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Catholic Clergy Abuse in the Netherlands: The Role of Social Relations in Redress Procedures

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ABSTRACT

Clergy abuse is a major crisis in the Catholic Church's recent history. This article examines the role of redress *procedures* in social relationships and how these relationships shape the redress *experience* of victim-survivors of clerical abuse in Dutch Catholic institutions, employing both a relational and intergenerational approach. It highlights how disclosing abuse, often accompanied by fear and shame, influences victim-survivors' healing processes and their social environments. Using Relational Theory, the study examines ripple-effects of abuse, which extend beyond individual survivors, impacting families of origin, families of creation, fellow victims, and broader (faith) communities. Through qualitative interviews with 20 victim-survivors and 10 family members, the research reveals the pivotal role of social support in navigating justice mechanisms, namely complaint and compensation procedures, mediation and litigation. However, this support can also strain relationships due to the emotional and systemic repercussions of abuse. The article calls for a systemic approach to redress that addresses relational harm, aiming for a more effective redress procedure that acknowledges the multi-generational, intracommunal social impact of clerical abuse.

KEYWORDS

Historical institutional abuse; Dutch Roman Catholic Church; victim-survivors; redress; social relations; relational theory

Introduction

> *The context to what Nicola and I do and why we work the way we do with victims and survivors of assault comes out of our own personal history – my history as a young person being abused by a priest over a number of years – and then our shared history of living through the impacts of sexual abuse. We were both victims of abuse because Nicola became a secondary victim of what had happened to me through my adolescence.* (Ellis & Ellis, 2014, p. 32)

John and Nicola Ellis – both active in Australia in the redress movement for clerical abuse – embody the prototype experience we examine in this article: the role victim-survivors' social relations have in redress procedures. They are active agents in providing social support, but also the ones who need recognition for themselves, for living under the influence of clerical abuse. They illustrate what we see in the field of redress for institutional abuse, namely that justice mechanisms often overlook families and communities, despite these groups sharing similar needs for recognition and repair as victim-survivors (Courtin, 2015; Ellis & Ellis,

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2014; Hamber & Lundy, 2020). This limited attention for and understanding of the impact of abuse on families of victim-survivors also leads to little attention for their (crucial) role in redress procedures. Utilizing a relational approach, these social relationships are integrated into the analysis of redress procedures regarding clergy abuse in the Netherlands.

Scope and prevalence of abuse by catholic Clergy

Members of the Catholic Church sexually abused tens of thousands of victim-survivors globally, creating an unparalleled justice issue (Méténier, 2020). The documentation of clerical abuse led to a widespread scandal in the Catholic Church. Child Rights International, a British NGO, identified three "waves" in how the clerical abuse scandal unfolded. The first wave emerged in 2002 after the Boston Globe's revelations in the US. A second wave began in 2009 - with the publication of two reports in Ireland resulting in the Vatican finally lifting its cloak of silence – subsequently affecting multiple European nations. The third wave started in 2018 - with Chile being the first Latin American country to set up an independent Church investigation commission – bringing new revelations in the majority of Latin America (Méténier, 2023). Initially, the crisis seemed concentrated in North America, where the sexual abuse scandal impacted all 197 US dioceses, with an estimated 11,000 minors abused between 1950 and 2002 (Terry, 2008). However, since 2009, reports have surfaced in over 30 countries, including Australia and several European and Latin American nations. In May 2023, for example, Brazil revealed that 108 priests and Catholic leaders had faced legal proceedings since 2000 (Méténier, 2023). Most of these reports addressed sexual abuse cases from decades earlier, primarily occurring between 1945 and 1970 (Klijn, 2015).

In the Netherlands, on which this article focuses, Committee Deetman estimated that clerical sexual abuse affected between 10,000 and 20,000 victims between 1945 and 2000 (Deetman et al., 2011). Additionally at least 15,000 girls and women were physically abused through forced labor by the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (referred to as Good Shepherd), a Catholic Church-affiliated organization operating in the cities Tilburg, Zoeterwoude, Almelo, Bloemendaal and Velp from 1860 to 1978 (KMGH, n.d.).[1]

Redress mechanisms and the social impact of clerical abuse

In many countries compensation modalities have been established for victim-survivors of catholic clergy abuse (Flanagan-Howard et al., 2009 in: Lueger-Schuster et al., 2015). In the Netherlands, victim-survivors could choose between three routes to obtain recognition and repair: through church-initiated redress procedures, through mediation (either initiated by the Church or victims themselves), or through tort actions. A key feature of these modalities is that they exclusively focus on victim-survivors and fail to acknowledge that family and friends too may suffer from the abuse – a phenomenon known as "secondary trauma" (Manion et al., 1996 in: Wind et al., 2008) – and may need justice for their suffering (Courtin, 2015; Ellis & Ellis, 2014; Kudlac, 2006; Wind et al., 2008).

Previous studies have shown that clerical abuse significantly disrupts families, often causing severe breakdowns in family relationships. Many family members feel overwhelming anger toward the Church and question their faith, adding further emotional strain

(Kudlac, 2006). Families whose child has been abused by clergy may question God's plan for them, wondering why the abuse occurred and what it means for their lives (Gavrielides, 2013). The threat to the child's religious identity can also provoke fear and a sense of loss among parents. As parents grieve, they may experience a traumatic aftershock similar to that of survivors mourning the loss of their own spirituality (Kline et al., 2008). Family splits may also arise, with some members supporting or doubting the victim, which further isolates the survivor (Keable, 2001). For example, siblings may feel neglected (Benyei, 1998) and the trauma can "ripple" through future generations, leading to lasting distrust and relational difficulties (McCourt & Peel, 1998 in: Kudlac, 2006). Prior research suggests that trauma from clerical abuse impacts not only victim-survivors but also their descendants, with epigenetic research indicating that trauma can alter gene expression (Edwards & Humphrey, 2020). Furthermore, communities may experience a collective sense of betrayal and a crisis of faith, leading them to reexamine their relationship with the Church and its leaders (Formicola, 2020). Thus, ripple-effects – traditionally defined as injustices impacting future generations (Conolly, 2003) – extend beyond families to communities and their relationship with the Church (Gavrielides, 2013; Kline et al., 2008). The systemic harm of clerical abuse demands a collective response that emphasizes the importance of social support in healing and redress processes. Social support, widely recognized as a protective factor after traumatic events (Calhoun et al., 2022), plays a crucial role in improving mental health (Kaniasty & Norris, 2008 in: Lueger-Schuster et al., 2015). Given the deep emotional and relational damage caused by clerical abuse, social support becomes essential for healing.

