DISCLAIMERS AND ACCOUNTS IN CASES OF CATHOLIC PRIESTS ACCUSED OF PEDOPHILIA

The priest abuse scandal in the Catholic church began to surface in 1983. Over the last decade the scandal has broadened; a seemingly endless string of pedophilia cases involving scores of young children have been discovered and disclosed. In a number of instances priests have been criminally prosecuted and sentenced to long prison terms; others have been remanded for mental health treatment. While there have been sexual violations of various kinds across a number of new and established religious groups (Jacobs, 1989), what distinguishes the current Catholic cases analyzed here is that they involve sexual encounters between priests and children under the age of majority, often in their teen and pre-teen years.[1] Most of the abuse has involved young boys, but there have been cases of abuse of young girls as well.[2] There have been scattered reports of similar incidents involving clergy in other churches as well, but incidents involving non-Catholic clergy most often consist of extra-marital affairs between adult women and ministers.

The child sexual abuse scandal constitutes an extreme case of deviance. The priests involved have violated their personal vows of celibacy and chastity; they have engaged in homosexual sexual activity in many cases, against which the church they represent preaches; they have deliberately concealed the sexual violations that they committed; they have violated the moral trust reposed in them by the church, their fellow priests, and the families whose children they exploited. Most centrally to the analysis here, these priests have engaged in sexual activity with children (See Beal, 1992; Provost, 1992). Moral condemnation of pedophilia

is virtually universal and impassioned, and efforts by individuals or groups to rationalize or defend such behavior meets strenuous resistance (de Young, 1989, 1988, 1984).[3] In addition to the nature of the acts themselves, the significance of the priest's actions is compounded by the lofty status they occupy within the Catholic tradition. Priests are the immediate intermediaries between parishioners and the church, trustees responsible for parishioners spiritual lives and spiritual welfare.

DISCLAIMERS AND ACCOUNTS IN CONTEMPORARY PRIEST ABUSE CASES

This paper examines the types of narratives that priests construct in initiating sexual relationships with children and in explaining their conduct when the violations are exposed. Given the number and seriousness of norms that these priests are violating and their lofty moral standing, the way in which they explain their conduct becomes an interesting sociological issue. The narratives that priests and their spokespersons develop may be divided into two broad types. First, priests must formulate prospective interpretations, *disclaimers*, for their behavior toward the children with whom they are sexually involved. These explanations are constructed in the context of the perpetrator-victim relationship and are concealed from others by various means. When the sexual relationships are publicly exposed, priests and their spokespersons are then compelled to offer retrospective interpretations, *accounts*, for their conduct. In this paper we examine both types of explanations and the relationship between them. We argue that retrospective accounts are significantly influenced by and must be understood in the context of prospective disclaimers.

Not surprisingly the data on priest abuse cases are quite limited. Many local cases are

not nationally reported, journalistic reports often are fragmentary or focus on issues other than defendant disclaimers and accounts, and the Catholic church routinely has demanded sealed records as a precondition for out-of-court settlements. The sources from which disclaimer and account data were drawn are listed in Appendix A. The narratives presented here were gathered primarily from 4 recent books and 257 press reports on priest abuse cases. The most fruitful sources were books authored by journalists since these books were based on cases that had reached a conclusion and contained considerable detail about events and explanations. In some cases, however, disclaimers and accounts are drawn from other sources, such as news conferences, trial testimony, and victim's accounts. Journalistic narratives in particular are biased toward public statements that yield sensationalistic stories; they systematically exclude stories that are given privately or are more mundane and unexceptional. Given the nature of the sources, caution must be exercised in generalizing broadly from these data. At the same time, we have conducted an extensive review of scholarly and journalistic sources, which constitute virtually the only accessible data sources. We should also note that narratives constructed over a period of time typically are more complex than the analytic account categories employed here, and actors are likely to use multiple disclaimer and account types (Schoenbach, 1990).

