

# *Cognitive Distortions of Religious Professionals Who Sexually Abuse Children*

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*This study used grounded theory to investigate the cognitive distortions in the self-report statements of 14 clergymen who had sexually abused children. These clergy were residents at an assessment and treatment center for child molesters. The content of the offenders' cognitive distortions was identified and categorized into thematic groups. These categories were found to relate to the various stages of the offending cycle. A tentative model was generated that illustrates the relationship between the categories and the hypothesized sequence of thought facilitating the initiation and maintenance of sexually abusive behavior. In addition, a number of cognitive processes were identified as contributing to offenders' beliefs. The study also revealed that the clergymen used their religious role and relationship with God within their distorted beliefs. These beliefs were predominantly concentrated in the areas of giving themselves permission to offend, denial of likelihood of getting caught, reduction of guilt after offending, and maintaining a positive sense of self.*

*Keywords: child sexual abuse; sex offenders; cognitive distortions; clergy; religious professionals*

**Perpetrators of child sexual abuse** can be found among the clergy of various churches. Yet although it is recognized that clergy of all denominations, in different countries (e.g., Frazee, 1993), commit such crimes, most of the literature in this area is focused on the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States (e.g., Berry, 1992; Jenkins, 1996; Rossetti, 1990, 1996). When cases of clergy malfeasance emerge, they become very high profile and receive a great deal of media attention, generating immense public animosity toward the perpetrators. Plante (1996) has proposed four reasons why priests

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receive so much media attention and arouse such hostility. First, it is due to the spiritual, moral, and ethical pinnacle on which such men are placed, leading to an expectation of the highest level of behavior. Second, unlike leaders from other religions, they take a vow of celibacy, and consequently, sexual contact of any kind is prohibited. Third, the perceived secrecy of the Roman Catholic Church as an organization casts a level of intrigue about anything associated with it. Finally, the church's failure to protect minors from abuse and its seeming inability to deal with the problem generate outrage among the general population.

Indeed historically, the Catholic Church's response has been to initiate surreptitious parish changes for offending priests (Blanchard, 1991; Lasser, 1991), which has only served to exacerbate the problem by giving the priest access to more unsuspecting victims and their families. These problems have been acknowledged by the Catholic Church in the United States, Canada, and England and Wales, for instance, with national child protection policies now in place. Very few systematic, well-controlled studies have been carried out to ascertain the actual prevalence of clergy child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church (Kelly, 1998) or indeed any other church. The most comprehensive study in England and Wales found that between 1995 and 1999 allegations were made against 1 in 50 of 5,600 Catholic priests, with 21 ending in a conviction (Nolan, 2001). Such national figures are currently not available in the United States, although perhaps the most systematic study to date found that in the archdiocese of Chicago between 1963 and 1991 allegations of sexual abuse were made against 59 of the 2,252 priests serving within this time span, and 41 of the allegations were found to be credible under civil law standards of proof (Dempsey et al., 1992, cited in Kelly, 1998). However, although not all allegations are of course founded, such figures are still likely to represent an underestimate due to the underreporting of sexual abuse in general (Russell, 1984).

Despite their high media profile, there has been little systematic research of clergy child molesters, partly because of a lack of access to the priests and partly owing to a general lack of data on them (Connors, 1992). Most of the literature in the area has either concentrated on the church structures that facilitate the opportunities for child abuse to occur and continue (Burkett & Bruni, 1993; Krebs, 1998) or investigated the special role of the priest imbued with power and trust (Rossetti, 1990, 1996). Although such knowledge is undisputedly invaluable, it is also vital to study the individual perpetrators themselves. A psychological understanding of clergy child molesters will help in the treatment of these men and contribute to the prevention of child sexual abuse within the church.

It is of particular interest and importance to try and gain an insight into how men of such supposedly high moral ideology can perpetrate such hurtful and abusive acts against children. However, once more, there has been very little work that directly considers the beliefs or the cognitive distortions (Abel, Becker, & Cunningham-Rathner, 1984) of clergy child molesters. The most concerted effort was been conducted by Thompson, Marolla, and Bromley (1998), who collected narratives of Catholic priests accused of child abuse from four books in the area (Berry, 1992; Burkett & Bruni, 1993; Connors, 1992; Sennott, 1992) and 257 press reports on such cases. The authors duly noted the methodological drawbacks associated with their source materials but also pointed out the difficulty in gaining direct access to this group of offenders. Their study did not attempt to categorize the cognitive distortions of clergy, per se, but considered the cognitive distortions by any person involved in the abuse, clergy or victim, and also those responsible for reporting it. Despite the methodological problems, the study did reveal some factors that merit further investigation.

