
CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE & THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Gender,
Power, and
Organizational Culture

Marie Keenan

OXFORD

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide.

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Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

© Oxford University Press 2012

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 2013.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Keenan, Marie.

Child sexual abuse and the Catholic Church : gender, power,
and organizational culture / Marie Keenan.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-989567-0 (hardcover); 978-0-19-932897-0 (paperback)

1. Child sexual abuse by clergy.
 2. Child sexual abuse by clergy—Case studies.
 3. Catholic Church—Clergy—Sexual behavior.
 4. Catholic Church—Clergy—Sexual behavior—Case studies.
 5. Catholic Church—Discipline.
 6. Child sexual abuse—Religious aspects—Catholic Church.
- I. Title.

BX1912.9.K44 2011

261.8'3272088282—dc23

2011026902

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

*For your love and inspiration: Imelda McCarthy, Nollaig Byrne, and Julia Maloney,
my mother.*

Acknowledgments

The experience of writing this book was enhanced by the support I received from my many colleagues at home and abroad, and I would like to pay tribute to them for their generosity and encouragement Nollaig Byrne, Sean L'Estrange, Nick Gould, Karl Hanson, Martin Kafka, Bryan Fanning, Brendan Geary, Patricia Kennedy, John Allan Loftus, Bill Marshall, Imelda McCarthy, Ian O'Donnell, Friedemann Pfäfflin, Stephen Rossetti, Tony Robinson, Fainche Ryan, Richard Sipe, Gerardine Taylor, Karen Terry, and Tony Ward. In the clinical sphere, I wish to thank my colleagues in Ireland who joined hands with me in trying to make a difference for children and adults caught up in the web of sexual trauma and abuse.

I would like to thank Carmel Flaskas and the staff of the School of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, for their kindness, hospitality, and for the many inspiring conversations during my stay there as a visiting fellow in 2010, when I worked on the final stages of this project. Thanks to Tony Fahey, the then Head of School at the School of Applied Social Science, University College Dublin for making this time abroad possible.

Working with my editor, Maura Roessner, Senior Editor at Oxford University Press (OUP), has been a joy from start to finish, and I wish to thank Maura for seeing the potential in the project and for believing in it from the beginning. I also wish to thank Nicholas Liu, Assistant Editor at OUP, for his ongoing support; Karen Kwak, the OUP production editor; and Smitha Raj, this book's project manager, for their expertise and especially for their patience. I also want to acknowledge the helpful comments from Henry Kaufman.

I cannot begin to stress my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers of the earlier drafts of this manuscript for their time, generosity, and expertise. The work of these anonymous reviewers has, without doubt, strengthened the text and shaped the book into what it has finally become. Of course what is finally presented is totally my own and for which I take complete responsibility.

The many men and women who were clients of my therapeutic practice for a period spanning more than 25 years with a variety of life issues and concerns have influenced my life, my research interests, and my therapeutic practice in the most profound of ways. I wish to thank my unnamed teachers for the important lessons they patiently allowed me learn, especially regarding the complexity of life, love, trauma, and abuse.

The many conversations I had with several bishops, priests, and religious brothers helped me understand the internal workings of the Catholic Church in ways that were invaluable, and I would like to acknowledge the importance of these men's contributions and for sharing their invaluable inside knowledge and wisdom with me.

Having tried and failed to secure funding from external academic and business sources for my earlier research with Catholic clergy who had sexually offended against minors (part of which is included in this book), I wish to acknowledge the contributions made by the Irish Bishops' Conference and two religious orders who responded to my request for funding with no conditions attached. This funding allowed me buy myself out of teaching for a semester to write and enabled me to employ modest research assistance.

This book could not have been written without the men who participated in my study, who agreed to share their life stories with me, and gave so much of themselves in their attempts to give something back to their victims, their Church, and their society. In gratitude to them, and in honor of all children and adults who experienced sexual abuse, and the families of both victims and perpetrators, I commit myself anew to working for a world in which all can be held in a spirit of safety, social justice, and reconciliation. I also wish to acknowledge the generosity of the four clerics and former clerics who filled in questionnaires and replied to my questions, as I attempted to deepen my understanding of the life of the Roman Catholic priest from as many perspectives as possible.

