DIFFERENT IDENTITY ACCOUNTS FOR CATHOLIC WOMEN

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Through interviews with thirty-seven individuals, I compare personal "identity accounts" for women who agree with Church doctrines, those who disagree and leave the Church, and those who disagree and remain loyal to Catholicism. Surprisingly, women who leave and women who agree with Catholic doctrines have similar accounts for what it means to be a Catholic. The central part of this paper is devoted to understanding women who are dissatisfied and remain committed Catholics. These women view Catholic identity as negotiable, finding meaning and voice in their parish and in the wider Church. This group also believes in their own abilities to make changes in the doctrines of the Church, revealing that individualist religious identities may actually foster commitment. Findings expand research on religious identities and have implications for the relationship of personal identity accounts to institutional change.

Women respond in a variety of ways to religions that place constraints on their leadership. Some see a contradiction and decide to leave mainstream religion (Stocks 1997). Others remain part of religious organizations, but switch from conservative to more liberal institutions. Women may also be fully part of religions where they have a limited role, and find empowerment in conservative ideologies (Griffith 1997; Manning 1999). Other women deal with limits to leadership by forming alternative religious communities while maintaining a traditional religious identity (Dillon 1999; Manning 1999). The Catholics whom Michele Dillon (1999) studies, for example, remain Catholic but expend their major energies outside of local congregations, through involvement in efforts aimed at reforming the doctrines of the Church. Others deal with patriarchal hierarchy by separating religion from the rest of their lives. For example, Christel Manning (1999) argues that a woman who is part of conservative religion and remains a feminist may be compartmentalizing work and religious identities, believing in gender equality at work and gender hierarchy in her religious community.

Yet, none of these ways women respond to patriarchal religions adequately addresses the question of how women negotiate personal religious identities as well as what kinds of identities are more or less likely to foster loyalty to religions that limit the role of women. Here I ask, first, how women understand their own religious identities in light of official Catholic teachings that limit their role. Second, I ask how such identities are reflected in different action strategies. Perhaps most illuminating for theorists who try to connect identity constructs to changes in institutions are findings about women who have strong disagreements with Catholic doctrines and remain committed to Catholicism. For some of these women, being able to negotiate the content of their identities as Catholics and find meaning and voice within Catholicism fosters loyalty in the midst of dissatisfaction and offers a particular action strategy for changes to the larger Church. These findings broaden research on religious iden-
tities and religious individualism, and have implications for eventual changes to Catholic institutions.

THE CHANGING PLACE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

The place of women in the Catholic Church has broadened considerably. Several structural developments within and outside Church institutions have made increases in women’s leadership possible. Richard Schoenherr and Lawrence Young (1993) were among the first to publish systematic demographic research about the U.S. priest shortage, arguing that a shortage in priests created the conditions for a different distribution of power, definition of goals, and structural changes in the Church (Schoenherr and Young 1993). One direct consequence was that women began to fill many of the vacant positions left by the shortage (Wallace 1991). Changes to Catholic doctrine resulting from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) increased the participation of laity in ministry to the local Church. Centrally important to this work, the council made theological provision for more female leaders. Women began to fulfill roles such as diocesan chancellor, altar server, eucharistic minister, and lector—positions they were unable to hold before the council (Seidler and Meyer 1989).

Changes in women’s roles and in the economy provided a societal context for women to expect greater opportunities for leadership in all spheres. Beginning in the 1960s and continuing to the present, the number of women in the paid labor force consistently increased. More women had college and graduate degrees, giving them upward mobility in the labor force. In addition, the statistical dominance of the “traditional family” began to decline. In 1990, only twenty-six percent of households were comprised of married couples with children. In about half of those, the mother worked outside the home. Propelled by new societal opportunities, women began to re-think their roles in traditional religious organizations, including those in the Catholic Church.

Changes in Catholic structures and institutions, such as those surrounding the Vatican II council (Wilde 2004) and those outside the Church, such as changes in expectations about the roles of women, reveal why some women are taking leadership. These explanations, however, do not sufficiently explain how Catholic women construct different personal identities as Catholics in light of official Church teachings that place limits on women’s leadership. Although women’s roles in Catholic parishes are varied, the official doctrines of the Church continue to constrain their role. Women are not able to be ordained as priests or serve as deacons, and in many parishes they are also restricted from filling other ministry roles. In essence, Catholic women are situated within a patriarchal organization—with an enduring socio-historical context that has traditionally marginalized women theologically and sociologically.

