

“Learning to Have a Voice”: The Spouse’s Experience of Clergy Sexual Misconduct

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Abstract The present qualitative study aimed to explore the systemic experience of spouses of clergy members who engaged in sexual misconduct in order to gain a holistic picture and therefore inform clinical practice and research for this specific population. Seven clergy spouses, five females and two males, participated in semi-structured interviews that utilized narrative inquiry. A consensual, team-based approach to analyzing patterns across the interview transcripts revealed two simultaneous organizing structures—relational (intrapersonal, dyadic, and contextual) and temporal (pre-misconduct, during misconduct, and post-misconduct)—both of which are derived from an ecosystemic approach to viewing participant experiences. The resulting structure highlights challenges faced by participants, couples, and congregations as well as factors influencing the recovery process. Specifically, findings suggest the need to increase awareness of systemic risk factors for sexual misconduct and to utilize clinical interventions that extend beyond the individual to address marital, familial, and communal distress. The results also point to the need for further research examining the means through which sexual misconduct impacts other individuals, relationships, and communities and for a more thorough and encompassing understanding of the overall impact of sexual misconduct by religious leaders.

Keywords Clergy · Clergy spouse · Clergy sexual misconduct · Family relations · Ecosystemic theory · Resilience

Clergy sexual misconduct broadly impacts individuals, family systems, and religious communities, creating the need for specialized psychological support to facilitate recovery for those

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affected. However, despite an estimated prevalence of 10 to 15% of Protestant clergy members' engagement in sexual misconduct (Chaves and Garland 2009; Thoburn and Baker 2011), research is particularly limited with regard to clergy spouses whose partners engage in misconduct. Spouses of clergy warrant research and clinical focus not only because of their proximity to the misconduct but also because of their unique perspective as intimate partners of the clergy, their place within the family system of the clergy, and their prominent role in shaping the clergy's relationship to the wider community. From the perspective of ecosystemic theory (Thoburn and Sexton 2016), clergy sexual misconduct is likely to permeate the clergy spouse's intrapersonal, interpersonal, and communal systems. The aim of this study is to examine the complex experience of clergy spouses whose partners engaged in sexual misconduct by utilizing the rich descriptive capacity of qualitative methodology and the analytical framework of ecosystemic theory.

Clergy sexual misconduct

There is substantial variance among Protestant denominations in their definitions of clergy sexual misconduct (Thoburn and Baker 2011), and the definitions are similarly varied within the research literature. One of the broader definitions characterizes clergy sexual misconduct as extramarital sexual behavior or emotional intimacy perpetrated by an ordained religious leader (Garland and Argueta 2010). Thoburn and Whitman (2004) note that emotional infidelity is a closely associated feature of sexual misconduct that "occurs when a relationship with a person other than one's spouse is characterized by emotional intimacy, sexual chemistry, and some degree of secrecy" (p. 493). Specific behaviors associated with clergy sexual misconduct range from masturbation and use of pornography for sexual gratification to infidelity or romantic behaviors outside of the marriage and even to nonconsensual or manipulated sexual activity involving verbal abuse, physical threats, and rape of another individual (Garland and Argueta 2010; Thoburn and Baker 2011). According to Friberg and Laaser (1998), pastors who engage in such acts are likely to return to the behavior or perpetrate again; offending clergy have two victims on average. Carnes (1991) suggests compulsive or addictive behavior is often part of the clergy misconduct complex, where the minister has a pathological relationship with a mood-altering experience that develops into a dysfunctional coping mechanism for dealing with early life trauma and/or dysfunctional dynamics in the minister's family of origin. Capps (1993) and Garland (2006) suggest that sexual misconduct by religious leaders is often power-driven, utilizing both psychological and moral manipulation. Many clergy experience unregulated power due to lack of surveillance or supervision, carry positions of influence and perceived authority, and hold intimate knowledge about the members of their congregation. Although imbalances in power are a common feature of clergy sexual misconduct, the concept differs from sexual misconduct in other professions by virtue of its broad scope. Clergy sexual misconduct is more expansive, covering a wide range of sexual behaviors considered to be outside of what is morally acceptable by their religious denomination.

Ecosystemic view of relationships

An ecological view of relational phenomena refers to the social embedding that occurs within nested environmental systems from the micro level of individual systems to the meso level of

dyads and family to the macro level of community (Bronfenbrenner 1992; Stanton 2009). Thus, ecosystemic theory draws attention to intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual levels existent in every experience or encounter (Thoburn and Sexton 2016). Considering the present study, this framework highlights the reality that clergy spouses live and work within an ecology of relationships; their world consists of an intrapersonal life, interpersonal relationships, and engagement with religious and nonreligious communities. Their experience with clergy sexual misconduct similarly occurs within this ecological milieu.

An ecosystemic paradigm further delineates a sense of reciprocity whereby each member of a system, as well as each nested system, influences one another (Stanton and Welsh 2012). Applying the principle of reciprocity to the present study, the contextual world of the clergy spouse is influenced by internal neurological wiring and connection with his or her personal core beliefs, attitudes, and feelings. These beliefs, feelings, and attitudes are shaped by the interpersonal world of his or her upbringing and reinforced by spouse, family, friends, church staff, and members of the congregation. The clergy spouse's intrapersonal and interpersonal life is also impacted by the environmental constraints and conventions of the local religious community and the wider denominational system of which he or she is a part. These systems are also permeated at each level by the chronosystem, representing the influence of time. An ecosystemic analysis of clergy sexual misconduct would thus view the phenomenon by tracing the reciprocal influences of three nested systems—intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual as they develop over time.

Intrapersonal factors

Previous research examining clergy sexual misconduct has focused primarily on the internal experiences of those directly engaged in the misconduct behavior itself, the clergy person and the target of his or her sexual advances. With regard to the clergy member, a number of specific, individual factors have been proposed as increasing the risk of sexual misconduct, including having held a position within the church for a long time; being at a lower pastoral level; exhibiting a combination of narcissism, sexual compulsion, and a need for affirmation; and engaging in flirtatious behaviors towards church members, pastoral counselees, and other church staff (Friberg and Laaser 1998; Thoburn and Balswick 1998). Several studies have also examined the impact of sexual misconduct on those targeted by the clergy. These individuals report experiencing self-blame, shame, feelings of sinfulness, relocation and resulting loss of community and friends, spiritual crisis and loss of faith, family crisis/divorce, psychological distress (i.e., depression and posttraumatic stress disorder), and suicidal behavior in the aftermath of the misconduct (Flynn 2003; Garland 2006; Kennedy 2003).

Research addressing intrapersonal variables related to the clergy spouse is limited and has largely focused on general stressors associated with the role. In a survey of clergy members and their spouses (Darling et al. 2004), 20.5% of spouses were identified as at moderate to extremely high risk of burnout, and spouses reported significantly lower levels of compassion satisfaction than their clergy partners despite roughly equivalent levels of compassion fatigue. Two previous studies demonstrated that clergy spouses are at risk for increased stress and mental distress (Moy and Malony 1987; Ostrander et al. 1994). They often carry a heavy load of obligations at home due to the clergy member's frequent work-related absences on evenings and weekends (Lee 2007). Clergy spouses also report feeling significant expectations to model expected morals and values, regularly attend services and other religious events, and respond

to the needs of church members (Lee 1995; Morris and Blanton 1994; Warner and Carter 1984). Despite these stressors, Hsieh and Rugg (1983) note that clergy spouses are likely to view their partner's position as a calling more than a job and to subsequently identify themselves as serving a derivative calling.

