

Abstract

Sexual misconduct poses a significant systemic concern across numerous helping professions, including religious organizations. Researchers have focused on identifying risk factors for religious leaders who engage in sexual misconduct, developing effective interventions and treatment, and determining reactions of the local religious community affected. However, the implications of sexual misconduct for the religious leader's spouse have been largely neglected.

In the present study, researchers utilized a systemic approach to examine the wide-ranging experiences and psychological responses of the spouses of religious leaders who engaged in sexual misconduct. Data was collected and analyzed through a process of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998) using in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and collaborative holistic content analysis (Lieblich et al. 1998; Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Multiple rounds of consensus-based coding led to the identification of two simultaneous organizing structures. First, participant descriptions of their experience with sexual misconduct typically fit into three distinct chronological phases: before misconduct, during misconduct, and after misconduct. In addition to the chronological component, participant statements were also grouped according to the systemic level being referenced.

The Impact of Sexual Misconduct on the Spouses of Religious Leaders: An Ecosystemic Model

Samuel B. Rennebohm, M.S., Fiona B. Kurtz, M.S.,
Jessica A. Carlile, Ph.D., Heather Lucas, M.S.,
& John W. Thoburn, Ph.D.

Seattle Pacific University

Introduction

Religious leader sexual misconduct broadly impacts individuals, family systems, and religious communities, creating the need for specialized psychological support to facilitate recovery for those affected. **Spouses** of religious leaders warrant research and clinical focus not only because of their proximity to the misconduct but also because of their unique perspective as intimate partners, their place within the family system, and their prominent role in the wider community. From the perspective of ecosystemic theory (Thoburn & Sexton, 2016), clergy sexual misconduct is likely to permeate the religious leader spouse's intrapersonal, interpersonal, and communal systems.

Defining Sexual Misconduct

Religious leader sexual misconduct encompasses a broad category covering a range of sexual behaviors considered to be outside of what is morally acceptable by their religious community. This may include components of extramarital sexual behavior or emotional intimacy, use of pornography for sexual gratification, or nonconsensual or manipulated sexual activity.

Eco-systemic View of Relationships

Spouses of religious leaders live and work within an ecology of relationships; their world consists of an intrapersonal life, interpersonal relationships (including their marital relationship), and engagement with religious and nonreligious communities. Their experience with clergy sexual misconduct similarly occurs within this ecological milieu; intrapersonal interpersonal, and community factors influence one another across time to shape the particular experience of misconduct.

Qualitative Method

Because our study explored complex interactions, patterns, and relational elements in a unique population, we utilized a qualitative methodology to effectively examine the multifaceted influence of clergy sexual misconduct on the spouse (Gilgun, 2009).

Data Collection

Information was gathered via narrative inquiry process of conducting and analyzing one-on-one interviews to emphasize the collection of in-depth chronological data within each participant's personal experience while simultaneously building a broad understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Creswell et al., 2007).

Analysis

We utilized a team-based, consensual approach to conduct this analysis, following guidelines for iterative, audited rounds of coding outlined by Hill (2012).

Sample

Seven participants (5 female, 2 male) met criteria as spouses of religious leaders who engaged in sexual misconduct. All seven participants identified as members of the Protestant-Christian religion.

Results

Three systemic levels—intrapersonal, dyadic, and contextual—provide the overarching structure (Level 1) for organizing participant comments. Participant descriptions fit into three distinct chronological phases (Level 2): pre-misconduct, during the misconduct, and post-misconduct. In this organizational structure, the chronosystem acts as an interactive mechanism that connects all subsystems.

Level 1: Sub-system	Level 2: Time point	Category
Intrapersonal	Pre-Misconduct	Previous Developmental Experiences
		Role of Being a Clergy Spouse
	During the Misconduct	Proximal Responses to the Misconduct
	Post-Misconduct	Healing and Growth
		Clergy Spouse Personal Faith
	Dyadic	Pre-Misconduct
During the Misconduct		Discovery/Disclosure
		Clergy Misconduct Behavior and Response
Post-Misconduct	Marital Dynamics after the Misconduct	
Contextual	During the Misconduct	Immediate Familial Response to the Misconduct
		Extended Family's Role and Impact
		Church Environment's Influence
		Acute Obstacles to Support Resources
	Post-Misconduct	Utilization of Support Resources
		Long-term Impact on Family System
		Enduring Beliefs about the Church and the Church Environment

Discussion

The emergent organizational structure provided an optimal basis for identifying patterns of reciprocal influence across systems, as well as developing informed proposals for a process of recovery and healing.

At the intrapersonal level, predominant participant themes included: (a) the pressure inherent in the role and identity of being a clergy spouse, (b) the cascade of emotional, cognitive, and physiological distress in immediate response to the misconduct, (c) the ongoing suspicion of the clergy spouse's capacity to relapse, and (d) the process of personal healing and growth.

At the dyadic level, prominent themes included a history of marital dysfunction prior to the misconduct, denial and consistent lying by the clergy about misconduct behaviors, and the repair or dissolution of the marriage.

Two impacted contextual systems emerged in spousal narratives: (1) the family system and (2) the church system.

In relation to the family system, prominent themes included increased division between the parent and child units of the family due to secrecy surrounding misconduct, clergy collusion with and manipulation of children, and structural changes following the misconduct.

The participants made frequent reference to the wider church system in which misconduct took place. Prominent themes included the significant church demands placed on the clergy and clergy spouse, criticism and ostracizing of the clergy spouse, inconsistent administrative responses to misconduct, and opportunities for spiritual healing.

Implications for prevention and recovery

The findings of this study inform mental health treatment or care for clergy spouses in three distinct ways:

- 1) results support the need for clergy couples to be wary of the predictors and warning signs (i.e., other problem behaviors and family turmoil) of clergy sexual misconduct prior to its occurrence in order to seek preventative care.
- 2) Findings highlight the significance of clergy spouses' interpersonal and contextual systems, which in turn indicates the importance of interventions following misconduct that extend beyond the individual to address their marriage, their families, and their wider communities
- 3) Data reveals the value of commonly used individual interventions for this population, specifically protective practices, (e.g., journaling, use of prayer and faith, vocational goals/identity) and post-misconduct interventions such as restructuring maladaptive thoughts around self-blame and self-criticism, the provision of psychoeducation around normative emotional experiences and expression, and acceptance of personal circumstances and commitment to present values.