

NUNS MAKING FUN:  
AN EXPLORATION OF HUMOR AMONG WOMEN RELIGIOUS

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THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper discusses the role and use of humor in the lives of nuns and consecrated women. A qualitative study consisting of interviews with nuns and consecrated women was conducted to produce data about the way in which they use humor. Humor among these women was examined through the framework of identity and social identity theories, as well as front and back stage presentation, and theories of humor as a method of emotion management for coping with stress. Results show that Catholic and women religious social identities influence the women's perspective of humor as a positive force and a method of creating social cohesion, as well as their commitment to avoiding harmful humor, more strongly than role identities. Person identities are more important than social ones in determining when, and what types of, humor could be used. The nuns' use of humor also reveals that their social identity as nuns is not necessarily their primary and most salient identity, and women religious often identify strongly with those in their age group. In backstage settings humor is universally accepted, and whether it is allowed on the front stage is determined by community social identity as well as person identity. Front stage faux pas are fair game for back stage mockery. I also found that the nuns enjoy and employ all categories of humor defined by Zijderfeld (1983). Additionally, while humor is used to cope with stress, its effectiveness in doing so is mediated by the valence of

negative emotions felt.

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## CHAPTER 1

### LITERATURE REVIEW

*What happens if you don't pay your exorcist?*

*You get repossessed!*

Popular culture has encouraged laughing at Roman Catholic nuns for years. Is this exchange reciprocal? While some research has been done into the ways certain types of people may use humor, particularly as a method of emotion management to help in coping with life's stressors, none of this research focuses small groups associated with Catholicism, such as nuns and consecrated women. While nuns—who live in communities together, take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and are not considered part of the laity—have existed for centuries, consecrated women are a newer sect of lay women who also live in communities and take the same vows. The two groups are very similar, and are both referred to within the Catholic Church with the label “women religious.” Women religious exhibit very strong ties to this social identity as well as to their broader social identity as Catholics. Studying humor in small, deeply committed groups such as these provides the opportunity to learn more about its use in emotion management as well as how it affects and is affected by identity processes. Understanding more about how nuns and consecrated women cope will be beneficial to others who regularly encounter the same stressors, such as social workers, teachers, and other clergy. Additionally, studies such as this one provide a venue for research into front and back stage behaviors and how cohesion among in-groups is developed and maintained.

Social psychology has developed a sociology of humor with a heavy focus on how humor affects group processes, and how it is used for coping and emotion management (Francis 1994).

It is widely considered to be a social, symbolic interaction rather than an individual experience (Francis 1988; Golozubov 2014; Mead 1934). It can be used to challenge notions of reality, unite people with common perspectives, and stigmatize outsiders (Yoels and Clair 1995; Zijderfeld 1983). It is subject to feeling rules as well as to the standards of conduct determined by person, role, and group identities (Hochschild 1979; Moore 2017). In addition, research has been conducted into how various types of people cope with stress, with some works specifically exploring how nuns and other religious figures address occupational stress (Parenteau et al. 2011; Puffer et al. 2012). Finally, a number of studies that have addressed the relationship between the emotion work of coping and humor confirm that humor is often a useful tool for dealing with stress (Francis 1994; Parkhill et al. 2011; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001; Sanders 2004).

Particularly within the sociology of humor, where new research is scarce, many studies indicate the need for more exploration of this phenomenon (Francis 1988; Zijderfeld 1995). While research about why people find things funny is more prominent, there is a pronounced lack of research on the way people use humor (Francis 1994). Its importance within organizations as a means of communication especially deserves attention (Yarwood 1995). While some studies involving coping have been conducted with nuns and other religious populations, none of the existing studies explore how nuns or consecrated women characterize humor or its relationship with coping. For example, Danner, Snowdon, and Friesen (2001) approached the topic of emotion management and optimism on the health of nuns, but the role of humor was not considered. Most studies involving nuns and coping focus on the nature and effect of religious coping methods in dealing with adverse situations (Parenteau et al. 2011; Proffitt et al. 2007).

The present inquiry, which consists of interviews with several Roman Catholic nuns and consecrated women, seeks to advance our knowledge of the sociology of humor through studying humor among nuns and consecrated women, including the relevance of identity theory and social identity to these women's perceptions of and rules regarding humor, how Goffman's (1959) theory of front and back stage presentations can be applied its usage, and its effectiveness as a tool for coping with stress and negative emotions in daily life. It asks whether existing theories of humor, identity, and emotion management may be applicable to these populations.

### **The Social Nature of Humor**

Humor is most crucially an interaction between the humorous and the humored, one which results in amusement and positive affect. The person who created humor does not have to have done so intentionally; rather, onlookers have the final say in whether a situation is humorous and express their verdict through laughter, or lack thereof. It is possible for an intentional attempt at humor to fail if those at whom it is directed do not find it funny (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001; Zijderfeld 1983). As such, society as a group decides what constitutes a humorous situation (Francis 1994; Golobuzov 2014). Like other behaviors, a person's attempts at humor, as well as their reaction to potentially humorous situations, "can be understood only in terms of the behavior of the whole social group of which he is a member, since his individual acts are involved in larger, social acts which go beyond himself and which implicate the other members of that group" (Mead 1934:6-7). Mead's (1934:150) notes on "the conversation of gestures" can be applied to humor: a humorous pronouncement draws forth the gesture of laughter, which may elicit more humorous statements. If the pronouncement does not result in laughter, the speaker may alter their behavior by not attempting any further jokes. This is true of conversations with

the self as well: if one finds one's own thoughts of attempts at humor internally effective or distasteful, behavior will be altered accordingly before engaging in conversations with others. One's ability to evaluate the attempts effectively relies on familiarity with the culture of, and the ability to see the attempts from the perspectives of, the people with whom one intends to interact. In short, humor can be examined through the social psychological lens of symbolic interactionism (Francis 1988).

Humor is a uniquely human behavior and its expression allows members of the same society to bond with each other and exclude outsiders (Golobuzov 2014; Yarwood 1995; Yoels and Clair 1995). People can intentionally employ humor as a tool to achieve group-related goals, such as ingratiating oneself to others, or alleviating boredom (Cooper 2005; Francis 1994; Yarwood 1995). A shared cultural understanding is necessary for people to understand each other's humor, and groups often employ their own specific style of humor (Francis 1988; Moore 2017). One's personal sense of humor will be mediated by the sense of humor of the group with which they engage, and in a group setting, the group's sense of humor often takes precedent over one's individual sense (Moore 2017). When used as a bonding and excluding mechanism, it helps group members define themselves as insiders and reaffirm their worldviews via a shared sense of humor (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001; Sanders 2004). The positive affect which humor produces may also increase members' commitment to their group (Stryker 2004 in Stets 2006). The type of humor employed to produce a bonding effect is influenced by the group's view, or self-concept, of its own members and its perception of outsiders, as well as the group's culture (Moore 2017). Groups differ in whether they use humor to bond by primarily making fun of outsiders or by mainly utilizing self-deprecating or inward-focused jokes, and by employing either more caustic, hurtful humor or less harmful types. During any given humorous interaction,



the particular individuals interacting will also influence to what degree the humor takes on these traits, as well as how often humor is utilized (Moore 2017). Setting is also an influence on group humor, as certain times, places, and events may be considered more appropriate or inappropriate for the use of certain types of humor (Cain 2012; Moore 2017; Sanders 2004). As society changes and evolves, so will the humor of its members (Yarwood 1995; Zijderfeld 1983).

At times, humor causes societal change by allowing people to view a new situation from a different perspective. Zijderfeld (1983) noted that people use humor to play with meanings, constructing new realities through bonding and othering as well as challenging current accepted patterns. Humor is frequently found in situations which deviate from the expected norms (Zijderfeld 1983). This is done through disruption of the normal progression of an event with the unexpected and primarily occurs in four ways. The first is wordplay; for example, puns and malapropisms, wherein words take on new, multiple, or incorrect meanings. Humor is also found in the absurd, during situations which seem to contradict common sense and logic. In gallows or dark humor, happiness and laughter are contrasted with the somber emotions expected to surround a negative event such as death. Finally, humor often calls attention to, and challenges, practices of daily life which are overlooked because they are so common, as in satire or parodies. Other studies find support for the idea that humor can be disruptive and transformative. Robinson and Smith-Lovin (2001) stated that humor is capable of toying with institutional and social meanings, causing us to question them. In another example, Yoels and Clair (1995) and Parkhill et al. (2011) found that people frequently use humor to point out inequalities within a society and bond with others who share their concerns in their attempt to correct these inequalities. Using humor often softens the blow of a message, making the jarring experience of challenging norms easier to tolerate (Yarwood 1995).

Humor is ambiguous. Although humor is generally viewed as positive and uplifting, it can at times be negative or offensive. Those facing grave risks sometimes use it to vent unfavorable feelings, such as fear and anger, in a safe manner. Sometimes the expression of the negative emotions and sentiments conveyed during this use of humor would be deemed unacceptable and invoke criticism without the use of a joke to lighten the message and downplay the intensity of the emotions (Parkhill et al. 2011). Jokes and teasing based upon stereotypes may make the subject of the jokes feel dehumanized, increasing tension in the relationship between the teller and the person the joke is about (Coenen-Huther 1987). In the case of sexually harassing or mocking jokes, humor can be used to harm others (Yarwood 1995). Further, sexist remarks phrased as jokes function to make sex-based discrimination seem less harmful and more acceptable. People who tell such jokes are also less likely to be confronted about their sexism than those who communicate such ideals through non-humorous means, and tolerance of such jokes correlates positively with acceptance of sexually harassing behaviors (Mallet, Ford, and Woodzika 2016). In instances where humor is used to bond people over a common viewpoint or characteristic, it can also be used to alienate those who disagree or deviate (Francis 1994; Yoels and Clair 1995). In contrast to their use as agents of social change, humor and laughter can also be directed at someone considered inferior in order to emphasize superiority and maintain the existing power structure. In this way it serves a social control function, as people exercise conformist behavior to avoid being the target of humor (Zijderfeld 1983).

