

The history and effects of child sexual abuse



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Child sexual abuse is definitely not a new or modern phenomenon and even though it was not necessarily acknowledged before the 1800's, it does not mean that it did not exist. Throughout history, documentation about child sexual abuse has existed, with references especially to Greek and Roman civilisations, as well as in colonial America and Europe (Bolen, 2002). Jean-Claude Chenais (1981), in a study using multiple data sources has been pivotal in the attitude changes in Western societies over the issue of child sexual abuse over the last hundred years. His studies have shown that due to a number of different contributing factors, in some European countries like Germany and France, child sexual abuse was so frequent as to be considered normal (Bagley & King, 2004). As cited in Bolen (2002), in his research on classical childhood analysis of different historical eras, DeMause (1988), states that:

“ The history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only begun to awaken. The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of child care, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorised and sexually abused”.

In her research of historical child sexual abuse, Florence Rush has found that it is predominantly a phenomenon of the patriarchal systems in history, where children were considered as property of the father. In Talmudic law it is the tradition that a female daughter can be betrothed by her father by means of sexual intercourse after the age of three. Even though not encouraged, sexual acts including intercourse with a child younger than three years is not a crime. Such sexual activity with young girls was not discouraged by the Catholic Church either in history, as in a Papal decree of

the sixth century stated that for a marriage to be valid it was copulating that was the overriding factor and consent only desirable. The age of the girl was taken into consideration for the purpose of betrothal where if the girl was not at least seven years old than this was considered invalid. Also, through history we find however that sexual abuse was not limited only to girls. Especially in Greece, it was popular to use boys for sex. It was also common to castrate young boys and buy or sell them as sex slaves (Bagley & King, 2004).

In its broad sense, child sexual abuse is when an older person forcibly engages in sexual activity with a child. The definition of the terms sexual assault on children or child molestation is different in different legal jurisdictions (Rowan, 2006). As cited in Kinnear (2007), child sexual abuse is defined by Fraser (1981) as being “ the exploitation of a child for the sexual gratification of an adult”, whilst Baker and Duncan (1985) claim that “[a] child (anyone under 16 years) is sexually abused when another person, who is sexually mature, involves the child in any activity which the other person expects to lead to their sexual arousal”. In their 2003 report on the maltreatment of children, the Children’s Bureau of the US Department of Health and Human Services defines it as the “ involvement of the child in sexual activity to provide sexual gratification or financial benefit to the perpetrator, including contacts for sexual purpose, molestation, statutory rape, prostitution, pornography, exposure, incest, or other sexually exploitation activities” (U. S. Department for Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, 2005). The age of consent is also different from one country to another. However, it is commonly

understood, that a child is not able to understand or willingly consent to sexual experiences with an older person. It is also acknowledged that there exists sexual experimentation between young people and therefore molestation charges are only enforced when the older person is sixteen or eighteen and that child is three or five years younger (Rowan, 2006).

There are certain factors which categorise sexual encounters as abuse according to the World Health Organisation. As well as the age difference it also includes in the definition the misuse of a position of authority by the adult which then leads to sexual acts. The child must also be unwilling to participate in such acts even if he or she did not offer resistance. It also requires the attempt to touch the genitals or breasts of a child or make the child touch the ones of the adult. If the adult attempts to touch the child by exposing himself or if the child is undressed, made to, as well as the attempt to seduce or tempt to take to another place whilst psychology threatening the child (Fegert, 2003). Sociological definitions of child sexual abuse differ from the clinical or legal ones and whilst some are universally acknowledged some are less so even though equally important and influential (Lawrence, 2004). One of the definitions widely accepted by child protection services is that of Schechter and Roberge and it states that “ Sexual abuse is defined as the involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexual activities they do not truly comprehend, to which they are unable to give informed consent” (Schechter & Roberge, 1976).