Some women deal with these limits by leaving the Church. Other women start organizations that do not practice official Church teachings and have a more open approach to women’s leadership (Dillon 1999; Farrell 1996). Most research on women’s loyalty or defection from the church has not been comparative; it does not explain the different kinds of accounts that women give for their loyalty to or exit from the Church and how such identities are reflected in the different strategies of defection from the Church altogether, doctrinal steadfastness, or selective appropriation of doctrine. This is a significant research oversight. Doing grounded studies that examine how the women who make these different choices explain their religious identities is the first crucial step to understanding how individuals create identities at odds with institutions while remaining aligned with those institutions. Such research will also predict what kinds of identity constructs will potentially lead to institutional change.
IDENTITY ACCOUNTS

Identity can be best categorized at different levels of analysis (Owens 2003). An individual’s personal identity is often related to a particular social network, being part of a social network of other women or a network of other Catholics. Scholars increasingly agree that, because people are affiliated with more than one social network, individuals have multiple personal identities (Owens 2003). Specific social contexts often help a person decide which identity is most salient at a given time. At another level of analysis, identities also have the potential to be collective, forming the basis for political mobilization. Social movements result from collective identities, where individuals share a common consciousness oriented towards action.

The current discussion is primarily concerned with personal identity formation: how individuals define themselves, in this case, vis-à-vis their understanding of what it means to negotiate religious identities within the Catholic Church. I am particularly interested in what I call “identity accounts,” the kinds of patterned discourse that individuals in certain social locations use to describe who they are in relation to the institutions in which they participate. Here I see religious identity accounts, in particular, as the discourse, motives, or moral boundaries that an individual develops to explain her place in the world and the distinction between others who are and who are not part of her religion. I take aspects of this definition from other scholars who have studied the moral content of personal identity negotiation (Lamont 1992; Wuthnow 1991). Here I am most interested in the process by which identities are developed to legitimate what appear to be the inconsistent frameworks between a commitment to gender egalitarianism and to traditional Catholicism.

Scholars who study religion have taken different approaches to religious identities. Survey research on religious identity might lead us to believe that such identities are often fixed. An individual is a Protestant or a Muslim and has an identity as part of that particular religious group. However, sociologists of religion are increasingly studying the extent to which religious identities are fluid and negotiated, even identities that are under the umbrella of the same religion. In particular, as related to gender and sexuality, there are multiple—although often patterned—gender negotiations about women’s roles and activities among those who are part of the same religion (Ammerman 2003; Dillon 1999; Gallagher 2003; Thumma 1991). For example, Dillon (1999) finds that Catholics who feel institutionally marginalized from the structure of the Catholic Church are still able to construct an identity based on the communal traditions of Catholicism. Read and Bartkowski (2000) argue that religious and gender identities often vary between Muslim women who choose to wear the veil, even though outsiders might perceive all veiled women to have conservative Islamic religious identities. The women I studied may also appear conservative, since they adhere to many Catholic doctrines and spend their primary time in local parish activities rather than in what Michele Dillon has called pro-change organizations aimed at changing core doctrines of the Church (Dillon 1999). However, all of these women stressed in their identity accounts that they have agency in determining what it means to be a Catholic, and many think that their personal appropriation of Catholic identity could actually lead to changes in the broader Church (Mann and Kelley 1997).

Part of understanding how Catholic women negotiate religious and gender identities is found through attention to the institutional level of the Church: to the particular doctrines that influence the roles of women. Another part of understanding this process is found at the level of organizations, through analysis of how Catholic parishes appropriate larger institu-
tions and the kinds of specific roles that women fulfill in parishes. Studying women’s roles in the Catholic Church only from the level of institutions and organizations, however, does not adequately account for differences in identity construction between individual women who participate in local parishes. Such research neglects to answer the central question of how women personally negotiate the boundaries between loyalty to an organization and loyalty to extra-organizational institutions, especially when such loyalties mean that they must endure specific institutional practices that constrain their full participation.

