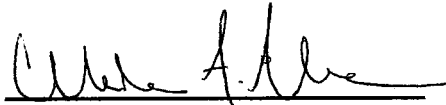APPROVAL SHEET

Title of Thesis: The Lonely Robes?: A Study of American Catholic Priests' Social
Connectedness as Predicted by Social Support

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ABSTRACT

Title of Document:	THE LONELY ROBES?: A STUDY OF AMERICAN CATHOLIC PRIESTS' SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AS PREDICTED BY SOCIAL SUPPORT.
	Kelly Holt Tockey, Master of Applied Sociology Candidate, 2018
Directed By:	Dr. Christine A. Mair Associate Professor of Sociology Sociology, Anthropology, and Health Administration and Policy

This thesis investigates predictors of social connectedness among American Catholic priests, a potentially isolated and economically limited population. Using the 1993 and 2001 replications of the 1970 Survey of American Catholic Priests, multiple linear regression models examine social support as a predictor of social connectedness among 1,994 American Catholic priests. Results suggest that social support is associated with social connectedness, but that this association differs by priest type and by attitudes toward support from organizations. Specifically, religious priests (compared to diocesan priests) and priests who agree that more organizational support is needed display a particularly strong positive association between social support and social connectedness. These findings are discussed in light of theories of social connectedness and support among uniquely isolated populations and argues for additional studies of American Catholic priests, particularly post-retirement.

THE LONELY ROBES?: A STUDY OF AMERICAN CATHOLIC PRIESTS'
SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AS PREDICTED BY SOCIAL SUPPORT.

By

Kelly Marie Holt.
(Kelly Holt Tockey)

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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INTRODUCTION

According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the Washington DC metropolitan area boasts one of the highest employment rates of ordained clergy members in the nation (BLS 2017). Nationally, the Georgetown University Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) reports just over 37,000 Catholic priests, 70% of which are diocesan priests, and 30% of which are religious priests (2017). Diocesan priests are those who are ordained, and take vows to serve a particular diocese, or administrative territorial entity. These priests are often assigned to parochial or parish priest roles, and often minister to congregations. They may or may not have an additional vocation, such as a teacher, guidance counselor, marriage counselor, etc. Religious priests are those who are ordained and take vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience to their religious Order or province. Because they are required to vow poverty, they typically live communally with Brothers of their Order or province, sequestered from lay-people, though they may minister to a parish or community regularly. (Libraria Editrice Vaticana 1983)

For this community of men, the median age is rising (Chaves 2011; Gautier, Perl, and Fichter 2012). There are fewer men entering the vocation, as well. In 2017, fewer than half the number of ordinations occurred as compared to 1965 (Georgetown University CARA 2017). Moreover, the proportion of diocesan priests in active ministry has been steadily decreasing by an average of 6.6% each decade since 1965 to just 63% in 2017 (Georgetown University CARA 2017). This suggests that more priests are reaching old age in a retirement atmosphere than ever before (Ladd,

Merluzzi, and Cooper 2006). However, the men entering retirement are often doing so in an economically disadvantaged environment, with dioceses, religious institutes, and priests themselves facing poverty in retirement at higher rates than ever before (Kane and Jacobs 2015). Furthermore, retirement and career exit, which may change an individual's level of social connectedness, have been theorized to have critical implications for health outcomes among the general population (Alpass and Neville 2003, Potočnik and Sonnentag 2013). However, the situation for American Catholic priests is unique due to their exclusively male, unmarried, childfree subpopulation characteristics. For these priests, who dedicate their lives to serving others in their spiritual journeys, the question stands: do these priests have sufficient support networks to maintain their social connectedness during their senior years, which are increasingly spent outside of active ministry and with limited economic resources?

REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

Theoretical Motivations

Life Course Perspective

A life course approach to investigation and analysis remains cognizant of the effect that historical and geographic location, life events, identity, and other contexts may have on groups of individuals' experience (Kaplan et al. 2003). Elder (1998) argues that macro-level societal experiences are interdependently and inextricably linked to individual's experiences through social institutions such as the family. In this way, experiences or shared social trauma may impact individual behavior (Elder 1998). Among a group that tends towards older adults, a life course perspective is critical in contextualizing both self-reported attitudinal or experiential data, as well as social network composition and operations. Furthermore, Price et al. (2000) identifies older age cohorts as potentially experiencing society in a unique manner based on their perceived age. The present study was designed to utilize the life course perspective, while specifically focusing on the social connectedness and support networks of Catholic priests within the larger context of social, familial, and career norms in contemporary American society during recent decades.

Linked Lives, Social Networks, and Social Support

Simmel (1908) laid the groundwork for social network theory by conceptualizing society as being comprised of interactions among individuals, who

attribute meaning to these interactions. Groups, interactions among groups, and interactions between groups and individuals, are key to forming an individual's "web of associations." (Simmel 1908). More recently, sociologists have conceptualized individuals' webs of associations as sharing common relationships and have understood this larger web of associations among individuals as a "social network" (Barnes 1954). A foundational assumption of social network theory is that society can be understood as a constellation of social interactions among individuals, demonstrating the formative impact of Simmel's (1908) framework. Social network theories examine an individual's interactions and relationships with other network members, assuming that these relationships are the basis for understanding a population as a whole. In this way, social networks and ties among subpopulations are crucial in gaining insight into social connectedness of the subpopulation members.

Social networks are often the greatest sources of social support, offering emotional aid, small and large services, financial aid, and companionship to network members (Wellman and Wortley 1990). Wellman and Wortley (1990:567) measured social support given through social networks, finding that friends who share strong ties often provide the largest proportion of emotional aid, small services, and companionship. Moreover, Wellman and Wortley (1990) discovered that individuals are most likely to receive support from a small number of strong social ties, supporting the social network theory. This would suggest that priests likely receive the most social support from a small number of strong ties within their social networks.