At this time, only one previous study has focused on the intrapersonal experience of the clergy spouse following sexual misconduct. King (2003) found that wives tend to initially refrain from seeking outside help, feel isolated, and utilize personal, reflective strategies during recovery, such as prayer and devotions. Additionally, King (2003) reported that common emotions experienced by wives during recovery were anger, depression, guilt, and shame. Although King's study expanded the scope of misconduct research to include clergy spouses, the results were limited to their intrapersonal experiences without discussing interpersonal or contextual elements.

Interpersonal factors

Clergy spouses often report that their marriages exist within a fishbowl of constant observation (Lee and Balswick 1989; McMinn et al. 2005). In this state of constant observation, the clergy spouse is expected to serve as a model wife or husband to the clergy member and their marriage is similarly expected to be a model for the rest of the community (Blanton 1992; McMinn et al. 2005). Although there is some evidence that church-related intrusions into a clergy's marriage are related to decreased marital satisfaction and greater loneliness for the spouse (Morris and Blanton 1994; Warner and Carter 1984), there are also some clergy marriages that thrive in light of these same stressors (McMinn et al. 2008). The difference between strain and thriving is substantial, in part because marital conflict and lack of marital intimacy are significantly correlated with clergy sexual misconduct. In a survey of clergy, 41% of those who acted out sexually acknowledged marital dissatisfaction, and 75% of pastors who had longstanding marital difficulties of 5 to 20 years duration were at risk for sexual misconduct (Johnston 1996). As such, emotional distance (i.e., lack of intimacy) in marriage is a strong predictor of clergy sexual misconduct. Intimacy is defined as "two committed people who are completely naked and unashamed before one another—completely known and accepted with nothing hidden" (Wilson and Hoffmann 2007, p. 34). If a couple cannot maintain open, unashamed emotional intimacy due to public scrutiny, they often feel forced to hide their marital problems from their congregation. Marital dysfunction may then be allowed to fester behind closed doors, which increases the likelihood of relational crises such as sexual misconduct. It is notable that no known studies have examined the trajectory of clergy marriages following misconduct nor how the process of dissolving or repairing their marriage impacts the clergy spouse.

Communal and contextual factors

Moving from the dyadic relationship of marriage to the family system as a whole, ministry is widely considered by clergy members to be a hardship for their families (Johnston 1996). Ministers are expected to put the work of the Church ahead of everything else, including their families. The pastoral role requires significant evening and weekend work, a demand that can directly compete with family (Lee 2007). Pressures faced by the clergy member, such as

modeling moral behavior, maintaining positive relationships with church members, and participating in the sacramental lives of church members, often extends to the immediate family as well (Lee 1995; Morris and Blanton 1994; Warner and Carter 1984). In cases where the clergy member sets poor boundaries between their home life and the congregation, the family is particularly vulnerable to strain due to external stressors (Moy and Malony 1987; Ostrander et al. 1994). Although there is strong evidence indicating the general burden that clergy families face, no known studies have examined the impact of clergy sexual misconduct on the wider family system.

Consistent with the nesting model of an ecosystemic paradigm, clergy marriages and families are embedded within the context of the wider church community. As large systems, congregations carry their own patterns of function and dysfunction. Steinke (2006) noted that congregations contain viruses of secrecy, gossip, deceit, and complicity that prove toxic to community cohesion. Congregations are also characterized by implicit trust without protective boundaries between congregants and the clergy. As such, Garland (2011) observed that church members often accept behavior that would lead to vigilance elsewhere (e.g., flirtatious advances, inappropriate comments), dismissing unease as an overreaction and continuing to invest misplaced trust in the pastor. This may create a foothold for pastors' misconduct behaviors.

Congregations are also subject to the influence of the wider denominational structures in which they are nested. Critiques have been levied against denominational structures for failing to provide adequate support for both clergy and congregations preceding misconduct (Thoburn and Baker 2011). Then, when sexual misconduct has occurred, denominations often share a portion of the legal responsibility (Dewhirst and Littrell 2011) and carry the burden of investigating and/or disciplining the clergy member (Roberts 2011). Although a discussion of church policy and disciplinary action in response to clergy sexual misconduct is outside the scope of this article, please refer to Thoburn and Baker (2011) for a more comprehensive dialogue regarding church policy around clergy sexual misconduct. In the ecosystemic paradigm, these functions and the efficacy with which they are carried out are likely to have a substantial bearing on the congregation, the clergy family and clergy marriage, and, ultimately, the well-being of the clergy spouse.

The present study

The lack of knowledge regarding the specific experiences of clergy spouses illuminates the need for further research to build our understanding of clergy sexual misconduct and to inform processes of treatment and recovery. Given the degree to which misconduct appears to permeate multiple systems in which the clergy spouse is embedded, an ecosystemic analysis is likely to provide the most robust framework for viewing their experience. Systems theory observes entities holistically as opposed to simply assessing parts independently (or as a whole being equal to the sum of its parts), and an ecosystemic analysis recognizes the reciprocal nature of interactions that take place between each element of the system (Stanton and Welsh 2012). An ecosystemic investigation thus involves uncovering details regarding the various systems and simultaneously tracing pathways of reciprocal influence between systems over time. The present study applied an ecosystemic analysis in engaging the spouse's experience of clergy sexual misconduct. To that end, the specific aims were to (a) gather rich detail regarding the clergy spouse's intrapersonal, interpersonal, and communal/contextual systems, (b)

investigate the impact of a specific phenomenon, clergy sexual misconduct, on these various systems, (c) identify patterns through which these systems influenced one another across the course of the phenomenon, and (d) use these identified patterns of reciprocal influence to inform suggestions for a process of healing and recovery.

Method

Research design

Because our study explored complex interactions, patterns, and relational elements in a unique population, we utilized a qualitative methodology to effectively examine the multifaceted influence of clergy sexual misconduct on the spouse (Gilgun 2009). Our qualitative design was grounded in integrated narrative inquiry theory and consensual qualitative research (CQR; Creswell et al. 2007; Hill 2012). Specifically, we gathered information via the narrative inquiry process of conducting and analyzing one-on-one interviews because this approach emphasizes the collection of in-depth chronological data within each participant's personal experience while simultaneously building a broad understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Creswell et al. 2007). As a constructivist approach, narrative inquiry uses open-ended questions to collect a story that is defined and lived by each individual participant. The resulting transcripts provide rich, detailed descriptions of how each individual (spouse) experienced the phenomenon (clergy sexual misconduct) over a period of time (Clandinin and Connelly 2004; Lieblich et al. 1998). Based on these rich descriptions, researchers may then identify themes, categories, and concepts within each individual's story and subsequently link those levels of analysis across a sample of participants. We utilized a team-based, consensual approach to conduct this analysis, following guidelines for iterative, audited rounds of coding outlined by Hill (2012).

