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Proposing a Behavioral Taxonomy of Priest Sexual Grooming

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Abstract

Sexual grooming is generally thought of as the way that would-be abusers build trust and camaraderie with their victims in order to lower the victims' inhibitions and eventually take advantage of the situation. Minimal levels of empiricism have focused on the sexual grooming patterns of abusive Catholic priests in the United States. In order to help close this gap, we conducted a retrospective content analysis of publicly available documents of credibly accused priests from one diocese in Illinois. Findings suggest that accused priests from this diocese used any of eight grooming techniques in order to abuse their victims; one of these tactics is specific to priest offenders. Using that knowledge, we propose and discuss a behavioral taxonomy of priest sexual grooming as well as the direction that future research should take in assessing this potential taxonomy.

Keywords

Sexual abuse; priests; Catholic Church; grooming; taxonomy; content analysis.

Introduction

Research has found that approximately four per cent (*n* = 4,392) of ordained priests in the United States sexually abused minors between 1950 and 2002 (Terry 2008). Like similar offenders, many of these priests used sexual grooming techniques to lower the inhibitions of their victims to reduce or eliminate skepticism that parents and others in the community may have had about the nature of the offender's relationship with the victim. The abuser used these techniques to establish trust. Once that was established, the victimization process began.

Since the early 2000s, there has been an increase in research concerning clergy sexual abuse, and a subcategory of this research concerns grooming. This grooming research is limited to general grooming behaviors, lacking in-depth analysis of the grooming process that clergy exhibit. Thus, the purpose of this research is to better understand the grooming behaviors of sexually abusive priests in order to determine if patterns exist.

To explore this topic further, we perform a retrospective content analysis of 16 priest personnel files from the Roman Catholic Dioceses of Joliet in Illinois, United States (US). The files, made publicly available in 2014, were of priests credibly accused of sexual abuse. It appears there is no formal criterion for determining a credible accusation; simply, an allegation was reported to the Church and local diocesan officials evaluated the report. After the initial investigation, officials deemed accusations credible or not credible. The following firstly discusses what is known about sexual grooming, including techniques used by clergy. We then describe the research methods used to analyze the data, our findings, and how our findings contribute to the growing body of empirical knowledge on sexual abuse within the church. In doing so, we offer a behavioral taxonomy of priest sexual grooming.

Literature review

Generally, sexual grooming is a nonviolent method that sexual offenders use to seduce victims by slowly creating trust through various actions that may appear normal but carry intentions to betray and violate a child and ensure the activity is not disclosed (Lanning and Dietz 2014). It is important to understand this behavior in order to identify and prevent the abuse from occurring rather than identifying it after an offense has been committed. To fully understand the behavior, an accurate definition that includes the diversity of grooming behaviors along with identifying its ultimate intent of sexual violation must exist (Bennett and O'Donohue 2014).

Definitions of grooming

A single conceptual definition of grooming does not exist; scholarship on the topic offers a variety of definitions. Gillespie (2002: 411) defines grooming as 'the process by which a child is befriended by a would-be abuser in an attempt to gain the child's confidence and trust, enabling them to get the child to acquiesce to abusive activity', thus enabling abusers to gain access to their victims. Meanwhile, Bennett and O'Donohue (2014: 969) define it as 'inappropriate behavior that functions to increase the likelihood of future sexual abuse'. Craven, Brown and Gilchrist (2006) provide the most in-depth definition of grooming:

> A process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of this child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child's compliance and maintain the child's secret to avoid disclosure. This process serves to strengthen the offender's abusive pattern, as it may be used as a means of justifying or denying their actions. (Craven, Brown and Gilchrist 2006: 297)

The grooming process

Grooming is a long-term process that requires planning and deviant intentions of the offender (Winters and Jeglic 2016). Research has found that many sex offenders self-report behaviors

consistent with developing a relationship with victims before initiating sexual contact (see Elliot 2017; Leclerc, Proulx and Beauregard 2009). It is important to understand grooming and grooming-related behaviors (Elliot 2017); the following offers more in-depth explanations.

Grooming the child, environment and significant others, as described by Craven and colleagues (2006), are necessary aspects of the selection and abuse processes. Building trust is important in the grooming process (Bennell et al. 2001; Craven, Brown and Gilchrist 2006). An offender interviewed by Conte, Wolf and Smith (1989: 297) stated that he tried to 'get the child to feel safe to talk with me'. Abusers and their victims share interests and create the basis of trust for a relationship to begin. Craven, Brown and Gilchrist (2006: 295) wrote: '[t]he abuser builds the child's trust … makes him or her feel good … and then starts to violate boundaries'.