From the narratives, using a framework devised by Scott and Lyman (1968), Thompson et al. (1998) constructed two broad types of categories: disclaimers and accounts. Disclaimers were defined as “prospective interpretations for their [the priests’] behaviour toward the children with whom they are sexually involved. . . [which serve to] cushion an anticipated reaction when some behaviour is about to be discovered” (Thompson et al., 1998, pp. 176-177). Accounts are retrospective interpretations of occurrences and defined as “a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behaviour—whether the behaviour is his or that of others, and whether the proximate cause for the statement arises from the actor himself or from someone else” (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 46). Thompson et al. also used Scott and Lyman’s (1970) further division of accounts into “justifications” and “excuses,” both of which serve to shift the responsibility from the offender and amount to the cognitive content of clergy offenders. They defined an excuse as “an admission that the act in question was bad, wrong or inept, coupled with a denial of full responsibility” and a justification as “an admission of full responsibility for the act in question, coupled with a denial that it is wrongful” (Scott & Lyman, 1970, p. 93).

Given the current lack of knowledge of the beliefs of clergy sex offenders, our own investigation has three aims: first, to identify the cognitive content of the distortions religious child molesters hold that facilitate their sexual abuse of children. Studies of offenders’ beliefs about their sexual behavior have found that child molesters tend to sexualize children, perceiving them not only as wanting sexual involvement with adults but also as initiating the involvement. Offenders also tend to minimize or deny the resultant harm to

the children (Abel et al., 1989; Hayashino, Wurtele, & Klebe, 1995; Stermac & Segal, 1989). Second, our study aims to identify the role of cognitive processes in forming the cognitive distortions. The concept of cognitive process refers to the information-processing strategies employed by sexual offenders, that is, how preexisting beliefs shape and affect subsequent judgments and behavior. As Spencer (1999) among others has demonstrated, many offenders pass through a similar process or cycle of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors when sexually abusing a child, although the content of the cycle's components is unique to the individual. It should also be acknowledged that cycles of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors and styles of cognitive process are not peculiar to sex offenders, just the content of the thoughts and the behavior that the cycles elicit. In our study, we have tried to integrate the cognitive content and cognitive processes of clergy sex offenders into a specific offending cycle. Our study also aims to identify the role of the religious beliefs themselves within the cognitive distortions of religious child molesters.

## METHOD

### Sample

A nonrandom, purposive sampling method was used to select the 14 religious participants included in this study. The participants had attended a residential treatment center for male child abusers in the United Kingdom that is of cognitive behavioral orientation. Thirteen participants completed a 4-week assessment and at least 6 months of treatment, with the remaining participant only attending assessment.

*Religious* participants are defined as those who have chosen a Christian religious career. The sample comprises 11 Catholic priests, 1 Protestant vicar, and 2 Christian missionaries. Although the vicar and the missionaries do bring slightly different dynamics and slightly different religious viewpoints, the differences were not considered significant enough to exclude them from the study. One missionary was actually married at the time of his offenses and was abusing his own daughters. Despite this, due to his religious convictions, his data were still considered relevant for the purposes of the study. The participants' ages ranged from 34 to 74 years old. In all, 10 participants offended against boys only, 2 against girls, and 2 against both boys and girls. The age range of the participants' victims was 4 to 17 years old.

### Data Analysis

The data were collected from the “pro-offending thinking” section of participants’ assessment and therapy work folders. The work folders are complementary to the therapy sessions and are used to help the residents individually (although sometimes in collaboration with a staff member) reflect, explore, and record the issues raised throughout their assessment and therapy at the clinic. The pro-offending thinking section of the work folders required participants to try and identify the beliefs that facilitated their sexually abusive behavior. Although it is stated in the exercise that these beliefs may occur before, during, or after offending, the participants did not record their pro-offending beliefs in any particular order. Residents provide informed consent for their work folders to remain as property of the clinic and be accessible to all its employees.

