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Psychological Characteristics of Irish Clerical Sexual Offenders.

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ABSTRACT

Background. Controlled studies suggest that clerical child sexual offenders may be better adjusted psychologically than their lay counterparts, although no studies of Irish clerical offenders have been reported.

Aim. To compare clerical and non-clerical sexual offenders with a normal control group, within an Irish context, on broad-band personality traits and narrow-band psychological characteristics that have been identified as risk factors for child sexual abuse.

Method. Thirty clerical men and 73 laymen who had sexually abused children and 30 lay controls completed the NEO Personality Inventory Revised (NEO-PI-R), the Sex Offender Assessment Pack (SOAP) and the Multiphasic Sex Inventory (MSI).

Results. The three groups differed significantly on 11 of 18 dependent variables. The only variable which distinguished between the two groups of offenders was conscientiousness, with clerical offenders being more conscientious than lay offenders. The two groups of offenders showed significantly lower self-esteem than normal controls and scores indicative of greater denial on the MSI sexual social desirability scale. However, they also showed greater agreeableness and empathic concern than the control group. Compared with the control group, the lay offenders (but not the clerical offenders) showed greater neuroticism, less extraversion, less openness, greater emotional loneliness, and more sensitivity to personal distress in others than the control group but also showed greater assertiveness.

Conclusions. These results indicate that there were few differences between clerical and lay sexual offenders, and that clerical offenders differed from normal controls less than lay offenders on the Big Five personality traits and psychological risk factors for sexual offending assessed by the SOAP and MSI.

INTRODUCTION

Clerical child abuse is a significant international problem. In a review of five US epidemiological studies, McGlone (2003) found prevalence rates ranging from 2-11%. A recent major US epidemiological study, spanning the period from 1950-2002 found a prevalence rate of 4% with a variation of 3-6% across regions (Terry, 2008). In this study just over half of clerical abusers had one formal allegation against them, and about a quarter had 2-3 allegations against them. Male adolescents were the most common victims, a finding common in other surveys (Plante, 2003). Most clerical sex offenders engaged in a variety of sexually abusive acts ranging from non-penetrative contact sexual abuse in just over half of cases to penetrative sexual abuse in about a quarter of cases and oral sex in about a quarter of cases. The duration of abuse ranged from 3-22 years with a mean of 5 years. For most clerical offenders 11 years elapsed before allegations were made about their abuse.

Controlled studies of the personality traits and personal characteristics of clerical child sexual offenders suggest that they may be better adjusted psychologically than their lay counterparts (Haywood, Kravitz, Grossman, Wasyliv, & Hardy, 1996; Haywood, Kravitz, Wasyliv, Goldberg, & Cavanaugh, 1996; Langevin, Curnoe, & Bain, 2000). In a study of 30 clerical child sexual offenders, 39 laymen who had sexually abused children and 38 normal controls, Haywood, Kravitz, Grossman et al. (1996) found that clerical abusers had fewer psychological problems than offenders and had committed fewer offenses, had fewer victims, and more of their victims were male adolescents. In a second study, Haywood's group investigated 24 clerical and 45 non-clerical child sex offenders, 48 non-offending clerical controls, and 40 non-clerical normal controls (Haywood, Kravitz, Wasyliv et al., 1996). They found that, compared with the control groups, more sexual offenders had been abused as children, and clerical sexual offenders had lower rates of

psychological problems, including sociopathy, than lay sexual abusers, but were more conflicted about sexual issues. In a study of 24 clerical child abusers, 24 demographically matched male paedophiles, and 2125 sex offenders matched only for offense type, Langevin et al. (2000) found that fewer clerics had antisocial personality disorder, most were homosexual paedophiles, and more had used physical force with their victims. They also had fewer offences, and longer periods before being convicted.