While research on redress mechanisms for clerical and other forms of institutional abuse – particularly regarding their impact on claimants' social relationships – remains severely limited, studies addressing other types of harm suggest that these procedures play a crucial role not only in the lives of victim-survivors but also in the lives of their families. For instance, when Jewish survivors and their families pursue reparations, painful family histories often surface, impacting intergenerational relationships, identity and collective memory, which can complicate family dynamics as they navigate the legacy of historical harm (e.g., Immler, 2012). In view of the aforementioned, we argue that redress *procedures* play a crucial role in victim-survivors' social relations and, conversely, that social relations play a crucial role in how victim-survivors *experience* redress procedures. Herein we fill an important gap in the literature, for it is known that social relationships are crucial for the transmission of harm (Danieli, 1998), but clarity is lacking on which relationships matter in which way in recognition and redress procedures (Immler, 2020). Before we explain the methods used, we first substantiate our claims with *Relational Theory*.

Relational theory: towards a relational approach to redress

Relational Theory encompasses a broad framework of psychodynamic models of practice that explore how the self develops in relation to others, emphasizing external relationships, internal patterns and sociocultural contexts, such as cultural norms, societal structures and group dynamics that shape individual experiences. It highlights the systemic nature of interpersonal dynamics and the importance of social context (Cait, 2016; Shaughnessy-Mogill, 2014; Voith et al., 2021). This study utilizes the framework of *Relational Theory* to examine redress and justice mechanisms for historical institutional clerical abuse. By

integrating perspectives from both psychodynamics and justice studies, this research introduces a novel approach that foregrounds relational dynamics in redressing clerical abuse. This lens not only highlights that relationships matter in the pursuit of redress but also seeks to identify *which* specific relationships play a pivotal role in these processes. This approach is particularly relevant in redressing clerical abuse, where the harm extends beyond individual experiences to encompass relational damage that deeply affects victim-survivors' social worlds. Recognizing this broader relational context is essential for a comprehensive approach to justice, as legal processes often narrowly concentrate on individual claims, thereby overlooking the interconnected social networks that shape how harm is experienced and redressed (Immler, 2022).

When victim-survivors seek redress for clerical abuse – for instance – social environments and particularly family support, significantly shape their journey. Families may either provide essential support or hinder the process, influencing the emotional and psychological dimensions of pursuing justice (Morgan, 1999). Positive relational networks can empower victims, enabling them to reclaim their "voice" and identity through the justice process, while a lack of support can lead to social isolation and disengagement from redress procedures altogether (Balboni & Bishop, 2010; May & Stengel, 1990; Morgan, 1999; Sloan & Hsieh, 1995).

Relational redress – with its responsibility lying primarily with the institutions involved in the abuse, such as the Catholic Church and the State – extends beyond addressing individual harm, focusing instead on long-term healing and the restoration of social trust. It emphasizes that justice must encompass efforts to rebuild relationships between victim-survivors, institutions and communities. Without this relational focus, justice risks being incomplete, as it would fail to address the ongoing impact of harm on these essential social bonds (McAlinden, 2022).

In sum, *Relational Theory* underscores the importance of focusing on social relationships rather than solely individual harm in redress. By recognizing the interconnectedness of victim-survivors and their social worlds, this approach promotes healing for both individuals and communities. Justice, through this lens, is not just about addressing past wrongs but about restoring trust and relational integrity.

The current study

Research on the social environment of abuse survivors and secondary trauma remains limited. Courtin therefore called for "a study for secondary victims of clergy sexual abuse [. . .] to assess, [. . .], the multi-generational impacts of these crimes on families, including [. . .] their avenues for justice" (2015, p. 196). Recent work partially addresses this call, but did not examine justice avenues for families or victim-survivors' broader social relations, underscoring the need for further scholarship on these social relations and their needs for justice, recognition and repair (Edwards & Humphrey, 2020; McDannell, 2023).

This article aims to explore (1) the role of redress *procedures* in social relationships and (2) the role of these relationships in shaping the redress *experience* of victim-survivors. To achieve this, we conducted interviews with victim-survivors and their families to gain in-depth insights into how families perceive redress procedures and the significance they attach to them. By distinguishing between *family of origin* (the family into which one is born) and *family of creation* (the web of relational bonds formed in adulthood, such as with

spouses, partners, and children), we investigated (1) whether ripple-effects vary by family type and (2) to what extent the Church, as another "family," influences ripple-effects.

By investigating these dynamics, this study fills a critical gap in clerical abuse literature, broadening the focus beyond individual trauma to include systemic relational harm and how redress procedures can address this harm.

Methods

Design

This research employs a qualitative design as part of a larger project investigating how recipients perceive redress procedures addressing historical abuse in Catholic institutions in the Netherlands. It examines whether these procedures fulfill their promises of offering recognition and repair by utilizing various systemic frameworks. We conducted a qualitative interview study with victim-survivors and their families to ensure that the voices and experiences of those marginalized by (institutional) state practices are heard and represented (Scraton, 2017 in: Pembroke, 2019).

Participants

We approached a total of 33 participants – 22 victim-survivors and 11 family members – for this study. Participants qualified if they had experienced historical abuse by Catholic clergy, without differentiating between types of abuse. To avoid causing further harm to claimants, we deliberately chose not to classify different types of abuse, as such categorizations in complaint and compensation procedures have often been experienced as problematic. Previous research has shown that such categorization can lead to secondary victimization, as survivors often experience their trauma being reduced to predefined classifications that fail to capture its full complexity (Bisschops, 2014; Ormskerk et al., in press; Van Dijck, 2018). Yet, participants qualified if they had experienced historical abuse by Catholic clergy, including sexual, psychological, and physical abuse, forced labor and neglect. Each participant had actively sought recognition and repair through one or more redress schemes or had assisted victim-survivors during redress procedures. We included family members if they had knowledge of the harm the victim-survivor experienced and were familiar with the chosen redress procedure.