Aging, Social Engagement, and Social Roles

Although previous theories of aging, social engagement, and roles posited that individuals begin to retract from society as they age (e.g., disengagement theory, Cumming et al. 1960), social connections are now considered a critical part of older adults' health (Rowe and Kahn 1998). Modern activity theory posits that by engaging in social activities and maintaining social interactions, older adults can delay the aging process and can enhance their quality of life (Maddox and Neugarten 1968). Thus, successfully aging requires engagement in activities, social roles, and interactions—particularly after retirement. Although these perspectives do not theorize specifically about spirituality and spiritual community roles, they provide a background for theorizing about priests' social connectedness by highlighting community engagement with age.

Conceptual Applications to American Priests

Priests' Unique Social Networks and Social Support

American Catholic priests have diverse and unique social networks that may include formal structural hierarchy, i.e. Catholic Church, and informal structural hierarchy, e.g. a rectory or monastery in which more senior priests are differentially responsible for maintaining order. Additionally, priests who serve in parishes are often central to leadership networks within their parish community (Negrón et al. 2014).

However, there are likely differences based on priest type: religious priests' and diocesan priests' social networks may be very distinct. Diocesan priests are those

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serving a particular diocese and are often assigned to parochial or parish priest roles. It is probable that diocesan priests have low-density social networks consisting of many weak ties (Bricker and Fleischer 1993). Religious priests are required to vow poverty, meaning they live communally with Brothers of their Order or province, often in a monastery, friary, or rectory sequestered from non-clergy individuals and other members of society (Libraria Editrice Vaticana 1983). Thus, religious priests' social networks are presumably highly dense and consist of much stronger ties networks of diocesan priests. (Virginia 1998) Common to both types of priests is the vow of celibacy, meaning that all Catholic priests live without a spouse and without children. These are typical sources for both social support and social network maintenance and expansion throughout the life course of men, particularly (Antonucci and Akiyama 1987). Although research into social networks among these populations is very limited, it is probable that social networks between religious and diocesan priests are distinct, and further, that priests' social networks are distinct from typical American citizens' networks.

For Catholic priests, whose social ties do not include an intimate relationship partner or parental relationship, their support networks are limited to friends, neighbors, parents, siblings, and extended families. Wellmen and Wortley's (1990) findings indicate that friends with whom priests share strong social ties likely provide the largest proportion of priests' companionship. However, they also found that emotional aid tended to be more evenly distributed among support network sources, indicating that priests may suffer in terms of emotional support by not having a spouse or children. Among Christian clergy members, a majority of the limited

literature on social support has investigated support sources for non-celibate clergy members. Therefore, although these married clergy members who tend to have children are comparable to Catholic priests in terms of their social roles, their social networks likely are very different. Interestingly, Van Groenou and Van Tilburg (1997) found that although the hierarchy for instrumental support sources differs for unmarried older adults in the Netherlands, emotional support sources do not. Thus, it is unclear whether American priests, as unmarried, older men, derive the majority of their emotional support from the same network sources as do married, Christian clergy members of other religious affiliations.

Retirement, Priesthood, and Social Roles

Priests are an aging population (Chaves 2011, Gautier, Perl, and Fichter 2012). While for many professions, there is a precedent for career exit, this precedent not established for Catholic priests, who tend to serve in active ministry until they are physically unable. Recently, there has been an increase in the number of American clergy members who are exiting active ministry, and effectively retiring (Ladd, Merluzzi, and Cooper 2006; Georgetown University CARA 2017). Among this trend is the new concept of "forced termination" among American clergy members. Importantly, American Protestant pastors surveyed who had reported experiencing forced termination also reported health problems associated with chronic stress at higher rates than those pastors who had not experienced forced retirement (Tanner, Zvonkovic, and Adams 2012:13). Although their study refers to termination rather than retirement and pertains to clergy members who share social support networks

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that do include spouses and children, this research may indicate that the loss of parish community experienced when a priest retires is an emotionally traumatic or stressful loss. This is of particular concern among Catholic priests, who have difficulty asking for informal help from congregants due to the social distance associated with their self-proscribed role (Pietkiewicz and Bachryj 2016), as well as for formal help due to self-stigma (Isacco et al. 2014). This loss of support community may be linked to loneliness and isolation, which have critical implications for health outcomes. Currently, descriptive and exploratory research on rates of Catholic priests leaving active ministry and the retirement transition among this population are limited.

Jammes (1955) demonstrated that "priest," unlike other professions, transcends the typical workday. Rather than interacting with a priest strictly in times of spiritual or religious need, as one would a plumber in need of plumbing repairs, laymen expect priests to uphold the role at all times. Society expects priests to be charitable, humble, and patient, for instance, continually (Jammes 1955:96). Hughes (1945) theorized that though individuals may have many roles, they tend to be ascribed a single role that supersedes all others, called a "master status." Aspinall and Song (2013) argued that though an individual may have an ascribed master status, they may also have a self-proscribed "dominant identity." The transcendence of role beyond the workplace signals that the role of priest serves not only as a master status, but also as likely a dominant identity.

Roles, Transitions, Isolation, and Well-Being

Most studies focus on clergy members who are not celibate, and therefore are able to marry, have children, and build their own family. Social roles among Catholic priests, who are unable to form marital and parental bonds, or to build their social network around a nuclear family, are likely unique experiences. Further, the identity of "priest" may have critical implications for their retirement transition through role ambiguity (Reitzes and Mutran 2006), which may lead to feelings of uselessness or isolation (Hill et al. 2003, Warner and Carter 1984).

