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Abstract

In August 2009, Sister Louise Akers was banned from teaching in the archdiocese of Cincinnati after refusing to denounce her support of women’s ordination as priests. This thesis combines several theoretical frameworks to perform a unique discursive, feminist analysis of Sister Akers’ experience of conflict within the Roman Catholic Church. This thesis is grounded in the foundational assumptions of the feminist communicology (Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004) and discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) perspectives, and focuses on membership categorization (Jayusi, 1984), and positioning work (Harre and van Langenhove, 1999) as resources utilized by Sister Akers to create space of action when constructing her identity and maneuvering within competing Discourses. Through the use of “The Listening Guide,” a feminist, narrative method (Brown and Gilligan, 1992), this thesis illuminates the aforementioned theoretical concepts within Sister Akers’ narrative of plurality and resistance.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

I am a woman who is passionate about advancing the rights and social position of women. But, at the same time, I am a member of a religious institution that explicitly excludes women from ordination, and in turn, positions women in a subordinate role within the structure of the organization. I was baptized into the Catholic Church as an infant, and I attended Catholic schools for the first twelve years of my education. Growing up, I most always embraced my Catholic upbringing and felt comfortable as a part of the Catholic community. However, recently, as a graduate student who has found herself fascinated and compelled by the study of gender and organization, I have recognized an inconsistency in my identity.

Historically and presently, male leaders form the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. The unequal distribution of power is most obviously manifested in the fact that women are not eligible for ordination within the Church. This masculine power structure is considered by Church hierarchy and many members to be central to the Catholic faith. This study investigates a particular conflict that ensued at the local level as a result of the hegemonic, masculine power structure of the global Catholic organization.

Background of the Study

Sister Louise Akers is a Sister of Charity who was banned from teaching in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati because she supports the ordination of women priests. In September 2009, Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk essentially fired Sister Akers, who had taught in Catholic institutions for over 40 years, after she refused to renounce her support for women’s ordination, a view that is considered to be a violation of the Church’s teachings (Horn, 2009). The conflict was brought to bear when the Archbishop asked Sister Akers to remove her name from the
Women’s Ordination Conference (an organization that supports the advancement of female leaders within the Catholic Church) website, and to publicly renounce her support of women entering the priesthood. Sister Akers agreed to remove her name from the site, but said she would not deny her strong belief in women’s ordination. In a *National Catholic Reporter* article, Sister Akers said, “Women’s ordination is a justice issue. Its basis is the value, dignity and equality of women. I believe this to my very core. To publicly state otherwise would be a lie and a violation of my conscience” (Ball, 2009). Officially, Pilarczyk then told Sister Akers that she could no longer make presentations or teach for credit in any archdiocesan institution (Ball, 2009).

The incident stirred much debate in the local area, and also on an international level, rallying support for both sides of the issue. Critics of the Archbishop’s decision viewed the incident as “an attempt to stifle debate” and “unfair to her and the people she serves” (Horn, 2009). Supporters of the Archbishop viewed Sister Akers’ beliefs as “anti-Catholic,” arguing that Church doctrine clearly states that because Christ chose only male apostles, the Church must allow only male priests. Sister Akers’ experience is a local reflection of global tensions that exist within the Catholic Church as an organization. In this study, I focus on Sister Akers’ case, as described above, for the purposes of exploring issues of gender, identity, power, and resistance within the local context of a Catholic community. It is not my intention to suggest that Sister Akers’ experience reflects the experience of all female leaders within the Catholic Church; rather, I hope to situate the issues that emerge in her specific case within the greater context of the Catholic organization.

**Purpose of the Study**
In this study, I adopt a feminist, discursive approach in analyzing Sister Akers’ narrative account of her experience of conflict within the Catholic Church. Through interview methodology, I analyzed how Sister Akers constructs her narrative and draws from larger Discourses that reflect the broader issue of women’s ordination. In my analysis, I focus on the ways in which Sister Akers constructs her identity to create space of action (Daudi, 1986; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996). More specifically, I draw from membership categorization (Jayusi, 1984) and discursive positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999), which I view as strategies used by Sister Akers to discursively construct her identity as she narrates her story.

This study contributes to feminist, organizational communication literature by illuminating the voice of a woman who has managed a great deal of opposition within a patriarchal structure. This study also adopts a unique analytical framework, which combines membership categorization and positioning theory to explore how Sister Akers creates space of action in narrating her experience. Sister Akers’ story exposes various consequences of gendered organizing, and the findings of this study have implications for other individuals functioning within patriarchal structures.

Chapter 2 provides a review of relevant literature to establish the theoretical areas that inform the study. The literature review begins with a broad discussion of poststructuralist thought and discursive analysis, followed by an overview of the feminist communicology perspective (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2004). Next, I review identity theory as it relates to the aforementioned framework, and I specifically present membership categorization and positioning theory as resources used by actors to create space of action when constructing their identities. To conclude the chapter, I present the research questions that emerge from the literature and guide the analysis. In Chapter 3, I present “The Listening Guide,” a feminist method that I have
adapted for the purposes of this study. Next, in Chapter 4, I present the analysis of Sr. Akers’ narrative, which attends to each of the research questions guiding the study. Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss the interpretations of the analysis and the implications of the study for theory, methodology and practice.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

In the present study, I engage in a discursive analysis of a narrative struggle involving gender, power, and identity. Before discussing the theoretical concepts that inform the gender, power, and identity focus of the research, it is important to understand the overarching perspective from which the research questions arose. In his overview of organizational communication research, Dennis Mumby (2007) described an intersection of feminist and poststructuralist thought that captures the theoretical framework of this study. Theorizing the role of agency in power-mediated organizing processes, or the “return of the subject,” is key to this type of research. Mumby (2007) described the research in terms of “examining the dialectical relationship between the discursive production of gendered organizational subjects, or identities, and the ways that subjects subversively appropriate these same discourses in order to construct resistant and alternative organizational realities” (p. 3296). Mumby’s (2007) description will function as a guide for the following extended discussion of the study’s theoretical lens.

I begin by providing an explanation of the poststructuralist perspective that grounds this study. While manifestations of poststructuralist thought permeate the entire paper, it is important to lay the groundwork before discussing the more specific framework and methodology of the analysis. I also include a discussion of “Discourse” and discursive psychology, as it relates to poststructuralist thought. Next, I narrow the scope of the study by explicating a feminist communicology perspective (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2004) as it applies to my study of the Roman Catholic Church. Following my discussion of the aforementioned feminist framework, I review
key literature that focuses on identity construction and negotiation vis-à-vis membership categorization and positioning theory. Finally, Chapter 2 concludes with the research questions that emerged from the review of literature, and serves as a transition into the description of the research method found in Chapter 3.

*Poststructuralism, Social Constructionism, and Discourse*

In this section, I first ground the study in a poststructuralist, social constructionist worldview. Second, I present several key components of discursive scholarship, beginning with the concepts of Discourse, power, subjectivity, and agency, followed by a discussion of discursive psychology.

W. Barnett Pearce’s “Sailing Guide for Social Constructionists” (1995) discusses at length the differences that exist among various social constructionist scholars; however, he also identifies certain commonalities that all social constructionists share. He states, “Social constructionists agree that there is no preverbal, objective reality that we can know because our ‘knowing’ is inevitably social, linguistic (in some sense), and constructive” (p. 97). Pearce (1995) goes on to explicate the nuanced differences between constructionists and constructivists¹, focusing specifically on the social constructionist belief of “knowing as participation.” This sort of knowing is often referred to as “acting into a context,” and is directly related to the concept of co-constructing meaning. In a social constructionist view, the construction and negotiation of meaning is central to the study of human interaction, thus communication processes are viewed as constitutive of reality. In a communicative sense, what any particular group believes to be “true” is at least partially a “social construct that is created, conveyed and reinforced through discourse in the form of theories, stories, narratives, myths, and so on” (Marshak & Grant, 2008, p. 97).

¹ The constructivist perspective views communication as a more cognitive way of knowing the world, rather than a social process (Pearce, 1995).
Poststructuralism is a variant of social constructionism where the constellation metaphor has often been used to illustrate a view of reality (Bernstein, 1992). This poststructuralist view avoids reduction and seeks multiple truths, hence the relevance of the metaphor. Multiplicity is thus central to contemporary poststructuralist thought where multiple, socially constructed truths are produced and reproduced through discourse. Michel Foucault (1972) views Discourse (with a capital ‘D’ to distinguish it from more common uses of the term) as a set of statements surrounding the formation and articulation of ideas in a historically situated time. Discourses form when statements combine to produce “truths” and knowledge about a particular subject matter in a particular culture, during a specific time period (Foucault, 1972). Foucault characterized historical analysis as an archeology, which involves treating Discourses as autonomous systems of thought that in which history affects the present in a subconscious manner. He later expanded his work to incorporate a genealogy, in which he argues that Discourses are always embedded in local and contingent social practices that constitute the experiences that define a particular context (Foucault, 1980). In this view, power and knowledge are consistently coupled, because what is viewed as “true” is determined by how it is enacted through Discourse.

For Foucault (1983), power and resistance are interrelated. He defines resistance as a signifier of power, describing it as “a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and the methods used (p. 211). In this way, Foucault turns his attention to local manifestations of power and resistance, rather than overarching institutional structures. Power and resistance are enacted through local technologies...
such as the examination or the confession, which are discursively produced and reproduced. The question then becomes not who is in power, but rather, how is power produced through various local technologies? Foucault’s view of power, therefore, is relational rather than essential in that power manifests itself through specific discursive practices, techniques or procedures in situ. For Foucault Discourse implicates power, which is both a branch of knowledge and a means of control. As a branch of knowledge, Discourse constitutes what is true. As a means of control, disciplinary power operates through some form of hierarchical observation. Once individuals are made visible, they are subject to normalizing judgments through one or more classification systems. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1995) provides the example of the Panopticon as an illustration of disciplinary power in which prisoners are consistently observed through surveillance technology. Key to this illustration is the idea that the prisoners become disciplined to monitor their own behaviors because they presume they are continuously being watched via surveillance technology.

Foucault’s conceptualization of objects and subjects is also central to an understanding of Discourse. According to Foucault, Discourse produces objects, which do not exist outside of language. Foucault (1972) describes this phenomenon in the following discussion of mental illness, which for the purposes of this study can be replaced with ordination⁡. This is not to suggest that ordination is comparable to mental illness; rather, my point is to emphasize the way in which ordination has been constituted through Discourse:

Mental illness [ordination] was constituted by all that was said in all the statements that named it, divided it up, described it, explained it, traced its developments, indicated its various correlations, judged it, and possibly gave it speech by articulating, in its name, [D]iscourses that were to be taken as its own. (p. 32)

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⁡Example originally utilized by Fairhurst (2004), in which she replaces ‘mental illness’ with ‘leadership.'
In this sense, Discourse brings objects into existence, but also constitutes human beings as subjects through three modes of objectification, as explained by Foucault (1983). The first mode of objectification is of speaking subjects in Discourse. This is especially important in a consideration of identity, because this form of power “categorizes the individual, marks him out by his own individuality, attaches him to his identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him” (Foucault, 1983, p. 212). For example, in this study, Sister Akers is objectified as a speaking subject because she is captured in a social justice Discourse but is also objectified as a speaking subject through her formal role within the Church. As will be shown, such Discourses both enable her to work for change, but also constrain her within the institution of the Church.

The second way that subjects are objectified is through norm-producing, which develops systems of judgment that are enacted through Discourse. For example, in this study systems of judgment are expressed through Discourse regarding how a Catholic nun should behave and what she should believe. Sister Akers pushes the boundaries of these norms through her publicly expressed views, which renders her behavior contestable. The third way subjects are objectified involves how humans turn themselves into subjects and create agency, which is a particularly relevant concept for the current study. Individuals subjugate themselves when Discourses become resources that contribute to their own understanding. Subjects can create agency, or space of action, by drawing from multiple Discourses (space of action will be discussed more specifically, later in this chapter) to escape the constraints of any one of them. However, it is important to note that Foucault (1983) argues that the power effects of Discourse still reproduce themselves, in spite of individuals’ perceived agency. This notion challenges the existence of one’s ‘true’ self, characterizing individuals as products of Discourse, rather than independent
agents. The notion that identity is discursively constructed will be extended later in this chapter; however it is important to consider how self-identity is contingent on the fixation of meaning. LaClau and Mouffe (1985) see fixation of meaning as temporary because Discourses are always competing. Because subjects construct self-identities through discourse, identity is fluid and can always be re-constructed; thus, no “true” self-identity exists.

While some scholars have challenged what they view as Foucault’s characterization of human beings as “docile bodies” who lack agency, Scott (1988) argued for the political potential of Foucault’s work, stating that it provides a framework for rethinking the “politics of the contextual construction of social meanings, about such organizing principles for political action as ‘equality’ or ‘difference’” (p. 257). However, as Sheep (2006) argues, Foucault does not clearly address how particular Discourses can change or become dominant over time. To address this gap, Shapiro (1992) extended Foucault’s conceptualization of (D)iscourse in his argument that Discourses exist in a constant struggle. Shapiro’s view of discursive struggle provides “an appreciation of the trace of losses associated with the victories of given, institutionalized systems of intelligibility” (1992, p. 38). In other words, by considering the struggle between competing Discourses, one can identify whose voices are silenced in relationship to the dominant voice(s). The presumption of discursive struggle, or Discourses existing in dialectical relationships, is a foundational concept of discursive analysis.

*Discursive Psychology*

One approach to the study of discourse that can capture the play of Discourses is discursive psychology. Discursive psychology was introduced in the work of Potter and Wetherell (1987) as an alternative paradigm for investigating issues of human psychology.
Discursive psychology emerged from the social constructionist assumptions discussed in the previous section, and is defined as:

An approach to social psychology that has developed as a type of discourse analysis in order to explore the ways in which peoples’ selves, thoughts, and emotions are formed and transformed through social interaction and to cast light on the role of these processes in social and cultural reproduction and change (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 7).

Discursive psychology differs dramatically from a cognitive view of psychology, which assumes a stable connection between cognition and discourse (talk). Rather, discursive psychologists view discourse as representative of cognitions at a particular moment, in a specific context. This view then allows for the possibility of inconsistency, incoherence, and variety in everyday discourse. As such, attitudes and other psychological concepts take shape in and through social interaction. Two points are noteworthy in this regard.

First, Potter and Wetherell focus on two levels of discourse, what Alvesson and Karreman have designated as little “d” and big “D.” Alvesson and Karreman (2000) discuss the various conceptualizations of discourse in terms of scope and scale, distinguishing between two primary approaches to discursive analysis. Discourse (capital-D) is characterized as “long-range, macro-systemic,” a “rather universal, if historically situated, set of vocabularies, standing loosely coupled to, referring to, or constituting a particular phenomenon” (p. 1133). On the other hand, discourse (lower-case d) refers to everyday talk and interaction, and discourse studies focus on “close range, considering and emphasizing local, situational context” (p. 1133). Alvesson and Karreman’s (2000) view of Discourse aligns closely with Foucault’s notion of Discourse, which couples power and knowledge.

Second, discursive psychologists locate the big “D” in little “d” discourse. How so? Potter and Wetherell (1992) challenge Foucault’s conceptualization of Discourse as reified. Discursive psychologists (Potter, Wetherell, Gill, and Edwards, 1990) are critical that Foucault’s
view of Discourse has become “something akin to the geology of plate tectonics – great plates on the earth’s crust circulate and clash together; some plates grind violently together; others slip quietly over [the] top of one another.” A view that, according to Potter et al. (1990), characterizes (D)iscourse as overly coherent and systematized. Potter et al. (1990) instead view Discourse as an “interpretive repertoire.” Viewing Discourse as an “interpretive repertoire” from which actors draw upon in everyday talk illuminates the way agency can manifest itself. This perspective then frames subjectivity and agency as dialectic, meaning actors are both constrained and enabled by Discourse. This view represents what Phillips and Jorgenson (2002) suggest is the synthetic strand of discursive psychology, which incorporates the study of both how people engage in discourse (everyday talk) and draw from Discourses (interpretive repertoires) to construct their identities. In accordance with the synthetic strand of discursive psychology, actors draw from competing Discourses as resources, which often creates dialectic tension between contradictory discursive maneuvers. Keeping in mind the utility of discursive psychology to reveal dialectical tension, the next section attends to the specific focus of this study to examine tensions of a gendered nature.

A Feminist Communicology Perspective

Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) propose a feminist communicology perspective in which human communication is constitutive of organization. In this sense, organization (rather than organizations) is viewed as a dynamic, communicative process. This concept has been theorized as the “becoming” organization (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004), which refers to the organization in a continual state of emergence via the organizing properties of (D)iscourse. In other words, the feminist communicology perspective represents a shift from studying “gendered organizations”
to studying “gendered organizing,” which centralizes the role of communication and (D)iscourse in processes of organizing.