There are also times when humor which may be seen as offensive in one context or among members of one culture or social identity may be perfectly acceptable in another. Each culture determines its own standards for the appropriate uses of humor (Francis 1988). For example, jokes which are sexual in nature or contain swearing are not considered couth in many situations,

but are frequently told without sanction by sex workers in private settings. Additionally, sex workers deride clients, but only when in the presence of others involved in sex work and never in the presence of clients (Sanders 2004). Medical students use humor among themselves in an attempt to cope with the discomfort they may feel performing intrusive exams and procedures on patients, but do not do so in front of others (Francis 1994). Hospice care workers have noted that humor, particularly dark humor, and laughter are accepted when shared among the workers but can be hurtful if engaged in in front of patients and their families (Cain 2012). Radcliffe-Brown (1952) wrote about the presence of “joking relationships” among African, Pacific Islander, and Native American populations in which people who are part of the same culture and group engage in teasing in a way which is not considered offensive. These relationships are governed by a strict set of rules and their establishment depends on the social positions of the people in such a relationship; breaking the rules is considered offensive. Outsiders, for instance, may misinterpret this teasing and take offense to it if someone attempts to engage in it with them. This is evidence of the existence of cultural rules and social identity standards which define humor for different groups.

Researchers have begun to see the importance of studying humor among diverse individuals and groups, both to develop and apply theories of humor. Humor has been studied in a variety of settings, such as comedy (Paolucci and Richardson 2006), business environments (Yarwood 1995), health clinics (Yoels and Clair 1995), religious minority groups (Moore 2017), and locations facing nuclear threats (Parkhill et al. 2011). Because of the use of humor is strongly tied to culture and identity, studying humor among nuns could increase the knowledge available on how humor affects group processes such as building social solidarity, and whether their use conforms to current theories of humor as a bonding mechanism. Studies of humor with this

group could also provide information on humor's role in the construction of social identity traits and standards of behavior. Additionally, patterns of humor use could provide clues on how and when nuns decide to activate the many other social and role identities to which they frequently belong.

### **The Role of Identity in Determining Behavior**

Humor is often used as both an indicator and a creator of identity. Two main theories regarding identity are popular in sociology: identity theory and social identity theory. Both theories describe three types of identity: person, role, and social. According to identity theory, person identity is composed of the identifiers and meanings one uses to define themselves. Though individuals each determine their own specific definitions for their identifiers, they are usually based in pre-existing definitions determined by society. People enact their position in the social world by taking on role identities: each role comes with a set of pre-existing behavioral expectations and occupies a certain position in a social structure (Burke 1991; Stryker 1980; Thoits 1983). Examples include identities such as mother, teacher, doctor, or husband. People also adopt social identities, which indicate membership within a group and an attempt to tailor one's behavior to adhere to the group's standard. When one adopts an identifier, they will attempt to behave in such a way that their environment and others in it give them feedback that the meanings of their behavior mirror their identity standard; that is, the meanings one associates with the identity. This is a continual process in which people are constantly evaluating the input they receive from others, altering or maintaining their behavior to reflect their identity standard, and receiving new feedback on their altered or maintained behavior (Burke 1991). This process is similar to what Mead (1934:140) described as "the conversation of gestures." When someone

violates the behavioral norms associated with their role identity, social sanctions in the form of ridicule are often imposed in order to inspire the violator to behave differently (Burke and Tully 1977). Because identities determine appropriate behavior, when someone loses or changes an identity a loss of knowledge of how to behave in interactions with others may result (Thoits 1983). Additionally, roles and identities only have meaning as they are related to other roles and identities: the identity of “doctor” would mean little without the role of “patient,” for example (Burke 1980).

The identities which are most important to a person, and which are frequently acted upon, are at the top of a person’s hierarchy of identities, a system of organizing one’s various identities and roles according to importance. The identities at the top of one’s hierarchy are also referred as those which are most salient; that is, most likely to be activated in any given situation (Stryker 1980). Identity salience may depend upon a number of factors. Gender, race, and age tend to be high in the hierarchy. Stryker (1980) believed that commitment, determined by how many people one is bonded to based on a certain identity as well as the strength of those bonds, influences how salient any identity may be. The stronger one’s commitment to an identity, the higher the likelihood of that identity being acted upon. In a 1982 study by Stryker and Serpe, this was demonstrated with religion: those who knew and were close to many people through their religious activities tended to spend a great deal of time participating in those activities. The presence of positive or intense emotions produced by activating an identity also seem to deepen the identity’s salience (Stryker 2004 in Stets 2006). Multiple identities and types of identities can be activated concurrently (Stets 2006; Stryker 1980). Person identity tends to be higher in the hierarchy than role or group identities and as such often influences behavior even when one is activating a specific role or group identity (Burke 2004). Similarly, someone who identifies

strongly as a member of a group may display that identity even during role-based interactions with both in- and out-group members (Stets 2006). Further, one is more likely to choose roles and group identities which are consistent with their person identity (Burke 2004; Stets 2006).

Social identity theory deals specifically with social identities rather than person or role-based ones, and contends that while person identity is based on the notion of oneself as an individual person separate and different from others, social identity is formed through the social groups and categories to which one belongs. The groups and categories differ in the amounts of status and power they possess, which are variable (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Like role identities, they exist only in relation to other categories (Hogg and Abrams 1988). Examples include identities such as Catholic, French, baseball team member, or white supremacist. This theory is concerned with large-scale group-based experiences such as out-group prejudice and interactions between groups rather than with individual psychological processes and interactions between individuals. A group is characterized by having at least three members who identify with the group and share traits by which they differentiate themselves from non-members (Hogg 2006). Adoption of a social identity causes one to identify with a certain in-group as well as to differentiate oneself (and other in-group members) from out-groups and their members (Hogg 2006; Owens 2003; Stets and Burke 2000). Additionally, in-group members evaluate their group's status positively and tend to see out-groups and their members in a negative light. Often, groups compete with each other (Hogg 2006; Tajfel and Turner 1986). Members of in-groups are emotionally invested in their social identity and maintaining its positive status, a process by which they gain self-esteem. Members also tend to favor members of their in-group over out-group members (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Social cohesion between in-group members can be created by engaging in

behaviors as a group, such as participating in rituals important to the group identity, taking similar approaches to managing stress or conflict, and utilizing the same styles of humor.

Groups tend to be viewed in terms of prototypes; that is, “fuzzy set of attributes (perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors) that are related to one another in a meaningful way and that simultaneously capture similarities within the group and differences between the group and other groups or people who are not in the group” (Hogg 2006:118). People view members of a group as representatives of this prototype rather than as individuals; their evaluation of a group’s members as positive or negative depends on their evaluation of the group and the prototype associated with it. This applies to self-evaluation as well. Group members who fit the prototype closely are frequently the most well-liked within the group, while deviants from group norms occupy lower-status positions within the group and are less trusted and liked by group members (Hogg 2006).

According to this theory, behavior is determined by acting in accordance with the group’s prototype and subsequent ideas of proper behavior in a situation (Hogg 2006). Group members are expected to engage in homogenous actions and ways of thinking (Stets and Burke 2000). Within the group, members may occupy different roles which affect interactions between them (Hogg 2006). It is also worth noting that people in groups may act in accordance with either their person or social identity depending on the circumstances, and person identities often influence and are influenced by social ones. Further, a person may occupy many different social identities, and which one will be most salient and thus determine behavior in any given situation is a question of accessibility, fit, and likelihood of goal accomplishment (Stets and Burke 2000). The way in which someone might choose to act out their salient identity is often affected by the audience and setting with which they engage, concepts developed more fully by Goffman

(1959). Exploration of this process among a group whose members have strong ties to their social identity, such as nuns, creates an opportunity to understand more about identity salience and the mechanisms used to bond members of an in-group.

### **Front and Back Stages: Venues for Identity-Based Behavior**

According to the social psychological identity theories discussed above, people work hard at presenting a specific identity to others. Goffman's (1959) work on identity revealed much about the process by which identity presentation, also known as impression management, operates; it is influenced by interactions and communication between people, both at the individual and group level. People working in what he called the "front stage" or "front region" (Goffman 1959) work to display a specific identity, whether personal identifier- or group-based, in front of others; they attempt to tailor their actions and emotions, and in some cases their settings, to reflect whatever type of identity they most want to communicate to their audience. Often the identities people attempt to present represent an attempt to conform to societal expectations in any given setting; for example, in the workplace, people generally attempt to maintain a presentation consistent with the identity of a good worker (Cain 2012; Goffman 1959). In most interactions, people are simultaneously the performer of the identity they hope to convey as well as an audience for the other person's, or people's, performance. Sometimes multiple performers will work together to convey a certain identity; when this is done, they form a team. To be effective, team members must agree upon how to present their identity successfully.