A big thank you to friends, colleagues in University College Dublin, and in particular to my brother Joe, my sisters Lillian, Paula, and Linda, and their partners Ann, Sean, and Paul, for providing the much-needed relief from the intensity of my writing and research. My mother's enduring love and my father's faith in me (both of whom are now deceased), kept me warm and hopeful, especially on the cold and dark days.

I want finally to thank my children, Kate and Colm Keenan, who have endured their mother's obsession with social justice through all of their conscious lives, as yet again they were asked to create a space for this special project on child sexual abuse. As young Irish citizens, who watched the situation of sexual abuse unfold in the Catholic Church in Ireland and across the world, they kept their mother firmly grounded with their questions, comments, and provocations. Writing on a complex topic of public importance with all that it entailed, I came to realize how much my children are my champions, and how much I am theirs. As the fullness of my thoughts are now unveiled after many years of research and writing, I hope I have honored childhood and displayed a compassion for all human beings with an understanding of a complex topic of which they can be proud.

Introduction

ONE CAN FIND many examples in literature, classical and modern, in which sexuality and cruelty are dealt with in a complex way, yet described on a human scale and with a human vision that makes social action and in particular sexuality intelligible. This is most unlike the discussions that seem to prevail in much of the public sphere nowadays, particularly when the issues of sexuality, cruelty, and religion (or a combination of all three) are at stake. Two modern examples of such writing craft stem from the pen of Robert Musil, the émigré Austrian writer who had to flee from the Nazis.

One is a poignantly and timely crafted novella, *The Young Törless*, and the other is a masterful novel called *The Man Without Qualities*. *Törless* is set in a boarding school somewhere in the Austro-Hungarian empire. It relates to the mental and psychological makeup of those who would later fight, get injured, or die in the First World War. It tells the story of a young boy who witnesses a comrade's sexual abuse by two school peers. The narrator reveals his own ambivalence and silence, until the entire story comes to a sudden halt in a kind of strange anticlimax. All participants suffer, there is no hero in the story, and there is no perceivable positive end or obvious lesson to be learned. The reader can only anticipate that one bad event (sexual abuse) is followed by another (the massive destruction and killings of World War I).

The Man Without Qualities also tackles the problem of sexuality, control, and latent violence, but links it more to the politics of wishful state- and empire-building than does the short novella. Musil sets *The Man Without Qualities* in Kakania, a country steering into the catastrophe of the First World War. While the novel's content and timing hints at World War I, it was actually written in the context of emerging European fascism, and therefore rather gives an inkling of the mental map of the latter's rise than the catastrophe of the First World War. At one point Musil introduces the perverse killer and sexual predator Moosbrugger. While other themes, such as the incestuous attraction that Ulrich (the hero

and main character of the novel, a kind of intellectual advisor to the government) holds for his sister Agathe, that are described in great detail, Musil reserves his most detailed and somewhat illustrative and illuminative descriptions for the murderer and sexual predator Moosbrugger. This is not the place to narrate and recall the entire novel; suffice to say that Musil is interested in the psychological makeup of his generation and his country.

Despite the Continental connotations of both novella and novel there is a universal and humanist theme at work here. What stands out in Musil's work is his distinct treatment of sexuality, sexual perversion, and cruelty. What distinguishes his sensibility when compared to the discourses and comments we get today from either the press or TV or religious commentary is the description of the full human dimension—or better, the revelation of the full scale or continuum of possible human action with which the writer treats his main characters. What Musil seems to say is that nothing is more human than to fail in the most human of human affairs, that of sexual relations, as radically one-sided as they often appear and sometimes are. At the same time, it is always clear where Musil stands morally. All his other publications, such as his numerous essays and a good number of short stories and plays, make clear that Musil is probably the most enigmatic and sophisticated of all anti-totalitarian writers between the two world wars. His work is clearly directed against cruelty and against institutional and personal hypocrisy, but in his fiction, and particularly in the two works mentioned, nothing is ever off the human scale, not even in the case of the most perverse of all murderers. In Musil we have an example of somebody for whom to understand all never means to forgive it all. However, one of the hallmarks of our present age is an increasingly strong belief in the collective capacity to right past wrongs and provide effective redress through the medium of the law (O'Malley, 2009, p. 95). However, the growth of public apologies internationally, individual, collective and political, and of restorative and transformative justice, suggests the limitations of the law in healing the wounds of the past and the need for additional processes. In my study I will try to live up to Musil's writing, if not in literary skill than at least in how I try to engage with the complexity of our most human of our human problems.