However, it is likely individuals in an organization will not adopt the “becoming” orientation and will treat the organization as an “already formed object with discursive features” (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004 as cited in Sheep, 2006). For example, as Sheep (2006) explained in his study of the Episcopal Church USA, “it is difficult for actors to orient to entities with centuries-long historical development such as ECUSA or the Anglican Community without some (perhaps unintended) expression that treats these collectivities as extant objects with relatively familiar features” (p. 16). I argue that the same is true for actors within the Roman Catholic Church in the present study. Because the Roman Catholic Church is characterized by long-standing traditions, it is challenging for actors to question or challenge the hierarchical structure of the organization because it is treated as a reified object, rather than a communicative phenomenon. Given this reification, organizations function as sources of dominant Discourses (Sheep, 2006). However, these Discourses remain unstable and are discursive accomplishments that are “produced, reproduced, or reshaped with each categorical utterance” (Sheep, 2006, p. 17). This view is central to the theoretical assumptions of the present study of organization, identity, and gender.

Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) claim that the organization is fundamentally gendered, based on three “radical principles”: first, gender is constitutive of organizing, meaning issues of gender are always present in organizational life and that organizing as a process always involves assumptions about gendered relationships; second, the gendering of organization involves a struggle over meaning, identity and difference; third, this struggle results in the reproduction of social realities that privilege certain interests over others. In sum, gendered organizing refers to
a direct connection between gender and power, in which the struggle for gendered meaning occurs through (D)iscourse within tangible institutional structures.

Ashcraft and Mumby’s (2004) notion of communicology ascribes to a definition of (D)iscourse that not only employs a Foucauldian conception of Discourse but also acknowledges the role of the active subject in meaning making. In other words, Discourse is not simply symbolic, but is also “invoked by social actors who engage with a real–albeit socially constructed–world” (p. 116). Based on this conceptualization of (D)iscourse, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) defined communication as “the dynamic, situated, embodied, and contested process of creating systems of gendered meanings and identities by invoking, articulating, and/or transforming available discourses” (p. 116). Their definition of communication relates directly to their view of gender as a “complex, fragmentary, ongoing, and contradictory accomplishment that unfolds at the nexus of communication and organizing” (Ashcraft and Mumby, 2006, p. 74).

The interrelatedness of these terms – organization, Discourse, communication, and gender – is central to building an understanding of the feminist communicological perspective. Based on the intersection of the previously defined terms, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) proposed a feminist communicology perspective as a means for studying gendered organization. The feminist communicology perspective is intended to be metatheoretical, and consists of the six thematic principles. For the purposes of this study, the following three principles are most relevant:

3 Ashcraft and Mumby’s (2004) three additional principles are as follows: (4) Discourse and the material world exist in a dialectical relationship, wherein discourse constructs material realities which impinge on discursive possibilities; (5) Masculinities and femininities are co-constructed and, thus, best understood dialectically; (6) Ethical research entails a normative commitment to exposing the consequences of gendered organization and possibilities for organizing differently (p. 74).
In the remainder of this section, I will describe these principles in order to establish a grounded framework for this study of a Catholic nun’s identity. This framework supplies the following three feminist assumptions that provide a backdrop for the gender element of the study.

First, a feminist communicology perspective views subjectivity as fragmented, unstable, and constructed dynamically through communication. This view of communication demands a consideration of everyday communication (or little “d” discourse) in order to gain insight into subjects’ constructions of gendered identities. These identities can be studied as examples of “process subjectivity,” which refers to a person’s communicative engagement with the world as a process involving the production and reproduction of the self. From this perspective, subjects “appropriate, accommodate, resist, and ironically adopt available discourses” as they function within social structures (Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004). These definitions fall between a postmodern and modern perspective, in that people are viewed as de-centered selves who are the products of multiple, socially constructed Discourses and as agents who engage in the material world in meaningful ways. Ashcraft and Mumby’s (2006) view of communication goes beyond the study of (D)iscourse and text to also include the body as an element of performed subjectivity.

Second, a feminist communicology perspective views the relationship between power and resistance as dialectical and mutually defining. A dialectical approach to the study of organizational behavior avoids privileging either domination or resistance perspectives. A domination perspective would emphasize the ways in which organizational control mechanisms
reinforce power relations; whereas, a resistance perspective usually privileges subjects’ ability to challenge those power relations. According to Ashcraft and Mumby (2004), both of these perspectives employ a model of power as domination; meaning power is viewed as a force that must be conquered. In contrast, a dialectical approach to power and resistance centralizes the role of communication in power relations. A dialectical approach allows for the examination of hegemony as “a dynamic process of discursive struggle in which various groups compete to secure meanings in conflictual contexts” (Mumby, 1997 as cited in Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004). Such an analysis emphasizes the ironies, ambiguities, and contradictions that emerge as individuals function within an organization.

Third, a feminist communicology perspective views historically informed analysis as the key to rich understanding of gendered organizing. This principle acknowledges the importance of contextualizing everyday communication within larger historical Discourses. A historically informed analysis examines the relationships between human agency, institutional structures, and historical change. In this analysis, agents are not necessarily individual social actors. Institutions, social movements, and groups also possess a degree of agency. A central goal of a historically informed analysis is to understand “how dominant groups and institutions mobilize particular meaning systems by drawing on and articulating together existing cultural discourses” (Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004, p. 122). A feminist communicological perspective focuses on how macro-level agents (institutions, cultural/political discourses, social movements, etc.) construct gendered identities and how individuals produce and reinforce these constructions in everyday communication. In sum, examining history through a feminist communicology lens resists the notion of history as “uniform, homogenous, and linear,” which allows for a consideration of how
struggles among competing cultural, political and economic forces affect issues of gender, identity and organization (Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004).

Ashcraft and Mumby’s (2004) communicology principles are woven throughout the remainder of the study, and the framework is particularly useful for examining the organization at hand as a site for gendered organizing. In the following section, I provide a rationale for applying this perspective to the study of gendered organizing within the Roman Catholic Church. Following this discussion, I extend a discursive psychology approach to identity theory. The aforementioned principles of the feminist communicology perspective warrant a discursive approach to identity because communication is viewed as the means for constructing individual subjectivity, as later discussion will reveal. This study is unique in utilizing both feminist communicology and discursive psychology perspectives to contribute to theories of identity and gender.

*Roman Catholic Church as a Site for Gendered Organizing*

In order to illustrate the appropriateness of the feminist communicology perspective for the study of gendered organizing within the Roman Catholic institution, I will briefly discuss the evolution of women’s roles within the Church. This historical overview is intended to satisfy the third guiding principle of the feminist communicology perspective, which addresses the importance of a historically informed analysis (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2004). This section is meant to contextualize the study within the macro-history of the Catholic Church and women’s ordination.

Carol Jablonski (1988) provides a useful overview in her rhetorical analysis of the women’s ordination movement. She argues that Catholic women exist in a paradoxical position, positioning women between dichotomous rhetorical choices. She posits that women can choose
to be “selectively orthodox,” which is characterized by identification with the Catholic institution, in hopes of reform through increased awareness of women’s spirituality; or women can choose to be “selectively heterodox,” which is characterized by distancing oneself from the institution without actually separating from it (Jablonski, 1988). While Jablonski’s discussion of Catholic women’s paradoxical position is useful in laying the groundwork for a study of gendered organizing within the Catholic Church, I would argue against limiting women’s choices to dichotomous, oppositional poles. Instead, I view what Jablonski (1988) calls “rhetorical choices” as competing Discourses that exist in dialectical tension. I will further explicate this argument in the analysis section of the paper. It is important now to ground this study in the historically patriarchal structure of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Roman Catholic Church is an institution characterized by sexism in the eyes of many, although the Church would likely disagree with this characterization. Historically and presently, male leaders form the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. The hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church is outlined in detail in the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, one of the many documents that resulted from Vatican II in 1964 (Vatican, 2010). The hierarchy of the Church is based on spiritual presumptions and begins with Roman Pontiff (the Pope) who is thought to be the successor of Peter, one of Jesus Christ’s apostles. Beneath the Pope follows the college of bishops, followed by priests and deacons. Only men can be appointed to these positions of leadership. The fact that women are not eligible for ordination within the Church most clearly illustrates the unequal distribution of power. The leaders of the Church are those in the hierarchy, and because of their leadership positions, those individuals have access to power within the organization. By explicitly excluding women from ordination, they are rendered as subordinates who must obey male leaders, as evidenced in the events that are the basis of this
study. The masculine power structure of the Church is considered to be central to the Catholic faith, and extends beyond the institution located in Rome to individual Catholic parishes and schools.

The positioning of women as marginalized is premised on a particular notion of the “order of creation,” whereby the Catholic Church historically taught that a woman should only assume “roles consistent with her nature” (Jablonski, 1988, p. 166). Historically, women who felt called to speak out, particularly female religious leaders and scholars were constrained by the popular belief that their gender limited “their ability to discern truth and express it appropriately” (Jablonski, 1988, p. 166). Pope John XXIII worked to expand the Church’s views of women by acknowledging that women’s roles in secular society were changing. His legacy was then carried on through Vatican II (1962-1965), which “created an unprecedented opportunity for women’s issues to be discussed at all levels of the Church’s hierarchy” (Jablonski, 1988, p. 166). Women’s ordination was one of the issues discussed, and soon after, supporters began to mobilize.

In 1975, Americans in support of women’s ordination gathered in Detroit to discuss the issues in an open forum. One month before the conference, Archbishop Joseph Bernardin, president of the United States National Conference of Catholic Bishops at the time, issued a statement that upheld the Church’s ban on women’s ordination (Jablonski, 1988), which both saddened and inspired participants in the Detroit conference (WOC, 2010). The 1975 Detroit conference focused on several themes regarding the gendered structure of the Church:

(1) patriarchy must be recognized as a world-view in Church and society; (2) patriarchy defines woman as “other” to God and man, and thus encourages the “sin” sexism; (3) patriarchy encourages bifurcated images of woman as seductress (the archetypal Eve) and virgin (the archetypal “Madonna”) that degrade women generically and provide poor models for personal spirituality; (4) women must not allow themselves to be defined by these images, but must seek self-understanding and spiritual fulfillment in community
with other Christian women; (5) women have a prophetic role to play in bringing about needed ecclesiastical change; and (6) for patriarchy to be eradicated, change must occur in Church structure as well as theology (Jablonski, 1988, p. 168).

The conference led to the formation of an alliance among the conference organizers that became the Women’s Ordination Conference (WOC) (Jablonski, 1988). WOC remains one of the forefront organizations in support of women’s rights in the Church. However, most, if not all, of the projected goals of the original 1975 conference have yet to be realized.

Currently, women’s ordination is symbolic of the larger struggle between the Roman Catholic Church and the Christian community as a whole. The Church’s last official word on the subject was the 1994 apostolic letter written and released by Pope John Paul II, which explicitly stated that women’s ordination was not up for debate (WOC, 2010). This issue of women’s ordination is but one contested topic in the Roman Catholic Church at this time. The hierarchy continues to confront the sex-abuse crisis in the Church, which has resulted in much criticism of the current Pope, Benedict XVI. Additionally, during the past year, two Vatican dicasteries – the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) and the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) – began conducting an “apostolic visitation” of women religious orders in the U.S. This investigation began as an attempt to learn why there aren’t more women entering religious life, but the visitation has not been well received by many religious orders who feel the investigation is unwarranted (Zagano, 2010). Additionally, the church is also experiencing ongoing struggles over finances and membership in Europe and North America, identity prerequisites for the priesthood (male/celibate/heterosexual), a dearth of priests, relations with other denominations (welcoming dissenting Anglicans), and changing perceptions about its credibility and legal standing.
The Church refuses to engage in dialogue with those who seek change in the Catholic patriarchal structure, as evidenced by the subject of this study. The history of gender inequality within the Roman Catholic Church discussed in this section speaks to the appropriateness of a feminist communicology perspective in studying instances of gendered organizing within the structure of the Church. In the next section, I provide an overview of identity theory, from a discursive perspective, followed by a more specific focus on membership categorization (Jayusi, 1984) and positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999) as a means for creating space of action.

**Examining Identity through a Discursive Lens**

A discursive approach to the study of identity can be particularly useful in examining how identities are constructed and managed. Postmodern, discursive identity theories acknowledge that identity is constructed through discourse, constituting “a self subjected to and by (D)iscourses of power in an increasingly complex, destabilized, and multivocal world” (Tracy & Tretheway, 2005, p. 171). Following this perspective, competing Discourses attempt to “fix” subjects’ identities. However, this does not mean that human subjects are without agency; each subject is capable of resistance, which manifests itself in the ways individuals challenge the (D)iscourses that have shaped their identities (Tracy & Tretheway, 2005).

Poststructuralists define the self discursively, but also acknowledge that the self is sometimes treated as an “object.” Specifically, the self is viewed as “a practical everyday accomplishment” in a sense that individuals reflexively organize narratives about their experiences with various Discourses. For example, in the present study, Sister Akers has constructed her identity as a Catholic nun by reflecting on her experiences as she navigates
between competing Discourses. This reflexive accomplishment illustrates individuals’ agency in their ability to engage or resist various Discourses based on their past life experiences.

Identity is also treated objectively because identity construction occurs “in relation to Discourses that construct employment and (subject) positions in institutional settings” (Tracy & Tretheway, 2005, p. 171-2). In other words, organizational Discourses encourage individual members to embody specific identities. In the case of Catholic nuns, this aspect of identity is particularly salient because these individuals are not only members of a particular organization (the Roman Catholic Church), but they feel “called” to their vocation; thus, they may embody prescribed organizational identities in a more complex and essential way than members of other organizations. A discursive approach is an appropriate means for studying these complexities.

Ainsworth and Hardy (2004) explore different discursive approaches to studying identity, including research focused on language, talk, narrative, and interdiscursivity. In the present study, I employ elements of feminist communicological and discursive psychological lenses to examine identity and gendered organizing (as discussed at length in an earlier section); I argue that this perspective combines various aspects of all four approaches discussed by Ainsworth and Hardy (2004). It is of value to examine these approaches in order to understand this view of identity construction. First, discourse scholars have developed the study of identities through language, “exploring how processes of linguistic categorization construct identities that are defined by their relationship to, and difference from, other identities” (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004, p. 155). Second, researchers study identity as it is constructed through talk and interaction with others, and how those interactions are reflective of broader social structures. Third, in narrative studies of identity, researchers examine how identity is constructed through story telling. In a narrative study of identity, “self-identity is constituted as actors attempt to construct
a coherent, continuous biography where their ‘life story’ is the sensible result of a series of related events or cohesive themes” (Gergen, 1994 as cited in Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004, p. 162). Finally, an ‘interdiscursivity, social practice’ approach to studying organizational identities adopts a Foucauldian method to examine the ways that broader Discourses affect identity construction processes. Through discipline, specific Discourses become normalized, limiting subject positions from which only certain identities can speak (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004). The perspective utilized in this study blurs the lines between these four approaches to identity construction. All four are discursive – a foundational characteristic of both the feminist communicology and the discursive psychology approach. A combined perspective, then, is ideal for this study in order to examine both the larger Discourses at play and a specific case, or “narrative,” in order to illustrate a more complete account of how identity is constructed vis-à-vis gendered organizing processes.

When considering how Sister Akers constructs her identity through talk, one must keep in mind that identity construction is an emergent accomplishment, rather than a fixed definition. Tracy and Tretheway’s (2005) explanation of the “crystallized self” is helpful in discussing the ways one’s identity evolves over time, in relation to competing Discourses:

In short, the process of embracing conflictual discourses encourages the continued (re)growth of a crystallized self – a life wrapped in a quilt of many colors rather than one suffocated by a monochromatic blanket. Although individuals cannot freely choose the discourses that constitute them (Foucault, 1980a, 1980b), a space for agency lies in the ability to traverse, intersect, and hold in tension competing discourses and attendant ways of being (p. 188).

The creation of a space for agency is central to understanding how individuals negotiate conflicting aspects of their identity, such as a Catholic nun who believes in women’s ordination. Space for agency is reflective of the feminist communicology view that power and resistance exist in dialectical tension (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2004). It is the dialectical tension (rather than a
power-over model) that provides individuals with the capacity to manage conflicting Discourses. Gregg (1993) refers to this tension in terms of “subject positions” – she states, “Identity is a matter of negotiating the inconsistencies and contradictions between subject positions and everyday realities…available in both Discourses and practices” (p. 25). From this perspective, postmodern researchers reject the notion that universal themes of identity and collective action can be identified in women’s common experiences of oppression (Mumby, 2001). Instead, instances of resistance are viewed as local, complex, and often contradictory; this study aims to explicate the specific ways one subject navigates these discursive tensions.