Offenders rely on techniques involving fun and play (Lanning and Dietz 2014), as well as giving victims special attention (Leclerc, Proulx and McKibben 2005) to make children feel good. This creates an exclusive relationship that makes each child feel more 'special' than others in the eyes of the perpetrator (Bennell et al. 2001; McAlinden 2006). Leclerc, Proulx and McKibben (2005) conducted a study with 23 men in Canada who sexually abused children while doing volunteer work with them. Most offenders (95.6 per cent) used strategies consisting of giving affection and attention to victims. Approximately two-thirds made victims feel special by saying caring things to them (65.2 per cent) and playing with them (69.5 per cent).

Gift giving and singling out the child for outings and events ensures continued interest from the child, but creating private settings allows the offenders to distance their relationship from witnesses (McAlinden 2006). Lang and Frenzel's (1988) study found that offenders took victims on overnight stays and gave gifts to victims. Of Leclerc and colleague's (2005) sample, 39.1 per cent of offenders took victims on outings.

Once the victim feels special or comfortable, the offender starts to push physical boundaries. Among the boundaries that the abuser violates are the child's space while undressing, insisting that they get dressed together, and physically touching the child in a gradual pattern that begins with non-sexual hair tousling or tickling; this progresses to sexual touching above and then beneath clothing (Craven, Brown and Gilchrist 2006). In Leclerc and colleague's sample, most offenders would start with non-sexual touching (91.3 per cent) and gradually introduce sexual touching (82.6 per cent). Similarly, Lang and Frenzel (1988) interviewed 102 inpatient offenders in Canada and found that over half of their sample attempted 'accidental touch' first, and then proceeded to inappropriately touch children through their clothes if they did not react. Over 30 per cent of their sample initiated horseplay to push boundaries. This physicality gradually becomes more sexual in a process designed to desensitize the victim (McAlinden 2006).

Frequently, offenders will also establish a position of trust with the parents of the prospective victim and within the community, thus giving themselves access to a victim (Knoll 2010; van Dam 2001). The purpose of familial and community grooming is to gain the trust of adults and significant others in the victim's life who can allow the perpetrator access to the child (Craven et al. 2006). Additionally, the perpetrator may hold a position of respect in the community or be involved in an organization that encourages communication and access with children (McAlinden 2006). Because of this, parents and community members may not question when a respected adult spends an exceptional amount of time with a child.

If a child were to disclose the abuse after familial or community grooming, the established acceptance of the perpetrator by the family or community may act as a safeguard and create disbelief towards the child's accusations. Because of familial grooming, parents may encourage the perpetrator to spend time with their child because they are viewed as charming, caring and friendly individuals. This allows the abuser more contact with children in private settings to

promote bonding and gives offenders added authority over victims (Lanning and Dietz 2014). In turn, it allows the offender more time to groom the victim.

Offenders also may target dysfunctional families where the child is lonely or seeking attachment to others. This gives the offender the opportunity to 'find and fill a void in the child's life' (McAlinden 2006: 349). Other research supports victims being selected due to their vulnerability, isolation, poor discourse with their family and lack of emotional dependence (see Elliot, Browne and Kilcoyne 1995; Lawson 2003; Robins 2000; Shakeshaft and Cohan 1994).

Importance of understanding sexual grooming

Understanding and being able to identify sexual grooming is vital in creating prevention measures that reduce opportunities for child sexual abuse (Craven, Brown and Gilchrist 2006). Because the abuser hopes to dissuade disclosure by the victim and to remain undetected by outsiders, it is important that this predatory form of seduction be recognized early. Children are easily manipulated by emotions (Salter 1995); therefore, sexual grooming is a common method of seduction used by many sex offenders who target children. In addition, children tend to be compliant victims in that they seldom disclose the abuse if the perpetrator has told them not to or they feel as though they are responsible for its occurrence. It is estimated that only three per cent of all child sexual abuse cases are reported (Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman 1994). This low number could be attributed to a number of the child's reactions including fear, obedience and guilt that has been fed by the offender (McAlinden 2006). The innocence and naiveté of child victims creates circumstances that make it important for the remainder of society to understand sexual grooming and the methods used by offenders.

Many of the characteristics of grooming resemble seemingly 'normal adult-child relationships' (Bennett and O'Donohue 2014: 963), making it difficult to decipher a friendly adult with good intentions from a perpetrator with abusive intentions. The perpetrator often portrays a friendly persona and may carry respect in the community, therefore avoiding suspicion when interacting with children. The common misconception that child sex offenders are strangers that lurk around playgrounds has been discredited; research suggests that over 90 per cent of child victims know their sexual abuser (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2000).