DISCLAIMERS

A disclaimer is "a verbal device employed to ward off and defeat in advance doubts and negative typifications which may result from intended conduct. Disclaimers seek to define forthcoming conduct as not relevant to the kind of identity challenge or re-typification for

which it might ordinarily serve as the basis" (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975:3). There are five types of disclaimers. *Hedging* disclaimers are employed when actors have a tentative commitment to a forthcoming line of action and are uncertain about the probable response to their actions. In this circumstance actors express willingness to consider and negotiate alternative perspectives. *Credentialing* disclaimers are employed when actors are committed to a line of action that they know will be discrediting. Actors offer qualifications or credentials that legitimate the line of action they are proposing. *Sin license* disclaimers also occur when actors are committed to a line of action which they anticipate will evoke a negative response. In this case they seek to depict a situation in which generally recognized rules may be suspended without discrediting the actor. *Cognitive* disclaimers are formulated when actors anticipate that others may doubt that there is a shared understanding of the "facts of the situation" on the basis of which they are operating; these disclaimers are employed to reassure others of such agreement. Finally, *appeals for the suspension of judgment* disclaimers are issued when actors anticipate that their statements or actions may produce a negative emotional reaction. These accounts are appeals for others to suspend their response until the meaning of the line of action is clarified.

Virtually all of the explanations priests offered to children in the incidents we examined are credentialing disclaimers. In most cases their authoritative statements take the form of simply asserting divine approval for the proposed relationship. For example, "Sex is okay," he told the girl. "This is the way God would have it" (Burkett and Bruni, 1993, 74). In some instances divine approval is paired with a stipulation that the relationship should remain secret: "Father Jay told the boy; `This is between you and me. This is something special. God would approve'" (Burkett and Bruni, 1993, 67). Children clearly are often shocked when priests first

approach them. The credentialing disclaimers provide a means for moving beyond this disorientation and potential resistance. One victim recounts that

> One day he went into the bedroom and all of a sudden he came out with his pants down around his knees and I freaked out...I was shakin'. He said, "It's not wrong. God made the body to be beautiful--for each of us to share it."(Berry, 1994, 128)

Some episodes do involve considerably more planning and complex interpretations. One victim remembers that the priest organized the sexual encounters as therapeutic penance:

> Ed's abuse began as a condition of absolution. The youth confessed to impure thoughts and to the sin of pride. Father Terrence directed him to learn self-control. The lesson was simple, Ed alleges: the priest would masturbate Morris, or lie on top of him rubbing their groins together, but would stop just shy of Ed's ejaculation. "Desensitization," Father Terrence called this penance. "No matter how you go to the altar, as a priest or to marry, this will help you," Ed remembers Father Terrence telling him. "You are special. You are pleasing to God. But you have a corruptible side you must learn to control."(Burkett and Bruni, 1993, 76)

There was one case in which the priest employed a sin license. The victim remembers that "He'd talk about unconditional love," Schrader said. "He said too many people love conditionally." And so although Schrader was uncomfortable with the sexual relationship, he felt that "it fit with what he [the priest] was saying about unconditional love,...If you're going to unconditionally love, you need to express it" (French, 1993, D-1). Finally, there was one incident in which credentialing was combined with a sin license disclaimer. In this case the priest not only asserts that his female partner has been chosen by God but also seeks to suspend the relevant normative context by asserting that he needs assistance due to his ignorance of sexual matters. In this instance,

> She recalled the beginning of the abuse..."I was told that I had been chosen by God to help him with his studies of sex because he was responsible for helping adults and he didn't know anything about it. (Berry, 1994, 128)

It is not surprising that credentialing disclaimers predominate in priests' constructions of sexual relationships to their youthful partners. Proposing sexual relations and offering to negotiate the relationship, attempting to reach agreement on the nature of the situation in which they are involved, or asking the children to suspend judgment each would be likely to engender confusion and/or resistance that would then have to be surmounted through some other disclaimer or line of action. These strategies also invite further discussion of the relationship with outsiders. The credentialing strategy places the priest firmly in control of the situation, asserts a legitimate basis for the connection that then can be veiled from outside observation. The fact that illicit sexual relationships with children have occurred in substantial numbers over a long period of time without being discovered outside the church hierarchy suggests that this strategy has generally been successful.

