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## A Polygraph-Assisted Psychological Assessment of Risk of Sexual Harm Posed by a Priest

Использование тестирования на полиграфе для психологической оценки риска причинения сексуального насилия со стороны священника

**Key words:** polygraph, psychological assessment, risk, religious organisations, Priests, secular

This paper provides a case example of how the polygraph can assist in achieving enhanced levels of disclosure when assessing a priest in relation to reported concerns about sexual risk. In the present case, the polygraph is used in combination with other tools employed to produce a comprehensive forensic psychological evaluation of a cleric for safeguarding purposes (Jack and Wilcox, 2018). The author considers that the case study is a helpful medium for describing the utility of the polygraph as an adjunctive tool in risk assessments (Wilcox and Buschman, 2011; Wilcox, Foss, and Donathy, 2005; Wilcox, O'Keefe, and Oliver, 2009). When combined with other forensic

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assessment techniques, the polygraph, in the author's judgement, provides important opportunities to examine the sexualised thinking and behaviours of individuals being assessed, in ways that conventional tools often cannot equal (Wilcox, 2009; Wilcox, 2013). In the current study, the polygraph is employed to help to reduce the levels of denial concerning sexual behaviours, in relation to a practicing priest. The identity of the cleric is protected through some alteration of reported information in relation to age, nationality, heritage and general background details. However, the progression of the assessment process, types of disclosures elicited and general reporting of the interview/assessment process captures the theme and essence of this evaluation. Over the course of four appointments, levels of denial of sexually inappropriate behaviour reduced, relevant new information was disclosed and a more thorough evaluation of sexual risk posed by this priest, was achieved.

## Background

Father (Fr) Joe is a 50-year-old man, of Nigerian nationality, who until approximately eight years ago lived and worked in that country. He was referred for a psychological assessment surrounding safeguarding concerns in relation to his vocation as a practising Catholic priest in the UK, since emigrating to England. A complaint was raised that he had sexually touched a young female parishioner in her mid-teens on the breast and buttocks, whilst undertaking parish duties at a function he was attending. This led the 15-year-old to be sufficiently distressed after this, to report the incident to the Church's safeguarding body. The allegation reflected that this priest had squeezed a young teenager on her body referenced above. However, it was reported that the family did not wish to report the incident, as they were frightened of possible repercussions. Rather, they elected to move to another parish.

Fr Joe's use of social media was also a cause of reported concern. Specifically, it was referenced that he had accounts on various online social media forums and had his own web pages with, reportedly, many thousands of friends on Facebook; where images of children and young people had been noted to be present. In relation to this, Fr Joe described that he had only "friended" children when they had sent him a request to do so.

Further to the Church's intervention, Fr Joe's involvement in social media had been "shut down" under the instruction of his superiors. Nevertheless, he asserted that his use of this technology had solely been for the purposes of promoting his evangelical aims. Although, concerns were expressed that Fr Joe's purpose in using social media was not as clear and straight forward as he had described, however, the independent police examination of his computer did not lead to any charges being made against him. How-

ever, in relation to this, I note that it was also alleged that Fr Joe asked the girl (whom he had been alleged to have inappropriately touched) to 'friend him on Facebook' and he subsequently sent her a message prefacing it with the comment, "hey babe, how are you doing?". Following discussion with her parents, this girl reportedly blocked Fr Joe from any further communication with her. He denied any sexually inappropriate intentions or behaviour and said that there had been no evidence to proceed with any investigation. However he stated that the Church safeguarding body wanted to explore this further and he was willing to cooperate.

Fr Joe said that he had a good upbringing in West Africa as a child, and that he had had different jobs as a younger adult, though ultimately, in his mid-thirties decided that he wanted to become a priest; describing that he completed a Theology degree at that time and went to seminary to pursue this vocation. In relation to this, he described that he wanted to do something "for the Church and the world to give to others." He described being ordained as a priest in 2008 and after taking up a post as an Assistant Priest in a local parish for two and a half years, prepared to move to the UK following discussions with his superiors. In relation to this, he stated that there were not enough priests in the UK and that he was happy to pursue his vocation in Britain, though considered that he would still, at some point, wish to return home. He reported that in 2018, he received a letter from the safeguarding team regarding the allegation of sexual assault, which he denied. Continuing, he described that he would wish to resume his duties as a priest and "clear (his) name".

