Reviewer's report

Title: Patterns of Child Sexual Abuse in Religiously-affiliated and Non-religiously-affiliated Institutions: Results of the Liaison Office of the Independent Commissioner for Victims in Germany

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Reviewer: Kate Walsh

Reviewer's report:

Although sexual abuse occurring within institutions is relatively understudied, the nature of the available data limit my enthusiasm for the current manuscript. I have detailed these concerns below.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. A stronger rationale is needed for comparing groups who reported abuse within different organizations. The manuscript makes note of how abuse in the Catholic or Protestant organizations could be associated with “toxic spirituality” but as far as I can tell, spirituality and problems associated with spirituality were not assessed. As currently framed, it is unclear what this manuscript adds to the existing literature on sexual abuse. What does comparing abuse in these different contexts tell us and how will it inform assessment, treatment, or prevention efforts?

2. The methods for participant selection are also unclear. How is sexual abuse defined? Also, the statement on page 9 that “Just a few victims (2%-1 to 2.9%) in the Roman Catholic and non-religiously affiliated context groups reported actual cases of sexual abuse” is confusing. What did the other 97% report? False cases of sexual abuse? Other types of abuse? In reading the manuscript until that point, I thought the 1050 participants all reported some type of sexual abuse.

3. The title of the manuscript states that child sexual abuse is a focus; however, all of the participants are older adults (mean age = 52.2 years). The manuscript analyzes the ages of participants currently, which tells us nothing about their abuse characteristics as they were likely abused many years prior. Are data available on age of respondents when abuse began and ended? What about length of time that elapsed between abuse experience and reporting informally (to family/friends) or formally (to authorities)?

4. On page 9, it is stated that there were no difference in the time of abuse. Defining time of abuse as past or current is odd in this adult sample and tells us very little about the actual timing of abuse. There is a large body of literature suggesting that characteristics of rape/sexual assault are different depending on whether the victim is a child, adolescent, or adult when the abuse occurred. Use age when abuse occurred or consider removing.

Were any individuals abused in more than one context? Is context defined as where the abuse took place or by whether the abuser was a member of a
particular institution?

5. The analyses focused on consequences of abuse on page 8 are limited in what they can tell us about mental health or emotional problems. As the authors rightly point out, these analyses focus on self-report of diagnoses. Many individuals do not seek treatment for emotional/mental health problems, so these analyses likely vastly underestimate mental health consequences.

Minor compulsory revisions

6. “Most of the victims were single (36.8%; N = 191).” Based on the numbers provided here, only slightly more than 1/3 were single, so most were NOT single. Please reword or correct.

7. On page 10, the manuscript notes that individuals abused in a non-religious institutional context reported fewer abusers. Does this mean several abusers were involved in the same incident or are these different incidents across the lifespan? Sexual revictimization (abuse by different perpetrators at different points in the lifespan) is an unfortunately common phenomenon, so it is unclear why individuals abused in a religious institutional context would be less at risk. The authors could consider discussing the validity of this finding and its potential implications.

**Level of interest:** An article of limited interest

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests