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Unchaste Celibates: Clergy Sexual Misconduct against Adults—Expressions, Definitions, and Harms

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Abstract: There is an ignored, misunderstood, and complex reality within the broader clergy sexual abuse scandal within the Roman Catholic Church (RCC)—that of clergy sexual misconduct against adults (CSMAA). Estimates and calculations of numbers of victims/survivors over the last half-century reach into the early millions. Furthermore, evidence reveals that CSMAA does produce many serious personal, relational, and practical harms. This article presents and discusses the many expressions of such harms. However, even with the evidence of such harms CSMAA events are, for the most part, still generally perceived as consensual affairs. Such a perception is challenged when CSMAA is contextualised within a professional misconduct framework, and even more so, when survivors thereof participate in the research. Furthermore, CSMAA is clearly not just one type of event. Accordingly, this article also presents a continuum of expressions of CSMAA to assist with perceptual accuracy of this issue along with an unambiguous definition of CSMAA.

Keywords: clergy; misconduct; sexual; adult; chastity; celibacy; harm; Catholic; professional sexual misconduct



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1. Introduction

From its very beginning, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) has declared itself to be ‘Apostolic’, meaning that its central authority and power lies with the “apostolic succession” or the ordination lineage going back to the original Apostles (ITC 1973). While celibacy was not at first required for the earlier diocesan/secular clergy, it was mandated during the Second Lateran Council of the RCC in 1139 (Leyser 2007). For already existing Religious/Monastic Orders, celibacy/chastity had been a self-imposed choice since their inception in the earliest years of Christianity (Dunn 2007; Rubenson 2007).

Out of these earliest of expressions and struggles of the fledgling RCC, it became firmly established that it was the apostolic descendants of the Apostles, in the form of bishops and Cardinals, and in the ultimate authority of the Pope, who held the central magisterial teaching power for the overall RCC (Doyle et al. 2006, pp. 8–9). This power or authority is in turn transferred to the general clergy in submission to the Pope and his bishop, for the teaching and guidance of the laity. As such, all clergy have been traditionally held up by the laity to be respected as leaders and teachers, representing Christ and the Pope, and to whom Catholics are required to submit in trust and obedience. To the general aura of chaste celibates can also be added Brothers and Sisters belonging to religious congregations and institutes such as the Marist Brothers and Sisters of Mercy.

Respect and trust of clergy are ascribed in part to such men due to their perceived holiness in giving up sex and marriage, to serve the ‘flock’ as caring and knowledgeable shepherds dedicated solely to doing so. This perception of clergy as holy, almost divine, found its definitional apex in the Council of Trent (1545 to 1563) when it declared that priests are

God's interpreters and ambassadors, empowered in His name to teach mankind the divine law and the rules of conduct, and holding, as they do, His place on earth, it is evident that

no nobler function than theirs can be imagined. Justly, therefore, are they called not only Angels, but even gods, because of the fact that they exercise in our midst the power and prerogatives of the immortal God (from The Catechism of the Council of Trent—1566).

(as cited by [Doyle 2006](#), p. 194; see also [Cozzens 2002](#), pp. 82–84; [Leyser 2007](#); [Yocum 2013](#), pp. 90–117)

While the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) downplayed this more deified definition, Pope John Paul II during his papacy (1978–2005) sought to reinstate it ([John Paul II 1992](#)). Pope John Paul II was responding to a lessening of respect for the role of the priesthood, even by the clergy themselves, and a growing struggle between conflicting concepts of what it meant to be a celibate. However, according to Professor of Canon Law, Brian Provost, clarifying the Vatican’s own documents concerning the nature and role of celibate clergy, there is no conflict:

the 1983 code [of Canon Law] makes it quite clear that clergy are bound primarily to perfect and perpetual continence [chastity], and to celibacy as a safeguard of this primary obligation. [However] even a celibate cleric can violate continence, and if so, sins against chastity.

([Provost 1992](#), p. 630)

What Provost is clearly acknowledging is the RCC’s mandating of chastity to protect the celibate state. However, of note for this article is the final line, where he acknowledges that clergy can and do “violate” and “sin” against this requirement.

As to how many clergy “violate” or “sin” against chastity is unknown. A.W. Richard Sipe, celibacy expert and psychotherapist to thousands of clergy in his time, has estimated that 50% of clergy¹ have actually abandoned the belief that chastity is necessary for celibacy and have normalised such a belief and the subsequent acting out thereof ([Sipe 1995](#), p. 61; [2003](#), pp. 44–50; [2016](#); see also [Bordisso 2011](#)). This conflict between ideal and reality must imbue a sense of cognitive dissonance in clergy so as to be able to live with such a contradiction. Such a contradiction then also inherently requires a culture of backstage and even underground secrecy to control the exposure of such clergy sexual activity, so as to maintain the myth of celibacy/chastity in general. It is within this culture of secrecy, Sipe claims, that CSMAA and indeed any expression of clergy sexual abuse, finds fertile soil in which to hide, to embed itself, take hold, and even flourish ([Sipe 2008](#)).

What this article will also, therefore, discuss is that in order to enable the continuance of this dissonant secret culture, it has been crucial that most clergy sexual activity be defined as merely consensual affairs requiring compassion, but not just consensual affairs. During the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse, when asked about adults being ‘abused’, Bishop Geoffrey Robinson stated that most of the men in the Vatican believed that “Probably it was the adult who was the instigator there” ([Royal Commission 2015](#), pp. 16047–48). There is little comprehension in such statements that clergy have great positional and personal power to manipulate victims into believing they are consenting and that such activity is also even ‘blessed by God’, because ‘God is love’ and, therefore, cannot be abusive. As a result, many victims of CSMAA are left in deep confusion and distress and, therefore, do not report CSMAA. Accordingly, the myth of the consensual affair, instigated by the other adult, continues as the dominant definition.

The gravity of the effects or harms produced by CSMAA, and this narrow and erroneous perception is still being minimised even in recent statements by Pope Francis regarding the sexual misconduct of the Archbishop of Paris, Michel Aupetit, with his secretary, many years ago; the Pope’s comment was that the archbishop’s “sin of the flesh” was “not that serious”, and that his mishandling of the case through pride was the more problematic issue ([Frishberg 2021](#)). Pope Francis may well be correct in this case’ however, what is missing is the secretary’s point of view concerning the sexual misconduct she experienced and how it affected her.

It is this lack of concern for those on the receiving end of clergy sexual activity and misconduct that lies at the heart of the research presented in this article. The overall

conclusion is that what makes CSMAA a grave issue is not that it is a ‘sin of the flesh’ so much as that, like its child abuse counterpart, it can and does produce serious harms, including extended harms resulting from survivors reporting their abuse to officials within the RCC.

One of the major conclusions of the research behind this article (de Weger 2016, 2020) was the role played by the absence of a comprehensive and contemporary, research-based, RCC-wide definition of CSMAA. Currently, there is very little appreciation of the more ‘professional’ elements of fiduciary duty and crossing professional boundaries, and no unambiguous resolution still as to the concept of vulnerability in the context of CSMAA, and general parish life (de Weger and Death 2017). To this end, following the Background section, this article will begin with an elaborated definition of CSMAA which, it is hoped, will help in providing a deeper appreciation of the realities of this issue and provide a basis for any following discussions.

2. Background

Background Research and Methods

Firstly, it needs to be acknowledged here that the two studies on which this article is based were exploratory ones which sought to provide some preliminary investigations and descriptions of the experiences of victims/survivors of CSMAA and the reporting thereof². As such, it is hoped these studies and the articles born from them will provide some foundation for further, more specialised and detailed quantitative and qualitative research studies: this issue is one in much need of such work.

When choosing CSMAA as my research topic, the question that needed to first be asked was whether CSMAA in the RCC is a relevant enough issue for in-depth research, i.e., was/is it harmful and do many adults experience it? In a short time, it became obvious that the answer to the relevancy question was a clear ‘yes’ for both elements. Indeed, it became clear that CSMAA may well “breed another crisis in the Priesthood” (Byrne 2010, p. 18). In 1995, regarding female victims, Sipe had also already warned that as myths about priests and women are exposed, and “a more accurate portrait of women’s treatment within the celibate/sexual system is delineated, the crisis in the church will expand with ever greater explosive force” (Sipe 1995, p. 114; see also Rossi 1993).

This present article is based on 10 years of researching this very misunderstood and suppressed reality within the RCC³. The research began with a research Master’s degree titled ‘Clerical sexual misconduct involving adults within the Roman Catholic Church’ (de Weger 2016). This was an exploratory mixed-method study utilising the responses of twenty-three women and six men who had experienced or were still experiencing clergy sexual misconduct as adults. These twenty-nine people volunteered to participate after reading invitations sent out to various social media platforms and Catholic-based online websites and magazines. Respondents were asked to complete an extensive survey but were also given frequent opportunities to provide freely written responses for those survey questions. This resulted in a great deal of highly informative qualitative data to compliment the more quantitative statistics and answers. In regard to the cases of CSMAA, many were historical cases, some recent and others were still current at the time (2015). As analysis of the responses progressed, three distinct themes emerged—Language; Power/Vulnerability; and Harm. The issue of the intersecting of Power/Vulnerability was further elaborated on in (de Weger and Death 2017).

The latest major study was a PhD dissertation titled ‘Reporting clergy sexual misconduct against adults to Roman Catholic Church authorities: An analysis of survivor perspectives’ (de Weger 2020). This time, a qualitative, in-depth interview approach was used. Six women and three men participated in those interviews and also provided documentation and written responses. While the findings of this second study are conceptually integrated into this article, a fuller analysis of those findings are the basis of a separate article (see de Weger 2022). The foci of this current article will be firstly, the element of

language surrounding CSMAA and how it is defined and why, and secondly, the findings and discussion surrounding the harms produced by CSMAA⁴.

One thing became very clear in the past ten years of research: CSMAA needs to be clearly and professionally defined so as to avoid unjust deflections of survivors who have experienced such abuses. The other significant issue that faced this researcher was the serious need to differentiate types of CSMAA and clergy sexual activities with adults (CSAWA) from the more clearly black and white criminality of child abuse.