Sampling procedure

Investigators recruited participants using Internet advertising sites, social media, and networking through Christian organizations. Specifically, selected organizations were asked to send an introductory e-mail to all organization members inviting potential participants who met our eligibility criteria to respond. Investigators also employed a snowball sampling technique; participants aided in recruiting future participants by providing our contact information to others in their social network, allowing for the ongoing dissemination of recruitment information (Noy 2008). In addition, one researcher staffed an informational table at a Christian faith-based conference in order to recruit participants.

Participants

Consistent with qualitative methodology, sample size was determined by the priority of reaching the point of saturation (i.e., when there is redundancy of information in participant interviews; Creswell et al. 2007). Participants were eligible for inclusion if they met three criteria. The first criterion was that participants were either currently or previously married to a full-time clergy member. Second, the clergy member had to have engaged in sexual misconduct while in a clergy position at some point over the course of the marriage. Sexual misconduct was operationalized as extramarital sexual behavior or emotional intimacy existing

on a continuum of severity of behaviors, ranging from pornography addiction to sexual affairs with another individual. Lastly, clergy member spouses of participants were required to belong to a Protestant denomination. After completing a brief phone interview to establish eligibility, participants were scheduled for a semi-structured interview with one investigator. This approach resulted in a sample of seven participants who completed interviews. Relevant demographic data are presented in Table 1.

Data collection

In accordance with the narrative inquiry approach, researchers conducted thorough, semi-structured interviews assessing the unique experience of each participant. The duration of the audio-recorded interviews ranged from 70 to 120 min and occurred either in person or through secure, HIPAA-compliant online videoconferencing (securevideo.com 2014). The interviews began with a demographic questionnaire followed by pre-selected, open-ended questions about the participant's thoughts and experiences. For example, items included, "Please share your story regarding the sexual misconduct of your spouse" and "What was the effect on your personal faith?" To acquire a depth of data regarding specificity of the experiences of spouses, follow-up questions were asked to elicit further information and clarify previous answers.

Data analysis

Data analysis was initiated with the transcription of the interviews conducted by the investigators; researchers listened to the interviews at least two times in order to confirm the accuracy of the transcription. Then the CQR (Hill 2012) approach allowed for the coding of individual narratives while simultaneously identifying comparisons across cases to build a wider understanding of the phenomenon. The consensual, team-based approach of CQR also allowed investigators to draw on the diversity and varied expertise within the research team (Vivino et al. 2012). Following transcription, investigators began by rereading transcripts to gain increased familiarity. Each transcript was then divided into individual, content-based fragments ranging from a single phrase to several sentences. The fragments were organized in a digital spreadsheet and labeled based on their prominent thematic elements. These thematic labels (themes) were then organized together into preliminary categorical groupings. To achieve consistency across all transcripts, investigators collaboratively discussed the emergent categorical groupings and then worked to identify a common list of categories that was both parsimonious and comprehensive. The themes for each transcript were sorted and labeled

Table 1 Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Married to Clergy Member*	Number of Children	Protestant Denomination
1	58	Female	Caucasian	No	3	Evangelical Covenant
2	50	Female	Mixed	No	2	Free Methodist
3	61	Female	Caucasian	Yes	3	Free Methodist
4	59	Female	Caucasian	Yes	2	Baptist
5	38	Female	Caucasian	Yes	2	Church of God
6	48	Male	Caucasian	No	3	United Methodist
7	57	Male	Caucasian	No	2	United Methodist

* The participant was married at the time of data collection

using this common list of categories. The research team then organized categories into preliminary conceptual groupings, and researchers again used these emergent groupings to consensually identify a common set of concepts. Based on the data content, there was need for an additional structure below the primary concept level that represented the temporal level.

Beginning with the writing of theme labels, each phase of analysis was audited through a systematic review process (Schlosser et al. 2012). One researcher was assigned responsibility for labeling all levels of analysis (themes, categories, concepts) for each transcript. After each phase, two other group members reviewed the labels and provided feedback. When a reviewer disagreed with a specific label or grouping, the item was presented to the entire research team and a final decision was reached collectively. The audit trail includes original transcripts and their unitization into fragments in a digital spreadsheet, the assignment of themes, categories, and concepts, written notes and feedback from reviewers at each phase of the analysis, working definitions for the common lists of categories and concepts, and the outlines used to write this manuscript. The review process also served to further establish consistency in coding across transcripts. The resulting analysis produced data saturation, as evidenced by the similar themes, categories, and concepts present across all interviews. Through this comprehensive analysis of the content, as well as the systematic identification of fragments, themes, categories, and concepts, a deeper understanding of spousal experiences with clergy sexual misconduct emerged.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the project is supported by attention to several criteria (Morrow 2005). *Credibility* (i.e., the confidence that participants and related stakeholders have in the findings) was established by persistent observation of the phenomena using a semi-structured interview format during which, researchers consistently used reflective statements to clarify and confirm participant statements. *Transferability* (i.e., the degree to which results might generalize) was supported by clearly defining the phenomenon of interest, sampling as broadly as possible within that definition, and providing a detailed description of the research method. *Dependability* (i.e., the consistency of the results) was supported by creating a systematic review process with multiple waves of review and a clear audit trail. *Confirmability* (i.e., the degree to which results represent a balance between subjectivity and objectivity) is supported through the researchers' acknowledgment that the result is a negotiated text. That is, although the researchers attempted to analyze and interpret the participants' perceptions as accurately and comprehensively as possible, it is expected that investigators' biases entered the analysis in ways that remain unknown.

Results

Multiple rounds of consensus-based coding led to the identification of two simultaneous organizing structures contributing to a holistic picture of the overarching system of the spouse. Participant comments were grouped according to the relational sub-systemic level referenced. Some comments were specifically focused on internal, psychological processes experienced by the participant. Emotional responses to learning about the misconduct, processes of self-growth, and the role of personal faith are examples of this internal, or intrapersonal, systemic

level. Other comments, such as those focusing on marital dynamics prior to the misconduct or on reconciliation after the misconduct, were focused on the marital dyad itself. These comments reference the dyadic or interpersonal system. Finally, there were comments that described engagement with a wider environment, including the church community, children and extended family, supportive friends, and helping professionals. These comments referenced what we refer to as the contextual systems in which individual participants and clergy couples were embedded. These three systemic levels—intrapersonal, dyadic, and contextual—provide the overarching structure for organizing participant comments. In addition to the systemic organization, participant descriptions of their experience with clergy sexual misconduct typically fit into three distinct chronological phases: pre-misconduct, during the misconduct, and post-misconduct. This organizational element incorporates the chronosystem of the spouse, the pattern of events, and transitions in the individual’s life as manifested through the variable of time (Bronfenbrenner 1992). The chronosystem acts as an interactive mechanism that connects all subsystems. For the purpose of demonstrating the results of analysis through a theoretical lens, we present the relational, systemic concepts as the higher-order structure (Concept 1: Sub-system) and the chronological phase as a second-order structure (Concept 2: Time point) (see Table 2).

Intrapersonal sub-system

Previous developmental experiences For both participants and their clergy spouses, the events surrounding sexual misconduct were preceded by formative developmental experiences. Participants frequently recounted traumatic experiences that the clergy member had endured in childhood or adolescence, including both sexual and emotional abuse and early exposure to pornography. One participant described the bullying and emotional abuse her husband experienced as a child and how he “chose to medicate his pain,” in her view, by compulsively using pornography. For many of the clergy members, these adverse childhood

Table 2 Concepts and Categories Identified in the Data Analysis.