The data were analyzed using the qualitative research method of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The essence of grounded theory is that a theory emerges or is generated from some data, and therefore, the theory is “grounded” in the data. The approach is inductive, in that it is “discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23). The intent is to develop an account of the phenomenon that identifies the major constructs, or categories, their relationships, and the context and process, thus providing a theory of the phenomenon that is much more than a descriptive account (Becker, 1993). It is argued that the researcher should let “the substantive guiding theory emerge from the data because no a priori theory could possibly encompass the multitude of realities that are likely to be encountered” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 4).

The grounded theory method was considered the most appropriate for this project because of the lack of research in the area. Thus, the method’s inductive nature would generate the major constructs, their relationship, and the context and process in which they exist. It therefore brings the investigation in line with the important cognitive content and process distinction. The method also allows for the construction of a tentative model that can help us in understanding the pro-offending cognitions of religious offenders.

Each of the participants’ accounts was numbered, and every relevant phrase was coded and allocated to a theoretical category. A relevant phrase was any phrase referring to an offender’s pro-offending cognitions. New categories were generated as each new concept was encountered. The method of constant comparison in grounded theory requires continual sifting and comparison of elements throughout the project’s lifetime. Thus, splitting, merging, or renaming categories occurs throughout. Grounded theory is not an

exercise to consider the incidence of any particular aspect within a category but aims to collect both similarities and diversities within a potentially significant concept. When additional data no longer produced further insights, the category was considered to have become “saturated.” The related categories were then sorted and grouped. Links were made between them and represented diagrammatically in the form of a flow chart.

## RESULTS

Ten categories of cognitions were found to be used by religious professionals to facilitate the initiation of the sexual offenses and to maintain the offending behavior once it had been established. Table 1 represents the cognitive content of the offenders’ distortions.

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed relationship between categories of cognitions elicited from the religious offenders. It is suggested that this represents the cognitive process the religious offenders go through and which facilitates the initiation, the acts, and the maintenance of the sexually abusive behavior. The model indicates that these religious offenders use religion-related beliefs prior to the sexual acts to enable them to overcome inhibitions to offend and also after they have offended to minimize the effects of their offending, to reduce any guilt associated with these offenses, and to maintain a positive self-image. Although this sequence of thought processes provides a general model, it should be recognized that the content of each stage of the process is specific to the individual offender.

### Preoffense Cognitions

The findings suggest that the clergymen cite as their reasons to offend various motivations, such as unmet needs. Although these motivations may not in themselves be distorted (e.g., “I want/need sexual gratification”), the distortion occurs in the belief that those needs should be met by sexual acts with a child (e.g., “Young people give me a decided lift”).

Once offenders have a motivation to offend, they justify and rationalize the possibility of sexual acts with children, and the distorted beliefs they hold tend to help overcome any inhibitions against offending. Offenders were found to hold selective beliefs about sexual acts that made them more inclined to commit sexual offenses against children (e.g., “Sexual activity with a child is not all that bad. It is no worse than an extension of natural sexual experimentation”). Offenders also tended to select particular aspects of religious, cultural, and/or moral values to support/justify sexual acts with