3. Reframing CSMAA as *Professional Sexual Misconduct*

As shall be discussed, it is clear that so many of those who experienced CSMAA in [de Weger \(2016\)](#) were not engaged in mutually consensual ‘affairs’. Rather, they had been groomed and coerced into sexually servicing those clergy, or opportunistically abused by sudden and troubling attacks by clergy. Most of these clergy appeared to have no concern for the other person involved, nor that they were breaking their vows of chastity. For others who may have cared about their vocation to celibacy/chastity, what appeared to be happening was that they were experiencing difficulties in maintaining their vows for one reason or another. Either way, for all the other adults involved, the sexualisation of their contact by these clergy was completely unexpected and unwanted. As a result, for most participants their trust in clergy was deeply betrayed. When trust is betrayed in this manner, and especially in the context of the Church’s teachings on sex outside of marriage, for so many Catholics, clergy sexualising relationships produces serious harms. This was potently clear in the narratives of all but one of the participants in ([de Weger 2016, 2020](#)). Once one considers the accounts of the survivors of CSMAA and the estimates of numbers of survivors, it is difficult to see this issue as something relating only to lesser ‘sins of the flesh’ by a few wayward clergy ([Frishberg 2021](#)).

In the course of the research here, one major element that needed to be acknowledged and more clearly understood was the fact that clergy are *religious* professionals who gain intimate access to their ‘clients’ or parishioners ([Marshall 2004](#), p. 1926). They also belong to a very powerful institution that ordains them into that power and ministry. With such access and power comes enormous responsibility to always act professionally and in the fiduciary interest of those to whom they minister. However, there is still a great deal of ambivalence and ambiguity as to RCC responses to its own celibate and supposedly chaste clergy acting out sexually with adults ([de Weger and Death 2017](#); [Flynn 2018](#)). In line with other professions such as psychiatry, medicine, and law, the RCC needs a clear universal definition for its own professionals as to what constitutes clergy sexual misconduct. Presented below is a clergy-behaviour focused definition that has been derived from experts in professional standards across all institutions, but perhaps even more importantly, is also founded on the epistemic insights of those who have actually experienced CSMAA.

3.1. Definition

Professional/Clergy sexual misconduct occurs when professionals/clergy—whether male or female—misuse, abuse, take advantage of, or disregard—whether intentionally or through negligence—their positional and personal power, that they hold by virtue of belonging to a powerful institution or professional organisation, to target, over-power, groom, or confuse—whether subtly or forcefully—less positionally/personally powerful adults, for any form of sexual activity with them—whether legal/consensual or not—with little or no regard for the harm produced, or the effects that such harm may have on others⁵.

3.2. Elaboration

- Professional/Clergy sexual misconduct occurs when professionals/clergy—whether male or female . . .

Professionals are men and women in society who have been officially recognised or ‘anointed’ to provide services to the public in their chosen field ([Peterson 1992](#), pp. 11–16).

They have received this recognition and approval from their respective educational/legal/religious systems. They are also, for the most, members of organisations and bodies that guarantee their professionalism. Professionals in society are in general, highly regarded and given greater autonomy because of their training and the specialised services they provide (Schilit 1984, p. 20; Russell 1993, pp. 75–80; Muzio et al. 2016, pp. 142–43; Gabbioneta et al. 2019, pp. 1708–10). Clergy are society’s religious professionals (Shupe 1995, p. 41). Regarding RCC clergy, in accord with RCC teachings, clergy are men (and women) who have openly dedicated themselves to imitate the life and teachings of Jesus Christ in both ministry and lifestyle, including his celibacy/chastity (CCL 1983, pp. 42–45). While clergy operate as general ministers, many are also professionals in a secular sense of the word as well, e.g., psychotherapists.

- misuse, abuse, take advantage of, or disregard

I.e., violate expectations, blur, and overstep boundaries, experiment sexually, in contradiction to the laws/policies/codes of conduct of their profession, and the general expectations of their clients/the laity (Rutter 1989, pp. 160–64; Russell 1993, pp. 89–111; Toben and Helge 2013; Tschan 2014, pp. 1, 22–23).

- whether intentionally or through negligence

Intent is a crucial perceptual and legal element of wrongdoing that results in harm; however, forms of neglect or carelessness also result in harm (Jorgenson 1995, pp. 243–46; Villiers 1996; Toben and Helge 2013). Intent usually implies pre-meditation to consciously violate laws, codes, and expectations (e.g., see Rutter 1989, p. 163; Jorgenson 1995, pp. 246–47). However, CSMAA also includes actions resulting from a perpetrator’s belief (be it genuine or not) in sexual actions as being acceptable for spiritual or psychological ‘counselling’ reasons (Kennedy 2009, pp. 112–13). These are included simply because behaving in such a manner contradicts codes of conduct and general expectations.

- their positional and personal power, that they hold by virtue of belonging to a powerful institution or professional organisation,

Professionals are ordinary men and women who are accorded positional power by their relative institutions. Clergy also often have an element of personal power through personal charisma and given their influential ministries, being the “golden boys” of their communities (Rutter 1989, pp. 1–2; Benson 1994, p. 115; Tschan 2014, pp. 65–66).

- to target, over-power, groom, or confuse

This includes actions that may involve physical boundary breaches and/or psychological manipulation and confusion (Peterson 1992, pp. 72–104; Flynn 2003, p. 204; Garland and Argueta 2010, pp. 13–14; Garland and Argueta 2011, p. 410). With clergy misconduct this often occurs by using ‘spiritual’ persuasion to remold an abusive event into one ‘approved by God’. Grooming also relies heavily on a professional’s/clergy’s abuse of their expertise and authority to blur accepted boundaries and to deceive and confuse their ‘client’ (Garland and Argueta 2010, pp. 12–15).

- whether subtly or forcefully

This addition is especially needed in regard to CSMAA. In religious and even general professional contexts, subtlety is more common than force, as force is generally not needed in a context of deeply confused trust (Kennedy 2009, p. 131). However, recent definitions of what are considered “Canonical crimes” found in the Vatican’s *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* document do not clearly account for grooming, rather the only element needed according to this latest document is ‘force’ as in “forcing someone, by violence or threat or through abuse of authority, to perform or submit to sexual acts” (*Vos Estis Lux Mundi* 2019, Title 1, Art.1). While force obviously does occur within CSMAA events (see Kennedy 2009, pp. 13, 110, 123–24, 130, 144, 149–51; Reisinger 2022; The Pillar 2022), because of the power to groom and deceive, it does not seem to be as needed in religious contexts. Furthermore, however, there is also a more subtle form of force that can be used such as blackmail using professional/client-based in-depth knowledge of the client’s private life.

- less positionally/personally powerful and most often vulnerable adults,

In professional/clergy sexual misconduct, clients/laity are easy targets. For most, they have submitted themselves to the professional in order to benefit from their expertise. This is a context involving much vulnerability and trust, in and of itself, which can be easily exploited (Rutter 1989, pp. 25, 26). Indeed, the fact that people are in a permanent or temporary state of vulnerability is almost an omnipresent factor in CSMAA and has been shown in all the studies of CSMAA to date (Flynn 2003; Kennedy 2009; Garland and Argueta 2010; Byrne 2010; de Weger 2016, p. 128). Furthermore, in CSMAA, those who are often targeted or who fall victim to grooming are also often adults of the more naïvely trusting kind or younger in age and experience (Doyle 2006, p. 208; Tschan 2014, pp. 57–58; de Weger 2016, p. 76). Evidence shows that there are also large numbers of individuals who were previously abused as children seeking out professionals and clergy. Many of these, as a result of their abuse, suffer boundary and transference issues that can be taken advantage of (Peterson 1992, pp. 134–36; de Weger 2016, pp. 129–33).

- for any form of sexual activity with them

These include criminal rape, penetrative and non-penetrative sexual activities, through sexual harassment, to obscene phone calls, and sexting, to sexually suggestive jokes and conversations, to inappropriate hugging and grooming behaviours (Tschan 2014, p. 46; Loftus 1994, pp. 28–31). All are included in this definition because subtler behaviours are often masking grooming behaviours that are the first steps to more serious abuses (Bourke et al. 2012, pp. 2405–6; Garland and Argueta 2010, pp. 4–5). As well, all are capable of producing harm in their own right anyway (Loftus 1994, pp. 28–31; de Weger 2016, pp. 50–59, 151–76).

- whether legal/consensual or not

In professional/clerical relationships, because of positional and personal power imbalances, combined with the personal vulnerabilities that are almost always present in those seeking the help of the professional/cleric, or even mixing socially with them, issues of consent or 'legality' are rendered moot (Rutter 1989, pp. 21, 25; Celenza 1991, 2004, p. 216; Gross Schaefer 1994; Kennedy 2009, p. 46; Tschan 2014, p. 47, 185; MEP 2014, pp. 13–14). Tschan (2014, pp. 46–47) states that professional/clergy sexual misconduct, "from a legal point of view, always takes place in a seemingly consensual way, otherwise it would be labelled rape" or another legal term corresponding to a given action, e.g., sexual assault, indecent assault, sexual harassment.

- with little or no regard for the harm produced, or the effects that such harm may have on others.

Whether intentional or not, professional/clergy sexual misconduct produces trauma/harm for primary victims. However, it also produces harm for others in victims' lives (Rutter 1989, p. 16; Cooper-White 1990; Peterson 1992, pp. 105–40; de Fuentes 1999; Flynn 2003; Tschan 2014, pp. 29–43). With any definition of CSMAA, all harms produced must be acknowledged.

3.3. Summary

Sex is unexpected in a professional/client relationship (Tschan 2014, p. 47). Professional people exist to provide the service defined by the professional body to whom they belong. Those coming to such professionals do not expect the provision of those services to include sexual activity. What the above definition seeks to provide is a clear understanding of what constitutes CSMAA and even CSAWA. Doing so clarifies what is expected of clergy professionals by their institution and by the whole community. It also provides a more definitive scaffold around which victims can claim victimhood. Furthermore, such a definition presents a solid framework and language around which people seeking to report CSMAA can construct their case. However, one more step was deemed necessary for a more nuanced approach to CSMAA cases and the reporting thereof. Accordingly, the following continuum of expressions of CSMAA has been provided.

4. Unchaste Celibates—A Continuum of Expressions and Severity

While it is clear that there are many clergy engaging in sexual activity with adults, unlike clergy child sexual abuse which is always a ‘crime’, CSAWA/CSMAA has much less clarity, with victims often, therefore, able to be dismissed. The definition in the previous section and the following continuum of expressions of CSMAA, within an overall harms-based approach to clergy sexual activity presented below, were all deemed necessary to counter-balance this anomalous ambiguity.