Multifactorial theories about the aetiology of sexual offending point to a range of developmental experiences and processes; personality traits and personal attributes; situational and interpersonal factors; and social-ecological variables that predispose individuals to sexually offend, that precipitate offences and that maintain offending behaviour (Finkelhor, 1984; Hall, 1996; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Ward & Beech, 2004; Ward and Siegert, 2002). The focus of the present paper is on personality traits and personal attributes. In this domain multifactorial theories have proposed that a range of variables including low self-esteem, an external locus of control, lack of assertiveness, loneliness, empathy deficits and cognitive distortions play a role in the aetiology and maintenance of sexual offending. This proposition has been supported, to some degree by empirical studies, such as those in which the Sexual Abuse Offender Pack (SOAP) has been administered (Beckett, Beech, & Fisher, 1996; Beckett, Beech, Fisher, & Fordham, 1994; Beech, Fisher, & Beckett, 1998). Alongside 'narrow-band' personal characteristics such as self-esteem and locus of control, it has also been proposed that broad-band personality traits may offer an explanation for offending behaviour (Egan, 2009). There is some evidence to show that scores on 'broad-band' personality traits are associated with child sexual abuse (Dennison, Stough, & Birgden, 2001; Egan, Kavanagh, Blair, 2005). For example, in a study of 64 incarcerated child sexual abusers and 33 controls, Dennison et al. (2001) found that sexual offenders obtained higher neuroticism scores and lower scores on extraversion and conscientiousness. In the same vein, Egan et al. (2005) found

significant correlations between factors derived from the SOAP instruments and three of the Big Five factors: neuroticism and extroversion and agreeableness.

To date there have been no studies comparing the status of clerical sexual offenders with non-clerical offenders on broad-band personality traits and narrow-band psychological characteristics that have been identified as risk factors for child sexual abuse. In view of this, the main question addressed in this study was how clerics and laymen who had sexually offended against children differed from each other, and from normal controls on the Big Five personality traits and psychological risk factors for sexual offending assessed by the SOAP (Beckett et al., 1996). In light of previous studies of clerical offenders, we expected them to show fewer psychological difficulties than non-clerical offenders, but more than normal controls.

METHOD

Participants

Thirty clerics and 73 laymen who had sexually abused children were recruited from a community-based treatment centre for sexual offenders. In both groups 90% had engaged in non-penetrative contact sexual abuse (fondling and/or masturbating victims or self in the presence of the victims) and 10% had perpetrated penetrative sexual offences (including vaginal, anal or oral sex). A convenience sample of 30 normal controls was also recruited using a “snowball” method. The groups differed significantly with respect to age ($F(2, 126) = 26.22, p < .01$), and education ($\chi^2(2, N = 133) = 19.76, p < .001$). The mean ages of the clerical and lay sex offenders and normal controls were 54, 44 and 33 years respectively. With regard to education, 100% of clerical offenders, 52% of lay offenders, and 66% of the control group had university degrees. (In the results section below, these demographic group differences were taken into account when conducting group comparisons on dependent variables.)

Instruments

Participants completed the NEO Personality Inventory-Revised (NEO-PI-R, Costa & McCrae, 1992), the SOAP (Beckett et al., 1996), and the Multiphasic Sex Inventory (MSI, Nichols & Molinder, 1984). In the present study all instruments had acceptable levels of internal consistency reliability with Cronbach's alpha coefficients greater than .7. Evidence of construct or criterion validity were available for all scales in the assessment protocol. The NEO-PI-R yields scores for the Big Five personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness and has been used internationally in studies of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The SOAP is a battery of assessment inventories approved by the UK Home Office for the evaluation of psychological risk factors of sex offenders (Beckett et al., 1996). What follows is a list of the instruments contained in the SOAP and the constructs these instruments assess. *The Thornton Self-Esteem Scale* provides a unidimensional measure of self-esteem (Beckett et al., 1996). *The Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale* assesses the extent to which respondents believe events are contingent on their behaviors and the extent to which they believe events are controlled externally (Nowicki & Duke, 1982). *The Social Response Inventory* yields an overall assertiveness score as well as scores for under-assertiveness and over-assertiveness in social situations (Keltner, Marshall, and Marshall, 1981). *The Revised UCLA Emotional Loneliness Scale* assesses emotional loneliness and social isolation (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980). The *Interpersonal Reaction Inventory* yields scores for personal distress (ability to cope with the emotional distress experienced by another person), perspective taking (ability to see things from another persons perspective), and empathic concern (warmth and compassion for other people) (Davis, 1980). *The Victim Empathy Scale* assess empathic understanding of the effects of sexual offences specifically related to the offender's own victim (Beckett et al., 1996). *The*