**TABLE 1: Categories of Cognitions**

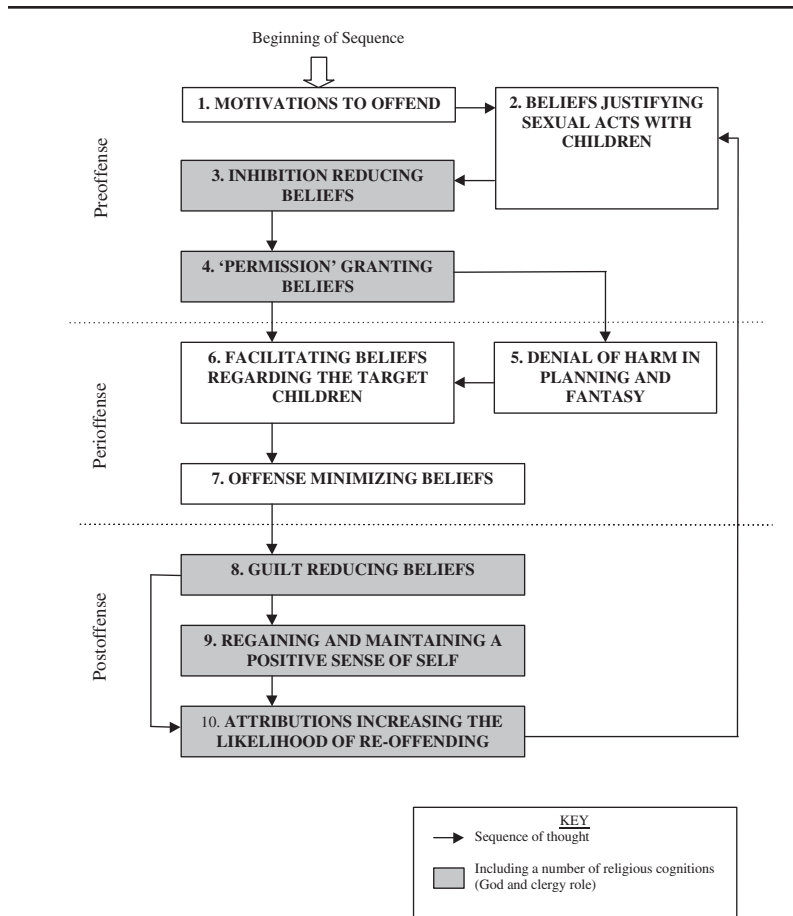
<i>Number</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example</i>
1	Motivations to offend	Offenders' perceptions of needs met by the sexual offenses	"I'm feeling down; I need cheering up." "Something is missing in my life which can be resolved by being in the presence of and abusing boys."
2	Beliefs justifying sexual acts with children Beliefs about sexual acts that predispose the perpetrators to commit sexual offenses Beliefs about children and sex (general) Religious, cultural, and/or moral values that support/justify sexual acts with children	Beliefs that make sexual acts with children socially and morally acceptable	"It is not really abuse, no actual penetration and no violence; they are not harmed and/or affected." "That it was love and physical expression of affection rather than sexual abuse."
3	Beliefs about other adults Inhibition-reducing beliefs Beliefs that the offense will be the last, and he will be able to control himself Beliefs related to the denial of likelihood that a child would tell or be believed "Permission-granting" beliefs	Beliefs related to reducing inhibitions against initiating a sexual act with a child	"No one will find out." "I would go to a priest and confess my sins and promise I would not do it again."
4	Denial of harm in planning and fantasy	Beliefs related to giving self "permission" to engage in sexual acts with children	"As a priest, everything is alright." "I work so hard. I get so lonely. I need something back for myself; [the victim] understands that."
5	Denial of harm in planning and fantasy	Beliefs related to denial of any potential harm in acts related to the process of choosing a child and rehearsal of sexual acts with children in fantasy	"I'll just observe him for a few seconds. If I see an opportunity, I'll smile at him and simply say 'hello.' If he should smile at me, I'll smile back. Surely, there is no harm." "Fantasies are safe; they are only in your head."

(continued)

∞ **TABLE 1: (continued)**

<i>Number</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example</i>
6	Facilitating beliefs regarding the target children Beliefs related to the target children Beliefs developed as a result of abusers' manipulations of their target children that facilitate the offending Offense-minimizing beliefs	Beliefs about the target children that facilitate the choice of a particular child and the offending behavior against him or her  Beliefs that minimize the seriousness of the actual offenses	"Teenage boys are full of sex, and they want it." "The boy likes me, therefore I can abuse him."  "It is only sexual intercourse within marriage. What I'm doing is not sex. Touching is not sex." "This is not sex. It is intimacy, and I really need it." "If I hadn't done all I had for him, he would be in worse trouble and worse company." "God has called me to be a priest. I believe this fully. When he called me, he knew what I was like, what my needs were, and how I could have them met." "Being kind and caring [fatherly] will compensate for the abuse." "How could a person who does such good possibly hurt anyone, least of all a child who everyone sees me helping in so many ways." "How could it be that bad if He [God] allows it!?" "Reinforcing the conviction that no harm can come from such sexual activity by referring back to previous [undetected] events."
7			
8	Guilt-reducing beliefs Reduction of responsibility due to external forces Postabuse denial/minimization of harm to victim	Beliefs that minimize the perpetrator's self-image as a culprit	
9	Regaining and maintaining a positive sense of self	Beliefs that reassert a positive self-image and enhance self-esteem	
10	Attributions increasing the likelihood of reoffending	Attributions made to not being caught that increase the likelihood of offending again	





**Figure 1: Flowchart Showing the Relationship Between the Categories and the Tentative Sequence of Thought Processes**

children (e.g., “It is okay, especially for a priest, to teach about sex, including practically”). These preexisting attitudes and beliefs held by the offenders influenced their subsequent information processing, judgments, and behaviors.

