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RESILIENCY FACTORS AND OUTCOMES FOR SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Catholicism and Childhood Sexual Abuse: Women’s Coping and Psychotherapy

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The long-term effects of child sexual abuse include numerous psychological, social, and behavioral difficulties in women survivors, ranging from poor self-esteem and depression to sexual disorders and posttraumatic stress disorder. The role that religious beliefs may play in the difficulties these women suffer has been largely unexplored. This qualitative study explored women’s experience of healing within the context of Catholicism. Interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of eight women raised as Catholics who reported child sexual abuse and who had participated in at least two years of psychotherapy. Results suggest that Catholic identity can both compound and relieve the suffering many women experience in healing from child sexual abuse. Participants related that their Catholicism was rarely addressed during psychotherapy.

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These findings have implications for clinicians working with Catholic survivors of child sexual abuse.

KEYWORDS religious identity, women survivors, sexual abuse, Catholic, culture, psychotherapy

Despite the cultural universality of the taboo, adult violation of children’s sexual boundaries occurs throughout the world and throughout history. The long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse vary from victim to victim. People who have been sexually abused as children often have a difficult time resolving the invasive and disempowering experience that is inherent in the abuse situation. Women’s cultural background has been found to shape their responses to their victimization (e.g., Fontes, 1993). Women abused sexually as children and raised in a Catholic environment present complex problems for a therapist. They may be particularly vulnerable and unable to resolve the issues fully (Redmond, 1989), incorporating the tainted cognitions into a chronically negative self-image.

According to Crisp (2007), embracing silence, a common spiritual practice for Catholics, may be problematic for the survivor. Unable to negotiate the recovery through expression of the experience, a survivor loyal to the church may harbor additional pain. In treatment, Catholic women survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA) may fear rejection in their spiritual communities, may experience conflicts with their own morals and values, and may suffer from negative perceptions of themselves, their relationships, and God. On the other hand, some Catholics may find strength in the spiritual and religious background in which they were raised and harness this to promote their healing.

After crisis events, many people turn to spirituality and religion. “They may find meaning in a new relationship with God, in a mission to change laws to protect and prevent future victimization, and in a love for humanity” (United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, 1999, p. 29).

Religion and suffering have long been related in intimate and paradoxical ways (Albright, 2002; James, 1902; Krause, 2010; Pargament, 2002; Schieman, Pudrovksa, & Milkie, 2005). Ganzevoort (2009) concluded that suffering is the strongest impetus for religious questions, thoughts, and behaviors, but also the greatest motivation for change. Some survivors define religion as a source of support. Kennedy, Davis, and Taylor (1998) found that an increase in posttrauma spirituality in sexually assaulted women strongly correlated with well-being. They hypothesized that traumatic events reduce the sense of well-being, and survivors then increase their involvement in spirituality to restore well-being. Other researchers (Behrman, 2007; Chmiel, 2007; Kauffmann, 1996) found that some survivors report that spiritual beliefs held them together during the traumatic experiences. Additional studies
provide support for the positive relationship between religion and recovery (Chopp, 1989; Crisp, 2004; Linley, 2003). Some survivors are sexually phobic and remain abstinent to avoid reliving the trauma (Herman, 1981). Indeed, some have conjectured that a celibate religious life may be appealing to women with experiences of sexual abuse in childhood (Crisp, 2004).

Other studies suggest that religious beliefs have a negative impact on people’s experience of suffering. Some survivors view the Catholic Church as a source of alienation (Walker, Reid, O’Neill, & Brown, 2009), while others experience profound spiritual damage in instances of sexual abuse where abuser and victim are both religious (Heggen, 1993). If the victim prayed to God for protection and the abuse continued, the victim may see God as uncaring (Heggen, 1993) or associated with the experience of violation. These negative views of God can keep the victim from seeking out religious spiritual help later in life (Franz, 2002). Studies of people with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) found them to be more likely to become less religious and less likely to see God as loving (Falsetti, Resick, & Davis, 2003). People with severe traumatization or complex PTSD have been found to be more likely than others to see God as absent or wrathful (Doehring, 1993; Pritt, 1998). Russell (1986) found that incest survivors raised in the Catholic Church were twice as likely to reject Catholicism as their nonabused peers.