Children and Sexuality Questionnaire yields scores for cognitive distortions and emotional congruence with children (Beckett et al., 1996). The *MSI* yielded scores for sexual obsessions and sexual social desirability (Nichols & Molinder, 1984). High scores on the sexual obsession scale are indicative of a pre-occupation with sex, while low scores on the sexual social desirability scale are indicative of denial of sexual drives and interests. A *Demographic Questionnaire* was used to record age and educational level.

Procedure

The study was conducted with ethical approval of involved institutions and informed consent of all participants. Clerical and non-clerical offenders completed the assessment protocol as a routine part of pre-treatment evaluation at a community-based treatment centre for sexual offenders. Participants in the control group completed the assessment protocol in their homes and returned their anonymized questionnaires by mail. Data were entered into a password-protected personal computer, and verified and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences V.14 for Windows. For any of the instruments listed in the preceding section, data were not analyzed if participants responded to fewer than 80% of the items in that inventory. For 92% of participants NEO-PI-R data were analyzed; for 81-98% of participants data from one or more of the SOAP scales were analyzed; and data from the MSI were analyzed for 84% of participants.

RESULTS

To determine whether the groups differed significantly on dependent variables, a series of 16 analyses of variance (ANOVA) with post-hoc comparisons were conducted. The rough false discovery rate was used to control for type 1 error associated with conducting ANOVAs on multiple dependent variables (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995). Using this procedure, the p value for each ANOVA was reduced by multiplying it by $(n+1 / 2n)$, where

n is the number of tests. So for $n = 18$, the p value was set at $19/36 \times .05 = .026$. This is a less conservative procedure with greater power than the Bonferroni correction (Thissen, Steinberg, & Kuang, 2002). A power analysis showed that for our 3 group design with 133 cases and an average of 44 cases per group, an alpha value of .026 permitted the detection effect sizes of .7 with a power of .8. From Table 1 it can be seen that there were significant differences between the three groups on 11 of 18 variables: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, self-esteem, under assertiveness, emotional loneliness, empathic concern, personal distress and sexual social desirability.

An important consideration is the degree to which intergroup differences in age and education level, which were potential confounding variables, affected results of ANOVAs. To assess this, age and education level (coded as 1=secondary education and 2=university education) were correlated with the 18 dependent variables. Significant correlations ($p < .05$) occurred between 7 dependent variables and either age or education or both. These variables were the openness ($r_{(age)} = -0.26$), agreeableness ($r_{(age)} = 0.31$), locus of control ($r_{(education)} = -0.20$), empathic concern ($r_{(education)} = -0.24$), victim empathy ($r_{(age)} = -0.20$), emotional congruence ($r_{(age)} = -0.20$, $r_{(education)} = 0.23$), and sexual social desirability ($r_{(education)} = -0.25$) scales. From Table 1 it may be seen that the results of the ANCOVAs on these 7 dependent variables were similar to those of the ANOVAs. Thus, age and education had a negligible impact on significant intergroup variance identified in the ANOVAs.

The pattern of group differences revealed by post-hoc tests is given in Table 1. The only variable which distinguished between the two groups of offenders was conscientiousness, with clerical offenders being more conscientious than lay offenders. The two groups of offenders showed significantly lower self-esteem and lower sexual

social desirability scores (indicative of denial of sexual interests) than normal controls.

