

Walk With Me

Pastoral care for victims of sexual abuse viewed through existential psychology

Lisa Rudolfsson
Department of Psychology, 2015

Avhandling för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i psykologi, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakulteten vid Göteborgs universitet kommer att offentligens försvaras fredagen den 6 februari 2015, kl. 10.00, Sal F1, Psykologiska institutionen, Haraldsgatan 1, Göteborg.

Fakultetsopponent: Docent Derek P. Farrell, Institute of Health and Society, University of Worcester

The thesis is based on the following four studies:

- I. Rudolfsson, L., Tidefors, I., Strömwall, L. A. (2012). Sexual abuse and the Christian congregation: The role of gender in pastoral care for victims. *Pastoral Psychology* 61, 375-388.
- II. Rudolfsson, L. & Tidefors, I. (2013). I stay and I follow: Clerical reflections on pastoral care for victims of sexual abuse. *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 67(2), 1-14.
- III. Rudolfsson, L. & Tidefors, I. (2014). I have cried to Him a thousand times, but it makes no difference: Sexual abuse, faith, and images of God. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, Advanced online publication*, 1-13.
- IV. Rudolfsson, L. & Tidefors, I. (accepted for publication). The struggles of victims of sexual abuse who seek pastoral care. *Pastoral Psychology*.



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Pastoral care can be described as a cleric's presence with people in their time of need, to promote their well-being and strengthen them in their faith. One dimension of working through an overwhelming trauma, such as sexual abuse, is to find a way to make sense of what has happened and possibly to find some kind of meaning in what has happened. Today, the clergy is identified as an important mental health resource and caring for people suffering from psychological trauma forms an important part of pastoral care. The aim of this thesis was partly to study clerics' preparedness to, and experiences of, pastoral care for victims of sexual abuse, partly to study what needs victims of sexual abuse bring to pastoral care and their experiences of seeking this help. The aim was also to investigate if pastoral care for victims of sexual abuse could be affected by different aspects of gender, and how the clerical vow of silence was perceived and handled. In **Study I** the role of gender in the care for victims of sexual abuse was investigated within three Swedish Christian denominations. Questionnaires anchored by vignettes illustrating different abuse situations were answered by 421 clerics. The main findings were that female respondents apprehended the described situations as more likely to occur than male respondents did, and that reported levels of preparedness to offer pastoral care as well as belief in the likelihood of the described situation to occur were higher when a woman was the victim, or a man was the perpetrator. In **Study II** clerical experiences of pastoral care for victims of sexual abuse were studied. Four focus groups with clerics were conducted and analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Participants expressed a wish to offer the best care possible. Insecurities and a perceived lack of psychological knowledge, however, provoked self-protecting strategies that may afflict clerics, confidants, and the outcome of pastoral care. Further, feelings of being caught in a trap were described since the vow of silence prevented actions from being taken. **Study III** and **Study IV** were built on interviews with 7 women and 1 man who had been sexually abused and sought pastoral care. The interviews were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. **Study III** focused on how victims of sexual abuse described their relationship to God and to other parishioners. The main findings were that the informants described feeling abandoned by, and angry at, God and that they sometimes felt excluded from the Christian community. The effects the abuse had on their faith were described as essential to their trauma and, further, as an issue they needed to work through to learn how to live with their experiences. **Study IV** focused on sexually abused individual's experiences and perceptions of the benefits and shortcomings of pastoral care, including their experiences of raising faith-related issues in psychotherapy. Main findings were that the informants described their needs to be recognized, their needs to express doubts, and a wish not to be rushed towards forgiveness. They wished for pastoral care givers to gain psychological knowledge and for psychotherapists to gain a deeper understanding about the faith implications of sexual abuse. The vow of silence was described as both making it possible to tell and as sometimes obstructing the cleric's ability to help the confidant get out of the abusive situation. In summary, results indicate that aspects of gender might affect pastoral care for victims of sexual abuse. In view of existential psychology, pastoral care could have a potential beneficial function for victims of sexual abuse. However, results also indicate that pastoral care for victims of sexual abuse can place both the confidant and the cleric in exposed situations. Consequently, there is a need to support and prepare clerics for this task. Further, there is a need to discuss the consequences of the vow of silence: the burden it puts on clerics and how it affects confidants' ability to receive help.

Keywords: Existential psychology; Faith; Gender perspectives; Pastoral care; Sexual abuse; Vow of silence