We excluded one victim-survivor who was only marginally involved with an alternative procedure, which was solely focused on memoralization. Another victim-survivor and one family member withdrew from the study.

Participants' characteristics

We conducted 22 interviews, involving 30 participants, namely 20 victim-survivors and 10 family members. In eight instances, we interviewed victim-survivors and their family members together. The group consisted of 20 females and 10 males. Table 1 provides a complete overview of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic data of the participants.

Participant	Type of victim	Sex	Age	Type of abuse
Christian	Victim-survivor	Male	71	Sexual abuse
Wouter	Victim-survivor	Male	71	Sexual abuse
Richard	Victim-survivor	Male	62	Sexual abuse
Frank	Victim-survivor	Male	67	Sexual abuse
Flora	Victim-survivor	Female	58	Physical & psychological abuse
Annette	Victim-survivor	Female	56	Sexual abuse
Mary	Victim-survivor	Female	75	Physical, psychological & sexual abuse
Sandra	Victim-survivor	Female	73	Sexual abuse
Tina	Victim-survivor	Female	63	Forced labor
Cara	Victim-survivor	Female	70	Forced labor
Miriam	Victim-survivor	Female	72	Forced labor
Elise	Victim-survivor	Female	83	Forced labor
Molly	Victim-survivor	Female	73	Forced labor
Anne	Victim-survivor	Female	69	Forced labor
Arnold-Jan	Victim-survivor	Male	68	Sexual abuse
Eric	Victim-survivor	Male	81	Sexual abuse
Lies	Victim-survivor	Female	69	Forced labor
Joke	Victim-survivor	Female	71	Sexual abuse
Michel	Victim-survivor	Male	71	Sexual abuse
Mieke	Victim-survivor	Female	83	Sexual abuse
Meg	Wife	Female	74	–
Alissa	Wife	Female	–	
Eva	Partner	Female	80	–
Chloe	Daughter	Female	47	–
Laura	Daughter	Female	69	–
Willem	Son	Male	50	–
Harry	Husband	Male	–	
Coby	Wife	Female	–	–
Frans	Husband	Male	–	–
Petra	Wife	Female	75	–

Data collection

The first author identified three "key contacts" based on their established expertise and active engagement in victim-survivor advocacy within the public sphere. These three key contacts were identified through an online search, where their names appeared in public available sources as individuals actively engaged with victim-survivors of clerical abuse: as documentary film maker, as advocate for survivors and as an outspoken participant in the redress procedures. Their visibility in advocacy networks and their direct connections with survivors positioned them as valuable intermediaries for this study. The filmmaker had previously worked on a documentary exploring the experiences of male survivors of clerical abuse and facilitated introductions to potential participants. The confidential advisor for victim-survivors of institutional abuse had served on multiple commissions focused on recognition and justice for survivors. The victim-survivor chairs a foundation dedicated to supporting victim-survivors in their struggle for recognition and justice. Next to facilitating participant recruitment, they were also interviewed as experts, providing insight into their lived experiences as their advocacy work. Their role as facilitators was distinct from their potential participation in the study. For the key contact who was also a research participant, particular attention was given to ensuring her consent was freely given, and her dual role was acknowledged in the ethical review process. The recruitment process maintained participant autonomy and key contacts did not

exert influence over who chose to participate. The three 'key contacts'approached the participants, which. was necessary as the researchers were unfamiliar with the participants and could not approach them directly. Once the "key contacts" confirmed that participants were willing to participate, the first author received their names and contact details and subsequently contacted each participant via telephone and/or e-mail. Participants received both verbal and written information about the study, and if they agreed to participate, we scheduled an interview date.

The first author conducted the semi-structured interviews, which were audio-recorded between November 2021 and June 2023 (two interviews in 2021 and the majority between November 2022 and June 2023). All interviews took place face-to-face at participants' homes.

We employed a semi-structured interview approach, using two predefined topic lists – one for victim-survivors and one for family members – as a guiding framework for the interviews. These lists covered key themes such as experiences with redress procedures, family involvement in seeking recognition, abuse disclosure, social support, and the broader emotional, psychological, and financial impact, thus detailing the ripple-effects of clerical harm. While the topic lists ensured thematic consistency across interviews, we also utilized an interview guide to create a safe and comfortable environment for participants, such as rapport-building techniques, opportunities for breaks, and the phrasing of open-ended versus more specific follow-up questions. Rather than adhering rigidly to a script, interviews remained dynamic, allowing participants' narratives to shape the conversation while ensuring that all key themes were addressed

Interviews lasted between 1,5 and 3 hours and were transcribed verbatim. We shared the transcripts with participants for validation. All interviews were conducted in Dutch.

Participants signed informed consent forms, with nine participants explicitly requesting that their real first names be used, while pseudonyms protected the remaining participants' anonymity.

Lastly, we have ensured that ethical considerations were adhered to, having received approval from the Ethics Review Board of the University of Humanistic Studies (number 2020–001).

Data analysis

We employed a combination of deductive and inductive reflexive thematic analysis (TA) to analyze the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020), using ATLAS.ti version 23. We selected the most illustrative narratives – those confirming or contradicting the identified themes – within these broader thematic categories. The study remains exploratory and we chose both deductive and inductive TA for this purpose.

The first author familiarized herself with the data (phase one), then began open coding and generating initial codes (phase two) while writing memos on her overall impressions of the interviews. She then grouped the patterns into overarching themes and sub-themes (phase three). After establishing a preliminary set of themes, she reviewed (phase four) and finalized them (phase five). In phase six, we selected the final set of relevant themes that align with the research questions. In the results section, we present key quotations deemed important by the authors.

Positionality and reflexivity

We recognize our subjectivity as researchers, making reflexive thematic analysis the most suitable approach for understanding our data. Positionality and reflexivity are integral to conducting qualitative research. The interviewer (NO) – a female in her mid-thirties of Dutch-Caribbean descent with a background in clinical psychology and victimology – began each interview by stating, "I won't be telling you that I understand what you have gone through because I cannot. The only thing I can do is listen and learn from you." Several participants specifically expressed their need to be listened to after this introduction.

Results

We structured the results according to our two research themes, namely (1) the role of redress *procedures* in social relationships and (2) the role of social relationships in the redress *experience*.