In contrast, when people are "back stage" (Goffman 1959), they act in a more uninhibited manner and are less interested in maintaining the markers of a specific identity. Actions



conducted in the back stage may seem to contradict front stage identities; they often involve the display of very different character traits and emotions than the ones associated with a person's or team's front stage identity performance. Sometimes back stage interactions among team members are used to determine what behaviors are appropriate on the front stage (Cain 2012). Engaging in back stage behaviors while on the front stage, or otherwise behaving inconsistently with one's front stage presentation, can disrupt the communication between performer and audience and often results in the audience's disbelief in the identity the performer or team attempted to convey. Settings, defined as the signs present in a region, which are inconsistent with one's desired front stage identity often have the same effect (Goffman 1959). The same is true of feeling and expressing emotions which differ from the desired front stage presentation. It is worth noting that both front and back stage presentations may be seen as true reflections of one's identity, even when the presentations seem contradictory (Cain 2012).

### **Emotion Management, Stress, and Coping**

While impression management involves presenting a particular image regardless of actual feeling, it can also be affected and accomplished by performing emotion management (also known as emotion work); that is, managing one's experience, and ensuing display, of emotions through conformity to what Hochschild (1979) termed "feeling rules." Feeling rules are the rules which dictate what emotions people are expected to feel and subsequently present during any given front stage situation, as well as the degree and duration of the emotions deemed appropriate (Hochschild 1979). Like humor, these rules are determined by culture and social identity. Thus, two similar occasions populated by members of two different cultures may operate under quite different sets of feeling rules. For instance, Nelson (1996) noted that while

one church he observed welcomed exuberant displays of emotion during worship services, other types of churches eschewed them. The rules are also determined by the roles one inhabits and the groups to which one belongs, and can change over time; thus, one's role and social identities can play a large role in the feeling rules to which they adhere.

The specific feeling rules followed in any instance are determined by which identity someone chooses to activate; for example, a woman in the role of wife has specific feeling rules she may feel obligated to follow in interactions with her husband (Hochschild 1983). Additionally, those who are acting as members of a group rather than in accordance with person or role identities will adhere to feeling rules common to the group and its prototype. Settings frequently play a role in determining feeling rules; for instance, certain emotions and corresponding behaviors are expected at venues such as funerals, church services, or parties (Goffman 1959; Hochschild 1983; Nelson 1996). Further, settings influence which identity (and corresponding set of feeling rules) will be most salient. For instance, Hochschild (1983) observed that flight attendants on duty were expected to act as group members, behaving in a way which reflected the "flight attendant" prototype and confirmed their identity as Delta airline employees. She termed the emotion work done in the context of employment "emotional labor."

When a person finds their emotions are out of alignment with the prescribed feeling rules, they must engage in a process of emotion management in order to attempt to experience and express the correct emotions. While simply behaving in accordance with feeling rules despite conflicting emotions is called "surface acting," "deep acting" is the process of successfully changing one's emotions and thus being able to display one's true feelings (Hochschild 1983:33). Performing emotion work through deep acting can involve either "suppression" of a feeling which is experienced but deemed out of place, or "evocation" of a feeling which is

considered appropriate for the situation but is not initially felt (Hochschild 1979:561). Because the initial emotions experienced in any situation are often determined by factors such as individual personality, this may be more difficult for those whose personalities often lead to emotions which readily contradict society's feeling rules (Hochschild 1979). Additionally, not all attempts at emotion work are successful at changing one's emotions. While emotion work can be an individual process, members of the society which determines the relevant feeling rules can also help a member in their attempt to conform to these rules. This is done by providing feedback to someone about their expressed emotions when they violate feeling rules, a process similar to the one seen in identity theory by which providing feedback that someone's behavior does not match their preferred identity elicits behavioral change (Burke 1991; Hochschild 1983).

Emotion management of negative feelings produced by stress is necessary when those feelings are deemed unpleasant or inappropriate. Stress is produced by any situation in which a person deems their resources for dealing with a known threat insufficient (Burke 1991). Stress and stressors can only be assessed as such by the people experiencing them; a situation which one group finds threatening may not be considered stressful to a different group with better access to resources. Thus, the situations which require emotion management to reduce a threat or control a reaction to it are heavily influenced and varied by culture, much like humor. Religious beliefs in particular seem to play a part in determining how people define and interpret potentially stressful situations (Parenteau et al. 2011). Protestant clergy have reported higher rates of job-related stress than have Catholic clergy. Nuns experience much less stress than the general public; their low stress rates are thought to potentially contribute to their life span being considerably longer than that of laypeople (Flannelly et al. 2002). It is also widely reported that

people with a high level of social support experience less stress than more isolated persons (Burke 1996).

Stress results in feelings of what Burke (1991) referred to as anxiety and distress. He classified it into two categories (which sometimes overlap): environmental stress, which threatens at a biological level, and social stress, which threatens one's sense of identity. Social stress occurs when the input a person receives from their environment about their identity differs from the meanings and standards which they have assigned to their identity. It results in behavioral change meant to confirm for the person that they truly embody the identity they wish to convey. If the changes enacted to cope with stress are unsuccessful, greater stress results (Burke 1991). Both types of stress can be caused by interruption, according to Mandler's (1982) interruption theory (Burke 1991). The level of distress felt in response to stress correlates directly with both how severe the interruption is as well as how complicated the process which is interrupted is (Burke 1991).

Coping is a type of emotion work performed by an individual or group to alter or dispel their negative and unpleasant emotions regarding situations they find stressful (Francis 1994; Sanders 2004). A plethora of coping methods exist, some of which have more positive results than others. Those who have a positive view of religion and use it to cope tend to have more positive outcomes than those who use negative or no religious beliefs to cope. This has been found true among clergy members, chronic pain sufferers, and opioid dependent patients (Parenteau et al. 2011; Pargament et al. 1998; Puffer et al. 2012). Regarding nuns and emotion management, Danner, Snowdon, and Friesen (2001) conducted a study of Roman Catholic nuns which found that those who frequently expressed positivity in their journals were found to live longer than those who used neutral or negative words more often.

Humor is often successful at coping with, and thus reducing, stress (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001). Booth-Butterfield et al. (2014:438) have gone so far as to say that “humor, by definition, is an emotion-focused coping strategy.” It is a way to make one’s emotions consistent with feeling rules in cases where emotions caused by stress do not conform to these rules (Francis 1994). Francis (1994:152) created a theory describing how humor helps groups cope. She defined humor and described its relationship with emotion management by stating that if humor “brings emotions into line with the feeling norms of the situation.... it is, by definition, a form of emotion management.” It does this by lessening the amount of tension or threat people interacting humorously feel, usually by bonding them and causing amusement while stigmatizing the threatening object or person. Bolton (2001) observed this process among nurses working in stressful situations, as did Parkhill et al. (2011) among those threatened by nuclear risks, and Sanders (2004) among sex workers. Additionally, use of humor can result in the re-framing of a situation from a threatening one to an amusing one, which alters the feeling rules adhered to (Helmy and Frerichs 2013; Hochschild 1979). It has been described as an empathetic response to group members’ stress and fear: one instance of this is the humor shared among protesters during the 2011 Egyptian revolution (Helmy and Frerichs 2013).

### **Identities in Flux: Roman Catholic Women Religious**

Two groups who have developed a strong social identity which includes behavior standards for humor use and coping with stress are Roman Catholic nuns and consecrated women, who are both known by the label “women religious.” I use the term “women religious” throughout this paper to refer to members of both groups collectively. Nuns and consecrated women have very strong ties to the social identities of “Catholic” as well as “women religious,”

and have largely formed their own culture. However, the members of these groups occupy other role and social identities as well. Roman Catholic consecrated women have rarely if ever been studied by sociologists, and there is also a lack of current information available on Roman Catholic nuns. Despite the paucity of attention given to these groups, studying them could yield information about the formation of social identities and the group processes involved in creating social cohesion. Their use of humor in particular has the potential to further develop current theories of group front stage impression management as well as emotion management connected to stress.

Roman Catholic nuns are a religious order dating back centuries. Motivation to join a convent has historically come from the social mobility awarded to nuns in a time when strictly patriarchal religious, economic, and social systems severely limited the roles available to women. While the nunnery allowed women greater opportunities than not joining the order could provide, even within the church women were subordinate to male superiors. Although women both within and without the convent are no longer as limited, the Catholic Church still forbids them from attaining more powerful spiritual leader positions. The gender disparity has been and continues to be a source of great tension for nuns. Many studies confirm that nuns find it stressful to work in places with mostly male parishioners and leaders. Feminist movements have gained a foothold within the church, challenging the archaic patriarchal structure (Ebaugh 1993; Stalp and Winders 2000).

The women who choose this life take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Some remain cloistered within the convent and do only work that pertains directly to ministry, while others have secular occupations and interact with others freely (Ebaugh, Lorence, and Chafetz 1996). Nuns frequently participate in social justice efforts (Ebaugh 1993; Stalp and Winders 2000).

Because of nuns' position of power and responsibility within the church and its organizations, they have upheld a long tradition of being highly educated. Catholic schools, hospitals, and other social services have traditionally been nun-run (Ebaugh 1993; Wittberg 1989). Many of the religious and secular positions filled by nuns require a large amount of emotional labor and interaction with people outside of their in-group, and many of these positions are typically dominated by women (Hochschild 1983). In addition, nuns have been shown to have longer life spans, better general health, and lower job stress than others who have similar jobs, factors which may be related to their coping methods (Flannelly et al. 2002).