My reference to Musil gives me a chance to warn against a possible misreading of my study. The very fact that my research draws on and tells the story of clerical perpetrators should not be mistaken as meaning that my attempts to understand these men and their lives epitomizes a call to forgiveness. Forgiveness and reconciliation require another project. My project represents the perpetrators' stories and my interpretation of them, which when taken all together, invites a paradigm shift from victim to perpetrator as part of the attempt to understand and prevent sexual violence, maybe not unlike the paradigm shift that has occurred in other difficult terrains and fields of study, such as the history of the Holocaust.

However, we should also be careful not to make wrong comparisons. Despite all the horrific accounts of abuse that have emerged in relation to the Catholic Church, none has suggested intentional persecution. I am not aware of any Catholic order that has demanded or asked individuals to abuse children. For all their failings, I am not aware of any claim that the pope or any of the bishops ever gave an order to abuse and to maltreat children. Without intention and widespread policies to inflict harm I find the Holocaust a limiting comparison in the context of sexual abuse by clergy. At the same time however, it is perhaps understandable that some victims have drawn on the analogy of the Holocaust to try to convey the depth of their suffering.

In the case of sexual abuse and how to deal with it, it might be more appropriate to argue both sociologically and functionally that once abuse remains unpunished and becomes widespread, as suggested in some reports into institutional abuse in Ireland (Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009), and that individuals and institutions learn that there are no limits to these behaviors and bystanders won't protest, the abuse and violence becomes "normal practice," which is what it appears to have become. Bearing such a more functional and contextual explanation in mind, as citizens and as bystanders we are all in the "political responsibility dock" for allowing such individual and institutional hypocrisy to produce such cruelty and for it to last for such a long time.

MOTIVATIONS AND METHODOLOGY

My interest in the subject matter of this book arose from my clinical experience as a systemic psychotherapist and as a social worker who has worked for many years both with victims of sexual abuse and with perpetrators of sexual violence. More specifically, my interest in Roman Catholic clergy who had perpetrated child sexual abuse developed when I, along with two colleagues, set up a community-based treatment program for child sexual offenders in Ireland in 1996. From its inception the treatment facility attracted a number of Roman Catholic priests and religious for the treatment of sexually abusive behavior. Apart from offering treatment, I became interested in a number of issues. First, I wanted to understand how priests and religious brothers who were attending the treatment center made sense of their own lives, as they looked back with hindsight. I was also interested in discovering how these men understood those aspects of their lives that had given way to their sexual offenses. Although appearing somewhat irrational to outsiders, deviance is known to have its own internal logic, and I was interested to understand that "logic." Usually, people join the ranks of Catholic clergy for a number of reasons, and while there is no evidence that the main reason for joining is the betterment of the human race, my experience of working with clergy in Ireland for over two decades led me to believe that the motivation for many was to be of service and to help others. I therefore wanted to know what had gone so wrong.

Despite occasional mutterings in the public press and the rare suggestion in the empirical literature, there is no evidence to suggest that Catholic clergy enter clerical and religious life with the purpose of gaining access to children to abuse them. In fact, the most comprehensive research ever carried out on sexual abuse by Catholic clergy, conducted by researchers in the United States (John Jay Study, 2004, 2006, 2011), reports that whatever else formed the priests' motivation for joining, there is no evidence to suggest that gaining access to children to abuse is part of it. My own experience confirms this. The more I met with the clerical men, who had abused, the more intrigued I became. Put simply, I was not in the presence of "monsters," nor was I in the presence of individuals who had an "illness." I began to think there must be more to this problem, situational and institutional dimensions beyond the well-documented mishandling of abuse complaints in Ireland, England, the United States, Canada, Australia, and now other parts of Europe.