Various spiritual effects of sexual abuse among religiously practicing adults have been documented, including difficulties with prayer and with imagining God as “Father,” feeling that one’s relationship with God has been disrupted, and considering leaving the church (e.g., Crisp, 2004; Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1989; Heggen, 1993; Rosetti, 1995). Compared with a control group who report no sexual abuse, women survivors were more likely to have felt that God was distant from them at some stage in their lives, to feel anger toward God, and to feel that God disapproved of them (Crisp, 2004). Similarly, abused Catholic women reported significantly more problems such as feeling less sure of God as loving or less sure that God is able to respond to their prayers than their nonabused counterparts (Rossetti, 1995). Furthermore, sexually abused women found it harder to accept God’s grace and love. Crisp (2004) suggests that sexually abused women find it more difficult than others to discern the will of God and that discernment becomes particularly problematic for them. Some survivors of CSA do explore their faith through prayer with the support of a spiritual guide, despite the absence of references to sexual abuse in much of the standard literature on spiritual directions (Crisp, 2004).

Kennedy and Drebing (2002) found that abuse was positively associated with transcendent religious experiences such as visions or contact with the divine as well as with feelings of alienation from God but not with conventional religious behavior such as going to church. Religious practice decreased for conservative Christian women following sexual abuse
Religious traditions commonly share stories of suffering transformed into new life and wisdom. Wisdom, however, is not only a possible outcome but also a possible resource. It can guide believers in managing their suffering. It invites the person to acknowledge and manage the uncertainty of life and the human limitations (Linley, 2003). Neuger (1993) argues that the church has embraced the notion that women are subject to the dominance of men since there are few stories of women in the Bible. When women are portrayed in the Bible, according to Neuger (1993), they are described as either evil or seductive or as impossible ideals of self-sacrifice and love. Ruether (1995), a Catholic feminist theologian, argues that “Catholicism recreates relationships of domination and submission, modeled on a fusion of male over female with parent over child relations” (p. 15). Ruether further suggests that this “socialization into paternalistic dependency fixes [people] between rebellion and submission,” prompting them to “revert back to forms of submission to assuage their feelings of guilt but not being freed to be responsible adults” (p. 16).

Religion becomes an additional obstacle to recovery when it exacerbates the feelings of internalized shame and worthlessness that stem from the trauma of CSA. Definitions of shame vary, but all share the notion that the individual’s core being has been damaged or that a fundamental defect of the victim has been exposed (Holzman, 1995). According to Fontes (2007), the focus of shame is not on the harm done by the perpetrator but on the defect within the victim because she has participated in taboo activities and, in most cases, has kept it secret. Children who experienced sexual pleasure may be more likely to identify as having sinned because they believe their pleasure indicates a desire to participate in the taboo acts (Fontes, 2007).

Clergy abuse has been found to have devastating effects on survivors’ relationships with spirituality, trust in God, and church attendance (Heggen, 1993; McLaughlin, 1994; Rosetti, 1995). Analyses of the Church’s handling and initial denial of abuse by clergy reveals that it created a climate for continued abuse (Doyle, 2003), sheltered sexual abuse and violence within the system (Sipe, 1995), and made victims feel further isolated (Franz, 2002).

CSA is associated with a variety of negative effects (e.g., Courtois, 1998; Crisp, 2007; Feinauer, 2003a) and has the potential to impact the spiritual lives of survivors (Reinert & Smith, 1997). However, information specific to women survivors raised within the Catholic tradition is scant. The current study applied narrative theory to make meaning of trauma and recovery for women raised Catholic and abused sexually as children.
METHOD

In order to explore the experiences of Catholic women survivors of CSA, a qualitative research study was conducted. Motivated by the idea of the survivors as experts, phenomenology and narrative theory guided the research. Qualitative research allows for the sharing of knowledge based on pure descriptions of the phenomena (Creswell, 2009) rather than preexisting ideas. While there are places for analyzing sexual abuse within specific paradigms, this study focused on following not a theory of predictability but one of understanding. This study sought to interpret the meaning constructed by the participants' lived experiences, and phenomenology aims to understand the lived experiences of the participants, including the ways they understand and the significance they attribute to their experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Narrative research is consistent with this paradigm and has been used in research with silenced or underrepresented populations, including victims of violence, and to explore sensitive and complex topics including spirituality (Chase, 2005). Narrative research explicitly addresses power relations and situates the researcher as a listener while still realizing the potential and inherent influence of the researcher role. Participant responses might be understood as testimony to what the person holds precious that has been violated (White, 2007). Narrative research is built on theory and practices that are interwoven throughout all stages of the research process, in terms of the methods used and the levels of representation (Chase, 2005; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Narrative research focuses on “the structure and content of stories people tell that help them make sense of their experiences” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 99). Narrative theory assumes that participants know themselves and can share their experiences and views on their own understandings of the presented ideas. Rather than attempting to garner facts from an experimental interaction or evaluating participants against a certain ideal, the researcher seeks the participants’ own narratives about their experiences, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings.