A broader conception of women’s loyalty is found through moving the level of analysis from institutions and organizations to individuals, and specifically through asking what kind of personal identity accounts women with different relationships to the Church provide for being Catholic or if there are any patterns in how Catholic women construct their religious identities. Through studying women’s personal identities, I discovered distinctively different understandings of what it meant to be a Catholic among women who largely agree with Catholic doctrines, those who decide to exit the Catholic Church because of their dissatisfaction, and those who disagree with Catholic doctrines regarding the place of women, yet remain loyal to the Church. These findings articulate the relationship between identity accounts and the status of women as Catholics. They also have implications for social changes in the broader Catholic Church.

METHODS

Between fall 1999 and summer 2000 I interviewed thirty-two women who were active members of a Catholic parish. The parishes were part of a larger study of Religion and Family in Upstate New York (Edgell 2005). Specifically, the women I interviewed for this study were from six different parishes. I also interviewed five women who had been active members of a parish, yet decided to leave the Church because of a perceived lack of opportunities for women in leadership. In total I completed thirty-seven interviews. I chose women in these six parishes because the churches in some ways had similar structural locations, yet were located in three different community contexts. At the time of this study, in each parish women had recently been or currently were pastoral associates as well as heads of pastoral, finance, and parish councils. Table 1 describes the parishes in greater detail.

In each parish, I interviewed women in formal leadership as well as those who regularly attended the parish but were not leaders. My respondents were all white, US citizens, and differed in educational attainment from high school degree to doctorate. I also attended services and gathered written information, such as that about the order of worship in each church. I received verbal permission to study the parish from the priest in each church and found women to interview through looking in the church directory and bulletins for women listed as formal leaders. These included pastoral associates (in most of the parishes pastoral associates were responsible for parish management and counseling parishioners), heads of finance councils, or those in another leadership role. I was often able to meet these women through the course of attending services and then set up meetings with them. The other respondents were either referred to me by women in parish leadership positions or I met them through attending services. My rationale for selecting respondents was to interview equal numbers of women in official leadership positions, both those who worked full-time in a paid position for the parish and those who worked full time in other jobs, yet served the parish as volunteer leaders. I also wanted to interview those who were actively involved in a parish but
Table 1: Characteristics of Parishes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parish/Characteristic</th>
<th>Number of Full Time Parish priests</th>
<th>Mean Number of Parishioners who attend weekly services*</th>
<th>Community Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>St. Matthew</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Mark</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Luke</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. John</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Anne</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Mary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>Small-Town Academic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Information taken from Religious Leader Interviews, Religion and Family Project, see (Edgell 2005).

were not in any official leadership position. In addition to interviewing parish leaders, I chose other women to interview through a modified form of the snowball sample, where respondents refer the researcher to other respondents who are in a similar social location. However, to increase the variety of women in the parish I interviewed, I started different snowball chains in each of the parishes. I also interviewed five women in the same geographical location who had previously attended a parish but at the time of our interview were no longer church members because of disagreements with core Catholic doctrines.

For this paper, I analyzed portions of the interviews where I asked respondents about their religious history, experience with Catholic parishes prior to the one currently attended and dissatisfaction or affirmation of Church teachings. Although I did interview a small group of women who left the Church, I did not select respondents who remained committed Catholics based on their agreement or disagreement with specific Catholic doctrines about the role of women. However, if a respondent expressed dissatisfaction with Catholic doctrines, I asked why she remained a Catholic. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted from forty-five minutes to over two hours. I received verbal, recorded permission to tape the interviews and I personally conducted and transcribed each interview. I then coded the interviews for themes related to how each woman understood what it meant to be a Catholic or the reasons why she decided to leave Catholicism. I paid particular attention to how my respondents viewed the doctrines of the Church, and how they negotiated their disagreements in the course of constructing an identity as a Catholic.

While doing interviews, I talked about my own religious background only when asked by a specific respondent. In most cases respondents did ask me if I was a Catholic and I told them that I had been raised a Protestant. Upon request, I provided written transcripts of the interviews to make sure that the transcripts were correct. Further, I mailed all respondents a written report of the research findings after the completion of the study.

The particular data collection activities were generated from a research focus on how individual women construct identities. This type of information could only be obtained through listening to respondent discourse about what it means to be Catholic, or about how their
movement from being Catholic to leaving Catholicism was negotiated. In particular, I was interested in how women understand their commitment to and/or dissatisfactions with the central doctrines of the Church. To this end, I did not test specific hypotheses, but used a grounded theory approach to data analysis, allowing multiple identity accounts to emerge during the analysis process (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The findings that result from this data collection are limited by the fact that the respondents were not a representative sample of all US Catholic women. However, the goal of this research was not to generalize from this small group to the universe of Catholic women or even to other women who have dissatisfaction with the doctrines of the Church and remain Catholic. Rather, the goal was to show several specific ways women within these local parishes negotiated identity accounts as Catholics in light of Church doctrines that officially limit their role.

**Catholic Identities**

The women I talked with created Catholic identities in distinct yet coherent ways. Women with what I called a "traditional identity" gave an account for what it meant to be a Catholic that included submitting to Catholic doctrine. Several told me they generally agreed with current doctrines about the role of women in the Church. These women responded to the place of women in the Church by believing that Church teaching and authority ought to dictate their beliefs about women’s parish roles. Another group of women seemed to have a very different approach. This group of women eventually decided to leave Catholicism largely because of disagreements over the place of women. Surprisingly, however, this second group, too, thought that being Catholic meant following Church teachings. For a third group of women, the group of women with which this paper is most concerned, being dissatisfied with Catholic teaching actually led to more Church loyalty. However, this group of women had a personal identity account that stressed "individually negotiated identities." For these women, having meaning and voice in the wider Church, and in particular in their local parish, was a significant part of remaining loyal.

**Traditional Identity Accounts**

Women with traditional personal Catholic identities took their ideas about what it meant to be Catholic directly from Church teachings about the place of women. For some of these women, similar to those Griffith (1997) studied in the evangelical women’s Aglow organization, adhering to a traditional religious identity even brought a sense of empowerment and protection from what seemed like the rootless moorings of the outside world. For example, in her early forties, Joan attends a parish in a suburban community. She is a stay-at-home-mother and volunteers as the director of the food pantry for her parish. When I asked her if women in her parish ever give the homily she responded:

He [the priest] did have her [former director of religious education] do a homily once. I don’t know if he had her read the gospel. That was the only time I ever heard of. Sister might have done a homily once. But it goes back to the old school. I like the priest doing the homily.

Joan is actively involved in her parish and during our interview seemed satisfied with the present doctrines of the Church. Joan negotiates her personal identity as a Catholic through accepting a fairly traditionalist position about the role of women. Even when her parish priest allowed a woman to give the homily, Joan felt discomfort. Overall, Joan had little
tension with the Church’s view of women in ministry and did not believe women should be priests or have a greater role in other leadership positions. Joan put herself in contrast to women who are fighting for more equality in the Church and when I asked her in what ways, if any, the women’s movement had influenced the Catholic Church, she responded:

No, I wouldn’t say so. See I don’t really get involved in that. I think it is ridiculous. . . . I do what I am going to do. If they don’t want me then I won’t go there. That is all there is to it.

Women like Joan who have traditional personal identities are aware there are women in the Church who do not agree with Catholic doctrines about the role of women. Because of this awareness, even though traditional women basically agree with Catholic doctrine they still negotiate what it means to be a Catholic.

I also interviewed Jill, a retired nursing assistant in her late sixties. Jill attended a suburban parish and spent many hours a week volunteering for her church. She has been a lifelong Catholic and told me: “I love my parish.” Jill said the only tension she has about the place of women in the Church is that women currently do too much work because of the priest shortage and many feel that they are “doing things the parish priest should probably be doing.” Later in our discussion Jill told me that the priest shortage is a serious problem in the Church and that most parishes will not survive if they do not find a way to get more young men interested in the priesthood. The way in which Jill interpreted my question about women’s roles in the Church revealed aspects of her identity account. She views the priest as the central leader of the church. Although Jill accepts it as a necessity to keep the parish going, women fulfilling positions that priests should be filling is not ideal. Rather than seeing the shortage as an opportunity for more women to lead, Jill is bothered that there are not more priests. Other researchers, too, have shown that women are often viewed as second-best to men in fulfilling church leadership positions, even in those denominations where women are allowed more official leadership than in the Catholic Church (Fobes 2004).

These findings about identity accounts among traditional Catholic women contribute to more general ideas about how identities are constructed and the conditions under which particular kinds of identity accounts are developed. I have shown here that, even at the individual level, construction of religious identities does not happen in a vacuum. In these cases, even those who have little conflict with Church doctrine draw on what is happening in the larger church—movements that are fighting for an increased role of women (Farrell 1996)—when they create an account of what it means to be Catholic.

