Priests, Presbyteres and Paradoxes

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This paper draws from a larger study on married Greek Orthodox clergy and the problem of role ambiguity and confusion encountered in their ministry. A pattern of ownership emerged, where clergy owned the “position” of Priest and Presbytera, but not all the roles which are contested among the clergy, such as the Church hierarchy and parishioners. This paper posits that the major contributing factor is the conflation of “role” and “position” and that this confusion creates paradoxes. This paper aims to raise awareness of these paradoxes and the problems they cause.

Introduction

This paper draws insights from a larger phenomenological study on married Greek Orthodox clergy in contemporary society. It is an exploration of the roles of the Priest and Presbytera under the wing of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia.1 The research topic overall sits within organisation cultural and practice frameworks, taking into account “the total sum of the formal and informal rules of behaviour and performance and communication” (Liddell, 2003:167). This is narrowed down to religious organisations where there appears to be an “invisible culture” (Kaye, 1996), with a specific focus on the Greek Orthodox Church in an Australian context.

Scope of the Problem

The study highlights that role ambiguity and confusion exist particularly where the roles of the married clergy, the Priest and (by extension) the Presbytera are not clearly defined. Drawing from Kahn’s (1964) views role ambiguity is seen as a discrepancy

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1 As a matter of style where the term Priest is used, it refers to Greek Orthodox clergy/ministers; Presbytera refers to the Greek Orthodox Priest’s wife; married clergy refers to Eastern Orthodox ordained clergy and Greek Orthodox specifically; Archdiocese refers to the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia; Church, Church community, parish or parishioners refers to the Eastern Orthodox Church and its congregation of faithful and more specifically Greek Orthodox in the Australian context.
between the information available to a person and the information required to adequately perform their role (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, & Snoek, 1964). It is this lack of clarity, assumptions, vague ideas and presuppositions, coupled with increasingly unrealistic expectations of occupational and personal competencies of the Priest and possibly the Presbytera from the Church, parishioners and each other (Tsacalos, 2007), about these perceptions of the roles of the married clergy, that form the overarching problem of this research, namely, role ambiguity, role confusion and potential role conflict. It appears that a major source of this role confusion is the paradox that “position” is not “role”. While some roles attached to the position of “Priest” are clear and unambiguous, others — and nearly every role attached to the position of “Presbytera” — are contested.

Aims

This paper continues the task of providing a voice for the Priest and Presbytera sharing insights into the roles of married Greek Orthodox clergy in the Australian context. It draws a clearer picture of the dynamics at play and the ensuing paradoxes caused by conflating roles and position, thereby empowering the Priests and Presbyteres to better inform their practice and providing information to the Church about the nature of those paradoxes. It further presents an opportunity for married clergy to expand their understanding of the impact these roles have on their lives, within their professional, public, personal and private domains. It is envisioned these insights could pave the way to a broader perspective of the diverse and multi-dimensional nature of these roles, drawing attention to how things should be (the expectations), through raising awareness of how things are (the realities) with an emerging framework for (potential) future practice or of how things could be (the hope).

Parameters

This research is positioned within the parameters of the very patriarchal and hierarchal framework within the Eastern Orthodox Tradition, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia and the Greek culture\(^2\) (Barrett, 1999). In order for this research to be useful for those living and working within this cultural context, it is necessary to remain within these cultural norms. Therefore, this research is not conducted from a feminist perspective or a fully critical analysis framework. However, it does offer a foundation for further exploration of these findings through other analytical perspectives.

Nothing apart from the author’s own work has been published in this area. This continues to be groundbreaking research. Earlier work (Tsacalos, 2007) presented

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\(^2\) Where the term *culture/cultural* is used draws from the classic anthropological sense in relation to the fabric and texture of the respondent’s distinctive manner and way of life (Barrett, 1999).
preliminary findings highlighting how married clergy perform certain functions and work within their parishes in addition to filling roles within their own families. It presented some elements and aspects on the Priest’s life in general and briefly looked at the roles of the Presbytera, finding that the nebulous and widely divergent ideas of what a Priest and Presbytera should be and do were causing varying degrees of anxiety and stress. This is mainly because such roles require negotiation of a multiplicity of expectations from Church, parishioners and each other, particularly where boundaries and restrictions within their ministry need to be faced. This complexity further confirmed that the roles of the Priest as well as the Presbytera can be very diverse, covering multiple dimensions of Spiritual, community, administrative, social and other work, as well as personal roles of spouse and parent. It is the varied expectations of these roles, not only according to the clergy performing them, but also according to different groups of parishioners and the hierarchy within the Church, that bring us back to our original problem of role ambiguity and confusion.