However, they also showed significantly greater agreeableness and empathic concern than the control group. Compared with the control group, the lay offenders (but not the clerical offenders) showed significantly greater neuroticism, less extraversion, less openness, greater emotional loneliness, and more personal distress than the control group but also showed significantly greater assertiveness.

Effect sizes, rank ordered in Figure 1 in terms of absolute magnitude, indicate positive and negative adjustment of clerical and lay sexual offenders compared with the normal control group. Effect sizes indicating negative adjustment occurred on 8 of 11 variables on which the groups were found to differ significantly. These were: self-esteem, sexual social desirability, openness, emotional loneliness, conscientiousness (for lay offenders only), extraversion, personal distress, and neuroticism. For both clerical and lay sexual offender groups very large negative effect sizes (from -1.23 to -1.77) occurred on the self-esteem and sexual social desirability scales. For both clerical and lay sexual offender groups, moderate to large effect sizes (from -0.55 to -0.98) occurred on openness, emotional loneliness, and personal distress. For the clerical offender group small effect sizes (from -0.40 to -0.41) occurred on extraversion and neuroticism.

Effect sizes indicating positive adjustment occurred on 4 of 11 variables on which the groups were found to differ significantly. These were: agreeableness, empathic concern, assertiveness, and conscientiousness (for clerical offenders only). For both the clerical and lay sexual offender groups, moderate to large effect sizes (from 0.63 to 1.46) occurred on agreeableness and empathic concern, and for the lay offender group on assertiveness. For the clerical offender group small effect sizes (from 0.22 to 0.27) occurred on assertiveness and conscientiousness.

DISCUSSION

The main question addressed in this study was how clerics and laymen who had sexually abused children differed from each other, and from normal controls on the Big Five personality traits and psychological risk factors for sexual offending. The only variable which distinguished between clerical and lay offenders was conscientiousness, with clerics being more conscientious than lay offenders. Thus, the main conclusion was that clerical and lay child sexual abusers are more similar than different.

Both clerical and lay offenders reported significantly lower self-esteem, and showed greater denial of sexual drives and interests on the sexual social desirability scale. In contrast, they also showed greater agreeableness and empathic concern than normal controls. However, the lay offender group also differed from the control group on a range of other variables which, with the exception of assertiveness, reflected psychological vulnerabilities. Compared with the control group the lay offender group showed greater neuroticism, less extraversion, less openness, greater emotional loneliness, and more sensitivity to personal distress. Thus, the second conclusion from this study is that clerical offenders differed from normal controls less than lay offenders on the Big Five personality traits and psychological risk factors for sexual offending. In this sense clerical sex offenders were better adjusted than lay offenders.

The clinical picture of the clerical child sex abuser provided by this study is of a man with low self-esteem, who denies sexual drives and interests, but who is interpersonally agreeable, and empathically concerned about others. The clerical sex offender is more conscientious and has fewer psychological vulnerabilities such as neuroticism, loneliness, and sensitivity to personal distress, than the lay sex offender, but little more so than other men.

The results of this study are consistent with those of previous studies which have shown that clerical child offenders had lower levels of psychopathology than lay offenders, and lower levels of sexual drive than non-offending controls. (Haywood, Kravitz, Grossman et al., 1996; Haywood, Kravitz, Wasyliv et al., 1996; Langevin et al., 2000).

This study had a number of limitations. The three groups were not matched for age or educational level, although an attempt was made to address this issue by conducting ANCOVAs with age and education as covariates, as appropriate. It would also have been useful to include groups of non-offending clerics, to determine if the profile of clerical sexual offenders is more strongly associated with offence status rather than clerical status. These limitations need to be addressed in future studies, by carefully matching cases and controls and including an additional control group of non-offending clerics. Our results point to many potential avenues for future research. For example, it would be informative to expand our data set and conduct further analyses in which clerical and non-clerical cases are divided into cases where contact and non-contact abuse occurred and analysed profiles of these subgroups.