One way to assess the level of risk a potential offender poses is by determining if the grooming activity carries an increasing probability of sexual contact. For example, providing a child with alcohol raises the likelihood the child will experience lowered inhibitions and allow sexual contact. Comparatively, supplying cigarettes does not carry the same level of likelihood since the side effects of tobacco do not reduce inhibitions to the same degree alcohol does (Bennett and O'Donohue 2014). Nevertheless, the perpetrator may give the child either of the two substances with the intent that the bribe will encourage further communication and eventually lead to sexual violation. In addition, when an abuser gives anything illegal to a child, it could be interpreted as a method of grooming because it creates a reliance on the adult in order to gain access to the product, whether it is a cigarette, alcohol or adult pornography (Williams 2015). In many cases, finding proof of the sexual intent is difficult unless the sexual abuse has already occurred (Craven, Brown and Gilchrist, 2007). Because of this, it is important that people know and identify early warning signs of grooming (Winters and Jeglic 2017).

Clergy grooming processes

Typically, victim-offender relationships are classified as familiar, acquaintance or strangers. Clergy do not neatly fit into one of these categories. They are trusted almost like family though parishioners usually do not know them on a personal level but more so through their professional role at the church. In relation to sexual grooming habits of abusive clergy, prior research has produced only general and broad knowledge.

Researchers at John Jay College of Criminal Justice conducted the single largest study on clergy sexual abuse to date, finding that approximately four per cent of all US priests were accused of sexual abuse between 1950 and 2002. They collected information from 97 per cent of Catholic dioceses, as well as 64 per cent of religious communities in the US (John Jay College of Criminal Justice 2004). A small portion of their study examined grooming processes by clergy. Their research found that clergy sexual abusers are similar to non-clergy sexual abusers (Terry 2008).

Utilizing data from the John Jay study, Tallon and Terry (2008) found that 30 per cent of clergy offered enticements to the children they victimized. Terry (2008) reported that nearly 8 per cent of victims were given gifts and 17 per cent were given enticements such as alcohol and drugs, money and overnight trips to the clergy's home. Terry also found that priests who had more victims than the average had used more types of grooming behaviors. Terry (2008: 562) reports that 'priests used enticements and socializing with family more often than threatening the victim'. In support of this contention, Tallon and Terry (2008) claim that 56 per cent of abusive priests between 1950 and 2002 socialized with the family of their victims.

The John Jay study was the first of its kind to examine priest sexual abuse and it offers comprehensive information about the topic. Clergy grooming is just one category of the study and leaves readers with only a general description of the topic. Additionally, most empirical research on clergy grooming has been derived from that study. More data collection and additional samples should be utilized to examine the topic in-depth. The present study seeks to expand on the current scope of clergy grooming literature.

Methods

Similar to the data collection methods used by Spraitz and Bowen (2016) and Spraitz, Bowen and Bowers (2016) in their analyses of priests and administrators from the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, as well as Spraitz, Bowen, and Arthurs (2017) in their examination of Saint John's Abbey, we performed a retrospective content analysis of unsealed priest files from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Joliet in Illinois, US. Files for 16 Joliet-area priests with credible allegations of sexual abuse against them were made publicly available in early 2014. The files contain 2,995 pages of documentation detailing reaction to the accusations and correspondence between priests, high-ranking diocesan personnel, attorneys, psychologists, victims and various others. The files range in size from 40 pages to 523 pages.

Unlike prior research conducted by Spraitz and colleagues that examined unsealed diocesan documents, we were not wholly interested in the techniques of neutralization that were used to perpetuate abuse of minors. We were more interested in investigating the grooming patterns that offending priests used in the commission of their crimes. To do so, we examined the files using an inductive approach. This approach was appropriate for several reasons. First, aside from Terry and colleagues' research on grooming habits by sexually abusive priests (see Tallon and Terry 2008; Terry 2008; Terry and Ackerman 2008), little is known about how the grooming behavior of clerics compares with those of other sexual offenders. Additionally, Bachman and Schutt (2015) argue that inductive research should be used for exploratory research that seeks to use data in order to develop a general explanation of a phenomenon. Considering what little is known about priest grooming patterns, inductively analyzing the existing data was the proper approach. While generalizability of the findings is limited because this study only examines the files of sexually abusive priests from one diocese, conducting an exploratory analysis using the 16 available files may assist in informing future larger-scale analyses of similar documents.