The role of redress procedures in social relationships

Abuse disclosure

For most participants, engaging in redress procedures meant disclosing the abuse they endured. Disclosure often happened for the first time – which caused legitimacy for their feelings and difficulties in life in some cases – consequently influencing their social relations, suggesting that formal justice mechanisms provide a critical structure for initiating conversations about past trauma. Nevertheless, whilst redress procedures offer a pathway for breaking the silence surrounding abuse, they also expose the complexities of family relationships. Abuse disclosure is often fraught with difficulty due to feelings of shame, fear and concern about the reactions of family members (Conte & Simon, 2020; Herman, 1997; Reitsema & Grietens, 2016). These barriers frequently delay disclosure for decades, as observed in many of our participants. Many, like the ex-pupils of the Good Shepherd, faced such severe social stigma that even close family members were unaware of their suffering. This social stigma was closely related to victims' social positioning; in this case related to their gender and socio-economic status. Thus, cases of widespread injustices must account for structural factors that contribute to harm and shape victim-survivors' experiences (Waligore, 2018). Relational theorists argue that any attempt to redress harm must consider these social inequalities, as they are often at the root of the harm itself (Mackenzie, 2021).

For example, Sandra's story illustrates how these structural factors – particularly gendered expectations and familial obligations – can shape the redress experience by influencing disclosure, silencing survivors and deepening the emotional burden of seeking recognition. Sandra delayed disclosing her abuse for years, fearing the emotional impact it would have on her *family of origin*, specifically her mother. Her brother had previously come forward about his clerical abuse, and the distress it caused their mother was overwhelming. The intense emotional toll she witnessed made Sandra hesitant to share her own experience, illustrating how family dynamics, guilt and the desire to protect loved ones can keep victim-survivors silent. Sandra's story also reflects how interactions with other

survivors can influence the decision to seek redress. Another claimant, Joke – who had been abused by the same perpetrator – was gathering evidence for her own case, which eventually prompted Sandra to pursue redress as well.

> In 1990, my brother started speaking about his abuse; he had all kinds of conversations. Joke found out about it and she contacted us, but we couldn't {face action} at the time. My mother was also completely devastated. I went to a psychologist from the Catholic Church twice with her {my mother}. There I saw and heard her cry so intensely, it still makes me emotional to this day. My brother disclosed his abuse and now I have to tell my mother too, I can't do that. So I then kept it to myself for about another ten years; around 2003 { . . . }, I mentally collapsed {. . .} I was heartbroken; I was completely drained. I did recover a bit and life went on again. I said to myself, I have to process it {the abuse} before I go into my coffin, but I can't do it until my mother has died. My mother passed away in 2010. By then she already had advanced dementia, but she knew and felt that something was going on {with me}. But we stopped talking to her about it; we didn't want to do that to her anymore. Later I got in touch {again} with Joke and she actually wanted to know my brother's story. Then at a certain point she said: "Sandra, what about you?" I then told my story and my brother sank further and further {in the couch}, he knew stuff had happened to me, but this . . . . (Sandra)

Sandra's story aligns with previous research showing that victim-survivors frequently experience psychological struggles such as depression, trauma, grief, self-harm, and anger (Fogler et al., 2008; McGraw et al., 2019; Pereda et al., 2022; Sicilia et al., 2024; Terry, 2008; Van Wormer & Berns, 2004). Social isolation and negative reactions from their environment, particularly from family members, can intensify these effects (Fogler et al., 2008; McGraw et al., 2019). Shame, guilt, and fear of disrupting family relationships often contribute to prolonged silence (Kudlac, 2006), while negative family responses can deepen trauma, leading to feelings of alienation or estrangement (McGraw et al., 2019). Sandra's experience underscores how family members' reactions – whether immediate emotional devastation or prolonged avoidance – can shape the disclosure process and influence when, how and if victim-survivors seek redress.

As redress procedures often took considerable time, victim-survivors felt compelled to inform their *families*.

> In the early stages, you're not going to do that, and you're not going to advertise that. That was only at a later stage. And then you say, I have to go to Maastricht. Before that I never went there, so yeah, it was time to tell my family what I was doing there. (Christian)

Disclosure also occurred among *fellow victim-survivors*. Eric, a victim-survivor, participated in mediation with others like Christian and Wouter. This led to the formation of peer support groups, and partners of survivors also connected for mutual support. Eric had disclosed his abuse early in his relationship with Coby. This ties with literature on sexual abuse disclosure, where factors such as older age, female gender and support from non-offending caregivers can encourage disclosure (Conte & Simon, 2020). Yet, not all partners were as familiar with the abuse before mediation. As Coby noted: *"For the women it was . . . I was quite familiar with it {the abuse}. So for us it was, especially for {Meg} and the others, to talk about it, just like, gosh, what happened here?"*

Self-awareness and understanding

Coby's story shows that abuse disclosure is a confrontation with the past which may lead to greater self-awareness and deeper understanding among families, leading to a redefinition of roles and relationships within the family and a reevaluation of identity and social connections for both survivors and their families. For instance, Willem, whose late mother was involved in a civil case against the Good Shepherd, reflected on the importance of children gaining insight into their parents' suffering.

> I definitely think it would make a positive difference if children of {victim-survivors}, could have or get more insight, if they don't already, on the suffering that was perpetrated on their parents. Yes, you know, in that respect, I have perhaps the best picture of someone who has been there {the Good Shepherd}, being so closely involved with the court case. (Willem)

Through the litigation process, Willem better understood his mother's character and her past trauma. Similarly, Michel shared how participating in a documentary during mediation helped his siblings understand him more fully. Mieke also found that sharing her story with her family allowed her late husband to better understand her behavior.

> { . . . } my husband was shocked. "Well I understand some of your reactions too." I never noticed that myself, but when he's standing in the kitchen and I approached him, he used to rub me along the buttock and then I would jump away. {My husband said:} "Now I just get it." (Mieke)

Yet, whilst participation in redress procedures allows for disclosure – which is a necessary step in the recognition process – communication within the family was sometimes sporadic, rarely discussing the abuse afterward. For example, Wouter mentioned that the mediation process helped him disclose the abuse to his adult *son*, but that this conversation was not sustained.