Role, Position and Paradox

As the analysis progressed from the earlier work noted above, several interesting findings emerged. These were that the roles of the Priest and Presbytera were enmeshed within a complex maze of paradoxes. These paradoxes began with the confusion between roles and position and the ensuing problems such a dilemma created. The paradoxes started when the terms “position” and “role” were used interchangeably, causing the original problem of role ambiguity and confusion. In fact it became increasingly clear that position is not role, and a distinction needed to be drawn between them.

Another finding showed that there is a distinct pattern of ownership emerging within the position which is not reflected in the role. That is, “Position” is owned by the married clergy filling the positions of Priest and Presbytera (Biddle & Thomas, 1979; Linton, 1936; Merton, 1949). However, the roles subsequent to these positions are not as clearly owned as they are dependent on understandings, attitudes and interpretations of those positions by the Priest, Presbytera, Church and parishioners. These multiple expectations of the roles within the position of the Priest and Presbytera are surrounded by a tradition of vague ideas and stories passed down from generation to generation (Tsacalos, 2004).

The confusion this causes is most particularly felt by the Presbytera. For the Priest, the spiritual roles are most closely identified with his position, and there is less ambiguity surrounding these roles. The Presbytera’s position carries no such clear-cut roles and, as noted earlier, this results in a mass of confusion. However, the non-spiritual roles performed by the Priest can also be mired in uncertainty.

Another finding now being investigated is the differing attitudes to roles caused by parishioner migration patterns and intergenerational culturality. However, this is beyond the scope of this paper and will be addressed at a later date.
Methodology

The research project sits within a qualitative research framework. Interpretation was conducted within a phenomenological approach and a analysis framework involving the social constructionist paradigm (Creswell, 1998; Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Moustakas, 1994).

Participants3 were asked to tell their stories, to share their perceptions, expectations, experiences and realities of their roles as a Priest, Presbyter and married clergy (before becoming a Priest and Presbyter and after, as married clergy). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Priests and Presbyterianes, individually and together. Participants were also asked to talk about the types of work, activities and tasks (roles) they performed, in relation to their position, namely paid, unpaid, volunteer and otherwise expected. The analysis took the form of unpacking the work and the roles of the Priest and Presbyter, taking into account the participants’ varied and multiple perceptions, experiences and realities. This process allowed a closer look at the complexities of these roles within their practice and cultural settings (Barrett, 1999; Creswell, 2007).

The Unravelling Process

While “position” seemed clear cut at the time, there was a supposition that the roles of the Priest and the Presbyter are also clear-cut and easily identified. In fact they are not. This facilitated a closer look at the nuances of “position” and the definition of “role”. Therefore, role theory (Biddle & Thomas, 1979; Linton, 1938; Merton, 1949) became the starting point in trying to clarify the difference between “position” and “roles”. Drawing from role theory, a role in its barest form is a set of expectations with regard to the actions appropriate to a social position (Biddle & Thomas, 1979; Linton, 1938; Merton, 1949), in this instance, the positions of Priest and Presbyter. Furthermore, social position is closely linked to the notion of role (Linton, 1936). Diverse and multi-dimensional roles or role-sets (Payne, 1997) emanate from a position. However, the literature does not appear to recognise the distinction between “role” and “position” to the degree required for an understanding of the problems experienced by Greek Orthodox married clergy.

Further analysis, however, provided a framework for identifying and exploring the various factors interwoven within the Priest and Presbyterianes’ work practice, as identified by the participants, both professionally and personally. The identified phenomena have been classified into several categories: the work; position and roles; and paradoxes. The paradox occurs when the work, role and position are not differentiated.

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3 The target group were drawn from Priests and Presbyterianes in parishes under the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese across Australia. Nine clergy couples were interviewed, drawing from a wide span of ages and years in as married clergy.
The Work

Below is a brief outline of the types of work the Priest and Presbytera do. It is important to note that these lists are by no means exhaustive.