Figure 1 from the underpinning study for this article, [de Weger \(2016\)](#) revealed the following examples of types of CSMAA abuses:

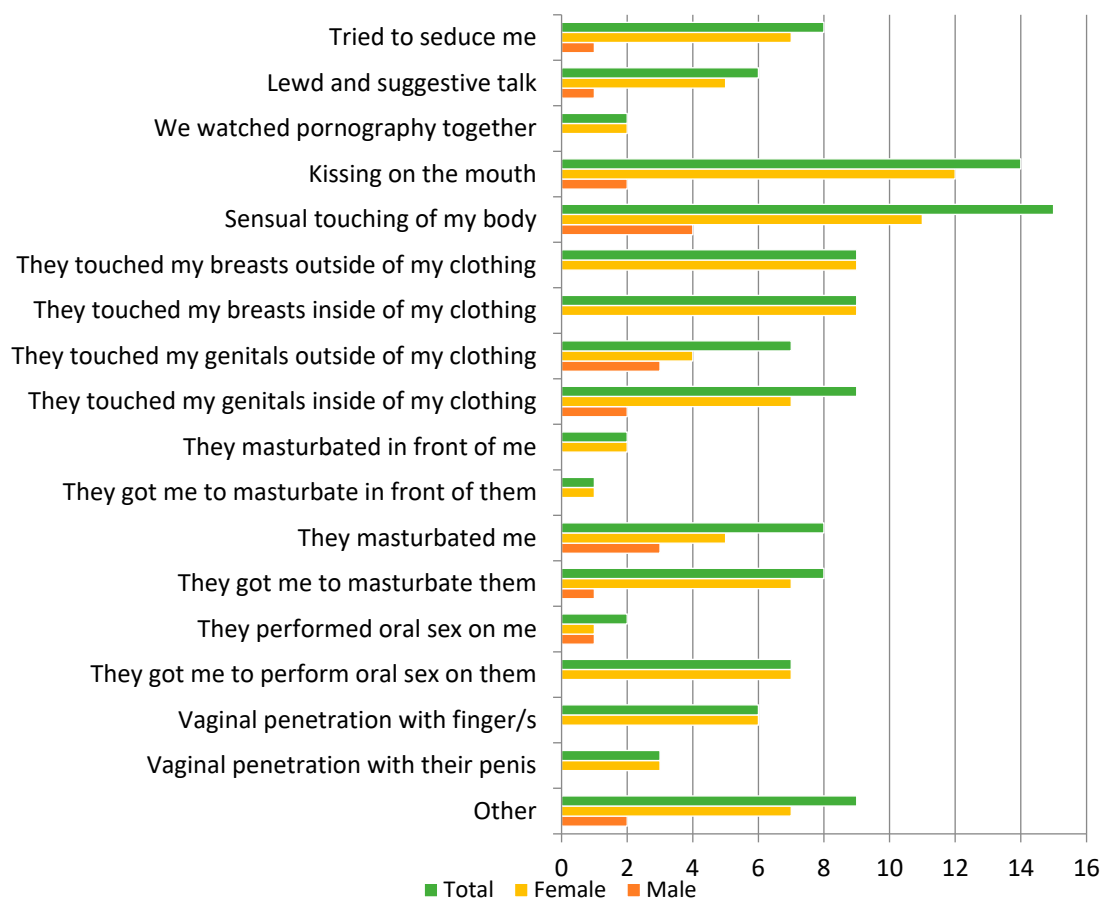


Figure 1. Types of abuse (n = 23).

In that study, all these examples were clearly CSMAA; it was not possible to come to any other conclusion. While many of the contexts and scenarios presented in the following continuum are based on these above examples, they have also been drawn from cases from other studies or news stories (see [Fortune 1989](#); [Flynn 2003](#); [Kennedy 2009](#); [Garland and Argueta 2010](#); [Byrne 2010](#); [de Weger 2020](#), Appendix 1). Others are possibilities, though very real ones, often discussed or mentioned in discourses on celibacy/chastity. While 99% of these expressions would be defined as ‘sin’ and immoral according to RCC teachings at least ([Provost 1992](#), p. 630), it is clear that most go beyond this simplistic and deflative category and into contexts of serious misconduct requiring more just outcomes. However, most of these contexts have not been accorded any gravity of concern by the RCC and even the legal justice system. If nothing else, this list reveals the complexity of the CSAWA vs. CSMAA issue. It also reveals, however, the corresponding need for the RCC or any other religious institution to clearly delineate when CSMAA as opposed to CSAWA ‘affairs’ occurs. Having a typology or continuum of ‘wrongness’, also helps survivors of CSMAA who have not been taken seriously because of the simplistic blanket ‘affairs’ perception, to

situate their own experience within a more accurate category and context. It is clear from the narratives of the participants in this study and elsewhere that clergy sexual activity is rarely as simple or harmless as the CSAWA ‘affair’ label makes them out to be but is, rather, more likely to be an expression of CSMAA. There simply needs to be greater clarity as to when CSAWA moves more definitely into CSMAA. Hence, this list.

One more point first needing inclusion here is that clergy also mix freely and socially within the faith and broader communities of their ‘clients’, and with them and their families. Through their religious ministry, they acquire deeply personal knowledge which obviously would stay with them as they mix socially. As such, CSMAA grooming utilising this knowledge can easily occur both within *and* externally to pastoral contexts. Clergy sexual misconduct within pastoral contexts is always serious, and is in some jurisdictions now classified as criminal behaviour (de Weger 2020, pp. 63–67). As such, to highlight the dual-contexts reality and assist clarity, each context and scenario will, therefore, be defined positionally as being ‘pastoral’ or ‘social’ (sometimes both). Though it can only be speculation here, each will also be allocated the most likely hemisphere of Sipe’s 50/50 clergy acceptance or rejection of celibacy/chastity rules (see Figure 2):

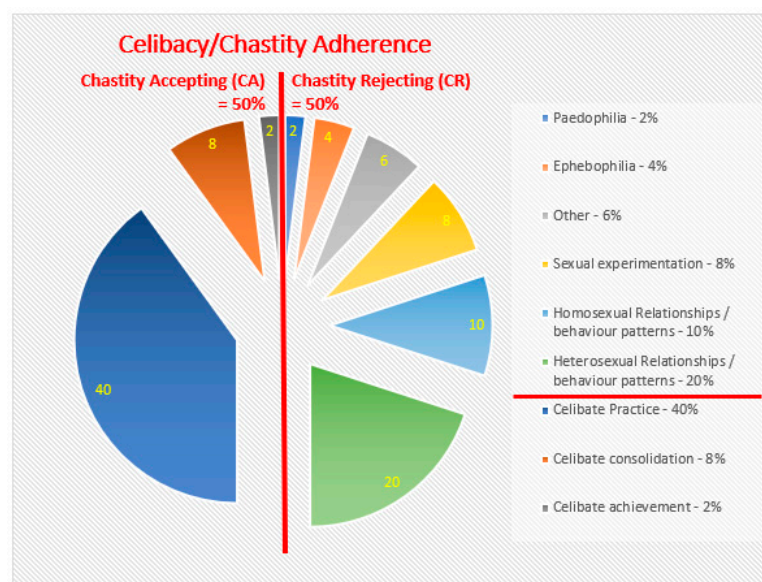


Figure 2. Sipe’s chastity/celibacy adherence levels (adapted from Sipe 1995, p. 69).

These will be coded as ‘celibacy/chastity accepting’ (CA) and celibacy/chastity rejecting (CR). The sixteen contexts below are by no means individually unique or stand-alone ones. Many indeed meld into each other or develop from one to the other. This list is also not exhaustive.

The list comprises of three sections: sexual ‘crimes’, sexual ‘misconduct’, and sexual ‘activity’ by clergy against or with adults whether lay or other clergy. The ‘crimes’ section does not need further expansion—they are prosecutable crimes, full stop. As to ‘misconduct’, for all the participants in both (de Weger 2016) and (de Weger 2020), their experiences fell somewhere under Contexts 3–11. As such, only these expressions will be expanded upon here. The final group of contexts could be more easily seen as clergy sexual ‘activity’ or CSAWA: these are of interest but do not really come under the individual harms-based approach of this study⁶.

4.1. Clergy Sexual Crimes against Adults

Context 1, the sexual psychopath and predator, and Context 2, the rapist cleric, fall clearly under the category of criminal acts. These are mentioned here because they occur (for examples, see Kennedy 2009, pp. 13, 110, 123–24, 130, 144, 149–51; Reisinger 2022; The Pillar 2022).

However, while these crimes are deeply heinous, of concern here are the contexts of CSMAA where distress and confusion exist because of grooming, consent doubt, and entrapment at the hands of powerful clergy in the context of adult vulnerability. In such contexts are found the seeds of doubt as to liability and harmfulness. This doubt also results in lack of clarity and direction from the church and society as a whole regarding responses to those who report these still more ambiguous forms of CSMAA.

4.2. CSMAA: Clergy Sexual Misconduct against Adults (Some Contexts Now Considered ‘Criminal’)

Context 3: The abusive cleric (Pastoral: CR/CA)

The major context, especially for this study, is when clergy are acting in their professional/pastoral roles as counsellors, confessors, therapists, and/or spiritual directors. In such a context, people come to their clergy professionals to seek guidance and support, usually in times of vulnerability or distress and confusion. For clergy to allow sex to enter this special relationship, is a clear breach of ethical and moral boundaries, fiduciary duty, and even a criminal act now in many jurisdictions (Toben and Helge 2013). There is no grey area here. This is clearly professional/clergy sexual misconduct, where their role, power, and position are seriously abused. While few clear laws exist to deal with CSMAA, under certain Australian jurisdictions, events such as those that fall under this context could be defined as criminal acts “if the person consents to the sexual activity because of the abuse of a position of authority or trust” (NSW Gov 2012, Section 61HE–8 (c); see also Tschan 2014, p. 47). Toben and Helge (2013, p. 159), discussing the need for new clearer legislation in regard to CSMAA, explain:

A clergyperson who, by virtue of occupying a position of authority—as perceived by the congregant or parishioner—and who, because of that position, has knowledge or notice of the emotional dependence or vulnerability of an adult congregant or parishioner, can take advantage of the position of authority and engage in sexual acts with the congregant or parishioner.