No Longer a “Real” Catholic

Most of the women I interviewed, however, voiced disagreements with Catholic doctrines about women’s roles. I interviewed five women who had decided to leave the Catholic Church over disagreements about the place of women. Surprisingly, these women actually view their religious identities in similar ways as those with no disagreements. Both groups think that being a Catholic means largely obeying all Church doctrines. For them, Catholic identities are fixed. These women view the meaning of being Catholic through the lens of what Patricia Hill Collins describes in her work, *Black Feminist Thought*, as “either/or” thinking (Collins 2000). As Collins might understand it, these Catholic women have internalized the either/or thinking promoted by the institutions of the Church and believe they have no agency in creating their own meaning of being Catholic.11 For these respondents, either a woman lives in
a manner consistent with the doctrines of the Church or she is not Catholic. Since these women have disagreements, they view their only option as exit.

For example, Margaret is in her mid-forties and lives in a small academic town. Margaret told me that she has had several frank discussions with a local priest who told her that she should listen to her own conscience when following Catholic doctrine. Rather than providing her with more options, however, Margaret came away from these discussions even more disillusioned with the present Church:

I went to talk to the Catholic priest. I said: ‘What about birth control, abortion, women being priests, all of these things I didn’t agree with?’ He said that I could think what I wanted to in my own conscience and I didn’t have to stop being Catholic... And that was it. I could never be Catholic again. I thought this was the stupidest thing. ... It was totally inconsistent. The American Church was going to ignore the papacy on birth control ... and the Pope is not really into altar girls and they ignore the papacy on that. I couldn’t raise my child in an environment where we were going to set the tone and rules and belong to a Church where we say: Well, this is the Church’s doctrine but we don’t really have to do that.

As demonstrated by what this priest told Margaret, the American Catholic Church has different cultural tools – what Swidler (1986) has described as “habits, skills, and styles from which people construct strategies of action” – for negotiating what it means to be Catholic. Official teachings of the Church emphasize that being Catholic means adhering to all of the doctrines of the Church. In light of Vatican II changes which give more freedom for interpreting Catholic doctrines to individual parishes, however, there is also a growing stream of Catholicism that stresses more selective appropriation of doctrines and more consequent negotiation of religious identities. The priest Margaret talked with was trying to offer Margaret the cultural tools to build a more individually negotiated Catholicism. However, Margaret did not use such tools to negotiate her religious identity. For Margaret, to be Catholic was to fully obey the doctrines of the Church.

Katherine is also in her mid-forties and works as a professor at a University in a small town. She had little hope the Church would ever change and saw few possibilities for remaining a Catholic. She also believed that to be Catholic was to follow the teachings of the Church. When I asked Katherine why she decided to leave the Catholic Church, she explained:

The doctrinal things about Catholicism that made it not worth it for me to struggle in the Catholic Church were related to a lot of issues surrounding misogyny. I found their position on birth control indefensible. In the way it predictably kept women in a position of hopeless dependency. ... I chose a profession that was strongly male dominated. I didn’t need that crap in Church as well. I think the structure of the priesthood is as much a problem in refusing priests to marry as not allowing women to be priests. ... It seems to be premised on a view that contact with women is distracting and unholy.

Katherine clearly thinks the institutional Church is inherently sexist. When I asked her if she would remain a Catholic if she found a parish with a more progressive view of women’s leadership, she explained:

I don’t know where you go except out of the Church in some way. ... It would take God striking dead all of the College of Cardinals before we get any structural change that would be of any significance.
Although very different from Margaret ideologically in stressing that the Church would have to change structurally and doctrinally for her to accept an identity as a Catholic, Katherine was like Margaret in that she thinks there is only one option for being a Catholic. Either an individual participates fully in the doctrines of the Church or she is not a Catholic. Since she believes changes to Catholic structures and institutions are unlikely, Katherine sees no option except to leave.

**Personally Negotiated Identity Accounts**

There is another group of women for whom disagreements with central Catholic doctrines are also a dominant concern. Unlike women who choose exit from the Church, however, this group negotiates complete identities as Catholics in the midst of tension with Catholic doctrine.