Holmer-Nadesan (1996) utilized Daudi’s (1986) concept, space of action, to theorize the identity construction processes discussed above from a poststructuralist perspective. Space of action describes individuals’ ability to maneuver and create possibility in dialectic instances of power and resistance. More specifically, she identified an unfulfilled “lack” in the Discourses experienced by actors, which allows them to create space for discursive agency. She states, “it is the (D)iscourse’s lack, and the subject’s experience of that lack, that engenders space of action” (p. 59). This means that when actors experience antagonisms (conflicting elements) in a particular Discourse, the logic of the Discourse is called into question, which allows for space of action. Specifically, “agency is the space of action/articulation that is engendered by the ‘undecidable structure’” (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996, p. 59, citing LaClau, 1990). This is not to suggest that individual behavior is ever “free,” rather, choice and possibility are created through the subject’s space of action. In this study, I utilize the following two analytic frameworks to explore how Sister Akers creates space of action: membership categorization (Jayusi, 1984) and positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Both are consistent with the aims of discursive psychology’s goal to study the big “D” in the little “d”.
Membership Categorization

Discursive psychology scholarship is characterized by two forms of analyses known as conversation analysis (CA) and membership categorization (MC). CA is a rigorous ethnomethodological technique used for “transcribing and analyzing interactional data from audio recordings,” which provides a way for researchers to access everyday discourse (Sheep, 2006). However, CA is beyond the scope of this study, and for my purposes, membership categorization is a more appropriate route for analysis. MC is an approach (not just a method) developed by Jayusi (1984), who draws from Harvey Sacks’ original definition of membership categories as social types or classifications to describe various persons (i.e. woman, priest, dentist, student). Jayusi (1984) makes the distinction between membership categories and membership categorizations, with the first term referring to the “already culturally available category-concepts,” and the second term referring to the work of members in categorizing other members, often drawing from available member categories.

As people engage in member categorization work, they classify others according to particular “types,” or constructed references to a group. These “types” are constructed based on specific traits and practices, and are used by members to predict future action. In this way, member behaviors are justified according to their “type” or characterization, rather than finding a specific reason for their action. This category work is used to talk about ‘deviant’ behavior, as Jayusi (1984) describes:

The underlying asymmetry of perspectives involved is a logical feature of such formulations, and it points clearly and simply to the normatively and morally organized character of categorization work, accounts, descriptions, predictions, and discourse-interactional work in general (p. 28).

Categorization work, then, functions as a mechanism for individuals to make sense of others’ behaviors. For example, in the present study, Sister Akers characterizes those who oppose her
behaviors as “conservative Catholics” in order to make sense of the recent conflict in the archdiocese. Key to this study is the idea that categorizations are “made to function at once as inferences, descriptions, and judgments” (Jayusi, 1984, p. 45). In the case of Sister Akers, the use of categorizations in explicitly moral ways becomes especially important in understanding how she makes sense of her identity and of how others are categorizing her during a period of organizational conflict.

Categories possess certain “category-bound” features, but are also constitutive in nature. Category-bound features, or predicates, are activities, rights, obligations, motivations, knowledge and competencies that are usually attached to category incumbents (Jayusi, 1984). However, categories are also constitutive, meaning individuals may displace historical categorizations through their “genuine performance” of a particular category. A genuine performance is defined as a good or moral performance of a category, “ably demonstrating the competencies/knowledge required of the category (not merely relevant to it, as in category-bound behavior)” (Sheep, 2006, p. 35, citing Jayusi, 1984). What is “required of” a category is determined by those engaging in categorization work in relation to morality. Category performances can also be viewed as moral failures, reflecting the judging potential of member categorization work.

In relation to Discourse, category use is strongly linked to “how the world is viewed (and how those views might be contested, changed, and overcome) by social actors (Sheep, 2006, p. 40). Category work is used in talk to privilege one worldview, or Discourse, over another, which reflects relations of power. Membership categories are used discursively in the moment, but also can become reified over time. Categories then become resources that can be viewed as part of larger Discourses (or interpretive repertoires), allowing individuals to strategically engage in category work to accomplish political goals.
Membership categorization can bring to light the existence of multiple organizational identities. A consideration of multiple identities is pertinent following situations of “dramatic changes,” such as Sister Akers’ recent experience as a Catholic nun who is now banned from teaching in the archdiocese. In this study, Sister Akers was punished for expressing her support for women’s ordination, a view that is oppositional to the greater, prescribed Catholic identity. Kreiner and Ashforth (2004) describe this phenomenon as “ambivalent identification,” which occurs when an individual simultaneously identifies and disidentifies with (aspects of) one’s organization. Sheep (2006) examined how multiple identities were expressed in terms of elasticity, which he defined as “how actors construct in their everyday discourse the conditions of how far conflicting multiple identities can ‘stretch’ before they break, and with what consequences” (p. 53). Central to the concept of elasticity is a consideration of how actors describe the complementary or conflicting identities, and whether the conflict “is being categorized as a break or schism in the members’ discourse” (Sheep, 2006, p. 54). In this particular study, Sister Akers’ narrative account of conflict in the Church functions as a text to examine how the multiplicity and differences in her identity have “stretched” to hold her identification with the Roman Catholic organization.

The concept of elasticity also relates to the discursive construction of legitimacy. Legitimacy refers to one’s attempt to gain acceptance of an identity position, often at the expense of conflicting positions (Sheep, 2006). Membership categorization is connected to legitimation because individuals draw on larger Discourses through category work in order to legitimate categorical behavior. Actors also attempt to transform categories to establish legitimacy. Jayusi (1984) defines category transformations as occurring when actors modify the relevance of one categorization device by negating it or by making another categorization more relevant in order
to alter the nature of persons being categorized. Transforming a categorization is related to legitimacy in that actors will attempt to transform categories into more or less legitimate ones. In this way, what is considered to be legitimate behavior for a particular category (such as a Catholic nun supporting women’s ordination) is discursively constructed. In this study, I analyze Sister Akers’ use of membership categorization to legitimate her identity, and in turn create space of action.

**Positioning Theory**

I also consider positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) as a tool for creating space of action. The discursive analysis of this study attends to the way Sister Akers narrates her experience of conflict within the Catholic organization. Narratives, or “storylines” are multiple, dynamic, evolving, and unfinished and can help people make sense of unfolding action (Boje, 2001). Harré and van Langenhove’s (1999) positioning theory provides insight as to how people position themselves and others within larger storylines or narratives. They view positioning as “the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person’s actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts and within which the members of conversation have specific locations” (p. 16). In this way, a position can be compared to a member categorization in that both reference moral qualities, and are associated with permissions, obligations, and prohibitions for how to act. Positions are fluid rather than fixed, and are used by subjects “to cope with the situation they usually find themselves in” (p. 17). A position-driven analysis attends to the relationships among positions, storylines, and speech acts—and thus provides value added beyond categorization work.

Harré and van Langenhove (1999) introduce many different positioning categories that can be used in discursive analysis. The most basic distinction discussed in positioning theory is
that between first and second order positioning. First order positioning refers to “the way persons locate themselves and others within an essentially moral space by using several categories and storylines” (p. 20). For example, if a teacher asks a student to answer a question, the teacher positions the student as someone who must obey his or her request. Second order positioning occurs when the first order positioning is challenged or questioned, and negotiated. If the student were to state his or her defiance to the teacher, their position of “student” would be questioned and potentially altered. Second order positioning occurs when first order positions are not taken for granted by someone involved in the conversation.

A second distinction discussed by Harré and van Langenhove (1999) is that between performative and accountive positioning. Performative positioning refers to instances when first order positions are challenged within a conversation, as in the example above. However, accountive positioning refers to “talk about talk,” when the questioning of first order positioning is discussed either during the conversation or within another conversation about the first conversation. The former is considered second order positioning, while the latter is labeled as third order positioning. In other words, third order positioning often involves other persons than the ones performing in the original discussion. In the teacher-student example, if the teacher were to discuss the incident with the principal, this would be an example of third order, accountive positioning.

An additional distinction that is relevant to this study is the difference between moral and personal positioning. Moral positioning refers to positioning according to a particular role (i.e. nun); whereas personal positioning refers to positioning according to an individual characteristic (i.e. feminist). This particular distinction is not dissimilar from Jayusi’s (1986) concept of “category-bound” and category-constitutive features discussed in the previous section. Certain
features are bound to a particular category or role, and are used to accomplish moral positioning (she is a nun, so she should obey her religious superiors), while others are constitutive and are used to accomplish personal positioning (i.e. she is a feminist nun, so she supports women’s ordination). In this study, I focus on identifying instances of first, second and third order positioning while also attending to moral and personal positioning.

Garcia and Hardy (2007) adopt a similar perspective to positioning theory, characterizing people as “story-telling creatures” (p. 365, citing Brown, 2006), who make sense of experiences through narrative, specifically “through selective sequencing of events, attribution of motive to characters in the story, and assignment of moral qualities to themselves and others – processes which are all crucial in the formation of identities” (Garcia & Hardy, 2007, p. 366, citing Brown, 2006). In addition to looking at these aspects of narrative, the authors focused on positioning, or “the audience to whom the narration is addressed” (Garcia & Hardy, 2007, p. 366). Furthermore, positioning theory explains that identity is constructed through talk, and when “individuals claim identities by taking up positions in Discourses” they speak from the vantage point of that particular position (Jorgenson, 2002, p. 358). In their study of organizational identities during a time of change, they found that individuals constructed narratives of similarity and difference and by positioning, created space of action for multiple meanings. In particular, individuals used positioning to strategically use the “victimhood” Discourse to cast themselves as victims who have been wronged and are able to take an active stance. This identity appears subjective, but actors are able to create space of action through positioning and category work. In a similar way, Sister Akers constructs a storyline of social justice by describing her active support of women’s ordination as a matter of human rights. In this storyline, she is able to position herself as a social justice activist, whose support of human rights issues falls under her official job description as
coordinator of the Office of Peace, Justice and Integrity of Creation, rather than as a deviant Catholic nun who is going against official doctrine.

In sum, I combine several theoretical frameworks to perform a unique discursive, feminist analysis of Sister Akers’ experience of conflict within the Roman Catholic Church. This study is grounded in the foundational assumptions of the feminist communicological and discursive psychological perspectives, and focuses on categorization and positioning work as resources utilized by Sister Akers to create space of action when constructing her identity through talk. Specifically, discursive positioning theory further contextualizes Sister Akers’ categorization work by embedding it in a broader storyline.

Research Questions

The following research questions emerged from the above review of literature, and each aims to satisfy a different component of the unique theoretical perspective. Research question one asks: How does Sister Akers discursively construct multiple identities in her narrative account of conflict in the Catholic Church? To address this question, I identify instances of membership categorization (Jayusi, 1984) work within the narrative. In other words, how does Sr. Akers categorize herself and others as she talks about her experiences? Research question two asks: How does Sister Akers position herself in her narrative account of conflict in the Catholic Church? To address this component of the study, I utilize discursive positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999) to identify how Sister Akers constructs first, second, and third order positioning in her narrative. In other words, how does she organize the categorizations identified in research question one throughout the narrative? Also, how does she enact or challenge the ways others position her? Subsequently, research question three asks: What Discourses does Sister Akers invoke in her narrative account of conflict within the
Church? This question is intended to illuminate how Sister Akers contextualizes her experience within the broader issue of women’s ordination (or more broadly, women and the Church). To address this question, I consider the use of terms, metaphor, and forms of argument in her narrative account in combination with the membership categorization and positioning work identified in the first two research questions, while also supplementing her talk with external texts that she identifies as support for the Discourses she draws from. Finally, research question four asks: How does Sister Akers use these strategies (category and positioning work) to discursively create space of action? I analyze how she performs her identity using these discursive strategies to create possibility for new meanings as she experiences criticism and conflict within the Church. Each of these research questions explores Sister Akers’ identity construction processes, and is ethically charged with the goal of exposing the consequences of gendered organizing and considering possibilities for change.
Chapter 3

Methods

The research methodology used in this study aligns with the theoretical perspectives discussed in the previous chapter, and thus reflects the assumptions of those perspectives. In this study, I utilize a feminist, narrative approach to explore how one individual, Sr. Louise Akers, constructs her identity in the face of patriarchal opposition. By focusing primarily on her narrative, I am able to focus my analysis on her identity construction processes. In this chapter, I begin by discussing the details of the study, followed by the introduction of a feminist method of analysis called “The Listening Guide” (Brown and Gilligan, 1992), which I have adapted in conjunction with the theoretical concepts presented in the previous chapter for the purposes of this particular study.

In their discussion of feminist interview techniques and analyses, Anderson and Jack (1991) state, “The interview is a critical tool for developing new frameworks and theories based on women’s lives and women’s formulations.” Because my research questions inquire about the identity work of a female subject, I felt it was ideal to conduct my research via personal interview. I obtained permission to interview Sr. Akers by contacting her through email. I interviewed her on two separate occasions, three months apart from each other. The first interview lasted approximately ninety minutes; the second lasted approximately fifty minutes. The interview followed a loosely structured guide (see Appendix A), beginning with Sr. Akers telling her version of the conflict without interruption, followed by questions regarding her identity as a Catholic sister. Both interviews were transcribed completely, totaling about twenty pages of single-spaced, typed text. Outside texts that Sr. Akers mentioned within the interviews
including a magazine article and a television interview were used in the study as background information, but the interviews served as the primary text for analysis.

I have adapted my method of analysis from “The Listening Guide,” a relational, qualitative method developed by Brown and Gilligan (1992). Brown (2001) states, “Such questions about and explorations of the impact of social and material location on individual subjectivities and interpersonal relationships are best explored through in-depth qualitative analysis of the language and forms of discourse of different groups of people in different contexts” (p. 96). “The Listening Guide,” according to Brown (2001), is a method that allows for such an analysis. “The Listening Guide” attends to the polyphonic, nonlinear voices that exist within an individual narrative. In other words, the method allows the researcher to focus on the multiple Discourses at play within the narrative. The method also requires the researcher to acknowledge her or his own positionality and relationship with the interviewee, characterizing “The Listening Guide” as a relational method of analysis. This voice-centered, relational method allows the researcher to identify entangled themes expressed through multiple voices. The method is creative and flexible, and allows for the complexity of human experience, rather than reducing meaning to simplified categories and constructs. The method also implicitly acknowledges that the interviewee’s story is co-constructed with the interviewer, which aligns with the feminist, communication perspectives discussed in Chapter 2 regarding the co-construction of meaning through discourse. To ensure a co-constructed narrative, I interviewed Sr. Akers on more than one occasion and remained in contact with her throughout the analysis process.

While I have adapted the method to allow for an analysis of the specific discursive concepts discussed in the previous chapter, I follow the analytical procedures advocated by
Brown and Gilligan (1992). “The Listening Guide” requires the researcher to listen to the interviews at least four separate times. In this study, each listening attends to a specific research question; however, none of the individual listenings are meant to stand-alone. Each of the listenings is recorded through underlining the text, using different colored pencils. In addition to the underlining, the researcher keeps careful notes and writes interpretive summaries during each step of the process, essentially constructing a “trail of evidence,” which later functions as the basis for a more reflexive analysis (Gilligan et al., 2003).

In the first listening, the researcher listens for the overall plot of the interview. In this stage of the method, I listen openly for concepts and themes to be focused on in later listenings, while also sketching the overall plot. The plot listening involves listening for the stories that are told, including the characters, context, and landmarks (significant events) of the interview. For the purposes of this study, I attend to the first research question by listening for instances of membership categorization in the first listening. These categorizations often correspond with characters in a narrative, in that the subject will engage in categorization work to make sense of others’ behaviors. In addition to listening for plot and characters, the first listening requires the listener (researcher) to respond to the narrative, acknowledging her or his relation to the narrative and the interviewee. It is the reflexive nature of the method that renders it relational.

The second listening illuminates the voice of the “I” – the person who is telling the story. In this study, the second listening is intended to address the second research question guiding the study by illuminating instances of discursive positioning in which Sr. Akers situates herself and others in the larger narrative. This listening requires the listener to attend to the use of first person (the voice of the “I”) throughout the interview, which according to positioning theory “expresses one’s personal identity” (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999, p. 7). In addition to
listening for first person voices, the second listening includes listening for second (the voice of the “you”) and third person voices (the voice of “he,” “she,” or “they”) as well. In other words, the second listening looks for how Sr. Akers’ organizes the categorizations identified in the first listening within the larger storyline. Following “The Listening Guide” method, the second listening results in the formation of I-poems, which visually isolate the I-voices throughout the interview. These voice poems illustrate “the internal conversations so that they are audible and the nuances can be readily seen” (Raider-Roth, 2005, p.186). It is central to this relational method to listen to how the interviewee speaks about her or himself. Additionally, how the subject speaks of herself will illuminate the way she positions herself and others in the narrative.