For the Priest these include the following:

*Spiritual work:* performing specific Church services such as Divine Liturgies, Holy Unction (Blessing of the Oil Service), prayers for the sick, Confession and providing spiritual comfort, support and guidance by listening to people’s problems, concerns, and troubles;

*Church work:* performing official ceremonies e.g. marriages, baptisms, funerals according to the legal requirements of Church and State;

*Community and social work:* visiting the sick, advocacy, facilitating groups, Board/Committee member (apart from Church committees), being a teacher of Religious Education in mainstream schools, facilitating youth groups, Bible Study groups, and attending various Church conferences;

*Church administration work:* being an active and Executive member of the Parish Board/Committee and all Church committees such as Ladies Auxiliary and Youth Groups; organising Church committees (as deemed necessary), overseeing Parish welfare organisations, overseeing Church finances, attending to correspondence, organising maintenance of Church properties and reporting to the Archdiocese;

*Other work:* often include things like attending youth soccer games to provide moral support (as articulated by respondents); parenting one’s own children; and maintaining a good relationship with one’s wife.

This list, while accurate, does not fully portray the essence and depth of dedication and service the clergy give to the parishioners. Here are some quotes by participants reflecting on the scope of their ministry:

“It appears that all we do are Services that is liturgies, weddings, baptisms and funerals. When in fact, there is an enormous social demand on the Priest, where the Priest is expected to participate in every aspect of communal life for the Orthodox people.”

“... the church is not just a place of worship; it is a community meeting point where they (the parishioners) can share their experiences, their common language, to reminisce about the mother land.”

“... all Priests are on call 24/7, going to hospitals, receptions, attending parishioner’s birthday celebrations, attending someone’s emergency — even if that means leaving your own child’s important occasion.”
“... the Priest needs to be tolerant, he cannot raise his voice, he has to be patient with those who demand his services, particularly with the ‘Greek gossip vine’ and the human need to know all aspects of the priest's personal life.”

“... being called to an accident and seeing a dead person in the middle of the road; trying to cope with the visual presence of seeing the deceased and then coping with the family's reaction to this tragic circumstance.”

“... we have to be all things to all people to lead them to salvation, that means speaking the truth as far as the Church Dogma, Church Doctrine and Canon Law and discipline is concerned.”

For the Presbytera some of the types of work she could do (by default as the Priest's wife) may include the following:

*Spiritual work:* facilitating Bible Study groups for women, comforting the grieving; teaching Religious Education in mainstream schools;

*Church work:* assisting in fund raising efforts, assisting the Priest (where needed or requested), sitting on Church committees, attending various Church conferences; organising and being hostess at Church functions for visiting Church dignitaries, and making sure that all Church cloths, covers and linens are well kept;

*Church administration work:* being an active member of the Parish Committees (such as the Ladies Auxiliary, Youth Groups, and fund raising events), answering phones, attending to correspondence, doing the banking for the Priest, attending or participating in ecclesiastic retreats;

*Community and social work:* visiting the sick, advocating for parishioners, facilitating groups, sitting on non-Church committees within the parish, facilitating youth groups and being a guest speaker at Church conferences;

*Other work:* attending non-Church functions in support of the Priest; parenting; taking on more parental duties when the Priest is absent on Church or parish work; maintaining a good relationship with one's husband.

Again, this list does not capture the essence of the love and dedication the Presbyteres give to their Church. Here are some quotes from the Presbyteres:

“Applying my ‘Presbytera’ knowledge, capacity and love for the church, I began teaching the young people of our Church to make *Prosforo* bread (used during the Divine Liturgy in the preparation of the Holy Communion).”

“... at Easter time we all sit within the Church area and make crosses for Palm Sunday, and taught the children how to prepare the Red Eggs for Easter with young and old, sharing our knowledge of the Church, our faith and our culture.”
“... I have not made his ministry my ministry.”

“... some people believe the Presbyter’s name should remain a mystery. We should remain nameless.”

“... people will ask you to pray for them... they say ‘you have a direct line with the forces’, and it’s expected of you.”

“... my job is to raise my children, have a cooked meal for my husband, and provide comfort and support and a place where he can relax... because nobody else will.”

The Unpacking Process

Once the work was identified, the process of unpacking the roles followed. These roles for the Priest would look something like this: Spiritual Counsellor; Spiritual Father/Confessor; Minister of Religion; Church worker; Administrator; Pastoral worker; community & social worker; husband/partner; father; and support person (to teachers, committee members, language school students and parents, family members of a deceased).

The Presbyter’s roles within the Church and parish are different because the focus is on her being the wife of the Priest, but not in her own right, as hers is a position acquired through marriage to the Priest. As noted in the earlier work discussed above (Tsacalos, 2007), the extent of her roles is first and primarily defined by the Priest. Nevertheless, if she does have roles from her position as Presbyter, she can also experience them in a variety of ways. The combination of roles for the Presbyter could potentially be: wife/partner; mother; Spiritual worker; Volunteer Church worker; Volunteer Church administrator; Volunteer community worker within the parish; Volunteer social worker within the parish; professional/career woman; support person (to her husband, and to parishioners, possibly by default, because of her position).

