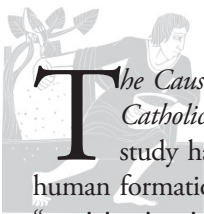


Seminary Human Formation: Lessons From the *Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse Study*

Fernando A. Ortiz, PhD, ABPP



The *Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950–2010*¹ study has significant implications for seminary human formation. For example, the study noted that “participation in human formation during seminary distinguishes priests with later abusive behavior from those who did not abuse. The priests with abusive behavior were statistically less likely to have participated in human formation training than those who did not have allegations of abuse.”² More specifically, it emphasized that, for these individuals, “the training in self-understanding and the development of emotional and psychological competence for a life of celibate chastity was extremely limited.”³ Recently, human seminary formation has become more robust and the report attributed this to several improvements, including: “many seminaries adopted the language of personal development ... more than a few seminaries adopted the practice of providing a formation advisor for each student to monitor growth in all areas of formation.”⁴ In light of these developments in seminary formation, it is important to outline the main lessons learned from this study. This article seeks first to place human formation within a psychological framework of human development, and second, to describe the study’s most salient findings related to seminary human formation.

Human formation is an essential component in the education, training and preparation of women and men in religious and seminary programs. It provides the basis for the integration of other equally important dimensions (spiritual, intellectual and pastoral) in the vocational development of individuals

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aspiring to serve in ministerial and pastoral settings. Human formation is, then, a multidimensional experience because it encompasses the existence of both personality traits and the development of specific skills. Human formation, moreover, can be greatly influenced by the person’s background, cultural and developmental experiences. It is important to note that human seminary formation is not purely understood psychologically, but also theologically. *The Program of Priestly Formation* (PPF) underscores that formation is “foremost cooperation with the grace of God.”⁵ It is all God’s doing as we make ourselves humanly available to God’s work of transformation. Ultimately, the foundation and center of all human formation is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.⁶ Religious and seminary formation programs are consequently structured so that they seek to form the individual in most aspects of their personality within this Christological foundation.

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The study is particularly important because it has provided useful information for formators regarding risk factors and protective factors in human formation. These constructs are widely used in the sociological and psychological literature to understand vulnerabilities and coping strategies associated with maladaptive behaviors. In this particular case, risk factors are conditions correlated with an increased probability of behaviors that are incompatible with a fully integrated and healthy human formation. For example, a seminarian with a significant risk factor for alcoholism could have an increased likelihood of engaging in substance abuse. On the other hand, protective factors are conceptualized as decreasing the likelihood of engagement in problem behaviors. These protective conditions may exert a direct or indirect influence on the individual to inhibit unhealthy behaviors, enhance the opportunity for positive human formation and development, and contribute to resilience.

Risk Factors

The study identified the following specific risk factors as measured by the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), a widely used multidimensional personality assessment instrument.⁷ It is important to point out that these are considered to be psychological vulnerabilities and not scientifically exact predictors of someone's behavioral and psychological functioning. The study specifically concluded:

Collectively, results from analyses using clergy classifications based on referral information, as well as analyses based on information obtained during treatment, suggested that the strongest (though not statistically significant) personality-based risk markers for clergy sexual abuse of minors included elevations on the following MMPI subscales: Denial of Social Anxiety, Authority Problems, Persecutory Ideas, Amorality, and Overcontrolled Hostility. Other possible risk markers for sexual abuse of minors included elevations on the following MMPI subscales: Need for Affection, Social Imperturbability, Imperturbability, and Inhibition of Aggression.⁸

As the study rightly pointed out, these risk factors should be used with caution in formation. The following table provides a detailed classification of these scales and their psychological interpretative meanings.⁹

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Table 1: Personality Risk Factors—MMPI Findings