From a clinical perspective the present study suggests that clerical offenders, because they have fewer psychological vulnerabilities than lay sexual offenders, may require treatment programs that take this into account.

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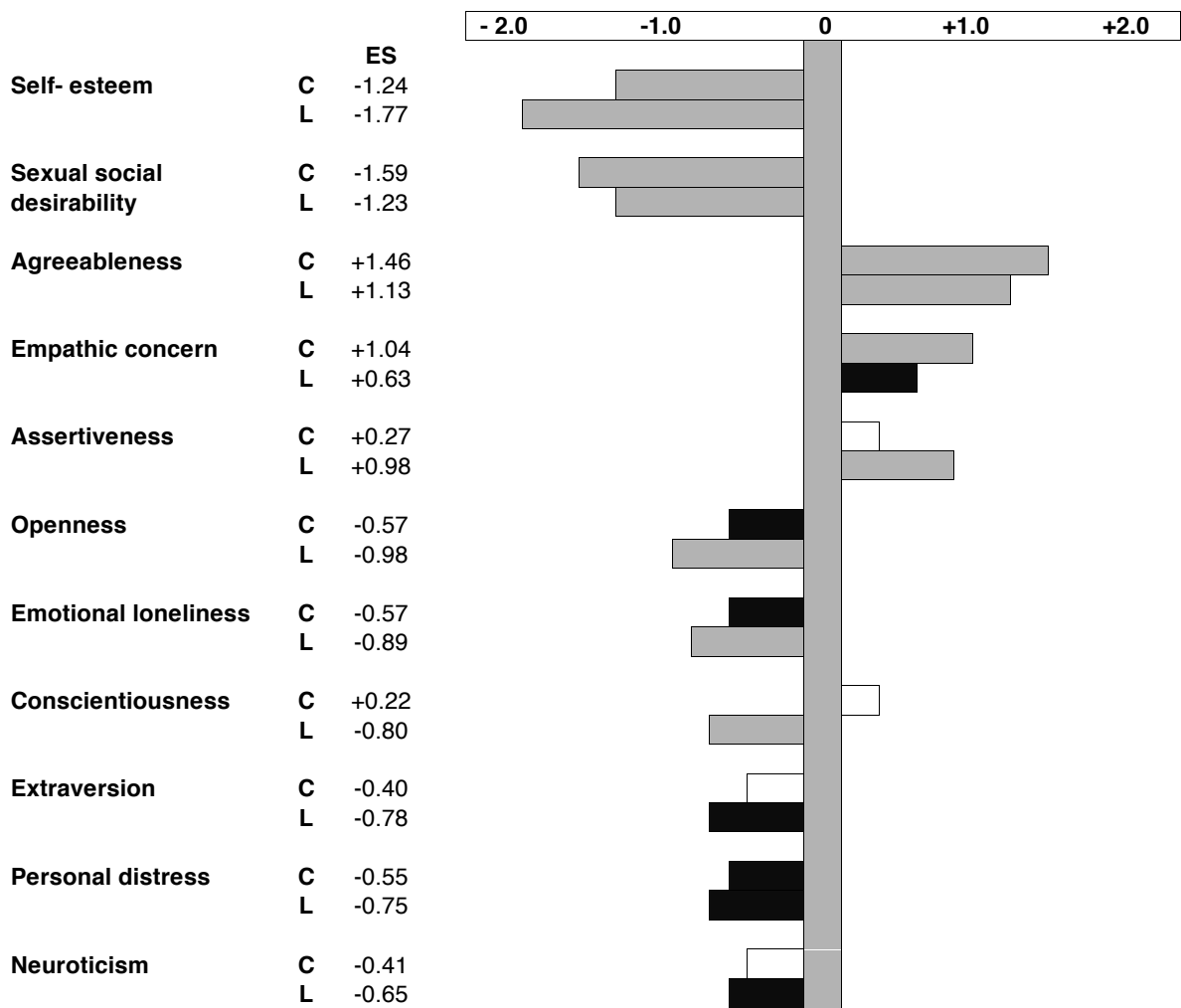
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Table 1. Comparison of clerical offenders, lay offenders and normal controls on personality traits and risk factors for sexual offending.