Concept 1: Sub-system	Concept 2: Time point	Category
Intrapersonal	Pre-Misconduct	Previous Developmental Experiences Role of Being a Clergy Spouse
	During the Misconduct	Proximal Responses to the Misconduct
	Post-Misconduct	Healing and Growth Clergy Spouse Personal Faith Enduring Consequences for the Spouse
Dyadic	Pre-Misconduct	Prior Marital Dynamics
	During the Misconduct	Discovery/Disclosure Clergy Misconduct Behavior and Response
	Post-Misconduct	Marital Dynamics after the Misconduct Clergy Growth, Accountability, and Relapse Prevention
Contextual	During the Misconduct	Immediate Familial Response to the Misconduct Extended Family’s Role and Impact Church Environment’s Influence Acute Obstacles to Support Resources Utilization of Support Resources
	Post-Misconduct	Long-term Impact on Family System Enduring Beliefs about the Church and the Church Environment

experiences were identified as linked with mental illness experienced in adulthood, according to the spouses. When discussing factors that preceded misconduct, three participants suggested that their clergy spouse struggled with addiction, one participant indicated that his wife had a long-standing personality disorder, and two participants reported that their spouse experienced depression.

Participants also identified formative experiences from their own childhood that influenced how they responded to their spouse's misconduct. Several participants described growing up in authoritarian households and learning to put the needs of others before their own. "I always thought I had to be perfect," explained one participant, "so carrying that all the way into the present, you know, it all makes sense." Two of the participants indicated that they were much less sexually experienced than their spouses. Similar to the participants' reports of their clergy spouses, one woman reported that she herself had struggled with depression prior to the misconduct. In each of these cases, participants reported these prior experiences as important, historical, predisposing factors that contributed to their experience of the misconduct.

Role of being a clergy spouse In addition to the developmental experiences that each spouse brought to the marriage, participants also described the challenges they faced as clergy spouses prior to the misconduct. Most indicated that they enjoyed some aspects of their role (e.g., several even felt a sense of calling), but several reported that it also came with significant demands on their time and energy. One participant called it the "two for" principle in which congregations think "you get two people when you hire one." Another participant described feeling that she was "doing everything" behind the scenes while her husband preached and received public credit for the ministry. Participants also expressed frustration with the difference between the congregations' rosy view of the clergy member and their own more realistic perspective. One participant described her experience as follows:

I was married to a twelve year-old who was a worshipped, worshipped pastor . . . and I was having to be the mother to the guy. So I started to resent it after a while. It became very, very hard.

Another participant described her internal experience within the congregation as feeling "like a big spotlight came over my head that just shined 'inadequate wife,' because people. . . tend to blame the spouse" for problematic behaviors of the clergy. Perhaps most distressing was the lack of access to support within the congregation. "As a pastor's wife, I really don't know where I would have reached out to," said one participant.

Proximal responses to the misconduct When describing their experiences immediately following discovering the clergy's misconduct, participants broadly reported pervasive negative emotion, cognitive meaning-making, physiological distress, and reactionary behaviors. With regard to emotion, many participants described experiencing an overwhelming flood of negative feelings—particularly sadness, shame, and anger—after learning about their spouse's misconduct. In the words of one participant, "I was at the end of my road, always just depressed and angry and frustrated," and also, "I was just this broken shell of a person." When asked about their emotions during this period, four participants specifically used the term "depression" to describe their affective characterization. Negative emotions were often accompanied by physiological distress (e.g., panic attacks, chronic fatigue, stomach pain, headaches, and nausea), weight loss or weight gain, and sleep disturbances associated with the discovery.

Participants also described the cognitive processes through which they initially made sense of the misconduct. It was common for participants to integrate the experience into their pre-existing beliefs and schemas. One woman interpreted the misconduct in relation to her beliefs about the degree to which a wife should make herself available to her husband. “So I just thought it was something I was supposed to do,” she explained, “to keep him from cheating on me, I’m going to be available all the time.” Both of the male participants initially made sense of their wife’s misconduct by assuming that another man had manipulated her. Other participants interpreted the misconduct as the result of their spouse’s psychological illness. “I really thought he was just sick,” said one woman, “and I took my vows seriously. . . in sickness and health.” Several participants noted that learning about the misconduct triggered negative thoughts about the self. “I figured it was my fault because I’d always been a mouthy, outspoken woman,” said one participant, and another reported that the misconduct “really did a nose dive for me with self-esteem.”

Immediate participant responses to the misconduct sometimes took the form of active behavioral reactions. Two participants chose to file formal complaints with their denomination. Other participants, in contrast, agreed to keep the misconduct secret from their families and churches, with what one participant referred to as a “cover-up for the sake of the ego” and another called a “conspiracy of silence.” Some also responded by taking actions they thought would help save their marriage, including one woman who “went through a lot of physical therapy” to heal injuries from childbirth, “just basically for him,” following discovery of the misconduct. Several participants attempted to confront their spouse, set boundaries, or give ultimatums:

When he got home I confronted him. . . . I was calm, I’d had time to get calm before he came home, and I told him I didn’t think I could stay in the marriage if that’s the avenue he was going. And he agreed to see our pastor, which was huge.

The array of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions described by participants demonstrates the tense and isolating intrapersonal experience of the spouses of offending clergy. Overall, as a clergy spouse, watching a clergy member suspected of engaging in sexual misconduct preach and lead worship was described as particularly conflicting. “It was kind of nauseating,” said one participant, “and I felt like I didn’t totally trust where he was in his relationship with God.”

Healing and growth Learning to create space for the self was one of the themes that marked a spouse’s transition away from acute distress in the aftermath of misconduct and towards long-term healing. Participants reported healing and personal growth processes with outcomes that included an enhanced sense of independence, greater awareness of and capacity for setting boundaries, appropriate understanding of the clergy’s responsibility for their misconduct, greater engagement in self-care activities, interest in helping others survive similar experiences, and appreciation for the healing process itself. “Probably one of the most important parts of it,” said one participant, “is learning to have a voice, and it’s good to have a voice.” Several participants noted the importance of developing this greater sense of autonomy by learning “to be extremely honest” with themselves and their spouse, even to the point of telling them that “I haven’t loved you in a long time.” For three of the participants, developing greater independence included a process of starting to date new people and explore new relationships. For those who remained with their spouse, personal growth entailed learning to independently develop, set, and enforce appropriate boundaries. One participant stated, “I didn’t really know

how to stick to boundaries because I really hated that mothering feeling, and I always felt like if I have consequences, I'm just being a mom." The process of learning to set boundaries and to value the self were deeply linked for several participants. Developing greater self-worth was also paired with learning to appropriately attribute responsibility for the misconduct. "It took me a while to get to the point of saying, 'This was his actions, this was his responsibility,'" said one participant, and that "'I didn't cause it.'" Finally, the development of self-worth also took on an operational form through self-care activities (e.g., journaling, spending time with their children, and writing music) that participants associated with healing and growth.