Like other organized groups, women religious have a culture all their own (Stalp and Winders 2000). Their ideas regarding humor, stress, and coping are all influenced by their shared culture, and may not be readily visible or discernable to those unfamiliar with nun culture. Relationships between women religious, such as nuns, are often based on community and a commitment to doing what is best for the group rather than for the individual. These women typically engage in behavior and attitudes which reflect their status as Catholics as well as women religious, especially around out-group members. A strong commitment to the beliefs of the Catholic religion is at the forefront of the Catholic social identity, which is expressed by a devotion to Catholic texts and beliefs, reverence for saints, and participation in religious rituals and holidays such as Mass, Good Friday, and Advent. Women religious express their social identity through a commitment to kindness and helpfulness towards both in- and out-group members, evangelizing, and setting themselves apart from mainstream society by living in community settings with other nuns and consecrated women. They do not marry or have children. Bonding and expressing solidarity with other women religious is a particularly important part of that social identity. This contrasts with the relationship ideals typically

associated with Western culture, which tend to be based on independence (Coenen-Huther 1987). Coenen-Huther (1987) also noted that nuns in America often faced both racial- and gender-based prejudice, and were seen by Protestants as deviants. Racial-based conflict has also occurred within nuns' groups.

Coburn (2004) noted that much literature overlooks the role of nuns throughout history. Consecrated women have similarly been largely overlooked not only by sociologists, but by other academics as well. However, the study of this group could contribute much to the knowledge available on many areas of sociology. Consecrated women live similarly to nuns: they take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, live communally, and are subject to male authority. Unlike nuns, however, the Catholic Church considers them lay people, and they have never worn habits. Members of both groups occupy many jobs which require a great deal of emotional labor, such as teaching, counseling, and ministry positions, and studying them could reveal how their identity as members of these groups mediates their strategies for performing it. It could also provide information about how they manage their emotions and presentation when faced with other types of stress. Whether they use humor to perform emotion work is of particular interest. Further, they live in societies which have developed distinct cultures, including identities and feeling rules all their own. Learning how the women manage their social identity as nuns or consecrated woman as well as their individual roles and person identities could provide insight into the world of identity salience, as well as their strategies for deciding how to conduct self-presentation and adhere to feeling rules in differing situations.

Over the past half century, the experiences of nuns have changed drastically. Decisions by the Vatican in the early 1960s caused nuns to question their traditional methods and attempt to adopt more modern practices. For example, nuns began to find jobs outside of those offered by



the Catholic Church and interact with laypeople regularly, and some abandoned the wearing of the habit (Ebaugh, Lorence, and Chafetz 1996). The number of Roman Catholic nuns in the United States has been dropping for quite some time as avenues for social mobility for women outside the order have opened up, while the sacrifices convent life requires remain high (Stark and Finke 2000). As a result, there are now many more older nuns than there are younger ones, and the lifestyle of younger nuns in particular is different from that of their predecessors.

Younger nuns are less isolated and more engaged with out-group members than nuns have been in the past. Whereas older nuns and more traditional orders tend to participate less in non-religious activities, today's young nuns listen to podcasts, go to movies, and even blog.

Additionally, convents are rapidly becoming a thing of the past; rather than living as a united group in a convent, many nuns and consecrated women live in smaller groups in houses, or even alone. Many no longer wear habits. The lifestyle of women religious is starkly different than it has been in the past, a change which still seems to be gaining traction. The methods of social cohesion for in-group members are changing, as are the challenges associated with religious life. As these changes progress, they will result in changing definitions of the culture-bound concepts of humor, stress, and coping among nuns.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODS

Data for this project was generated by conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight nuns as well as with three members of one group of consecrated women living communally. All participants live the United States, although some are originally from Canada. They currently reside in nine different states; seven are in the south, two reside in the Midwest, one lives on the east coast, and another on the west coast. Participants were generated through reaching out via email and in person to many groups of nuns and consecrated women in my state, as well as to nuns across the country who run online blogs. Contacting women from both traditional convent settings and from more modern orders who encourage more participation with out-group members allowed the collection of perspectives from women of different age groups and lifestyles, which is critical to understanding the social identity of women religious during a time of massive and rapid change. Snowball sampling, in which participants were asked to recommend other women religious who might like to participate, was then used to gain more participants. Five women I contacted through emailing their organizations initially agreed to participate, two bloggers I contacted via email participated, and four more women were added to the number of participants through snowball sampling. The youngest was in her early 30s, while the oldest was in her 70s. All participants were white.

Interviewees were aware of my status as a researcher and as an outsider. Interviews were conducted one-on-one and face-to-face with two nuns and three consecrated women. Four other nuns were interviewed over Skype, and two participated through email (these two women were unable to meet me in person and did not wish to use Skype). When women participated over

email, they were sent the interview questions in the form of a questionnaire; when I received their answers, I responded with follow-up questions and requests for clarification. Most interviews lasted about an hour; the shortest was 30 minutes, while the longest was two hours. While the in-person and Skype transcripts ranged from nine to 20 pages, the email transcripts were five and six pages. I asked questions about humor, how it influences and is influenced by their status as nuns or consecrated women and the accompanying religious beliefs, the rules for employing humor, and their perspectives on stress and coping. The two bloggers were also asked questions about their use of humor on their blogs and with their readers, as well as how the blogs were received within their communities. Field notes were taken sparingly during the interviews, and more in-depth notes were written afterwards. Interviews were audio recorded, then transcribed with all identifying data removed. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to preserve confidentiality. The transcriptions were coded using an open-coding approach, then analyzed with special attention paid to data relevant to humor and its forms and uses, identity, and emotion management, as well as the four categories of humor described by Zijderfeld (1983) and Francis' (1994) theory of humor as a coping strategy due to its bonding effect.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

#### **Catholic and Women Religious Social Identities: Unifying Beliefs and Humor**

Social identity was a major factor in determining standards for conduct surrounding humor. The women noted that their social identity of “Catholic” influenced their opinions about the propriety and purpose of humor use, as well as its application to emotion management. The women almost all spoke of their religion’s influence on their perception of humor as positive. Said Hazel, a nun in her 60s who lives in a convent in the south and wears a habit, of humor, “It’s good. It comes from God. It’s a human emotion, so it’s good and God gives it to restore us.” Her Sister Dorothy echoed this, stating that “I think that life is a challenge, and God gives us everything that we need to work through the challenges with a sense of humor that comes from trust in him.” A nun in her late 30s without a habit, Anna, believed that “Jesus has to have had a sense of humor.” Consecrated women espoused quite similar views about the connection of Catholicism to humor; as one southern consecrated woman in her 30s named Paula related, “My religion would say that humor is part of being human, so it’s good.” Another southern consecrated woman in her 30s, Dawn, described the link between Catholic identity and humor by drawing on the work of a revered saint:

I think St. Thomas Aquinas himself spoke lengthily on humor, um, and how important it is in, in life, to have humor to get through, to get through the tough moments and to really enjoy, to really enjoy the enjoyable moments.... The human person is the only being really capable of humor.

The general consensus was that Catholicism influenced their view of humor as an ingrained part of being human, as well as a concept with the ability to mitigate stress. Additionally, many of the women interviewed believed that others in their religious community shared their views on

humor and its connection to their religion. This speaks to the presence of a group belief rather than a belief based upon a role or person identity, and points to the salience of the women's social identity in their thoughts about humor (Hogg 2006; Stets and Burke 2000).

When communicating with in-group members who shared a social identity but occupied different roles within the group, such as leaders, both social and role identities were considered when deciding whether to use humor with them. However, humor was never seen as fully inappropriate to use with leaders, and the social identity related belief that humor is positive was visible in discussions of using humor and joking with members of the communities' leadership. As Paula said, "Obviously as authority, they are to be respected by their position, but at the same time, joke just the same as anyone else." Dawn said of the leadership, "I'm more careful and more respectful about how I use humor with that person... whether I joke about that person or tease that person... They're another member in the community to a certain extent even though they have authority over us." This treatment was echoed in the comments of Anna: "it's silly, it's playful, it's kind of humor, but it's not like-I mean it's lighter humor, you know what I mean, it's not as intense I think." Hazel commented that while she frequently uses humor with the leaders she knows well, "There's other leaders that I don't see as often; I probably would be less likely to use humor with them." One late 30s nun in the south named Tara shared that using humor with the leader of her community benefitted their relationship and allowed them to work together well. She said,

... sometimes it does help to joke with her, because it helps me to hold things more lightly with her. She's not a heart person, she's more of a head person, and I am a heart person, and so-but she's also funny. Having a sense of humor about things I think helps us to connect with each other.

Ella, an east coast nun in her mid-40s who had fulfilled leadership roles in her community, described the leadership system of her community as "as non-hierarchical as you

can get for a hierarchy,” and said of others using humor with her that “I hope people would, because the leaders are just sisters who are taking their turn. Now that I’m on this side of it, I can see how serious this role could be, so, yeah, I hope, I hope I was [able to joke with the leaders] and I hope people can be that way with me too.” Her explicit desire for her fellow Sisters, including those who were not leaders, to engage in humor with her shows that social identity was more important than role identity when joking. While the leaders’ role identity as leaders, as well as their closeness with the people they led, sometimes mitigated how much, and in what ways, humor was used with them, their group identity as fellow Catholics and consecrated women or nuns caused nuns and consecrated women to regard humor as appropriate and positive when used with authority figures (Hogg 2006; Stets and Burke 2000).