Like women who agree with the doctrines of the Church, dissatisfied women also told me that having an identity as a Catholic is centrally important to their lives. The surprising part is how the content of personal identity accounts differed from those of the traditional women. It is significant that dissatisfied women do not believe identities are ascribed or fixed. For them, being a Catholic is not primarily about upholding the doctrinal affiliation into which one is born or having allegiance to an institutional Church. It is something one becomes and negotiates to fit her life. For example, Rebecca, in her early forties, is a stay-at-home mother and attends a parish in a small academic community. She told me that she disagreed with several central doctrines in the Church, but had freedom to choose the doctrines in which she wanted to believe.

Because a lot of these doctrines are man-made. ... If I think of what the basics are. If I say that I believe in God, what are the basics? God is love. How you treat other people matters. How you live your life matters. Those are the things that I agree with. I think we should treat other people with compassion. I like to treat other people how I want to be treated. The basic things ... I am in agreement with. The things like, priests can’t be married. Well, they were married for a long time. And then, something happened. ... That’s a man-made thing. I don’t really feel dissonance about that.

Rebecca believes she has agency in deciding which doctrines of Catholicism she will take and which she will leave when forming her idea of what it means to be Catholic. Such accounts confirm and extend to the area of religious identity formation the recent feminist theories that view gender identity as a negotiated rather than a fixed construct (Read and Bartkowski 2000).

**Meaning**

Among the women who think that identities as Catholics are individually negotiated, two distinct aspects of identity accounts emerged from analyses of these data. Women most often mentioned that finding “meaning” in Catholicism and in their local parishes is a significant part of being a Catholic. Among both the women who worked for their parishes in paid positions and those who were volunteers, meaningful work was described as that which “made a difference,” “helped others understand the Catholic faith better,” “realize there are different approaches to Catholicism,” or “build community with those who are part of a common tradition or share common gender egalitarian values.” Meaning is particularly important for this group of women when it is juxtaposed with current or previous employment outside the
church. These women fully acknowledge their disagreements with Catholic doctrines yet they remain loyal, in part because they are able to do meaningful service in the midst of their particular Catholic community, work that is especially significant in comparison to secular work.

Beth attends a congregation in a small academic town and is in her mid-forties. She has serious disagreements with Catholic doctrines about the place of women in the Church. Beth believes the Church should allow women in all leadership roles, including the priesthood. She also works over fifty hours a week as a pastoral associate for her parish, work that involves doing pastoral counseling, giving occasional homilies during Sunday services, directing parish programs and doing the Mass (Wallace 1992). I asked her why, when she could find other jobs that might provide more gender equality than her parish work, she stays in her role as a pastoral associate. Beth answered by talking about the meaning she finds:

You probably have a sense of the role of women in the Church and I wasn’t sure if there was one. [Yet] I found that I went from ten to forty or fifty hours a week and I was exhausted and I said: “I am in love with this work.”

It is clear from this quote that Beth had initial misgivings about working full-time for her parish because of limits to women’s leadership in the Church. However, after working for her parish, Beth said she fell “in love with this work.”

Josephine also finds meaning through the work she does in her local parish. Josephine and Beth are not in similar structural locations. In her mid-forties, Josephine lives in a more impoverished community than Beth and works for the national park service in her area. She compared her experience in her current parish to that in previous parishes. Josephine told me that she finds in her parish a place where “my daughter can be fully involved and my own work as a lay minister is valued.”

Sarah is the director of education at a suburban parish, a paid position that involves directing programs that teach Church doctrine to both children and adults. Sarah says she finds meaning in her work as a director particularly because she is able to help girls come to understand important pieces of women’s history:

Women’s rights are really important to me. And being able to vote is really important to me and I think it is important for girls to know the background.

According to Beth, Josephine, and Sarah, part of the reason that they remain so involved in their specific parishes and in the broader Church is because they find meaning. In the case of Sarah and Beth, meaning comes through paid work for the parish and in the case of Josephine, through her volunteer labor. This finding expands understanding about the relationship of meaning to religious loyalty and identity. Even women who are deeply dissatisfied with patriarchal religious doctrine have the ability to retain personal identities as religious people if they see the potential to incorporate “meaning” as a central part of these identities.

**Voice**

Albert Hirschman’s (1970) organizational theory of exit, voice, and loyalty provides theoretical insight to why women who desire core changes in Catholic doctrines might remain committed to the Catholic Church. He explains that members often remain loyal when they
Different Identity Accounts

disagree with the policies of an organization if that organization provides them with the opportunity to bring change. Hirschman calls this belief in one’s ability to make changes possessing “voice” (Hirschman 1970). Here I extend this idea to the realm of identity construction.