Clergy spouse's personal faith Consistent with most participants having spent so much of their life in religious contexts, all of them reported some interaction between the misconduct experience and their own personal faith. Participants described feeling a "greater sense of God's presence," "spending more time with God," believing "my walk with God is significantly stronger," and "sensing God's love for me in stronger ways" in the aftermath of the misconduct. Across all participants, there was a strong consensus that their experience with misconduct had enhanced rather than diminished their personal faith (but not necessarily their connection to the Church). One participant described this transformation as a "more personal relationship with God," and another described it as a "less dogmatic" relationship. Several noted the importance of their faith for surviving the distress, stating, "I can't have done this without faith, I just can't," and, "I probably would have killed myself." Three participants who remained in their marriage articulated a belief in God's capacity for redemption and forgiveness.

Enduring consequences for the spouse Not all long-term outcomes for the individuals were positive. Many of the participants described ways in which the experience of misconduct had left a lasting impact on their ability to trust others, their suspiciousness of relapses, and their sensitivity to triggering stimuli. At the intrapersonal level, experiencing betrayal by a long-time intimate partner seems to have shifted the degree to which some participants are now willing to trust others. Specifically, one participant noted that "it certainly makes me think about trust in a different way. . . I'm going to give some thought" before trusting people again. For those who remained in the marriage, this lingering distrust was often described as an awareness that the clergy member could act out again in the future. One woman explained that although "I no longer worry all the time that he is going to relapse. . . I'm still not naïve enough to believe that he couldn't." Finally, several participants described an ongoing sensitivity to stimuli that they associate with the misconduct experience. Multiple participants referenced "having trauma triggers" such as hearing people compliment the clergy member in a ministry setting, returning home and finding the clergy in a state of undress, or encountering references to pornography. One participant explained that she had removed her glasses during the interview because "when he used to talk to me I had to take my glasses off so I couldn't see him, because he was so mean." These enduring consequences suggest that the spouse's experience with clergy misconduct can continue to have an adverse impact on their life as an individual, even after significant healing and growth has taken place.

Dyadic (interpersonal) sub-system

Marital dynamics prior to the misconduct All spouses provided information about their marital relationship prior to the discovery of the clergy sexual misconduct. For a large majority

of the participants (i.e., $n = 6$), conflict and dysfunction were prevalent well before the sexual misconduct occurred or was revealed. Participants described various examples of past relational dysfunction, including feelings of codependence, sexual difficulties or lack of intimacy, poor or limited communication, partner criticism, and imbalances of power, with one participant defining their relational dynamics as “abuse.” Another participant revealed that her marital problems were often shielded from the community, stating, “there was a lot of unhealth [sic]; we just covered it well.” Two additional participants expressed that marital dysfunction was compounded by having limited social support due to feeling as though their partner was their only friend. Overall, previous relational dynamics appear to have played a salient role in predicting future dyadic distress and response to the misconduct.

Discovery and disclosure of misconduct Participant narratives revealed various themes in terms of how the sexual misconduct was disclosed or discovered interpersonally. The most consistent theme across participants was initial lying and denial by clergy members. Four participants highlighted this behavior, with one spouse suggesting, “the lying I think was the—that was the biggest disappointment.” Three participants indicated that their spouse revealed it to them personally and described it as an emotional, often tearful “confession.” Regardless of the way in which the misconduct was revealed, several spouses reported observing warning signs of potential troubling and offensive behavior by the clergy members, including revelatory dreams, personality changes in the clergy member, and behavioral red flags (e.g., spending more time interacting with others online, missing family events and holidays, and concealing information from the spouse and family). Even with warning signs, the lengthy relationship prior to the discovery of misconduct and limited knowledge about specific details (reported by three participants) contributed to the devastating impact of learning about the misconduct. In addition, three spouses reported multiple stressors or traumatic events occurring at the same time as the discovery, such as medical illness, mental health disorders, and financial crises—what one spouse described as “loss upon loss upon loss.”

Clergy misconduct behavior and response Participants described specific clergy misconduct behaviors including emotional and sexual infidelity with one or more congregation members ($n = 2$), emotional and/or sexual infidelity with another pastor ($n = 2$), participating in cybersexual behavior ($n = 2$), involvement in sexual affairs with individuals of the same sex ($n = 1$), and viewing pornography coupled with masturbation ($n = 2$). Several clergy members engaged in more than one of these misconduct behaviors. When describing the period immediately surrounding their discovery of the misconduct, participants frequently provided rich descriptions of how the misconduct behaviors played out in relation to their marriage. In six of the seven cases, the misconduct occurred through the congregation, either at the church itself or with a congregant or staff member. Participants reported feeling pressured to accommodate their spouse spending more time working or at the church without knowing that this time was actually being spent engaged in misconduct behavior. Says one participant whose wife had an affair with another staff member, “Gradually, over time, there was a lot more time where she was required to be at work. .. she didn’t have time to come home to the family, she was just constantly at church.” Participants reported that if they questioned or criticized these time demands, they were met with significant “defensiveness” or “meanness” on the part of the clergy. After clear discovery, several participants noted that the clergy member continued to avoid taking responsibility for their actions. “He’s entrenched himself more in the mythical world that. .. nobody understands him,” said one participant, “and that churches would be just

fine if they had just let him do what he did.” Another participant noted that her husband “blamed the church” for his behavior, and a third participant reported that his former wife “proceeded to lie about the whole thing,” including the investigation of it. Two participants reported that they themselves were blamed for the misconduct or dissolution of their marriage.

In some cases, clergy misconduct behavior also continued to impact marital dynamics even after initial disclosure. In the words of one participant, “The Internet is bad” because it provides ubiquitous opportunities for clergy members to act out. Three clergy members continued to use “online chat sex” or pornography to act out even after their misconduct was initially revealed. These online sexual behaviors were continually discovered through browser histories or shared email accounts. “It just made me nauseous because I kept finding things,” explains one participant, “it just kept coming up that there’s more.” Online sexual behavior was also frequently linked to a larger addictive cycle. For three participants, coming to terms with the misconduct entailed coming to see their spouse as an addict and dealing with the ups and downs of addiction and recovery. “There’s truth in some ways, but a lot of the rest is crap,” said one participant, “because when you’re dealing with an addict, all bets are off.”

Marital dynamics after the misconduct There were multiple relationship trajectories following the misconduct, including divorce ($n = 4$), divorce and remarriage ($n = 1$), and remaining married ($n = 3$). Among participants who divorced following the misconduct, many described continued tension with and resentment toward their former spouse. One participant hoped to end their relationship on amicable terms, but “he wanted nothing to do with me,” and another spouse attributed the dissolution of their relationship to the misconduct, stating that “it ended our marriage, and it ended it pretty promptly and precipitously.” Those that remained married often described a process of dyadic healing and growth that emerged from shared commitment and the desire to maintain their families. One participant explained, “We’re both healthier, and I felt like it was worth fighting for, and I still do.” Two participants disclosed that following the misconduct, maintenance of the relationship required intentionality in building emotional connection through physical intimacy, planning and scheduling dates, and/or writing letters. Just as they helped cultivate well-being at the intrapersonal level, boundaries enforced between the dyad were also identified as important factors for couples that remained married. As suggested by one spouse, setting boundaries “helped me see that it really was important to him to honor me in that way after so dishonoring me.”

