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A Survey of the Views of Catholic Safeguarding Coordinators about the Inclusion of the Polygraph in Psychological Risk Assessments of Clerics

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Abstract

This paper reflects the views of Catholic safeguarding coordinators (SCs) with regard to the inclusion of the polygraph in forensic psychological risk assessments that they have commissioned. The contents are derived from feedback forms sought of these instructing parties, relating to fifteen priests referred for assessment by SCs from eight different Catholic dioceses in England. The SCs responded to a post-assessment survey including a range of questions concerning their perceptions of the utility of independent, secularly organised, forensic psychological risk assessments undertaken during the period from January 2019 to December 2021.

Feedback was obtained in relation to twelve of the clerics, with two SCs having left their positions during the period and as such, not available to provide feedback, and one SC not responding to the feedback request. Replies were received from SCs representing seven of the twenty-two Catholic dioceses in England. The overall survey results reflected that a significant majority of respondents positively connoted the value of independent secularly organised forensic psychological risk assessments. However, their expressed views about the polygraph in this context were more varied, thus prompting the authors to produce this separate paper.

Key words: polygraph, psychological assessment, risk, church safeguarding, priest, sex offences

Potential Role of Polygraph

The polygraph was employed as part of the forensic psychological assessment process with the majority of these clerics (nine of the twelve priests) and the survey sent to the SCs referenced one closed question about the polygraph, „Where relevant, did you consider that the inclusion of the polygraph examination added to the comprehensiveness of the assessment?“, offering a choice of „Yes“, „Somewhat“, or „No“. Responses were received from SCs in seven of eight Catholic dioceses contacted.

The cleric psychological report survey sent out to the instructing SCs also provided a section at the end offering an opportunity for a narrative response to the question, „Do you consider that, with future risk assessments, you would likely be more inclined to include the polygraph in the assessment process, and if so, why?“. The authors note that the three respondents for whom the polygraph was not employed also commented on polygraph’s potential usefulness in this section of the feedback form.

Current Study

Of the nine forensic psychological risk assessments of which the polygraph formed a part of the evaluation process, seven respondents reported, „Yes“ ... the inclusion of the polygraph examination added to the comprehensiveness of the report. This equates to 78% of the respondents. Two respondents reported, „No“ ... the polygraph did not add to the comprehensiveness of the psychological report.

The authors note that of the remaining three instructing SCs who did not request the use of the polygraph in their forensic psychological risk assessment, two report-

ed a belief that its absence from the evaluation process likely diminished the comprehensiveness of the final report. The third of these respondents referenced a need to understand more about polygraph testing to make an informed judgement about its possible utility.

The authors note that the broader questions concerning the usefulness of forensic psychological assessments, including responses to questions such as, „Did the report answer the referral questions?“, „Did the report give you new information about the referred cleric?“, „Did you think that the discussion about what caused the cleric’s difficulties was helpful?“, and „Did the report meet your needs?“ etc., are addressed in an article separately submitted for publication.

Safeguarding Coordinators’ Views About Using the Polygraph in

Cleric Risk Assessments:

Negative appraisals of the polygraph’s use were reported in two diocesan safeguarding responses.

First Cleric:

In the first, in the narrative section, the SC indicated that the polygraph had ‘caused significant issues and was a source of complaint by the priest involved’. The SC described that as a result, ‘this led to anger and contributed to this cleric’s disengagement’ with the process and ‘dismissal of the outcome’ of the assessment.

Authors’ Commentary:

Relevantly, the authors note that the polygraph led to further disclosures made by this priest, wherein he acknowledged that over the course of his career in ministry, he had repeatedly and deliberately directed questions to young parishioners eliciting information about their sexual experiences, for the purposes of later using these images to aid within the context of his masturbatory fantasies. Through the assistive aid of the polygraph, coupled with pre- and post- clinical interviews, the cleric acknowledged engaging in this behaviour over time for his own sexual gratification. He further noted, at times, causing distress and embarrassment to those individuals when they divulged this information. However, whilst confirming incitement in prompting these disclosures, this did not result in a criminal prosecution, as the threshold required to press criminal charges was not met; no-

tably, because the cleric described behaving this way with some regularity and as such, asserting an inability to confirm or disconfirm whether he had done so with the specific minors who had made complaints.

