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A phenomenological exploration of Self-Supporting Ministers in the Church of England who have experienced Spiritual Abuse or Spiritual Wounding, and how it effects their Mental Health and Ministry'

Introduction

Spiritual abuse is a pervasive yet under-researched phenomenon that can have profound effects on mental health and well-being.

Although research to date suggests that anyone can be a victim of spiritual abuse, congregations, lay leadership or ministers, little is known about how these differences vary.

The Church of England has more recently begun to research the mental-health and well-being of its clergy, yet data is sparse. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the clerical experience of spiritual abuse or spiritual wounding and how it affects them psychologically, as well as their ministry.

Aims:

- To understand the experience of Self-Supporting Ministers in the Church of England who have experienced Spiritual Abuse or Spiritual Wounding
- To determine how the abuse/wounding has affected their mental health and ministry
- To ascertain how the Church of England could offer better support for Self-Supporting Ministers in such circumstances.



Methodology

Research was approved through the University of Chesters ethics committee and used a qualitative methodology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

This is a method used widely in the fields of psychology and social sciences as it focuses on exploring how individuals make sense of their own specific experiences.

This was achieved through in-depth interviews of 10 participants. Heterogeneous sampling was achieved by not differentiating participants by age, gender, or sexuality etcetera. Reasonable adjustments were made for neurodivergent participants in the way data was collected or prompts and memory jogger notes were used.

Analysis

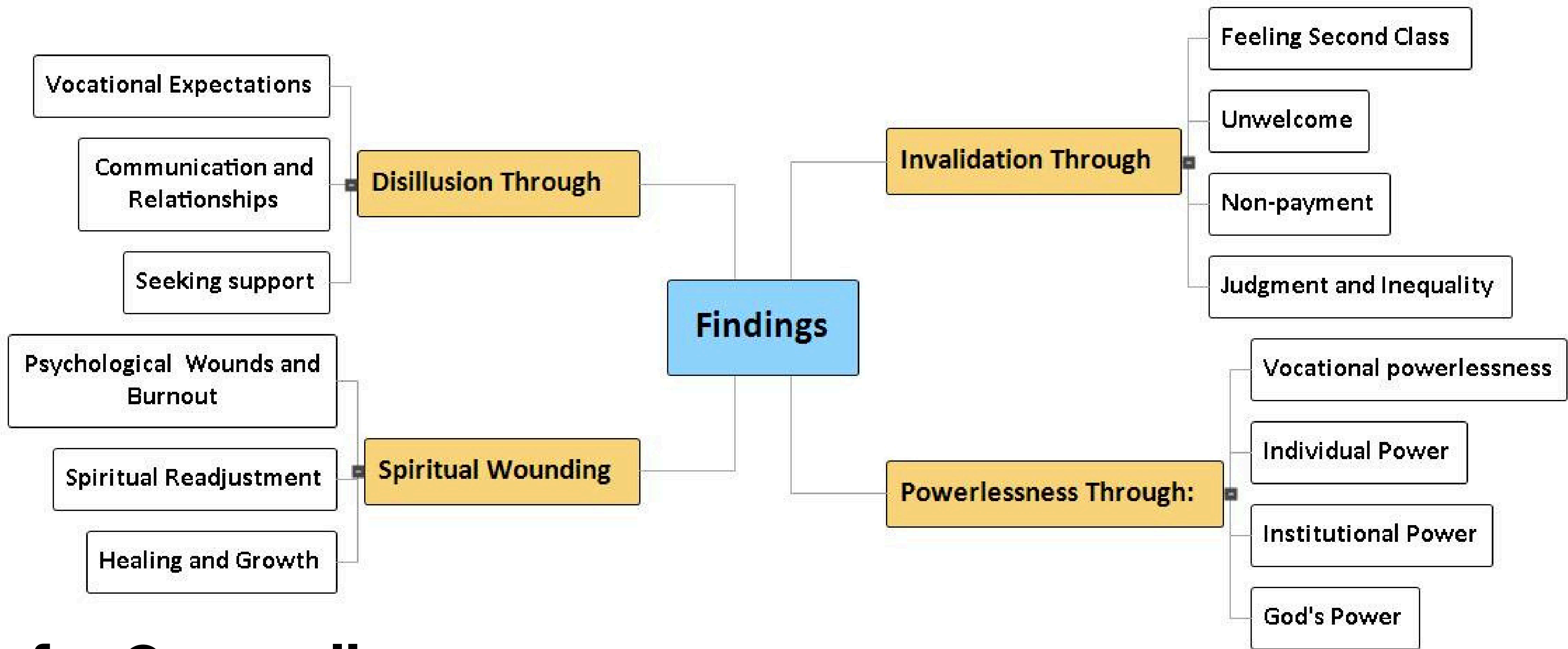
Transcriptions were made of the interviews in order to understand how participants perceive and make sense of their experiences. this was achieved through:

- Reading and re reading transcriptions to immerse in the data
- Taking detailed descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes.
- Identifying patterns or themes within the transcript for each participant to make meaning from their experience and make sure they represent their individual experience
- Cross checking between transcripts for co-occurring patterns and themes and making sure they represent the participants shared experiences.
- Cross checking against existing literature to see how theses fit or contrast the current knowledge.

Findings

Preliminary findings suggest a correlation between the clerical and lay experiences of SA, with themes of invalidation, use of power, and identity. While lay experiences of Spiritual Abuse might leave individuals struggling with their faith, there are indications that Self-Supporting Ministers go through a period of readjustment of their ministerial identity.

Initial findings indicate a need for the Church of England to be aware of interpersonal dynamics between all clergy and the lay teams they work with in order to better offer training, supervision, support and mediation.



Implications for Counsellors:

While some participants were offered counselling, they were unsure of its effectiveness. Therefore, it is essential for counsellors working with clergy not only have an awareness of how these experiences affect clergy; including loss of trust and autonomy, leading to depression, anxiety, PTSD, insomnia, increased stress and burnout, but also of the system in which they are working and how this operates.

While experiences are similar to other experiences of Spiritual Abuse, participants also expressed a readjustment in how they understood their vocation, identity, and role as a minister. Counsellors who have training in religion and spirituality would therefore be well positioned to help clergy reflect on their spiritual identity.

Conclusion

Findings indicate that clergy are experiencing psychological wounds through their work as self-supporting ministers.

For some this might be experienced through judgement from others, workplace bullying, or through coercive or controlling behaviours. For others, this includes the misuse of scripture or God, in order to undermined their autonomy and ability, , indicating Spiritual Abuse.

Many experienced burnout and needed time away from ministry to reevaluate their role within the church.