The use of the “I-poems” and more broadly, “The Listening Guide” method as a means to conduct a position-driven analysis is unique to this study; therefore it is helpful to further explicate the function of the “I-poems.” In practice, “I-poems” are constructed through underlining during analysis. Specifically, I underlined each “voice” in a different color.

Consider, for example, the following excerpt:

So, I think, um, that whole thing about, okay this is what the Church said or this is what this Bishop said, and then here’s the individual group, primacy of conscience, like the women’s movement in the Church is based upon, grounded on, the value and dignity of women. Now, nobody’s going to tell me that women do not have equal value and dignity – nobody. No matter who says it. I don’t believe it. It’s not true. It’s an “untruth.” And so I, based on my truth, and in this case, I believe it needs to be universal truth, I act accordingly.

When the “I” and the “They” voices are extracted from the passage, the narrative sounds like this:

**I**  
I think
The Church said
This Bishop said
No one’s going to tell me
I don’t believe it

**They**  
They
I believe
I act accordingly

Listening to the narrative in this way allows the researcher to more clearly illustrate the struggle articulated by the speaker. In this way, “I-poems” are very useful in terms of identifying instances of struggle over discursive positioning.

The third and fourth (and potentially fifth and sixth) listenings are referred to as contrapuntal listenings, and are meant to identify different layers or tensions present in the person’s narrative. In musical terms, “contrapuntal” refers to the sound of two or more independent but harmonically related parts sounding together. In a similar fashion, these listenings attend to different voices present in the narrative. These listenings allow for creativity and flexibility to combine levels of analyses (Raider-Roth, 2003), permitting the researcher to listen for themes identified earlier in the analysis. In this study, these listenings correspond with the third research question guiding the study, and will attend to the broader Discourses invoked by Sister Akers in her narrative. Recall from Chapter 2 that Discourses refer to a set of statements surrounding the formation and articulation of ideas in a historically situated time (Foucault, 1972). In my analysis, I listen for terminology, concepts, metaphors, themes, and habitual forms of argument as evidence of such Discourses. The membership categorization and positioning work rendered from the first two listenings will also contribute to the identification of competing Discourses. According to “The Listening Guide” method, the voices (in this case, Discourses) in the contrapuntal listening are in a relationship, but are not necessarily in opposition to one another. In the same way, competing Discourses may or may not exist in direct opposition; rather, the existence of discursive struggle warrants a closer look at how Sr. Akers constructs her identity.
The final step of “The Listening Guide” is the creation of a narrative synthesis. This stage of the process “asks the researcher to form an interpretation of the interviewee’s words, ideas, and stories” (Raider-Roth, 2003). In the synthesis, the researcher tells what she or he has learned, providing evidence of her or his analysis. The narrative synthesis articulates the journey of the process, making connections and illustrating the complexity of human experience and meaning making. In this study, the narrative synthesis will specifically focus on how the subject creates space of action through categorization and positioning work between and among multiple Discourses, as a result making connections between the subsequent listenings and addressing the final research question guiding the study. Recall from Chapter 2 that Daudi’s (1986) concept, “space of action” is defined by Holmer-Nadesan (1996) as an individual’s ability to maneuver and create possibility in dialectic instances of power and resistance. “The Listening Guide” is most effective “when one’s question requires listening to particular aspects of a person’s expression of her or his own complex and multilayered individual experiences and the relational and cultural contexts within which they occur,” (Gilligan et al., 2003). Thus, this method is ideal for my study of Sister Akers’ narrative of conflict in the Church.
Chapter 4

Analysis

Following “The Listening Guide” method introduced in the previous chapter, I present the analysis in four parts, first attending to the first, second, and third listening individually, followed by a synthesis of the listenings as a whole. The first three sections sketch the journey of the analysis, and correspond with the first three research questions which attend to three different theoretical concepts in Sr. Akers’ narrative: membership categorization, discursive positioning, and competing Discourses. The last section will then theorize the connections between the first three listenings to provide a more cohesive rendering of Sister Akers’ narrative and address the fourth and final research question guiding the study. As stated in the previous chapter, none of the listenings are intended to stand-alone; rather, the analysis sections should be read as an interconnected whole.

First Listening: “Two Versions of Church”

In the first listening, I aimed to trace the overall plot of the interviews while also identifying instances of membership categorizations present in Sister Akers’ narrative. Recall that research question one asks: How does Sister Akers discursively construct multiple identities in her narrative account of conflict in the Catholic Church? In this sense, discursive categorization work should illuminate the existence of multiple and potentially competing identities within her narrative, or more broadly within the Catholic Church. I treat this categorization work as such in my analysis; in the first listening, I aimed to identify the categorization work in connection to the characters presented in Sr. Akers’ narrative. In accordance with “The Listening Guide” method, the first listening also includes my personal
reflections as the interviewer. Thus, a portion of this section is written in a more reflexive tone than the subsequent listenings.

Our first interview took place on a February morning when I met Sr. Akers for the first time. I was slightly nervous as I drove through light freezing rain to EarthConnection, an office building sustained by all natural materials where Sr. Akers asked me to meet her. When she met me at the door, I recognized her from the television interview I had seen, and she greeted me with a warm smile and a friendly handshake. We proceeded to a meeting room, where we sat together at a large wooden table. The building was peaceful and quiet, and I immediately felt comfortable with her. To begin, she asked me to tell her about myself and about my study, and I obliged. She seemed interested and open. I was anxious to hear her story. When we wrapped up our small talk, I asked Sr. Akers to tell me her version of the story about which I had read so much. I told her I wanted to hear her voice. What followed was a ninety-minute conversation, which involved many characters and several smaller narratives within the interview.

Sister Akers began the interview by telling me the story of her confrontation with the Archbishop. While the details of her experience will unfold in the remainder of the analysis, it is important to discuss the overall plot, as she tells it. At the time of the incident, Sister Akers was teaching two courses, one on Church and one on Social Justice, to religious educators in the archdiocese. The Archbishop received complaints about Sister Akers’ progressive teaching and about her name and picture appearing on the Women’s Ordination Conference website. The Archbishop sent a mediator to notify Sister Akers that she must remove her name and picture from the site, which led Sister Akers to schedule a meeting with the Archbishop to discuss the issue further. In their meeting, the Archbishop told Sister Akers that she must not only remove her name and picture from the website, she must also publically renounce her support of
women’s ordination. When Sister Akers refused, because doing so would be against her conscience, the Archbishop banned her from teaching in the archdiocese.

After Sister Akers’ narrates her confrontation with the Archbishop, she continues to tell stories that explain her views and shape her identity. Many of these stories are accounted for in the subsequent listenings. However, to begin analysis, I isolate a passage that occurred in the second half of the interview. Recall from Chapter 2 that as people engage in categorization work, they often classify others according to particular “types,” or constructed references to a group (Jayusi, 1984). These “types” are constructed based on specific traits and practices, and are used by members to predict future action. During analysis, this particular passage stood out as one that captures the multiple identities constructed by Sr. Akers:

…John Sobrino was the spiritual director of Romero, and so he said to us, “Remember, there are two ways of being Church. I’m not saying there are two Churches, but the two ways of being Church are: one is the Church of Rome, the institutional Church, the one of rules, regulations, and he developed that. The other way of being Church is the Church of the martyrs, the Church of Romero, the Church of the gospel of Jesus. And I’ve never forgotten that.

This passage best captures the multiple identities that emerged in Sr. Akers’ membership categorization work throughout the narrative. However, these identities bifurcate the Church. In the first instance the Church of Rome, the institutional Church, the Church of rules and regulations are made into synonyms for one another, while the Church of martyrs, the Church of Romero, and the Church of the gospel Jesus are similarly equated. This complicates Sr. Akers’ view of the Church by clearly delineating between the two “ways of being Church” that seem to oppose each other. With this passage in mind, I have identified the following conflicting identities: “conservative Catholics” and the “underground Church.” I discuss each identity or “type” below, providing examples of how Sr. Akers uses such categorizations to bifurcate the
Church to legitimate her identity and make sense of her experiences. Further, I discuss issues of
elasticity and legitimacy in relation to the multiple, conflicting identities.

Conservative Catholics

According to Jayusi (1984), “type” categorizations are constructed references to a group
based on specific traits and practices, and are used by members to predict future action. At the
very start of Sr. Akers’ narrative, she engages in “type” categorization:

Well you know, just like in our country, uh, where there is this extreme right wing,
politically and culturally, so too exists in the Catholic Church.

In drawing a political and cultural analogy to U.S. politics, Sr. Akers creates a conservative
“type”. The categorization of those who belong to the “extreme right wing” subsequently recurs
throughout the interview, most often describing people whose views and behaviors oppose those
of Sr. Akers. Leading up to her experience of conflict in the Church, she describes the
individuals who took a course she taught in the archdiocese:

Sister Akers: Well the last couple years when I taught it there would be like one or two
people in it who were so [emphasis] conservative. And also, when I taught at Xavier
University, the chairperson asked me to design a course on Vatican II. I said, “Oh, I’d
love to.” So one of the people, they were graduate students, well one of the people in it
was a seminarian [laughs], I don’t know if he was ordained or not. He came up to me
after about a week of class, and he said you know Sister, I took a course on Church at the
Athenaeum, but it wasn’t anything like this [laughs].

Interviewer: [laughing] Shocking!

Sister Akers: So anyhow, these very conservative, right wing people –

Interviewer: And these are adults…

Sister Akers: All adults, um, teachers, and directors of religious education, like pastoral
ministers, and some parishioners from different parishes who just wanted to renew and
update their understanding of Church.

Interviewer: Right.

Sr. Akers clearly establishes the categorization of “very conservative, right wing people” who,
she implies, are not open to the progressive views of Church to which she subscribes. She
specifically mentions a seminarian, who falls into this “conservative” categorization because of
his statement that the course he took on Vatican II through the Athenaeum was very different from the course she was teaching. Sr. Akers’ implicitly emphasizes a conservative view of Church as a “category-bound” feature of the seminarian. Recall that “category-bound” features are expectations that are historically tied to particular categories. Sr. Akers’ laughter that accompanies this statement indicates that her views, versus those taught to men learning to be priests at the Athenaeum are so very different that it is, in fact, somewhat humorous. Sr. Akers then turns back to the chain of events leading up to her conflict with the Archbishop:

**SL:** So, I would say in May or June of last year, I was teaching this course, same course that I’ve taught for a number of years, and there were two women in it who were just like, I mean they were just beside themselves, I mean the one woman said to me, you’re, you’re heretical. And I said, well I don’t think so [laughs].

In the above passage, Sr. Akers implicitly categorizes the two women in her course as more than a little conservative when she references their categorization of her as “heretical.” She implies that the two women are examples of the “very conservative, right-wing people” in her courses. To suggest that they were “just beside themselves,” reinforces her attribution of their conservatism.

In this case, her categorization work also functions as a predictor for the future behavior of the two women. Sr. Akers establishes that the two women fit the categorization as conservative that, in turn, predicts and justifies their behavior because they belong to this specific “type.” Specifically, Sr. Akers tells about how one of the two women wrote a letter of complaint about her teaching to the Archbishop. It is through the above characterizations that Sr. Akers makes sense of, and justifies, the woman’s behavior.

Sr. Akers’ characterization of “conservative Catholics” continues as she narrates her experience, telling about a man who publically criticized her on his blog. The man questioned why Sr. Akers was permitted to teach in the archdiocese even though she “doesn’t teach
doctrine.” “Teaching doctrine” is a contested term throughout the narrative, which also serves as a specific point of controversy in Sr. Akers’ exchange with the Archbishop. In addition to the blog, someone notified the Archbishop that Sr. Akers’ name and picture appeared on the Women’s Ordination Conference website; this occurrence was later pointed to as the catalyst for the whole firing ordeal. This chain of events eventually led to Sr. Akers’ face-to-face meeting with the Archbishop.

As Sister Aker’s tells of her conversation with the Archbishop, she categorizes herself as a theologian, in an attempt to establish legitimacy. Legitimacy refers to one’s attempt to gain acceptance of an identity position, or to discursively construct legitimate reasons for one’s behavior (Jayusi, 1984). When the Archbishop accuses Sr. Akers of not teaching doctrine, she responds:

I said, you know, I’m a theologian and I think part of the role, historically, part of the role of theology is to be in dialogue with the magisterium of the Church and from that dialogue, sometimes doctrine evolves, changes. Well you’re not supposed to be teaching theology – I’m like, what? I thought after forty years, okay [laughs].

In this passage, Sr. Akers describes her behavior by typing or categorizing herself as a theologian, a category that is at once an inference, description, and a judgment (Jayusi, 1984). As such, she is morally responsible for raising questions and engaging in dialogue with Church doctrine. In this way, Sister Akers and the Archbishop disagree on the moral implications of Sr. Akers’ role. Sr. Akers calls herself a theologian, transforming her role of teacher or nun which functions to legitimize her behavior. In doing this, she categorizes herself as a theologian, who should challenge contemporary issues, whereas he characterizes her as an educator who should focus on teaching doctrine. The two are battling to establish legitimacy for oppositional identities.
Sister Akers continues to narrate her conversation with the Archbishop, which eventually resulted in her being banned from teaching for credit within the archdiocese. The Archbishop’s request for Sr. Akers went beyond her removing her name and picture from the Women’s Ordination Conference website. He told Sr. Akers that if she refuses to publicly announce that she has changed her mind about women’s ordination and that she now agrees with the Church’s teaching, she must “accept the consequences.” In Sr. Akers’ description of the moments following this exchange, she continues to legitimate her behavior, this time by drawing on larger historical Discourses:

So, I was like, stunned. And so on my way home, and I think I said this in the interview, too. Um, you know I thought of Catherine of Sienna, her quote on cry out as if you had a million voices, and Martin Luther King, and I thought, I am not going to be silent about this. This is so wrong.

By citing two famous historical figures, Sr. Akers describes the motivation behind her actions and emphasizes the moral justification of her behavior. Catherine of Sienna and Martin Luther King, Jr. are morally righteous figures known for their courage and martyrdom in the face of great strife; by characterizing herself as a similar “type,” Sr. Akers justifies her identity. This characterization builds throughout the interviews, and connects to a broader characterization of those who belong to and identify with “the Underground Church.”

The Underground Church

After listening to Sr. Akers narrate her experience of conflict with the Archbishop, I asked her specifically about how the event altered her identification with the Catholic Church, and how she manages the aspects of her identity that seem to conflict with it. In her response, she tells of her relationship with a volunteer teacher who was subsequently “fired” after writing a letter to the editor in support of Sr. Akers. As she describes this woman, Sr. Akers does more categorization work. She states, “She’s a physician, she’s a mother of three adult children, I
mean, she is no *flaming radical.*” In this sense, she actually constructs a categorization of what
this woman is *not*; however, this discursive choice ultimately justifies the woman’s support of Sr.
Akers as “not crazy” (the implication) but, at a minimum, “not heretical.” Following this
statement, Sr. Akers makes first mention of the underground Church. In the passage below, she
implies the presence of “Conservative Catholics” in Cincinnati:

> I went to graduate school in Cambridge, um, Massachusetts, and then I went to work in
Washington, and so when I decided to come back to Cincinnati, people said *how* are you
going to move back to Cincinnati? I said, the thing about living in Cincinnati for me, and
many I know, you have to be in touch with two things: you have to be in touch with *the
justice community,* and you have to be in touch with *the underground Church.* And part
of this *underground Church* is the ordination of Roman Catholic women into the
priesthood.

In this passage, Sr. Akers describes how she is able to tolerate living in (an implied)
“conservative Cincinnati” by identifying with the justice community and “the underground
Church.” As the name suggests, the underground Church is not a tangible, material structure;
that is, you can’t go visit the underground Church. Rather, the underground Church is a
construction, or a categorization of those who resist the traditional, conservative model of
Church. In this way, the characterization of those who support women’s ordination into the
Roman Catholic priesthood form an alternative, but still Catholic, identity that challenges the
dominant “conservative Catholic” identity.