Personality Risk Factors MMPI Findings			
Name of Scale	Scale Label	Number of Items	Interpretative Meaning
Denial of Social Anxiety	Hysteria (Hy1)	6 items	Items on this subscale have to do with social extroversion, feeling comfortable interacting with other people and not being easily influenced by social standards and customs. In general, these individuals deny problems with shyness or difficulty in social situations. They also value freedom or independence from the influence of others.
Need for Affection	Hysteria (Hy2)	12 items	Individuals with high scores on this scale describe strong needs for attention and affection from others, as well as fears that these needs will not be met if they are honest about their feelings and beliefs. They describe others as honest, sensitive and reasonable, and they deny having negative feelings about other people. It may well be that by not having any critical attitudes toward others they seek to meet their own strong needs for attention and affection.
Inhibition of Aggression	Hysteria (Hy5)	7 items	These individuals deny hostile or aggressive feelings. They report feeling sensitive about how others respond to them.
Imperturbability	Mania (Ma3)	8 items	These individuals are confident in social situations. They will profess little concern about the opinions, values and attitudes of others. In general, they do not care what others think.
Amorality	Mania (Ma1)	6 items	High scorers on this subscale describe other people as selfish, dishonest and opportunistic. Because of these perceptions, they may feel justified in behaving in similar ways. They may derive vicarious satisfaction from the manipulative exploits of others. In general, they are callous toward others and feel justified in this.
Authority Problems	Psychopathic Deviate (Pd2)	8 items	High scorers on this subscale express resentment of societal and parental standards and customs, have definite opinions about what is right and wrong and stand up for their own beliefs. They may admit to having been in trouble in school or with the law. In general, these individuals are resentful of authority and may report problems with the law.
Social Imperturbability	Psychopathic Deviate (Pd3)	6 Items	Individuals who show an elevated score (higher than 65) on this scale express feeling comfortable, competent and confident in social situations; having strong opinions about many things; and defending their opinions vigorously.
Persecutory Ideas	Paranoia (Pa1)	17 items	These individuals tend to see the world and/or other people as threatening, and they often feel misunderstood and unfairly treated. They blame others for their problems.
Overcontrolled Hostility	O-H	28 items	This scale helps to identify individuals who are prone to overcontrolling their hostility until they are suddenly provoked and, consequently, have sudden aggressive episodes. This scale has been particularly helpful with prison populations.

From the perspective of seminary and religious formation, the profile that emerges from these clinical indicators is someone who is emotionally needy and engages in possibly ingratiating or attention-seeking behaviors in order to meet deeply rooted emotional vulnerabilities for intimacy, affection and affirmation (*Need for Affection*). Socially, this individual will appear confident, cocky and charming, and will engage in sophisticated impression management strategies to gain favors from others (*Denial of Social Anxiety*). Remarkably, this individual will impress others as outgoing, talkative and socially competent (*Social Imperturbability*). At a deeper level, however, this person is unperturbed by what others think because he is primarily motivated by satisfying his own egoistical needs (*Imperturbability*). On the surface, he may deny having hostile or aggressive feelings. He may have learned to wear a social mask of benevolence and camouflage himself to appear in a good light before others (*Inhibition of Aggression*), and rigidly defend himself against any extreme aggressive impulse, but eventually succumb to aggressive outbursts (*Overcontrolled Hostility*). What makes individuals with these profile markers particularly high-risk is that they appear to be callous and unconscionable in their behavior and worldview (*Amorality*). They may have had significant traumatic experiences in their lives and consequently view the world and other people as malevolent and threatening (*Persecutory Ideas*). They are particularly suspicious of those in positions of authority (Authority Problems).

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Serious consideration should be given to reject a candidate for ordination whose profile presents elevations on several of these risk factors.

Evaluation of Personality Risk Factors

Most would agree that if the above risk factors were found to be significantly elevated in a candidate to religious or seminary formation, it would be very important for the evaluating psychologists and formators to seriously consider the candidate's overall application. Moreover, serious consideration should be given to reject a candidate for ordination whose profile presents elevations on several of these risk factors. The following are additional traits based on the main themes emerging from such risky and high-liability profiles that should prompt serious consideration.

Callousness

Callousness is often thought of in association with the antisocial, sadistic and narcissistic personalities. Callousness suggests lack of empathy and compassion, resulting in personality profiles that are highly irascible or hard-hearted. In extreme cases, individuals with noticeable callousness will be perceived by others as belligerent, vicious, malignant, brutal, vengeful and vindictive. If an evaluating psychologist were to detect a significant level of callousness, it should be probed further to determine if it is associated with a pervasive maladaptive personality structure. If this person is admitted into a formation program, he will most likely engage in behaviors charged with defiance of conventional formation rules and will interpret the tender emotions of others as a sign of weakness. In a religious community, he will be prone to interpret the goodwill and kindness of others as hiding a deceptive ploy for which he will react with cold-blooded ruthlessness. Minors and vulnerable adults are particularly at risk with this type of personality.

Imperturbability

Some candidates to the priesthood may be characterized by a marked air of nonchalance

and feigned tranquility. They may appear coolly unimpressible or buoyantly optimistic, except when their narcissistic confidence is shaken, at which time they will display rage, shame or emptiness. This imperturbability will be self-deceptive and facile. They could also be perceived as naively self-assured and happy-go-lucky, and serious matters will not affect these individuals in formation.