## Assessment Process

Fr Joe said that he had never had any sexual or intimate relationships, describing that he considered that this was likely the result of 'God protecting him'. However, he said that he had female friends, asserting that these involvements were all platonic. When the issue of normal sexual needs and desires was raised with him, he said that he 'has these feelings but does not act on them'. We then explored the index incident, which he characterised as a complaint that he had been observed as "not behaving properly with children". He said that he had been attending a Christmas function at the time and an allegation was raised that he had touched a female child inappropriately at that time (on her breast and buttocks). Describing his views about this, Fr Joe said "they (the Church) have always been happy with my work. I think some people are causing problems and I just want to get it sorted out" so he can return to ministry.

I note during the assessment process, owing to a rather strong accent, Fr Joe was difficult to understand although his eye contact was good. In addition, Fr Joe was inclined to

make statements and subsequently alter them, expressing a different view even when his comments were read back to him verbatim. I found this unusual and considered that he may likely have been using the language issue as means of obfuscating matters during his interview. As such, ostensibly, Fr Joe appeared as cooperative though I increasingly questioned his willingness to be open and disclosing over the course of his appointments.

When further discussing his personal perspective about his maintenance of vows of celibacy, Fr Joe said that he did have to contend with a degree of temptation. As an example, he said that, if there was a sexual theme in something he chanced to watch on television this might produce some sexual thoughts and feelings in him. However, he said that he managed these experiences, reporting that ‘God gives (him) confidence’ to do so. Indeed he continued, stating that nothing would dissuade him from continuing with his work as a priest, as he described that, irrespective of the outcome of my risk assessment, he would continue to practise either in the UK or in West Africa.

Fr Joe was administered psychometric measures that revealed his cognitive abilities to have been within the normal range and that he was inclined to present himself in a socially desirable manner. A degree of impulsivity was noted as well as cognitive rigidity, and his pattern of endorsements on the personality measure administered suggested a rather immature, and self-centred orientation with a sense of uniqueness and entitlement, most closely, in my opinion, associated with narcissism. Bearing these personality features in mind, I considered that Fr Joe was more likely than his peers to feel comfortable with manipulating others to meet his needs, whilst purporting that his overall aims were directed towards the greater good.

In relation to the above, I note that Fr Joe’s levels of self-deception, as well as impression management, were significantly greater than those obtained by age equivalent peers in the norming groups for this measure. Further, on a questionnaire associated with children and sexuality, Fr Joe declined to answer several questions associated with how much knowledge children might have about sex, how innocent they are, and their potential capacity to ‘teach adults about sex’.

The polygraph was employed as an integral part of this risk assessment process, with two appointments arranged to administer this instrument, as on the first occasion, it did not prove to be possible to successfully engage him in this process. As a precursor to the first appointment, Fr Joe was asked to complete a Sexual History Disclosure Form (SHDF). This form is set out to comprehensively explore types of behaviour associated with sexual expression over the course of one’s life. It examines early sexual experiences, masturbation habits, and an extensive consideration of wide-ranging, normal, atypical and deviant sexual interests or involvements, up to the present. An example is given in Sosnowski and Wilcox, (2009, appendix one, page 92-95).

When Fr Joe attended his third appointment, at which time the polygraph was to be administered, he brought the SHDF with him and during a pre-test interview, the nature of the test and questions was explained to him. Based on inconsistency in his responding, an impression was formed that he was being deceptive about the information he reported on the SHDF. This related to vague disclosures he began to make during this pre-test interview, which he proceeded to retract or report that he had misunderstood the question. In his interview style during the pre-test, Fr Joe was, in my opinion, evasive, and the polygraph examination was not employed during this appointment. Rather, he was asked to take another blank SHDF away with him to fill out fully, in preparation for a second polygraph assessment appointment. In particular he was advised that his further disclosures and lack of clarity in relation to some items should be addressed thoroughly when completing this form again. The importance of disclosing all sexual activity was reinforced with Fr Joe.