Sr. Akers later constructs “the underground Church” identity by drawing on larger,
historical Discourses to justify her behaviors and beliefs. Sr. Akers is hopeful in her evaluation
of such a Church. She states, “the paradigm is shifting,” and refers to the Catholic Church as the
“last bastion of patriarchy.” With such characterizations, she names the tension that bifurcates
the Church into “dominant” and “minority” views. Following this characterization, she cites
various influences on her identity in the passage below by referencing larger Discourses:
Sister Akers: And I think part of why I have thought about it is, I am a child of the sixties. And for me, so many things came together during that time. Vatican council was happening, John XXIII was head of the council, I was involved in civil rights – Martin Luther King, Caesar Chavez and the farm workers, John F. Kennedy – first Catholic president. And I, my major was history and we had to take at that time, 18 credits of both theology and philosophy.

Interviewer: mmhmm.

Sister Akers: I mean that’s a lot.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Sister Akers: Today in Catholic colleges, you take two or three. But I am so grateful for that groundwork and so I was involved in these things in the sixties, I was – Vatican II was happening and I was studying theology and history, and there was a real convergence for me. And so from the get-go, I was involved in social justice and as I had opportunity to travel, and I met women from all over the world and I think that lived experience with so many different women, in different cultures, and seeing the universal struggle, is, all of that helped raise my own awareness and so then I began to develop courses, at Seton high school, as I told you. It’s been a real, I think, probably lifelong journey. But also my mom was a single mom. My dad died, I have a brother and a sister, when I was three years old.

Although a more in-depth discussion of the broader Discourses from which Sr. Akers draws occurs later in the chapter, it is important to note their role in her positioning of herself. Thus, in this passage, Sr. Akers characterizes herself as a “child of the sixties,” drawing from larger Discourses of social justice and human rights. She refers to “the universal struggle,” thus referencing the Discourse of women’s rights; the academic Discourses of theology and history that (implicitly) build and support her perspective; the Discourse of Vatican II and John the XXIII known for progressive change within the Roman Catholic Church; and growing up with a single mom, a female head-of-household, all of which “converge” to justify her perspective and construct her identity. It is this “convergence” of factors and influences that likely spurs her categorization work and functions to legitimize her identity performances as morally righteous.

In our second interview, I was able to focus specifically on the identity of “the Underground Church” that emerged in our first meeting. I view the second meeting as an extension of Sr. Akers’ narrative, where she expands the characterization of her own identity to
what a “sister should be.” In the passage below, she repeats much of the Discourse cited above through references to social justice movements and progressive leaders, but she also further extends the characterization to what she believes is the moral obligation of Catholic sisters:

Different things affect you. So, the sixties, um, the Vietnam War movement, I was involved in that, um, I was involved with the migrant farm workers. Um, Vatican II, I read the Vatican II documents like every – meditated, reflected, underlined. I mean I really imbibed them as much as I could at that time. And of course the first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, and he was very focused on justice things. John XXIII, I mean, [ha] talk about a contrast between Benedict XVI and John XXIII, I mean there’s absolutely no comparison as far as I’m concerned.

So all those things that happened in the sixties during my formative years affected how I saw myself as a sister. So from the get-go, I was involved in justice issues, because I saw it as gospel-based, Vatican II-based, and I think I mentioned to you, my mom had a big influence on me. She was a public health nurse for forty years, and so all that really influenced my saying “yes.” Cause as far as I was concerned that’s what sisters should be about. And there were other sisters of course, especially in the sixties. Now, one of the reasons for this investigation from the Vatican of the sisters, how dare they? In a sense of what’s happening to them.

This passage is particularly compelling because it further articulates the larger Discourses that converged for Sr. Akers, including the sixties, which was a decade of social movements from the Vietnam War, migrant farm works, and women rights. Within the Catholic Church, it extended to Vatican II. However, two other factors are noteworthy here. First, she explicitly positions herself with respect to these Discourses when she says, “…mediated, reflected, underlined. I mean I really imbibed them as much as I could at that time.” Second, she names leaders who role model the Discourses such as President Kennedy and Pope John XXIII, even going so far as to rather pejoratively contrasting the latter with Benedict XVI, the Church’s current prelate.

Thus, Sr. Akers drawing on social justice Discourse which functions to legitimize her identity, then in the second half of the passage she clearly expresses the moral success of sisters who adopt such an identity. Recall that membership categorization work can constitute “genuine performances” of particular categories (Jayusi, 1984). In this case, what Sr. Akers describes as
“what sisters should be about” characterizes what she views as required of Catholic sisters in order to enact their “type” in a good or moral way.

Sr. Akers also describes the “underground Church” identity in terms of elasticity, which Sheep (2006) defines as “how actors construct in their everyday discourse the conditions of how far conflicting multiple identities can ‘stretch’ before they break, and with what consequences” (p. 53). In her narrative, Sr. Akers characterizes the “underground Church” as a site for elasticity. In other words, the “underground Church” identity serves as a means by which she remains a Catholic yet opposes the dominant, traditional Church on matters of policy. In the passage below, Sr. Akers describes the way the “underground Church” illustrates both elasticity and also breaks or schisms within the traditional Church:

But there was a real solidarity, and the diversity within the group was wonderful. And it wasn’t just all Catholics either, so it was ecumenical. So that went on like in the seventies, and I think probably early eighties. Now, my sense of the underground Church, there’s still some of that, but not a lot. Because, well **many people have walked away**, which is hard. But now, the underground Church are the women who are being ordained, you know, we have a woman Catholic priest here in Cincinnati. Her name is Janice, it’s a Polish name, I can never pronounce it. But she came here to take care of her mom, and she’s married. And, the women who are ordained are all lay-women, who like one, Regina in Minneapolis, was a hospital chaplain, so now she’s also a priest. And there are priests in Massachusetts, like it Boston, across the river, I mean there are over a hundred Roman Catholic women priests, and within the seminary, there are also some men, it’s an international seminary, because **they want a different system, they want a different structure, they want a different paradigm**, so they’re joining the women’s movement in the Catholic Church, which I find amazing.

In the above passage, Sr. Akers acknowledges the schisms that have resulted from the existence of multiple identities within the Catholic Church, saying, “Many people have walked away.” But she also accounts for those who are able to stretch their identity through the underground Church, which functions as a site for pursuing a “different system,” a “different structure,” and a different paradigm” while still identifying with the Catholic faith.
The membership characterization work described above encompasses the discursively constructed “types” that suggest the existence of multiple, conflicting identities in Sr. Akers’ narrative of conflict in the Church. Broadly speaking, I have identified the “conservative Catholic” identity and the “underground Church” identity. In the following section, I utilize discursive positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999) in accordance with “The Listening Guide” method to construct the second listening analysis.

Second Listening: Positioning the “I”

As I argued extensively in Chapter 2, discursive positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999) provides value beyond membership categorization in that it allows the researcher to further theorize the relationships between multiple identities. In a sense, positioning theory organizes membership categorizations into a broader, more cohesive storyline. In the second listening, I focused on the voice of the “I” to identify instances of discursive positioning to address the second research question guiding the study: How does Sister Akers position herself in her narrative account of conflict in the Catholic Church? Recall the discussion in Chapter 3 of the utility of “The Listening Guide” method for identifying instances of discursive positioning. Because the use of personal pronouns often indicates one’s view of his or her personal identity, the voice of the “I” functions as an indicator of positioning work. The construction of “I-poems” as a visual rendering of the narrator’s “I” voice is a helpful way to illustrate how an individual positions him or herself and others within a larger narrative or storyline (refer to Chapter 3 for a more in depth discussion of “I-poems”).

In this section of analysis, I aimed to identify instances of the various positioning categories described in Chapter 2 (i.e. first order, second order, etc.). However, it is important to note that because Sr. Akers was telling her story to me, an uninvolved party, much of her
positioning work falls under the accountive positioning category, in a broad sense. Recall from Chapter 2 that accountive positioning is also referred to as third order positioning, which is described as “talk about talk,” or when first order positioning is discussed within another conversation about the first interaction. While the positioning work discussed in this section is often accountive, I characterize most of the subsequent passages as examples of first and second order positioning. I do this because Sr. Akers relays much of the conversational back-and-forth she had with the Archbishop and other characters throughout the narrative.

To begin, I identified instances of first order positioning, which refers to “the way persons locate themselves and others within an essentially moral space by using several categories and storylines” (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999, p. 20). As Sr. Akers narrates her conversation with the Archbishop, she describes the way that he positioned her in their exchange:

He said, “You’re supposed to be teaching doctrine.” Because this woman had raised lots of questions and maybe somebody else had too, because, I said, “Well, I do teach doctrine.” Because I’m really clear about what the doctrine [says], whatever topic it is, not just women in the Church. I said, “But then if it’s a contemporary issue, I’ll raise questions about it, and sometimes, I don’t need to raise questions because the people I’m teaching are raising the questions.” He said, “Well, you’re not supposed to be raising questions.” And again, I said “Well, what am I supposed to be doing?” And he said, “Teaching doctrine,” and I said, “That’s it?” I said, you know, “I’m a theologian and I think part of the role, historically, part of the role of theology is to be in dialogue with the magisterium of the Church and from that dialogue, sometimes doctrine evolves, changes.” “Well, you’re not supposed to be teaching theology.” – I’m like, “What?” I thought after forty years, okay [laughs].

In an act of first order positioning, the Archbishop positions Sr. Akers as a Roman Catholic sister whose responsibility is to teach doctrine, without asking questions. However, Sr. Akers then engages in second order positioning as she questions and works to negotiate this characterization. The first and second order positioning is especially clear when the voices of the “I,” the “You” and the “He” are isolated in poem form:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>He</th>
<th>You</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He said</td>
<td>You’re supposed to</td>
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<tr>
<td>I said</td>
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<tr>
<td>I do</td>
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<td>I’m really clear</td>
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<td>I said</td>
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<td>I’ll raise</td>
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<td>I’m teaching</td>
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<td>He said</td>
<td>You’re not supposed to</td>
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<tr>
<td>I said, what?</td>
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<td>He said</td>
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<tr>
<td>I said</td>
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<td>I’m a theologian</td>
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<td>You’re not supposed to</td>
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<tr>
<td>I’m like</td>
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In this conversation, the Archbishop positions Sr. Akers as a traditional Roman Catholic sister, an instance of first order positioning. This positioning reflects a “category-bound” feature (Jayusi, 1984) of being a Catholic sister, according to the Archbishop. Sisters should function in accordance with the orthodoxy of the Church. “Category-bound” features express historically tied expectations to particular categories. This concept relates to moral positioning. According to Harre and van Langenhove (1999), moral positioning refers to positioning associated with a particular role (or category). In turn, Sr. Akers, in an instance of second order positioning, challenges this characterization, arguing, “I’m a theologian,” in an attempt to reconstruct her position. By positioning herself with the category “theologian,” Sr. Akers is attempting to negotiate the moral implications of her role. Sr. Akers engages in moral positioning as well in that “asking questions” is an assumed responsibility of theologians. Positions are associated with permissions, obligations, and prohibitions for how to act; thus, the Archbishop and Sr. Akers are
engaging in positioning vis-à-vis the categorization work associated with debating how a “sister” should behave.

Sr. Akers further challenges the way that the Archbishop positions her by emphasizing the moral implications of his requests. Sr. Akers argues that she cannot behave in a way that is against her conscience, which directly questions the Archbishop’s first order positioning in the following passage:

And he said, “You must make a public statement that you have changed your mind and you now agree with the teaching of the Church against women’s ordination.” I said, “What?” I mean, I was floored. And he said, he repeated it, and I said, “Well, I can’t do that.” I said “First of all, that’s brutally a lie, and secondly it’s against my conscience, I can’t do that.” And he said, “Well then you accept the consequences.” And I said, “Well, what are the consequences?” And he said, um, “You can no longer teach in parishes or any structure related to the diocese.” And I thought, I gotta get out of here.

This passage illustrates the power-resistance relationship between the Archbishop and Sr. Akers. In one sense, she does not have any choice but to obey him by “accepting the consequences,” because of his authority in the archdiocese. However, in terms of discursive positioning, Sr. Akers challenges the way he positions her as one who must obey authority by stating that she cannot make a public statement that is “against her conscience.” Again, the positioning work is especially visible when the passage is presented in poem form:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>He</th>
<th>You</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He said</td>
<td>You must make</td>
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<td>You have changed your mind</td>
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<td>You now agree</td>
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<td>I said, what?</td>
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<tr>
<td>I mean</td>
<td>He said</td>
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<td>I was</td>
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<td>I said</td>
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<td>I can’t</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
He said

I said

He said

You accept

You can no longer teach

I thought

I gotta get out of here

The interplay of the voices of the “I,” the “He,” and the “You” illustrates the discursive struggle over positioning that takes place in the conversation between Sr. Akers and the Archbishop. The Archbishop’s directive language (“you must,” “you have,” “you accept”) indicates his attempt to position Sr. Akers. She challenges this positioning using language such as “I can’t” repeatedly. Further, Sr. Akers’ argument that she cannot obey the Archbishop’s requests because it goes against her conscience connects to a broader issue in the conflict, which she refers to as “primacy of conscience.” During the second interview, Sr. Akers explicitly connects her exchange with the Archbishop to the broader conflict over women’s ordination. In discussing the relationship between advocating for women’s rights and her identity as a sister, she argues:

I mean, a lot of people don’t see a connection at all. But to me, it’s like hand and glove. Why wouldn’t we be involved with helping those who are poor, helping empower women? It’s all so connected, and I think that’s why when [Archbishop] Pilarczyk said to me, well you have to make a public statement that you changed your mind and you agree with the teaching of the Church, I was absolutely stunned.

In other words, when the Archbishop positioned Sr. Akers as an obedient member of the Church, she was driven by the moral logic stated above to challenge his first order positioning. To her, helping empower women is a responsibility that is tied to role of being a Catholic sister. Therefore, Sr. Akers works to position herself as an individual who is morally responsible for maintaining the “value and dignity of women.” In the following passage, she returns to the issue of “primacy of conscience:”

So, I think, um, that whole thing about, okay this is what the Church said or this is what this Bishop said, and then here’s the individual group, **primacy of conscience**, like the
women’s movement in the Church is based upon, grounded on, the value and dignity of women. Now, nobody’s going to tell me that women do not have equal value and dignity – nobody. No matter who says it. I don’t believe it. It’s not true. It’s an “untruth.” And so I, based on my truth, and in this case, I believe it needs to be universal truth, I act accordingly.

When this passage is presented in poem form, the accountive positioning described by Sr. Akers becomes more visible:

I
I think
The Church said
This Bishop said
No one’s going to tell me
I don’t believe it
I believe
I act accordingly

In this case, Sr. Akers references various “others” (the Church, this Bishop) who attempt to position members of the Church, such as herself, in particular ways. However, when that position undermines the “value and dignity of women,” Sr. Akers denies that position and adopts an alternative role that is “based on [her] truth.”

In a final instance of discursive positioning, Sr. Akers further emphasizes the moral obligation she associates with being a Catholic sister. She again illustrates the characteristics she associates with the role of “sister.” In spite of “criticism and questioning” from others, Sr. Akers is emphatic about her role as a sister, as evidenced by the following passage:

Sister Akers: So [laughs], a lot of people didn’t think that was the role of sister. So over the years I’ve had a lot of criticism and questioning, and what are, what are you doing? You know?
Interviewer: Right.
Sister Akers: But I really felt like I was doing what needed to be done as far as my life was concerned, so it really was an evolution from that was influenced by the Vatican council, but also external. So, for me there has never been a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. The secular is sacred, as far as I’m concerned because human life, you know of course the whole creation is ecology. So it’s – my spirituality was developing in the midst of these works I was involved in with justice, like the civil rights movement and then in the seventies the feminist movement. And I smile because there
are many funny stories about my involvement with the feminist movement [laughs]. So, to me they’re all justice issues, based on the dignity and the value of what it means to be a person. And how can we help those who are less advantaged, less privileged than we are? So my identity, or my belief in what I’m about has always been connected with justice and eventually congregations were also there. But I used to have to practically beg to go to a civil rights demonstration. Because at that time we had superiors, and when I first started asking, our superior said, “Well, no. That’s no place for you.”

In this passage, Sr. Akers tells of how others positioned the Catholic sister as one who separates the secular from the sacred. In other words, authority figures such as her “superiors” (and likely other sisters) positioned Catholic sisters as individuals who had no business concerning themselves with justice issues such as civil rights or feminism. However, in another instance of second order positioning, Sr. Akers challenges the role of the sister, stating her view that “the secular is sacred.” In poem form, the strength of her voice becomes clear:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I/We</th>
<th>You</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People didn’t think</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve had</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are you doing?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You know</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I really felt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m concerned</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I smile</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We help</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m about</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I used to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We had</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I first</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior said, well no</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That’s no place for you</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was convinced</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We needed to be</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m still convinced</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We need to be</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As this poem illustrates, Sr. Akers is convinced that her place as sister is located within justice issues. By discussing her role of sister in terms of place, or where she “needed to be”, Sr. Akers
further engages in positioning work in order to make sense of her identity within the broader storyline. This illustrates her “genuine performance” of the category of “Catholic sister,” in that Sr. Akers displaces the historical notions of obedience and orthodoxy by defining her identity as one concerned with social justice issues.