Few studies examine social support as a moderating or buffering factor against the negative effects of clergy-specific isolation, though social support is a strong predictor of successful aging among the general population (Tovel and Carmel 2014). Existing studies suggest that priests often utilize social support networks that include denominational and congregational support sources to mitigate stress related to their role as a priest (Wells 2013).

For example, staying active in one's community helps to mitigate depression rates and severity following the retirement transition, for older, non-clergy retirees (Potočnik and Sonnentag 2013). Social isolation and loneliness increase the likelihood of experiencing depression among older men (Alpass and Neville 2003). Interestingly, diocesan priests, in particular, have higher rates of depression and of spiritual exhaustion than religious priests, even when social support is held constant (Virginia 1998). This may indicate the importance of living among a community of priests in the experience of social support. In a recent study, Zickar et al. (2008) found evidence of a buffering hypothesis, demonstrating consistently that social

support sources (i.e. parishioners, staff, and fellow priests) moderated the negative relationship between role stressors and job satisfaction (Zickar et al. 2008). Additionally, a study by Wells (2013) further discerned the moderating effects of social support by distinguishing between the effects of congregational support and denominational support. Wells (2013) demonstrated support for both congregational and denominational support as moderators of both emotional and physical stress related to individuals' role as clergy. Furthermore, Wells determined that congregational support is a stronger moderator than denominational support for role stress (2013:886). From the literature, it is clear that there are dimensions to social support, including congregational support, denominational support, and support from friends or family.

Purpose of the Study

Investigating the connection between social support and social connectedness indicators may yield insight into the experience of aging as a Catholic priest and social networks of aging Catholic priests. Although there is limited research on social support networks of Catholic priests, considering the life course of priests and the context in which priests are serving, aging, and increasingly retiring is critical to understanding not only Catholic priests, but also similar, and larger groups. This insight may also be useful in understanding social connectedness among childless older adults, and unmarried older adults when investigating long-term health outcomes and morbidities related to social isolation. The present study will investigate the connection between social support and social connectedness indicators

among American Catholic priests, asking whether social support is related to increased social connectedness in this population. Given the common social support sources among priests in active ministry, including congregational and denominational support, it is likely that stripping these sources from priests when exiting active ministry impacts priests' ability to maintain sufficient support networks and remain socially connected in ways that mitigate health consequences.

METHODS

Data

The Survey of American Catholic Priests (SACP) is a self-administered, cross-sectional mail survey of Catholic priests in the United States. Respondents are entirely male, because the Catholic priesthood is exclusively male. The Association of Religion Data Archives makes this data publicly available online. The original SACP was conducted in 1970, and was replicated three times in 1985, 1993, and 2001. The 1985 study was only a partial replication of the original 1970 study, and thus used an abridged instrument, making it largely distinct from the 1993 and 2001 instruments. Thus, the current study excludes 1985 data, and utilizes data from both of the full replications in 1993 and 2001. Both the 1993 and 2001 samples are distinct cross-sectional samples of Catholic priests, but were combined for the present analysis to maximize sample size among this smaller population. Topic areas consistent across the 1993 and 2001 waves include social support measures and sources, attitudes toward popular and theological issues, and experiential measures indicating perceived social role, as well as limited demographics.

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The original study utilized two-stage cluster sampling, in which participant priests were randomly selected from a random sample of 85 of the 155 dioceses and 91 of the 252 self-governing groups of religious institutes. During the second stage, 7,260 of approximately 64,000 priests were selected, yielding a 71% response rate (5,155 usable questionnaires). The 1993 replication drew sample randomly from half of the dioceses of each strata from the original study, resulting in 44 dioceses, which each provided a complete list of member priests. From these lists, 12.5%, or 1,243 priests, were randomly selected for participation and mailed a questionnaire. There is no information on the 1993 stratified sampling of religious institute priests, or the sampling procedure for the 2001 replication. The 1993 study resulted in a response rate of 68.3% among diocesan priests. The 1,186 total respondents from 1993 and 1,279 total respondents from 2001 were combined in the present study. After listwise deletion for missing data, the final analytic sample includes 1,994 priests.

Measures

Dependent Variables

Social connectedness is assessed through three outcome measures including perspectives on closeness, loneliness, and the importance of living together. For each outcome, priests were asked to think about statements regarding "the priesthood and the church today," "problems which priests face today," and "sources of satisfaction in the life and work of a priest," respectively. They were asked to indicate on Likert scales their level of agreement (higher scores indicate greater agreement).

Closeness. The first indicator is agreement with the statement: "What is lacking today is that closeness among priests which used to be present." Scores range

from zero "Disagree strongly" to five "Agree strongly." This is the only measure with a neutral response category. _Loneliness._ The second dependent variable "loneliness" uses responses to the statement, "Would you indicate how important the following problems are to you on a day-to-day basis: Loneliness of priestly life." Scores range from zero "No problem at all" to four "A great problem to me personally." _Live Together._ Third, respondents were asked about the degree to which living among other priests as a source of satisfaction in their lives, using the question, "Would you indicate how important each of the following is as a source of satisfaction to you?: The well-being that comes from living the common life with like-minded priests." Scores range from zero "No importance" to four "Great importance."

Independent Variables

Independent variables include social support, priest type, and beliefs about organizational support.

Social Support. Social support is measured with a continuous scale comprised of ten items that ask respondents to identify how much social support he receives in their work as a priest from various sources. There are items asking about support from these sources, grouped by the author to align with social support theory: bureaucratic or hierarchical support, i.e. presbyteral council, bishop, Vatican, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), and the National Federation of Priests' Councils (NFPC); congregational support, i.e. parishioners and parish staff members; and personal support, i.e. non-priest friends, fellow priests, and family members. Response categories were uniformly recoded such that a low score

indicates that the priest receives no support from this source, whereas a high score indicates that the respondent receives strong levels of social support from the source mentioned in the statement. The variable "social support scale" was calculated as the average score across all ten items for respondents who answered a minimum of seven of these ten social support items. A low score on the social support scale variable suggests that social support is largely absent in the respondents' daily life. Scores range from zero to three.