Clergy growth, accountability, and relapse prevention When describing improvements in the dyadic relationship after misconduct, several participants noted maturation and greater accountability on the part of the clergy member. Such change included greater insight and responsibility, cooperation with accountability and relapse prevention measures, and broader life changes. One participant described receiving a thorough apology from her husband as an important turning point in their relationship: “It was the first apology I’d ever received that was heartfelt, that sounded broken, that took full responsibility for everything, that didn’t make an excuse, that didn’t blame me.” For this participant, her husband’s apology was accompanied by his willingness to listen to her experience and the pain he had caused her. Having their suffering recognized was a common theme in participant descriptions of improved marital relationships. Active engagement in relapse prevention and utilizing accountability measures were also common in cases where the marital relationship improved. “He was following through on all the things I had asked him to do,” explained one participant, and another noted that she required her husband to be part of a support group for two years, delete his Facebook

account, and maintain an accountability partner. Other examples of demonstrating accountability and relapse prevention included installing a software program that provided weekly reports of online activity, putting “blocks” on computers and tablets, and removing televisions and computers from hotel rooms when traveling.

In addition to addressing the misconduct behavior, several participants also described broader life changes that their spouses had undertaken. Three clergy members chose to leave the ministry entirely, recognizing that the role itself was too much of a risk factor for acting out. “He knows he was addicted to praise and he doesn’t want it,” explained one of the participants. Another participant described a particularly significant transformation that took place in her husband; he moved to a new city, developed greater self-efficacy with regard to independent life skills, improved his physical health, and gradually re-earned the trust of the participant and their children. “He grew up like you wouldn’t believe,” the participant explained, and “for an addict, to have that sense of accomplishment and power of knowing that, ‘hey, I’m not out of control’ was tremendously significant.” These indicators of transformation—taking responsibility, accountability, and broader life changes—provided participants with reassurance and allowed for the rebuilding of trust in the relationship. It is worth noting that these indicators were only described by four of the seven participants. Three participants whose marriages ended in divorce reported no such indicators, and a fourth (whose marriage also ended in divorce) reported far fewer indicators than the three participants who remained married.

Contextual sub-system

Immediate familial response to the clergy sexual misconduct Six out of seven participants described that family dynamics were significantly impacted by the immediate occurrence(s) of the sexual misconduct. Several spouses reported feeling responsible to keep the misconduct from their children, which caused a separation and feeling of loss. For instance, one participant stated that she feared disclosure to her children would alter their perception of their clergy father; however, she described ambivalence in the additional belief that “there’s some wholeness that comes from being transparent, so it’s really a struggle.” Spouses characterized their clergy partners as causing triangulation and conflict in the family by “colluding” with specific children. At the same time, boundaries set by spouses influenced the functioning of the families in beneficial ways; one participant reported that directly after her clergy member spouse engaged in and reported his sexual misconduct,

He was only allowed to shoot baskets with [the children] in the driveway or open the garage and have them ride bikes. The things he should have been doing all those years anyway. . . . The boys never caught on that he couldn’t go in . . . they just thought they were having fun outside with daddy ‘cause that’s what they’ve always wanted.

Despite the ability of some families to benefit from boundary-setting following the disclosure of the sexual misconduct, four participants indicated that the experience was emotionally traumatic for the children, including feelings of manipulation and pressure that resulted in worsened school performance and engagement in risky behaviors. Watching their children suffer as a result of the experience caused significant turmoil for participants, with one mother stating, “My tears are not for me feeling sorry for myself. My tears are for my children.” One male spouse also stated that as a result of the clergy’s engagement in sexual misconduct, he began to feel like a single parent, took on all significant parental duties, and

observed distancing between his children and clergy wife. These spousal depictions suggest the profound, immediate impact of clergy sexual misconduct on the functioning of the family.

The extended family's role and impact Participants also touched on the role of their extended family during the period immediately surrounding the misconduct. Three spouses shared that they did not disclose the misconduct to their extended family or families of origin. One woman suggested that she felt, "I couldn't tell my sister. . . I didn't want to tell my mom. . . she would be devastated beyond belief." Two others worried family members would "think bad" of the clergy member and of them after learning of the misconduct. As a result, participants indicated that they were lacking familial resources that may have aided in the healing process. One woman stated that her father had historically been a critical source of support and wisdom, but his prior responses to her fears of her husband's use of pornography resulted in reluctance to disclose the misconduct to her father. She specified,

Before anything was out of control and I had gone to my dad . . . he had kind of made a 'little bit' of it because he didn't know the magnitude of it . . . so I never told my parents. All of these years that we went through all of this stuff, I never talked to my parents.

As this participant noted, limited communication with extended family kept participants from a possible source of critical social support. That point was further illustrated by one spouse who was able to connect with a cousin who had endured a similar experience. "That response probably was as much help as anything," she said, "because they had walked with that before." For this single participant, sharing the emotional pain with a family member proved to be palliative. These reflections highlight a potential avenue of comfort for spouses in similar situations.

The church environment's influence at the time of the misconduct Another key element shaping the period immediately surrounding misconduct was the response of the church community. Every participant endorsed experiencing either feeling isolated or outcast from the church community. Specific words used to describe the experience of separation from the church community included "humiliating," "abandoned," and "betrayed." One spouse described a community member stating that they wished the clergy member and spouse had never come to their town, and another participant reflected on the sense of gossip surrounding the event and its effect on their family. In addition, the majority of spouses stated that they adjusted or modified their involvement with the church after discovering the sexual misconduct. A male spouse shared, "I went from an extremely active person in the church to one that had no activity in looking for a church, and I had made a conscious decision not to be engaged. . . at any of the churches." In a similar fashion, four spouses felt disappointed by the response of other church staff members.

Experiences with the church community were not entirely negative. Three spouses also recognized the positive impact of the church community, with one participant reflecting on "the huge amount of support and outreach that came to me from a large percentage of the congregation and the community." By the same token, several participants remarked that the church demonstrated care and appropriate responses to the clergy's misconduct behavior. Specific church acts included offering additional time off, providing the family with "a restorative process" for recovery, personal invitations to the spouses to return to the church, and educational resources for the families of the offending clergy member. Thus, overall experiences with the church community were mixed.

Acute obstacles to support resources In addition to barriers presented by the church, participant narratives also revealed several barriers to receiving support in the wider community. Four spouses indicated that they immediately felt silenced or as if they had lost their voice throughout the sexual misconduct experience; one woman stated, “This was so isolating because it’s not something you can talk about.” In addition, two spouses specified that they felt an internal resistance to asking for help from others, endorsed feelings of “shame” around the receiving of assistance, and therefore limited their own access to support resources. Some spouses expressed that they felt unheard or ignored, even by counselors and support groups, and others described the absence of social resources available to them after the discovery of the misconduct. One spouse depicted her particularly distressing encounter with a Christian counselor:

She [Christian counselor] said, ‘We’re not here to talk about you; we’re here to talk about how you can help [clergy].’ And, I just died. I actually, at that moment, wanted to not be me anymore ‘cause this wasn’t my life.

In addition to the emotional and interpersonal obstacles to receiving support, two spouses also noted that they felt geographically cut off from mental health resources or access to treatment. All spouses showed that lack of access to social support was associated with compounded stress during an already painful experience.