Participants

Nine adult women who reported they were raised as Catholics, abused sexually as children, and had experienced a minimum of two years of psychotherapy participated in the study. Ages ranged from early 30s through mid-60s. Detailed demographic information was not sought as part of the study; however, most of the women disclosed aspects of their identities during the interviews. The sample was mixed in regard to sexual orientation, marital status, and ethnicity and included women identifying as lesbian, heterosexual, married, divorced, single, Latina, European American, and French Canadian.
Procedure

In an attempt to find women who had been raised Catholic but now have different religious affiliations and varying degrees of practice, word of the study was spread to potential participants through local listservs as well as flyers and mailings to women’s health clinics, clinicians’ offices, and local universities. Thirteen potential subjects contacted the researcher via e-mail or by telephone. The study was explained in more depth, questions were answered, the specifics and expectations for participation were reviewed, and the required aspects of inclusion were confirmed. Interviews were then scheduled with individuals who remained interested and who were qualified (for example, two men contacted the researcher but were disqualified because the study sample was limited to women). A total of nine interviews were conducted. One participant withdrew from the study several weeks after completing her interview and her data were destroyed.

Seven of the interviews were held in the home of the participant, one interview in the private office of the participant, and, due to geographical constraints, one interview was completed on the phone. Consent forms were read and clarified. Before any of the interviews began, the participant’s signature as well as the researcher’s were required to indicate consent. For the phone interview, the consent form was scanned, signed by the participant, returned to the researcher, signed again, and scanned back to the participant.

Semistructured interviews were conducted, each lasting from one to two hours, using the same provisional interview structure for each participant. Questions were as follows: (a) Tell me about your experience of growing up Catholic, (b) How about your experience with Catholicism now? (c) Do you feel as if Catholicism played a role in the abuse you suffered? (d) What role has Catholicism played in your recovery? (e) What should a psychotherapist be aware of to work well with Catholic women survivors of childhood sexual abuse? and (f) Is there anything additional that is important to you that I have not addressed?

According to Creswell (2009), “Qualitative research is an emergent design in its negotiated outcomes” (p. 195). Consistent with emergent design, the original plan for research was not tightly prescribed; questions were often reframed, expanded, or added based on the data generated during the interviews. The target questions included in the provisional interview structure served as a guide, but a flexible approach was maintained, allowing the participant and her perspective to control the direction of the interview. With the participant’s consent, interviews were digitally recorded. Notes were taken reflecting the researcher’s comfort level, the observed comfort level of the participant, emotions and energy level, nonverbal behavior, the researcher’s own reactions, and anything else that stood out as salient. At the end of each interview, time was taken to debrief the participant and provide some closure. Following the interviews, field notes were written
by the researcher to highlight observations, concerns, and reflections. The conduction of interviews ceased when the data was saturated.

Analysis

To begin analysis, pseudonyms were assigned to all of the participants. Next, each of the interviews was listened to twice. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim. The transcripts served as the primary source of analysis. In the initial stages of analysis, each transcript was read a number of times to become as familiar as possible with the participant accounts. Using narrative analysis, key themes were identified in the participants’ accounts related to their experience of sexual abuse and recovery as women raised Catholic.

During the process of analysis, the data (digital recordings, transcripts, and field notes) were organized categorically. The data were repeatedly reviewed and compared with the emerging themes. In addition, copies of the transcripts were provided to a colleague of the researcher who served as a peer debriefer. She reviewed the transcripts and compiled a list of themes. Later, the researcher’s and colleague’s themes were compared to both negotiate names for the themes and to ensure that the themes had indeed emerged from the participants’ accounts rather than preexisting theories or assumptions. When connections between themes were identified, superordinate themes made up of the conceptually related subthemes were compiled. As the clustering of subthemes emerged, they were again checked against the transcripts to ensure their foundation in the text (Patton, 2002).