At the time of his further appointment, Fr Joe attended with a newly completed SHDF wherein disclosed more information. In relation to social media contacts, Fr Joe asserted that he and friends had shared pornographic videos. When asked to quantify this, he said “maybe a dozen times”, he also acknowledged masturbating to these images. Whilst initially he said that he had not viewed child pornography, when discussing these issues further he acknowledged that he had viewed “less than five” videos of children under the age of 16 engaging in sexual activity. As an example, he described, that one of these clips depicted a child fellating an adult male. Fr Joe said that he did not retain these videos but deleted them directly after viewing them.

As we discussed these issues further, Fr Joe acknowledged that he had also derived sexual pleasure from mental images of children under the age of 16 on ‘a handful’ of occasions. He reflected that these thoughts had been inappropriate, “the wrong thoughts to have about children” and later reported that he had masturbated to mental images of children on several occasions. Fr Joe specifically referenced a young girl by name, whom he said was approximately 14 years old. He said that these thoughts happened when he was “hugged by (her), a friend’s child”, describing that he retained the thoughts of this experience as a memory to later re-engage in, when masturbating.

During this further interview, Fr Joe also acknowledged some sexual engagement with adult females. He asserted that a young woman in her mid-twenties had sought religious instruction for receipt of baptism; and had asked him if she could see him in the nude. He said that this had occurred in the previous year, and although he considered that this had been wrong, he insisted that she had requested this of him and that he subsequently masturbated to thoughts about this incident. Fr Joe also acknowledged requesting that a friend show him her naked body over the internet. He also reflected that he had had voyeuristic interests from earlier in his life when working in an ac-

commodation, where occasionally, he was afforded the opportunity to see nude people through windows, in what he described as, more opportunistic than planned circumstances. During this pre-test interview, Fr Joe also acknowledged having put his hand on the “breast and bottom” of the teenage girl who had reported him, though he initially described that he had “simply cuddled her”. Relatedly, he went on to state that he had not touched the girl for ‘sexual reasons’. However, following further discussion he accepted having experienced “some sexual pleasure” from the incident.

## Polygraph Administration

At the end of the pre-test interview, Fr Joe consented to be polygraphed and agreed to answer the following questions:

- 1) Since being a Priest, apart from what you’ve told us, have you touched any other child under the age of 16 for sexual reasons?
- 2) Since being a Priest, have you ever met or arranged to meet any child under the age of 16 for sexual reasons?
- 3) Since being a Priest, have you ever communicated by any means with a child under the age of 16 for sexual reasons?

In explaining the administration process, Fr Joe was familiarised with the polygraph instrument, how it works, the physiological indices measured, and the types of questions were agreed. These questions were recognised as irrelevant, comparison and relevant queries which were to be put to him as his physiological measures were continuously recorded. At the conclusion of the polygraph, the result was ‘Deception Indicated’, suggesting that Fr Joe was not being truthful in answering “no” to these questions. He initially reflected surprise at these results and his anxiety levels were notably heightened. However, when he was encouraged to think about, and try to explain why the ‘Deception Indicated’ result was given, with a degree of supportive prompting, he gave further indications of a paedophilic interest in children. Even so, he denied ‘approach behaviours’ in relation to his sexual behaviour. Specifically he stated, he has experienced sexual thoughts about a number of children when they have approached him “for a hug”. Fr Joe appeared to largely exonerate himself of responsibility as he insisted that the overall sexual attraction did not derive from him hugging them but rather, from the children embracing him when he opened his arms to them. He further acknowledged that this has happened with children “of parishioners, friends, family” etc. Indeed, I note that, Fr Joe was quite dramatic in making this assertion, as he gestured with his arms spread wide that children would come to him for a hug, but he did not prompt or initiate this.