When researching child sexual abuse, it is common to associate this with the phenomology of pedophilia. When assessing and treating sex offenders however, professionals know that it is important to explore different

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variables that have an important role in such deviant sexual behaviour. The sexual preference and history, including any of crime or violence, are taken into consideration. Any other disorders such as endocrine or neuropsychological ones as well as any other biological factors are to be explored (Langevin, 2003). By definition, a pedophile is generally an individual who for no less than a period of six months fantasises about having sexual encounters with young children or is sexually aroused by the thoughts of such fantasies. Usually the sexual urges of such individuals are focused on children younger than thirteen years of age. Pedophiles can be frustrated from these urges and often suffer from interpersonal difficulties because of these sexual impulses. However, even if not necessarily always the case, some pedophiles will act upon such fantasies and are usually only apprehended or brought to attention because of this. Most pedophiles are usually not necessarily disturbed enough about such fantasies about children and as a consequence do not seek voluntary medical help (Hall & Hall, 2007). The key factor in the assessment of pedophilia is the age of the children for whom interest is shown. In its most strong forms, exclusivity is shown towards prepubescent children with no sexual urges or interest in other adults. Not all pedophiles however commit sexual offences with child victims and not all sex offenders with children are pedophiles (Seto, 2004). Dr Langevin (2003) noted however, that even though there seem to be a number of factors that are common between pedophile priests and other pedophiles in terms of sexual preferences, pedophile priests generally have less antisocial behaviour characteristics.

In light of the huge amount of media coverage of the clergy abuse crisis in the last few years, it seems that even though much interest by the community has been sparked on the topic, little research has been carried out by psychological and clinical bodies. This may be due to a long existing mutual indifference between the Church and the mental health field. Only a few studies have actually addressed the issue of the 'pedophile priest' or the priest who sexually abuses children. Despite the surmounting media coverage and attention of the issue providing an alarming public assumption that most priests are pedophiles, an American study estimated however that only 2% of priests are pedophiles whilst another 4% being ephedophiles. However, it is also taken into account that a probably large number of sexual abuse cases by the clergy are not reported (Plante, 1999). Michael Rezendes (2002), part of the Boston Globe's Spotlight Team was one of the first journalists who brought attention to the issue of child sexual abuse allegations against the American clergy. A year of investigations carried out by this team resulted in the resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law on the 13th December, 2002. This was mainly due to the exposure of a series of shortcomings and mistakes, in his handling of a well known pedophile in Boston; Rev John J. Geoghan, where after being reported of sexual misconduct with children, he was reassigned. However, it was clear that Geoghan was only a sign of a more serious problem. The Spotlight Team investigated further into the Archdiocese of Boston and by the time of Law's resignation, had published over 800 stories.

An earlier singular case which also received worldwide publicity however dates back to 1984, where Fr Gilbert Gauthier of Lafayette, Louisiana was

charged on multiple counts of child sexual abuse. This was the first criminal case of its kind to receive such level of media attention and publicity and also was the first time that a civil suit was initiated against a diocese on the grounds of failure to protect children from a known abuser in its clergy (Murphy, Buckley & Joyce, 2005). Dr Richard Sipe, a psychotherapist and psychiatrist as well as a former Roman Catholic Priest, wrote extensively on the subject of child sexual abuse and reports that even as early as 1976, before the big scandals broke out on the media, there opened a programme, the first, perhaps, in the world dedicated to the treatment of psychosexual disorders for clergy. This included the treatment of disorders which involved the sexual abuse of children. The need for such a programme and its preparation, years before its opening, shows that knowledge of Catholic Clergy who had problems of sexual misconduct was already widespread in the 1960's and 70's (Sipe, 1995). With such an increasing interest in the phenomenon of priests as sexual abusers of children, the Catholic Church seemed to be spiralling into a crisis as portrayed so by the media, with an increasing number of people coming forward with new allegations all over the world. Philip Jenkins (2001), as cited in Dokecki (2004) explores the terms of moral crisis as opposed to moral panic. In order to fully understand whether the Catholic Church was being victimised by a new panic born out of media frenzy or if the panic was due to a moral crisis deeply rooted in actual facts and reality of the problem, one must also explore the issue in its full context. It is worth noting and reflecting upon the possibility of child abuse scandal by clergy as being a classic example of social construction. This is not to belittle the seriousness of priests committing such lewd acts with children, but it is more a manner of asserting how the media portrayal of <https://assignbuster.com/the-history-and-effects-of-child-sexual-abuse/>

such events can impact the way it shapes the social response to it (Jenkins, 2001).