Of course, holding beliefs that justify sexual acts with children is not sufficient to actually initiate the behavior. Most offenders have inhibitions against sexually abusing a child related to societal perception that this is wrong and their fears of being caught and punished. The results of this study indicate

that such inhibitions tend to be reduced because offenders exhibited a denial of the likelihood that a child would tell or be believed, and often, this would be due to the offender's perception of trust and power as a priest (e.g., "I will never be suspected because I am a concerned, hard working, and good priest").

The findings demonstrate that these clergy offenders held beliefs related to giving themselves "permission" to engage in sexual acts with children. These beliefs are the triggers to offend: for example, the belief of entitlement to the behavior and the perception of self as unrewarded and, therefore, deserving of a reward such as sexual gratification. The powerful position of the priest and the demands of the role are emphasized in such beliefs (e.g., "I have a right to love and affection because I spend my life doing good for others"; "As a priest, everything is alright").

### **Perioffense Cognitions**

Here, it is hypothesized that once the "decision" has been made to offend and particular targets have been selected, offenders start planning and fantasy rehearsal increases. Offenders tended to deny any potential harm in acts related to the process of choosing a child and rehearsal of sexual acts with children in fantasy (e.g., "I'll just observe him for a few seconds. If I see an opportunity, I'll smile at him and simply say 'hello.' If he should smile at me, I'll smile back. Surely, there is no harm"; "Fantasies are safe; they are only in your head").

The beliefs the offenders hold about target children facilitate the choice of a particular child and the offending behavior against him or her. For example, some offenders perceive the age of the victim as influencing the choice of that child as a target as well as minimizing the harm that is done to the child or justifying the sexual acts against him or her (e.g., "By hugging them before puberty, I was doing no harm"). In addition, this shows that the offenders constructed an interpretation around the children's responses to their own grooming of target children that was consistent with those children wanting sexual contact rather than what offenders appeared to be offering them, such as time, affection, attention, and/or friendship (e.g., "Thinking that if he came with me that it was some sort of consent to whatever I wanted to do or wanted him to do").

Once the target has been found, groomed, and manipulated, the sexual acts are carried out with beliefs that minimize the seriousness of the actual offenses (e.g., "It is not really abuse, no actual penetration and no violence; they are not harmed and/or affected"). Such cognitive distortions minimizing the sexual acts feed into the offender's minimization of the fact that he is cul-

pable of a sexual offense. It should be noted that no religion-related beliefs were found during these stages of the offending process.

### **Postoffense Cognitions**

The findings indicate that the clergy offenders frequently used their religious beliefs and role as the basis of cognitive distortions during the postoffense stage. The beliefs these offenders hold that help reduce guilt cluster around reducing their own responsibility for their behavior by attributing it to external forces, such as to the victim or to their own negative childhood experiences. It may also involve attributing blame and responsibility to God (e.g., "I believed that as God forgave me my sins, he would one day perform a miracle and change me. This 'responsibility' was His, and He had called me and accepted me how I am"). Another cluster of beliefs reduce guilt by denying or minimizing the harmful effects of the abuse or by perceiving the abuse as "helping" the victim in some way. Some perpetrators hold the perception that God will let no harm come to the victim (e.g., "He will look after this particular child and see that it comes to no harm; it will have his special protection").

If, in this way, the offenders can convince themselves that no harm will come to the children, it is proposed that this helps to remove the belief that they are actually sex offenders. This is also facilitated by other cognitive beliefs, such as compartmentalization (e.g., "This part of my life I can put into a compartment, close the door, and deny it exists"), and also by beliefs that allow offenders to regain and maintain a positive sense of self (e.g., "I am a person of peace"). Offenders' perception of God as understanding and forgiving and the effect of their priesthood contributed significantly to this (e.g., "He [God] allows the 'good' and the 'bad'; he allows the offending because of all the good I do").