The authors would posit that, as this important safeguarding information had been obtained with the assistance of the polygraph, whether it led to complaints, anger, or disengagement expressed by the cleric, this information seemed to have very substantial relevance to decision-making about this priest's continued involvement in ministry. The authors would further suggest that the value of gaining this otherwise undisclosed and unaccepted information considerably exceeded concerns about causing the cleric discomfort in the process. The authors also note that a detailed examination of risk issues during a psychological risk assessment will likely be the key assessment focus and that clarifying these matters through such focal questioning and, where considered appropriate, the use of the polygraph will likely produce a degree of distress. This will particularly be the case where important disclosures and areas of concern are otherwise being concealed by the priest from the Church and safeguarding body and will ultimately impact on the perceived suitability of the cleric to remain in ministry.

From the authors' perspectives, the relevance of the priest's self-report of so frequently behaving in this self-serving, sexually gratifying manner that he could not confirm who he engaged in this behaviour with, would have critical relevance to his suitability as a priest in ministry now and in the future. Notwithstanding, the authors appreciate that safeguarding offices have a responsibility to acquire information of relevance to assessing risk in each case, employing strategies that may, at times, be viewed as uncomfortable for the priest to engage in, and they may likely feel a responsibility to explain why certain methods, that may feel more intrusive, are employed. This might better ensure the maintenance of successful, cooperative engagement between safeguarding and the cleric in working with them in the future, taking account of what is generally viewed as a lifelong vocational commitment on the part of the priest.

Second Cleric:

In another risk assessment where the polygraph was viewed as unhelpful, the cleric passed the examination with regard to the specific questions put to him about touching a child under the age of sixteen for sexual reasons or masturbating to thoughts or images of a child who he believed to be under that age. The priest's responses during polygraph suggested 'No Deception Indicated' when giving a neg-

ative response to these questions. The SC respondent considered that the polygraph was not of any assistance since the cleric passed on these items.

Authors' Commentary:

The authors took the view that this was a positive outcome in relation to assessing this cleric's possible engagement in illegal behaviours. However, concerns about being generally overly tactile and causing parishioners and members of the community to become uncomfortable through this behaviour was referenced and highlighted in this assessment (though not reflected as potentially criminal in nature). In addition, there were indications that physically intrusive behaviours, likely not of a sexualised nature, continued to create problems for the priest in ministry and required addressing through an intensive intervention and further safeguarding work.

In reviewing this safeguarding response, the authors have cause to support the SC's additional comments that a 'more cooperative process' is necessary, involving the referred party as well. The advice given by the SC was,

„It would be good at the point of referral for the referrer and the assessor to speak about the process they intend to use so that the cleric can be better supported in this effort”.

The SC also acknowledged, „At the point of referral, this was a new process for the safeguarding body” and it was considered that 'there was some learning to be done as to how to best support the process and to gain a greater understanding of the techniques used and outcome relevance'.

Third Cleric:

An equivocal appraisal was made by this SC, reflecting an acknowledgement that the polygraph's inclusion added to the comprehensiveness of the assessment, though concluding, 'whilst its use resulted in disclosures that may not have otherwise been made, this did not result in any criminal action'.

Authors' Commentary:

The authors would assert that the assessment of risk of harm to parishioners and the community extends beyond issues of the legality of a cleric's actions and into the domain of the moral and ethical appropriateness of their behaviour, such that the priest's observed behaviour projects them as a transparently positive member of the Church who can be relied upon and trusted. Again, the SC reflected that making disclosures hitherto concealed was a distressing prospect for the cleric, and

the authors would have to conclude that, where disclosures are given that offer the Church an opportunity to better safeguard their parishioners whilst also highlighting areas of deficiency or even deviance in the behaviour of the priest, it is unsurprising that there would be some distressing aspects in the reporting of these behaviours and predilections. The SC concluded that they believed the inclusion of the polygraph gave some evidence of abusive behaviours that would otherwise not have been reported, though they concluded that the actions taken by the diocese would not, ultimately, have been much different, irrespective of these further disclosures being made.

Within this assessment, the priest in question produced a ‘Deception Indicated’ result on the polygraph in relation to questions with regard to touching a child under the age of sixteen for sexual reasons, arranging to meet a child of this age for sexual reasons, and communicating with a child under the age of sixteen for sexual reasons. In post-polygraph interviews, the cleric acknowledged behaving in ways to induce physical contact with children and promote sexual arousal for himself. He had hitherto denied self-interested and sexually deviant motivations for engaging in this behaviour with children. As such, this disclosure from the perspectives of the authors had highly pertinent and direct relevance to future decision making about the appropriateness of the cleric remaining in ministry.

Fourth Cleric:

This SC reflected that they wished that they had incorporated the polygraph into the assessment process as they concluded that the report was only somewhat helpful and this, in their opinion, related directly to a shared view that the cleric, throughout, was not open and engaging. In the narrative section of the feedback form, the SC indicated that at the time of this assessment, “A senior police officer and a barrister specialising in child protection were of the view that the advantages of polygraph were limited, and doubts were held about the polygraph’s reliability and admissibility”.

Authors’ Commentary:

In subsequent discussion with this SC and other interested parties, the authors referenced several papers that address these issues in some detail (Jack & Wilcox, 2018; Wilcox & Collins, 2020; Wilcox et al., 2020), noting evidence that reliability rates are high and admissibility is not an issue in relation to the clinical use of the polygraph in these settings for monitoring purposes. It was also noted

that, in this context, the polygraph has an established place in UK law for the supervision of individuals who commit sexual offences (Offender Management Act, 2007) and more recently, domestic violence offenders in the UK (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021) as well as released individuals convicted of terrorist crimes (Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Act, 2021).

Resonating with comments made above and subsequent views expressed by SCs elsewhere, a theme began to emerge of the benefits that would accrue from providing specific training to safeguarding offices with regard to various elements of a forensic psychological risk assessment and, where deemed appropriate, exploration of potential gains achieved through including the polygraph as an adjunctive measure.

In particular, the SC referenced a need to improve the preparation phase of a risk assessment, with reference made to the „cumbersome Catholic commissioning documentation” that may, at times, potentially impede the practicalities that make the whole risk assessment work. This particular SC considered that, as the professionals undertaking this work, the authors could have been more directional in this area, with first-hand knowledge of what works and what does not work, that may not be so readily known or available to the safeguarding office. Indeed, this individual concluded, „I suspect many commissioners from the Catholic Church will be similarly limited in their knowledge base” and as such, a relevant information handout would have been of considerable assistance at the outset.

The issue of Canon Law was also raised, with the SC noting that, through these powers, the priest has considerable flexibility in deciding what kind of engagement in the assessment process they are willing to accept (Jones, 2011). This SC also noted, „We have learned a lot about the benefits of virtual meetings (since the advent of COVID)” as this assessment was undertaken, pre-pandemic, in 2019. As such, it was suggested that helpful pre-meetings could have been undertaken using Microsoft Teams or Zoom. The SC concluded that such discussion might have promoted a better common shared understanding of the aims of the assessment and the procedure advised.

Fifth Cleric:

This SC also reflected that they would have wished to have included the polygraph in the assessment process, though the priest ultimately withdrew consent and refused to engage in this aspect of the assessment.

Authors' Commentary:

It was, however, noted that additional disclosures were made by the priest leading up to the anticipated polygraph examination that proved to be helpful in framing this individual's level of risk and indeed suggested to the SC that the assessment „would have been more in depth had (the cleric) agreed to engage” fully, i.e., undertake the polygraph.

Sixth Cleric:

This SC spoke positively about their perceptions of the added value that polygraph's inclusion may have brought to the assessment process. However, in this instance, it was not employed and the respondent echoed a similar concern about gaining more information with regard to what its application might contribute to the assessment. Further reflections were made that perhaps the polygraph's use should be examined within a context of considering the 'proportionality' of the risk issue and investigation procedure required.

This and other safeguarding responses have reflected that more information should be provided to the referrer with regard to the process of undertaking the risk assessment to ensure that the referrer is in an informed position and can provide appropriate support to the person being assessed.

Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Clerics:

The feedback given by two SCs from the same diocese were uniformly supportive in relation to the three cleric assessments they commissioned. They concluded, „We would use the polygraph as it was useful to highlight any deception indicated which is clearly an issue for a Bishop when determining any future ministry for a cleric”.

Authors' Commentary:

In the judgement of the authors, the SCs evidenced a good understanding of the polygraph's utility within the assessment, though also sought further input and training around the overall forensic psychological assessment process.

Tenth Cleric:

This SC offered the following narrative responses with regard to polygraph's inclusion,

„Yes, we would definitely be more inclined to include the polygraph in the assessment process in the future. The inclusion of the polygraph test allowed the examiner to structure the questions on the sexual history form in such a way that it fed into the polygraph test process. This demonstrated that without the polygraph test, the cleric may not have answered so honestly. Although this may exert an amount of pressure on the cleric it demonstrates their ability to comply and show whether or not they will attempt to be deceitful and not work within the process honestly. These questions ahead of the polygraph test revealed new (risk related) information that was suspected, but not known or even accepted by the cleric”.

Eleventh Cleric:

This SC responded,

„The polygraph in this assessment was invaluable. The cleric was not open and honest and without the questions ahead of the polygraph test, the information that became available around risk would not have been revealed. The level of concerns discovered were of such magnitude that the decision was made for him never to return to ministry. These were matters not of a criminal nature, but behavioural. Polygraph tests alone are useful, but it is the sexual history questions ahead of the test that exposes avoidance and deceitfulness, which in this instance was ‘off the scale’. Those matters revealed were not directly linked to the individual’s index offence but outlined decades of concerning behaviour which was not known to the diocese”.

Authors’ Commentary:

The authors concluded that this SC, as was the case with some of the others, had helpful, prior knowledge about the polygraph’s utility for such investigative purposes. Further, the authors note that the application of the polygraph in the forensic risk assessments undertaken proceeded most smoothly where the SC came from a secular career background in public protection and actually had prior experience of the monitoring applications of this instrument.

Twelfth Cleric:

At the point of referral, the SC endorsed the polygraph’s use. In providing feedback, they reported,

„We asked specifically for polygraph to be included to provide additional confidence around the findings and to support the process. We were aware that the individual had some ‘oddities’ but needed to be clear if these presented a risk to the young and vulnerable. This approach was further supported by the LADO outcome, which was formally unsubstantiated but where both we and the statutory authorities had considerable remaining concerns. We needed professional assistance to understand these to be able to address them. The employ-

ment of the polygraph in this case assisted greatly in resolving those concerns in a way that allowed us to positively move forward with the individuals”.

This SC further reported,

„Whilst I was very comfortable in the commissioning process and was clear about what I required, including the use of the polygraph...and the contract from the Catholic standards agency...I am not convinced that all my colleagues in other diocese would be on the same page around this issue. There remains a great deal of myths around the use of the polygraph and what it adds, which would benefit from greater explanation to many of my colleagues”.

Authors’ Commentary:

In dialogue with this SC, there was agreement that there appears to be an unhelpful mindset that persists which frames the polygraph bluntly as a ‘lie detector’, though this SC’s views seemed to chime with the first authors’ comments noted in *The Economist*, „It’s more useful as a truth facilitator than as a lie detector” („Lie-Detectors Might Be Useful”, 2019).