The I-poems and passages discussed above attest to the value of positioning theory as a means for exploring the relationship between membership categorizations. In the first listening, the existence of multiple identities was identified through Sr. Akers’ categorization work. Through various characterizations, Sr. Akers constructed the conflicting identities of “conservative Catholics” and the “underground Church.” In the second listening, accountive instances of first and second order positioning demonstrate how these conflicting identities are challenged and negotiated through discourse. In the third listening, I explicate the ways in which the aforementioned multiple identities and positioning work are situated within broader, competing Discourses.

**Third Listening: Contrapuntal Discourses**

It is beyond the scope of this study to attempt to fully capture the competing Discourses at play within the global debate about women’s ordination. However, in this portion of the analysis, I attend to the third research question guiding the study: *What Discourses does Sister Akers invoke in her narrative account of conflict within the Church?* I argue that Sr. Akers calls upon broader, competing Discourses based on the multiple identities and positions discussed in the previous sections. I also argue further, that while the Discourses invoked by Sr. Akers may not capture the full scope of the conflict over women’s role in the Roman Catholic Church, there is existential support for those Discourses beyond her personal narrative.
As stated in Chapter 3, the contrapuntal listenings are intended to attend to multiple voices, or in this case, Discourses within the narrative. In my analysis, I listened for terminology, concepts, metaphors, themes, and habitual forms of argument as evidence of such Discourses because discursive psychology formulates “Discourse” as an interpretative repertoire of such linguistic forms (Potter and Wetherell, 1992). Consequently, I identified two major Discourses at play: a Discourse of Doctrine, and a Discourse of Justice through Dialogue.

Before I provide evidence of the existence of these Discourses, three points are of relevance. First, it is not my intention to oversimplify Sr. Akers’ narrative into one or more opposing set of Discourses. Competing Discourses do not always exist in direct opposition to each other; however, because Sr. Akers’ narrative is one of opposing views where people often identify with one side or the other, it is sometimes helpful to discuss the Discourses at play in such a way. Second, in my discussion of these competing Discourses, I not only recognize the agency Sr. Akers achieves through the use of various discursive resources, but also the ways in which she is constrained by Discourse. Because I am identifying the Discourses Sr. Akers’ invokes in her narrative, it may appear that the Discourse of Justice through Dialogue dominate the Discourse of Doctrine. I work to explicate the ways Discourses both enable and constrain Sr. Akers in order to retain a dialectic view of power and resistance (Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004). Third and finally, I embrace and recognize variation within each Discourse, and I recognize that it is often impossible to declare “official” cultural Discourses. As discussed in Chapter 2, the very nature of Discourse is unstable and ever shifting; thus, my identification of a Discourse of Doctrine and a Discourse of Justice through Dialogue is specific to this particular time and context.

*Discourse of Doctrine*
Within Sr. Akers’ narrative, she invokes a Discourse of Doctrine when describing the actions of those who have questioned or criticized her views and behaviors. In this sense, a Discourse of Doctrine can be used to capture the arguments of those who oppose women’s ordination. I characterize this particular Discourse as one of “doctrine,” because much of the terminology, metaphors, and forms of argument that emerge from this side of the conflict are positioned as defending the doctrine of the Church. According to those who ascribe to this particular Discourse, women cannot be ordained as priests because it goes against Church doctrine.

In her narrative, Sr. Akers describes the Archbishop as one who sees himself as a “defender of doctrine.” This terminology also occurs in a news article that Sr. Akers alluded to during the interview, which discusses the firing of the volunteer teacher for her letter of support for Sr. Akers. In the article, it states, “The Archdiocese of Cincinnati says [Father] Sunberg has Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk’s support, that pastors have the responsibility and the authority for their parish and won’t be second guessed” (Ramsey, 2009). Sunberg, the pastor who fired the volunteer teacher, was responsible for defending or protecting his parish from views that challenge the Church’s current teaching on women’s ordination. Similarly, Sr. Akers’ conversation with the Archbishop reflects the argument that the Church’s teaching on women’s ordination must be defended. In a report by *The Catholic Telegraph*, the Archbishop stated, “It is a bishop’s responsibility to provide authentic and orthodox Catholic teaching in his diocese. Persons who are not in accord with the teaching of the Church should not expect to be allowed to teach catechetical leaders or others in the name of the Church.” This statement further illustrates the Discourse of Doctrine that characterizes the arguments of those opposed to women’s ordination.
The Discourse of Doctrine also emerges in Sr. Akers discussion of obedience within the Church. Sr. Akers refers to “traditional convent life” characterized by “a strict schedule of prayer, of work, duties within the household, and silence, there were periods of silence.” She emphasizes the conflict between those seeking change and those who wish to defend the status quo. In this way, the “conservative Catholic” identity discussed in the first listening functions as a source for the Discourse of Doctrine. Conservative Catholics believe it is their moral obligation to defend the traditions, orthodoxy, and doctrine of the Church, which in turn, discourages dialogue. Not surprisingly, one of the alternative Discourses invoked by Sr. Louise throughout her narrative can be described as a Discourse of Justice through Dialogue.

*Discourse of Justice through Dialogue*

Themes of justice achieved through dialogue emerged throughout Sr. Akers’ narrative, as I have mentioned in earlier sections of the analysis. From the very start of her narrative, Sr. Akers argues for the importance of dialogue in relation to controversial issues such as women’s ordination. She specifically requests dialogue in her exchange with the Archbishop:

**Sister Akers:** I said, “So it seems to me, wouldn’t it be great if we as Church could offer an alternative model of *dialogue with dissent*, rather than having what’s going on in the country ---

**Interviewer:** This standoff – you know, with the two sides.

**Sister Akers:** Right – people not listening.

Sr. Akers’ form of argument for “dialogue with dissent” permeates the entire narrative. As her earlier category work suggests, she views her role as an educator, and a theologian, as one who is responsible for raising questions and engaging in dialogue. It is by invoking the broader Discourse of Justice through Dialogue that Sr. Akers is able to construct her logic.

As I illustrated in the first and second listenings, Sr. Akers draws from the Discourse of Justice through Dialogue to support her views and behaviors. She compares her thinking to that
of Catherine of Sienna, who said, “Cry out as if you had a million voices.” Sr. Akers views the argument for dialogue as her way of “crying out.” She has “refused to be silent about this,” and through the Discourse of Justice through Dialogue, she works to justify her beliefs about women and the Catholic Church. Her references to historical figures, many well known leaders, include Martin Luther King, Jr., Martin Luther, Thomas Moore, Caesar Chavez, John F. Kennedy, and John XXIII, as well as larger movements for civil rights, migrant farm workers, feminism, and other social justice causes. Each of these leaders and movements function as discursive resources for Sr. Akers in her narrative, enabling her to support her behavior. These aforementioned historical Discourses fold into a broader Discourse tied together by a theme of social justice.

Several times throughout her narrative, Sr. Akers also uses metaphor to explain her views. One such metaphor stood out as a key part of the “interpretive repertoire” available to her through the Discourse of Justice through Dialogue. Recall that an “interpretive repertoire” refers to the linguistic tools available to actors drawing from various Discourses (Potter and Wetherell, 1992). In this passage, Sr. Akers uses metaphor as tool as she discusses what she originally wrote in her doctoral dissertation, which concerned feminist theology:

I said, you know, “We no longer want a piece of the pie; we want to change the recipe.” We don’t want to just reform or Band-Aid. It’s about structural change, which all my adult life I’ve been involved in social justice, and if there’s anything that’s a justice issue, it’s women. Not just women in the Church, but whether they’re poor or religion or whatever. So I just think people have to somehow we have to help people understand, or at least raise questions but see people don’t want to raise questions because it’s a threat to the status quo, whether it’s the institutional Church, or whether sometimes in family life.

The use of a “changing the recipe” as a metaphor for altering women’s role in the Church reflects a Discourse of Justice through Dialogue, as does reference to reform as a mere “Band-Aid.” Change, or justice, cannot be achieved without raising questions, or engaging in dialogue.
This Discourse exists in struggle with the Discourse of Doctrine discussed in the last section, because dialogue often challenges and threatens the status quo.

Sr. Akers relies heavily on the Second Vatican council, which took place in the early 1960’s, as a reference for how change can be achieved within the Church. She states, “Vatican II called us to read the signs of the times,” which is why she raises questions about contemporary issues. She argues, “the role of theology or the theologian has always been to be in dialogue with the magisterium of the Church and from that dialogue, doctrine evolves or changes.” In other words, equal treatment of women in the Church can only be achieved through dialogue. This argument exists outside of Sr. Akers’ narrative as well, and is invoked by others in favor of women’s ordination.

For example, much of the writing in newspapers and magazines in support of Sr. Akers discusses the incident in terms of silence, which is the opposite of dialogue. In the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, an opinion piece stated, “What has happened to the two women [Sr. Akers and the volunteer teacher] is indeed a testimonial to the destructiveness of forced silence” (Ramsey, 2009). In this case, silence represents the lack of dialogue in the Church. Similarly, the first article published in the *National Catholic Reporter* regarding Sr. Akers’ experience discussed “losing the voice of justice” as “Other women religious, lay friends, supporters and former students have called for ‘responsible dialogue’ on the subject of women’s ordination” (Ball, 2009). The “voice of justice” and “responsible dialogue” are both concepts that constitute the Discourse of Justice through Dialogue referenced by Sr. Akers.

It is important to note that Sr. Akers’ use of “dialogue” as a metaphor for change within the Church may be chosen strategically, as opposed to a metaphor of “dissent.” By advocating for dialogue with dissent, rather than only dissent, Sr. Akers is able to remain within the Church.
Alternatively, promoting dissent without dialogue would likely lead to exit. This discursive choice connects to the discussion of elasticity in the first listening. The “underground Church” functions as a site for promoting “dialogue with dissent,” which allows Sr. Akers to remain within the Church while questioning its policies at the same time.

As I have illustrated in this section, the Discourse of Justice through Dialogue enables Sr. Akers and her supporters to argue for change within the Church through the use of historical references, metaphors, and concepts; however, the Discourse also constrains Sr. Akers. Specifically, by requiring dialogue in order to achieve justice, the oppositional party must engage in the discussion. The concept of dialogue is constraining in this way because the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church has historically stifled dialogue about women’s ordination. The actions of the Archbishop are testament to such behaviors, and official documentation from the Vatican emphasized that discussion of women’s ordination was not an option.

The last word from the Roman Catholic Church on the subject of women’s ordination occurred in 1976, when the pope John Paul II praised women for what they have to offer, but stated that the Church does not view women as valid candidates for ordination (Miller, 2010). In this way, it is difficult, if not impossible, to have dialogue about an issue characterized by such extreme polarization. The constraining quality of this particular Discourse undoubtedly has implications for the way Sr. Akers negotiates her identity.

In this section, I have identified two competing Discourses: Discourse of Doctrine and Discourse of Justice through Dialogue. In my description of these Discourses, I view membership categorizations and positioning as sources for the “interpretive repertoires” available to actors within the narrative. In the final section of my analysis, I further explicate the connections between the first, second, and third listenings. Keeping in mind the enabling and
constraining qualities of the Discourses discussed above, I theorize how Sr. Akers’ use of membership categorization and positioning work allows her to maneuver within these competing Discourses to create space of action in constructing her identity.

**Narrative Synthesis: Creating Space of Action**

In accordance with “The Listening Guide” method, the final step of analysis is the narrative synthesis, which articulates the journey of the process, making connections and illustrating the complexity of human experience and meaning making. In this study, I view the first three sections as pieces of the synthesis, which sketch the journey of the analysis by attending to three different theoretical concepts in Sr. Akers’ narrative: membership categorization, discursive positioning, and competing Discourses. This final section then, is intended to further explicate the connections between these concepts, with a specific focus on the final research question guiding the study: How does Sister Akers use these strategies (category and positioning work) to discursively create space of action?

Recall from Chapter 2 that Holmer-Nadesan (1996) utilizes Daudi’s (1986) concept, space of action, to theorize the identity construction processes in terms of an individual’s ability to maneuver and create possibility in dialectic instances of power and resistance. More specifically, creating space of action occurs when an actor identifies an unfulfilled “lack” in the Discourses she experiences, which allows her to create space for discursive agency. This means that when actors experience antagonisms in a particular Discourse, the logic of the Discourse is called into question, which allows for possibility and resistance. In Sr. Akers’ narrative, the “lack” she identifies in the Discourses she experiences is one of exclusion. In her conversation with the Archbishop, she emphasizes the “polarization” present in the Catholic Church, which she later articulates as “conservative Catholics” versus the “underground Church.” Through
categorization work, Sr. Akers emphasizes the exclusion of women from the Roman Catholic hierarchy. By identifying this “lack,” she is able to create discursive agency by advocating for a plurality of faith, which she describes in the following passage:

**Sister Akers:** And this woman who wrote the two-page letter, one of the things she was so upset about was um, I was talking about pluralism with regard to faith and religion. And for years, the Church taught that we, and we alone, have the truth.

**Interviewer:** Everyone else, good luck [laughs].

**Sister Akers:** Yes, everyone else, too bad. So then it wasn’t until Vatican II that the Church officially said, so in other words we were exclusive. So at Vatican II we were inclusive so far as we said, we honor other faiths and other religions, but still with the understanding that we have the fullness of truth. And so since Vatican II, pluralism, a pluralistic approach that says we are one among many journeys of faith, of paths to God or the spirit or whatever you call the ultimate. And we are one among many, but we are not superior because everybody has a piece of the truth. And this Teresa was like, “Oh my God,” she said, “So are you denying that we, we are the one true Church?” I said, “I’m not denying my faith,” but I am saying, and I tried to repeat it. Well she was just, she could hardly sit there she was so upset. I wish she had left, I wish she had gone, you know, away [laughs]. I do say that, you know, we all, whether it’s in a family, or any kind of a group, certainly within the Church, we all have a piece of the truth. And that’s why dialogue is so important, and listening is so important.

**Interviewer:** Right, to share meaning.

**Sister Akers:** Yeah, yeah. But it’s so threatening.

In the “two page letter” written by one of the conservative women in Sr. Akers’ class, she criticized Sr. Akers’ pluralistic view of faith as one which undermines the Catholic teaching that the Roman Catholic Church is “the one, true Church.” However, in a way, the pluralistic view of faith advocated by Sr. Akers transcends the polarization she identifies within the Church between the “conservative Catholic” and the “underground Church” identities. In this view, all are included and are able to gain “a piece of the truth” through dialogue and listening, including those members of the hierarchy. This discursive choice creates space for agency in that Sr. Akers avoids privileging one side over the other; instead, she embraces both under a larger umbrella of faith. She creates space for agency in the Catholic community, by redefining what it means to be a Catholic. In spite of the exclusion of women from the hierarchy, Sr. Akers views
the Catholic Church as a site for plurality and inclusion. This “space” exists within the Catholic faith, regardless of the strict institutional policies.

She further emphasizes this inclusive model of faith when she discusses conflicting views of how women religious should behave, returning to the debate over what a sister “should be” from the first and second listening. In the following passage, she again transcends the polarized, exclusive model:

**Sister Akers:** But it, especially I would say in the sixties and seventies in religious communities, women in religious communities, um, wrestling with who are we, and what are we about, and what does community mean, and how do we relate to the “outside world.” Because even though we were an active community, there was still the monastic model that was operative. And for some religious communities, the monastic model is still active. So I think we have a blend of both, so that the umbrella of our community is big enough that it allows, just like the Church, it allows people at both ends of the spectrum and all the in betweens. You know, people say, describe a Catholic, and ----

**Interviewer:** Yeah, how do you do that?

**Sister Akers:** Right, who are you talking about?

**Interviewer:** It’s a more inclusive model.

**Sister Akers:** Mmhmm.

Again, the inclusion of people “at both ends of the spectrum” allows Sr. Akers to create possibility as she maneuvers between the competing Discourses of Doctrine and Justice through Dialogue explicated in the previous section. She is able to make sense of her identity, not by criticizing and excluding those who oppose her views, but by acknowledging them as members of the plurality of faith.