Women who were dissatisfied with core Catholic doctrines, and who thought that they could personally negotiate identities as Catholics, often included having a “voice” in what happened in their parish and the potential to bring changes to the broader Church as part of their account of Catholic identity. Seeing religious identity as connected to having voice in the Church and in a local parish figured prominently in keeping dissatisfied women loyal to Catholicism, even in an institutional Church they saw as officially limiting their role. Voice for these women referred to believing that they had the ability to make changes at the local and institutional levels of the Church. For example, Sarah said that she was troubled by the Church’s stance towards women in leadership and towards gay and lesbian Catholics. She explained that in her parish she is vocal about her opinions and believes her voice will eventually be part of bringing changes.

People know that I am a ‘gay-friendly’ person. You can just look at my office. And they know that I am very ‘warm and welcoming’ to that. We also give phone numbers out to people. Kids ask questions. I have had some parents come to me about their children. . . There is a need out there and I don’t think that people know that the Church is ready to meet that need. They still think that it is bad to be gay if you are a Catholic. And all those myths behind that. It’s going to take an awful long time still for that to go away.

Sarah remains in the Church largely because she is actively working towards change in her congregation and she hopes—although it may be slow—in the larger institutions of the Catholic Church.

Debbie is the director of religious education in a parish located in a small academic town. She believes that there should be women priests and that women more generally should be given increased opportunities to lead. Even though she realizes that her opportunities for leadership within the Catholic Church are limited, she remains a Catholic to make changes in her own parish. She negotiates voice through the changes she believes she is making at the local level:

And I think if we keep doing what we are doing, with preaching. I think that will influence people. When they enjoy hearing women preach, and they think they are faithfully proclaiming the Word, then other things will naturally go from there.

Debbie thinks she is bringing changes through the kind of work she does as the director of religious education, specifically through her preaching.

In exercising voice at the local level, women with disagreements engage in a form of protest inside institutions, what Mary Katzenstein has defined as simultaneously remaining committed to and participating in an institution while objecting to certain institutional rules (Katzenstein 1998). According to Beth, mentioned above,

[Being Catholic] is who I am. I am in love with it. I am here as much as anyone else. I can not imagine being anywhere else. There is faith that you can find here. I came into the Church knowing about the pain and the prejudice. . .I think I can effect change. If I didn’t think that, I wouldn’t stay.
Earlier in our discussion, Beth told me that she thinks the Catholic Church should allow women to be priests and should be more accepting of gays and lesbians in Church leadership. Beth also believes her opinions are as important as those of other Church members and leaders and that she has the ability to make changes. She remarked, "I am here as much as anyone else." As evidence of the significant link between identity construction and "voice" Beth said she would not remain a Catholic if she did not believe she could make changes.

These excerpts show that, in contrast to other research, dissatisfied women do not always maintain separate identities between church and other life spheres (Manning 1999). Their ability to retain loyalty can actually be found through expressing rather than suppressing their disagreements. These examples also broaden understanding of the relationship between personal identities and institutional change. Because having a "voice" is central to their account of what it means to be a Catholic, these women may become part of larger collectives with those who share similar personal identities. Through changes to local parishes, such collectives may actually make a difference in changing the Church.

CONCLUSION

I have shown here that women who exit the Church and women who remain involved yet are dissatisfied may have very different ways of constructing Catholic identities. It is surprising that the women who had a more traditional view of Catholicism as well as women who exit Catholicism actually had similar ways of constructing Catholic identities. Both groups essentially believed that to be Catholic meant following all the Church teachings. However, it is not just traditional women who remain active Catholics, but also women who are able to negotiate what it means to be Catholic with gender egalitarianism and make finding meaning and having a voice a central part of Catholic identity.

In particular, analyzing personal identity accounts increases understanding of involvement among Catholic women who are dissatisfied. Finding meaning and voice in a local parish may not be necessary for dissatisfied women to remain affiliated, but might be necessary to justify the kind of significant commitment to parish activities and leadership among the women with whom I spoke. I found here that how women viewed their own agency in creating identity—whether or not they believe they have the option of choosing the content of Catholic identity—is an important predictor of loyalty. Those who think they have more agency in determining what it means to be Catholic are able to remain loyal in the midst of disagreement with doctrines about the place of women in the Church. This agency translates into very specific strategies of action. These same women are trying to make changes in their local parishes.