ACCOUNTS

Numerous typologies of accounts have been formulated (Sykes and Matza, 1957; Schoenbach, 1980, 1990; Tedeschi and Reiss, 1981; Semin and Manstead, 1983). The analysis presented here is based on Scott and Lyman's widely used typology (1968). They define an account as "a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior -- whether the behavior is his own or that of others, and whether the proximate cause for the statement arises from the actor himself or from someone else" (Scott and Lyman, 1968:46). Accounts are divided into two broad types, *excuses* and *justifications*. From their perspective, "An excuse is an admission that the act in question was bad, wrong, or inept, coupled with a denial of full responsibility. A justification is an admission of full responsibility for the act in

question, coupled with a denial that it was wrongful" (1970:93). Excuses thus are accounts constructed with the objective of mitigating the actor's responsibility for the act in question, while justifications are intended to offer a more positive interpretation of the act in question.

Justifications

Scott and Lyman define six types of justification. *Denial of injury* accounts construct events so as to minimize the negative and maximize the positive consequences of contested behavior. *Denial of victim* accounts define victims as deserving harm as a result of having injured the actor, being enemies of the actor, or holding membership in devalued groups. *Condemnation of condemners* accounts rationalize contested actions by comparing them to uncensured acts by others that are equal to or greater than the actor's normative violations. *Appeal to loyalties* accounts deem contested conduct appropriate in terms of higher allegiances to which the actor is committed. *Sad tale* accounts reconstruct the actor's biography in highly disadvantaged terms that explain current behavior. Finally, *self-fulfillment* accounts lay claim to personal growth, health, or conscience as a legitimate rationale for contested conduct.

In the priest abuse cases we examined, almost every instance involved *denial of injury* accounts.[4] In one case a priest included in his account a statement referring to self-fulfillment. Father Ritter asserted his right to personal fulfillment, even to the extent of avowing that divine disapproval would not override his right to pursue his own identity. He stated: "You know, I decided twenty years ago, if God didn't like me the way I was, that's His problem" (Sennott, 1992, 30). However, this account stands in striking contrast to virtually every other justificatory statement.

The priests or their spokespersons have employed several strategies to elevate the moral standing of the deviant behavior. One approach is to insist that the sexual contact is consensual. For example, a therapist/columnist specializing in treatment of priests accused of sexual abuse wrote in a Catholic magazine:

> "We are not involved with the dynamics of rape but with the far subtler dynamics of persuasion by a friend. As we speak to and about the victims we must be aware the child sometimes retains a loving memory of the offender."(Connors, 1992)

In this account the denial of injury is buttressed by characterizing the incident as involving *persuasion* rather than *coercion* and by further asserting that the child involved in fact harbors no hostility toward the priest.

In another account, journalist Jason Berry (1994) records the statement of a diocesan vicar responsible for the conduct of priests. The vicar makes a comparable characterization of the sexual relationship as "misguided affection," but seeks to mitigate the damage by juxtaposing indiscretion or poor judgment in this incident with the catastrophic consequences for the priest's career.

> The diocese had received a report some time ago, Larroque continued, terming it "a case of misguided affection...We're talking about ruining a man's career," said Larroque, referring to the implication of charges against a priest (Berry, 1994, 11).

A third strategy is to moderate claimsmaking by emphasizing the "extraordinary importance" of the work in which the priest and his colleagues are involved, a mission that should not be placed in jeopardy by a single behavioral "failure."

> "It is probably better to say I failed. If I had to give a reason for my own personal
>
> failure it is probably hubris...What happens to me, ladies and gentlemen, is not

> really very important. I decided long ago that I did not care about that. What happens to the kids is very important. The work we do here is of extraordinary importance" (Sennott, 1992, 273).

Justice for the victims and the vital mission of the institution thus are placed in opposition. Vigorously prosecuting the offender might cripple or destroy the institution, thereby sacrificing "the kids."

Finally, the harm involved in sexual abuse may be minimized by shifting the behavior to an alternative category that possesses at least subcultural legitimacy and carefully distinguishing the traits of acceptable and non-acceptable sexuality. For instance, in a legal statement one priest juxtaposes sexual intercourse with "reserved embrace":

> "I may have had a reserved embrace," he admitted in a deposition in 1992...Sexual intercourse, he said, doesn't occur unless a man clutches a woman with passion and ejaculates into her. Yes, he had lain atop Susan. Yes, he put his penis in her vagina. But there was, "no passion, no kissing, no nothing," he said. And he had not ejaculated.
> "I don't think that is sexual intercourse," Father Bob said. "Reserved embrace, yes, that's what we call it...This is a very calm embrace. It's not a real sex act, as you would think of one." (Burkette and Bruni, 1993, 87-8)

"Reserved embrace" is thus distinguished from a "real sex act" by the absence of sexual passion and climax.