The findings show that these perpetrators make attributions related to why their offenses have not been detected, which serve to reinforce their beliefs relating to sexual acts with children. These attributions relate to conclusions of the lack of harm to the victims and also to the lack of "divine intervention" (e.g., "reinforcing the conviction that no harm can come from such sexual activity by referring back to previous [undetected] events"; "How could it be that bad if He [God] allows it!"). Such postoffense attributions deriving from lack of detection appear to fuel the beliefs that justify sexual acts with children and consequently the likelihood that if there was again motivation to offend, sexual offenses against children would again be perpetrated.

## DISCUSSION

This study revealed that clergy child sex offenders, like other child molesters, hold extensive cognitive distortions throughout their offending cycle. The cognitive distortions fall into 10 categories that relate to stages throughout the offending behavior, from distorted beliefs prior to offending to distortions about the choice of victims and the acts themselves and through to postoffense distorted beliefs. This study also revealed that a number of the distorted beliefs that facilitated and maintained the clergymen's offending involved their religious role and relationship with God. It is of interest that these distortions were concentrated in preoffense and post-offense stages.

The study also found that religious offenders, like nonreligious offenders, tend to sexualize children, perceiving them as wanting and even initiating sexual involvement, and denying and minimizing harm to the victim. The content of many of the distortions is also consistent with factors that have been found to be related to sexual offending in general, such as high levels of emotional loneliness (e.g., Ward, Hudson, Marshall, & Seigert, 1995), emotional congruence with children (e.g., Howells, 1979), and an external locus of control (e.g., Fisher, Beech, & Browne, 1998). The cognitive distortions derived from this study can also be seen to be broadly consistent with the findings of researchers who have previously tried to group cognitive distortions of nonclergy sexual offenders (e.g., Neidigh & Krop, 1992; Pollack & Hashmall, 1991). However, the distorted religious beliefs collected in this study could not necessarily be encompassed by such taxonomies.

This cognitive content provides us with the basis for understanding the clergy offenders' behavior. Yet it is only when the relationship between these cognitions is elucidated and the sequence of these thought processes is considered that a more complete understanding of the offenders' behavior can be gained.

For example, the religious offenders were found to hold beliefs justifying sexual acts with children. Such preexisting beliefs lead to information being interpreted in an expectancy consistent manner and also to the maintenance of existing beliefs (Johnston, 1995). Ward, Hudson, Johnston, and Marshall (1997) stated that social information processing deficits at this stage predispose an offender to misinterpret a victim's behavioral cues and emotions. For instance, offenders in this study commonly held the preexisting belief that sexual acts equate to love and affection (e.g., "I did believe that 'love' implied giving attention and comfort to someone and experienced in a sexual manner"). This means that an offender is likely to see a child who spends time with him (owing to the child's role and through being groomed by the offender) as returning that love. The offender perceives a "relationship" with

that child and an expression of love in a sexual manner (e.g., “Sex with a child was okay because I love them and that love was returned”; “He hasn’t said ‘no’ before, so he’ll be happy to do it again”). Indeed, the targeting and grooming process seems to contribute strongly to the offenders’ beliefs and misinterpretations, bringing the child’s behavior in line with their preexisting beliefs and vice versa. Offenders not only selectively attend to information from the victim but also to various sociocultural factors, as has been reported by Hartley (1998) in her investigation into the cognitive distortions of incest offenders. These contribute to establishing the preexisting beliefs and serve the offenders’ unmet needs and motivations to offend. In this study, offenders held religious, cultural, and/or moral values that supported and/or justified sexual acts with children (e.g., “Sexual activity with a child is not all that bad. It is no more than an extension of natural sexual experimentation”).

It seems of particular interest that no religion-related beliefs were found during the peri-offense stage of the offending process. This suggests that cognitive deconstruction (Baumeister, 1989) may be a particularly important process for the religious offenders at this stage in the offense cycle because it allows them to suspend their usual moral and personal standards, which constitute the very essence of their religion, in order to commit behaviors that are the antithesis of that religion. The role of the process of cognitive deconstruction in the abuse by religious offenders may therefore be an area worthy of further investigation.