Humorous stories which turn into running jokes are used to bond members in the same community and often serve as a critical part of group identity and group solidarity formation. Ella said of these types of stories, “there’s meaning to it, and there’s community building to that kind of story. The shared stories that you have, they become stories that get told. Those are-you feel kinda special when you have those.” These stories do not have to be tales of things which happened to current group members; she explained, “most of these shared stories happened before I was born.” She recounted one such story:

In England they tend to kind of do whatever they want. Like, they’ll tell you “Yes, yes, Sister,” and then they’ll do what they want. And the story that we have for that is that years and years ago, we’re talking like 60, 70 years ago, the superior from America wanted them to build a white picket fence around the cemetery where one of our founders is buried, and the other sisters. And they didn’t have the money to build it, and they didn’t really want to build it because it’s an American thing. So, the provincial got a picture taken and painted a white picket fence in the picture and sent it. Because she figured that that sister wasn’t gonna come check, and if she did that she’d have to take a boat, and so they’d be able to build a fence before she got there . . . that happened before my parents were even married but it’s still a story that has become my story. So there’s some element of that in religious community, that stories just get passed down.

Tara, a slightly younger nun from a community in the south, cited a similar experience with running jokes in her community, saying that

... oftentimes Sisters will joke about things that happened years and years ago . . . things like that that are part of our, our canon almost. But they happened so long ago that I wasn't around... when I first entered it seemed like all the funny stuff already happened before I got here. Sometimes when Sisters would tell those stories, it was like I felt left out because I didn't experience it... And I don't feel so left out when I hear them because now I have experiences of hearing them over and over so it's like I was there.

Knowing and laughing at stories which are often repeated among Sisters from the same community is a favorite pastime in many communities and marks those who know them as part of an in-group. Taking part in the experience of listening to and retelling these stories creates social cohesion and strengthens the ties between the women and their social identity as women religious.

### **Group Divisions, Differential Identities, and Outgroup Membership**

Despite humor's use in bonding women religious, who highly value social cohesion with other nuns and consecrated women, it seems that "nun in a particular community" as a social identity may not be the primary, most salient identity. The definition and lifestyle of nuns are going through changes, which is something well documented in the literature and demonstrated and discussed by the women I interviewed. There is a contrast in behavior and lifestyle between older nuns (those born before the late 1960s), many of whom live or lived in convents, and younger nuns, who are more likely to live in homes with other nuns or alone. Young nuns from different communities have formed an in-group with the help of humor, and the social identity of "young nun" is often activated when these women spend time together. Ella noted that "it's a balance of finding that community within my own congregation and then also with other

religious around my age.” Vanessa, a nun in her late 40s who lives alone in the Midwest and works as a professor, expanded upon the differences between older and younger nuns: “I entered the community at a more contemporary time where I don’t wear a habit, it was fairly open, relatively independent lifesty-interdependent lifestyle, as opposed to the Sisters 20 years and older had very rigid, very structured, confined kinds of things.” Young nuns may identify more with younger nuns from other communities than with older nuns from their own, and they share a distinct style of humor, which aids in creating an in-group for the younger nuns and may exclude some of the older ones. This humor often pokes fun at the contrasts between the groups. Anna explained,

When the younger nuns get together, in our own communities or across communities, we’re super deliberate, and we just need that time so much, so that time is always hilarious time. It’s usually some version of, “You know you’re in a convent when dot dot dot.” (laughter) we have all these stories about intergenerational living, about whatever, that nobody else could ever understand . . . Then, living as a younger sister now versus living as an older sister now; the ways we interact with culture, the ways we interact with other people—we just get to telling stories about it, and when we’re together it just gets really, really funny. That’s a common, common one, is about our unique experience.... of being a younger sister.

In joking about life as a younger nun, the women use humor to create a definition of their social identity as young nuns and construct their group perception of life as a young nun.

Additionally, nuns are far from isolated and occupy many different roles and social identities, some of which may not be connected to their religion or status as nuns at all. Their humor use shows that while person identities pervade both of these, nuns easily activate different identities, and consequently adjust their humor use, depending on the role they are in or with members of which social identity they are interacting. The nuns seem to be aware of these transitions and intentional about them; for instance, Vanessa, who is also a professor, described utilizing different types and styles of humor depending on who she was interacting with:



... here at school, it's an academic setting so we're much more into the political satire type of humor.... I've got different aspects of humor that come out in different settings, depending on who I'm with. I share a certain element of humor at work, and a different one with family.

Tara, who volunteers on a college campus, used humor to bond with out-group members while activating the role identity associated with volunteer position, wishing to amplify this role identity more than her social identity as a Catholic or a woman religious. She explained, "when I'm with the LGBTQ students, I'm a churchy person; in some ways, they've been hurt before, they don't wanna trust me, and so I think sometimes making a joke helps to put them at ease too." Anna described using different types humor with her family than with her community of nuns, going so far as to mention that the "humor, like, that we would do with my family would not work in the convent." All of these instances indicate that the nun social identity is frequently not salient, and that what identity is activated is largely situational. While the nuns do find their religious social identity an important part of their lives, their use of humor suggests that it is not pervasive in their interactions with others.

### **Women Religious Identity and Avoiding Harmful Humor**

Social and person identities largely influenced what type of content was not laughed at. Some types of humor were not only not considered funny, they were seen as offensive and inappropriate to use. The most common topics and types of humor considered inappropriate were those which violated group norms of the Catholic social identity, which include a spirit of acceptance and charity, by hurting or offending others. Intentionally critical or hurtful jokes which were aimed directly at others were not considered appropriate, even if those others were not personally known to the group or present for the jokes. One consecrated woman, Paula, explained that she did not enjoy sarcasm because "it could be at the expense of others." Another,

Dawn, stated that “in general we try to be careful about politics because you’re usually talking about somebody specific, so it might not always be appropriate.” Dorothy, a more traditional nun in her 70s, explained that her sense of humor differs from that of the teenagers she works with because of their tendency to use hurtful humor: “If they are laughing because the boy has a green sock and a red sock, I don’t think that’s funny, because he may be colorblind... so I don’t appreciate” it. Vanessa, who is less traditional, tied her avoidance of harmful directly to her social identity as a nun, stating, “The laughing at somebody in a derogatory way, I don’t, that’s not really, that isn’t part of our culture.”

In addition to eschewing hurtful jokes aimed at individuals or members of an out-group, jokes and humor which had the potential to divide members of the community, whether or not they were intentionally hurtful, were looked down upon. Ella spoke of the detrimental effect humor can have when used in a harmful manner:

I think there have been times where humor, whether it’s in a local community, or like in a community meeting, has had a negative effect. But that’s usually when it’s like, barbed, or meant to say something they can’t say otherwise.

She also mentioned that even when humor does produce a positive or bonding effect among Sisters, the positivity is lessened when divisions arise from it. She noted, “it’s like your group of people that are experiencing something, [humor] can help build that bond, but that’s not always a good thing either, if it creates a little cadre of people of resistance.” Tara described a time when humor unintentionally created a division between one Sister and the others:

There was one night that we were-3 of us, there were 4 of us in the community and 3 of us were up making cookies, and we accidentally doubled the butter, and so (laughter) it was a big mess. It was just like, those cookies were never gonna bake, because they were just oozy (laughter). And it was late at night, and we were punchy, and we were just laughing, hysterical, like hysterically. It was very bonding, and we had some stories to tell about it later. But, I was aware that one member of the community wasn’t with us.... And I think that was divisive, because then she didn’t have that experience of bonding with us, that the rest of us

felt so connected but not as much with her.

Paula, a consecrated woman, expressed similar reluctance to engage in humor which might make other community members feel left out or excluded. She explained that she and the members of her community who are also her coworkers

... have jokes, and humor, things that we laugh about but nobody else understands... if we like come to the bigger community and joke about that, that could be-they could feel excluded from that, y'know. Um, so, I know people have expressed that before, so we have to be sensitive to that.

The presence of the dislike of potentially divisive humor among multiple participants indicates that this is part of the social identity of women religious. Further, their dislike of divisive humor shows concern for the group to which they belong as a whole, indicating that they find the source of their social identity to be important.

Person identity was important in deciding if a joke or topic might be hurtful to an individual. Said Dawn, a consecrated woman, "We do try to understand and respect where each one is at...and if we're joking, not offend." Another, Paula, noted,

Maybe we've laughed about someone's mistake before, right? But now they were not in the mood for that or, you know, that it hurt, for whatever reason, so I think that's another time where that could happen, and has happened.

Person identities were in this way shown to occasionally have stricter standards than the social or role identities, and to be more important than either in determining whether a joke would be appropriate (Stets and Burke 2000). The women recognized that person identities sometimes change, and modified their humor use to respect these changes. Anna, a young nun used to joking about memory with one of her older Sisters explained, "Now that memory's becoming an issue for [her], we can't really joke about the memory stuff in the same way that we used to. It loses its funny and it's not cool." She also explained that she refrains from joking with some Sisters "because I don't know them as well." She further explained,

... there's some Sisters who are less likely inclined to joke around or tease or whatever, and that's alright, but certainly, a number of Sisters. It's just finding the right way with which Sister, you know? And that's a lot with anyone. Different personalities you can joke around with differently. Or not.