What is most striking about justification accounts, of course, is their clustering in the denial of injury category. In essence the other types of justifications accounts apparently are unavailable or difficult to construct for this type of violation. Priests and their allies can hardly accuse the young boys with whom they have sexual liaisons of deserving harm. They would also be understandably reluctant to compare themselves with the other categories of deviants with which comparisons are most likely to be drawn, such as incestuous fathers, sexual predators,

and homosexuals. Likewise, given the high moral calling to which priests are pledged, it would be difficult to conceive of how sexual relationships with children could be constructed as an appeal to higher principles. Even if priests were to make a case for the "sexual liberation" of children, they could not be the liberators. Given priests' pledge to the spiritual welfare of their parishioners and sacrificial lifestyles, self-fulfillment could not be accorded a higher priority than the welfare of children. Priests might conceivably reconstruct their biographies so as to explain their conduct. This is a common accounting strategy employed by psychotherapists accused of inappropriate sexual intimacy (Pogrebin, Poole, and Martinez, 1992). However, since priests' personal lives are so completely enmeshed in the church, such a strategy would almost inevitably involve an attack on the church or admission of their own incompatibility with the priestly role. In essence, it appears that priests seeking to mitigate claimsmaking against them have few justification options beyond damage control. Asserting that the acts they have committed are not as heinous as public depictions of them in the media or prosecutorial rhetoric, may be their best available option.

Excuses

Scott and Lyman identify four types of excuse accounts. *Accident* accounts seek to mitigate actor responsibility by asserting an inability to control environmental events. Actors may misinterpret events, be unable to foresee impending events, become distracted, lack skills and abilities requisite to deal successfully with occurrences, or have insufficient time to respond. *Defeasibility* accounts aver impairment of mental capacity as a result of mental disorder, intoxication/addiction or psychological duress. *Biological drives* accounts identify

biological attributes such as sexual passion, sexual orientation, or criminogenic tendencies as the source of contested behavior. Finally, *scapegoating* accounts seek to shift responsibility for contested behavior to the participation, duress, or provocation of another actor.

Three types of excuse accounts dominate in the cases we examined. Accident accounts usually are presented by church representatives with the objective of defending the church rather than the individual priests. These accounts assert the impossibility of absolutely preventing individuals with psychological disorders from entering the priesthood. In some cases these errors are blamed on the absence of effective screening techniques. In this effort church officials are supported by church-affiliated clinicians responsible for treatment of offenders. A psychiatrist presented a paper at the East Coast Canon Law Conference in which he stated that "there were no effective techniques to screen out potential abusers of children before they are admitted to a seminary" (Berry, 1994, 208). In another instance the Bishop of Baton Rouge blamed his ignorance on the priest's deliberate, skillful deception.

> ..."My mistake, said Frey, "[was] not being able to recognize the depth of [Gauthe's] mental illness. His personality was such that he skillfully masked his condition."(Frey, 1986)

A second type of excuse account is scapegoating, which also is largely employed by church administrators. In these accounts church officials imply, with varying degrees of specificity, that individuals or groups are using the abuse scandal for their own nefarious purposes. The issues of responsibility and harm are turned around as the accused is presented as a victim of a kind of conspiracy to discredit the offender. The controversy thus results not from the actions of the accused, but rather from the evil intentions of named or unnamed enemies, calling the motives of the accusers into question. In some cases the alleged enemies

remain anonymous. For example, one newspaper editorial issued this advice:

> ...Let's offer a special prayer for the resolution of the affair that has rocked the Acadiania community and ask the forgiveness of any unscrupulous individuals who for one reason or other attempt to blacken the reputation of our entire religious community. (*Lafayette Sunday Advertiser*, 1985, 1)

Sometimes enemies are more clearly defined. In the Covenant House case, one of Fr. Bruce Ritter's staff said to a reporter, "I think it was outrageous and disgusting for the District Attorney to outfit this kid with a wire to try to entrap Father Ritter" (Sennott, 1992, 265).

Another strategy for scapegoating involves alleging that the charges against the church are being pursued so vigorously precisely because of the church's high moral standards. The condemnation of the church in one case is attributed to the low moral character of the public in general and the mass media in particular.

> ...how the media glorifies scandalous stories, but they do so because of the public's love affair with dirt....I have to wonder about the potential contagiousness of allegations, a contagiousness that is only being encouraged by sensationalistic media and a `let's sue' atmosphere that is cheered on by some of the most ridiculous and inciteful advertising I've ever seen (Hayes, 1993).

Attacking the church through the conduct of wayward priests becomes a cynical means for undermining its calls for moral standards to which the larger society does not wish to adhere.

> Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk [said] "I think our culture in general sees this as a chance to get a little bit even with the Church in the context of unpopular prophetic things the Church says about society. Maybe it's really a kind of implicit acknowledgement of the relevance that people, even unconsciously, find in the Church.
>
> The Church is saying you don't have to be sexually active, that homosexual behavior is not acceptable. These are all unpopular issues the Church is taking on. Then along comes the Church and it is being badly sexually embarrassed. It gives everyone a chance to say: 'Look at that. We told you so; it was all a front. These guys are misbehaving with little kids while the Church is posturing against society.' One could submit it's a kind of corporate vendetta."(Burkette, 1993, 199)

In this account the accusation is portrayed as part of a larger conflict, with the individuals accused merely as victims in the Church's crusade to foster sexual morality. Condemnation of the priests creates the potential for undermining the church as a bastion of morality.

In some instances church spokespersons even find ways to raise questions about the motives of the victims who are making claims against the church. A bishop wrote in a newspaper column:

> "...one can ask; if the victims were adolescents, why did they go back to the same situation once there had been one 'pass' or suggestion? Were they cooperating in the matter, or were they true victims?" (Harris, 1990, 16)

Creating categories of true and counterfeit victims, the bishop removes responsibility for some (perhaps many) of the acts from the accused and transfers it to the victim, legitimating differential treatment of claims. This challenges a primary assumption of the accusers, that it is the power differential between priest and victim that accounts for the actions of the victim.

The most common excuse account offered is defeasibility. In this strategy pedophile activities are attributed to mental or physical conditions over which the actor has little or no control, at least until the application of some form of treatment. Causality is attributed to the condition rather than to the actor. There are a few accounts postulating biological pathology. One medical theorist speculates that a genetic defect carried by pedophiles is the cause of the disease.

> A chromosome may be broken or otherwise distorted. Even without such a mishap, the conditions in which the earliest stages of cellular and embryonic differentiation take place may be altered and atypical, so that normal masculine or feminine course of differentiation is interfered with (Money, 1972, 24).

However, in most instances accounts simply assert psychological disorder, often in rather perfunctory terms. In a statement Fr. James Porter's lawyer read to reporters Porter simply states:

> "I was a very sick man while I was a Roman Catholic priest in the 1960s. As a result of my illness, I sexually abused a number of children."(Burkette and Bruni, 1993, 18)

Similarly, in an interview with journalist an anonymous former priest confessed:

> "I was the charming priest," he says. "I was the hero. I looked great on the outside, but I was a very sick man. I had a psychic disease, and it can be so powerfully compelling that it overrides rational thought, it overrides moral resolve. I violated my own code. I violated everything I stand for and everything I could preach about. I shit on my own parade" (Burkette and Bruni, 1993, 80).

One source of defeasibility specified, which fits with current explanations for abusive behavior, is the priest's own abuse as a child: "A certain proportion of priests...abuse children not because they are sexually starved, but because their `love-maps' -- their objects of sexual desire -- have been vandalized in childhood experiences of their own" (Greeley, 1993, 45).

In these defeasibility accounts priests are prone to emphasize the potency of the emotional feelings with which they have to deal, feelings that often become more powerful once they are expressed. One priest refers to the

> ...enormous stress on him, which is why, he believes, his desires caught him so off guard. Horsing around with a parish altar boy for a Mass well done, he patted him on the rear...The more he touched them, the harder it became to control his gestures. "It opened up a hunger," he says, "Now fantasy was not enough. It's like--how does a person go back to masturbation when he's had intercourse?"(Burkette and Bruni, 1993, 93)