Next, a list of representative quotations illustrating each theme was chosen. Notes of new themes were also made as they emerged. Themes that were not supported by rich evidence (substantiated from the participants’ accounts) were dropped. This iterative process was continued until a final set of subthemes was identified, conceptually organized into superordinate themes and supported with relevant examples from the transcripts. A list of themes was also provided to the peer debriefer. She compared her list against the researcher’s to ensure the accuracy of the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three central themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews: God is watching, Catholic patriarchy, and the Catholic identity.

God Is Watching

These women survivors of childhood sexual abuse raised as Catholic describe the concept of God as playing a critical role in their upbringing,
their understanding of Catholicism, and their religious development. All of
the participants related experiencing God as watching them critically in the
context of their everyday lives and influencing their thoughts and actions.
They described this watching as both malevolent and protective.

GOD WATCHING MALEVOLENTLY
The majority of the respondents recalled the sense that God watched
their every move. The notion of a male, vigilant, and ubiquitous God left
the women feeling ashamed of their nakedness, even when alone. Gloria
explains, “I always thought God was in the window, and I never wanted
God to see me naked. And I remember my mother specifically telling me
at all times God is watching you.” Elizabeth recalls, “We were raised to fear
God. My image of God was this big white guy sitting on a huge throne up
there looking down and watching everything we did. We were always told,
‘God is watching you.’”

As a child, Myrna feared God would take her. She said she sensed that
he was always watching, and if she did anything bad, there would be a flash
of lightning: “He would get me. A bolt would just come out of the sky and
knock me down. As I grew older it was more like a fear of death and going
to hell because of the bad things I did.”

GOD WATCHING PROTECTIVELY
While all the participants remembered the feeling of God watching them,
some described the vigilance in positive terms. A few of the women who
had feared God as children continued to describe their God as powerful, but
in a more benevolent way. Gloria, who as a child believed God made lists
of good and bad children, said:

To me, God is no longer judgmental. God is no longer Santa Claus,
checking who is naughty or nice. He’s not even a “he.” I have a very
benevolent idea of the concept of God. God has no shape, no form.
Within Catholicism God is manifested in another. That’s the idea. The
only way we know God is through someone else.

As adults, both Caroline and Eleanor have worked in the Catholic Church
in some capacity. Both women consider God as a friend. Caroline described
God as her best friend growing up. She adds that God remained her best
friend throughout her recovery and “plucked [me] up pretty good.”
Anne both feared God and felt protected by the church growing up:

I grew up fearing God but I also grew up believing that church was
a protection and a strength. I learned from my mother. She believed
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in the miracles of the Virgin Mary. And I believe that in an emotional way I wouldn’t have survived without the emotional connection to a power greater than me. The bottom line was, I was protected. Bad things happened to me, but I was protected overall.

Catholic Patriarchy and Child Sexual Abuse: “Men Did What They Wanted”

Respondents discussed the role of women in the Catholic Church. Although Catholic teachings hold that men and women are created equally in the image and likeness of God (Catholic Church, 2000) and that one sex complements the other (Catholic Church, 2000), participants offered a gloomier perspective on gender relations in the church, especially regarding the role of Catholicism in their abuse.

Women’s role: “The mother is just by the cross weeping”

Gloria, who considers herself devoutly Catholic, suggests:

The Catholic culture and the Latino culture go hand in hand. One informs the other, and I believe the Catholic culture overwhelmingly informs the Latino culture. I think the Catholic hierarchy and the Latino patriarchy, the machismo—all of that stuff not only derives from the paradigm of Catholicism, like who’s the father, who’s the son? Notice how the mother is just by the cross weeping and wearing a mantle and taking care of things. You know there’s no role for her in the church, there’s no role for women except [to] take care of your men. I equate that to Mary at the foot of Jesus just washing the feet. And in the Bible they are all washing bodies, and that’s their whole role. That stuff just gives enormous permission for all that goes on.

Myrna has left the Catholic Church but identifies herself as Catholic. Myrna and others hold patriarchy partly responsible for their abuse:

Patriarchy. Because that is where the power is. A man abused me, and I think his wife knew what was going on. He wasn’t a priest but he collected for the poor box too. Catholicism played a role because everyone looked the other way where I grew up. Women didn’t have any say, and men did whatever they wanted—like drinking and staying out all night and then cleaning up for Sunday mass. It’s all the same.