Contrary to what may be expected with clergy offenders, the findings of the study revealed that their religious beliefs play an instrumental role in facilitating their offending, rather than inhibiting pro-offending behaviors. This is not obviously to imply that religious beliefs cannot act in a prohibitive way and indeed more often than not probably do. Rather, this study shows just how religious beliefs and the perception of a religious role can be distorted and used not only to remove the inhibitions to offend but also to actually become part of pro-offending thinking. To date, Thompson et al.’s (1998) study may be considered the most concerted effort to categorize the content of the cognitive distortions of clergy offenders. However, the Thompson et al. study and the present study draw their findings from very different sources, which makes a direct comparison difficult. Nevertheless, many similarities were identified.

For example, consistent with Thompson et al.’s (1998) study, Scott and Lyman’s (1970) justification grouping, denial of injury, was extensively used by the clergy offenders in this study. Some offenders minimized or even denied the negative or harmful effects of the abuse, while they maximized the perceived positive effects such as a perception of the abuse as helping the victim. In many cases, the use of religious beliefs to support this contention was

evident. Some offenders perceived that God would not let any harm come to the victim (e.g., "He will look after this particular child and see that it comes to no harm; it will have his special protection"). Through their religious role, offenders carried out compensatory behavior that they believed excused the abuse or made amends with God and/or the victim (e.g., "I would go that extra mile to help people, which minimized the awfulness of the abuse"; "that my offenses would be forgiven because of the effect of my priesthood, that 'they' would look at the good things: friendship, concern, care, etc. I'd therefore be excused for my failure, 'since we all fail' type attitude").

The effect of their priesthood and the good, hard work they do in the community are also likely to have the dual effect of helping prevent disclosure. This is because of the great reverence in which the clergyman are held (e.g., "I will never be suspected because I am a concerned, hard working, and good priest"). As Bottoms, Shaver, Goodman, and Qin (1995) have found, the child is more likely to perceive the clergymen's actions as unquestionable because of all the positive messages the child receives from his or her environment. Even if the child is motivated to disclose the abuse, the thought that he or she will not be believed is likely to inhibit the child, a belief also held and employed as a "permission-granting belief" by the offender (e.g., "Should a complaint be made, they wouldn't be believed").

There were also a number of inconsistencies between the present study and Thompson et al.'s (1998) study. Some of these inconsistencies are probably due to the different data sources of the studies. It may well be that whether it is an observer or the clergymen themselves presenting the account, people cognitively select the aspects of the account that fit most comfortably with their own perceptions. For example, although Thompson et al.'s study found the majority of excuses to be "defeasibility accounts" (i.e., attributions to psychological disorder, duress, illness, intoxication), this study revealed very few such accounts. This may be because it is less acceptable for the clergy to perceive themselves as impaired and less comfortable for observers to accept that clergy have biological drives, or use their religious beliefs to facilitate rather than inhibit sexual offending.

It is of particular interest that only one offender reported negative thoughts and feelings about children and no evidence was found of the perpetrators' belief of the victim as an aggressor and so deserving of harm. Therefore, as Thompson et al. (1998) also found, Scott and Lyman's (1970) justification of a denial of a victim was not prevalent in the present study. This may be because a negative belief about children would be so inconsistent with religious beliefs and roles that holding such a belief would undermine the core religious beliefs that they are in fact "good men" and their behavior is supported by, or allowed by, God.

The perpetrators were found to hold the belief that God permitted or understood the abuse and would forgive them of their sins (e.g., "God knows I'm weak and will forgive me"). Because God accepts the weaknesses of the clergyman and forgives him for the acts he has committed, religious beliefs do indeed allow the offenders to continue their behavior. Although they recognize that the abuse is a sin, the act of forgiveness facilitates the maintenance of a positive sense of self. The "special position" of the priest is used here with the perception of a "calling" by God to the role. This perception of a calling has the effect of investing a clergyman with a divine right to his behavior (e.g., "God has called me to be a priest. I believe this fully. When he called me, he knew what I was like, what my needs were, and how I could have them met"). For some offenders, a belief in the lack of divine intervention to prevent the sexual offenses served as evidence that God accepted the behavior, which in turn increased the likelihood of reoffending (e.g., "My family is fine and healthy, and I've not been struck by lightning"; "How could it be that bad if He [God] allows it!?" )

