

Beginning Research on Clergy Sexual Abuse: A Brief “Resource Kit” for Scholars

WE OFFER THIS BRIEF LIST of suggestions and resources based on the experience of the Taking Responsibility research groups and on the experience of others we’ve consulted.

1) **Think about your audience and goals, which may be diverse.** Will your conclusions be directed to inform others in your academic field, the general public, a particular institution and its practices, survivors of clergy abuse writ broadly, and/or some other group? Are you doing what we’ve called “historical memory” work, or looking to make changes to institutional functioning going forward, or both (and if both, how are those goals related)? If you are taking a team approach, team members might also have diverse goals, both personal and professional.

2) **Whether or not your team members come from a community you are studying – but especially if not – constitute a community advisory board as soon as possible, and arrange to compensate them appropriately for crucial work that might include reviewing your research instruments and introducing you to potential participants.** (“Community” here might mean many things: a particular racial and/or socioeconomic group, a geographic community like a parish, a group like “survivors of sexual abuse,” and so forth.) Be aware that especially when you are working with members of marginalized communities, trust takes a long time to build and can be lost quickly. This is long-term research. If you or your team don’t already have prior experience working with human subjects, consider involving those that do, perhaps researchers in anthropology, sociology, psychology, education, social work, or ministry, or in other relevant fields at your university.

3) **You will also likely need to build as much support as you can with relevant institutional players.** Depending on your project’s design and goals this might mean members of your university administration, or provincial or diocesan leaders, or parish priests or employees, or those who run a local survivor group. While you will need to be clear at every stage that your work is independent, and while this may involve significant ongoing negotiation, sympathetic institutional players can considerably ease your access to relevant documents, interview contacts, and the like, and can be valuable partners in identifying resources as well as in implementing suggested changes if relevant.

4) **IRBs – institutional review boards – will be an important part of any university research involving living human subjects, which includes administering surveys and interviewing.** Your team should have someone who has been through an IRB process before, but you should also be aware that IRBs are often especially wary of any research to do with sexuality, on the theory that this research is more likely to harm subjects. Although they are not supposed to consider the political valence of research, IRB members are human, and if the research proposed seems to impact the reputation of the institution, you may also meet some resistance on this account. To counteract at least the first of these fears, we recommend that you proactively share with your IRB research that indicates that discussing sexuality, even sexual trauma, is not particularly harmful to participants and may even be felt as liberatory, under certain circumstances. See, for example, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105424>.

In your application, be clear with the IRB about your intentions regarding data security. How will confidentiality be protected? Are you adhering to relevant legal standards (eg, HIPAA)? At the same time, consider that anonymity and confidentiality may not be desired by research participants, and if this is the case, provide evidence to the IRB or suggest a protocol for providing anonymity where appropriate and

requested, but otherwise, not. Some victim-survivors might prioritize anonymity, but others might want to use their own names and have their particular stories told. It might also not be necessary or desirable to destroy data such as survey instruments or interview transcripts at the conclusion of the study, as is often initially suggested; instead, data might be transferable to an archive for future research use, with appropriate anonymization.

If you are doing research that can be classed as “oral history,” you may be exempt from IRB review, depending on your institution. See the recommendations of the Oral History Association at <https://oralhistory.org/information-about-irbs/>. You should consult others at your institution, your IRB guidelines, your department chair, etc, etc. If you do not proceed with IRB review for an oral history project, we do recommend that you pursue in-person training for your team members that will be conducting oral histories, and minimally that your research design considers guidelines like these written by RAINN: <https://www.rainn.org/articles/tips-interviewing-survivors>.

5) If your research is wholly or partially based around archival materials that are not public, you will likely need to dedicate considerable time to gaining access. The first step, of course, is to identify what kind of records might exist that would be useful, where they are held, and request a meeting with the archivist by email or phone. If that person cannot give you access to what you need, ask (in a non-adversarial way) if there is a higher-up you can contact to discuss the situation and argue your case. At either level, you will want to indicate your own credentials, your goals and commitments, and your justification for seeing the material. You may also want to indicate your level of openness to anonymizing data, your level of willingness to work with the archive around publication of specific quotations, and/or your awareness that control of archival data is an ongoing issue for religious orders. For example, even if you are not working with a Native American population, resources developed for historians and archivists working on Native boarding schools may be useful in making your case: <https://achahistory.org/boardingschools>. If negotiation with the archive does not succeed, hold out continued hope and stay in touch over time. Sometimes a change of administration or a change of archivist can dramatically affect research access to records (either making them much more open or much more closed). It may also be possible for you to gain access to some materials that are held in archives in other ways, for example by speaking with individuals who retain their own records.

6) Prepare as best you can for the reality that, while it may also be deeply rewarding, this is likely to be emotionally difficult and frustrating work. If you are applying for funding, you can designate some money for therapeutic intervention if necessary – maybe especially appropriate for those conducting interviews. Allow time in team meetings for processing whatever is going on around the research: feelings about obstacles, about realities encountered, etc. Know that certain team members may need a break, and stay flexible about your goals and timelines.