The offender's experience of desire is depicted as an inexorable progression from thought to physical satisfaction. The overpowering nature of the feelings and their growing strength are important in these accounts since priests frequently abused a succession of children over an

extended period of time. Loss of control may account for a single episode; a more elaborate accounting is necessary for extended abuse. The potency of the feelings becomes such an explanation to the extent that the priest is unable to resist them. One accused offender claims just such an overwhelming compulsion that led to habituated moral violation:

> "Did you think you had sinned?"
> "Yeah."
> "Were you aware that you had violated criminal laws?"
> "No, that didn't sink in."
> "It never occurred to you?"
> "What occurred to me was, Hey, this isn't right but I can't help it...I said to myself, This is wrong. I shouldn't do this. But I want to do it again. I like it."
> "Did you ever reach a point where you had no feelings that it was bad or wrong?"
> "Yeah, It became very automatic. I didn't think about it any more -- didn't look upon it as moral or immoral. It was just something I did." (Berry, 1994, 40-41)

Church-affiliated professionals offer support for this interpretation. For example, in a professional paper a canon and a civil lawyer argue uses anecdotal evidence to argue that offenders have no control and therefore accrue a lower level of personal liability.

> We are dealing with compulsive sexual habits which the priest may temporarily suspend in the face of legal or canonical pressure, but not in all instances. There are many examples wherein sexual abuse took place very soon after the confrontation between the priest and his Ordinary (bishop) had taken place. The priest must clearly be seen as one suffering from a psychiatric disorder that is beyond his ability to control. (Mouton and Doyle, 1985)

Medicalizing sexual abuse as a psychological disorder offers the church an explanation that relieves the individual priest of responsibility and avoids the stain on the Church's reputation that accompanies a moral interpretation (Freidson, 1970). Thus to the extent that pedophilia is an undetectable disorder, this account lowers the responsibility of both priest and church. One additional development of the defeasibility account mitigates priest responsibility even further. Using the medical model, church psychiatrists separate behavior from character.

> Diagnosing a person as a pedophile says something about the nature of his sexual desires and orientation. It says nothing about his temperament, or about traits of character (such as kindness vs cruelty, caring vs uncaring, sensitive vs insensitive, and so on). Thus a diagnosis of pedophilia does not necessarily mean that a person is lacking in conscience, diminished in intellectual capabilities, or somehow "characterologically flawed." One needs to evaluate independently the nature of an individual's sexual drives and interests, as opposed to what the person is like in terms of character, intellect, temperament, and other mental capacities. (Berlin and Krout, 1986)

Separating behavior from character is important to both the church and the priest. The stigma for both is reduced if conduct rather than moral essence is at issue. The church is less culpable if it fails to detect behavioral disorders than low moral character, and priests can be treated for specific disorders but not for flawed moral essence.

As with justification accounts, excuse accounts sometimes are multi-themed. For example, one priest asserts long-term defeasibility bordering on biological drives but argues that the manifestation of this condition was precipitated by the structure of the church.

> He suspects the attraction was always within him and suddenly found voice and expression because there was no intimacy in his life. "I sought that feeling out after that. I began to look for and depend upon affection from younger persons. I didn't know exactly when sex came in, but it did."...He began fondling and performing oral sex on some of the 14 and 15 year old boys he befriended. He knew it was wrong, but was so transfixed by need that he couldn't stop himself. At the same time he was consumed by rage over the demands and sacrifices of living as a priest. "There had been so many needs that had been unmet and so many disappointments and so many pains and so many rejections that it didn't matter," he says. "After 20 years of parish life, I guess I felt that nobody gave a damn about me."(Burkette, 1993, 85)

This excuse account is particularly interesting because it is one of the few instances in which a priest invokes an account that would mitigate his own culpability by transferring responsibility to the institution and his peers.

Excuse accounts are more diverse than justification accounts, as all four types are used in the child sexual abuse cases. Accident and scapegoating accounts are employed primarily by

church officials who utilize these accounts to defend the institution rather than individual priests. The church improves its moral positioning by arguing that there is no way to detect every case of behavioral disorder, particularly when priests deliberately secrete such attributes, and by contending that the limited number of incidents that have escaped detection are being used by opponents to discredit an institution that in fact is a moral exemplar. For their part, priests appear most likely to choose related biological and defeasibility accounts that attribute their conduct to loss of control. Where they offer more than perfunctory illness accounts, priests tend to emphasize a process of spiraling out of control after the initial transgression, which offers an interpretation that explains a pattern of long-term violation.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of narratives explaining priest sexual abuse leads to two general conclusions. First, the narratives that actors construct are best interpreted as an entire sequence rather than as separate elements. We have illustrated this point by exploring the relationship between prospective disclaimers and retrospective accounts. Second, narratives must be examined in the social structural context as well as their symbolic context. This dimension of narrative construction is not the focus of the analysis presented here, but we can offer some preliminary observations. Let us consider, in turn, these two conclusions.