From the early days of my involvement with clerical men who had sexually abused minors I realized that as well as their offending there was another dimension to the abuse problem: the handling of abuse complaints by the Catholic hierarchy. This has become apparent in almost every country in the world in which sexual abuse by clergy has come to light.

While seen by some as two separate and distinct problems, it was clear to me from the outset that the two problems were interlinked. It is my thesis that some of the factors that contributed to a climate in which clerical men could sexually offend also contributed to the conditions that made it possible for the Church hierarchy to act as they did in handling the abuse complaints. In essence, they were both part of the same institutional culture. However, within this culture not all priests were abusive, and so it was important to determine the particular dynamic circumstances that gave way to sexual offending on the part of some clerical men, without forgetting the larger cultural landscape within which this abuse took place. That is part of my project.

The main aim of this book is to understand and analyze child sexual abuse by Catholic clergy in its individual and systemic dimensions, and to offer a perspective that combines both. It is based on over a decade of research. The book draws on empirical and qualitative data that are used to illustrate possible interpretations of the problem and to suggest possible ways forward. A number of sources are used for this analytical and theoretical work: research involving the first-person narratives of nine Roman Catholic priests and religious brothers who were willing to discuss their lives and experiences, having admitted to sexually abusing minors (the interested reader is referred to the Appendix for further information); research involving four non-abusive Catholic clergy and former clergy who were willing to share their experiences with me; a wide-ranging analysis of the key literature in the area; my extensive clinical experience with victims and perpetrators of sexual crime, both outside and inside the Church; and my experience of working with Catholic clergy in general. As part of the methodology of the book I also visited treatment centers for abusive clergy in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia and had conversations and communication with colleagues throughout the world. The general results are of course also conditioned by my training and experience as a systemic family therapist who worked over many decades with victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse and their families, who in different ways and for different reasons felt themselves to be marginal and marginalized. As Byrne and McCarthy (1998) have argued in *Marginal Illuminations*, the margins can often illuminate the center—if we allow them.

However, this is not a book-length description of an empirical project with clerical perpetrators, and it is not structured like one. Rather, the book is an analysis of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church and the responses to it, drawing from policy, theory, and empirical studies and data. Although the interviews with the offending clergy are an important source of information, as are the questionnaires and interviews conducted with the non-offending clergy, the ideas presented in this book are also strongly influenced by my reading of a number of reports and commissions into the handling of abuse complaints and by my direct contact with many of the key players involved.

Another important aim of this work is to try to understand the “logic” of the Church hierarchy in their responses to abuse complaints, and to set this understanding in its systemic context. For this I draw primarily on secondary sources, which is itself a serious limitation, and on my clinical experience. My primary sources for this work are three government-commissioned reports into the handling of sexual abuse by the Church hierarchy in Ireland (Report of the Commission into Child Abuse in Ireland, 2009; Report of the Commission of Investigation into the Archdiocese of Dublin, 2009; The Inquiry into the Diocese of Ferns, 2005), and seven official reports in the United States (Office of the Attorney

General, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2003; Office of the Attorney General, New Hampshire, 2003; Office of the Attorney General, State of Maine, 2004; Office of the Grand Jury, Philadelphia, 2005, 2010; Suffolk County Supreme Court Special Grand Jury, 2002; Westchester County Grand Jury, 2002), as well as other documentary sources and literature. This is an area of work that would benefit enormously from further research with the Catholic hierarchy.

