**Module F – Understanding the Sexual Victimization of Children**

**Outline, Goals and Comments, Discussion Questions, References, and Sources**

**Outline**

1. A. Sexual Abuse of Victims: Age and Gender (F-4)
2. B. Onset of Sexual Abuse (F-5 to F-8)
3. C. Grooming Behavior (F-9 to F-17)
4. Seduction, Testing, Manipulation, and Coercion (F-10 to F-11)
5. Surprise, Force, and Disguise (F-12 to F-14)
6. Using Alcohol and Drugs, and Building Relationships (F-15-to F-16)
7. Effects of Grooming Over Time (F-17)
8. D. Persistence of Abuse (F-18 to F-29)
9. Excuses for Behavior (F-20 to F-22)
10. Justifications for Behavior (F-23 to F-28)
11. Deviance Disavowal (F-29)
12. E. Desistance from Abuse (F-30 to F-31)
13. Summary and Discussion Questions (F-32 to F-33)

**Goals and Comments**

The goal of Module F is to be aware of the age and gender of victims and then to examine how abuse begins, especially through grooming, why it continues, and what contributes to it discontinuation. Most victims of clergy sexual abuse are male (81 percent) and most are ages 11 to 14 (51 percent). The preconditions for abuse include factors such as blockage to “normal” sexual relationships, the ability to overcome internal inhibitions, external factors that may prevent the abuse, and the child’s resistance to the abuse. Among factors relevant for priests who abuse are poor relationships with parents as youths, a history of sexual abuse, loneliness, confusion over sexual identity, psychosexual immaturity, and alcohol abuse.

Grooming is pre-meditated behavior intended to manipulate a potential victim into complying with sexual abuse. Tactics may include seduction and testing of a child, emotional manipulation and verbal coercion. It may also involve catching the victim by surprise, using physical force, disguising sexual advances, and using alcohol and drugs. Building relationships to gain trust often precedes abuse and may take years to develop.

Abuse persists as offenders employ a variety of justifications and excuses, as well as deviance disavowal. Excuses include denial of responsibility and blaming the victim. Accused priests justify their actions by denying the wrongfulness and harmfulness of the behavior, and downplaying what actually occurred. They may also shift the blame to church leaders and expect to be forgiven. Others say they were not adequately prepared to make better choices or equipped to deal with celibate life.

Abusers also may disavow the deviance of the act and focus on their relationship with a forgiving God without understanding the harm to victims. Abuse may stop for internal or external reasons. Internal reasons include feelings of guilt or shame or having a sense of remorse. The most common external reason for stopping is being removed from the situation where the abuse took place.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What are some of the relevant factors to be aware of at the onset of abuse?
2. How can those responsible for the care of children and young people be made more aware of the characteristics of grooming behavior and how to respond?
3. How do the excuses and justifications for sexual abuse affect the persistence of the behavior?
4. What are some other ways supervisors can more readily detect abuse?

**Titles of Slides and References**

F-1: Module F

F-2: Title Slide

F-3: Main Sources of Data

F-4: A. Sexual Abuse Victims

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 10

F-5: B. Onset of Sexual Abuse

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 98

F-6: Onset of Abuse, 1: Preconditions

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 98

*\* Finkelhor, Childhood Victimization*

According to Finkelhor’s model, once motivational factors are in place that create a predisposition to sexually abuse, individuals must then overcome any internal inhibitions to abuse a child. To do so, the abusers employ “techniques of neutralization,” which allow them to diminish their feelings of guilt, responsibility, and shame.

F-7: Onset of Abuse, 2: Relevant Factors for Priests

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 98

Like the other data assessing individual explanations of abuse, these factors indicate the vulnerability (if not motivation) of some priests to abuse.