Indeed, the SC referenced biased and inaccurate views held even by professionals about the employment of this tool, noting previous employment with the police where they had acquired considerable knowledge and experience of its use. This respondent noted being particularly keen to counter the „black magic brigade who lack a proper understanding of how the polygraph is used in a clinical setting”.

Conclusions

Whilst, overall, the authors’ broad survey identified a high level of endorsement of secularly undertaken forensic psychological risk assessments, there were indications of diverse views in the ways that SCs perceived potential benefits of the polygraph within the assessment process. This seemed to centre around the issue of prior knowledge and experience about the possibly helpful applications of the polygraph in assessing risk issues. Relatedly, concerns were raised that the polygraph increased the levels of distress in the clerics being assessed, thus negatively impacting on the SC’s ability to work collaboratively with the cleric at the end of the process.

Suggestions were made by SCs that some structured training around the various elements of forensic psychological assessment would be of assistance to them and to other key individuals in the diocese, including Church advisors. Individuals who had experience of the polygraph seemed clearer in their views, that achieving

greater openness and transparency in investigating risk behaviours for purposes of protecting the community was a higher priority than maintaining a positive working relationship with the cleric. However, where possible, and perhaps facilitated through training, both aims should be pursued.

The authors noted that concerns were, at some points, raised that the investigation of these risk issues did not lead to criminal convictions. Here again, the authors would posit that there is a possible learning need to address here. Relatedly, the authors considered that achieving such a result was not the key purpose of the assessment, but rather gaining a more robust and comprehensive understanding of the risk that the cleric might pose to the public and to the reputation of the Church.

The authors noted that where clerics were cooperative in engaging with the assessment process, including demonstrating a willingness to be polygraphed, the priest's views about its usefulness were, accordingly, often judged by the authors to be more positive, even where they acknowledged risk-related behaviours that had hitherto been concealed. Indeed, within this process, the authors would emphasize the need to maintain a supportive manner in respecting and valuing open disclosures that were made whilst also promoting more honesty in those clerics that were less forthcoming (Wilcox et al., 2020).

The authors further note that, by definition, distress occurs when an individual is exposed to anxiety-provoking circumstances. Relatedly, any concealed, self-interested behaviours that might negatively impact on a priest's potential for maintaining a position in ministry would necessarily reflect the criteria for such an emotional experience. However, within this process, the assessor and polygraph examiner consistently endeavour to demonstrate an attitude of respect towards the cleric for efforts made to be open and honest about risk issues.

This survey across seven participating Catholic diocese safeguarding offices revealed variation in the knowledge base of SCs with regard to the risk assessment process and more particularly, the employment of the polygraph within this context. The authors formed the view that those parties who are most knowledgeable about the polygraph, often coming from secular backgrounds in public protection (including retired police and others who have undertaken community safeguarding roles) brought with them a level of understanding or experience of the applicability of the polygraph in this context that some of their colleagues lacked. Whilst the authors have produced papers and clarifying information about the employment of the polygraph with clerics (Jack & Wilcox, 2018; Wilcox, 2019;

Wilcox et al., 2020), they considered that this information has not likely been as widely disseminated as would be helpful for SCs to make informed decisions about the polygraph's potential utility.

The suggestion of preliminary discussions employing videolink pre-instruction discussions is viewed by the authors as a helpful way forward. In this way, relevant information can be imparted to SCs at the outset to assist them in understanding the purpose of the assessment, which will normally necessitate comprehensive assessment of the risk posed by the priest as the primary aim, such that the Church can make responsible decisions about the future of this cleric in the Church.

The truth facilitation role of the polygraph in clinical settings has increasingly become recognised (Wilcox, 2000; Wilcox & Collins, 2020) and now has a place in law in the UK, for monitoring the behaviour of different types of offenders, including those who commit sexual offences, domestic abuse, and acts of terrorism. The authors consider that there is an important requirement to enable SCs to work 'on a level playing field' with regard to achieving a similar level of understanding about the forensic psychological assessment process and polygraph's often helpful role in this effort.

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