> { . . . } and at that last conversation my son was also there. That's quite intense and then you have to tell everything again. Again. So twice I had to tell that story. { . . . }. Actually, it {the abuse and/or the redress procedure} sometimes comes up by chance, but actually not much. Look, we just get on with our lives. And {my son}, I don't want to bother him with that either. He also has his work you know. . . . (Wouter)

Michel shared a similar experience, choosing not to burden his family: *"No, it happened to me and it's my misery { . . . } It's bad enough. I mean, I hope they never have to face it."* This statement is similar to other participants, who felt that loved ones – usually children – should not be burdened with their parents' problems: "*they {the children} have their own lives and families to take care of*" (e.g., Christian, Molly and Eric). Further research is needed to tap into the feelings of the children themselves and whether they would agree with their parents that they (the children) should not be involved in the redress procedures.

Some participants, like Elise, found that even after disclosing the abuse, the silence surrounding it was not completely broken. When her *grandchildren* heard about the abuse through a civil case, they were shocked but did not discuss it further due to Elise's ongoing shame about being an ex-pupil of the Good Shepherd. Elise's *son* could not tolerate hearing about the abuse, although he and the grandchildren assisted her with practical matters related to the case. Sandra had the option to include her *family (of origin and creation)* in mediation but they

declined. She acknowledged this rejection, accepting that it was too difficult for them.

> Within the mediation procedure there was a possibility to have a conversation together with my children, but the children rejected that possibility and so did my family. But it was possible so that was very nice. And would I still want it now, I think it is still possible but maybe I would have to pay for it I don't know, but I won't open the cesspit with the children now; it is the way it is. It's getting too close. Some also said: "I already have enough on my plate, I don't need that {your story} added to it." (Sandra)

Family members may refuse to engage in redress due to emotional exhaustion, known as compassion fatigue, which leads to symptoms like anger and depression (Day & Anderson, 2011). Sandra still wished to involve her family and valued the opportunity to visit the site of her abuse with her friends, partner, and brother, marking a significant moment in her healing process.

Acknowledgement

Participating in redress procedures also influence victim-survivors' abuse acknowledgment. For instance, Sandra and her brother – both clerical abuse survivors – had contrasting outcomes in their redress processes, leading to tension. While Sandra received recognition, her brother did not, which caused pain and resentment within the *family of origin*.

> We were fortunately allowed {to do our hearings} on the same day, my brother and I, so that was very nice. My sister who was also abused, she went with me. So you could also have people there to support you, so Joke {who was abused by the same clergy member} also wrote a whole story {on my behalf}, friends who knew me when I was an adolescent and once I started working {also wrote stories on my behalf}. Colleagues, former colleagues I am still in touch with also wrote something in my favor. So then my brother, on a Thursday when we both got the message that I received recognition and he did not { ... }. I got something out of the recognition. It also said that I was entitled to this and that and I thought, bullshit, what am I going to do with that money if my brother is not recognized? (Sandra)

This case underlines yet again that recognition and repair are systemic processes. What does "official" recognition mean – e.g., monetary compensation – if a fellow sufferer is not acknowledged? This situation shows how redress can create rifts within families, complicating sibling relationships. Whilst it is possible that fruitful communication processes had taken place between brother and sister(s) through their participation in redress, the suffering of the brother was not acknowledged. It is not clear whether or not this sibling relationship needed repair in the first place. But what was clear was that because of the redress process, the relationship between brother and sister had to be renegotiated. Joke, on the other hand, shared her monetary compensation with her siblings, seeing it as a retrospective payment for her underpaid father. Herewith, she acknowledged – what she saw as clerical victimhood as well – her own father.

Participating in a redress scheme does not always lead to acknowledgment from the surrounding social environment. Mieke was the only respondent who specifically mentioned *the Church* as part of her social relations. Unfortunately, redress offered little hope of repairing her relationship with the Church. Her abuser – a priest – had denied her the sacrament, leading to lifelong shame, which was exacerbated by the shame of her immediate

family and their subsequent anger. Mieke was made to believe she was an "evil" child. Whilst Mieke has been hurt by her family's reaction – they seemed to be angry with her rather than sympathetic and their lack of anger at the Church – it was the Church that had worsened her pain. Mieke's experience shows how redress procedures often fail to repair the broken relationship between victim-survivors and the Church.

Empowerment versus disillusionment

Abuse disclosure and the participation in redress schemes may also lead to some sort of empowerment for both the victim-survivor and the families themselves. As a son – thus part of the *family of creation* – Willem felt the burden of seeking justice on behalf of his mother in her litigation case. Despite the difficulty Willem also sees the merit in the process as his goal is to receive justice for his mother and other women who have suffered abuse under the so called "protection" of the Good Shepherd. He also feels responsible, because his elderly father and his brother "*are not made to do this, because I have always been the more empathetic one*." Whilst Willem does not see his task as a burden and both he and his family are content with this arrangement, it can be challenging for one member of the family to be/feel solely responsible for seeking justice.

> After the last trial, I always go to my father and tell him how it has been. Then I say: well father, we are going to appeal and there will be four more years I think, minimum. You won't live to see that. My father then asks: But you will go through with it? Yes I will, if it is possible. I will definitely go on, to the last gasp, I will say. { . . . } Moments like this, even days like this, then it's quite heavy for me. (Willem)

This illustrates the emotional toll redress can take on extended family members, particularly when one person feels responsible for the process. However, sometimes redress is "just" costly, lengthy and painful and is the sense of empowerment far away. Wouter also stressed the emotional toll on loved ones, noting that his wife suffered alongside him. Mirroring statements from victim-survivors and their loved ones in previous literature, Wouter concludes that much more needs to be done to care for the loved ones who are enmeshed in these procedures: *"Much more, much more. Look, because she {my wife} went through a lot. I've been through that. And I've had my bad times too, yes, she {my wife} has suffered from that too."*

Synthesis

Regarding the role of redress *procedures* in social relationships, our data shows that abuse disclosure through redress procedures facilitates understanding, acknowledgment and empowerment, while also prompting difficult yet necessary conversations within families. However, complex emotions such as shame and fear often delay disclosure, straining relationships within families of origin and creation. Among fellow survivors, disclosure can strengthen solidarity and provide mutual support, yet redress schemes sometimes fail in meaningfully restoring social bonds or achieving acknowledgment from key institutions, such as the Church, complicating the path to empowerment for both survivors and their broader social networks.

The role of social relationships in the redress experience

Social support

The presence or absence of social support plays a crucial role in shaping how victim-survivors experience redress. Those who had strong support from their *families of creation*, such as spouses and partners, often felt more empowered to persist with lengthy and emotionally taxing redress procedures.

Frank was one of the participants who was in the minority who disclosed his abuse to his wife Alissa long before the redress procedures were initiated. He credits Alissa's support as the main reason why he not only started a mediation procedure, but also continued with it when he was almost too traumatized to continue. Alissa felt like "the strong one," the one who had the tools to confront the Church, since "*I know how to talk to them seeing as I studied political science, so I am somewhat schooled in power shall I say*." This example also shows the protective side of Alissa, whilst she simultaneously set the wheels in motion for Frank to have a chance at receiving recognition and repair. Alissa also emphasized her anger toward the Church and their treatment of Frank, where she felt like she had to reclaim her position as the wife of an abuse survivor and also as someone who had a right to repair: "*I am a citizen of the state of the Netherlands. So I have rights that go beyond what canon law grands me. I claim my citizenship. And you all can go to hell with your ecclesiastical law*." This example shows yet again that including claimants' social environment within redress procedures is of vital importance. Alissa seeks for both herself and her husband to be recognized as citizens whose rights have been violated, thereby challenging a perspective that frames them solely as "victims." She aims to highlight the role of the Church as an institutional perpetrator, calling for its accountability in addressing the harm it has caused.

Coby - *wife* of Eric – who already described above how fellow victims can help with abuse disclosure and understanding – also mentioned how not only the male victim-survivors built firm relationships, but also their spouses, who experienced much support from each other.

> But the fact that, and I think that was nice, that you went there together. Sitting on that train together. You just really liked that I noticed, not saying anything for a while but not having to. . . So that was just nice, to go there together. As support and indeed as an outlet because you go through a lot together. And I had more contact with those women. Yes, with those men too, of course. (Coby)

Annette, who disclosed her abuse to her parents as a child, was initially ignored. Later, during the redress process, her *mother* wrote a letter as a form of social support to the congregation on Annette's behalf, which caused mixed feelings. Annette's case highlights the emotional complexity when family members to mediate on behalf of the victim-survivor; this can be perceived as an interference rather than support.

> My mother, on her own accord, did write a letter to the Congregation. To say: will you do something, because my daughter is suffering so much. And that was never responded to {by the Congregation}. My mother wrote that letter in an emotional mood, she also gave me a copy of {the letter} at the time. When you read the letter, it does impact you. My mother had put her {Catholic} faith in there as well, "from your mercy" etc etc. I actually did not want her to interfere in these proceedings, because it's difficult enough as it is. On the other hand, I do understand her concern. That in her way - at that moment I thought, please don't intervene - you just had your maternal concern, you were just terrified that you would lose me in such

> a procedure and you just wanted to expedite that procedure for it to finish. So I understand that now. But with that, she didn't actually acknowledge me. . .. . (Annette)

However, in some instances loved ones step in and take on the role of carer and/or protector. This happened in Arnold- Jan's case, who – after feeling dissatisfied with the outcome of the complaint- and compensation procedure he participated in – started and subsequently lost a tort action to address his clerical abuse. Tort litigation for systemic and historical injustice cases is clearly on the rise (Wentholt & Immler, 2023). By establishing liability, certain claimants may seek to initiate interaction with the perpetrator or responsible institution, however, such engagement does not align with the legal objective of tort proceedings. Nonetheless, tort actions can align with the approach of relational redress, as they may consider the impact of harm within interactions between individuals, underscoring the need to repair relational damage rather than solely addressing individual consequences (Sage, 2021). In some instances – as was the case for Arnold-Jan – claimants resort to tort actions as a final means to initiate dialogue with the implicated institution, as they "force" the institution to respond to their claim(s). It is a confrontation which establishes as such a form of relational engagement (Ormskerk et al., in press; Wentholt & Immler, 2023). For Arnold-Jan, losing the case ruined him financially and psychologically but he felt the urge to continue his quest for justice. His wife and two sons urged him not to continue, out of fear of what it would do to him mentally, but also what it would do to their family.

Arnold-Jan's case highlights the profound personal and familial costs of seeking justice through tort litigation for historical abuse. While such legal actions can compel institutions to respond, they do not always provide the resolution survivors seek. The financial and psychological toll on Arnold-Jan was immense, straining both his well-being and his family. Loved ones may support a claimant's pursuit of justice or, fearing further harm, urge them to stop; a tension that can itself be painful. His case underscores the fine line between social support and social discomfort, as both the claimant and their family bear the consequences of seeking redress, including severe financial strain.

Secondary victimization and continual focus on victimhood

Peer support groups often included claimants who participated in redress schemes. Social support from peer support groups also proved to be a double-edged sword. While many participants – such as Sandra and Annette – found comfort in connecting with others who had experienced similar abuse, others found that peer support groups could reinforce a victim mentality or, in some cases, replicate oppressive dynamics. Failure to provide social support may cause secondary victimization (Campbell et al., 2001; Orth, 2002), which is defined as something that happens to primary victims after the offense as their victimization is prolonged, compounded, and made worse by the reactions of others and their treatment in the (criminal) justice process (Condry, 2010, p. 236). Flora, for example, felt disconnected from the anger expressed by other survivors in her peer group, noting that their continual focus on victimhood kept them trapped in the trauma of the abuse.

Really, the anger of those women, I didn't recognize myself in that at all. I thought, you guys have been victims all your lives. You do exactly what those nuns want. You know, you just feel like you're not worth anything, that everything is broken, that you

can never be happy. That's what those nuns were constantly shouting at you. And you do exactly the same thing. You just still let them into your life and you still let your life be defined by what they did to you. I went there once {at the peer group meeting} and then I didn't go anymore (Flora). Like Flora, Mary also felt somewhat disconnected from the victim narrative within the peer group. However, while Flora chose to disengage entirely, Mary acknowledged that adopting a victim label was sometimes necessary, especially in redress procedures. This tension – between rejecting a victim identity and needing the same identity for recognition – shaped her experience in the group.