In weaving together my own “thick description” (C. Geertz) based on these rich and varied sources and experiences, my overall aim is that the book will provide a model of performance that helps to conceptualize and understand, but never justify, the perplexing phenomenon of child sexual abuse by Roman Catholic clergy. It provides a new way of thinking about the clerical sexual offender as someone whose clerical masculine identity and way of “doing” priesthood or religious brotherhood is built on a life that is impossible to live. It addresses the question of how the problem of child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church can best be understood—namely by combining the clerical perpetrators, the Church hierarchy, and other subject positions in what I refer to as the multilevel relational and contextual framework for understanding child sexual abuse by Roman Catholic clergy. This framework emerges from an analysis of the problem that combines institutional, organizational, and cognitive dimensions. By understanding the meaning of the problem and its developmental and systemic pathways, it may be possible to go some way towards preventing future offending by Catholic clergy. My hope is that the book will make a contribution towards improved safety for children and adults, will lead to a better understanding of clerical perpetrators, and will suggest a more considered and informed way for the future.

DECIPHERING MEANING OR “JUST THE FACTS, MADAM”: INTERPRETIVE VS. “SCIENTIFIC” APPROACHES

Before discussing some of my findings, I should draw the reader’s attention to the fact I am not approaching the topic of sexual abuse by clergy by means of an exact science, nor do I think it suffices to employ what are thought to be “scientific” methods to simply gather ever more data in an attempt to give my study a more “objective” touch. *Au contraire*, I continue to have serious doubts about how the attribute “scientific” is awarded when it comes to studying and understanding complex social phenomena. I share the critique of the notion that there is only one thing called “science,” and that this has a clear and obvious nature to which all must conform, especially in the social sciences. From the earlier debates on the philosophy of science from the 1960s (Kuhn, 1962 Popper, 1959, for example) up until today, there has been over 50 years of (scientific) work on science that has led to tendencies within the field of social scientific research that are less about specific theories or disciplinary methods than about the conception of enquiry and the implicit underpinning “philosophies” of science (see Sismondo, 2009, for a review). This field of study suggests there are multiple disciplines and multiple forms of enquiry and practices of research, all of which have an important place in the social “sciences.” These multiple forms of research do not have to follow the same rules (such as representative sampling) to gain the title “empirical,” nor is there a singular essence that can serve as the norm to chastise all “deviants.” I have been influenced by notions of interpretive social science, first conceived by Max Weber (1978) and later refined by other scholars such as Clifford Geertz (1973), Jürgen Habermas (1971), and

Jeffrey C. Alexander (2003), to name just a few. An interpretive social science perspective underpins my work.

Weber pointed out that the subject matter of social research differs considerably from that of the natural sciences. He argued that in the context of social science research we are always dealing with human beings (in the case of social action at least two) who give meanings to their actions. In contrast, when it comes to research in the hard or natural sciences the subject matter of study does not give meaning to anything. For example, trees, plants, cells, kidneys, water, or iron never talk back, and it does not make sense to think of them as giving meaning to their existence, never mind attempting to make sense of or have doubts about it. If this basic assumption holds true we begin to think of social science research in different terms to research in the natural sciences. However, many social scientists disagree with this perspective and attempt to emulate the natural sciences in method and approach, seeking out “reality” or “truth” through “objective” methodologies. In contrast, interpretive social science perspectives aim to understand humans’ actions first (from their perspective) (an operation called *verstehen*) as part of the attempt to explain (*erklären*) the action or behavior. The role of interpretation in this process gives rise to the label “interpretive” social science.

The problem with an interpretive approach is of course the fact that it is hard to think of it as a progressive enterprise—a clear disadvantage when compared to the facts that the natural sciences seem to produce in a systematic and cumulative fashion. Having said that, since Thomas Kuhn’s groundbreaking study of how scientific paradigms have developed historically, are maintained, and are occasionally revolutionized by nonscientific circumstances in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) or Robert Merton’s study of serendipity patterns in the history of science (Merton & Barber, 2004), we also have learned that progress in the natural and social sciences is less obvious or self-evident than often perceived.

We also witness in social scientific scholarship all kind of attempts by those social scientists (*sic!*) who maintain that what they do is “objective” in their attempts to claim the title “scientific”. The restless attempts to appear more serious, less biased, more “objective,” and more “empirical” becomes a constant effort to produce “facts” by resorting to the number game. The history of the “the impossible science” (sociology and the social sciences) is full of such attempts. As Wolf Lepenies, one of the great internationally renowned historians of the social sciences noted, sociology emerged first as a third culture situated between literature and science (Lepenies, 1988). Famously, Lepenies concluded that to pretend otherwise or to ignore this fact would be to sell sociology, and consequently the social sciences, short and seriously undermine the complex nature of their enterprise to a reductionist model.