The church's past response in "dealing" with accused clergy offenders (Blanchard, 1991; Lasser, 1991; Plante, 1996) contributed to the perception of an approval of higher allegiances (Thompson et al., 1998). This study also indicates how the offenders' attributions related to not getting caught serve to increase the likelihood of reoffending, as well as providing the perpetrator with access to more unsuspecting children and their families. The historical approach of some of the church hierarchy in "overlooking" and "allowing" the offenses to continue served to fuel the attributions and act as a positive reinforcement to reoffending. Evidence from the work of Bottoms et al. (1995) and Isley and Isley (1990) would suggest that such low discovery and/or conviction rates also support the beliefs of the offenders.

## CONCLUSION

Our model thus indicates that religious professionals are like other sexual offenders in that they too hold many similar cognitive distortions throughout the cycle of offending, sexualizing children and minimizing and denying the harm caused by sexual activity between an adult and a child. In addition to these, religious offenders also use many religion-related cognitive distortions to facilitate their sexual offending. In particular, these beliefs occur at the preoffense and postoffense stages. During the preoffense stage, they enable the perpetrators to overcome inhibitions to offend, whereas during the postoffense stage, they facilitate the minimization of any negative emotional effects, help maintain a positive self-image, and through attributions of not

being punished, increase the likelihood of reoffending. Due to the similarities between religious child molesters and nonreligious child molesters, it may not be necessary for such religious offenders to undergo a special treatment program. However, it is of paramount importance that these additional and very influential religious pro-offending beliefs be challenged and restructured. There must be a recognition and appreciation of the importance of the offenders' spiritual life, with treatment aiming to refocus it and harbor the adaptive beliefs implicit in the offenders' religion rather than deny or chastise the religion itself.

Although this study used as its participants those who held a strong religious conviction, indicated through their choosing a career dedicated to their religion, it is also recognized that many other child molesters and indeed rapists may also have strong religious convictions. However, the findings of this study illustrate that the position of power, trust, and high esteem the participants' held provided an important dynamic facilitating their offending behavior. As a result, it is difficult to generalize the findings of this study of religious professionals to religious offenders who are not religious professionals. Thus, an investigation into the role of religious beliefs in other sexual offenders would seem to be an area worthy of further investigation.

A limitation of the study is that no formal procedure to assess the reliability of the categories of cognitive distortions was undertaken beyond a general agreement between the authors, although the face validity of categories was informally approved by a clinician with expertise in the field of child sexual abuse. Also, although the study has essentially taken a bottom-up approach, it could be argued that the data may have been generated from a top-down approach due to the role of the therapists in eliciting the pro-offending beliefs of the clergymen. The main problem with the data, as in any retrospective study of perpetrators' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors concerned with their offenses, is first that the offenders themselves are prone to recall bias and second that it can only be hypothesized at what stage in the offending process particular thoughts and feelings occurred. Another problem with the source material is that the data may not be considered to be a comprehensive collection of religious offenders' cognitions. The overlapping content derived from the source material further exacerbates the potential inaccuracy because it is not clear if a certain belief is used at one stage or another, or at both stages. It would at least be preferable to use a more dynamic and comprehensive post hoc data collection method (see Ward et al., 1995) from which the pro-offending beliefs could be extracted with more certainty regarding at what stage in the offending process they were prevalent. Another limitation of the study is the small sample of just 14 religious child abusers and its lack of uni-



formity. These two main limitations of the study are indicative of the problems related to investigating such a sample of offenders. This is due to the difficulty in gaining access to religious sex offenders and obtaining a large enough sample from which to generate representative findings.

This research represents the first attempt to categorize and provide a tentative model of the cognitions of religious offenders. Due to its limitations, it cannot be considered a comprehensive framework from which to understand the behavior of such offenders, but it can provide the basis for future research in the area.

Further research into the cognitive distortions and indeed all aspects of religious offenders is required. It is also vital that the problem of clergy malfeasance is not seen solely as one of the Catholic Church. A greater recognition of religious offenders in other religious denominations and different countries is required, with research expanded to these accordingly.

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