		Clerical Offenders Group 1	Lay Offenders Group 2	Control Group Group 3	ANOVA F	ANCOVA F	Group Differences
		N=30	N=73	N=30			
Neuroticism	M	92.12	97.37	83.37	4.08*	-----	2>3
	SD	17.43	23.19	21.54			
Extraversion	M	109.50	102.08	117.50	6.94***	-----	2<3
	SD	21.41	17.01	19.84			
Openness	M	107.90	100.10	118.50	12.53***	8.63***	2<3
	SD	14.52	16.16	18.74			
Agreeableness	M	137.10	131.51	112.10	17.79***	8.96***	1=2>3
	SD	16.27	16.44	17.16			
Conscientiousness	M	120.40	96.2	115.4	6.87***	-----	1>2
	SD	16.42	39.22	22.64			
Self-esteem	M	7.35	6.26	9.89	9.38***	-----	1=2<3
	SD	3.72	4.15	2.05			
Locus of control	M	17.15	17.90	15.78	2.258	1.03	-----
	SD	4.87	4.66	3.18			
Over assertiveness	M	1.15	1.01	1.11	1.706	-----	-----
	SD	0.40	0.16	.32			
Under assertiveness†	M	12.81	13.89	12.4	9.83***	-----	2>3
	SD	1.87	1.62	1.52			
Emotional loneliness	M	38.84	41.2	34.52	4.60**	-----	2>3
	SD	9.3	10.72	7.52			
Personal distress	M	11.07	12.07	8.30	5.14**	-----	2>3
	SD	4.36	5.6	5.01			
Perspective taking	M	17.47	17.17	15.59	1.158	-----	-----
	SD	5.12	5.24	4.85			
Empathic concern	M	23.15	21.49	18.93	8.79***	9.68***	1=2>3
	SD	3.58	3.83	4.07			
Victim empathy	M	44.53	47.03	58.72	1.92	0.92	-----
	SD	33.03	31.80	18.69			
Cognitive distortions	M	55.71	56.44	59.52	1.32	-----	-----
	SD	8.37	8.61	8.91			
Emotional congruence	M	53.78	54.04	57.04	0.73	0.52	-----
	SD	10.03	11.90	8.98			
Sexual obsessions	M	3.57	3.10	3.11	0.18	-----	-----
	SD	3.12	3.63	3.11			
Sexual social desirability	M	8.75	9.59	12.44	8.43***	8.98***	1=2<3
	SD	3.72	3.87	2.32			

Note: *p<.026 (the rough false discovery corrected p value). **p<.01. ***p<.001. †High scores indicate positive assertiveness. M= Mean. SD= Standard deviation. ANOVA = Analysis of variance. ANCOVA = analysis of co-variance. Age was the covariate in the ANCOVAs on the openness, agreeableness and victim empathy scales. Education was the covariate in the ANCOVAs on the locus of control and empathic concern scales. Age and education were covariates in the ANCOVA on the emotional congruence sexual social desirability scale.

Figure 1. Effect sizes for clerical and lay sexual offenders on 11 variables on which groups differed significantly.



Note: Large effect size >.8 Moderate effect size: .5-.79 Small effect size <.5 ES = effect size. C = effect size for clerical sex offender group. L = Effect size for lay sex offender group. Positive effect sizes indicate positive adjustment compared with the normal control group. Negative effect sizes indicate negative adjustment compared with the normal control group.