She further transcends the polarized nature of the “conservative Catholic” versus the “underground Church” identities by telling of experiences with those who are fall under the conservative category but still support her in the conflict with the Archbishop. In this instance, she illustrates a contradiction in the “conservative Catholic” identity:

**Sister Akers:** In fact, a very conservative sister in our community came up to me last week and said, hugged me and she said, “Louise, I just want you to know that I have read every word I could get a hold of about your conflict with the archbishop.” And she said,
“I had no idea that you had been involved for over thirty years with this issue.” She said, “Why would he ask you to go against your conscience?” She said, “That’s terrible.” I said, ”Well, I agree.” And she said, “Well I just want you to know, I support you. You know I don’t agree with you, but I support you.” And I said –

Interviewer: That’s a very big gesture.
Sister Akers: Yes it was.

By focusing on the fact that even a “very conservative” sister in her community recognizes the contradiction in the Archbishop’s actions, Sr. Akers is able to create possibility for agency. She constructs her identity in this way because this discursive choice allows her to make sense of her identity in the midst of conflict. By focusing on those who support her, regardless of whether or not they agree with her, she is able to exist within the patriarchal structure of the Catholic Church.

Sr. Akers also creates possibility between competing Discourses by focusing on solidarity based on the “value and dignity of women,” and more broadly, of people. Throughout the narrative, she discusses various aspects of her identity through the membership categorization and positioning work identified in the previous sections of analysis. However, an underlying aspect of her identity is her womanhood and her experiences with women all over the world, which results in powerful feelings of solidarity. She states:

And I feel that my womanhood, because I’ve met so many women around the world in my work, which is a wonderful privilege. I’ve travelled probably to five of the seven continents and met women and when you see women, let’s say in Central America or in Africa, who have such hard lives, and a lot of it is because they’re women. And so I have a strong solidarity with these women and that’s one of the reasons why I am so persistent and strong with regard to the value and dignity of women, whether it’s about women’s ordination, or whether it’s about the plight of women who are so very poor.

Solidarity with all women allows Sr. Akers to transcend the opposing identities and competing Discourses present in her narrative. Her womanhood is a central part of her identity that allows her to extend beyond the polarization in the Church over women’s ordination. She further narrates this feeling of solidarity in a story about a Nicaraguan woman. She tells of Pope John
Paul II’s visit to Nicaragua in 1983, which resulted in tragedy and uproar when the Pope refused to pray for seventeen teenage soldiers who had been killed by the contra. The following passage describes the events that followed:

I mean, it was a tragedy. And in this one base Christian community, I don’t know her name, I can still see her. My Spanish is a little better than it was then but not much, and so I tried to ask her in Spanish, you know, “Do you think many people will leave the Church because of what happened yesterday?” And she looked at me so confused. I thought she was confused, and she just didn’t answer. So I asked this other sister sitting next to me who had been there for over twenty years, I said, “Would you ask her my question for me?” And so then she still had the same look on her face. And so Peg, the Marinole sister said, “What do you think?” And she looked at me and she said, “Leave the Church?” She said, “We are the Church.” And I can just remember, ahh. I just said, “Thank you.” I thought, “How many years, Louise, have you taught, ‘girls, we are the Church?’” But that’s when I got it.

In this story, Sr. Akers describes her view of Church, which is characterized by inclusivity and solidarity with others. The statement, “We are the Church,” is incredibly powerful as a discursive tool because it transcends the polarization and exclusion of the institution.

Embodying this view of Church allows Sr. Akers to create space for action and elasticity within her narrative, in that she does not leave the Church after her conflict with the Archbishop; rather, she emphasizes solidarity with the members of the Church who support her.

The above analysis uses “The Listening Guide” method to trace Sr. Akers’ narrative of conflict within the Catholic Church. In the first listening, I identified instances membership categorization work, in which Sr. Akers constructs two opposing versions of Church: “conservative Catholics” versus the “underground Church.” She engages in categorization work which functions to legitimate her own identity as a Catholic sister who supports women’s ordination, and also illustrates the elasticity of members of the “underground Church” who are able to retain their identification with the Catholic faith while opposing the Church’s institutional policies. Through positioning work, Sr. Akers articulates the relationships between these
opposing identities, as evidenced by the visual use of “I-poems” in the second listening, which illustrate the power-resistance relationship between Sr. Akers and those who disapprove of her behavior. In the third listening, I identify the broader Discourses invoked by Sr. Akers throughout her narrative. The Discourse of Doctrine and the Discourse of Justice through Dialogue emerge from her categorization and positioning work and characterize the contested issues regarding women and the Church. Finally, in the fourth listening, I show how Sr. Akers creates space of action by advocating a pluralistic view of faith and remaining in solidarity with all women to transcend the polarization in the Church. In the next chapter, I discuss interpretations of my analysis, implications for the theory, methodology and practice, limitations of the study, and possibilities for future research.
Chapter 5

Discussion

Sr. Louise Akers has challenged the Catholic Church on matters of the ordination of women as priests. At the hands of Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk, she has dealt with the consequences in having been relieved of her teaching duties within the archdiocese. However, her case is exemplary of resistance leadership, especially when the powers of narrative and other discursive methods are utilized. This study made specific use of “The Listening Guide” method, a feminist, narratological approach that approaches interview text with “four listenings” that first include tracing the overall plot of the narrative. The second listening attends to discursive positioning by locating the voice of the “I” through “I-poems,” while the third listening articulates contrapuntal Discourses. Finally, the fourth listening synthesizes the previous three to discern Sr. Akers’ “space of action” or maneuverability within the situation at hand. Discourse concepts such as membership categorization, discursive positioning, and Foucault’s Discourse were found to amplify “The Listening Guide” with more fine-grained distinctions that were subsequently folded into the analyses.

As the data analysis commenced, a primary goal of the analysis was to explicate the connection between the concepts of membership categorization, discursive positioning, and Discourse in a study of Sr. Akers’ narrated identity construction processes. Specifically, membership categorization work illuminates the existence of multiple identities within a narrative through the categories invoked, split apart, stretched, or otherwise named (Jayusi, 1984). These categories can be adopted, challenged, or negotiated by the actors in the narrative to position themselves with respect to specific others, in this case, the Archbishop and the Church itself. This is known as discursive positioning work (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999),
which combine with categorization work to suggest the presence of broader Discourses within the narrative. These Discourses constrain and discipline (Foucault, 1995), but also enable actors to create possibility and space of action as they construct their identity (Holmer-Nadesan, 1992).

In light of these connections, I argue that the use of “The Listening Guide” as a feminist, relational method combined with more fine-grained discursive analyses allow for a unique, rich analysis of such concepts of identity construction, space of action, and resistance leadership. In this section, I will first discuss the interpretation of the analysis presented in Chapter 4. While it is important to remember that none of the listenings exist in isolation, it is of value to consider the interpretation of each individual listening to give adequate attention to each of the research questions guiding the study. Following the interpretation of the analysis, I consider implications of the study for theory, methodology, and practice. These implications lead to a brief discussion of the limitations of the present study, followed by potential opportunities for future research.

**First Listening and Research Question One: How does Sr. Akers discursively construct multiple identities in her narrative account of conflict in the Catholic Church?**

The first listening aimed to identify instances of membership categorization work that suggest the existence of multiple identities. Research question one examined Jayusi’s (1984) concept of membership or “type” categorizations, in which prototypical instances of a category are named. Typically, they function as inferences, descriptions, and judgments all at once. Category work also allows actors to make sense of social “events,” and can be used for explicitly moral purposes. In Sr. Akers’ narrative, I have identified the way she uses categorization work to construct two opposing identities: “conservative Catholics” and the “underground Church.” These “two versions of Church” exist in opposition to each other and in turn, bifurcate the Roman Catholic organization. In her category work, Sr. Akers suggests the moral successes and
failures of those who belong to both categories. The moral implications of categorization work are central to building an understanding of the ways in which Sr. Akers is able to logically construct these multiple identities. In other words, morality functions as a discursive tool to legitimize her behaviors as successful performances of the Catholic Sister identity.

Jayusi’s (1984) conceptualization of category-bound versus category-constitutive features provides an explanation for how Sr. Akers’ view of morality influences her categorization work throughout her narrative. Recall that category-bound features are viewed as implicitly tied to particular roles in the form of activities, rights, obligations, motivations, knowledge, and competencies (Jayusi, 1984). In this sense, what is considered to be morally appropriate for a Catholic sister has been constructed and potentially reified over time. For example, as evidenced in the analysis chapter, much of the “category-bound” behaviors of Catholic sisterhood are characterized by obedience and orthodoxy. In fact, the notion of “category-bound” features implies an adherence to tradition. However, in Sr. Akers’ narrative she describes the way she displaces those historical notions of what a “sister should be” through genuine or more authentic performances of her identity, which incorporate an obligation to remain active in social justice issues, such as women’s ordination. Sr. Akers characterizes those who do support women’s rights within the Church as moral failures. This functions to legitimize her position over other categories and in relation to larger Discourses.

As a tool for constructing her identity, Sr. Akers draws from broader Discourses, which privilege one worldview over another. Specifically, she draws from Discourses of social justice, which functions to legitimize her behavior. She aligns herself with the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr. and President Kennedy, drawing comparisons between civil rights and women’s rights within the Church. A more in depth discussion of the Discourses that emerged within Sr. Akers’
narrative will occur in the interpretation of the third listening, but it is important to recognize Sr. Akers’ usage of such Discourses to achieve political goals.

Finally, Sr. Akers illustrates the elasticity of members of the Church in her description of the “underground Church” identity. She describes the “underground Church” as a site for elasticity within the Church; acknowledging that while many members have left, others (including herself) have remained in identification with the Catholic faith in spite of their disagreement with the Church’s policies. Sr. Akers is thus able to “stretch” her identity through her involvement with the justice community and the underground Church. This elasticity further emphasizes the moral quality of categorization work by showing how members of a patriarchal organization can find ways to create multiple meanings by connecting with others who share their views. The relationships between the conflicting identities that emerged in this section can be further interpreted in conjunction with the findings of the second listening.

**Second Listening and Research Question Two: How does Sister Akers position herself in her narrative account of conflict in the Catholic Church?**

In the second listening, this study pushes the boundaries of Jayusi’s (1984) work by incorporating discursive positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999) as a means to theorize how actors within a narrative attempt to negotiate multiple identities. Before discussing the ways discursive positioning theory goes beyond membership categorization, it is important to further discuss Jayusi’s (1984) concept of category transformations, which she defines as occurring when actors modify the relevance of one categorization device by negating it or by making another categorization more relevant in order to alter the nature of persons being categorized. Transforming a categorization is related to legitimacy in that actors will attempt to transform categories into more or less legitimate ones. For example, in this study, Sr. Akers
characterizes one of her most vocal supporters as “no flaming radical,” in an attempt to transform the way others had categorized the woman in extreme opposition to the “conservative Catholic” identity.

While this aspect of Jayusi’s (1984) work addresses the way individual actors attempt to modify certain categorizations, discursive positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999) provides value beyond Jayusi’s (1984) work by considering how such devices are negotiated within a broader storyline. Specifically, discursive positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999) accounts for the negotiation and sequencing of membership categorizations within a given conversation. As shows in the analysis, much of Sr. Akers’ narrative involves her relaying the conversational back-and-forth between herself and the Archbishop. While Jayusi’s (1984) work is especially valuable in identifying the ways both Sr. Akers and Archbishop use categorizations in explicitly moral ways for political gain, her theory does not fully account for the way such categorizations are challenged and negotiated in talk. Positioning theory accounts for the action-reaction process that occurs as multiple actors challenge and negotiate various categorizations unfolding in time.

For example, in the analysis chapter, I presented a passage that illustrated how Sr. Akers’ attempted to transform the categorization of Catholic sister to the more legitimate one of “theologian.” While membership categorization theory (Jayusi, 1984) accounts for the implied features of these categorizations, positioning theory illuminates the way these categorizations are negotiated through communication. Sr. Akers’ categorizes and positions herself as a theologian; however, the Archbishop challenges this position by arguing that she is “not supposed to be teaching theology.” In this example, the value of positioning theory in combination with membership categorization becomes clear as the Archbishop negates Sr. Akers attempt to
establish that Catholic sisterhood equals theologian. Further, the use of “I-poems” as a means to visually illustrate the positioning work of the actors in the narrative increases the theoretical potency of the analysis.

The visual effect of the “I-poems” provides a clear illustration of power and resistance within a narrative. Additionally, the use of “I-poems” allows for the accountive nature of positioning by isolating the voices in conversation as accounted by the narrator. Recall one of the more powerful “I-poems” in the analysis taken from the following passage:

And he said, “You must make a public statement that you have changed your mind and you now agree with the teaching of the Church against women’s ordination.” I said, “What?” I mean, I was floored. And he said, he repeated it, and I said, “Well, I can’t do that.” I said “First of all, that’s brutally a lie, and secondly it’s against my conscience, I can’t do that.” And he said, “Well then you accept the consequences.” And I said, “Well, what are the consequences?” And he said, um, “You can no longer teach in parishes or any structure related to the diocese.” And I thought, I gotta get out of here.

The “I-poem” isolates the voices from the passage, achieving a particularly compelling illustration of the struggle over positioning between Sr. Akers and the Archbishop:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>He</th>
<th>You</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He said</td>
<td>You must make</td>
<td>He said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You have changed your mind</td>
<td>You have changed your mind</td>
<td>He repeated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You now agree</td>
<td>You now agree</td>
<td>I said, what?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I mean</td>
<td>I mean</td>
<td>I was</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was</td>
<td>I was</td>
<td>He said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I said</td>
<td>I said</td>
<td>He repeated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can’t</td>
<td>I can’t</td>
<td>I said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can’t</td>
<td>I can’t</td>
<td>I said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He said</td>
<td>You accept</td>
<td>He said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You can no longer teach</td>
<td>You can no longer teach</td>
<td>I thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I gotta get out of here

Because accountive positioning can be especially messy in talk, the “I-poems” are ideal in terms of the visual clarity they afford. Harré and van Langenhove (1999) do not identify a comparable method to conduct a positioning-driven analysis; therefore, the use of “I-poems,” and more broadly, “The Listening Guide” method, in conjunction with membership categorization and discursive positioning theory is a major contribution of this study. “The Listening Guide” will be discussed further in a later section; for now, I turn to the third listening, which attends to the broader Discourses at play within Sr. Akers’ narrative.

Third Listening and Research Question Three: What Discourses does Sister Akers invoke in her narrative account of conflict within the Church?

This study is also unique in its view of membership categorizations and positioning work as sources of broader Discourses present in a narrative. In the third listening, I attended to the larger Discourses invoked by Sr. Akers by relying on her category and positioning work as indicators of those Discourses. In her narrative, a so-called Discourse of Doctrine emerged to describe the discursive resources, or “interpretive repertoire,” available to those who ascribe to the “conservative Catholic” identity. Specifically, terms like “traditional,” “obedience,” “orthodox,” and arguments in defense of the “Church’s teachings” characterize this particular Discourse.

Alternatively, a Discourse of Justice through Dialogue surfaced as a broader Discourse to describe the “underground Church” identity, which incorporated various Discourses characterized by social justice themes (civil rights, feminism, migrant farm workers, etc.). Terminology such as “social justice,” “value and dignity of people,” and arguments for working to advance the rights of various marginalized groups constitute this Discourse. My consideration
of membership categorization devices and positioning work as sources of Discourse was strategic, in that I wanted to retain focus on the Discourses invoked by Sr. Akers during the interviews. This choice was purposeful because I felt it was beyond the scope of this study to attempt to capture an in-depth analysis of the broader Discourses at play in the global debate over women’s ordination (what Foucault would term an “archeological” analysis). However, future research would benefit from focusing on the presence of competing Discourses in Sr. Akers’ narrative and what Leslie Baxter (2011) terms a “rupture” within Discourse.

Baxter (2011) coined the term “disjuncture” or “rupture” in her discussion of the nature of competing Discourses. Baxter (2011) argues,

In many instances, these (D)iscourses are competing with one another in the valenced meaning that is constructed for expression and nonexpression. However, quite frequently, a single (D)iscourse ruptures, and it appears to compete with itself. That is, a disjuncture erupts within a (D)iscourse and renders meaningful both acts of expression and nonexpression (p.79).

In other words, Baxter (2011) identifies a phenomenon in which a Discourse contains competing notions that undermine its central arguments. She views a discursive web (in this case, I view Sr. Akers’ narrative as a “discursive web”) as “one in which a given (D)iscourse both fragments internally, competing against itself in legitimizing both expression and nonexpression, and competes with another (D)iscourse at the same time” (p. 81). In Sr. Akers’ narrative, two “ruptures” are of significance, and warrant further discussion.