One author read all 2,995 pages of documentation in order to identify instances of sexual grooming by priests. Identification of grooming in the files was guided by several grooming-related themes discussed above in the literature review. We noted the progression of the relationship between priest and victim: for example, how it began and who initiated it. We looked

to see if the victim shared their vulnerabilities or fears with the priest prior to the commission of abuse and tried to identify what the priest did to create a comfortable rapport. Perhaps, the relationship was deemed 'special' or exclusive, or made the victim feel safe. In addition to looking for these themes, we focused on gift giving and trip taking. We wanted to know if gifts played a role in building the relationship. And, we were interested in finding out how abusive clergymen from this diocese isolated their victims. Did they invite children to the rectory after mass or school; were children allowed to spend the night? Did they take their victims out of town and, if so, where? For these trips to occur, it is likely that the parents of the victim would have granted permission. To that end, we wanted to uncover the ways in which a priest would befriend the family and gain the trust of parents. Finally, we documented the progression of physical touch in each case, from the seemingly innocuous hair tousle and horseplay to an 'accidental' touch to sexual abuse. In inductively documenting these data, we were interested in noting any theme that seemed like grooming and categorizing each once all themes were compiled.

Upon completion of this task, the researcher sent information from all documents that detailed and described each grooming occurrence to another author. That author then read the compiled data in order to double-check that sexual grooming was exhibited in each incident as well as to ensure that the first reader's identification of grooming habits was reliable. In case of disagreement over coding, we discussed the statement that we disagreed about, argued why the statement could and could not be considered grooming, and then came to an agreement on how to code it. By conducting this type of reliability check, we achieved complete agreement on each incident.

The Diocese of Joliet in Illinois was erected in 1948. In 1949, there were 83 diocesan priests serving the diocese. As of 2013, there were 174 diocesan priests assigned throughout the diocese; the diocese employed a peak of 197 priests throughout the 1990s. The total number of diocesan priests to cycle through Joliet since the diocese was erected is unknown but, by using the 197 priests from the 1990s as a benchmark, we can reasonably conclude that the 16 priests with credible allegation of abuse against them represent less than 8.1 per cent of all diocesan priests ever assigned to Joliet but, again, the exact percentage is not known.

Findings

At the time of the document release in early 2014, 10 of the 16 alleged offenders were still alive. The 16 accused priests were placed in 132 different parishes and diocesan locations by the bishop; one priest had as few as three assignments, while another priest had as many as 13 assignments. There are 147 known accusations of abuse against the 16 priests with a range of 1-40 alleged victims; this is an average of 9.2 reported allegations of sexual abuse per priest. In total, we identified 70 reported incidents of sexual grooming of minors by priests from the Joliet diocese for an average of approximately 4.4 documented grooming incidents per priest. The highest number of reported instances was eight and the lowest was one; there was a bimodal distribution of grooming reports with three priests each having two and five documented occurrences.

Similar to the grooming techniques outlined by McAlinden (2006), several priests from Joliet used alcohol to lower the inhibitions of their victims, while others gave gifts or took the children on special outings. Even with these similarities, the techniques used by Joliet-area priests were more varied. In addition to supplying alcohol and other gifts, the priests from Joliet would use camping trips, other drugs, the guise of friendship, the trust of parents, physical play like wrestling, and identifying 'favorites' in order to groom their abuse victims. Findings also suggest the existence of a grooming technique specific to abusive priests: using the innate respect shown to members of the clergy as a way to evade suspicion while simultaneously victimizing children. The following will detail these eight grooming techniques and outline a potentially new taxonomy of priest sexual grooming behaviors.

Alcohol, cigarettes and drugs

In 56 per cent of files (*n* = 9), there is documentation that accused priests used cigarettes, alcohol and other unnamed drugs to entice or lower the inhibitions of victims. Abusive priests who supplied their victims with alcohol and cigarettes followed a similar pattern. In addition, victims who were given intoxicants by priests reported comparable reactions. In a number of cases, alcohol distribution occurred during out-of-town trips. The unsealed documents allege that priests would provide their 'adolescent companions with their fill of beer and hard liquor', sometimes to the point where the minors 'became intoxicated'. One abuser asked his victim 'what he liked to drink' prior to stopping at a liquor store while *en route* to the priest's cottage, while another victim claimed that a different priest provided 'any alcoholic drink [I] wanted' during their encounters. On another occasion, a priest and his 10-year-old victim were openly carrying two six-packs of beer as they made their way to an abandoned quarry to go swimming.