> They were all talking about abuse. Also some of course about sexual abuse. But yes, I did have the feeling that I was somewhat outside of it. But also because it was so long-lasting with me, from when I was 6 until I was about 20. And I had trouble with the victim things because I'm not used to being in a victim role for so long. I had to do that {be a victim}, to be able to do that {claim for recognition}. But there were people who were broken, you know. Really broken. And I did meet extraordinary people, but yes, I was also the only person of color, just to put it that way. (Mary)

Experiences such as the ones mentioned above show that peer support can lead to divergent experiences; while it can be valuable, it must be navigated carefully to avoid perpetuating cycles of trauma.

Social recognition and validation

Our data showed that social support was also given by the *broader society* and by *friends*, whom played a significant role in the redress process. Participants found that their participation in redress procedures led to increased social recognition, which contributed to a sense of validation. This acknowledgment was particularly important for victim-survivors who had previously felt silenced or dismissed by their communities. Mary, for instance, described how public acknowledgment of the abuse scandal in the Netherlands validated her abuse experience and helped her feel more acknowledged.

> I received recognition from the people I interacted with, the people who actually knew what was going on with my health, and who actually understood that these kinds of things I had experienced had actually happened. My social relations. The moment the Dutch public finally recognized a large part of: gosh, so this kind of thing really happened. I got that recognition from them, from the public. And that did me a lot of good. And that is also possible because they {her social environment and the public} are separate from {Church} power. (Mary)

However, not all participants felt that social recognition equated to meaningful repair. Flora, for example, appreciated the support of friends but remained adamant that full recognition and repair could only come from the Church itself.

Public social support played an important role for some survivors, with the following quotes showing how clerical abuse affects the public or broader communities. Michel – featured in a documentary about clerical abuse where his participation in a mediation procedures was fully shown- recalled how a long-time acquaintance acknowledged his experience.

> I have played billiards with someone, for years, who has never spoken a word to me. And now, about three or four months ago he says: "Michel, a very stupid question, did you get any money from the whole thing {the redress procedure}?" I say: "{. . .} sure I got money." He says: "Well,

> that makes me feel really good." While he also saw that I didn't need that money. But {that I did} have that recognition. He says: "yes, I did follow all that {the documentary; the abuse scandal} back then, you know." But he never told me that while I always went to billiards. (Michel)

Annette also received unexpected support about her abuse after an interview in a Dutch newspaper, whilst she was participating in a redress mechanism. A member of the public sent her a card, which she described as a much-needed "pat on the back" missing from official procedures. She also received a letter from the niece of her abuser – thus *family of the perpetrator* - expressing doubts about her uncle's character and a desire to investigate: *"She doesn't give me the recognition necessarily, but she does express her doubt {in her uncle's character} and she wants to investigate this"*.

Vicarious victimization

In rare cases, *villagers* openly expressed their anger toward known perpetrators, as Joke and Sandra described. Furthermore, ripple-effects of harm extended to faith communities – specifically mentioned by Sandra and Michel – with some congregations losing members who were appalled by the abuse scandals and thus leaving the Church. Michel shared that his religious relatives were outraged by the revealed abuse in the documentary. This can be classified as vicarious victimization, which is a process that results from repeated empathetic engagement with populations who experience first-hand victimization (Knight, 2018). The fact that Michel received monetary compensation – which was shown in the documentary – also helped with him being "believed" by others. Some of his relatives stopped attending Church: *"I have relatives of my mother, for example, who are very Catholic and very religious. Well, there is not one of them who goes to Church anymore, so to speak."* For Michel, this response from his family provided strength and support, helping him cope with the abuse. In line with research from Formicola (2020), (church) communities may experience a collective sense of betrayal and a crisis of faith, leading them to reexamine their relationship with the Church. Nevertheless, in contrast with previous research from Hakesley (2023), Sandra and Michel did feel societal and congregational support, which improved their chances of recognition and repair.

Synthesis

Regarding the role of social relationships in the redress *experience*, our data show that social support plays a critical role in shaping the redress experience for abuse survivors, with families, friends, peer groups and the broader public each influencing survivors' sense of validation and social recognition. Strong support from loved ones, such as spouses, can empower victim-survivors to persist with emotionally taxing redress procedures, while a lack of support – particularly within families – can lead to social discomfort, secondary victimization and reinforce feelings of victimhood. Peer support groups offer valuable connections, but they can also perpetuate trauma and victim identity for some individuals. Public and social recognition of abuse can provide much-needed validation, with friends and society at large playing significant roles in acknowledging survivors' experiences. However, full repair and recognition often remain elusive without acknowledgment from the perpetrating institution the Church.

Our data largely parallels previous research on social support and given the deep emotional and relational damage caused by clerical abuse, social support becomes essential for healing. The main effect model suggests that social support improves health by boosting self-esteem and belonging (Cohen & Syme, 1985 in: Lueger-Schuster et al., 2015), which we have seen in the examples where friends and the broader society supported the victim-survivors. We have also demonstrated the opposite, when there is a lack of social support, the feeling of belonging decreases and victim-survivors are being trapped in the trauma of the abuse. This can be explained by the stress-buffering model, which posits that social support mitigates harmful responses to stress (Cohen & Syme, 1985 in: Lueger-Schuster et al., 2015).

Discussion

This study set out to explore two key themes: the role of redress *procedures* in social relationships, and how these relationships shape the redress *experience* for victim-survivors of clerical abuse. Through analyzing interviews with victim-survivors and their families, we accounted for ripple-effects, traditionally defined as experiences of injustice impacting different generations. In doing so, we argued for a distinction between *family of origin* and *family of creation*, allowing us to examine differences in the types of ripple-effects and whether it mattered that abused children were raised in another "family," namely the Church. Additionally, we critically examined the limitations of redress mechanisms, arguing that a systemic approach would be more effective in addressing the broader impacts of abuse.