It is interesting to note that there are many permutations to the roles the Presbyter might play. She could have all, none, or a selection of these roles. Each role the Presbyter takes on will be a choice influenced by factors which will be discussed later.

Clarification between Role and Position — Role is not Position; Position is not Role

From this analysis of work and roles so far, there seems to be little ambiguity. These are roles common to most ministers of religion, and in some churches, their wives. However even for the Priests, there is in fact, uncertainty, depending on the differing expectations of their families, parishioners, and Church hierarchy. As the Priests talk about their various roles, it becomes clear that within that diversity some roles could be considered to have a more general nature, being diffuse or fluid (Linton, 1936; Merton, 1949). Others are more tightly defined (static or fixed) set within boundaries, with no room to move, carrying a set of behavioural expectations prescribed by Dogma and
Canon Law. These consist of spiritual guidelines, boundaries and professional ethics, and the ecclesiastical structure prescribed by the Archdiocese, acting as a governing body with a Constitution and legislation, operating by set processes and procedures. For example, an individual Priest fills a position formally assigned through ordination, thereby defining who he is, and can therefore perform a wedding ceremony as the “Minister of Religion” which is a role, that is, what he does, within set processes and procedures laid down by the Church. Position here conflates with role. However, not all roles are so unambiguous. For example, the role of spiritual confessor is self-evidently part of the position of Priest. However there is no clear line between the roles of confessor and counsellor, such that the Priest, while carrying on the work of a confessor or advisor, can find he is discussing matters outside religious values and thereby take on the role of Social Worker — for example, when asked for help with marital problems. This may be expected by some parishioners, but be resisted by others (particularly where the Priest holds no such formal qualifications) who might feel that the role of Social Worker is a professional position requiring the appropriate qualifications and training. Role ambiguity can arise therefore, depending on the situation, personal circumstance, expectations from these personal circumstances and the existence or otherwise of rules and guidelines laid down by the Church.

Additionally, it appears that there are some roles which are static and fluid simultaneously. For example, the Priest as Chairperson on the Parish Committee is a fixed role set out in the Patriarchal Constitution (1959) that must be performed within certain guidelines. The performance of that role, though, can be affected by the individual Priest’s interpretation of that role which in effect, makes it fluid. This interpretation is influenced by the perceptions, expectations, understandings, experience and skills each Priest brings to his ministry. These might or might not coincide with the expectations of the Church hierarchy in relation to the Priest. All the participants acknowledged that each role also carries specific expectations, rights and obligations within the Church as a workplace, which in turn, are subject to the interpretation of the Church Hierarchy. This role confusion and conflict is further complicated by the parishioners. Depending on age, upbringing (Greek migrant or descendant of migrants), and cultural conditioning (Bauman, 1999), expectations by parishioners of the roles of a Priest and by extension, his wife, could vary widely. In the case of the Chair of the Parish Committee referred to above, the role may also be affected by the expectations of parishioners on the Committee, and these expectations may in turn have been formed by how a previous Priest performed the role. All of this creates anxiety and stress, the emotional cost from this confusion and conflict.

The respondents all recognised that the relationships associated with the roles and the position represented the area in which they were most likely to encounter tension (role conflict) in coping with the requirements of potentially incompatible roles. For example, the Priest has to work many long hours to serve his ministry, but at the same time, should he be married, he would be expected home for dinner with his wife, taking out the garbage and listening to her bad day (Tsacalos, 2007).
the respondents (Priests and Presbyteres) felt this was the area they struggled with most. The Priests admitted to feeling helpless, unable to alter the situation of either in order to meet the obligations of both. In most cases the conflict is very real and very painful. Role fluidity can also potentially cause problems in relation to the Priest’s relationships with leading parishioners serving in Church positions or as members of Church committees responsible for managing Church-run schools and charities. The divisions of responsibility in such situations may not always be clear, leading to tensions in which the lay leaders may contest the authority of the Priest.

The case of the Presbytera is even worse. Her position is informally assigned through marriage yet is fixed or static, governed by a set of expectations and personal attributes ascribed by the Eastern Orthodox Holy Church Fathers (Athanasopoulos, 2002). However, she might or might not fulfil some of the roles available to that position, depending on her husband’s expectations. He has the ultimate say over the extent of her activities within the Church, should she desire such involvement. If she is involved, the roles and how she fills them will depend on the perceptions and expectations of not only her husband and herself, but those of the parishioners and even the Church hierarchy. All will have widely differing expectations of what a Presbytera should do and how she should look and behave (Athanasopoulos, 2002; Tsacalos, 2007). Older migrant parishioners may expect the Presbytera to dress and behave according to her traditional Greek role as “mother of the parish” with the stereotypical appearance of the Greek mother (Tsacalos, 2004), while Australian-born parishioners may expect her to be more stylish and modern in dress and appearance as befits a representative of the Church.