Since Weber first established the interpretive paradigm and since it has been fine-tuned by other, perhaps more “watertight” accounts, the basic circumstances he referred to have not changed. While we continue to exist, we are meaning-producing social animals who try (and often fail) to understand and make sense of each other’s actions. It often appears messy, to say the least, and often so do interpretive social science accounts. However, despite what might appear as rather unsystematic and not very “scientific,” there is also a great opportunity in such approaches. First of all, we come to an understanding of human action that other approaches are simply unable (and often simply unwilling) to understand, such as irrational or a-rational behavior. Second, there is an element of open-endedness, contingency, and “possibilism” in human action, which some of the more reductionist social science

perspectives haven't even started to think about much less capture. It might be helpful, as Lepenies has argued, to realize that *savoir* (to know) and *savoir vivre* (to know how to live) are related to each other (Lepenies, 1997, p. 47). Third, moral and ethical questions and concerns, which are never far away when talking about sexual abuse, are also more likely to be addressed by an interpretive approach. As Alan Wolfe (1989) has suggested, social science and moral obligation should not be treated as two totally different entities or enterprises. Deep moral questions penetrate our work. At the same time Wolfe realizes that "no abstract and formal rules exist specifying that we owe to others and others owe us. Instead, moral obligation ought to be viewed as a socially constructed practice, as something we learn through the actual experience of trying to live together with other people" (p. 20). Herein lies indeed a great chance for the social "sciences" to remain relevant, a chance that should not be missed. Since I am engaging with normative and deviant positions (which I hold lightly in order to leave open the possibility for deeper understanding and explanation as knowledge evolves), I hope that my work can contribute to what has been called retributive and transformative justice as well as to hope and repair. This is something that a mere "scientific" approach (based on notions of here's the researcher, there are the research "subjects," here are my "objective" methods and my "findings,") will simply not do.

I do not want to use up all the space in this introduction to go into the finer details of interpretive approaches, nor is this the place to go into extensive epistemological debates. Suffice to say that that interpretive approaches to research have clearly identifiable advantages, and my hope is that this will become even clearer in the course of my argument. Be that as it may, I should stress that following an interpretive approach does of course not imply that I reject or that I am in neglect of the usefulness of collecting simple data and making use of statistics or other empirical findings (as the reader will see, I actually do so, sometimes even extensively). My point here is that there are constellations in social life, particularly when it comes to micro-sociological environments, for which interpretive approaches are better suited, than, let's say, massive data collections or employing strictly "scientific" notions or methodologies. Of course one cannot ever fully exclude the possibility that, for example, sexual abusers have a different biological, physical, or even psychological makeup. However, just a cursory reading of the situation will immediately show that employing "scientific" explanations for complex historical, religious, cultural, and sexual notions will not serve us well when such interrelated circumstance really cry out for social understanding and explanation.

I would like to turn briefly now to the question of what kind of conclusions I can realistically draw from my own research with clerical perpetrators and my analysis of the reports and inquiries into the handling of abuse complaints by the Church hierarchy, both of which form the core of this book, particularly since what the reader has before him or her is best seen as a case study stemming from observations from a particular environment (i.e., Ireland and within that area a small cohort of Catholic priests who have sexually abused and two Catholic dioceses that were investigated). As any conscious reader will realize, by definition one cannot extrapolate too much from a small sample. On the other side, however, case studies can often produce insights that other macro-based studies and investigations seem to miss. As Howard Becker has argued (in Ragin & Becker, 1992), case studies are helpful because the researcher begins to know more about fewer people. Also, story-telling (and listening to the stories of the clerical perpetrators) is based on a different logic when compared

to large data sampling. We arrive at questions such as: "What kind of an organization could accommodate a part like this? What would the rest of the organization have to be like for this part to be what it is? What would the whole story have to be for this step to occur as we have seen it occur?" (p. 213).