Utilization of support resources There were numerous ways in which spouses did ultimately use support resources to cope with the discovery of misconduct. Four spouses accessed professional mental health resources, including individual therapists, marriage counselors, Christian-specific counselors, and mental health retreats. One participant described how her first counselor “really worked with me on sharing my thoughts and my emotions, which I had really learned to stuff over the years.” In addition to professional support, several spouses benefited from relationships with friends, support groups, and mentors. For one spouse, joining a support group facilitated the realization that “I wasn’t alone” and provided “a lifeline for me” in the aftermath of misconduct. As well, three participants noted the importance of the solidarity they felt with other spouses who had endured similar experiences, as shared in support groups.

Long-term impact on the family system Clergy misconduct behavior also seemed to have a lasting impact on the wider family system. More than half the participants described a personal distancing and either loss or limitation of communication with their children over time. One participant expressed, “I got diagnosed with breast cancer and she [my daughter] never called. Never called. I think that was the worst thing that has ever happened to me in my life.” Multiple spouses suggested that their current relationship with their children is not as close as they would like it to be. Three spouses also reported that, over time, they had observed their children engage in several unhealthy coping and avoidance strategies, including promiscuity, heavy alcohol and marijuana use, termination of education, and the abandonment of their faith. Two spouses noted their children’s sustained negative perceptions of their clergy parent as a result of the sexual misconduct, with one participant describing how his daughter “called me one night saying that she couldn’t be there [with her mother] and I had to come get her right away and that she didn’t feel safe and you know mom was really upset and was crazy.” Despite the ruptures in family relationships described by some spouses, three others portrayed a gradual familial recovery involving hard work and patience. For two families, the recovery

process involved the rebuilding of clergy parent-child relationships, and for another family it involved sharing their story with the congregation in order to help others who might be facing similar experiences.

Enduring beliefs about the Church and the Church environment Almost half of the participants indicated that their negative beliefs about the Church and its response to the misconduct have endured in the time since the misconduct. One woman remarked that the experience significantly changed her perception of all clergy members:

Now I don't trust any pastors. So now I think pastors are scum. My husband is scum, the pastor at our church who told me to get over it was scum [laughs]. . . . I basically thought all pastors were liars. They were all fakes.

Another spouse expressed concern about the lack of clerical supervision and stated that he has “zero faith” in his denomination. Three spouses reported either leaving their previous church or feeling forcefully pushed out. Participants made statements such as, “I’ve never gone back to [our previous] church on a Sunday; I’ve had no desire to,” and “I can’t go back to that church.” Despite exiting their previous churches, more than half of the participants discussed renewed faith and church attendance, sometimes involving a change in denomination. Some spouses even returned to more significant church involvement in the form of leading worship, mentoring others, and leading committees. One spouse suggested that her current church is a safe haven for her, a source of “solace” for maintaining her faith. Although the church environment may have created barriers and tension during an already difficult time for the spouses, these individuals’ ability to find a renewed or strengthened church identity appears to have facilitated the experience of growth and recovery.

Discussion

This study sought to apply an ecosystemic framework in exploring the experiences of spouses, both male and female, of clergy who engaged in sexual misconduct. Our ecosystemic analysis resulted in a structure for organizing participant data that traced relational systems (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and communal/contextual) across three distinct phases of the misconduct chronosystem (pre-misconduct, during misconduct, and post-misconduct). Organizing the findings in this way allowed us to meet our first two aims of gathering rich detail regarding the various systems and investigating the chronological impact of the misconduct phenomenon on these systems. The resulting organizational structure also provides an optimal basis for our third aim, identifying patterns of reciprocal influence across systems, as well as the final aim of developing informed proposals for a process of recovery and healing. Having reviewed the data and resulting organizational structure, we turn now to a discussion of conceptual themes and patterns of reciprocal influence that emerged at each systemic level as well as the implications of these themes and patterns for healing and recovery.

At the intrapersonal level, predominant participant themes included the pressure inherent in the role and identity of being a clergy spouse; the cascade of emotional, cognitive, and physiological distress in immediate response to the misconduct; the ongoing suspicion of the clergy spouse’s capacity to relapse; and the process of personal healing. Consistent with previous literature (Lee 1995, 2007; Moy and Malony 1987; Ostrander et al. 1994),

participants indicated that the clergy's time away from the family while engaged in ministerial work and the pressure faced by the spouse to present a façade or false representation of perfection caused significant stress prior to the misconduct. Here we see the significant influence of the congregational community on the intrapersonal functioning of the clergy spouse. At the same time, many of the participants identified their own involvement in the life of the congregation as a form of vocational calling and described expending considerable time and energy working for the church. Such involvement provides another pathway of influence whereby the clergy spouse's intrapersonal skills and work ethic helped to shape the wider religious community and its expectations for the clergy spouse role. Participant descriptions of intense distress in response to misconduct replicated those described by King (2003) as well as descriptions provided by victims of clergy sexual misconduct (Flynn 2003; Garland 2006; Kennedy 2003). Although emotional, cognitive, and physiological distress are constitutive of the intrapersonal system, the source of such suffering lies at the interpersonal level.

Participants consistently explained their suffering in reference to the marital dyad, describing a betrayal of marital vows and acute grief over the erosion of the relationship. The spouse's proximal response to misconduct is thus derived, to a significant degree, from their interpersonal relationship with the clergy member. Their distress, in turn, inevitably influences the subsequent trajectory of the marriage by introducing—or in some cases further entrenching—the dynamic of transgressor and victim. The ongoing distrust and vigilance regarding relapses experienced by many of the participants similarly influenced the long-term course of their marriages. For some, the distrust represented too large an obstacle to overcome and contributed to the eventual dissolution of the marriage. For others, addressing this distrust became the primary focus of reparative efforts for both the clergy and the spouse. It is notable that this sense of distrust and vigilance is not documented in previous literature and represents an important contribution to the clergy sexual misconduct literature.

Unlike past literature that has largely emphasized the dysfunction and pathology associated with offending clergy and their spouses (Friberg and Laaser 1998; Garland and Argueta 2010; King 2003; Moy and Malony 1987), the present study sheds greater light on the strengths, resilience, and recovery processes of clergy spouses. There is particularly rich data regarding the use of one's relationship with the self, God and faith, one's partner, the family, and community networks to find healing. Participants communicated the importance of attributing responsibility to the clergy rather than internalizing it, developing independence, promoting awareness and empowerment among other spouses, engaging in self-care, making theological meaning out of their suffering, and drawing upon a belief in redemption.

At the dyadic level, prominent themes included a history of marital dysfunction prior to the misconduct, denial and consistent lying by the clergy about misconduct behaviors, and the repair or dissolution of the marriage. The data provide a number of possible dyadic risk factors for clergy sexual misconduct, including codependence, imbalances of power, poorly articulated boundaries, and lack of intimacy. From an ecosystemic perspective, these factors are influenced by both the individual psychological makeup of the clergy and clergy spouse, particularly any individual psychopathologies (Friberg and Laaser 1998; Thoburn and Balswick 1998), and by the strain placed on the couple by their wider religious community (Morris and Blanton 1994; Warner and Carter 1984). Denial and the maintenance of secrecy were commonly reported experiences in the immediate period surrounding misconduct. In these instances, the burden of secrecy was transferred from the individual clergy member who committed misconduct to the dyad through a process of disclosure. The effect was often to

create a wall around the couple and isolate the clergy spouse from potentially supportive connections with the community.