Eleanor, a woman who has raised her children Catholic but with the freedom to explore other religions, says her healing was harder because of her beliefs: “I believed in this system, and it was something I loved, and I
think that those beliefs made it easier to abuse me and harder to get over and easier for others not to notice because of the patriarchy and where the women were located in the hierarchy.”

As part of her job, Caroline speaks with sexual abuse survivors on a regular basis, and she states that while Catholicism “was not necessarily a vehicle for abuse, it enabled access. This was a time when a male who was overly interested in young females would have been identified. But a Catholic priest would never have been identified.”

Anne currently has no involvement with the Catholic Church other than attending baptisms, weddings, and funerals. “The Catholic or the traditional Catholic ideology of the male, the male figure, the patriarchal figure, patriarchy in general, and therefore the allowance for them to do whatever they want, one-hundred percent played into my abuse.”

CATHOLIC GUILT: “HOW BAD I WAS”

All of the participants spoke about the guilt they have felt as Catholics in general. They also experienced guilt specific to the abuse that has evolved over time. Many have moved beyond blaming themselves for the abuse they endured. However, the accounts of the effects of guilt, shame, and sin are startling. Michelle attests that the abuse “wasn’t physically or emotionally Catholic.” She continues, describing her guilt, “But everything I had learned in church and at school, like about sinning, just made it worse because it was all I thought about, how bad I was and what I sinner I was and how I’d never be forgiven.”

The participants reported a range of sexually abusive experiences by family members, neighbors, and priests, all of which burdened them with guilt. Mary said, “The guilt made it worse and that guilt is all Catholic.” For some women their guilty thoughts were worse than the actual abuse: “Catholic guilt was so pervasive, you know.” Myrna relates. “There wasn’t a day that went by that I didn’t think or feel some guilt about going against God or the men or the rules of the church.”

All of the participants suffered from feelings of unworthiness at one time or another: “That’s how I felt, lower than the lowest. And Catholicism did as much as the sexual abuse did, and together they were a win/win situation for them and a lose/lose for me.” Narratives included repeated references that women were blamed both in the abuse and in the church as a whole. Gloria shared a compelling argument as to why she blamed the women in her life rather than the abuser:

The entire idea of a woman supporting the men in their lives—of a woman washing their feet, of a woman being at the bottom of the cross, of a woman bearing her crosses—personified everything that was wrong with the women in my family. And it all derived from the Mary concept.
And when it comes to my abuse, this is what’s tough, is that I don’t hold him responsible. I hold all the women in my life responsible.

Similarly, Caroline stated that, “It was always the woman’s fault.” She said that this was a significant reinforcer to her as an abused child, keeping her in her place. Caroline told of a priest yelling from the pulpit every week about going to hell. “I had been threatened, you know, ‘If you tell I’ll kill you. You’re a terrible person and I’m punishing you.’” For years, Mary tried to leave the church: “I still was trying. He was right and I was wrong. And I wanted him to know I was a good person, but I also felt guilty about it, because it was like trying to use God.” The participants reported that their recovery was made more difficult because they held on to deep shame and guilt, believing they were sinners. “I think that the guilt and the shame and the punishment, that whole concept of sin, and in my case—because my abuser told me it was all my fault—so to hear that repeated over and over again, through the church in admittedly a different context, drove it home for me.”

Catholic Identity and Psychotherapy: “Who I Was Before Anything Else”

The Catholic women survivors of CSA repeatedly emphasized the centrality of their Catholic identity. However, very few of their psychotherapy experiences had honored that identity or explored how it might affect their recovery from CSA.

CATHOLIC: “THE MOST IMPORTANT THING”

All the participants reported a strong sense of Catholic identity. One woman said it was considered a status:

It was a huge part of my identity. Before anything else, I was Catholic and now that you ask I remember thinking I was part of the right religion and that all those other people were wrong. We had this sense that Catholics were smarter, just better. You could say you were Catholic out loud, but I remember other religions were mentioned in whisper.