Amorality

Any evidence during the screening process of unprincipled behavior should be closely evaluated. Others will experience these individuals as unscrupulous, exploitive and deceptive. The psychologist should include in the report any evidence suggesting that a candidate to seminary formation has previously demonstrated a flagrant indifference to the welfare of others, willingness to harm, and fearlessness by humiliating and dominating others. A rigorous clinical interview should attempt to uncover any evidence of extreme self-interest and, if this is coupled with any veneer of politeness and civility, this should be interpreted with caution. An evaluating psychologist should ask detailed questions to rigorously uncover if the candidate has any history of behavior suggesting that he has been fraudulent, a con man or a charlatan.

Neediness

Emotional neediness is another psychological vulnerability and concern in this profile. Extreme examples of dependency with a marked need for affection and approval would be highly suspect in a seminary applicant. If the person is already in formation and appears to have an insatiable need for attention and nurturing while also exhibiting childlike behavior, he would likely be detrimental to peers in the community. This would be the case if, underneath, this individual is seething with helplessness and thoughts of revenge at those who fail to recognize his need for approval. This ineffectual dependency should be seriously considered when determining suitability for the priesthood.

Hostility

The *Causes and Context* study stated that “the experience of having been sexually abused by another youth or by an adult during childhood or adolescence was reported by more than a third of the priests in treatment for sexual abuse of children at the third treatment center.”¹⁰ The negative consequences of sexual abuse are not necessarily found in every priest who has been abused. Some of them have been able to overcome

their trauma, yet it can be considered as a risk factor for some, and it may be experientially linked to hostility. Children exposed to neglect, indifference, hostility and physical abuse, for example, are likely to learn that the world is a cold and unforgiving place. Such infants lack normal models of empathic tenderness. Rather than learning how to be sensitive to the emotional states of others, they instead develop enduring resentments and an unwillingness to reflect on the consequences of their actions. The study suggests that individuals prone to abusing minors display an elevated level of over-controlled hostility. Under pressure, it is very likely that the peaceful surface of these individuals will quickly give way to impulsive hostility. Relating to these individuals in a seminary or religious community would be an arduous process, and in a parish or ministerial assignment it would require more patience than most people are likely to offer. These individuals may attempt to sabotage the formation of others and may displace their hostility onto the community superior or seminary rector. It is very telling that the *Causes and Context* study examined the difference between priests who seek out help and those who do not, concluding,

when differences between accused and nonaccused priests were observed, it was in their willingness to reach out to peers for advice. Although a majority of priests were willing to seek advice from peers, accused priests reached out less often than nonaccused priests; approximately three-quarters of accused priests reached out for work role advice and two-thirds reached out for personal advice, while about 90 percent of nonaccused priests were willing to consult peers for either work or personal advice.¹¹

It is very likely that priests that have overcontrolled hostility toward others, who experience persecutory fears and who endorse callousness will find it unhelpful to reach out to others for solace and emotional support.

In addition to these personality risk factors, the study also identified several risk factors in the area of sexuality. It found that priests who engaged in sexual behavior prior to and while in the seminary were significantly more likely to participate in post-ordination sexual behavior. This risk factor applies to both homosexual and heterosexual individuals. Masturbation and access to pornography after ordination was also correlated with other sexual behavior post-ordination. Of priests using pornography, those who accessed pornography post-ordination in various modalities (paper, video, Internet) were more likely to have child

victims than adult victims. Family formation was also found to have an influence on post-ordination sexual behavior. Priests who, in their family of origin, approached the topic of sex as a taboo or who were not allowed to discuss sex were more likely to engage in sexual behavior after being ordained.

Protective Factors

The study stated that, many accused priests began abusing years after they were ordained, at times of increased job stress, social isolation, and decreased contact with peers. Generally, few structures such as psychological and professional counseling were readily available to assist them with the difficulties they experienced. Many priests let go of the practice of spiritual direction after only a few years of ordained ministry.¹²

This clearly implies that self-care for clergy should be a priority in formation. Especially when suffering from psychological distress, seminarians or those in formation need to be proactive and seek out those resources that would provide them with emotional support and guidance. Human formation programs have evolved to pay particular attention to the vulnerability and brokenness of those in formation. Spiritual direction and prayer can provide strength. Continuing education and learning experiences can help an individual navigate the complexities of a crisis and contribute to a sense of competence and understanding when dealing with challenging situations. Formators can encourage students to be healthy and to utilize counseling services when needed.