## Summary

At the conclusion of this assessment, I formed the opinion that Fr Joe had not been sufficiently open and disclosing during the assessment process. However, through carefully structured interviews and employment of the polygraph, information was obtained reflecting that he poses an active, sexual risk, in particular to female children and minors. Specifically, he reported sexual arousal to physical contact which he prompts by opening his arms in an accepting manner and, rationalises that, he does not instigate this as the children choose to embrace him in these circumstances. In my opinion, Fr Joe demonstrated a lack of insight and accountability for his actions, inviting children to come to him for a hug, knowing that this will promote sexual arousal in him. Of particular concern, Fr Joe's behaviour reflects significant boundary transgressions that he appears to promote for his personal gratification and which at times, presents with levels of temptation leading to physically inappropriate, sexual touching and holding as demonstrated in the instance involving the girl who made the complaint to the safeguarding body.

In my opinion, due to the lack of openness demonstrated by Fr Joe, the frequency and harm caused by inappropriate physical contact and poor adherence to sensible rules of conduct (given his reported predilections), this indicated that boundary violations would be a major concern in his potential day-to-day interactions with children. In view of the position of trust engendered in working as a parish priest, and potential access to victims, the risk of him continuing to work in Ministry with children was described as "too great to be manageable". As such, it was advised that Fr Joe's access to children should be severely restricted and, relatedly his involvement in any Ministry should be closely supervised and significantly curtailed whenever even working around children or vulnerable adults. As it is difficult to identify a 'vulnerable adult' given the significant position of authority held by a priest in relation to parishioners, the term 'vulnerable adult' was described in its broadest context with the Church safeguarding body having to consider how Fr Joe's continuing role in the priesthood could be reconciled with the risks he poses in Ministry. Relatedly, it was concluded in my report upon Fr Joe that he demonstrated an unwillingness to openly share his sexualised thoughts, attitudes and behaviours, despite many opportunities given to him. It was judged that Fr Joe had shared only limited information about his sexual interests, seemingly in the hope that this would allow him to "pass" the polygraph over the course of the assessment process. Another concern evidenced at different times during the assessment, related to Fr Joe's assertion that if the outcome of the assessment was not favourable, he would always have the option of returning to Africa to resume his duties as a priest there. In relation to this, the authorities' concerns arising from this assessment would be

even greater in such circumstances, where Fr Joe was not under the close scrutiny that could be potentially achieved in his current work as a cleric in the UK.

## Conclusions

The author is increasingly using the polygraph in combination with a range of other forensic, psychological assessment tools when undertaking both sexual and physical risk assessments with members of the Clergy. This may relate to a number of issues. The author would assert that the disproportionate power and authority held by a priest, in relation to his parishioners, makes abuse of his position perhaps a greater area of concern than amongst many other professionals and community leaders, leading potential complainants to avoid making relevant disclosures for fear of faith related repercussions and indeed the risk of being humiliated or not believed.

Consideration may also be given to the very fact that the sacrament of confession carries a strict, inherent requirement of confidentiality, wherein what is reported and atoned for remains between the priest, the confessor and God. Indeed, Church law dictates that any priest who breaks these cows of confidentiality in hearing confession will be subject to excommunication from the Church. As such, whilst I consider that Church authorities will responsibly take steps to protect the community, it still seems likely that in some circumstances, where issues about safeguarding are raised, some parties to these discussions may be somewhat more informed yet bound to levels of secrecy. In such circumstances, the employment of the polygraph, within a secular assessment may serve to bring these issues more fully, into the open.

The author also notes that a perception of deceitfulness may be more inherently manifest in clerics, within the psychometric assessments they complete as, in the experiences of the author, socially desirable responding or positive misrepresentation may more likely be considered to be present amongst individuals who aspire to a higher moral code than the majority of their peers. As such a group, clerics are likely to be perceived to be 'faking good' in the completion of measures that evaluate this feature, when compared with other adults. However, this may likely be a reflection of a benign, 'red herring' factor that may lead the assessor to believe that the cleric is being deceitful in ways that are not indicative of clinical or forensic significance.

In the author's opinion, employment of the polygraph as an adjunct to forensic psychological assessments of clerics should be paired with focal training in these areas to support safeguarding bodies, offering consultancy, and post assessment dialogue around containment of risk, as well as supervision and general oversight of the clerics assessed.



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