\* Surveys of Victim Assistance Coordinators

F-8: Onset of Abuse, 3: Overcoming External Factors that May Prevent Abuse

from Occurring

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 99

Grooming is a premeditated behavior intended to manipulate the potential victim into complying with the sexual abuse.437 Pryor describes several methods by which child sexual abusers approach and engage their victims in sexual behavior, including verbal and/or physical coercion, seduction, games, and enticements.438 He explains how they are able to manipulate their victims into sexual compliance and how offenders either continue the manipulation or adjust it in order to continue with the abuse.

F-9: C. Grooming Behavior

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, pp. 102, 202

The tactics used by offenders depend somewhat on the potential victim’s response to the tactic. If an offender encounters little to no resistance from the potential victim, he will continue to use the same tactic repeatedly. If, however, some resistance is encountered, the offender may either change the tactic and/or become more forceful in his endeavor.

Pryor, D.W. (1996). Unspeakable Acts: Why Men Sexually Abuse Children. New York: New York University Press.

F-10: Grooming 2, Seduction and Testing of a Child

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, p. 172

F-11: Grooming 3, Emotional Manipulation and Verbal Coercion

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, p. 172

F-12: Grooming 4, Catching the Victim by Surprise

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, p. 172; *Causes and Context*, p. 103

F-13: Grooming 5, Using Verbal or Physical Force

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, p. 172

F-14: Grooming 6, Disguising Sexual Advances

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, p. 172

The most methodical and deliberate tactic of engaging a victim in sex involves a process of initially introducing the victim to the idea of sex and then gradually engaging them in sexual activity. Pryor describes this tactic as turning the victim out. For example, the offender will begin by displaying himself in the nude or introducing the victim to pornography. Then there is a period of rationalizing that sex is okay. This may be followed by fondling the victim or having the victim fondle him, all the while rationalizing that sex is okay and possibly verbally praising the victim for his/her efforts. This exchange slowly builds up to more serious sexual acts and possibly to the point where the victim is being rewarded with gifts for his/her participation.

F-15: Grooming 7, Using Alcohol and Drugs

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 103

F-16: Grooming 8, Building Relationships with the Families of the Victims

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 103

F-17: Grooming 9, Effects of Grooming over Time

Notes: *Nature and Scope*, p. 173

When offenders set out to groom a victim, they will usually use tactics that have previously proved successful in gaining their victim’s compliance. However, given that offenders attend to their victim’s response, they are open to changing their tactics if an approach proves unsuccessful.

F-18: D. Persistence of Abuse

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 115

F-19: Persistence of Abuse: Categories

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 103

This mechanism is one through which priests can deal with the emotional, psychological, and social harms of a negative label, thus distancing their “bad” or immoral acts from themselves as individuals.

F-20: Excuses for Behavior, 1: Denial of Responsibility

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 105

Some accused priests relied on clinical or psychological explanations for their deviant behavior. A common excuse for offending was sexual immaturity. The priests alluded to what they had lost (their active ministry), rather than recognizing the harm done to the accuser. In this explanation, they also showed a lack of victim empathy. In addition to the sexual immaturity, they also expressed emotional immaturity. The priests talked about seeking excessive emotional closeness with parishioners generally (such closeness with parishioners is not considered appropriate for priests), and they also explained that their emotional needs were not met by peer priests. Other priests explained that abuse is really no one person’s fault, because it is either a disease of the mind, a misunderstanding about what is appropriate, or the result of retarded psychosexual development.

F-21: Excuses for Behavior, 2: Denying the Victim

Notes: *Causes and Context*, pp. 105-107

F-22: Excuses for Behavior, 3: Denying the Victim

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 107

It was evident that the “bad self,” or the sinner, was not engaged as an identity belonging to the priest, but was instead some other disavowed self. Similar to the excuses in which priests denied their own culpability, the accused priests, even when admitting that sexually inappropriate events occurred, did not always identify the actions as abusive. Accused priests expressed the sentiment that had the family not included them in their lives, or if the family of the victim was not so broken, or even if the victim was not so intimately forward, none of these things would have happened. Without such circumstances, the priests argued, no sexual interaction would have taken place and therefore no allegations.