The process of developing the kind of explanatory narratives for behavior examined here is an extended one that begins when the actor pursues a contested line of conduct. Most sociological research has focused on the account construction process. We argue that it is theoretically important to analyze both (1) the prospective explanations (disclaimers) through

which actors initiate lines of action that may be contested and that may alter the actor's identity in a negative fashion and (2) the retrospective explanations (accounts) through which acts evaluated as deviant are justified or excused in an effort to minimize sanctions and defend personal identity. Whatever the ultimate sources of priests' motivation in initiating sexual relationships with minors, the evidence presented here indicates that priests find it important to assert a rationale and identity as central elements of the process.

Disclaimers largely cluster in the credentialing category. Priests draw upon their spiritual authorization in most instances to legitimate the lines of action upon which they are about to embark. Particularly in dealing with children, this strategy maximizes the priest's capacity to orchestrate the interaction, reduces the necessity for more difficult, complex negotiation, and creates the basis for simultaneously sealing off external disclosure. Virtually all priests select this solution as a way of asserting priestly authority so as to integrate the priestly role with conduct that is normatively defined as incompatible with and violative of that role.

This type of disclaimer pattern arguably is clearly linked not only to the priests' behavioral objectives but also to a specific organizational context. Priests are able to employ the credentialing disclaimer in large measure because of their high moral/spiritual status. Their authoritative pronouncements are unlikely to be challenged by devoted Catholics, particularly children. Further, the priest role is located within a religious organization in which spiritual welfare of parishioners is entrusted to the care of priests. In organizations which are granted trustee status, normative violations are adjudicated internally with limited, if any, external oversight (Bromley, 1995). As findings from a number of priest abuse scandals make clear, church officials were well aware of pedophile priests, deliberately concealed priests' identities,

and activities, and in a number of cases simply transferred priests out of one parish to a new, unsuspecting parish when sexual violations were discovered. The fact that priests were able to use a credentialing disclaimer to initiate and sustain sexual relationships with a succession of youth over an extended period of time in the same and different locations is highly improbable outside of this structural context.

The patterning of accounts offered by priests and their spokespersons are most usefully interpreted in terms of the disclaimers that priests construct to initiate sexual relationships as well as the ensuing relationships. On the one hand, pedophile priests use their spiritual status to authorize sexual relationships, clearly orchestrate relationships with individual children and a succession of children over time, and engage in a concerted pattern of concealment. On the other hand, the church is aware that such violations are occurring, protects the identities of perpetrator priests, and transfers priests to new locations when problems surface. In this context both the accounts and the organizational strategies of priests and their organizational spokespersons make considerable sense.

Justification accounts that diminish wrongfulness are considerably less common than excuse accounts. Where justifications are offered, they are almost invariably denial of injury accounts. Priests have little alternative but to attempt to mitigate the seriousness of their infractions by emphasizing the consensuality of the sexual encounters; characterizing the behavior as misguided, an indiscretion, or reflecting poor judgment; or shifting the behavior to a less stigmatized category. Often incorporated into the these accounts are statements inviting comparison of the limited number and severity of incidents in which priests are involved to the vital larger mission that the church serves or in which the priest is engaged through his career.

Such comparisons place the injury in a larger framework that tends to diminish relative harm and discourage unchecked prosecution that would unduly damage the priest or the church. In short, priests concluded that damage control in the form of minimization of injury is the most viable course to pursue.