When asked what their roles were within their husbands’ ministry the Presbyteres’ responses varied from being very actively involved in the Church as the Presbytera, that is sitting on Committees, helping with fund raising functions and activities, and being part of the overall care for the people of the Church, to the other extreme of not being involved at all and really only having the title of Presbytera by default. A few such Presbyteres were made uncomfortable even by being addressed by their title. Others, who took on more roles, were addressed by their title all the time, to the point where one respondent said she had almost forgotten her given name, indicating a possible loss of identity. Consequently, the evidence highlights the notion that the Presbytera has to make it all fit around her husband’s ministry. There are no actual fixed roles whatever. Therefore, while the Presbytera’s position is static, through the analytical process, we discover that her role or roles are the opposite. The Presbytera’s roles are all fluid.

With this in mind one could then argue that the roles conferred by their positions are a key part of the Priest and Presbytera’s social identity, so part of their self-concept will probably be based on how they think others see them. However, these perceptions of others will vary according to which roles they fill and also the expectations of these roles by the perceivers, and their overarching perceptions of what a Priest or Presbytera should be (Biddle & Thomas, 1979; Linton, 1936; Merton, 1968). It seems
clear from this analysis that Role is not Position; Position is not Role. The position of “Priest” will only give a limited insight into the roles carried by that position, and the position of “Presbytera” will give none whatsoever.

**Paradoxes: roles that keep coming back to their own opposite**

Paradoxes arise from the conflation of role and position. The positions of the Priest and Presbytera are clear cut and static. However their roles have been identified as either static or fluid, and most confusingly, can be a combination of both. For example a Priest sits on a parish committee as Chairperson: the role of the chairperson is fixed, governed by the Patriarchal Constitution (1959). However the interpretation and enactment of that role could be flexible depending on the individual Priest's experience, perceptions and interpretation of that role. Equally, it can depend on the experience, perceptions and interpretation of the role by others on the committee, especially if those committee members have served with earlier Priests. This role displays a classic mixture of fixed and fluid elements, where it is fluid yet predefined. It is this constant shifting between static and fluid which creates the paradox. Any belief that roles arising from the fixed positions of Priest and Presbytera can be easily defined is therefore misleading. Such perceptions can result in creating positions that loop back into opposites. These roles will seem visible, yet be also invisible; set, yet also fluid; flexible, yet also bounded by expectations; expected, but perhaps not there. Drawing from Bauman’s (1999) cultural discourse, an autonomy and at the same time, a vulnerability, is often inherent in the roles of the Priest and in the case of the Presbytera's role, there is often evidence of confused autonomy, and a considerable vulnerability, all of which indicate the existence of the identified paradoxes (Bauman, 1999).

**Conclusion**

The major overall finding is that the source of much role conflict lies in the difference between role and position. Married clergy each have positions, Priest and Presbytera, which are unchanging. For the Priest, there are certain behaviours which are associated with the “position” which are also unchanging, for example, taking services and hearing confession. However, these positions are surrounded by expectations from the married clergy themselves, from each other, and from different levels of the Church hierarchy, parishioners, and co-workers in the parish such as committee members and outsiders. It is only when the terms role and position are used interchangeably, or when one does not realise that position is not role, that the problems of role ambiguity and role confusion arise. Such problems can often affect the ways in which married Greek Orthodox clergy perform many of the roles associated with their positions. They are also subject to feedback on how they are perceived as performing these roles, giving
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rise to uncomfortable paradoxes. If those who believe they are interacting with the positions of Priest and Presbytera (including themselves), understand the complex web of individual perceptions and expectations surrounding the roles filled by the persons in those positions, they may well develop further insight into how those roles can disappear or blend or clash depending on a given situation. Such awareness might well lead to considerably less anxiety.

All the participants felt that the ambiguity and confusion inherent in these paradoxes could potentially lead to conflict due to the varying expectations of married clergy held by the Church, fellow clergy, parishioners and each other, and reciprocal expectations by all of these parties. This conflict has a further potential to create emotional costs such as anxiety, stress and burnout. The solution may lie in raising awareness within the married clergy themselves and the Church, as a necessary first step towards wider education and conflict resolution.

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