Inserting sex into this context is certainly a violation of the person who came seeking spiritual or psychological help from a trusted religious ‘expert’. The reason also that it is a clear case of sexual misconduct is because of the very obvious power imbalance in helping relationships (Marshall 2004, p. 1926). Even if clients seem willing, such ‘consent’ is often more a form of coerced or manipulated consent, emanating often from, for example, transference and/or trauma repetition compulsion issues (Celenza 1991; Gross Schaefer 1994). Regardless, in this ministerial context, it is always the cleric/professional who is responsible for controlling what unfolds. As Kennedy (2009) so astutely explains:

Clergy may not force, and the woman may desire him, but he has constructed this context, in which he makes her responsible, whilst relinquishing his responsibility for the boundary-keeping he knows he, as the professional, should maintain.

(Kennedy 2009, p. 131)

The same is true for male victims and female professionals/clergy in such contexts. Kennedy (2009, pp. 109, 112) provides two examples of clearly intended CSMAA in Context 3:

Therapeutic deception (bodily redemption)—[] in one third of the study participants, this form of deception was used where the cleric convinced his victims that “sex (was) a necessary and appropriate part of (their) treatment; (that) sex will make (them) feel better, (and that they, the cleric, was) uniquely able to provide the sexual experience (the victim) need(ed)”.

And

Spiritual deception: the sacrament of sex—36% of women in [Kennedy’s study] stated in various ways that “God was drawn on to convince women that sexual activity is not only therapeutic but also ‘god-inspired’ or sanctioned”.

When such ministerial relationships are sexualised, it is clearly CSMAA. It is also this context around which most new legislation is centred—that of clergy sexual activity *during or surrounding* ministry, especially when the clergy are also acting as healing professionals such as psychotherapists.

Context 4: The ‘love-bombing’ cleric (Pastoral: CR)

This context concerns clergy using ‘falling in love’ as a ‘pick up’ line, or, where the intent is to use proclamations of ‘love’ to obtain sex from a vulnerable other. This too is clearly CSMAA. Kennedy (2009, p. 107) has an example of this as well, that she names ‘romantic deception’:

Romantic deception—in one third of the cases the women explained how the cleric had fallen in love with them. As such, these are the [CSMAA] events most commonly defined as “affairs”.

In this case, the intent is not to pursue a mature relationship but to target people seeking support by declaring love for them, thereby making them more malleable to sexual activity. The key word here is ‘deception’. Into the overall context of deception can even be added the self-deception of the cleric truly thinking that his actions are ‘loving’.

Part of this scenario usually also involves clergy continuously telling the other person how lovely they are, how beautiful, with the intent of softening their resistance to sexual activity. This was clearly evident in the following statement from de Weger (2016, p. 106):

I was extremely confused. The priest was telling me this was “love” and said I was “beautiful”. I felt wonderful while he was there, because his definition of what was happening was dominant. But afterwards I felt awful, sinful, depressed, seriously bad and often suicidal (Tanya).

Furthermore, ‘Tanya’, who was seeking the help of this priest because she had been abused as a child and raped by a man just a year before, made the following final statement:

I was depressed and frequently suicidal. In retrospect NONE OF IT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED except that HE INITIATED a sexual relationship. I can say for absolute certain that, if it was up to me at all, I would have followed my sense that he was celibate and out of bounds. I fell for his bull-shit because I was convinced he was truly holy.

(Tanya; emphasis, hers)

This abusive context can last any duration, from ‘one-night stands’ to decades of manipulation (de Weger 2016, p. 80). It is clear from such events, and especially their aftermath, that mature, consensual, mutual ‘love’ was never part of these scenarios⁷. As such these events can clearly be defined as CSMAA.

Context 5: The (non?) deceptive relationship (Social: CR/CA)

Different to the deceptive cleric above, clergy developing mature and lasting relationships with other women and men who have not been coerced or deceived into such a relationship obviously must occur, and more frequently than realised (Murphy 1992; Anderson 2006). This is one of the ‘grey-area’ scenarios which, however, may become ‘black’ or ‘white’ so to speak. As such, three possible scenarios for Context 5 are given. It needs to be noted that none of these are ‘pastoral’ contexts which would *automatically* render them CSMAA.

Context 5: Scenario 1 (Social; CR/CA)

This scenario is where clergy and adults have relatively equal positional and personal powers such as a priest and a psychiatrist. Also, both have shared intimate details about each other, and both have deep insights into the possibilities of deception and misconduct. They realise that there is an element of *public* deception in regard to the priest’s proclamation of celibacy; however, both choose to continue the relationship. If the priest honestly acknowledges the contradiction of his personal and public life and leaves the priesthood this is a ‘grey’ context that has become ‘white’ so to speak.

Context 5: Scenario 2 (Social; CR/CA)

Similar to Scenario 1, however, in this context, the priest intends to remain a priest and the relationship remains secret. This is now presenting issues of equality in regard to how it may be affecting one party who may be forced to hide a relationship which he or she may not want to do. There are many accounts of such relationships where the woman has been waiting and waiting for the priest to leave so they can marry, but the priest never does and perhaps never intended to (see [de Weger 2016](#); and Maltesemarriedcatholicpriest's Blog for examples⁸). If the cleric maintains this relationship as one that is convenient to him but deeply troubling for the other adult, this would then be clearly more akin to CSMAA. The following example from [de Weger \(2016, p. 94\)](#) shows the obvious control the priest has over the other adult:

I say emotionally abused me because everything is on his terms. I only see him when he wants to. If he doesn't want to see me he avoids me for months and then when he wants to see me he comes back as he pleases. He doesn't care if I'm crying or asking him to stop, then afterwards he says he loves me then I get so very confused because I love him and I don't want to lose him. I hope and wish that he will marry me (Winnie).

If the pastor leaves the clerical life to pursue his relationship with the other adult, this is more a non-CSMAA context, though some may disagree. The Maltesemarriedcatholicpriest's website, run by a married priest, Rev Daniel Bartolo, and set up for clergy and lay people involved in relationships with clergy and to promote and discuss clergy marriage and relationships, is full of stories of this particular scenario. Most stories there seem to involve the cleric not leaving and the painful impact this has on the other adult.

Context 5: Scenario 3 (Social; CR)

This is a second possibility for Scenario 2 above. In this case, the other adult is more than happy with the arrangement where their relationship remains secret, and they happily live their own lives as well. Throughout Church history such other adults were termed 'paramours' or 'concubines' ([Doyle et al. 2006](#), pp. 14–15, 24–25). Today the term would more likely be 'defacto' relationship, albeit a secret one, or private lover. There is, however, a broader aspect to this—the general laity do not know that 'Father' is having a canonically illegal relationship and as such is deceiving them in regard to his status as a highly respected because celibate priest/Bishop and professional. In this case then, on the individual couple level, one could say that theirs is a CSAWA relationship; however, in regard to the broader community, it is more a CSMAA one.

Context 6: The abusive cleric (Social) (CR)

For the most part, these clerics are chastity rejecting (CR). Keeping in mind also that while many examples of this scenario may begin in the pastoral realm, this context concerns sexual activity between clergy and another adult that occurs more in the 'social' setting. In this context the cleric is moving in family and friendship circles. Within these circles, the cleric can still engage all their power as a cleric to target and manipulate vulnerable people with whom he comes in contact. For example, participant Lynne described how [Fr J] had become "the family friend" and was then invited to her 18th birthday "as a family friend, not as a priest". Lynne later summarised how [Fr J] "cultivated the friendship" over about 3 years "and then made his move once [she] turned eighteen".

As mentioned above, clergy have many 'social' opportunities to engage in CSMAA. In this case, as Lynne explained, even after many years, [Fr J] had no intention of ever leaving to marry. When pushed, he told Lynne that he was really just "experimenting". As such, this is clearly another case of CSMAA.

Context 7: The opportunistic abusing cleric (Pastoral or Social; CR/CA)

This form of adult abuse occurs without warning for the victim, or any real premeditation in the offender. However, it often suggests an underlying lack of commitment to or struggle with the promises of chastity made at ordination/final vows. In this form of misconduct, opportunities to indecently or sexually assault or 'have sex with' others or to try to do so, are seized if the chance to do so arises. For example:

[He] walked into the meeting room and ran his left hand up under my skirt, grabbed my right breast and planted his mouth on mine. YUK (Jane).

I asked him to stop . . . As this was the only occasion, I would accept his behaviour was perhaps due to extreme grief & was suffering complete loneliness (sic) (Jessica).

I just said “No” I think the episode was a once only accident of arousal as far as I was concerned (Margaret).

Again, these are all clearly cases of CSMAA.

Context 8: The sexually harassing cleric (Pastoral/Social: Occupational; CR)

This form of CSMAA is more common than realised. It occurs in parish houses, schools and convents/seminaries at a rate that is only now starting to be realised (see [Aguon 2017](#); [Douthat 2018](#); [DeGeorge 2019](#)). [Chibnall et al. \(1998\)](#) show how prevalent sexual harassment is for Religious Sisters, both in regard to same-sex harassment between Sisters but even more so of sexual harassment by priests. CSMAA as sexual harassment may or may not end in actual sexual activity. One case from [de Weger \(2016, p. 78\)](#) describes a 60-year-old parish secretary who was constantly propositioned by the parish priest to have a ‘relationship’ with him. Her response:

You are immature to think that your secretary finds you an attractive proposition. Offering large sums of money, in this case over \$10,000 for holidays etc. along with letters/poems proclaiming love are not what one expects from a parish priest, if parishioners knew they would be appalled by your behaviour. You know I need my job desperately and you tried to exploit my vulnerability as a single struggling parent—you are a pathetic little man (Carol).

This form of sexual harassment is one of the penultimate expressions of power abuse using sex *and* financial need to ‘get one’s way’.

Context 9: The needy ‘fallen’ cleric (Pastoral or Social; CA)

In this context, all the emphasis is on the cleric who does believe in his/her call to celibacy but has deep and genuine needs most often relating back to psycho-sexual underdevelopment, or the existence of deep loneliness resulting from mandatory celibacy ([Murphy 1992](#); [Anderson 2006](#)). Those in this category may have also joined the priesthood/religious life at a very young age and some of these in turn may also be struggling with sexual identity issues. As a result, there very often comes a time when such clergy feel they have missed out on a major aspect of life, and feel intense pressure to explore their sexuality, or seek comfort or ‘development’ in the arms and sexual companionship of another. Christine, from [de Weger \(2016, p. 96\)](#) explains one such scenario:

He did ask me to marry him which I found utterly remarkable given by the time he asked he was definitely an out gay man in the gay community. I said no, mostly because I was pretty sure his idea of marriage was not mine, and that in reality he would never leave the priesthood because his mother would disown him. We remained friends for the rest of his life and I more or less became his sole confidant. Unfortunately, he never really did get his head out of his rear end because he could never get over his mother (Christine).