Waiting until one's person identity is known enough to understand one's opinion on appropriate humor was common behavior among other participants as well.

One notable exception to the rule about laughing at the expense of others was seen in the presence of joking relationships (Radcliffe-Brown 1952). The women's relationship with each other as sharers of the social identity of consecrated women or nun allowed them to engage in teasing each other without offense being taken. One consecrated woman, Paula, described the relationship as a "sisterhood," saying about teasing that

... there's a level of comfort to be able to do that and... first they know that I love them so it's not like I'm making fun of them or I'm teasing them, like, meanly or whatever... it's all in love and jest.

Dawn simply stated, "We do tease each other quite a bit." Ella, a nun, described a fellow nun's tendency to tease as "the way that she shows her love." The most common topics of teasing were personality quirks, such as one woman's tendency to quote the Bible relentlessly, and accidents, such as misspeaking. When teasing did accidentally cause hurt, it was common for the object of teasing to excuse the comments as harmless due to the joking relationship. Dawn said that when she finds herself hurt in these instances, she thinks, "I'll try and imagine that she didn't mean that, and not look at the deeper meaning, if there was a deeper meaning." Michelle, a late 30s consecrated woman living in the south, had a similar viewpoint:

There's a few times when people would laugh at me because of my quirks, or, y'know, ways of being that I didn't really appreciate, and I felt kind of sensitive about, and I didn't think it was funny at all, so in that sense I felt kind of put down or whatever by them. However, I don't think-I think it was more of a misinterpretation of mine because of my own wounds than their intention.

### **Use of Humor in Front and Back Stage Settings**

Goffman's (1959) discussion of front and back stage regions can be used as a lens to understand more about how various social and role identities affect humor use among the nuns and consecrated women interviewed. The specific rules which determined whether humor was welcome or unwelcome in any given front stage situation were influenced by the Catholic social identity, the social identities of various communities of women religious, and the various role identities occupied by the women. Front stage activities related to their social identity as Catholics and women religious, such as religious practices, were sometimes considered inappropriate times for intentional humor and laughter. When asked about places humor would not be welcome, Hazel exclaimed, "Not in Mass, not in the prayers!" Vanessa echoed, "People don't tell jokes in prayer times so much." Behavior rules in these circumstances were determined by group status, and members of the group were expected to act in uniform ways, communicating the message to onlookers, in the case of Mass, and God, in the case of prayer, that the setting of the chapel was sacred and called for solemnity.

While trying to create humor on purpose while on the front stage during religious ceremonies was not always appreciated, nuns from different communities sometimes had different reactions to humorous events beyond their control which occurred in these settings. Some women did not believe that laughter was welcome at all during front stage religious activities. For instance, Allison, a nun who wears a habit and lives in a Midwestern convent, insisted that "during Mass, one can smile at something humorous, but laughing loudly or talking about it are not appropriate at that time." In contrast, Ella-a younger nun without a habit-recalled, "I have laughed so many times at Mass... saying the joke at Mass, not appropriate, but laughing at Mass if something funny happens, like, how do you not do that?" Vanessa said that in her

community,

... if something happens, then I think everyone takes it in good humor, and you can laugh. So it's not like it's rigid or laughing would be inappropriate; if something funny happens, I think it's like, yeah, you laugh at it.

Their different reactions show that social identity connected to their specific community rather than social identity as a Catholic or as a woman religious in general was more determinant of how humor could be dealt with on the front stage during religious settings. Less traditional communities which tend to attract younger members also seemed more accepting of laughter in these settings.

Role identities which required front stage behavior sometimes became salient when deciding whether a setting was an appropriate one for humor. The women interviewed all fulfilled roles which, while related to their social identity as members of Catholic religious orders, had their own set of rules and impression management standards regarding humor. Popular roles were teacher, ministry leader, and counselor; all these roles have different identity standards and require front stage interactions with others in different roles. Hazel was opposed to using humor with her counseling clients because "I work with people who have to do the annulment process and that's very painful, so, it's serious for a while." Behavior consistent with her identity standard for her role of counselor meant that she needed to convey a comforting and sympathetic presence rather than a humorous one. In contrast, her community member Dorothy found that her front stage presentation as a religious workshop leader was the perfect setting for humor. Because the family workshops she led required her audience to be relaxed and cooperative, she related that "In my workshops, I try to put in humor to relax my audience and to get them into the mode of working with me rather than just listening." The message she hoped to communicate about her identity as workshop leader was that she was amiable and similar to

those taking the workshop, and she found humor a useful aid.

When back stage, impression management was not as important and the women felt free to laugh or joke about events which may have occurred on the front stage. Events which happened in the chapel were openly joked about when the women were no longer in the sacred setting. One consecrated woman, Paula, described this:

Sometimes, like today, when the cell phone went off in the chapel...you just think, "That's not an appropriate time," but sometimes those are the funniest moments because it's not an appropriate time... but it's not that people tell jokes in the chapel or whatever but funny things do happen there, and um, we'll laugh about that later.

Another consecrated woman, Dawn, felt similarly:

We've had moments when something funny happens in the chapel and we just-we don't joke about it in the chapel, but we'll all laugh about it because it's hilarious... But we won't take advantage of it and carry it on in the chapel. That's, like, inappropriate... So afterwards, you know when we're like at the meal, we'll talk about it and you know, get a kick out of it.

Nuns agreed with this; Ella stated, "If you're at community assembly, and there's a speaker talking, that's not the time to tell a joke. But if it's the break time, and you want to make a joke about something that happened, why not?" The backstage region seemed to be defined as the times when the group as a whole did not need to present any specific version of themselves to others; for example, meals were almost universally cited as a backstage setting. A consecrated women referred to them as "community moments." On one occasion this backstage setting was transformed into a front stage one by the presence of other groups. Hazel explained that "We are having a lot of retreats here, so different groups of people, we share the dining room with them...it's an adjustment."

### **What is Considered Humorous**

The women seemed to primarily use and enjoy the four methods Zijderfeld (1983) outlined for creating humor through challenging and deviating from norms. Absurdity, wordplay, and playing with meanings of everyday practices were the most popular, and gallows humor was mentioned occasionally as well. Though they were amused by prepared jokes which employed these concepts, the women especially enjoyed these forms of humor as they occurred spontaneously in reality.

Nine participants described instances which fit Zijderfeld's (1983) concept of absurdity as a form of humor. As Hazel responded when describing things which frequently make her laugh, "I guess the surprising things that happen, the silliness." The other women echoed her view. Situations in which reality did not match expectations, such as surprises or things which did not make sense, were popular topics of laughter. For example, Dawn, a consecrated woman, related a situation in which a fellow consecrated woman described quinoa by saying, "It looks like fish larvae." This was automatically met with laughter and the response that "Well you know, fish don't have larvae. It's fish eggs; larvae is insects." She described this as a prime example of a funny situation in which the absurdity of the woman's statement concluding, "Anyway, silly things like that, that people are so tired, they just make mistakes."

Ella laughed while explaining that one of her Sisters loved absurdity so much that

... she was trained as a clown, and she just acts like one. So when I first met her, when I was just, like, not even a Sister yet, she had a whole conversation with me in the dining room with these fake teeth in that blinked and had lights in them, but she had the conversation as if she didn't... I'm like this totally, like, freaked out, holy person, thinking about becoming a sister, and I come up, and I like, put on my best outfit, and I come to this thing, and introduce [sic] to this sister who talks to me the whole time (laughter) with those blinking lights.

She also said that this clown Sister in particular was someone she regarded as highly humorous among their community. Ella expected this woman to conform to her idea of proper front stage



behavior for a nun: seriousness and a polished appearance. The unexpected shock of seeing a nun behave in an absurd way which violated this perceived norm created a mirthful situation.

The women also enjoyed and employed wordplay, both in the form of intentional puns and accidental malapropisms. Misspeaking was considered especially funny when it happened organically. The consecrated women in particular, when asked to share funny stories, responded by recounting times when someone had misspoken. A popular theme was laughter at the misuse of words by women who were attempting to speak in a language which was not their native one.

Paula explained,

We're an international community, and so, we have people from all over, and some people speak English better than others or some speak Spanish better than others.... So, that's funny, right, people with accents that say things funny and so we joke about that, or like, picked the wrong word.

Puns were frequently used in prepared jokes, which relied on double meanings to be seen as humorous. For example, when asked her favorite joke, Dorothy responded, "How long did Cain hate his brother? As long as he was Abel (able)." Allison cited her favorite as, "Did you hear about the actor who kept falling through the floor? It was just a stage he was going through."

One reason cited by Anna for the popularity of wordplay is that "puns work all the time, everywhere. It's a safe enough, general enough kind of humor." The mass appeal of puns being listed as an advantage indicates that humor use is connected to a group standard, making it a part of social identity.

At times, humor was used in order to change one potential view of a common situation by constructing a new definition of it. Hazel described her experience of framing her lack of preparation for a meeting in a humorous manner:

I wasn't feeling well at all but I knew I had to be there, and, I, I was kind of like barely getting done the things I needed to get done all morning long. And so, we were having this meeting, and a lunch, and I told people, "I have, I have great

news for you! I don't have any agenda to this meeting so we're going to have a really short meeting." Like, I made a joke about it... Once a month we have a lunch, a Sunday lunch, and we talk about how we're working with the organization's candidates. Anyway, I, I made it like that, "I have good news! I don't have any agenda, I didn't have enough time!"