Another reported that being Catholic was the most important thing in her family, “It was more important than being Irish, if you can imagine that.” The participants offered both positive and negative aspects of the Catholic identity. Anne said, “My experience of growing up Catholic was authority, discipline, punishment, you better do it or else, so I kind of walked away from the church, but it is a hard identity to shake!” Gloria remarked, “A lot of people claim to be Catholic, and only ten percent ever go to mass on
Sundays. How can they still call themselves Catholic? The response is, ‘Well, I’m not a fanatic.’ So, there’s a definition, and it is the Catholic DNA.”

For all of the women involved in the research, the meaning of a Catholic identity extends far beyond Sunday routine, holy days, and sacraments. For example, Michelle comments,

Catholicism is one hell of an identity. Even a scandal cannot loosen the hold; that is the power or maybe the status the Catholic Church has. What does that mean? Does it speak to the elaborate secrecy and intimidation of the Catholic Church, or does it speak to the tenacious beliefs of a good Catholic?

Caroline, who remains active in the church, recalls a conversation with a friend who asked her how it felt to have gone to Catholic school and still be a practicing Catholic:

I said, “SAVED.” There is a way in which people who grow up in certain Catholic families that are culturally Catholic, ethnically Catholic, and within a Catholic culture and move—some of the people will say, “I’m Catholic in my DNA.” There’s nothing I can do about it, no matter how upset, angry, disgusted, frustrated, no matter whether you even still believe some of the doctrines that you believed as a child or during their adult lives. You still define yourself as Catholic, and part of it is a sense of being right with God.

**God and Spirituality**

Some of the respondents consider themselves Catholic today, and others are far removed from the church. However, each narrative included a reference to a sense of spirituality. Myrna described it as a sense that “there was something greater than the experience of the abuse. My life was greater than just that. Greater was not so much a God or person, more of a feeling or an energy, I think.”

Anne credits Catholicism for the foundation from which she has built her sense of spirituality that has been a force in her healing: “The groundwork was laid when I was a kid to accept the whole concept of a God and a larger being and spirituality and Heaven and hell and sin and forgiveness and everything else that goes with it.” Mary never related the abuse to her Catholicism before the interview. She said that understanding her own spirituality as distinct from her religion has helped her heal. She continued, “I wouldn’t have searched for a different way to understand it if I hadn’t been so stuck with the right and wrong I understood from learning like a Catholic as a child.”

Elizabeth says she has been able to put her abuse behind her: “I haven’t struggled looking for answers, trying to find answers that are beyond my
control, about why it happened either because it isn’t up to me. I’ve been able to get past it. I truly believe God is the final judge.”

**Catholicism in Psychotherapy for Child Sexual Abuse**

For the participants, the Catholic rituals, routines, and ways of thinking became part of who they are. They described it as a core part of themselves that cannot, and many believed should not, be erased: “The fact that people who are not raised Catholic somehow can believe that you can turn that mind-set on and off just by saying, ‘I don’t believe. I think it’s stupid.’” Myrna continued to state that being Catholic becomes part of a person’s personality:

> Compare a Catholic to someone who has never been to church, who never had to get up early to go to mass. Where your actions are so connected to Catholicism—that doesn’t happen for other people. Even if you don’t consider yourself a Catholic, there is a part of you that is forever embedded in that ritual.

The participants spoke passionately about the need to recognize Catholicism as a layer of identity in therapy. They reported feeling that there was not a place for Catholicism in therapy and that this impeded their recovery. When considering Catholics in therapy, Myrna suggests that “a therapist cannot understand completely without being aware of the intensity of this identity. Shaking it or maintaining it, being raised Catholic needs to be understood, and understood from the person because Catholics are not all the same either.” The majority of the therapy experiences discussed by the participants typically occurred without mention, let alone integration, of a Catholic upbringing. Gloria bemoans the lack of understanding about the place of Catholicism in a Catholic person’s life:

> As I started moving forward in my own recovery and I began to understand the role of Catholicism in my life because I had to talk about this and have it honored in the room. I found that people who are therapists don’t understand this and do not honor it, and that was very difficult. Because I can’t sit with somebody, berate the church for what it was, and have that person look at me and go, “Yeah, isn’t it horrible?” I can’t do that. Or I can’t have somebody say to me, “But wait, why would you believe the priest?” Like a therapist says that to you like you’re a child, it’s like, they have no business doing this because they don’t get it. They don’t get it, and to me it’s the same thing as saying to a child, “Why would you ever listen to your father?” What therapist would ever say that to a kid?