However, not all instances of alcohol provision occurred on trips. Many times, victims were supplied with alcohol during meetings at the rectory. One victim reported going to the rectory for counseling and the priest 'insisted that I join him in a number of alcoholic drinks'. Another victim who worked in a rectory during the week claimed that a different priest gave him 'access to the liquor, beer whenever he was there'. In an email to an unknown recipient, this victim wrote that he would go to dinner with the priest who encouraged him to order a few cocktails. The victim, who was approximately 15 years of age at the time, admitted that he 'started drinking alcohol a little earlier, and thought this was great'. This feeling was shared by another victim of a different priest, who explained the following in a letter: '[a]fter that first night's dinner, including beer and access to cigarettes, it seemed like a 14-year-old's dream to be with an authority figure who was treating me like an adult'.

The lone mention of drugs appears in a summary detailing the abuse of two boys, one of whom alleges being fondled and the other who reported that he was anally raped. Amid the redactions in the summary, it reads that the priest 'held wild parties on weekend nights including drugs and booze'. Given the ages of the victims who were allegedly supplied with cigarettes, alcohol and other drugs, it seems the abusive priests were exploiting the curiosity that adolescents have towards alcohol and drugs. Doing so allowed the priests to conceal their true desires under the guise of being the cool older person who skirts the rules. Providing intoxicants to minors lowered victims' inhibitions, or rendered them temporarily unconscious, which gave the priests unfettered opportunity to sexually abuse them.

Overnight stays and trips

Findings suggest the tactics of providing alcohol and going on trips are not mutually exclusive in all interactions. In many instances listed above, priests provided their victims with alcohol while on an overnight trip or other excursion. Yet, alcohol and drug use was not reported on all trips; thus we chose to examine it as a separate technique. Allegations against 10 priests (62.5 per cent of the sample) suggest that they abused their victims while traveling. Oftentimes, victims reported going out-of-state to a cabin or condominium. These types of places were not the exclusive destinations of all abusive priests from Joliet. Some victims reported that abuse occurred on trips to Chicago and others detailed abuse that took place in-town but away from the church or rectory. Additionally, there are reports that some priests would convince minors to spend the night in the rectory.

Many of the allegations detail out-of-town trips. Details from the files suggest that Wisconsin— and sometimes Minnesota—was the preferred location for priests from Joliet, which is approximately 90 miles south of the Illinois-Wisconsin border. Many victims spoke of going to Wisconsin for fishing trips or a Friday fish fry; one priest had access to a condominium in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, a two-hour trip from Joliet. Other trips took place closer to Joliet. One victim talked about being abused in a cabin in Wonder Lake, Illinois (approximately 80 miles from Joliet)

and a different victim discussed abuse that took place in Itasca, Illinois (less than 40 miles from Joliet).

Not all abuse occurred in secluded cabins, cottages or condominiums. One priest frequently took boys to nearby Chicago, just 47 miles away. While barely a teenager, one victim said, 'the abuse occurred at least twice in Chicago hotel rooms'. Another victim presented a more detailed account of being taken to the Museum of Science and Industry followed by a hotel in Chicago; the victim reported that 'when he awoke, he had no clothes on … There was shaving cream on his stomach with a smiley face on it'. Meanwhile, a different priest did not take one of his victims outside the city limits. An affidavit details the priest's technique:

> [He] would often take me from my house to get a treat. On the way, he would stop on … an isolated dirt road … Once a police officer stopped and asked what was going on. [He] responded that he was a priest and he was hearing my confession. He would wear his collar while we were parked.

This victim was first abused by the priest at the age of five and it continued for approximately nine years; he claimed that 'abuse occurred on that road many times'.

These trips served several purposes for the offending priests. First, it gave them time to interact with their victims and build trust. Building trust is an essential part of the grooming process. But, the trips also allowed the abuser to seclude his victims away from parents, other potential guardians and a viable escape route. As one abuse victim wrote: '[his] MO [*modus operandi*] was to take me out of that physical environment and into one where he either has control or you would never run because there's no way home'.

Establishing relationships with parents

As seen in prior research on techniques of sexual grooming, there are documented instances in which nine accused Joliet priests (56 per cent) developed positive relationships with the parents of their victims. All evidence pointing to the development of these relationships is seemingly the same. A composite look at the way abusive priests ingratiated themselves with the families of their victims suggests the following: of their abusers, victims reported that their 'parents knew and trusted him'; and thought the priest 'would be a good mentor for their son'; and serve as a 'very good friend' of the family who would accompany them to social events like dinner or assist them 'financially or [by] doing favors for them and … gaining their confidence'. After confidence was earned, the priests 'sought and gained my parents' consent to participate in counseling and other activities', such as overnight fishing trips, dinners, ice cream outings and swimming trips to abandoned quarries. During one counseling session at the rectory that included alcohol, a priest 'took the initiative' to call one boy's mother claiming the session would run late and that the boy could spend the night.