I will say more about my own case study in the course of this book (particularly in what I consider to be the core of my argument in Chapters 6 to 10). What I would just like to point out to the potential skeptics among my readers is that case studies, when properly contextualized, can actually produce quite surprising insights and results. (One of the founding fathers of empirical research, Paul Lazarsfeld, was well aware of this when he invented the focus group—as we all know, to great success.) Although my own small and unique research environment cannot be regarded as resembling anything close to Lazarsfeld's focus groups (it was never intended as such; its original motivations and concerns were totally different), in a surprising way its results fulfill a similar function. My work links detailed knowledge of the Church administration and the institution of the Catholic Church to the personal narratives of some offenders, and in fact each reflects back on the other. When the results of my own micro-research are interpreted in the larger context, it becomes obvious that there are noticeable links between what happens on the grand scale of things and on the local level, and that the individual, the organization, and the institutional dimensions are actually influencing each other and bound together in particular dynamic relations. Such observations might reveal that the classic micro/macro distinction is a rather artificial construction. As Clifford Geertz has pointed out, it makes sense to see social interpretation as "a continuous dialectical tracking between the most local of detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring both into view simultaneously . . . Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it, and the parts conceived through the whole which motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another" (Geertz, 1979, p. 239).

Whether it is possible to achieve a full interpretive understanding through a process of grasping an actor's intent is widely debated. Having said that, on this issue I sympathize very much with Geertz (1979, p. 225), who argues that genuine understanding comes from the act of looking over the shoulders of the actor and trying to figure out, both by observation and conversation, what it is that he or she means. The idea of trying to grasp the clerical men's understanding of their offending was certainly one of my central epistemological interests. While I am also interested in trying to grasp the Church leaders' understanding of their responses to abuse complaints, the dearth of data on their perspectives makes such a prospect a little illusive for the moment. Those studies that have undertaken such first-person research are of course consulted (Balboni, 1998; Goode et al., 2003).

THE CONTEXT

The project of this book began in a treatment program in Ireland for sexually offending men and for victims of sexual abuse, and by way of setting the scene I will describe a little of that early setting. Needless to say, the contours of influence for what was to become the final endeavor spread far and wide, taking me a long way from that treatment center into many libraries and conversations in the United States, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and the

United Kingdom. I have also corresponded and spoken with colleagues in Europe more recently, something I will continue into the future.

The treatment program in which the research began was primarily of a narrative nature; however, we also drew on cognitive-behavioral approaches to help the men in therapy for sexual offending find ways of reorienting their lives so that it totally avoided abuse of minors. The therapeutic aim of the work was to put all children beyond risk and to help the men to live non-abusive lives. We also wanted to offer a systemic ear to individuals who came to the center so that the experiences of all could be held and honored in the interest of healing, collective restoration, and transformation. The therapy involved individual, group, and family therapy modalities, as well as accountability meetings, workshops on specific topics, and self-help groups for families. For the men who had perpetrated sexual abuse, weekly group therapy sessions of five hours, supplemented by weekly or fortnightly individual counseling sessions, formed the core of the treatment program. Accountability meetings involved the offender, significant people in his social and professional network, and key treatment staff, and took place at regular intervals. In the case of the Catholic clergy who attended for therapy, these meetings involved the cleric's bishop or his immediate superior and other Church personnel. Members of the cleric's family of origin were also offered help and support. The family support group for the families of all of the men attending the treatment center met on a monthly basis and consisted of family members, mainly women, who had played an important role in clients' lives.

The initial three practitioners involved in setting up the program came from differing professional backgrounds and had different clinical orientations. The director was a registered psychologist who practiced primarily in the tradition of humanistic/integrative psychology. The consultant therapist, who was a registered psychiatric nurse and psychoanalyst, practiced in the tradition of psychoanalytic psychotherapy. As a consultant psychotherapist and the coordinator of the treatment program, I had trained as a social worker and systemic therapist and practiced in the tradition of systemic and narrative therapy. Within this environment, cognitive-behavioral approaches (Abel et al., 1984; Knapp, 1984; Marshall, Anderson & Fernandez, 2000) and relapse prevention ideas (George & Marlette, 1989; Pitchers, 1990), which dominate much of the outcome studies on successful sexual offender treatment, were reinterpreted through a narrative frame (Keenan, 1998).