Excuse accounts are far more common than justifications as priests and their spokespersons acknowledge wrongfulness but deny culpability. Given the rapidly growing number of scandals and the fact that often there are numerous victim-witnesses offering corroborating testimony, neither priests nor the church can easily refute the charges being brought against them. Rather, institutional representatives seek to disavow responsibility through accident and scapegoating accounts. Both accident and scapegoating accounts shift the focus of attention to victimization of the church rather than the child-victims, in the first case accidentally and in the latter case as a part of a deliberate campaign. Church officials offer an accident excuse account resting on the assertion that it is impossible to identify psychologically disordered priests either because diagnostic procedures are fallible or because priests deliberately camouflage these personality characteristics. Alternatively, church spokespersons contend that opponents of the church paint a far grimmer portrait of the church untrustworthiness than is warranted by a limited number of individual violations. In this version, the church is being attacked precisely because of its principled character, which raises moral standards to a level that most individuals would prefer not to meet. Both the accident and scapegoating accounting strategies are premised on a "bad apples" theory that assumes the existence of few abuse cases. The church has attempted to create this reality through an institutional strategy of non-responsiveness to victims and private settlements in which sealing

of all records is a precondition of monetary settlement. As the number of new revelations has mounted and the concerted effort by the church to deny victim claims and conceal incidents has been revealed, both accounting strategies have become less tenable.

For their part, individual priests almost unanimously employ defeasibility accounts. There are scattered references to biological drives, but the primary theme is psychological disorder. These excuse accounts are constructed so as to offer an explanation for having engaged in prohibited relationships at all but also for a succession of illicit relationships over an extended period of time. One major problem that priests face in employing a defeasibility account is that because they consciously used their priestly authority (credentialing disclaimer) in initiating and sustaining sexual relationships with children, they need to account not only for a sexual encounter but also for a highly organized pattern of behavior and legitimation. This requires a stronger defeasibility claim than might have been required to account for a single, momentary lapse. In essence these priests must argue that the planning and disclaiming in which they engaged are elements of the disorder, but this means pleading to a much more serious condition. Nonetheless, defeasibility accounts offer the best chance for priests to continue in their occupational/spiritual roles since their behavior rather than their moral character is at issue and there is at least a possibility of rehabilitation. The church can also come to the defense of the priests for these same reasons.

The results of disclaimers and accounts reported in this study underline the significance of symbolic formulations in the organization of deviant behavior. Actors must prospectively construct motives and identities that permit them to engage in a deviant line of action and do so in such a way that minimizes the likelihood of resistance and stigmatization of identity.

Likewise, when violations are exposed, individuals are pressed to formulate accounts that will place their conduct in a symbolic context that minimizes sanctions and damage to individual identity. Absent a coherent set of disclaimers and accounts, actors have no coherent identity that can served as a basis for ongoing interaction. The data on priest sexual abuse presented here illustrate how explanations for action formulated at the prospective stage limit the degrees of freedom and shape the nature of accounts at the retrospective stage. Further progress in interpreting these symbolic strategies requires placing disclaimers and accounts in a relational context. In the case at hand, it is evident that major normative breeches are difficult to negotiate symbolically when violators are called to a final reckoning.

NOTES

APPENDIX A
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DISCLAIMERS AND ACCOUNTS IN CASES OF CATHOLIC PRIESTS ACCUSED OF PEDOPHILIA

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1.. Some physicians and psychologists make an analytical distinction between *pedophilia* and what they refer to as *ebolophilia* (American Psychiatric Association, 1987; 1994). Clinical definitions of pedophilia refer to an attraction to pre-pubescent children. If the object of affection has passed the age of puberty, the condition is referred to ebolophilia. Furthermore they divide pedophiles into fixated and non-fixated types, with different prognoses and treatment regimens. These distinctions are not pertinent to the disclaimer and account formation process.

2. While the true extent of such activity will probably never be known, Sipe (1990) estimates that two percent of American priests suffer from pedophilia and another six percent are attracted to older minor children.

3. It has consistently been observed, for example, that even among prison populations pedophiles are reviled and placed at the bottom of the status hierarchy, even below murderers and rapists.

4. This analysis focuses on priest-pedophile behavior. However, there have been cases of nuns engaging in similar activities, and they have resorted to comparable accounts as the following statement indicates.

> Sister Georgene, in a 1991 court deposition, admitted the fondling. She admitted the sucking..." It really hurts when you say sexual contact," Sister Georgene said, "but I know that's what we have to say." The nun explained that she and the girl were simply spiritual companions on a "shared journey." Through each other, the two were simply discovering God's divine love (Burkette and Bruni, 1993, 88-9).