A mother of one abuse victim wrote a letter to the Bishop expressing her anger. One passage in the letter suggests that she realized this pattern of behavior, albeit too late to prevent the victimization. The mother wrote: '[the priest] picked out the good kids of the parish whose families were very active in many things for the welfare of the parish. He was a pretty smart operator'. This summation adheres to known grooming tactics that offenders use when building relationships with parents in order to gain greater access to their victims.

Guise of friendship

Fifty per cent of the files ($n = 8$) contained statements suggesting that abusive priests would feign friendship, mentorship or guidance in order to gain the trust of their victims. Priests carried out this grooming tactic similar to the ways they developed relationships with parents. Those victimized reported that the abusers 'gained my trust, friendship, admiration and obedience', that

they were 'very understanding', and became mentors who would always make time for spiritual direction while doing 'something nice for the minor, [and praising] the minor'.

This behavior appeared in a variety of different ways. One priest would talk and laugh with the boys after school. A different priest learned that a boy liked fish, so he invited the child to his living quarters to see his fish before changing into shorts and asking the boy to sit on a chair with him. Another priest was counseling a 9-year-old girl who was concerned about her parents' marital issues. It is reported that, during this conversation, the girl was sitting on his lap and he kissed her three times, and that he had 'something hard in [his] pants'. The priest is quoted as saying: '[i]t's our secret; we're going to be real good friends'.

Two quotes from victim-survivors about separate priests stand out. The first quote is from a victim who was confused about his sexual identity and sought advice from a priest: '[t]he priest artfully and skillfully led me on a journey to find out if I was gay or not. When I finally got the nerve to admit to myself that he was seducing me, I ran'. The priest used the fact that the young man was vulnerable and seeking guidance as an opportunity to attempt sexual abuse. The second quote, from one of several brothers who were abused by another priest, details how their parents invited the priest over for dinner, which led to this:

> The priest always wanted to say good night to us. That was [his] routine. He'd come into the bedroom and as he was blessing us, speaking gently, talking as if he was concerned, at the same time he's grabbing us. He's fondling us.

This example ties gaining the trust of parents in with fabricating spiritual guidance and mentorship of the child victims in an effort to build a relationship through grooming.

Playing favorites

Another tactic used by some priests in Joliet was identifying favorite altar boys or other young people and then bestowing rewards or gifts upon them. This grooming technique was observed in six files (37.5 per cent). In one instance, a non-abusive priest reported that the abusive priest was known to 'have his favorites' and would not talk with them 'if they crossed him' or refused to go on trips with him. A different priest 'was known for selecting personal favorites among the middle school age … boys'. These boys were invited on trips, allowed to hang out in the rectory, and permitted to imbibe alcohol in the priest's presence. The minor who was victimized after a trip to the Museum of Science and Industry detailed above was described as 'an altar boy who [the priest] took a liking to'. A favored altar boy for another priest was invited 'to serve weddings in other towns' and then spend the night together in motels. Playing favorites is akin to the feigned friendships described earlier, though the experiences of two other victims highlight the psychological effects of this grooming procedure.

In an email, one victim wrote, 'I felt so lucky to have [the priest] there for me all the time. He treated me better than all the kids always'. A report in the file surmises that the priest was able to parlay the notion that the victim was favored in order to '[manipulate the victim's] emotions to gain control and obedience over him, thus ensuring his silence and creating an environment of confusion, guilt, shame, and other disorders, so that he could exploit [it] for his own personal gain'. Another example is equally as grave. In it, the victim described the depression and emotional dependence that he felt when the priest would 'pick some boys over me and leave me out'. Continuing, the victim noted: '[t]o further the abuse, he used favoritism amongst my peers and I would become worried and withdrawn'. When the victim was approximately 13 or 14 years of age, he told the priest about his depression and detailed the priest's response: '[h]is response was to ejaculate me in the car. "Do you feel better now?" he asked'.

Physical play

Wrestling, roughhousing and other forms of physical play were grooming tactics that five priests (31 per cent) from the Diocese of Joliet used to lower their victims' inhibitions and procure instant physical access to them. In one example, the priest would wrestle with his victims in a garage attic before physically abusing them. This was a common technique used by priests in their living quarters or in other areas on the Church grounds. In a couple instances, boys—usually altar boys—were invited to the rectory where they would arm wrestle, roughhouse or play 'mercy' with the priest. According to the statements in the unsealed documents, this often led to tickling, fondling and groping of the victims by the priest.