The research aim of the treatment center was primarily to extend the understanding of the problem of sexual abuse beyond the context of deviance and psychological damage. In particular, we wanted to understand the wider relational and personal experiences of the offender. It was clear from a review of the literature that the predominant focus on child sexual offenders was a medico-forensic-legal one and dealt mainly with deviance, criminality, and psychological dysfunction. In general, clerical offenders were largely seen as sexual deviants or moral degenerates or suffering from psychological dysfunctions. Much of the literature on victims focused on psychological pathology and the symptoms that accompany or result from the trauma. Victims were seen as psychologically damaged (by the trauma), and little attention appeared to focus on the individual's resistance, with some exceptions (Todd & Wade, 2003; Wade, 1997; White, 2000, 2004b). We were interested in the idea that the clients' symptoms or problems might be first honored as a form of resistance to the practices of power that were impoverishing their lives.

The focus of many therapy programs for sexual offenders is on gaining detailed accounts of the offending act, with the implied contingent risk of further offending (Eldridge & Wyre, 1998, p. 86; Loftus & Cameron, 1993, p. 300; Wyre, 1996). Professional and legal discourses caution against “believing” the offenders’ accounts (Eldridge & Wyre, 1998, p. 82; Wyre, 1996) because of the assumed denial, minimizations, and rationalizations that are thought to be hidden in their stories. Working with such a conceptual framework inevitably silences and marginalizes first-person accounts. As a result the voices of men who had abused were absent from public debate. The perpetrators’ silence in response to exposure was interpreted in public discourses as evidence of further deviance and pathology. Such an interpretation troubled me. By undertaking research with clerical perpetrators my aim was to create the space for more personal and context-specific narratives to emerge.

However, in undertaking research with individuals based on their narratives, it is important to contemplate the possibility that these narratives are shaped and guided by the available social explanations and the forms of professional discourse that are available to them. It could be argued that the clergymen who participated in my research were influenced by the societal discourses of child sexual abuse and by the professional discourses in which they were embedded. Their narratives could thus be seen as “re-presenting” a number of storylines influenced by such perspectives, with the narratives acting as a powerful describer of society or of therapy. One problem in using clients or patients in research is therefore the possibility that they might tell you what they have learned in therapy.

In modern society sex acts with children are illegal because of the likelihood of harm to children. However, there is evidence to show that children are not universally harmed by sexual abuse (Clancy, 2010), although some are. For some individuals it is a relatively unimportant event in their lives, or even a challenge from which they have gained strength. Clancy argues that survivors of childhood sexual abuse are victimized not only by their abusers (whose acts often leave them both confused, due to incomprehension, and sometimes frightened), but also and inadvertently by well-intentioned health professionals, whose interpretations of abusive experiences are often more traumatic than actual events and effects themselves. Here Clancy is drawing attention to the social discourse in which the problem is embedded. Drawing on case studies, statistics, and technical data, Clancy opposes the view that abusive acts destabilize the neurobiology of the victim, as in other traumas. Positing that the trauma model damages victims with inaccurate predictions and ineffective treatments, she suggests that what hurts most victims is not always the experience itself but the meaning of the experience and how victims make sense of what happened, in line with the available societal and therapeutic discourses, and how these understandings make them feel about themselves and others. It would be quite possible to make sex with children illegal on grounds other than harm to the victim, such as an affront to public morals, which in turn would influence the way the problem is described and language. This would in turn influence the narratives of child sex offenders.¹

In my research with the clerical perpetrators, as an attempt to counteract some of these problems, I distinguished the men’s *explanations* for how they came to act as they did from their *descriptions* of their lives and their abuse of children. Their narratives contain both. Their explanations tended to portray storylines strongly influenced by societal or therapeutic discourses of “distorted thinking,” “minimizations,” and “justifications” that appeared to be filtered through legal, psychological, and medical rationality that were in turn “owned” by