First, a contradiction exists within the Discourse of Doctrine, in that concepts and arguments found in official Church doctrine can be used to argue for and against women’s ordination. Sr. Akers’ specifically references this in her narrative, in the following passage:

I’ve always been an educator. I love education; I love teaching. And when I left high school teaching, Seton High School I went to the social action office for the archdiocese, um, a number of people because I was known to be an effective teacher, and I loved it and so they said, “Oh, Louise, why aren’t you teaching?” I said, I am, I’ll just be teaching
in a different venue. And also my teaching was focused on Catholic social teaching, on justice issues. I began to present more and meet people around the diocese, because I was the parish liason, so I, my whole role was to start parish justice commissions, which was great. I met wonderful people. So and, one of the major hats I wear is that I’m an educator. I’m also an advocate for justice issues. An advocate for women, with women. An advocate for the poor, with the poor.

In this passage, Sr. Akers implies that advocating for women is central to Catholic social teaching, which would include supporting the ordination of women as priests. Because social teaching exists within Church doctrine, the argument can be made for women’s ordination by using discursive tools available within the Discourse of Doctrine. She further argues this point in her discussion regarding “primacy of conscience.” Recall from the analysis in Chapter 4 that “primacy of conscience” is a Catholic concept mentioned in documents that resulted from the Second Vatican Council. Because supporting women’s ordination is in alignment with Sr. Akers’ conscience, she is unable to denounce her support of the issue. Consequently, if “primacy of conscience” is a concept that exists within the Discourse of Doctrine, the same Discourse used to justify the Archbishop’s choice to fire Sr. Akers can be used to argue against his actions. Thus, the Discourse of Doctrine competes with itself.

A comparable “disjuncture” exists in the Discourse of Justice through Dialogue. Sr. Akers emphasizes the need for dialogue throughout her narrative; however, as I argued in Chapter 4, the concept of “dialogue” not only enables those working for change within the Church; it also potentially constrains those invoking the Discourse. In order for dialogue to be productive, both parties must engage in conversation. Since women’s ordination is such a polarizing issue, it will prove to be extremely challenging, if not impossible, to convince those who so adamantly oppose the issue to engage in dialogue. Therefore, the Discourse of Justice through Dialogue may contain terms and arguments that lead to its own demise. Perhaps a Discourse of Dissent would be more radical and productive in promoting change for women
within the Catholic Church. Interestingly, most of the social justice Discourse cited by Sr. Akers is characterized by more radical means of achieving change (i.e. civil rights protests). Also, Sr. Akers attests to the heavy involvement of women within the Catholic Church in non-clergy roles, which would suggest that if women were to adopt a “dissent” perspective, this might create pressure for the hierarchy to engage in dialogue.

Baxter’s (2011) conceptualization of a “rupture” in Discourse has significant implications for actors maneuvering within competing Discourses because the discursive tools that appear to increase agency may actually constrain subjects in particularly debilitating ways. Especially in a situation of conflict characterized by a dialectic of power and resistance, such as that of Sr. Akers’ experience, an awareness of potential “disjuncture” within a Discourse would be essential for creating space for action. This is analogous to Anthony Giddens (1984) notion of “discursive penetration.” Sr. Akers’ space for action exists primarily in association with her role as an educator (outside of the archdiocese, at this point) and a leader within the Sisters of Charity, and more broadly within the Church. Her platform for change is afforded to her through the publicity she has received as a result of this incident, and she capitalizes on that platform by creating space of action for new meanings of faith. Sr. Akers is an example for other women in the Church because of both her material situation, and the ways she has discursively managed the conflict. Her space of action is created through new ideas about what it means to be a Catholic sister and a Catholic woman, and through her roles as educator and leader, she operates as an example of such possibility.

*Narrative Synthesis and Research Question Four: How does Sister Akers use these strategies (categorization and positioning work) to discursively create space of action?*
Finally, the fourth listening was intended to analyze the three concepts discussed above in tandem (membership categorizations, discursive positioning, and Discourse) to theorize how Sr. Akers was able to create space of action within her narrative. Recall that Holmer-Nadesan (1992) viewed space of action as the way actors are able to navigate competing Discourses to create discursive possibility or room to maneuver. This study extends Holmer-Nadesan’s (1992) work by suggesting that actors may use categorization and positioning work as discursive tools to create such possibility. Considering categorizations and positioning work as discursive tools for creating space of action is unique to this study, and results in a complex synthesis of Sr. Akers’ narrative.

In her narrative, Sr. Akers is able to transcend the polarization of the Church by constructing categories of plurality, and positioning herself as one who does not leave the Church but instead focuses on existing in solidarity with those who support her. In a sense, she uses categorizations and positioning to resist the disciplining effects of the Discourse of Doctrine. Recall that Foucault discusses the disciplinary power of Discourse as a producer of knowledge, and as a means of control. As a result, the Discourse of Doctrine, in many ways, fails to discipline Sr. Akers. By identifying the contradictions or “lack” that exist within the Discourse, Sr. Akers creates space for multiple meanings. She is able to define her identity and her faith as one of plurality and solidarity in order to increase the elasticity of her identification with the Catholic Church.

It is important once again to consider the potential affects that a “rupture” in Discourse may have on individuals working to create discursive possibility for new meaning as they resist hegemonic power. In the case of Sr. Akers, what potential “ruptures” exist in a Discourse of plurality? Further, once potential “ruptures” are identified, how can actors within an
organization manage such contradictions? In a study of Discourse and power, such as this one, one must resist the urge to overemphasize an individuals’ agency. Sr. Akers’ is able to create space of action and construct new meanings to define her faith and her identity; however, she is still constrained in many ways within the competing Discourses at play, and the potential for “rupture” further complicates her identity construction processes.

Implications

The findings of this study have many implications for building theory, developing methodology, and improving practice. In this section, I discuss the unique contributions of this study in each of those areas in relation to the analysis and interpretations presented above.

Theory

In this study, I adopted a theoretical framework that incorporated several different perspectives. In this section, I will discuss the following theoretical contributions: (1) combining a discursive psychology and feminist communicology perspective, (2) using membership categorization theory and positioning theory as complementary tools for analysis, (3) applying the aforementioned frameworks to the study of resistance leadership.

First, this study utilized a meta-theoretical approach that combined discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) with a feminist communicology perspective (Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004). While the two research perspectives exist in different areas of scholarly work (primarily organizational behavior and management versus communication), the two share many foundational principles and marry together quite well, as argued extensively in Chapter 2. By combining the two perspectives, I was able to locate a Foucauldian, big “D” discourse in Sr. Akers’ narrative (à la discursive psychology) while also retaining a dialectic view of power and resistance as it relates to gender (à la feminist communicology perspective).
Second, as discussed earlier in the chapter, this study combined membership categorization theory (Jayusi, 1984) with discursive positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999) in order to fully explicate the ways in which Sr. Akers’ discursively constructed her identity in her narrative of conflict. A combined approach allows for an understanding of how categorization work can be used by actors to establish legitimacy and argue for political gain within cohesive storyline. By using the theories in tandem, I was able to analyze how categorizations were adopted, challenged, and negotiated through communication.

Third and finally, the present study contributes scholarship concerning resistance leadership. Although my study of Sr. Akers’ narrative did not focus on leadership explicitly, the findings have implications for the study of individuals in organizations who lead through resistance. Zoller and Fairhurst (2007) argued for the utility of applying theories of leadership to the study of resistance, a theoretical dialogue that has yet to be realized in the field of communication. They advocate a dialectical approach to resistance as an appropriate means to study resistance leadership, calling attention to the ways collectives mobilize through “everyday organizational life” (p. 1355). While this study does not directly apply leadership theory to Sr. Akers’ discursive resistance, the ways she creates possibility in the face of opposition throughout her narrative contributes to an understanding of resistance leadership. Specifically, Sr. Akers’ actions are “influential acts of organizing” that have the potential to mobilize collectives within the Catholic organization (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007). The support for Sr. Akers found in various news sources, and the support of the people she mentions throughout her narrative are examples of potential mobilization within the Church.

In sum, this study contributes to building theory by combining a feminist focus with a discursive psychology lens, considering membership categorization theory and positioning
theory as complementary perspectives, and implicitly studying resistance leadership. In the next section, I discuss the methodological contributions of the study.

**Methodology**

A particularly unique contribution of this study is the use of “The Listening Guide” method to study communicative processes within a narrative. “The Listening Guide” (Brown and Gilligan, 1992) was originally developed as a method for analysis in the field of psychology, and has since been used in educational studies (Raider-Roth, 2005) as well. However, this study may be the first to apply the method to a study of communication. “The Listening Guide” is a relational, voice-centered method, and therefore translates well to the study of communication. “The Listening Guide” is a flexible method, and “its goal is to elicit the complexity embedded within a text” (Raider-Roth, 2005). Although the method does not name the concept of “(D)iscourse,” the principles of the method imply a discursive perspective. Attending to the different layers or “voices” of a narrative essentially points to the discursive processes accounted for by the storyteller.

Specifically, the use of “I-poems” as a tool for analysis enriched the study of discursive positioning in Sr. Akers’ narrative. By locating the “I” voice and displaying it visually in relation to the other “voices” within the narrative, the positioning work became especially clear. As argued earlier in the chapter, “The Listening Guide” provides a specific tool for the study of discursive positioning, which is something for which Harré and van Langenhove’s (1999) theory doesn’t account. Moreover, “The Listening Guide” proved to be a useful method for the study of multiple, complex concepts; by organizing the analysis into different “listenings” which are viewed as pieces of the narrative synthesis, the method allows for a consideration of multiple layers while also retaining a focus on the interconnected whole.
Beyond its theoretical and methodological contributions, this study also has practical implications for women (or other marginalized groups) functioning within patriarchal organizations. The Roman Catholic Church is an extreme example of a patriarchal structure; however, the dynamics and tensions present in Sr. Akers’ narrative of conflict exist in other organizations, religious and secular. The study of categorization and positioning work as discursive tools available to actors facing challenges similar to those of Sr. Akers is important to consider when working for structural change. While I do not intend to overemphasize Sr. Akers’ agency, I would argue that she has been successful in creating possibility for new meanings regarding what it means to be a Catholic woman, as a result of this conflict. In many ways, she is an encouraging example for others who have been silenced as a result of patriarchal leadership. This claim may be contested due to the lack of institutional change within the Roman Catholic organization; however, I argue that Sr. Akers’ experience has the potential to redefine the role of women in the Church. She has been forced to accept relatively severe consequences because her beliefs oppose those of the institutional Church, but the incident itself has allowed her to share her experiences with others and has created awareness for the issue of women’s ordination. Sr. Akers’ creation of space of action in terms of what it means to be a Catholic woman may not result in changes in Church policy, but she has set an example for other Catholic women (or marginalized groups) by taking advantage of other opportunities to work for change, including her work in the justice community and her sharing of this experience with the greater Catholic community.

This study also has implications for the study of Roman Catholic Church and other religious organizations. Specifically, Sr. Akers’ view of “Church” is one constituted by people,
as evidenced by her statement, “We are the Church.” This illustrates the argument made by Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) in Chapter 2 that communication is constitutive of organizations, which shifts the focus from organizations as reified structures to the study of organizing processes. This view has implications for religious organizations such as the Roman Catholic Church, in that it emphasizes the power of communication in organizing collectives. For instance, the “underground Church” has formed as a result of collective organizing that challenges the dominant structure. These notions attest to the value of studying communication processes in order to theorize about power and resistance within organizations, both religious and secular.

**Limitations**

Like all research, this study is not without limitation. One such limitation is the limited time and resources for this study, the primary data of focus consisted on two interviews with one person. In future work, it would increase the complexity of the study to conduct similar interviews and analysis with individuals whose perspective differs from that of Sr. Akers. In other words, a limitation of this study is that only Sr. Akers’ “side” of the story is told. An incorporation of alternative narrative(s) would certainly increase the depth of the analysis.

That being said, it is not my intention to make generalizable claims regarding the experiences of all Roman Catholic sisters. Rather, I aimed to listen closely to Sr. Akers’ narrative of conflict in order to achieve greater understanding of the complexities, contradictions, and tensions that characterize her identity. As suggested by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), by studying the “particular,” we can discover “universal” elements of human experience. Therefore, I view my focus on one individual’s narrative not as a limitation, per se, but rather as
a starting point for future research concerning Roman Catholic sisters, women and the Catholic Church, and more broader women and religious institutions.

**Future Directions**

As stated above, I view the limitations of this study as opportunities for future research. Possible avenues for such research are many, but in this section, I would like to focus on a few particular points of interest. First, this study expands Sheep’s (2006) work concerning elasticity and the Episcopalian Church. Specifically, in Sheep’s study, he identifies similar discursive strategies as tools for creating possibility and retaining elasticity during times of conflict. His study highlights the use of metaphor as a tool for establishing legitimacy, and my identification of Sr. Akers’ use of metaphor in her narrative yielded similar findings. For example, Sr. Aker refers to the “umbrella” of faith when discussing a pluralistic view. Such metaphors allow actors to establish legitimacy “without ever having to mention or argue logically” (Sheep, 2006, p. 153). As argued by Sheep (2006), the study of metaphor has not before been considered in relation to membership categorization theory, or more broadly, organizational identity theory, and warrants further research.

A second potential avenue for future research would be to further examine Baxter’s (2011) notion of “rupture” in Discourse, as discussed earlier in the chapter. The presence of “ruptures” within competing Discourse complicates the relationship between opposing identities, and warrants further study. Also, while this study adopts a dialectical view of power and resistance as advocated by the feminist communicology perspective (Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004), a more focused analysis of the dialectical tensions that emerge as a result of the incident that is the focus of this study, would increase understanding of how Sr. Akers’ manages her identity.
A final opportunity for future research stemming from this study would be the application of “The Listening Guide” method to other studies of communication. The method is best suited for analyses that focus on the complexities of an individual narrative. I argue for the utility of the method in studying power as it relates to (D)iscourse, because the rigor of the method allows the researcher to unpack the discursive layers of the narrative. Further, I argue that the use of “I-poems” as a tool for analysis enriches the study of membership categorization and discursive positioning by providing a specific, visual means for displaying conversational exchange.

Concluding Thoughts

In this study, I hope to have constructed a rich synthesis of Sr. Akers’ narrative by listening to her story and attending to its complexities. By listening to Sr. Akers’ story in this way, I was able to unpack the layers of her voice to identify how she manages to negotiate her identity during a time of struggle. The findings in this study are mere starting points for further examination of gender, power, resistance, and identity in relation to women religious, as their experiences and narratives are most certainly worthy of scholarly attention.
References


*Communication Theory, 14*(1), 5-26.


Appendix A

Interview Guide

Introduction:

I grew up in the Catholic Church, and as a young adult I have recognized the inconsistency in my identity as a Catholic and as a supporter of women’s rights. I began thinking about my thesis project, and had an interest in gender, organization, and identity. I was brainstorming different ideas that combined my interests when I first read about you and your story, and I realized that I had to talk to you. I feel so fortunate to be able to speak with you face to face; I had no idea that this is where my project would take me!

I am interested in your identity as a sister in the RCC and how you have managed and negotiated aspects of your identity that seem to contradict each other.

I have read about the incident and feel relatively familiar with your story, but I am really interested to hear you tell your story in your own words. So to begin, I would like to hear you tell your story, then I will follow up with more pointed questions.

Interview I:

1. How would you describe the identity of the Roman Catholic Church (i.e., what is central, distinctive and enduring)? How does the Roman Catholic Church differ from other denominations?

2. Has the identity of the Church changed over time? If so, how?

3. How do you identify or see yourself within the Church?

4. In your TV interview, you referred to yourself as a sister, a theologian, a teacher, etc. Do you think that you have multiple identities? If so, are goals and values associated with each identity compatible or conflicting? Is one identity more dominant than the others?

5. How have these identities changed since the event?

6. Has the event drawn you closer to the Church in any way? [If so, ask for a specific example.]

7. Has it distanced you from the Church in any way? [If so, ask for a specific example.]

8. Do you feel mixed or conflicted feelings toward the Church as a result of the event or its aftermath? [If so, ask for a specific example.]

9. What tensions do you experience as a person with your beliefs? And how are you attempting to manage or resolve those tensions? [As for a specific example.]
10. In your TV interview, you spoke of “primacy of conscience.” Can you explain this to me?

11. How do you see your identities evolving in the future, in light of this event?

**Interview II - revisit**

1. How were you told to act as a Roman Catholic nun or as a Sister of Charity? Who told you this?

2. What parts of your identity were prescribed? What did you challenge?

3. You spoke of multiple identities/hats – can you tell me more about these?

4. How do you define the role of Sister? How do others’ views differ from or align with yours?