Gifts and other 'cool' stuff

There was evidence of gift giving in four files (25 per cent). In two instances, victims report receiving 'gifts' from the priests who abused them. They do not specify, though, the nature of the gifts. Details of the gifts the other priests gave were more specific. One priest gave fourth-grade boys Matchbox cars by placing them in their pockets during class. He also bought Dunkin Donuts and bicycles, and paid for boys to go to the movies with him. One parent reported: '[h]e had brought both our sons to that [movie theater] and touched them as one sat on one side of him and one sat on the other'. A fourth gift-giving priest gave his victim 'a new ten speed bike, a full size trampoline and a pool table'. Additionally, this victim disclosed the following: '[h]e gave me a very nice Army surplus tent and fondled me in it while he masturbated'. Finally, a different abusive priest had a lot of toys that he let his victims play with, 'every gadget, compass, radar detector … a cool blue police light in his car and radios and scanners, CBs, a motorcycle, walkie talkies, a motor home, a sauna in the house, he had a cool stereo'. Those who gave gifts were grooming their victims to like them and want to be around them, while the last offender gave the gift of access to his 'cool' stuff in order to lure the children to him.

Abuse and misuse of respect

In six instances (37.5 per cent), accused clergy used the innate respect afforded to them because of their vocation to sexually victimize children while avoiding suspicion and detection. For example, one victim 'felt unable to report [the abuse]' because his family 'held the clergy in inordinately high esteem'. On other occasions, victims claimed that the abusive clergymen had served as 'spiritual advisors' and 'spiritual leaders'. It was reported that one priest gained a victim's 'trust, friendship, admiration, and obedience', which served to condition the victim 'to comply with his direction and to look to him as an authority on all matters spiritual, moral, ethical'. The victim said that particular priest 'was a person of great influence and persuasion as a holy man and authority figure in my life'. In arguably the most damning quote, a district attorney from Illinois said that an accused priest 'used his power as a man of God to molest three 12-year-old boys and persuade them to stay silent about it', while also claiming that the trust and authority the priest possessed allowed him to 'entice these boys'. While abusing one's position of power has been used as a general sexual grooming tactic in the past, the inherent respect and admiration given to members of the clergy is specific to this category of sexual abusers. As seen in these examples, these priests were able to exploit the respect given to their clerical status in order to groom children and take sexual advantage of them.

Discussion

Results from this retrospective analysis of 16 unsealed priest personnel files from the Diocese of Joliet in Illinois suggest that sexually abusive priests follow patterns similar to other sexual offenders when grooming their victims; this is unsurprising. However, there is one major exception. Our analysis revealed that priests from this diocese would rely on the prestige and respect bestowed upon them as members of the clergy in order to avoid suspicion or ensure that their young victims did not report the abuse. Certainly, those in power from other professions can evade detection for similar reasons. But, it is clear that some priests who groom benefit from specific machinations that are unique to them. Because of this, and in conjunction with our overall

findings, we have developed an outline for a taxonomy of priest sexual grooming that—once further tested and refined—may help identify potentially abusive clergy as well as children in high-risk situations.

As outlined above, the grooming techniques used by abusive priests in Joliet follow similar patterns to those discussed in past research. Accused priests from this diocese provided alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs to their victims; this practice lowers the victim's inhibitions. Victims received various gifts from their abusers and accompanied the priests on trips throughout Illinois and sometimes into Wisconsin. Each of these techniques have been shown to lower the inhibitions of the victims or provide them with a false sense of security while in the presence of their abuser. Comparable to techniques depicted in prior literature, accused priests from Joliet slowly built relationships with their victims and their victims' families, specifically their parents. This allows the offender to manipulate the emotions of the victim and their family members. Then, as explained by McAlinden (2006), this leads to a tactic in which the abuser distorts the victim's emotions in a way that makes the victim feel more 'special' than others; essentially, the offender plays favorites. The seventh technique is the introduction of physical touching through wrestling and roughhousing that inevitably leads to tickling, massaging and further illegal behaviors. As stated, it is the eighth technique that provides the basis of a potential taxonomy of priest sexual grooming (see Table 1) that differentiates clergy offenders from other offenders: misuse and abuse of the deference and respect given to priests in order to avoid suspicion and coerce victims into silence.