Priest Type. Priest type (religious or diocesan) is measured as a dichotomous dummy variable (1=religious priest, 0=diocesan). *Organizational Support.* Respondents were asked about if they agreed with the statement "More effective organizations of priests are needed to serve the needs of the priesthood today." Because of clustering in the "Agree strongly" and "Agree somewhat" categories, responses to this question were collapsed into a dummy variable indicating agreement that more organization is needed (1=agree, 0=do not agree). Responses from the neutral category were coded as zero, "do not agree". Responses in the "Disagree somewhat" and "Disagree strongly" categories were also collapsed into the "do not agree" category of the dichotomous variable.

Control Variables

As this study was administered exclusively to Catholic priests in the United States, there is no variation in gender; all respondents are male. Because the survey was administered only to those who are currently priests, there are no married respondents. There are no racial or ethnicity indicators because there are items in which the respondent identifies the specific diocese or institute, i.e. province or order,

to which they belong. The ability to cross-reference these data points may realistically compromise the confidentiality of respondents, particularly those in racial and ethnic minority groups.

As such, the dataset contains very few potential control variables that are similar across the two combined samples. The analysis includes two control variables, age and age at ordination as a priest. These measures are highly correlated, but represent separate conceptual processes. Therefore, the reduce collinearity between variables age is dichotomized as "senior" (1=aged 55 years or older, 0=younger) and age of ordination is included as a continuous measure that ranges from 21 to 61 years.

Analysis

To conduct univariate analysis and generate descriptive statistics, the author used SAS software to generate mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum values for each variable included in the analysis (Table 1). To examine potential collinearity between measures, all variables were also examined in a correlation matrix (Table 2). The author conducted bivariate analysis through comparison of mean social support scale score across response categories of each dependent variable (Figure 1). Multiple linear regressions were conducted in three models for each dependent variable. For each dependent variable, Model 1 included only the three independent variables, Model 2 additionally included control variables, and Model 3 included two interaction terms (Table 3). The researcher tested for two interactions between priest type and social support (Figure 2) and between agreement that more organizational support is needed and social support (Figure 3).

Results

Univariate Analysis

The majority of the respondents in the working data set are diocesan priests, i.e. associated with a diocese, and the remaining one-quarter are religious priests, i.e. associated with a religious institute. (Table 1) The typical respondent is a diocesan priest (75%), over the age of 55 (69%), and was 28 years old when ordained. Furthermore, the typical respondent moderately agrees that loneliness among priests is a problem, moderately agrees that living with other priests is important, and agrees that closeness among priests is a problem today. Moderate social support is typically reported, and the majority of priests agree that more organizational support is needed (55%). Table 2 demonstrates that many of these variables are significantly, but weakly associated.

Bivariate Analysis

Figure 1 illustrates trends between social support scores and social connectedness measures. Negative relationships exist between agreement that loneliness is a problem and social support, as well as between agreement that closeness among priests is lacking and social support, whereas a positive relationship exists between importance of living together and social support. As agreement that loneliness is a problem among priests increases, reported social support decreases, as demonstrated in Figure 1A. Similarly, as agreement that closeness among priests is lacking increases, decreases reported social support decreases, shown in Figure 1B. Finally, Figure 1C illustrates the contrasting positive relationship between agreement

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that living with other priests is important and reported social support also increases. Interestingly, the relationship between agreement that closeness among priests is lacking and reported social support is weaker than that of other social connectedness measures and social support.

Multiple Linear Regressions Analysis

Table 3 shows linear regression results predicting social connectedness. Social support varies among the dependent variables. Models A1 and B1 demonstrate highly significant, inverse relationships between social support and both agreement that loneliness is a problem and agreement that closeness among priests is lacking. Model 1C demonstrates a highly significant positive relationship between social support and importance of living among other priests. Models A2, B2, and C2 confirm that these relationships do not change when age at ordination and senior status are entered into the model. Specifically, for every unit increase in reported social support, there is a 0.060 unit decrease in agreement that closeness is lacking, a 0.163 unit decrease in agreement that loneliness is a problem, and a 0.178 increase in agreement that living with other priests is important.

Religious priests have significantly lower agreement with all social connectedness measures compared to diocesan priests (Models A1, B1, and C1). The relationship between religious priest status and agreement that living with other priests is important is highly significant, as seen in Model C1. These relationships do not change when control variables are entered into the equation (Models A2, B2, and C2), with the exception of Model B2, in which the relationship between religious

priest status and agreement that loneliness is a problem becomes less significant (B=-0.070, p=0.011). Religious priests experience 0.072 units less agreement that closeness is lacking, 0.070 units less agreement that loneliness is a problem, and 0.137 units less agreement that living with other priests is important.

Agreement that more organizational support is needed is only significantly associated with agreement that living among other priests is important, as seen in Model C1 (B=-0.084, p<0.001). This does not change when control variables for age ordained and senior status are entered into the models (Model C2). Agreement that more organizational support is needed is associated with 0.084 units less agreement that living with other priests is important. Interestingly, just one significant relationship exists between the control variables and measures of social connectedness.

Model A2 demonstrates a significant relationship in which those aged 55 years and older report 0.053 units higher agreement that closeness is lacking. However, none of these models explain a sizeable proportion of the relationship between social support and indicators of social connectedness (R-sq. ranges from 0.02 to 0.09). Across all three indicators of social connectedness, there are statistically significant interactions between social support and religious priest status as well as between social support and agreement that more organizational support is needed.