Such clergy often see themselves as having ‘fallen’ in their quest to be celibate. In many ways, this context has grey areas which, humanly speaking, demand some understanding and leniency. However, what is a major issue here is the concept that others can be collaterally ‘used’ to help clergy develop and grow up. Some adults may be more than happy to ‘help’ clergy do so. At first, Christine above was one of these. She says she was also confused about her sexuality and she and the priest were going through confusion together. She later wanted the whole sexual aspect to stop because it was causing her too much grief, but the priest did not want the sex to stop. As such, this really is one context which, while having the ever-present and obvious *positional* power differential, may have a less obvious *personal* power differential. It is also one context that requires a more case-by-case assessment of intention and consent to determine whether it seriously falls under the CSMAA definition. Regardless of this questionability, objectively speaking,

whether the cleric has personal problems or not is more an explanation rather than an excuse for sexualising a pastoral or even social 'relationship'. Furthermore, the effects on the other adult must be of primary consideration given that these are professional/religious contexts.

Context 10: The experimenting cleric (Social or Pastoral; CA or CR)

This context is near to Context 9. Here, the cleric who says s/he is 'experimenting' with sex and/or relationships, may be being honest. Their desire to experiment may also be a result of having joined the clerical life too early. However, this desire may also be a form of deception and/or a form of neutralisation of responsibility. This appeared to be the case for Lynne. After [Fr J] had ended the 'relationship', being told to do so because he was being considered as the next superior of the Religious Order to which he belonged, he said that he still wanted to be her friend. When she asked what he considered the 'relationship' had been until then, his reply was that he had been "experimenting". This realisation was understandably very devastating for Lynne. As such, this too was a clear case of CSMAA as firstly, this case began when Lynne was still considered a child, and secondly, the cleric led her to believe that he was in love with her and would marry her. He used his positional and personal power to manipulate Lynne into a sexual relationship which in the end he defined merely as "experimenting".

Context 11: The sex-addicted cleric (Pastoral or Social; CA or CR)

This context has some very complex, serious, and controversial elements within it. However, such complexity, while needing to be acknowledged and challenged, are beyond this article. Nevertheless, the element of clergy sexual addiction is one that has been previously explored and, in some depth, (see [Fones et al. 1999](#); [Gregoire and Jungers 2004](#)). Sex-addicted clergy do commit CSMAA but while it may be a way of explaining CSMAA, sex addiction cannot be used to excuse it in any way. If approached from a harms-based perspective, the results for the victim are still adverse and perhaps even more complexly so in such a context.

4.3. CSAWA: Clergy Sexual Activity with Adults?

Finally, there exists various sexual interactions that are difficult to define as abusive, simply because the power imbalance has been removed in some way. Such contexts may, for example, exist where the other adult is as 'laissez-faire' about sex with the cleric as the cleric is himself. Other even less serious contexts would be sexual activity with an atheist where the adult really has no 'respect' or awe for the role of the cleric. Another would involve 'anonymous' casual sex as found in cases involving Tinder or Grindr, or park cruising where the cleric is incognito. The final context where it would be difficult to define clergy sexual activity as abusive, unless it went beyond the acceptable behaviours, would be the cleric who visits a sex worker.

4.4. Summary of the Contexts

Firstly, it is because of the confusions or even confabulations of various contexts of CSMAA/CSAWA, such as describing confusing sexual seduction of unsuspecting laity as 'affairs', that many survivors of CSMAA are not taken seriously when reporting. This confusion erroneously conflates the more serious professional misconduct realities of CSMAA with 'sinful' or 'immoral' definitions of CSAWA events. Presenting the many possible and real contexts will hopefully clarify when CSMAA is obviously professional misconduct and even criminal as opposed to merely immoral. Having done so, survivors can more clearly understand their own experiences within these various contexts. This will assist them to construct a perhaps more accurate self-perception in regard to feelings of shame or self-blame. Finally, it will allow victims/survivors to come forewarned and forearmed when reporting.

Secondly, regardless of where a scenario or context may lie on a CSAWA-CSMAA continuum, there is one unifying element: *all* are forms of deviance, at least according to the teachings of the RCC and the expectations of most of the laity. As such all also

contribute to the parallel cultures of secrecy that need to then be created, and the fallout thereof (Sipe 2008). As well, they all also have potential to cause a form of covert social harm in the undermining of morale and morality amongst the clergy, and within RCC communities. Finally, it is also this culture of secrecy that appears to negatively impact the ability of those who report CSMAA to be sincerely heard and redressed (de Weger 2020).

Because of the confusion surrounding what CSMAA/CSAWA events entail, there is a great need then for the RCC to clearly define clergy professional sexual misconduct against adults. This clarity does not yet exist. While acknowledging that this non-existence may well be an attempt at neutralisation itself, in the above contexts of obviously broader and varied expressions of CSAWA and CSMAA, without a clear and universal definition, the issue and those affected by it cannot be consistently and genuinely responded to.

The above contexts and definitions are a more 'legal' approach to the issue of CSMAA. However, there is the other approach—the harms-based one. CSMAA becomes even more clearly recognizable when viewed through the harms produced by this form of clergy abuse in the lives of adult victims/survivors.

5. Harms

Because the focus is rarely on the harmful effects on those caught up in CSMAA, little is known, let alone believed, concerning these effects. Along with definitions, and the power-vulnerability intersection, the area of harm emerged clearly as a major theme and issue when analysing the experiences of the twenty-nine victims/survivors of the first study (de Weger 2016). All but two respondents (Margaret and Christine) felt psycho/spiritually, relationally, occupationally, and even physically damaged by the effects of their CSMAA, effects which usually lasted decades. Such disabling was further often compounded and even intensified when they sought compassion and redress by officially reporting those experiences (de Weger 2020). Accordingly, the remainder of this article will be dedicated to presenting the findings surrounding the sequelae of harms produced by CSMAA.

5.1. Findings and Discussion

When analysing the data from de Weger (2016), it was helpful to categorise CSMAA harm into three main types. These are: personal harm (also separated here into psychological, spiritual, and physical); relational harm (harm to familial and intimate relationships, including sexual expression); and practical harm (the effects of CSMAA on jobs/careers, finances). While these separations are artificial, and are in reality all complexly interwoven, it is helpful to look at each type on their own.

Furthermore, rather than presenting the findings and discussion as separate sections, it was considered more beneficial to present the more qualitative-based findings and discuss them within the framework of the different types of harms as presented. As well, it needs to be noted that the quantitative material has not been analysed statistically here or in de Weger (2016) as this was never the intent of that study, it is presented only to show the given responses of the participants. In short, though, all but one participant in both studies (Margaret⁹) presented examples of some form and intensity of harm.

5.1.1. Personal Harm

Figure 3 shows the responses to the question, "In general, as a result of clerical sexual misconduct in your life, which, if any of the following apply"? These responses show the many forms of personal harms experienced by victims/survivors of CSMAA at the time of the event/s and at three subsequent stages. These responses, along with the written accounts, produced a vivid picture of what the respondents have had to endure as a result of their adult abuse experiences.

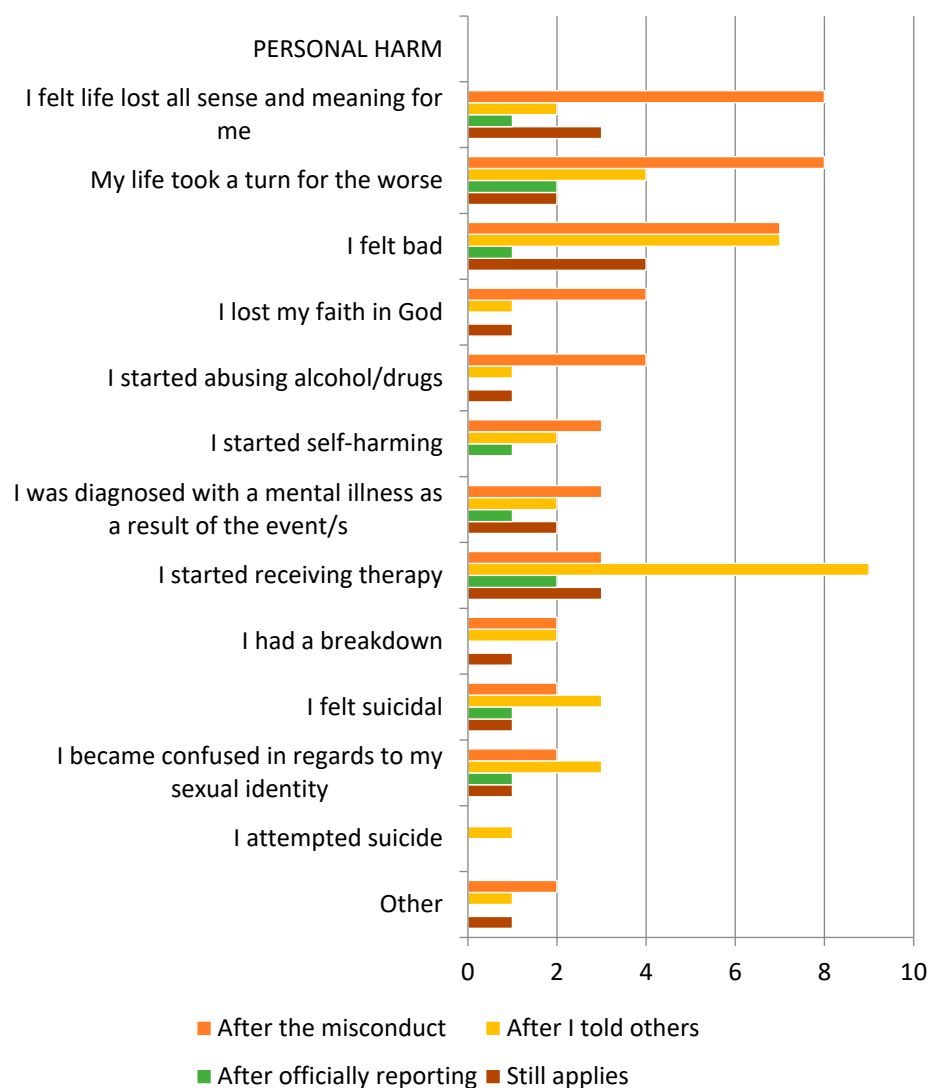


Figure 3. Personal harm produced by CSMAA according to periods of time ($n = 22$). More than one response was permitted.