Table 1: Proposed taxonomy of priest sexual grooming behaviors

Taxonomy	Purpose
Provide alcohol, cigarettes, and other drugs	Lowers victims' inhibitions, exploits curiosity, provides 'forbidden fruit,' and establishes the offender as 'cool' in the eyes of the victim.
Provide gifts	Helps build relationship with the victim and may induce the victim to want to spend more time with the offender.
Overnight outings and trips	Builds trust with the victim, secludes the victim, and makes escape more difficult.
Physical play	Lowers victims' inhibitions while establishing physical contact that builds to abusive behavior.
Guise of friendship	A relationship that may lead to increased trust and access that otherwise may not have been obtained.
Playing favorites	Manipulates the emotions of the victims, such as confusion or guilt, which allows the abuser to gain psychological control of the relationship.
Establish relationship with family	Earn trust of parents or other family members in order to gain access to the child and potentially avoid suspicion.
Abuse and misuse of respect	Take advantage of the respect bestowed upon clergy in order to avoid detection or suspicion while advancing inappropriate or illegal relationships.

Smith (2002: 381) notes that taxonomies 'classify items on the basis of empirically observable and measurable characteristics'. We contend that these eight categories of priest sexual grooming are both empirically observable and measurable. Now the onus is on future research to examine, refine and validate these behavioral taxa. Doing so may result in several positive outcomes for potential victims, their families, parish communities and society.

With proper education and training, children and others can learn to identify persistent red flags. For example, children should be taught that it is inappropriate for any adult to give them 'forbidden fruits', like alcohol and cigarettes. They should also be taught to question intentions of any such adult that attempts to give any such gifts, which McAlinden (2006) discusses, even a priest. However, children also should be told that they would not get in trouble if they tell another adult when they receive these items; this should be reinforced verbally as well as in practice. More difficult to identify are situations of inappropriate gifting of non-forbidden items, such as bicycles, tents and other goods that the data from Joliet included. In situations like these, parents and other adults should try to determine if one child or a group of children are receiving more attention than other children. If skeptical of the nature of the relationship, adults should ask the children if anything unusual is going on while paying particularly close attention to the demeanor and emotions of the children. If it is determined, or even perceived, that a priest is playing favorites, the issue should be discussed openly with the priest in a non-accusatory way in order to determine exactly what is taking place.

Further, children and their parents should be skeptical of adults who engage in physical play and other forms of touching. Priests should be told that tickling, massaging and roughhousing with minor children is not tolerated. There should be regular reminders and reinforcement of these rules. Adding to the difficulty of creating diocesan policy around some of these behaviors is determining the true nature of relationships. Much of what we have seen in the general grooming literature and in the specific findings from this diocese suggests that sexual abusers will manipulate relationships. Oftentimes, it is difficult to identify the manipulation in real time. Thus, the grooming categories of 'establishing relationships with parents', 'the guise of friendship' and 'misuse of respect' should be discussed with parishioners, but it would be difficult to build any type of policy or protocol around these techniques. Instead, children, parents and other parishioners should be encouraged to trust their intuition if they feel a situation like this has arisen and take proper action or precautions, if necessary.

To reiterate, potential victims of clergy sexual abuse and their families must be educated about the grooming tactics that offenders use in the commission of these crimes. Given the esteem directed towards priests because of their standing and status within Catholic communities, it makes sense that parishioners trust clergy. But, parishioners in general—and specifically parents with minor children—should be given pamphlets and be invited to information sessions in which these behaviors are discussed. Additionally, this information should be incorporated into the safe environment programs that dioceses across the US have created.

Limitations and future research

This study focused exclusively on unsealed personnel documents of 16 credibly accused priests from one Catholic diocese. Though our analysis uncovered empirical evidence that is comparable to existing literature about sexual grooming, limitations are present in any single-case study. First, because we only analyzed the files that were available, we are unable to generalize findings to other dioceses, other accused priests or other sex offenders. It is important to note, though, that the highest possible percentage of abusive priests in Joliet is 8.1 per cent, which is comparable to Terry's (2008) data that suggested 4 per cent of priests were sexually abusive between 1950 and 2002. Second, this study was a retrospective content analysis. Thus, it relied heavily upon our subjective interpretations of the data. Other researchers or research teams might have different interpretations of the data.

To ensure the validity of our findings, future research should replicate this study not only with the available Joliet documents but with other publicly available priest files as well. The taxonomy that we propose as a result of this research should be used in the examination of unsealed priest files in order to determine if it is specific to priests solely from Joliet or if it can be applied to sexually abusive priests from other dioceses. In addition, future research should strive to improve upon and revise these categories, if necessary. It is of the utmost importance that children, parents, teachers, priests, diocesan officials and other parishioners are able to identify potentially high risk grooming behaviors and report them to the proper authorities.

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