The way that this issue in the US has been widely covered and reported by the media, it has undoubtedly generated a growing popular feeling of mistrust in the church. This might have been a trigger in the claim that the Catholic Church has been inefficient in its response to such abuses and allegations, as the increasing number of cases began to crop up all over America as well as the rest of the world. By 2004, the time of the Globe's investigation of the Boston cases, it was reported that between 1950 and 2002, four thousand three hundred priests were alleged to have abused or molested almost eleven thousand children or adolescents (Paine & Hansen, 2002). A study of child abuse committed by clergy which was conducted by the John Jay College for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2002 recorded these figures. However, this only reflects the numbers for those victims who actually reported their abuse and came forward to the Church authorities. Studies have shown that a great number of victims, especially males, never come forward to disclose their abuse to anyone and even more never report it to the authorities. It is also important to note that not all dioceses participated in this study and not all kept official and accurate records (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2002). In the matter of establishing whether the problem of child sexual abuse by clergy in the Catholic Church is just moral crisis as opposed to just moral panic, numbers alone do not suffice. It is often normally recognised for organisations and public entities to take defensive measures when dealing with such serious accusation against its employees or members. Most importantly the defense

would most certainly be targeted against a blanket condemnation of the whole organisation. Sometimes, such corporations genuinely fail to recognise and acknowledge the fact that the destructive effects of such allegations have deeper roots than simply moral panic (Dokecki, 2004).

Studies of other organisations entrusted with the care of children show that the prevalence of child sexual abuse is also of concern. In his study as reported in *The Washington Times* (1991), Patrick Boyle outlined that between 1971 and 1989 there were one thousand, one hundred and fifty seven reports of child sexual abuse out of a million volunteers (all adults) and four million member scouts; with the majority believed to be boys aged between eleven and seventeen. Case studies also seemed to indicate that in order to safeguard the image of the Boy Scout organisation, certain information was covered up in order to prevent the possibility of a crisis scandal. The police were not involved if the alleged abuser left the organisation. However, it was common practice for these offenders to move to other states and join new troops whilst those reported to the General Headquarters still managed to bypass the system and re-roll in new States (Boyle, 1994). Other studies of different organisations for youths and children also show sexual abuse incidents reported. These include institutions like the Big Brother Organisation, the YMCA as well as other athletic organisations and centres for child care-giving in day care institutions or families. In sporting organisations, the perpetrators were found to be involved in the majority of cases with a school; i. e., teachers or principals who appeared to have multiple victims, with one coach reported to have four hundred counts of sexual abuse. The majority of these cases

occurred in the US, the UK and Ireland. In both the sports organisations and the Big Brother one, however, it seemed that legal action was taken against the perpetrators and screening processes put in place for all future volunteers (John Jay College, 2002).

As seen from the community, the sexual abuse crises in the Catholic Church presented a larger moral shock than any other abuse scandal, predominantly because of the social status priests hold within the same community. The priest is believed to be not merely a man serving the pastoral functions for his church, but also a delegate of Christ on Earth. The priest is often held in a position of trust within society; where people look upon him as a source of comfort and advice. In Catholic communities the clergy are viewed as central and present in everyday life through their work within the parish and as reference points for the safeguarding of the souls (Cozzens, . However, priests do not only function in a society as preachers of the word of God. In most cases, they will take on the role of therapists, care-givers and educators. They do not only earn their loyalty from the altar, but mainly from being there for the sick, the troubled, the dying and the dead. It is understood, because of such an intimate involvement in social and community life, that any case of sexual abuse by a member of the clergy will have relational and social implications as well as personal ones (Frawley-O'Dea, 2007). According to Lebacqz (1985), from an ethical perspective, priests are professionals and as such, a relationship of mutual trust needed. The clergy however go beyond our normal understanding of their sacramental office and thus in the relationship between priest and child, the typical power discrepancy is significantly amplified. This is so because the

context of the relationship is the church and also the professional is a priest and the client a child (Dokecki, 2004).

From their early years children are socialised to view the Church as a 'mother' and a priest as a fatherly figure; hence also priests being called 'father'.