Under ‘other’, “I felt confused and troubled” was the only one which directly stated an effect of the CSMAA. For, “I was diagnosed with a mental illness as a result of the event/s”, respondents were asked to specify the mental illness if they wished. The following responses were provided:

- complex PTSD
- clinical depression
- depression and anxiety
- major depression

To further analyse and clarify the given responses, ‘Personal Harm’ was broken down into the following three types. The written comments of the respondents surrounding their choices have been added.

5.1.2. Physical Harm

CSMAA produces long term physical impacts on the victims. The respondents in this study revealed physical ailments that they saw as being directly linked to the CSMAA. These findings were consistent with other research on the physical effects of sexual abuse/assault (Brady 2008, p. 371; Freyd et al. 2005, pp. 98–99; Kluff 2010, pp. 48–54; Mason and Lodrick 2013, pp. 31–32; Morris et al. 2014, p. 98; Wilson 2010, pp. 57, 60–61).

Many of the harms discussed here are also expressions of “somatization” or “the development of physical symptoms of emotional problems” (Flynn 2003, p. 115; see also Garland 2006, pp. 12–13). Physical harm here also includes aspects of physical expressions of psychological harm, or “dysfunctional coping”, such as drug/alcohol abuse, self-harming, and ideation about or attempts at suicide (Orzeck et al. 2010, p. 179). Elements of drug/alcohol abuse, self-harm and suicidal ideation became apparent in the selected answers to questions as well as in the written responses. For example, Maria stated the following:

I had a nervous breakdown but continued to work. Whilst she [the mother superior/perpetrator] dyed her hair (worn totally obscured by the veil...so this made no sense if not to fool herself), I was pulling mine out...as a form of self-harm (Maria; in parenthesis, hers).

Maria’s account of her two years of repeated sexual abuse as a young nun by her Mother Superior, is most powerful and disturbing in regard to revealing how CSMAA can have deep and lasting physical effects on victims:

I was disgusted and afraid, I felt trapped, used as an instrument of gratification. I began vomiting after eating and felt nauseated when I looked at her or even smelt her body odour. I was becoming increasingly depressed and confused, fearful of God’s wrath.

This last episode of abuse by the mother superior during my life among religious caused me to become so ill that I died during surgery and was resuscitated. My reaction to this final effect of the abuse was to run away from the convent as soon as I could get up from my hospital bed.

I have struggled with my chronic worsening health problems all my life (undiagnosed thyrotoxicosis and increasing pain and disability from undiagnosed arthritis) and I am on the verge of being confined to a wheelchair (Maria; in parenthesis, hers).

Judy was both a victim of CSMAA and a whistle-blower against clerical sexual abuse of children. She has had to endure much:

The whole matter of being disrespected, crushed, vilified, and denigrated for carrying the message of truth—or being a whistle blower, has seriously affected my life and now I have been diagnosed with fibromyalgia and possibly chronic fatigue (Judy).

Judy and Maria’s health issues are consistent with research on “betrayal trauma” (Freyd et al. 2005, pp. 85–86, 98–101). According to Freyd et al. (2005, p. 85):

The Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey (BBTS) assesses exposure to both traumas high in betrayal (such as abuse by a close other) and traumas low in betrayal but high in life-threat (such as an automobile accident). Exposure to traumas with high betrayal was significantly correlated with a number of physical illness, anxiety, dissociation, and depression symptoms. Amount of exposure to other types of traumas (low betrayal traumas) did not predict symptoms over and above exposure to betrayal.

Maria took her faith and religious life seriously. Maria’s abuser was a ‘close other’, in the context that she was her ‘Mother Superior’ and that she was in a Religious Order, a Christian community of faith, service, and love, where sexual abuse is simply not expected. As such, she suffered deeply from betrayal trauma. Maria was also the only respondent to provide so much detail about the link between her CSMAA and her illnesses. However, as Flynn (2003) observed, CSMAA-related physical illnesses were a very real issue for many of her participants as well. According to Flynn (2003, pp. 114–17), many of these physical symptoms are directly connected with PTSD and complex PTSD resulting from the traumas of their abusive experiences, a reality backed up by the medical profession. However, for most of the respondents in this survey, the harmful effects of CSMAA were more of a spiritual and/or psychological nature.

5.1.3. Spiritual Harm

Catholicism is a “spiritual force, a way of life, and a religious movement” (Doyle 2006, p. 189). Spiritual harm disturbs this context and subsequently, a person’s equilibrium in regard to their inner map, their faith in God, life, and others, and their overall world view. After abuse within one’s faith institution, the belief system that has hitherto provided their sense of self, meaning and balance in life, begins to fracture (Crisp 2012; Doyle 2006). Figure 3 (above) gives some indication as to the extent respondents felt spiritually harmed by CSMAA. Sue sums up such harm:

I felt an attempt had been made on my integrity, that my commitment to religious beliefs and work was twisted into a space defined by another person according to his self-interest and need to release (Sue).

For 36% (6 women and 2 men), their life ‘took a turn for the worse’, and for the same numbers ‘life lost all sense and meaning’. For 18% (3 women and 1 man), ‘I lost my faith in God’ was selected. Tanya sums up such harm:

He destroyed my sense of safety and my hope of ever going to heaven (Tanya).

Spiritual harm, however, is not a stand-alone effect. If one couples it with the broader loss of faith in the victim’s Church and all it stands for, and their faith community and even one’s own family, spiritual harm is an outcome of CSMAA that can and does have very profound effects on the lives of victims (Kennedy 2009, p. 206–217). As Maria states:

This abuse caused me to become divorced from my religion and shunned by my family. I have always felt an outcast (Maria).

Another respondent sums up the spiritual (and associated) harm caused by CSMAA:

I lost a lot of long-time Church “friends” who were really fellow hero-worshippers of the priest. I often feel I was privileged by God to be liberated by the truth, where they have remained under illusions. They didn’t want their sense of safety in the Church to be threatened. I don’t have any illusions about the Church or priests, but a strong belief in God’s holiness. Unfortunately, however, I seem to have lost fairly permanently my sense of safety in the world. I manage OK, but I suffer from chronic high anxiety (Tanya).

Interestingly, for many of the respondents like Tanya, what was affected most was their faith in the RCC and Catholicism as a religion. For many, a personal faith in God was retained in some form.

While spiritual harm, or any type of harm, should not be viewed in isolation, the ‘god-factor’ (Flynn 2003, p. 8; Villiers 1996, p. 44) is an obvious and major contributor to this form of harm (Cooper-White 1990; Doyle 2006, pp. 207–8; Kennedy 2009, pp. 210–13; McLaughlin 1994). According to Doyle (2006, p. 209), the level of harm created when a trusted member of one’s religious faith system abuses the trust of believers, is akin to spiritually dying. As Doyle (2006, pp. 208–9) states:

The impact on Catholic victims is unique and, in the opinion of some experts, particularly devastating precisely because the abuser is a priest . . . Many victims experience a kind of toxic transference and experience in their sexual abuse a form of spiritual death.

Based within religion, CSMAA produces harms in ways that other forms of professional sexual misconduct do not (Flynn 2003, p. 8, pp. 121–22; Kennedy 2009, pp. 210–14). This spiritual harm can result in deep existential confusion and psychological conflict (Flynn 2003, pp. 155–56). Indeed, it is very difficult to separate the spiritual from the psychological (Crisp 2012). As such, spiritual harm is also very closely followed by and entwined with psychological harm (Crisp 2012).

5.1.4. Psychological Harm

Of all the forms of harm evident in this survey, psychological harm was the most prominent in the data presented. This is also the type of harm that Lievore (2003, p. 28)

states as being one of the qualities of “serious crime”. As [Lievore \(2003, p. 28\)](#) explains, in Australia, sexual acts that may be viewed as serious are those that “deprive victims of liberty, threaten their lives or physical integrity, or produce psychological harm”.

Figure 3, above, includes many examples of psychological harm produced by CSMAA as selected by the respondents. Respondents’ written accounts provide an even deeper insight into their experiences of psychological harm:

I was naturally anxious and unable to suppress the anxiety till I began to inappropriately express frustration, mostly in community. When offered to have therapy I was diagnosed with major depression (Maria).

After a time of great struggle and consequent growing dependence on substance abuse, in my case alcohol, I began my journey of recovery (Edith).

CLERICAL SEXUAL ABUSE DESTROYS LIVES AND IT HAS SEVERELY DAMAGED MINE (Judy—capitalisation hers).

A lot of the therapy in the first year or two was to help me cope with how the Provincial and others known to the priest were reacting to me (Tanya).

As many of these statements also reveal, victims/survivors expressed a need for therapy to help them cope with the CSMAA, not to mention the effects of the reporting thereof. For Teresa, a religious Sister, this was her experience as well:

Having therapy has helped me immensely to acknowledge the truth of what happened. This has freed me from feeling restricted by the guilt and shame. It has enabled me to revisit my childhood, to forgive and to re-engage with life as a religious (Teresa).

According to [Kennedy \(2009, pp. 142–45\)](#), this regaining of control, where a renaming of CSMAA and other forms of abuse plays no small part, is deeply important for mental health restoration and eliminating the effects of CSMAA as much as is possible ([de Weger 2016, pp. 40–50, 108–9](#)).

The need for therapy or some other form of healing/support, suggesting the existence of CSMAA-produced psychological harm needing resolution in some way, was not found in traditional therapies alone:

I ended up involved in a twelve Step Program AA, [and] my life has slowly picked up... My husband has had great difficulties coming to terms with it and yet we have stuck together through it all (Edith).

This statement by Edith also shows the important role of loved ones in the lives of victims/survivors. Andy makes this plain, as well:

I was fortunate to find a woman who loved me unconditionally (Andy).

Such statements also express that CSMAA never occurs in isolation but always in a context where other people are caught up in the event/s and the repercussions thereof. This reality became even clearer in the responses to survey questions relating to the effects of CSMAA on relationships.