Figure 2 illustrates the interactions between social support and religious priest status for each dependent variable. When interactions are entered into the interaction, the adjusted R-squared value skyrockets, explaining between 62% and 63% of the

relationship between social support and social connectedness indicators (Closeness R-sq. = 0.62, Loneliness R-sq. = 0.63, Live Together R-sq. = 0.63). For diocesan priests there is almost no impact of social support on agreement that closeness is lacking or for agreement that loneliness is a problem (Figures 2A and 2B). Yet, the almost non-existent impact of social support on agreement that living with other priests is important changes directions to become positive (Figure 2C). Conversely, for religious priests, high levels of social support is related to higher agreement with each indicator of social connectedness (Figures 2A, 2B, and 2C). For religious priests is high social support is particularly strongly related to higher agreement that living with other priests is important (Figure 2C).

Figure 3 illustrates interactions between social support and belief that more organizational support is needed. For those who agree that more organizational support is needed, high social support is strongly related to higher agreement with each dependent variable (Figures 3A, 3B, and 3C). For those who disagree that more organizational support is needed, there is little to no impact of social support on agreement with each dependent variable (Figures 3A, 3B, and 3C). However, for these respondents, the interaction effect changes direction such that higher social support is very slightly related to higher agreement that living with other priests is important (Figure 3C). Overall, there are highly significant interactions between social support and priest type as well as between social support and belief that more organizational support. Religious priests and those who agree that more organizational support is needed experience strong impact of social support on agreement with social connectedness indicators, whereas diocesan priests and those

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who disagree that more organizational support is needed seem to experience no impact.

DISCUSSION

Priest Type Affects Social Support on Connectedness

Social support is a highly significant predictor of social connectedness, but has weak predictive power. Higher levels of social support predict lower levels of agreement that closeness is lacking and that loneliness is a problem, but more agreement that living among other priests is important. However, there is a strong interaction effect of priest type on this relationship. For religious priests, there is a strong relationship between increased social support and increase agreement with each social connectedness predictor, yet for diocesan priests this relationship is effectively nonexistent. This indicates that religious priests experience social support differently than diocesan priests.

Differential experience of social support between religious and diocesan priests may indicate distinct network structures based on priest type. Priests' strongest social ties tend to be with friends, and these friends tend to be the strongest source of emotional support (Bricker and Fleischer 1993). However, strong ties or friendships with non-clergy members may function differently. It is likely that religious priests, who often live in sequestered communities of fellow priests, experience stronger friendships and ties with fellow priests as compared to diocesan priests, who have potentially larger support networks, with weaker ties (Bricker and Fleischer 1993). This interaction effect may suggest that for religious priests, whose social support networks are likely smaller and denser, social support experienced is more effective in boosting social connectedness. Moreover, the interaction effect may suggest that diocesan priests' support networks are ineffective at providing social ties to buffer

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against role stress (Zickar et al. 2008) or role ambiguity (Hughes 1945), potentially leaving diocesan priests vulnerable to more negative health outcomes than religious priests. Further investigation into distinctions between religious and diocesan priests in terms of social network structures, strength of ties with fellow priests and non-priest friends, and social support network operations.

Attitude towards Organizational Support as a Confounding Variable

Priests who believe that more organizational support is needed are significantly more likely to agree that living with other priests is important. For those who agree that more support is needed, there is a strong relationship between increased social support and social connectedness indicators. However, for those who disagree, there is almost no effect. Interestingly, the more social support reported, the stronger the agreement that closeness is lacking, loneliness is a problem, and living with other priests it important. This indicates that the relationship between social support, social connectedness, and perceived organizational support needs further investigation.

It is possible that the increased level of social support is linked to increased awareness of the importance of social connectedness. This may explain the connection between agreeing that more organizational support is needed, reported social support, and strong agreement that social connection is lacking. Potentially, this relationship illuminates one aspect of career exit among priests. Priests, who experience high levels of organizational and congregational or community support during their active ministry (Wells 2013), may feel that the lack of organizational

support once they have left active ministry is very noticeable (Ladd, Merluzzi, and Cooper 2006). This may be compounded for those priests who experience forced retirement (Tanner, Zvonkovic, and Adams 2012). Stripping priests of this support sources may have critical implications for coping mechanisms for role-related stress (Virginia 1998, Zickar et al. 2008, Wells 2013) and thus also for related health outcomes, including depression (Virginia 1998; Tanner, Zvonkovic, and Adams 2012).

Further research into this relationship may reveal a difference by type of priest. Diocesan and religious priests, who likely experience different levels of congregational and organizational support during active ministry, may also experience and view the support levels differently late in their career trajectory, and after leaving active ministry. Research shows that social support has a unique impact on diocesan priests as compared to religious priests (Virginia 1998). Engaging each type of priest is important, as increased social connectedness and social support are linked to lower rates of depression and related health risks (Alpass and Neville 2003, Potočnik and Sonnentag 2013).

Senior Priests May Not Feel Particularly Isolated

Senior status is not significantly related to social connectedness indicators, with one exception. Senior priests are significantly more likely to agree that closeness among priests is lacking. This relationship has weak predictive power, and is no longer significant when interactions are entered into the model. Such findings may indicate that senior priests do not feel particularly isolated as compared to non-senior

priests. This may not support the literature, which argues that seniors are at risk of social isolation (Alpass and Neville 2003), or that senior priests in particular are at risk (Warner and Carter 1984; Virginia 1998; Hill et al. 2003; Ladd, Merluzzi, and Cooper 2006). It is worth investigating further any long-term social connectedness patterns among the Catholic priest community. Such research may reveal findings applicable to large portions of the population, e.g. childfree seniors, unmarried seniors, highly religious seniors, or seniors living in communities based on shared interests and lifestyle.