The humorousness in her statement lay in the fact that her pronouncement contradicted what the others in the meeting expected to hear, as well as what they were expected to feel upon finding out about her lack of agenda. She intentionally employed this strategy hoping to elicit laughter from its hearers, in order to reframe the situation as a beneficial one rather than as one in which the meeting would be unproductive or in which she would appear ill equipped to conduct it. The message communicated in the nun's use of humor made her challenging the definition of the situation easy to accept (Yarwood1995). This is consistent not only with Zijderfeld's (1983) conception of humor which confronts accepted meanings of ordinary life events, but also with Robinson and Smith-Lovin's (2001) theory regarding humor as able to cause people to question meanings.

Anna, a nun in her late 30s, used the tactic of employing humor to reframe a situation when interacting with older Sisters who did not always view, or treat, her as an adult:

One of my lighthearted approaches to age is I reference, I refer to myself as being old, because in my family, I'm the oldest, and I have—my little sister who I'm super close to is 13 years younger than I am. So she tells me I'm old. So, I share some of that and joke around about that with my nuns, because it's good for them to hear that I'm old sometimes. And then the flipside is that too, sometimes I call them kids, the older sisters. So I'll be like, "Alright, kids, when we playing this card game?" or whatever, and it gives them a jolt, but I'm clearly being lighthearted about it, and it's kind of like a gentle way to make a point.

Presenting herself as old or the older Sisters as young caused the hearers to reconsider their perception and subsequent treatment of her. The women liked challenging humor even when not employing it themselves. Tara, another young nun, explained that she enjoyed her favorite comedy podcast

... because [the comedians] can challenge things through humor in a different way than if they're just confronting. When they bring us stuff in a humorous way, it kinda does challenge me, sometimes, but it opens me up and it makes me laugh... it speaks some truth, but in a very digestible way for me, an enjoyable way.

All of these nuns not only found this type of humor funny, but also appreciated the softening of difficult or sensitive messages it could be used to deliver.

Gallows humor was mentioned by only three participants, all young nuns, and while this shows that it is not off-limits to all women religious, it does not experience the popularity of Zijderfeld's (1983) other categories of humor. One nun referenced its use while explaining that when asked in a group setting about her hope for the future of the Sisterhood, "my hope was that we as younger cohort could build connections and that we would support each other as our sisters died, and so because of that I got the nickname 'Death Girl.'" She discussed its lack in popularity as well, noting that "having that humor around something that you really shouldn't laugh at, that, if like, other friends I told that to they would be horrified, but in this context it just helps." It appears that gallows humor is not considered appropriate by all nuns. To her and her fellow nuns who made up the nickname, however, it is a useful tool in dealing with uncomfortable feelings surrounding serious subjects. Tara told of a time when her Sisters' near death experienced became transformed into a funny story among her community:

But, there was one time I lived in a house where two of the Sisters were just so anal about time. We were all gonna go somewhere together that morning and we said, "Alright, 9 o'clock, we'll all leave." We're all in the same house; I mean it's not like-if somebody's not present you just yell up the stairs. I came down at 9 o'clock, or I came down at like ten minutes till, and just looked and there are 2 Sisters sitting in the car, in the garage, with it-the engine running. Like, "What are you doing? You can't run the car in the garage; you could die! You need to shut that thing off or open up a door or something, like the whole house is basically exhaust!" So of course we all laughed at that.

Laughing at experiences related to tragic topics did occur amongst nuns on the group level, but

was not universally utilized.

### **Humor and Emotion Management**

Much of the stress the women faced resulted from trying to balance and fulfill their many obligations to themselves, to their community, and to others. One consecrated woman, Paula, noted that “there’s always more that could be done, and there’s always more people that could need... my time, my energy.” She added, “Sometimes there’s just a lot of things to do...and you hit upon your limit.” Their use of humor as a form of coping with stress is consistent with Hochschild’s (1979) ideas about feeling rules and performing emotion management and Robinson and Smith-Lovin’s (2001) findings about humor as a way to dispel oneself of the negative feelings brought about by stress. Dawn, another consecrated woman, stated simply, “humor for me is a de-stresser.” Paula also explained that “in normal stressful situations, it does help. It helps a lot to... clear the air.” Two different nuns observed that “it makes me feel better.” Many women noted that humor has the power to alter negative emotions and create more positive ones. Said Hazel, “It’s something that will help me forget [my counselling clients’] problems.” She noted that humor and laughter made her feel “happy, relaxed.” Dorothy stated that humor makes her feel “Light. Cheerful. Energetic. Ready to go and do something fun.” Paula described it as making her feel “free. Joyful...Silly. Young.”

The women also used humor to help them cope with these sources of stress in a manner consistent with Francis’ (1994) theory about humor effectively being a form of emotion management in times of stress specifically through creating a bonding effect. Dawn described the effect of humor by saying, “It really lightens me up a lot and helps me... keep going, it helps me bond.” She also noted that

... when I happen to be part of a team, and what I'm working with that weekend or that week or month or whatever, then it's easier, right, to de-stress with humor, because you have the same thing to talk about and stress about.

Dorothy observed that "When I am down I really appreciate someone saying something humorous to get me out of limbo, so to speak. And it, it works." Ella noted that jokes are especially welcome when "when they can express love and care and make people happy." She also spoke of humor's role in relieving group stress: "your group of people that are experiencing something, it can help build that bond." Anna described an occasion on which she

... used humor to deescalate and even undermine the coercive environment [at a former job], and it was a hugely stressful environment. I created goofy things that I would do.... I had a cartoon depiction of different circus acts, and I made a little sign for everybody's door, assigning them to a different act in the circus.... People laughed so hard.

There are limits to the effectiveness of humor as a method of emotion management during stressful situations, however. While it works for everyday sources of stress, when emotions are especially extreme humor is not considered helpful. A certain level of calmness must be reached before humor can effectively manage emotions. When asked about these scenarios, Hazel said that "if I'm upset about something, probably, I don't let it help me." Ella recounted a time when her community had faced a crisis; she observed that "when everyone is so stressed out, sometimes if one person tried to make a joke, it just pissed everybody off, so it's a balancing act. You have to judge it." Dawn had similar observations, noting that "if humor is used when I'm upset it drives me deeper into my upsetness if you want to put it that way. Yeah, that's how it usually works. Until I've at least like, calmed down." Paula said of using humor to reduce negative feelings,

It can help. For the most part it helps. Like lighten the mood, like take my life and me less seriously and all that. Sometimes, when I'm real mad, it has the reverse effect and it makes me more mad. But that's very rare. I would say, I'd have to be real mad.

In addition to humor, the women religious used a variety of other coping methods, often religious in nature, to help them manage their stress and the emotions it elicited. Ella described humor as used to cope with group stress as “part of the toolbox of relationship, but it’s not the only tool in the toolbox.” Prayer, exercise, and talking with others were common strategies for stress reduction. A nun living in the South called Sophia contended that “prayer is important in dealing with any stress.” Tara said that

... doing the coping things that I do for myself also help me to enter into prayer. I think sometimes if I’m too anxious I can’t even pray, but if I can run first, or laugh, or take a walk, then I’m much more able to enter into prayer and talk to God about the things that stress me out.

They exercised awareness of when humor would and would not be effective as a coping device, indicating that this knowledge, as well as this limit on humor’s efficacy for coping, may be a marker of social identity among nuns and consecrated women.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

This study looked into the experiences of women religious with humor, who are part of a community and social identity which is becoming less structured and isolated. Humor was used as a lens through which to observe the maintenance of social cohesion and strong bonds to other group members, as well as to observe the importance of the other identities nuns and consecrated women inhabit. Because the definitions of what it means to be woman religious are shifting, this provided an ideal setting to look into the mechanisms by which groups create a definition of their identity and develop front and back stage behavior standards.

The women religious' use of humor is consistent with existing theories about humor and identity in several ways. Person identity plays a larger role in determining appropriate uses of humor than does social identity (Burke 2004); however, social identity standards are still very important. The women reported positive feelings associated with using humor with other group members and with using it in a way that was consistent with the group's identity standard, as well as a strong bond to their social identities as Catholics and as women religious. This echoes Stryker's (2004) assertion that commitment to a group may be positively affected by the levels of positive feelings produced. Further, their shared rules surrounding the use of humor and their ritual of bonding over humorous stories involving community members help the women identify more strongly with their communities and with other women religious in general (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001). Nun-hood is in a state of great change, and humor's use has changed along with nun culture (Yarwood 1995; Zijderfeld 1983). Many younger Sisters and members of orders which have abandoned habits and convents use humor to bond with women from outside their

communities who shared these traits, resulting in the creation and cohesion of new in-groups and social identities.

Front and back stage behaviors also show signs of changing. Front stage interactions are handled differently not only by each specific community of women religious but also by traditional and contemporary nuns, as well as nuns in different age groups. Younger nuns living in more relaxed communities take a more relaxed stance on impression management (Goffman 1959) during religious ceremonies related to group identity which are largely considered front stage interactions. They are more likely to engage in laughter in response to humorous situations during these ceremonies, whereas older or more traditional Sisters are more concerned with presenting a solemn demeanor to their audience. The differing amounts of concern for impression management-and rejection of humor-during occasions which some see as rigidly serious and others do not also shows that the feeling rules associated with these occasions vary among different groups nuns and consecrated women (Hochschild 1979).