5.1.5. Relational Harm

In [de Weger \(2016\)](#), the following question was asked: “In general, as a result of clerical sexual misconduct in your life, which, if any of the following applied to your experience/s in regard to your relationships with others?” This question was asked because, obviously, CSMAA, like all sexual assaults/abuse, even if kept secret, does not occur in a personal vacuum. CSMAA involved not just the victim/survivor, but their families and loved ones, their broader communities, and the RCC institution itself. Accordingly, all these existing relationships are threatened or suffer. In turn, within these broader contexts, victims/survivors have to also contend with the many varied beliefs, attitudes and behaviours concerning CSMAA and sexual assault in general. These beliefs, attitudes and behaviours include ignorance and/or denial of such events. Furthermore, unlike

child abuse, in CSMAA, because of the existence of relationships of victims/survivors with husbands, wives, partners and children, the possible relational harms resulting from reporting such abuse causes victims to maintain secrecy about their abuse, resulting in great tensions and still further harms. Figure 4 shows the responses to the above question:

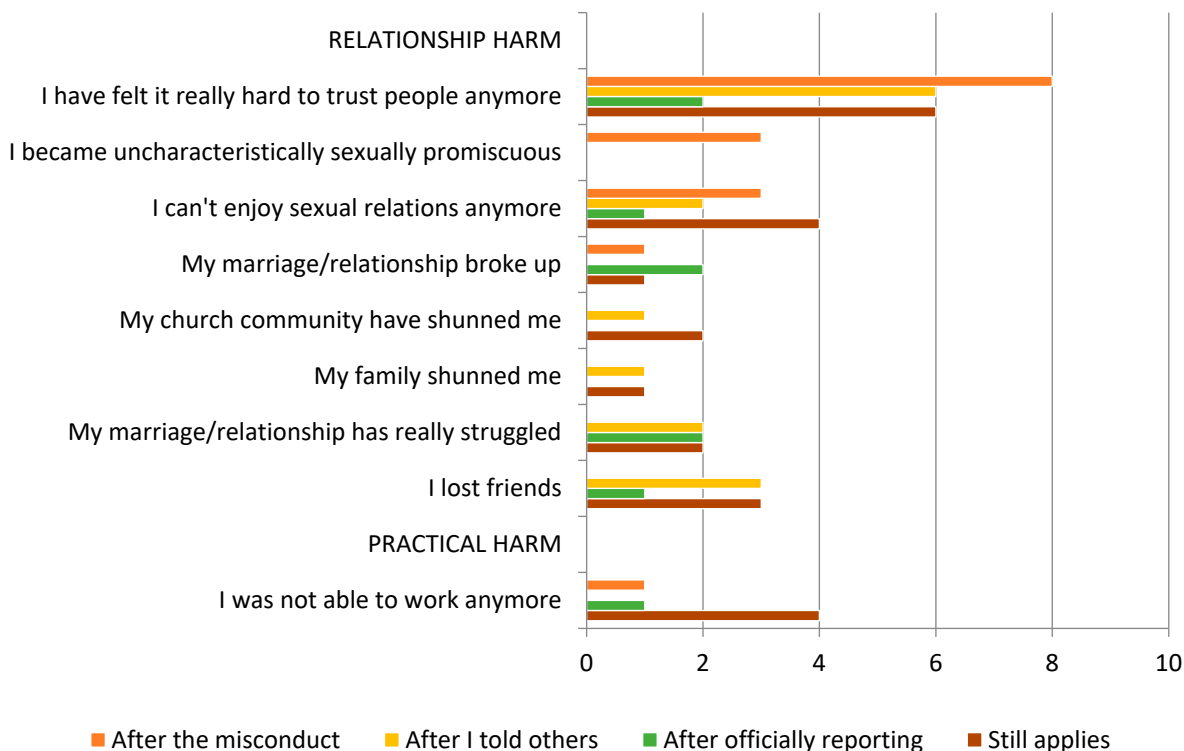


Figure 4. Relational, and practical harms produced by CSMAA according to time periods (n = 22). More than one response was permitted.

More variations and details became evident when respondents elaborated. James, who at the time of his abuse as a postulant in a religious congregation selected ‘heterosexual’ in regard to his sexuality, selected ‘I became uncharacteristically sexually promiscuous’ (with men), after the CSMAA, and

Following the abuse, I acted homosexual with other males but denied it externally (James).

As James further revealed, he seems to still be struggling decades later with various expressions of sexuality and relationship issues.

My wife and I struggled sexually from the first year of our marriage 15 years ago. Now I am confused sexually. I find other males sexually attractive but remain in a Hetro (sic) marriage whilst living alone apart from my wife who lives alone too. I have had continual problems with power figures including managers, clergy, and so on. I prefer to live alone but need others loosely around me. I hate feeling controlled by anyone including checkout workers at a supermarket (James).

According to James’ own words, CSMAA has had a major impact on his relationships, sexuality, and broader self-identity in some way. Others elaborated even further:

Impact on my marriage has been huge and may be irreparable. While he has been incredibly supportive, the psychological effects on me continue to impact on our relationship and he feels he cannot “put up” with these anymore. He is still angry that I did not “trust” him and tell him sooner. I told him almost 20 years after we were married. What happened to me stole my adulthood and developing positive relationships with people in general, and men in particular. I feel so icky to have actually married and had children (Wendy).

My friendships are becoming difficult because I'm living a secret life that I can't share with my friends. If I have problems, I have no one to ask for advice and if I am happy, I have no one to share the joy with (Winnie).

Even without wanting it to, [CSMAA] sets up barriers. People who have not experienced it have no idea of the ways it affects a person, and because it's so hard to discuss, it just kind of gets in the way of everyday relationships (Sarah).

At 65 years old I am still trying to accept myself as a good and worthwhile person (Scott).

What all these statements verify is that consistent with the findings of Flynn (2003) and Kennedy (2009), one of the sources of greatest anguish felt by victims/survivors is how the CSMAA affected their personal relationships, including with themselves. This distress included the sense of dislocation they experienced within, and with their loved ones and community of faith (Flynn 2003, pp. 79–86, 122–40; Kennedy 2009, pp. 205–6, 208–9).

For some survivors, the deep impact on their ability to trust others again was also extended to their once highly respected and trusted clerics, as the following express:

I cannot respect priests now any more than I respect any other people. The word "Father" sticks in my throat (Tanya).

For Teresa, her reversal of what was initially deep trust became especially clear in her final statements 'to the cleric' at the end of the survey:

I trusted you and I believed you would respect my trust. It took me a long time to rebuild my trust in men, in particular, although I am much more cautious (Teresa).

The betraying of trust by a highly respected cleric whose religion stands for all that is hopeful, compassionate, and good profoundly impacts a person's whole outlook on the safety of life (Byrne 2010, p. 80; Flynn 2003, pp. 85, 117–22; Victorian Inquiry 2013, p. 47). The same is true for betrayal trauma in any relationship circumstance but particularly those of traditionally close ties of trust (Freyd et al. 2005). The breaking of that trust then leads to a deep inability to trust anyone again. A fallout of this is that this inability to trust can then, in turn, become one of the deepest barriers to the healing and re-establishing of relationships as well as the development of new ones (Flynn 2003, pp. 130–32).

While the sample for this study is small, the data provided do show that relational harm is part of the overall experience of victims of CSMAA, and in no insignificant way. However, there is one more area of harm that needs discussion, one that victims/survivors included throughout their stories of survival—practical harm. As with other forms of harm, practical harm cannot be seen in isolation. However, when discussed as a separate entity, a greater clarification of this usually ignored form of harm is possible.

5.1.6. Practical Harm

As with child abuse victims, the practical harm experienced by victims/survivors of CSMAA is an often-underappreciated aspect of clerical misconduct. However, the reality for victims/survivors of CSMAA is that, as a result of traumatic psycho-social effects of CSMAA in their lives, many have had to endure very serious practical difficulties. These include job/career losses, an inability to work and support their families and/or themselves, the need to upend their lives and move away from abusive clerics, financial crises, and all the everyday stresses inherent therein.

While the responses relating to practical harms given in Figure 4 are few, further reading of the written material given by the respondents revealed much practical and financial distress. While only one woman selected 'I was not able to work anymore', two female respondents (Maria and Ann) added that they were on a disability support pension, Maria stating that her need for this was directly related to her CSMAA. Below, Maria tells the story of how she had to rely on that disability pension when she fled the convent. As a result, she has struggled not just physically and psychologically/emotionally, but financially and practically as well. One of the last questions asked in this survey was "What might be some of your present urgent needs resulting from your whole experience of the

clerical sexual misconduct and how it has been dealt with?" Maria's answer was poignant and to the point:

I have struggled with my chronic worsening health problems all my life and I am on the verge of being confined to a wheelchair. I have never been able to work hence I've never been able to put away savings for my old age and possible infirmity. I have been in receipt of a disability support pension all my life since age 30. I am in debt and insolvent and am having to negotiate with the financial institutions to which I owe money to be relieved of my debts so I will not lose my house. My present most urgent needs are: (a) be relieved of my debts (b) be strong enough in body and positive enough in mind to survive surgery (Maria).

When asked who should provide the assistance she needed, Maria had little doubt—the RCC:

It was their religious order that took from me every prospect of a career and a stable financial life by abducting me at 16¹⁰ then abusing me as a child and as an adult until my health suffered, never to recover (Maria).

Elsewhere, she explains:

If you truly repent give me of this world's goods and security...which you say you do not care about yet have much of! I need some financial relief so I can have surgery on the body I had, once strong and fit as that of a junior gymnast and ballet dancer...you stole that body from me! You abused that body until it died during surgery and was revived. Give me back my strength. Give me the money my poor mother gave you as my dowry that should have been returned to me when I left your convent so I could start my life again. I need you to pay the doctors to mend my broken body! I need to be funded at the highest level of medical and hospital cover...that insurance you cancelled and told me to pay myself when all I had was a Disability Pension of \$42.70 a fortnight and was so very ill to the point of death. That's what I want, that the Church compensate me for ruining my body and mind then pay for the best doctors and medical treatment to restore me... (Maria).

Respondent Ann had a physical disability from birth. However, she was still able to acquire a university degree and work. Nevertheless, Ann goes on to explain that because of her CSMAA,

I also lost my job and had to find part time work, but didn't know why, and then I was not able to work anymore, so that was when even part time work didn't last and it all came crashing in (Ann).

As a result, she has to now rely on a disability support pension as well. With the realisation of her increasingly dire situation, Ann stated that she also believed it was the RCC, or the cleric's Religious Order, that needed to supply redress:

I also know that the Order must replace my massive loss of income/super from having to resign 20 years early. They need to be able to be taught to acknowledge this (Ann).

James also needed to eventually rely on a disability support pension and had the following to say about how CSMAA has impacted him in practical ways:

Ever since the abuse I have suffered financially for many reasons. I volunteered three years as a missionary too. I have lost so many jobs due to issues with authority and I don't have a solid financial future due to the abuse and due to an ineffective church and Towards Healing.

I need financial security into the future as I may have another 25 to 30 years of life in me (James).

Job loss or the inability to work can be seen as a related effect of CSMAA. However, disclosure of CSMAA for those who are working, especially within the RCC, can present its own possibilities of practical harm. Another respondent, Joe, selected 'I work in the

church, and I am scared of losing my job' as one reason why he has never officially reported his CSMAA. Another practical harm resulting from CSMAA was, as some respondents also stated, how the CSMAA thwarted their desired future or greatly interrupted their current work:

I had to leave my studies and I so wanted to work as a missionary sister (Grace).

I felt I had to leave a work position that I truly loved because working where I did with this person in a power position became untenable (Sue).

As a result of their CSMAA, Scott, James, and Sarah all left the religious orders they had chosen and loved. They had hoped to dedicate their lives to the Church and its people.

Practical harms are not trivial. Maintaining a career or job was an issue for many victims/survivors of CSMAA in other studies as well (Flynn 2003, pp. 25, 77–78, 112–14, 135–36, 141, 163, 190, 196–97; Kennedy 2009, pp. 162, 205, 209–10). As the accounts given by the respondents show, such harms are deeply debilitating, stressful and destabilising. Studies have revealed the relationship between job loss and further connected harmful sequelae (Price et al. 2002, p. 310; see also Loya 2015). As such, the practical harms produced by sexual assault/abuse can be shown to have very disruptive cyclic practical, relational, and personal impacts. Clearly, the practical harms of financial and job instability produced by CSMAA needs to also be fully acknowledged along with the personal and relational harms.

5.2. Summary of Harms

CSMAA and even CSAWA cannot be said to be harmless. For all the participants in this study, apart from Margaret and Christine who considering their harm as not too serious and dealt with at the time, it was clear that the remaining survivors had been personally, relationally, and practically harmed and not in minor ways. As such, CSMAA needs to be more clearly outlined and defined beyond any myopic and simplistic, and even deflective 'consensual affair' perceptions.

6. Conclusions

For the RCC, one 'deviancy' that needs to be strongly suppressed or neutralised is that many more clergy are engaged in both clergy sexual activity with adults (CSAWA) and CSMAA, than those sexually abusing children (Sipe 1994, p. 134; John Jay Report 2004, p. 258). However, as Sipe (2008) has troublingly hypothesised, all expressions of sexual activity, misconduct, and abuse, are also inter-connected by the creation of a deep culture of fear of exposure of any abuse or sexual activity. Such an exposure could undermine the core male clergy power structure of the RCC (Doyle et al. 2006, pp. 8–9).

The most crucial element that needs to be fully grasped when dealing with CSMAA, and even CSAWA, especially in this context of the RCC, is that CSMAA does not happen because of adult vulnerability: all the cases in de Weger (2016) and de Weger (2020) clearly showed that CSMAA happens because there are clergy who are willing to groom, exploit, and even attack such adult vulnerability, and to explain away their behaviour, often criminal, as acts of love or weakness. However, this is clearly professional misconduct and a deep betrayal of usually vulnerable women and men, and indeed everything the clergy and the RCC stands for. Any definition of CSMAA, including the one presented in this article, must, therefore, seriously reflect these realities. Furthermore, victims who report CSMAA need to be sincerely validated and actually thanked for attempting to reduce sexual misconduct within the RCC. But they are not. Why?

One of the main reasons is that there are still officials within the RCC who are either unaware of or who choose to ignore their plight. Furthermore, lawyers are reluctant to take on cases of CSMAA simply because the existing laws make it virtually impossible to prove non-consent: the still erroneously held belief especially within the religious context, is that being an adult (over 18) those caught up in sexual activities with clergy must have consented unless there was violence or signs thereof. Governments now need to step up

and seal up this gap in the law. In addition, jurisdictions around the world need to catch up with those, such as certain U.S. states, that are unambiguously criminalising sex between clergy and parishioners, at least within the pastoral context.

In the Western world at least, in cases of sexual misconduct in other professions, arguments surrounding consent are no longer considered due to the inherent power imbalances in such contexts. However, because of a general perception of clergy as unique, respected, celibate/chaste, socially elevated ‘holy men’, clergy are not perceived in the quite same light as secular ‘professionals’. There is some element of truth in this, given that clergy also socially mix with their ‘clients’ outside of the more one-to-one pastoral ministries. For some, this broader context also means that, somehow, sexual activity between clergy and others somehow translates into being a less serious issue than that of other professions. However, those who have researched professional sexual misconduct within institutions have clearly concluded that religious professionals have even *more* power and contexts with which to abuse others than their secular counterparts because of the ‘God Factor’, and when they do, the effects are, therefore, even *more* harmful (Rutter 1989; Peterson 1992; Russell 1993; Gonsiorek 1995; Villiers 1996, p. 44; Flynn 2003, p. 8; Tschan 2014).

CSMAA is harmful and has affected countless but unknown number of women and men within the RCC. In the fallout of the RCC’s ambivalence and ambiguity concerning clear definitions of CSMAA, the victims/survivors thereof have been left feeling abandoned, unhealed, and even further traumatised when they reach out, usually in great hope, to the Church for help and understanding. When survivors report such misconduct, they need legal and psycho/spiritual validation, as well as sincere and just responses to their abuse-affected lives, but they are not receiving this (de Weger 2020). The question has to be asked, ‘why is this still the case?’ Hopefully this article has provided some valuable material for further discourses and action around this greatly deflected issue.

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Notes

¹ Due to the controversial nature of Sipe’s estimates, the following explanations and additions were deemed necessary:

For Sipe’s explanations for his estimates and a validation thereof, see (Sipe 1995, pp. 66, 75–79; 2003, pp. 44–50). Sipe’s (1995) estimates were based on his work with “over 1500 Catholic priests”. Furthermore, he worked with and utilised a great deal of data from “25 psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, psychologists and historians”, checking figures with “10 groups of priests in diocesan and Religious settings” (Sipe 1995, p. 66). In his 2003 book, the sample had increased to 2775 priest from “five levels of observation (Sipe 2003, pp. 49–50). Sipe’s ‘estimates’ were also supported by various cardinals, including Cardinal Josk Sanchez, Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy in Rome (Sipe 1994, p. 134), as well as many leaders from the various Religious Orders.

As to other sources, Sheila Murphy’s, *A Delicate Dance: Sex, celibacy, and relationships among Catholic clergy and religious*, revealed the following: Of the female participants, 49% acknowledged sexual behaviours. Of this 49%, 39% reported only male partners; 35% only female partners and 29% both male and female partners. As for the male participants, 62% reported being “sexually active” and of these 58% said that their partners were exclusively female, while 32% said they were exclusively male (Murphy 1992, pp. 60–63).

The John Jay Report also provided data concerning clergy sexual misconduct against adults in this summary:

Haywood and Green provided an overview of the literature pertaining to prevalence, offense/victim characteristics, and evaluation of cleric serial offenders. Depending upon the study, prevalence rates ranged from 2% to 6% (pedophilic and ephebophilic clerics), 20% to 40% (sexual misconduct with adults), 8.4% (in a sample of 1322), and 5.8% to 24% (boundary violations with adults).

(John Jay Report 2004, p. 258)

Similar figures can be found in a 1995 report by Spanish psychologist, Pepe Rodriguez:

In traditionally Catholic Spain, 60 per cent of priests are sexually active, in violation of their vows of celibacy. Of these, his study found that 53 per cent had relations with adult females, 21 per cent with adult males, 14 per cent with underage males and 12 per cent with underage females.

(Yallop 2010, p. 200)

It needs to be noted, however, none of the given studies can be generalised to the entire population of clergy. Not until a complete study of all clergy (Brothers and Sisters included) is done, and all clergy answer honestly, shall we never know with absolute certainty whether the 50% figure is fully accurate. But no one in the church or in academia is contradicting these claims/estimates and if anything, they are being ‘supported’.

² For the complete outlines of the research design, methods, and underlying methodological framework, including limitations, see (de Weger 2016, pp. 60–70) and (de Weger 2020, pp. 129–50).

³ Please note that only pseudonyms have been used here and in the foundational studies.

⁴ It was not possible to fully outline these findings here. For a full discussion on these see (de Weger 2016).

⁵ This is my own definition. While simpler ones exist, I felt the need to be as unambiguous and as inclusive as possible. It may well be developed or changed in the future.

⁶ For fuller descriptions of the scenarios either side of 3–11, see (de Weger 2020, pp. 48–55, 262–64). For another list, similar but different, see Benyei (1998, pp. 65–72).

⁷ The very important question of ‘What is love’ is far beyond the scope of this study even though there was a desire to include a discussion on the topic. Suffice it to say here, this study found the best definition of adult human love in Fromm’s mid-20th classic, *The Art of Loving* (Fromm 1956). It also found similar content on appropriate mature and logical concepts in Karen Lebacqz short article “Appropriate Vulnerability: A Sexual Ethic for Singles” (Lebacqz 1987). For a definition of consent, see Marilyn Peterson book *At Personal Risk* (Peterson 1992, p. 124).

⁸ See <https://maltesemarriedcatholicpriest.wordpress.com/?s=Married+Priest> (accessed on 10 November 2021). (As of 17 May 2020, this site has ceased to operate, however, the content remains).

⁹ At the time, Margaret was a Christian Chaplain at the hospital where the event occurred. She was not ‘disturbed’ by the indecent assault of the priest who was a patient there, but understood the context. She also knew of his personal history of previous CSMAA. Also, it was clear in this case given the circumstances she was an ‘equal’ to the priest/patient.

¹⁰ The following is a paraphrasing of Maria’s testimony dealing with her abduction:

These Sisters had abducted Maria from their Hostel for Girls, where, due to her mother’s ill health, she had been sent to live. When she was 16 the Sisters allegedly forged documents and shipped her off to [country] and forced her to become a Sister, herself, enduring abuse there during the training. Once professed as a Sister, she was returned to Australia.

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