Furthermore, the ability to maintain social connectedness into old age may be impacted by social network structure (Virginia 1998). For priests with strong ties and small, dense networks, maintaining social connectedness into old age may require less socio-emotional effort, and thus may be achievable at higher rates than for those priests with weak ties and large, more porous networks. This may explain Virginia's (1998) findings that social support is most effective among priests living communally. This may also be linked to Zickar et al.'s (2008) findings that social support buffers against role stress among priests. There may be a unique buffering effect among religious priests as compared to diocesan priests. Therefore, further exploratory research into network structure among priests and between priests and communities may give insight into maintaining meaningful and supportive social connections while aging. Additional research may investigate differences in network structure and density by priest type.

The author recognizes several limitations of the data and research. First and foremost, the data used is between 15 and 25 years old, meaning that the data may not be representative of the current landscape in which priests live and experience social connection and social support. Additionally, because the Survey of American Catholic Priests data is cross-sectional, conducting longitudinal research is impossible. It is also impossible to determine whether the respondents are unique in each wave, or if there are any repeat respondents. Due to the nature of secondary data analysis, the researcher was quite limited when choosing measures, particularly in selecting control variables. American Catholic priests is a highly specific group that is not representative of larger American population groups. Findings about this group may not be generalized to larger populations. Finally, please note that because this is such a highly specific subpopulation, there is sparse research that specifically addresses social support, social ties, and social networks among this group.

CONCLUSIONS

American Catholic priests experience social support differently based on priest type, i.e. religious priests and diocesan priests experience social support distinctly. Furthermore, the relationship between social support and social connectedness appears to vary by priest type. This may indicate that unique social support network structures exist among religious and diocesan priests. Another finding showed that increased social support was linked to more agreement that social connectedness is lacking, demonstrating an unclear relationship between social support, social connectedness, and perceived organizational support which warrants further investigation. Finally, senior status is not significantly related to social connectedness indicators, which may mean that senior priests do not feel particularly isolated. Successful long-term social connectedness may be a strength of priests, which requires further research that compares network structure and long-term network maintenance by priest type.

APPENDICES

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (N = 1,994)

Variable	Mean or %	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Agreement with…				
Loneliness is problem	1.45	0.94	0	3
Closeness is problem	2.45	1.13	0	4
Living with other priests is important	1.98	0.91	0	3
Social support scale	1.76	0.43	0	3
Religious priest (0=diocesan)	25%	0.50	0	1
Organizational support needed (0=disagree)	55%	0.50	0	1
Senior, aged 55+	69%	0.46	0	1
Age at ordination (years)	28	5	21	61

Table 2. Correlation Matrix of All Variables (N = 1,994)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(1) Loneliness is problem	1.000							
(2) Closeness is problem	0.071 **	1.000						
(3) Living with other priests is important	-0.123 ***	0.086 ***	1.000					
(4) Support scale	-0.284 ***	-0.124 ***	0.274 ***	1.000				
(5) Religious priest (0=diocesan)	-0.042	-0.030	0.206 ***	-0.046 *	1.000			
(6) Organizational support needed (0=disagree)	0.123 ***	0.255 ***	0.083 ***	-0.052 *	-0.001	1.000		
(7) Senior, age 55+	-0.140 ***	0.085 ***	0.126 ***	0.028	0.102 ***	0.014	1.000	
(8) Age ordained	-0.057 *	0.050 *	0.047 *	0.000	0.197 ***	0.012	-0.028	1.000

* indicates $p \leq 0.05$, ** indicates $p \leq 0.01$, ** indicates $p \leq 0.001$

Figure 1. Mean Scores for Support Scale by Predictors of Social Connectedness (N = 1,994)
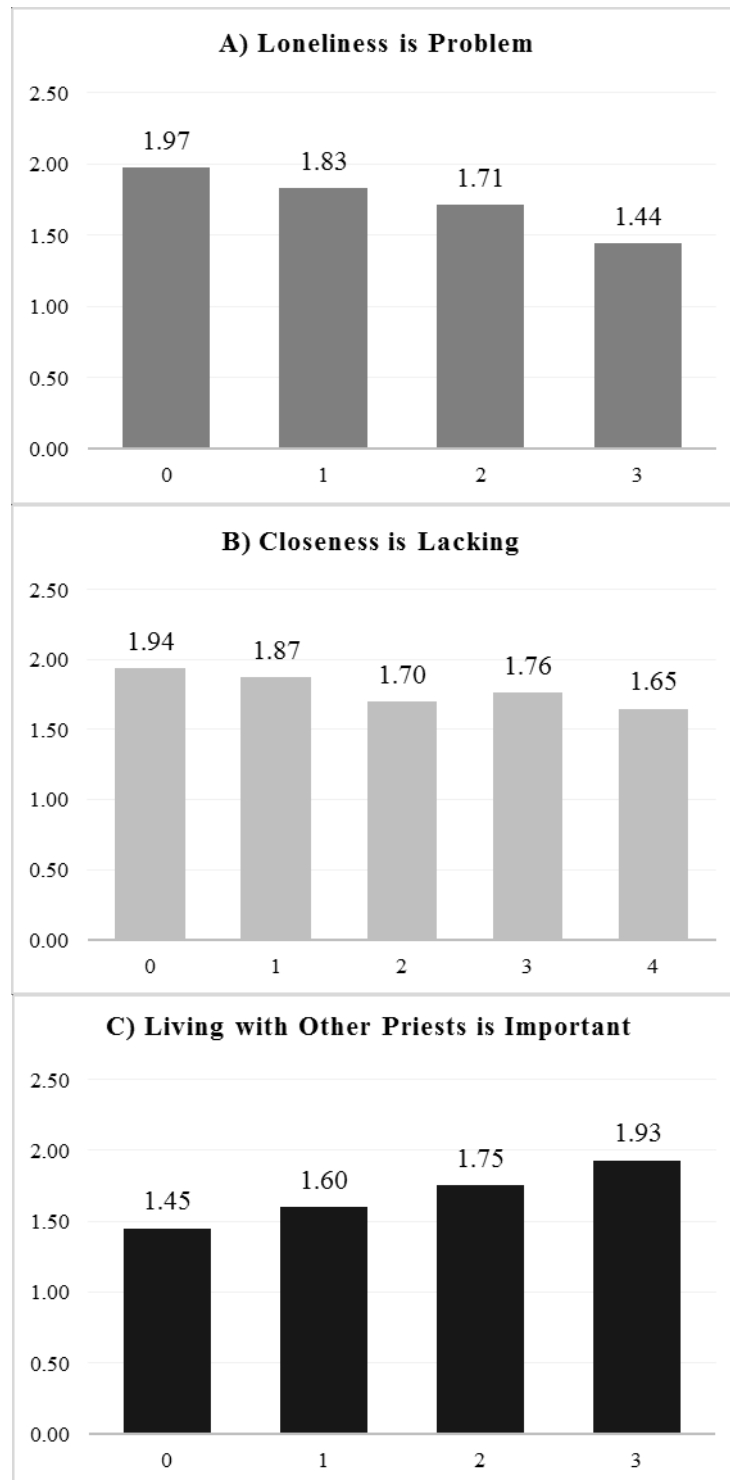
Table 3. Multilevel Linear Regression Results Predicting Social Connectedness Measures in 1993 and 2001 Samples (N = 1,994)