Participants commonly described a process that each couple experienced of deciding whether to pursue restoration or dissolution of the marriage. The decision reached by each couple was typically informed by a multiplicity of factors, including the willingness of the clergy member to make amends and address maladaptive patterns, the spouse's willingness to forgive, the collaborative establishment of appropriate boundaries, and the degree to which the couple was able to effectively disentangle itself from the congregation in which misconduct had occurred. For those who remained in their marriage, dyadic recovery required open, effortful communication, acceptance/forgiveness, and greater accountability on the part of the clergy member. It is also notable that multiple participants described a desire for their clergy partners to step away from the work and context of ministry. With this combination of factors, there is again evidence of intrapersonal and contextual factors affecting the trajectory of the dyad. It should also be noted that the decision to repair or dissolve the dyad ultimately has a significant impact on the life of each individual member as well as the wider church community's understanding of the consequences of misconduct.

In relation to the family system, prominent themes included increased division between the parent and child units of the family due to secrecy surrounding misconduct, clergy collusion with and manipulation of children, and structural changes following the misconduct. Whereas previous research highlights the strain that ministry places on the family system (Johnston 1996), there has been little documentation of the specific conflicts and structural realignments that occur as a result of clergy sexual misconduct. In the present study, participant data highlighted the process by which behavioral efforts to keep misconduct a secret within the marriage led to increased distance between the parents and their children. When fidelity to the dyad was prioritized (through secret-keeping) over relationships with the children, the clergy spouse was ultimately alienated from the children. In cases where the misconduct was more openly discussed with children, however, participants described alliances that were formed between children and one spouse or the other. In several of these cases, the alliances were accompanied by a deterioration in the relationship between the children and the non-allied parent. The dyadic decision to keep misconduct secret or to reveal it to the children thus significantly influenced the structural alignment of the family system.

The participants made frequent reference to the wider church system in which misconduct took place. Prominent themes included the significant demands placed on the clergy and clergy spouse, criticism and ostracizing of the clergy spouse, inconsistent administrative responses to misconduct, and opportunities for healing. Nearly all of the participants described their church as having significant expectations of both the clergy member and the spouse prior to misconduct, consistent with previous assertions about the strain associated with ministry work (Lee 1995; Morris and Blanton 1994; Warner and Carter 1984). As previously mentioned, these demands have a bidirectional quality shaped by both the community's expectations and the individual clergy's or clergy spouse's own sense of calling to ministry. They are also indicative of poor boundaries on the part of the wider community (Steinke 2006).

These inadequate boundaries, coupled with the pervasive trust that characterizes church systems (Garland 2011), were also manifested in inconsistent congregational responses to misconduct. Participant descriptions suggested that church leaders vacillated between ignoring the misconduct, making nominal efforts at accountability, and outright rejecting the clergy member. In many cases, such inconsistency appears to have allowed the clergy's misconduct

behavior to continue. In the aftermath of misconduct, participants reported that critical comments and social rejection were directed at the clergy spouse as well as the clergy member, ultimately exacerbating the spouse's intrapersonal suffering and interpersonal isolation. Church congregations also featured prominently in data related to healing and recovery, often as new communities that the clergy spouse joined. In at least a few cases, the original congregation was involved in a reconciliation process that addressed the fallout from misconduct. Other participants described finding a social support and community in parachurch organizations, particularly groups comprised of other individuals who had endured similar experiences. In all of these examples, healing was made possible both through the individual efforts of the clergy spouse (and sometimes the clergy member) and the efforts of the wider community to embody values of hospitality, forgiveness, and care.

Implications for prevention and recovery

The findings of this study inform mental health treatment or care for clergy spouses in three distinct ways. First, results support the need for clergy couples to be wary of the predictors and warning signs (i.e., other problem behaviors and family turmoil) of clergy sexual misconduct prior to its occurrence in order to seek preventative care. This study suggests that strength-based or positive psychological approaches to therapy could be utilized to enhance healthy family functioning for clergy families with unidentified troubles or signs of misconduct. Second, this study highlights the significance of clergy spouses' interpersonal and contextual systems, which in turn indicates the importance of interventions following misconduct that extend beyond the individual to address their marriage, their families, and their wider communities. One key to such a therapeutic approach would involve defining, establishing, and implementing appropriate boundaries within the family system and the dyadic relationship. The findings of this study also demonstrate that many spouses experience barriers to accessing social support but benefit once social support is obtained. Therefore, clinical treatment for spouses should tailor approaches to enhance the accessing and utilization of social support, with specific emphasis on supports outside the family and immediate congregation, including those who may be able to provide solidarity or mentorship. Research has emphasized the importance of positive social interactions for victims of psychological trauma and for those belonging to a specific culture, community, or population (Bernal and Sáez-Santiago 2006; Hobfoll 1988; Horowitz 1976; Joseph et al. 1993; Kagawa-Singer and Chung 1994; Moos and Schaefer 1993).

Third, the data support the utility of several specific individual therapeutic interventions to target or treat specific presenting difficulties reported by clergy spouses. Protective factors already in place (e.g., journaling, use of prayer and faith, vocational goals/identity) should be encouraged and supported. Clergy spouse clients may also benefit from the restructuring of maladaptive thoughts around self-blame and self-criticism, the provision of psychoeducation around normative emotional experiences and expression, and acceptance of personal circumstances and commitment to present values. In sum, the participant narratives help to further inform treatment by illuminating the significance of preventative family care, enhancement and use of social support, and tailoring individual treatment around personal protective factors, modification of maladaptive thoughts, and value-strengthening.

Limitations and future research

The results of the present study provide illuminating and valuable information about the experiences of clergy spouses; however, the study has notable limitations. First, the generalizability of the data is limited by the lack of diversity of the sample with regard to denomination. All participants identified as belonging to Protestant Christian denominations. The small sample size and lack of variability also suggests that the data may not be generalizable to other racial and ethnic groups, non-heterosexual couples, or other branches of Abrahamic faith. Second, narrative data were collected through self-report at a single time point, suggesting that the results may not accurately reflect the richness and true temporal progression of spousal experiences. Collecting supplementary data from additional people (e.g., family and congregation members) and sources (e.g., artifacts, journals, or documents) may enhance the design of qualitative studies and strengthen the results. Further, given our longitudinal organization of findings, collecting narratives over time or at multiple chronological time points may provide additional support for more comprehensive results.

The limitations of this study provide insight into areas for future research, including data collection from a broader sample and over a longer period of time. In addition, the majority of research on clergy sexual misconduct has focused on psychological factors related to the clergy member themselves and neglects the systemic impact or the effect on individuals outside of the intrapersonal system of the clergy. Along with the present study, qualitative research that examines the experiences of additional individuals associated with clergy who engage in sexual misconduct (i.e., family and congregation members) could facilitate a more systemic examination of such an event. Furthermore, quantitative analysis comparing clergy couples that remained in their marriages vs. those who ended their relationships could provide insight into best practices in relationship repair and recovery. Finally, outcome research comparing psychological treatment models (e.g., cognitive behavioral or positive psychology-based) with a sample of clergy spouses following misconduct could help to identify evidence-based treatments for use with this specific population.

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