

[a]This table gives the combined scores of the interviews, the focus groups, and the open-ended section of the survey but not the multiple-choice questions which are scored separately in Table VII.

TABLE VII. The results of the multiple-choice section of the survey

Code	Replies out of 43 N	%	Causation
4.4.2	39	91	Lack of awareness training
4.2.4	36	83	Neediness
4.6.1	34	79	Projection (attract. to women)
4.3.1	30	69	Power and charisma of the role
4.4.1	27	62	Absence of a Code of Conduct
4.2.1	25	58	Individual's problems
4.4.7	22	51	Silence and secrecy
4.1.1	20	46	Male libido
4.3.3	20	46	Specific working practices
4.5.3	18	41	Societal trends (i.e. entitlement)

The multiple-choice survey questions

The results of the multiple-choice section of the survey reveal a similar range and degree of findings as listed in the combined score. The score for 'boundary ambiguity' is higher because this was scored on my assessment of ambiguity as well as the participants' awareness of 'boundary ambiguity'. Without this factor, institutional inattentiveness scores equally at the top. The combined score describes 'Individual sexual and personal problems' and the Survey 'Neediness'; the latter is subsumed in the former. In both cases 'Power and charisma of the role' score equally. The differences largely reflect the difference between the survey and the focus group as data gathering techniques. The multiple-choice questions do not allow for expansion or the observer's assessment. The character of the data generated is predetermined by the questions. This is less true of the open format used for the interviews, the focus groups and the second part of the survey (see Table VII).

The extent of the problem

Following the example of a survey in *Leadership* magazine (Moeller, 1995), I asked on the last page of the survey the following two questions: 'Since ordination, have you ever done anything with someone [other than your spouse] that you feel was sexually inappropriate? Do you know a colleague who has?' These only required a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer, although space was given for comment. Seventeen out of 42, or 40% of my sample, answered 'yes' to the first question and 28 out of 42, or 67%, answered 'yes' to the second question. Of the 40% that answered 'yes' to the first question, seven individuals added qualifications like 'only impure thoughts' or 'kissed a woman in trouble'. I think that these qualifications reduce this to a more accurate figure of 10 out of 42, or 24%. These figures match US research on the same question cited in an article in *Leadership* based on 1000 mailings with a response rate of 30%. My response rate was 42% based on 100 mailings. *Leadership*

cites 23% and 77% respectively (The Editors, 1988: 12). My figures are lower than the figures cited by the Centre for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence (1992), which are based on an unpublished PhD dissertation (Overhead I-G, 12) of 38.6% and 76.5%, respectively. These are the only figures on this subject in the UK[1].

A discussion of principal causation

The three principal issues about causation revealed by the data are boundary ambiguity, institutional inattentiveness, and personal need. In almost all the data, except for the multiple-choice section of the survey, boundary ambiguity competes with institutional inattentiveness for top ranking. All the writers, and the results of the research, bear witness to the idea that misconduct is a blurring and a crossing of boundaries. Marie Fortune recognizes this in a paper given at an annual conference of the American Academy of Religion and published in the *Journal of Feminist Studies*:

> Our professions of ministry and teaching, unlike many others, bring us into some of the most intimate, sacred and fragile dimensions of others' lives. Paradoxically, it is because of these intimate connections that ministers and teachers face the risk of engaging in inappropriate or unethical behaviours with those whom they serve and supervise.

The ambiguities in this factor combine with other ambiguities and dualities in ministry to create unique vulnerability to misconduct. In the case of the Rev. Clifford Williams (*Guardian*, 25 October 1997) the correspondent "told the court that Mr Williams seduced her while she was grieving over the death of her son". Intimacy, vulnerability and pastoral care spill over into misconduct.

In a Letter to the Editor about the William's affair (*Guardian*, 27 October 1997), Margaret Kennedy of the Minister and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors Group calls upon the church to have "policies to challenge similar and abusive predatory behaviour". Of the clergy who responded to my survey 91% took the view that the absence of 'awareness training' was the single most important factor in the causation of misconduct.