Covariates	A) Closeness			B) Loneliness			C) Living together		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
Support scale	-0.057 ***	-0.060 ***	-0.019 **	-0.163 ***	-0.163 ***	-0.065 ***	0.179 ***	0.178 ***	0.074 ***
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.007)	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.008)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.008)
Religious priest (0=diocesan)	-0.061 *	-0.072 *	-0.912 ***	-0.072 **	-0.070 *	-0.899 ***	-0.135 ***	-0.137 ***	-0.915 ***
	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.054)	(0.027)	(0.028)	(0.053)	(0.027)	(0.028)	(0.053)
Organizational support needed (0=disagree)	-0.024	-0.023	-1.537 ***	-0.019	-0.019	-1.488 ***	-0.084 ***	-0.084 ***	-1.514 ***
	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.038)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.038)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.037)
Senior, age 55+		0.053 *	0.012		-0.007	-0.011		0.003	-0.007
		(0.026)	(0.016)		(0.025)	(0.016)		(0.025)	(0.016)
Age ordained		0.002	0.001		-0.001	0.000		0.001	0.001
		(0.002)	(0.001)		(0.002)	(0.001)		(0.002)	(0.001)
Support scale*Religious priest			0.511 ***			0.503 ***			0.496 ***
			(0.030)			(0.029)			(0.029)
Support scale*Organizational support needed			0.864 ***			0.839 ***			0.838 ***
			(0.020)			(0.020)			(0.020)
Model Parameters & fit									
Intercept	1.927 ***	1.844 ***	1.798 ***	2.023 ***	2.044 ***	1.886 ***	1.484 ***	1.459 ***	1.648 ***
	(0.030)	(0.072)	(0.045)	(0.025)	(0.071)	(0.045)	(0.030)	(0.070)	(0.045)
Adj. *R* sq.	0.02	0.02	0.62	0.08	0.08	0.63	0.09	0.09	0.63

* indicates $p \leq 0.05$, ** indicates $p \leq 0.01$, ** indicates $p \leq 0.001$