The role of redress procedures in social relations

Our findings indicate that abuse disclosure through these procedures often serves as a catalyst for engaging in difficult but necessary conversations within families, especially among members of the *family of origin*. For many victim-survivors, redress mechanisms marked the first time they disclosed their experiences of abuse, resulting in a sense of validation. However, the disclosure process also complicated familial relationships, especially when survivors delayed sharing their trauma to protect their families from further distress. The fear of negative reactions from family members often prolonged silence, with ripple-effects extending to multiple generations. For instance, some participants revealed that their *family of origin* - including *parents* and *siblings* - reacted with disbelief, anger, or emotional withdrawal upon learning about the abuse. In some cases, the redress process caused family rifts as siblings or parents struggled to reconcile their roles within the family dynamics. This strain underscores the broader systemic impact of abuse, demonstrating that redress is not an isolated individual experience but one that affects victim-survivors' entire social network.

When the *Church* constituted a family for the victim-survivor – resembling an extended "family" - feelings of shame and anger surfaced, mirroring those experienced by victim-survivors living with their family of origin. Importantly, our data revealed that ripple-effects extend beyond the family and impact social relations as a whole. Redress mechanisms often involve revisiting painful memories, which can

reignite trauma for survivors and their families. The strain that redress places on social relationships highlights the systemic nature of the harm caused by clerical abuse, suggesting that families of survivors also require recognition and support in healing. Therefore, while redress mechanisms help foster acknowledgment of abuse, they frequently fall short of addressing the full scope of relational damage, particularly within family systems.

The role of social relations in the redress experience

In line with *Relational Theory*, we found that social support – whether from *family, friends* or *peer groups* - emerged as a critical factor in determining whether victim-survivors felt empowered to pursue justice. Strong social support from *spouses* and *children* in particular provided emotional resilience, allowing survivors to navigate lengthy and emotionally taxing procedures. Conversely, a lack of support from immediate family members often led to feelings of isolation and disempowerment, exacerbating the trauma of the abuse.

Our findings also show that *peer support groups* can serve a dual role. For some victim-survivors, these groups provided a much-needed sense of community and solidarity, helping them process their experiences. However, for others, peer support groups reinforced a "victim identity" that made it difficult to move forward, suggesting that while social connections are essential for healing, they must be carefully navigated to prevent prolonging distress or impeding recovery.

Societal social support also played a significant role in the redress experience. For many survivors, public acknowledgment of clerical abuse contributed to a sense of validation and social recognition, particularly when official redress mechanisms failed to provide adequate acknowledgment. Herein, we found evidence of vicarious victimization, with some individuals feeling uneasy about their faith or leaving the Church after abuse disclosures. The faith community itself experiences harm, with ripple-effects manifesting a deep spiritual damage in response to the perceived betrayal by the Church. These far reaching ripple-effects show that harm is not only intergenerational, it is also "intracommunal." Claimant communities (such as *villagers*) also need some kind of repair. Social recognition was especially important for those who had previously been silenced or dismissed by their communities. However, despite public acknowledgment, full recognition and repair often remained elusive without validation from the Church, which is seen as the primary source of harm.

The distinction between family of origin and family of creation

We encountered contradictions and complexities while aiming for a differentiation between family of origin and family of creation. We observed that ripple-effects manifested differently in families of origin compared to families of creation. For *families of origin*, the abuse often resulted in familial fragmentation, as parents and siblings struggled to come to terms with the harm inflicted on their child or sibling. This often led to strained relationships, emotional withdrawal and in some cases, complete familial disintegration. In contrast, *families of creation* - especially spouses and children – played a more supportive role in the redress process, which acknowledged their immense value. While they too were affected by the trauma, they were often more inclined to provide emotional support, facilitating the

survivor's ability to engage in redress procedures. However, this support came at a cost, as several spouses reported feeling the emotional toll of reliving the trauma through their partner's experience. Thus, while families of creation often served as a source of strength, they also experienced the ripple-effects of trauma in more subtle, but significant ways. Consequently, our data did not provide a definitive answer as to whether differences exist between redress for former children "raised" within an institution, where clergy members became the so-called family of origin and for those not raised in an institution.

Recommendations for future research: towards a systemic approach

The redress procedures we discussed are situated within the field of transitional justice, which encompasses the full range of processes and mechanisms that a society uses to address large-scale past conflicts, repression and abuses. These mechanisms aim to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation. Transitional justice strives to recognize victim-survivors, rebuild trust in state institutions, reinforce respect for human rights, and promote the rule of law as a path toward reconciliation as a step toward reconciliation and the prevention of new violations (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner [OHCHR], n.d.). Over the past decade, transitional justice has emerged as a framework for evaluating justice measures addressing human rights abuses, including clerical abuse (Gallen, 2016; Gallen & Gleeson, 2018; Ludwin King, 2017; McAlinden, 2013; Stan, 2023). While previous research focused primarily on state and institutional accountability, our study reveals the crucial role that personal, intergenerational and social dynamics play in the success or failure of redress procedures. However, herein we have failed to look closely at the role of the institution Church as part of victim-survivors' social environment. This is particularly relevant in contexts where the Church functions as both a religious institution and a "social family," complicating the relationship between victim-survivors and the institution responsible for their harm. In our next study, our goal is to include the Church in the social fabric of victim-survivors and in doing so, we seek to draw on insights from the transitional justice field.

Conclusion

This study highlights the profound and systemic impact of clerical abuse on both individual survivors and their social relationships. By acknowledging that ripple-effects of abuse extend beyond the individual, we have shown that clerical abuse affects families of origin, families of creation and even broader communities. However, there is no single redress procedure or approach that can fully heal these harms, as redress affects victim-survivors in different ways depending on their personal, familial and social contexts. Current redress mechanisms – which primarily focus on individual recognition and compensation – fail to fully address these broader social dynamics. A shift toward a systemic approach – one that acknowledges the role of social relationships in both experiencing and healing from trauma – would provide more comprehensive and meaningful redress. This approach would not only enhance individual healing but also facilitate the repair of relational and generational harm, ultimately leading to a more just and effective redress system. Future transitional justice mechanisms should focus not only on institutional reforms but also on actively engaging with the social environments of victim-survivors, acknowledging that true

redress requires restoring relationships across multiple layers of society. This inclusive approach may prove useful in other historical cases of institutional abuse, such as the Dutch childcare benefits scandal or the British Post Office scandal, thereby expanding the application of transitional justice beyond its traditional scope.

Note

1. https://www.kmgh.nl/over-ons

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