In the cumulative content of the interviews and focus groups there is recognition that misconduct is also located in the individual character and psychological circumstances of the minister. In the survey 83% of the participants took the view that 'neediness' was the most important cause after the 'absence of awareness training'. The first interview called 'loneliness' a 'huge potential' for misconduct. The second interview and the focus groups all mention loneliness and stress. Neediness and loneliness seem, to me, to be different words to describe similar kinds of issues and needs within the life of the minister.

From this research, the conclusion that I reach about clergy misconduct, and the rate of misconduct, is that causation is, primarily, the effect of the juxtaposition of three things:

- boundary ambiguity that comes with the role;
- absence of awareness training that comes with the institution;
- problems and needs that come with the clergyman.

While this applies to the clergy it is perhaps most analogous in circumstance to those working as teachers and educators. Such people also live with high levels of boundary ambiguity. Until recently sexual contact, certainly at university and college level, would not normally have been seen to constitute misconduct and therefore, as in the church, there is less of a culture of awareness or attentiveness.

Problems with the research

There are weaknesses with any research project. These can be generic, in the sense that they apply to all research, and some can be specific to a particular project. One could argue that all I have presented is a measure of what I have measured. How does the reader know that the results are consistent and repeatable? Although ultimately unknowable, I believe that consistency and repeatability are safeguarded by the high degree of congruence that has been achieved in this research through the process of triangulation.

Gender bias

The project would have benefited from the involvement of more women clergy. Some part of the process should have been designed specifically to involve and include their views. I believe the work to be impoverished by this omission.

Subjectivity

The methodological format had many advantages. It was clear and easy to understand and relatively easy to use. My major criticism of the methodology is its subjectivity. The formation of categories and the evaluation of material for 'fit' are entirely subjective and unchecked. For example, my identification and indexing of 'boundary issues' was based entirely on my own personal decision to call something a boundary issue. There is no place for readers to inspect or independently evaluate such decisions.

The role of the insider

It may well be that Margaret Mead used "all she knew about the target culture" (Kirk & Miller, 1986: 54) to direct and promote her research but others caution against undertaking ethnographic fieldwork in well known environments (van Maanen, 1979). I am aware that my 'insider knowledge' has been important in the pursuit of this research. I am also aware that I have been anxious not to harm the church organization. For example, I had originally described the inattentiveness of the hierarchy as 'culpable negligence'. On reflection I decided not to put that implication on to my own primary organization. I chose instead to use the much more morally neutral phrase 'inattentiveness'. The position of the insider can make for the 'up' and the 'down' in research.

The survey

Towards the end of the project, I became increasingly unhappy with the multiple-choice part of the questionnaire. This was in the light of incoming data and could not necessarily have been foreseen. The problems are problems of proportion and consistency. For example, there is no question set up to pursue the notion of 'blurred boundaries' and no question to pursue the absence of pastoral oversight and accountability. A few questions present the same topic twice and some of the codes are over-represented in the survey. The survey was drawn up without the advantage of the analysed data from the interviews and focus groups. The discrepancy shows that the data received on the survey are more strictly dependent on the design of the survey and imitate that design. It is the data received later that show up the limitations of the survey and of surveys in general. These factors reflect the inductive character of the research, the way in which new and emerging data and reflection affect conceptual development. This affects, but does not diminish, the usefulness of the data acquired. The problem with the questionnaire illustrates further the importance of triangulation and the need for multiple sources of data.

Prevention

Three major categories of recommendation are suggested from the results of this research: education, care, and openness. These categories apply, not only to the clergy, but also to other professionals working in caring professions. In the first interview, the participant emphasized that there should be set in place in the process of theological education, a psychotherapeutic programme of personal growth and development. I believe most important of all would be a programme of 'awareness training' to sensitize clergy to the issues of misconduct. Such training should be part of a continuing programme of ministerial education. A format for pastoral care and support should also be devised to help protect the clergy from misconduct and, by definition, those they serve from the consequences of misconduct. Every opportunity must be taken to bring this into wider debate and to break down the ecclesiastical culture of silence and secrecy that covers, supports and encourages misconduct.

Acknowledgements

Note

[1] This has been validated by The Rev'd Dr Marie Fortune, The Centre for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, Seattle, Washington, Tel: 206–634–1903.

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