The participants were clear that even if a client did not continue to identify as Catholic, the topic had to be respected and explored: “I think it
permeates through your soul and through your veins, and people have to understand its power, even if you rejected it.” Mary reports that not talking about Catholicism affected her ability to heal: “I was bad, evil, all the words from Catholicism. The deed makes you feel that way anyhow so I’m not trying to say that, but it’s like adding that to a layer of already being—I mean, Lord I am not worthy to receive you.”

Myrna believes that Catholic identity is connected to recovery from CSA for women raised Catholic, even if they no longer consider themselves Catholic:

It has to be connected even if you don’t want it to be . . . I bet it took a long time to feel okay saying you weren’t because if you aren’t Catholic, then what are you? How do you define yourself without including that? And then the person doesn’t mention the Catholic part, and what do they say? “I’m nothing.” It is a layer, like a cultural layer, a race. It is an identity, comfortable or not it is one, and isn’t that what you do in therapy? Get comfortable with who you are and who you are not? How can a therapist not consider the Catholic upbringing?

Psychology’s views and interest in religion and spirituality have evolved in recent years (Powers, 2005; Shafranske & Sperry, 2005; Worthington & Sandage, 2002). Religion and spirituality are central to the identities of many in the increasingly diverse U.S. population (Evans, 2003; Myers et al., 2005). As the field continues to expand and integrate the human experience across cultures and worldviews (American Psychological Association, 2003), psychologists are encouraged to consider the complex roles that religion and spirituality play in their clients’ lives (Evans, 2003; Fukuyama, 2003; Powers, 2005; Shafranske & Sperry, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to explore women’s lived experiences of healing from CSA within the broad context of Catholicism. The study reveals that the healing involved a wide range of themes related to Catholicism. Some of the participants adhered to negative views of Catholicism and the teachings of the church due to abuse. However, some maintained and were comforted by their involvement with the church. The participants name a vigilant God, Catholic patriarchy, and the Catholic identity as major influences in both suffering and healing. The findings of similar research by Bliss (2011), Bryant-Davis (2005), Ganje-Fling, Veach, Kuang, and Houg (2000), and Heermann, Wiggins, and Rutter (2007) support the recommendation that spiritual issues of clients be discussed in psychotherapy. In addition, the research supports the need for clinicians to understand the inherent features of Catholic identity and the nature by which these phenomena interweave themselves into every aspect of the survivor’s life, especially suffering and healing. Clinicians who inadvertently impose parameters on allowed topics of discussion—excluding examination of religion and spirituality—might
re-create and intensify dynamics of the abuse by defining how their clients should feel and when and what they speak about.

The current study highlights the need to consider the specific issues of Catholic woman survivors in psychotherapy. Exploring the circumstances of the abuse and the survivor’s related beliefs, fears, and defenses and how these fit in with their Catholic upbringing may help lessen the blame survivors take for their abuse (Feinauer, 2003b). The findings of this study are in keeping with other studies on the importance of the effects of religion and culture on psychotherapy for child sexual abuse.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Some limitations should be acknowledged in interpreting the results of this study. First, the findings are based on a small sample of volunteer participants. They are undoubtedly not representative of all Catholic survivors of sexual abuse. Second, the sample was mixed in regard to ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and past and present religious practice. Because the findings were not analyzed by demographic group, however, we cannot know how Catholics from specific groups face specific issues. This area is ripe for further exploration. In addition, this sample included only women who had been in psychotherapy for at least two years. Therefore it would be inappropriate to generalize the results to all women who experienced childhood sexual abuse and were raised Catholic.

Despite these limitations, the results clearly revealed that the participants consider the need to include the Catholic identity and all of its features in the therapeutic setting. Further research that allows the opportunity to share the unique experiences of Catholic women survivors of CSA is likely to increase knowledge about religious and spiritual issues in general and how to best address them in psychotherapy. Investigating therapists’ training in exploring religious identity issues with clients from a variety of backgrounds may also help identify potential areas of conflict in psychotherapy. Expanding the professionals’ understandings of recovery embedded within a religious context could affect the extent to which survivors are able to disclose, explore, and heal. Further exploration of the issue would benefit those professionals working in collaboration with their clients and acknowledge the survivors, their experiences, and their resilience.

REFERENCES


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