Women religious successfully utilize humor as a method of emotion management when they feel stressed, which also occurs in other types of groups (Bolton 1991, Francis 1994, Sanders 2004). However, humor was not the only coping method regularly utilized, and the women interviewed are insightful as to the occasions and feelings for which humor will and will not help them cope successfully. It does at times help them bond during stressful situations, but has the potential of increasing negative feelings if used when the emotions brought on by stress are especially strong.

One interesting finding is the nuns' and consecrated women's avoidance of humor which might denigrate members of out-groups. While Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory of intergroup behavior describes competition between different groups and a tendency to elevate



one's in-group to a higher status than out-groups, this was not observed through their use of humor. The women religious instead used humor to validate members of out-groups and to form bonds with them. This could be due to women religious and Catholic social identities' emphasis on compassion and kindness rather than competition. It also speaks to the perceptions women religious have of out-group members. The women's avoidance of mocking out-group members indicates that non-Catholics and non-nuns were considered worthy of respect and seen as equals to the women interviewed. This is consistent with Moore's (2017) findings regarding humor use among evangelical Christians.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The research presented highlights the multiple purposes of humor for women religious: it bonds them to their social identities as Catholics and as women religious, as well as to the other women who share these identities. Additionally, it aids them in bonding with out-group members and creating new in-groups among women religious based on common traits, such as age. This helps them manage-and facilitate-the changes happening in the lifestyles of women religious. The differing levels of acceptability of humor in front stage social identity-based settings elucidates these changes and the new definitions of the in-groups and social identities the women are creating. Finally, the research confirms that humor can be used by these women to cope with stress in a way consistent with existing emotion management theories, and also explores the limits on the viability of humor as a coping strategy. One limitation of this study was the small number of interviews which were conducted. Nuns and consecrated women were often unable or unwilling to participate in this project. Many of them had very busy schedules and cited a lack of time as the reason, and others simply did not feel that they wanted to be part of the project. Future research involving greater numbers of these women would be beneficial and serve to enhance the knowledge gained by this study. Additionally, the sample was not representative of women religious as a whole. Because snowball sampling was utilized, and participants tended to recommend people similar to themselves, younger women are overrepresented, as are those who have a particular interest in humor, and white women. A more diverse, representative sample could provide more insight into whether the experiences here are related to the Catholic nun and/or consecrated women social identity. Replicating this study with women from a single

organization would also have advantages, such as providing more information about how specific groups of nuns and consecrated women experience humor, and the implications of the differences between the group's humor usage and women religious' usage as a whole.

Observing the reluctance of women religious to engage in humor which elevated their own in-group's status at the expense of an outgroup (Tajfel and Turner 1986) presents the possibility of deeper exploration into when, and into which groups, the social identity theory of intergroup conflict does and does not apply. Future research into this theory with other groups who do not willingly engage in competition could provide more information about why these groups choose not to do so, and what processes they instead use to maintain their self-esteem.

Nuns and consecrated women indicated that humor was limited in its efficacy as a mechanism for coping with stress; only when emotions were not extreme was it able to be used as a form of emotion management. While the literature currently documents humor as a viable emotion management technique, research into other groups could reveal whether these limitations are common or are specific to women religious. Knowing more about when humor can and cannot relieve stress by altering the emotions associated with it can provide more knowledge about emotion management in general, as well as useful data regarding stress relief, which can benefit anyone looking to manage the levels of stress in their lives or to expand on the knowledge available about coping with stress through using humor.

Humor was shown to be a tool in coping with and defining the differences between the lifestyles and experiences of older, more traditional nuns and younger, more contemporary ones. Nuns and consecrated women are creating new social identities based around age and experience, and using humor to assist them in this. While this unites members of these new in-groups, it also divides them from older members. Studies concerning whether other groups

which are changing or experiencing divisions between members use humor in a similar manner could create more knowledge about how sharers of social identities respond to divisions and how cohesion is developed between members of social identities and in-groups which are in the process of forming.

Research into nuns has previously provided insights into gender-based issues, such as how they respond to the patriarchal structure of the church, as well as insights into health issues, such as effective coping with stress, Alzheimer's, and lifespan increases (Danner, Snowdon, and Friesen 2001; Ebaugh 1993; Flannelly et al. 2002; Stalp and Winders 2000). This study on women religious has also provided unique insights, contributing to the knowledge available on humor as well as on group processes and dynamics, particularly in smaller, tightly bonded groups. I find that in addition to deep connections to their social identities as women religious and as Catholic, these women also demonstrate strong connections to a number of other social and role identities, often using humor to do so. Further, changes to the social identity of women religious have resulted in the formation of new in-groups and divisions within existing communities. Women religious also employ humor to define these new groups and process the divisions occurring. These conclusions not only contribute to the sparse knowledge available on women religious and on humor, but could also have relevance for other types of small groups in many settings, particularly those experiencing change.

## APPENDIX A

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. How long have you been a member of your religious community?
2. Have you always been a member here, or did you join other locations in the past?
3. How did you make the decision to join?
4. What do you find most enjoyable or pleasurable about membership in the group?
5. Who do you interact with frequently?
6. Who are the important people in your life?
7. Why are they important to you?
8. Do you ever joke around with them?
9. Do you ever tease each other?
10. Is there anyone in particular you enjoy laughing and joking with?
11. Is there anyone in particular you enjoy laughing at?
12. Do you use humor with leaders of your religious community?
13. Do you use humor with people thinking about joining the community?
14. Do you use humor with people you meet in the course of activities with your religious community?
15. What topics or subjects make you laugh frequently?
16. When are humor and jokes especially appropriate or welcome?
17. When are they are especially inappropriate?
18. What does your religion have to say about humor?
19. Can you tell me about whether others in your religious community share your views on humor?

20. What about others you interact with?
21. Is humor something which brings you closer to people in your community?
22. Do you feel it has ever divided you?
23. Can you tell me about any running or inside jokes between you and other community members?
24. Will you tell me about a real life occurrence that made you and other members laugh?
25. Will you tell me a joke?
26. How does humor make you feel?
27. What effect does humor have on you when you are upset?
28. Have you ever used humor to manage stress?
29. Does this work better with some stressors than others?
30. Can you give me an example of a time humor was used to make a stressful situation easier?
31. What other types of coping mechanisms do you use to manage stress?
32. How do your religious beliefs influence how you cope?
33. How do your religious beliefs influence your view of stress?
34. How do you define stress?
35. Do you think your life is stressful?
36. What are some of the stressors or challenges of being part of your community?
37. Can you tell me about any stressors or challenges you face in fulfilling your obligations to your religious community?
38. Can you tell me about any stressors or challenges you face in your living situation?
39. Can you tell me about any stressors or challenges you face in the daily activities of being

a group member?

40. How do you handle those challenges and stressors?
41. Are there any other sources of stress you regularly encounter?
42. Do you ever discuss the challenges of life in of your religious community with others?
43. Do you talk about what you like about being a community member with others?
44. Do you have any final thoughts you would like to share?

## APPENDIX B

## INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR BLOGGERS

1. How long have you been a member of your religious community?
2. Have you always been a member here, or did you join other locations in the past?
3. How did you make the decision to join?
4. What do you find most enjoyable or pleasurable about membership in the group?
5. Who do you interact with frequently?
6. Who are the important people in your life?
7. Why are they important to you?
8. Do you ever joke around with them?
9. Do you ever tease each other?
10. Is there anyone in particular you enjoy laughing and joking with?
11. Is there anyone in particular you enjoy laughing at?
12. Do you use humor with leaders of your religious community?
13. Do you use humor with people thinking about joining the community?
14. Do you use humor with people you meet in the course of activities with your religious community?
15. Do you use humor in writing your blog?
16. What about when interacting with your readers?
17. What about when interacting with other bloggers?
18. What do the other sisters think about your blog?
19. Have the leaders of your religious community had anything to say about your blog?
20. When are humor and jokes especially appropriate or welcome?



21. When are they are especially inappropriate?
22. What does your religion have to say about humor?
23. Can you tell me about whether others in your religious community share your views on humor?
24. What about others you interact with?
25. Is humor something which brings you closer to people in your community?
26. Do you feel it has ever divided you?
27. What topics or subjects make you laugh frequently?
28. Can you tell me about any running or inside jokes between you and other community members?
29. Will you tell me about a real life occurrence that made you and other members laugh?
30. Will you tell me a joke?
31. How does humor make you feel?
32. What effect does humor have on you when you are upset?
33. Have you ever used humor to manage stress?
34. Does this work better with some stressors than others?
35. Can you give me an example of a time humor was used to make a stressful situation easier?
36. What other types of coping mechanisms do you use to manage stress?
37. How do your religious beliefs influence how you cope?
38. How do your religious beliefs influence your view of stress?
39. How do you define stress?
40. Do you think your life is stressful?

41. What are some of the stressors or challenges of being part of your community?
42. Can you tell me about any stressors or challenges you face in fulfilling your obligations to your religious community?
43. Can you tell me about any stressors or challenges you face in your living situation?
44. Can you tell me about any stressors or challenges you face in the daily activities of being a group member?
45. How do you handle those challenges and stressors?
46. Are there any other sources of stress you regularly encounter?
47. Do you ever discuss the challenges of life in of your religious community with others?
48. Do you talk about what you like about being a community member with others?
49. Do you have any final thoughts you would like to share?

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