Stress

Clergy stress is a debilitating experience that can be harmful to both the ordained and the community. Stressful demands will always be present in the life of ministry. Formation can address this problem by encouraging individuals to develop stress-relieving practices in the form of healthy recreation and rest. This in turn can lead to resilience, which is the capacity to return to well-being after a stressful situation. The *Causes and Context* study found the following specific stressors among priests: transition to parish life, negative early parish life, uprooting (for example, reassigned to a new parish without being asked), distance ministry (“rural” or “roving” ministries) and family stress. A strong human formation program can raise awareness of these potential stressors and prepare candidates accordingly.

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Support Systems

Formation should also encourage individuals to learn how to create and access social and emotional support systems. In the life of the ordained, this would be the network of relationships experienced as nurturing and emotionally supportive. This type of support is a basic human need, and lack of it can be a contributing factor to burnout. Those in formation should learn to prioritize the development of an adequate support system and, most importantly, learn how to identify relational isolation. Learning how to access family, friends, a priest’s support group, professional peers, a counselor and a spiritual director should be part of a man’s formative development prior to being in full ministry. It is worth mentioning that the *Causes and Context* study indicated that,

priests who lacked close social bonds, and those whose family spoke negatively or not at all about sex, were more likely to sexually abuse minors than those who had a history of close social bonds and positive discussions about sexual behavior. In general priests, from the ordination cohorts of the 1940s and 1950s showed evidence of difficulty with intimacy.¹⁴

Those in formation can learn to address their need for intimacy through the healthy formation of relationships. Additionally, through mentoring, these individuals can gain knowledge and understanding of stress, along with useful coping strategies.

Balance

Individuals doing pastoral work are deeply committed and dedicated, and this often places extraordinary demands on their lives. As noted by the *Causes and Context* study, this can lead to exhaustion, fatigue, decreased effectiveness, negative attitudes and other problems. For example, many priests reported that they never took time off due to parish understaffing and commitment to too many events and responsibilities. They found it very hard to have a clear boundary between home and work. This eventually led to a poor diet and lack of exercise, resulting in obesity. A human formation program may include, therefore, the development of wellness skills to teach future priests how to maintain a holistic sense of balance in their lives.

Formative Growth

The study distinguished between priests who underwent human formation and those who did not. Human formation encourages individuals to look at their own areas of growth and to address them proactively. For example, some candidates who are attracted to the priesthood may be interested in this

Similar to the assessment of risk factors, individuals entering human formation should be evaluated in their capacities, competencies and strengths.

commitment because their personality structure craves admiration and they see this pathway as a way of meeting those emotional needs. Once in ministry, people may notice this and demand personal sacrifices from this person while also putting them on a pedestal. Entering formation with the narcissistic perspective of obtaining a position whereby one would meet personal needs at the expense of others is incompatible with an authentic religious calling. This same reasoning can be applied to those with marked low self-esteem and who are emotionally needy. These individuals may be unable to set emotional and problem-solving limits as well as limits on time commitments when pastorally



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helping others. Regarding self-esteem, the *Causes and Context* study found that “when there was low esteem, accused priests were slightly more likely to have a lack of positive attitude about themselves and their priestly roles.”¹⁵ Formation provides a critical venue where students can address these issues and achieve the needed formative growth prior to ordination.

Evaluation of Protective Personality Factors

Similar to the assessment of risk factors, individuals entering human formation should be evaluated in their capacities, competencies and strengths. Each individual arrives with some deeply seated tendencies, including an entire psychological makeup, cognitive abilities and personality traits. Some of these predispositions have genetic and biological bases. Of specific importance to formation are personality traits, generally defined

as pervasive patterns of thinking, relating and feeling. Personality psychology has developed a comprehensive classification system for personality traits, which provide structure to the most important functional and adaptive traits mentioned by the *Program of Priestly Formation*. Evaluators and formators can use this system to gauge the normal aspects of someone’s personality and, more specifically, the strengths that an individual brings to the formation program. The Big Five personality trait theory posits that human personality comprises six domains: *Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness* and *Conscientiousness*. A comparable system includes six similar dimensions: *Honesty–Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness* and *Openness to Experience*. The following table integrates these two personality systems, outlining the most salient traits in human formation.