In these cases, everyone else but the accuser was a victim of the sexual abuse. Denying the victim’s identity therefore allowed the accused priests to absolve themselves of the status of abuser.

F-23: Justifications for Behavior, 1

Notes: *Causes and Context*, pp. 107-108

In these cases, the accusers may have been the media, church hierarchy (bishops), parishioners, or families of the victims. This technique overlaps with the appeal to a higher authority, particularly if the priest had sought and felt that he had been given forgiveness.

Although excuses allowed the priests to accept that they committed particular acts, the justification framework suggests that what was done was something for which the priests can be forgiven by God (appeal to a higher authority or loyalty), was not really harmful to the victim or others (denial of harm), and/or was not the real problem (condemning the condemners). All of these techniques are deflective and allowed the priests to deny that they did anything objectionable, whereas the excuses allowed them to admit that they engaged in wrongful acts, but such acts were not their fault.

F-24: Justifications, 2: Minimization of Harm

Notes: *Causes and Context*, pp. 112-113

It is important to note that many instances of sexual abuse did occur at a time in social history (late 1960s to early 1980s) when there was little or developing knowledge around the concepts of sexual violation, victimization, and long-term impact of sexual victimization. Priests may have been uncomfortable with their actions but would not have viewed them as criminal or harmful.

It is valid that a bulk of the events did occur decades before reporting, which made it easier for the priests to minimize or deny the harm that was caused. The priests rationalized that if there had been harm, the abuse would have been reported sooner. Another technique of minimizing harm employed by some of the accused priests was to call the interaction between the accuser and the accused something other than an abusive interaction. The language suggested that the interaction occurred as a part of a friendship or relationship, be it romantic or even a relationship with the family. Accused priests employing this justification of their actions explained that they had contact with the victims through harmless encounters or invited relationships, such as socializing with the family of the victim. Several priests with allegations of abuse had established relationships between themselves and the victims’ families.

F-25: Justifications, 3: Condemning the Condemners

Notes: Causes and Context, p. 113

These respondents ignored their own abusive behavior and simply focused on the behavior of church leadership. This technique is known as “condemning the condemners.”

F-26: Justifications, 4: Condemning the Condemners

Notes: *Causes and Context*, pp. 113, 115

F-27: Justification, 5: Condemning the Condemners

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 115

F-28: Justification, 6: Inadequate Seminary Preparation

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 115

The problem, as it appeared to the accused priests, was the failure of church leaders to adequately train them for the priesthood, particularly the loneliness and isolation therein. Some priests who were not isolated expressed that they were emotionally, psychologically, and sometimes physically abused by their pastors, especially in their early assignments. They experienced a shock in making the transition from the supportive communal seminary setting to the more isolated and difficult experiences of active ministry.

F-29: Deviance Disavowal: Appealing to a Higher Authority

Notes: *Causes and Context*, pp. 108, 112

F-30: E. Desistance for Abuse, 1: Why Abuse Stopped

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 116

Survivor surveys and information from public documents lead to a more situational explanation for the desistance from abusive behavior. Many of the victims said that abuse ceased when they removed themselves from the abusive situations. In other words, they removed themselves from the situations in which they were being abused, and the priests no longer had the opportunities to abuse them. Often, however, the abuse had continued for a period of time before the victims could determine a way in which to remove themselves from the abusive situation.

F-31: Desistance from Abuse, 2: Why Abuse Stopped

Notes: *Causes and Context*, p. 116

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F-32: Summary of Understanding the Sexual Victimization of Children

F-33: Discussion Questions

**Sources**

This module and others prepared for use in seminaries and schools of theology are based primarily on the two reports presented to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops by the John Jay College Research Team, The City University of New York: *The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States*, 1950-2010, March, 2011 and *The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States, 1950-2002*, February 2004.

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