Figure 2. Interaction Effects of Religious Priest Status and Social Support on Social Connectedness (N = 1,994)
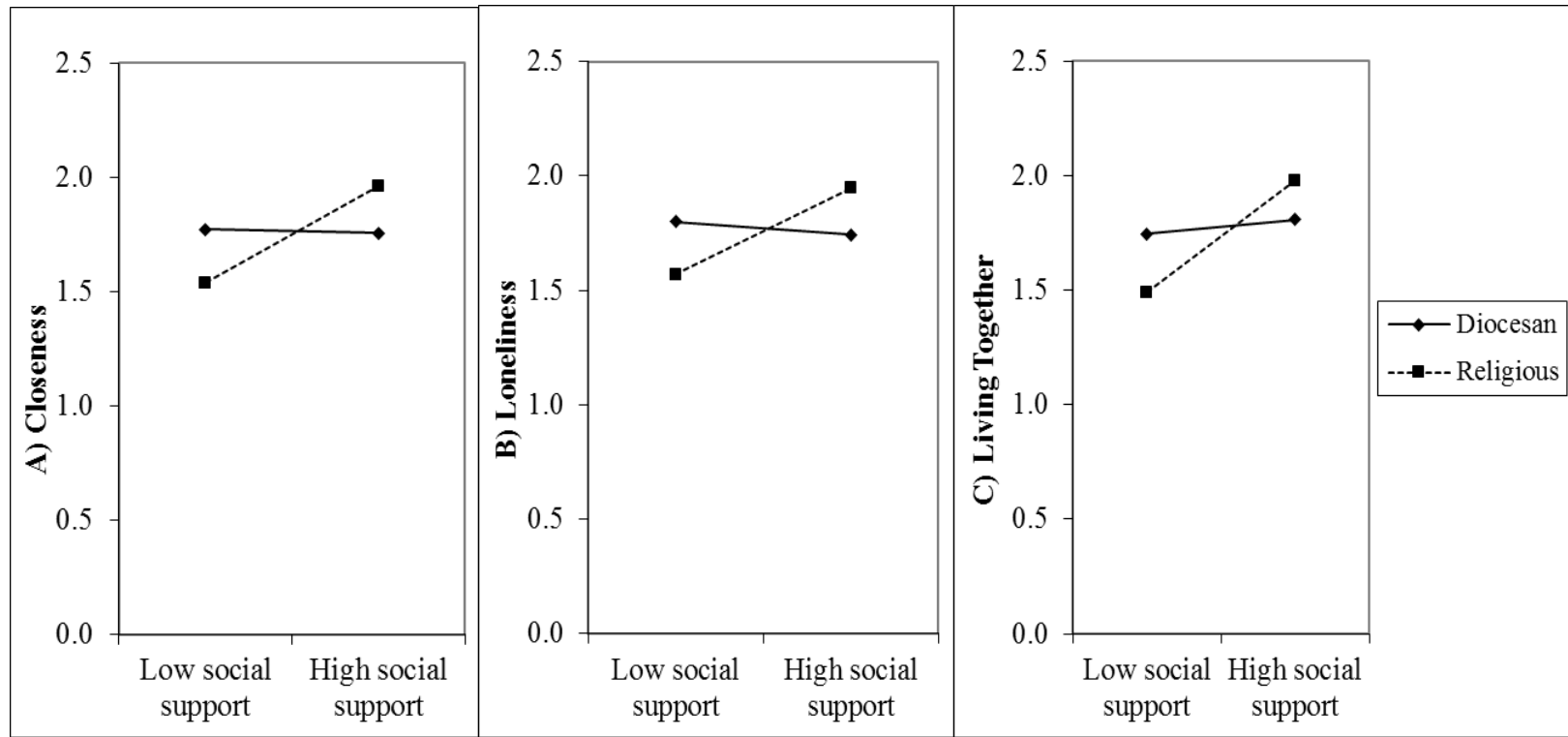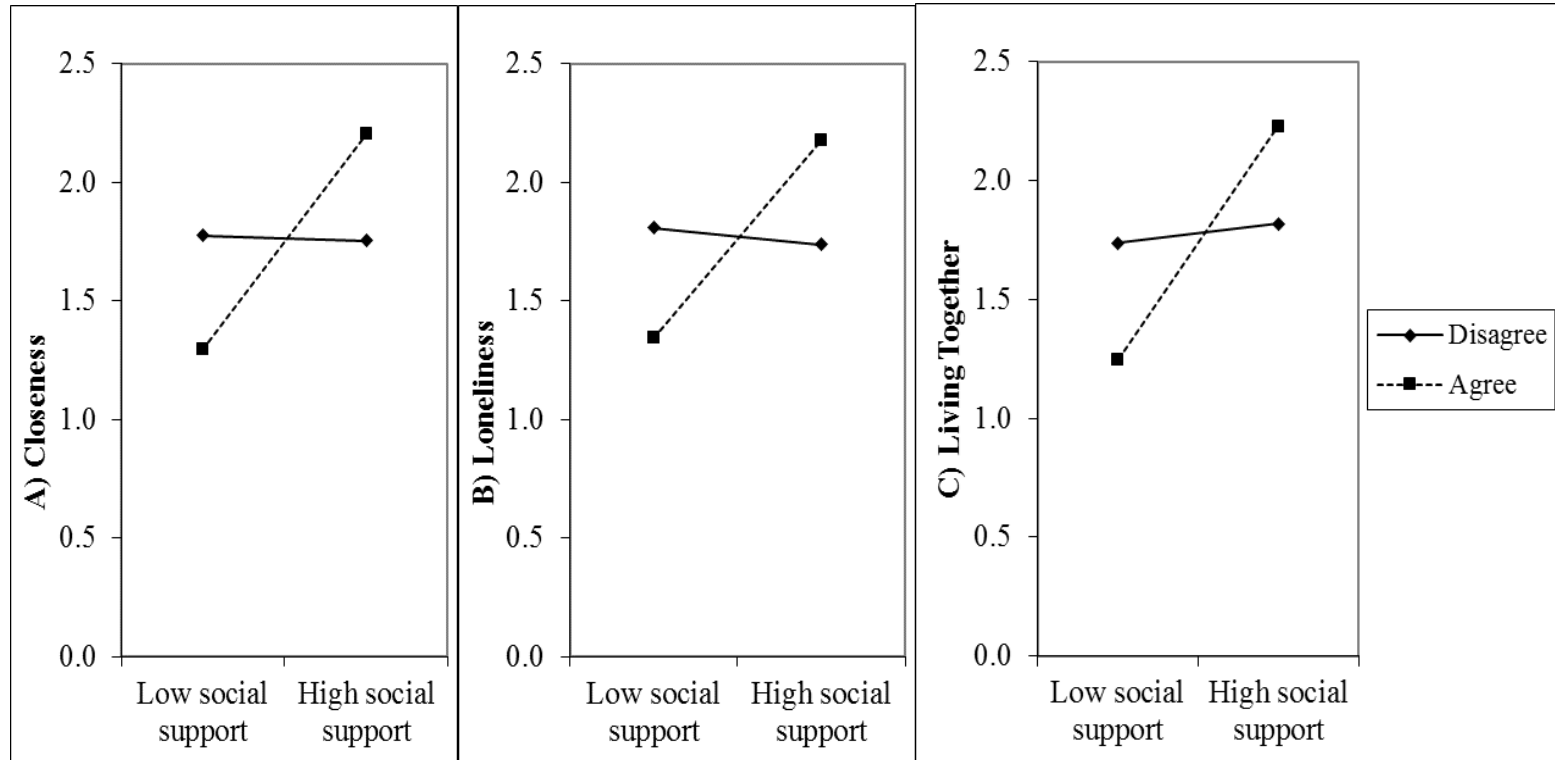
Figure 3. Interaction Effects of Belief that Organizational Support is Needed and Social Support on Social Connectedness (N = 1,994)

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