Table 2: Comparison of Personality Systems

Personality Dimension	<i>Program of Priestly Formation Traits</i>
Honesty–Humility	A person of truthfulness, integrity and humility. (§280)
Emotionality	A person of affective maturity: someone whose feelings are in balance and integrated into thought and values. A man of feelings who is not driven by them, but freely lives his life enriched by them. This might be especially evidenced in his ability to live well with authority and take direction from another, to exercise authority well among his peers, and an ability to deal productively with conflict and stress. (§76)
Extraversion–Introversion	A good communicator: someone who listens well, is articulate and has the skills of effective communication. Someone capable of public speaking. (§76) A man who can take on the role of a public person. Someone both secure in himself and convinced of his responsibility who is able to live not just as a private citizen, but as a public person in service of the gospel and representing the church. (§76)
Agreeableness	A man who relates well with others, free of overt prejudice and willing to work with people of diverse cultural backgrounds. A man capable of wholesome relations with women and men as relatives, friends, colleagues, staff members, teachers and as encountered in areas of apostolic work. (§76)
Conscientiousness	A person of solid moral character with a finely developed moral conscience, a man open to and capable of conversion. A man who demonstrates the human virtues of prudence, fortitude, temperance, justice, humility, constancy, sincerity, good manners, truthfulness and keeping his word, and who also manifests growth in the practice of these virtues. (§76)
Openness to Experience	A free person: a person who is free to be who he is in God’s design. Candidates have the potential to move from self-preoccupation toward an openness to transcendent values. (§76)

Honesty–Humility

To counter the risk factors presented by hostility and rebelliousness, it would be preferable for individuals in formation to have high scores on honesty and humility. Lee and Ashton define this psychological construct as measuring sincerity, fairness, greed, avoidance and modesty.¹⁶ These individuals would be appropriately equipped for formation given their authenticity and truthfulness. Formation programs are interested in individuals who are genuine in their interpersonal relations and who do not engage in manipulative behaviors. Similarly, these individuals avoid fraud, corruption and the abuse of others. They do not take advantage of minors and vulnerable people. Evaluating psychologists can closely assess whether applicants to the seminary are interested in possessing lavish wealth, luxury goods and signs of high social status. A sense of modesty would also be more amenable to a healthy human formation.

Emotionality

Individuals with low levels of fearfulness, emotional neediness, anxiety and dependence will most likely do better in formation. They will be self-assured and able to deal with problems without necessarily needing someone else's help. They will maintain healthy emotional bonds and demonstrate empathic sensitivity to the feelings of others.

Extroversion

An appropriate level of expressiveness and social competence would also be optimal for human formation. Given the social nature of ministry, which demands being able to navigate complex social relationships, an individual in human formation will work on improving their ability to enjoy conversation and social interactions. Being communicative is highly valued as well.

Agreeableness

The *Program of Priestly Formation* points out that human formation speaks to the need for individuals who can relate well with others and are willing to work with diverse cultural backgrounds. They are characterized by forgiveness, gentleness, flexibility and patience. These individuals have an ability to establish friendly relations with others, are reluctant to judge others harshly and, when interpersonal conflict arises, they remain calm and open to resolving such conflicts.

Conscientiousness

The *PPF* also mentions that individuals participating in human formation are individuals of solid moral character who demonstrate the virtues of diligence and prudence. They have a tendency to be self-disciplined and an ability to deliberate carefully and inhibit their impulses.

Openness to Experience

Human formation is also about being a free person. This person has intellectual curiosity and seeks additional knowledge (such as philosophical or theological) with a profound interest and desire to know others.

Conclusion

The *Causes and Context* study implicated institutional, psychological, behavioral and contextual factors as contributors to the sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy. When there is a risk for unhealthy and destructive behavior, there is greater chance that associated problems will occur. We have all witnessed the unspeakable damage that perpetrators of sexual abuse—who were educated, trained and formed in Catholic seminaries and religious formation programs—have inflicted on minors and vulnerable people. From a psychological perspective, then, examining potential etiologies and the associated risk factors at play may help us take preventive steps against abuse. We have to be realistic that some of these abusive behaviors are extremely difficult to detect, measure or accurately evaluate. Some individuals are also very adept at deception. It is particularly useful to know, therefore, what experiences evaluating psychologists and formators can focus on in order to design prescriptive and preventive interventions at the screening level, during formation and prior to ordination.

Similarly, a protective factor is defined as an element or process that buffers an individual who is predisposed to an undesirable outcome when risk is present. It is not simply the opposite of a risk factor; it instead interacts with a risk factor to determine the outcome. Through interaction, a protective factor moderates the effect of a risk factor and increases the likelihood of a positive result. A comprehensive human formation program attempts to reduce risk factors, aggressively promotes and enhances strengths such as resilience, emotional intelligence, problem-solving skills and the acquisition of healthy support systems, and is committed to engendering well-integrated individuals. A

From a psychological perspective, then, examining potential etiologies and the associated risk factors at play may help us take preventive steps against abuse.

rigorous psychological evaluation should focus on accurately evaluating protective factors and providing formators with useable suggestions on how to maximize the potential of these factors during human formation.



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