The findings presented here are limited in their generalizeability by several factors. My respondents were not randomly drawn from the population of all US Catholic women or even the entire population of women within the parishes I studied. In addition, the parishes were all located in Upstate New York. Future studies should take the importance of geographic location and diocesan context into consideration when studying the various identities that Catholic women develop. These parishes might have been different if they were located in a different geographic region, one that was politically more conservative or more liberal, for example.

However, this interview data is valuable in its ability to uncover the actual meaning of religious identities for this group of Catholic women. Those who do surveys of religious identity are often constrained by their methodology into seeing religious identities as fixed,
boxed concepts. Other sociologists of religion have interrogated this idea, seeing religious identities as more fluid. The findings presented here expand both of these approaches by showing the value of bringing into question the idea of religious identities as either/or categories and identities as completely fluid. These findings show that some women view Catholic identities as fixed constructs and others view such identities as more fluid and negotiated. They indicate more broadly that researchers should be concerned about understanding the particular conditions under which individuals think of identities as fixed and the conditions under which people give accounts of religious identities as negotiated.

These findings about identity constructs presented here also have implications for how scholars should understand the relationship between identity accounts and social change. Most research on change within the Catholic Church has focused on the characteristics of collectives or the structural conditions that lead to changes in institutions (Seidler and Meyer 1989; Wilde 2004). Less work focuses on the accounts that individuals give for the meaning of being Catholic and how these accounts might relate to membership in social change organizations. Future research ought to link, in particular, the differing accounts of women who are dissatisfied to changes in local parishes. For example, does a higher percentage of women who believe they have "voice" in a parish lead to an actual increase in the leadership possibilities for women in that parish? Focusing mainly on organizations that are trying to bring changes to Catholic institutions, pro-change organizations, as at the locus of institutional change (Dillon 1999; Loseke and Cavendish 2001) may overlook how individual women are already bringing changes to local parishes. I hypothesize that women who think of Catholic identities as negotiated and believe in their own agency to choose a religious identity will have more potential to bring changes to the Catholic Church by effecting change through local parishes when compared to women who think Catholic identities are fixed, believing the most significant changes occur only at the institutional level of the Catholic Church.

Finally, these findings have implications for connecting the study of identity constructs to larger issues of change within traditional religion. It is important that some dissatisfied women may find ways to maintain loyalty rather than exit religious organizations. Given the right conditions—when there are groups of women who have meaning and voice in a religious organization—those who have identities that are at odds with the dominant ones of their organization may use these identities as a resource to form collectives and coalitions with like-minded others. These coalitions may eventually lead to changes within the context of local congregations rather than putting primary changes in pro-change organizations or leaving congregations all together.

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NOTES

1 When I refer to the "institutions of the Catholic Church," I mean the Vatican level of the Catholic Church and doctrines of Catholicism. This definition of institutions would also cover specific policies or legal rules, such as workplace family leave laws.


See (Lamont 1992), in particular, pp. 5-8, and (Wuthnow 1991), pp. 49-51, who both discuss identity in this way.

See (Mann and Kelley 1997) for a review of approaches to identity negotiation that stress the agency of women in determining their own identities.

The names of all the parishes and individuals I discuss in this paper have been changed.

Three of the female respondents were women religious (sisters). I interviewed these women because they were in key leadership positions in their parish. During the interview, however, I asked them primarily about the lives of women in their parish who were not officially part of religious orders.

While I recognize that women religious are officially lay members of the Church, I use the term "lay women" to refer to those who are not part of religious orders (Wittberg 1994). The women also varied in whether or not they identified as feminists (Winter, Lummis, and Stokes 1994).

Although technically all work, paid and un-paid, is considered service to the church, in this paper I use the term "work" to refer to a full or part-time paid position in the church. I use the term "service" to describe volunteer, non-paid labor for a parish or the broader Church. These are not exact categories, as many of the women who worked part-time in a paid position were also involved in non-paid service to the parish outside of their official paid position. I try to denote these inconsistencies wherever possible.

Some sociologists believe researchers have an obligation to explain their rationale for revealing or not revealing their identities (Kreiger 1991; Pierce 1995). Some choose to emphasize aspects of their own history to create common ground with those among whom they are conducting research (Fobes 2001). Others, for equally good reasons, stress the importance of withholding facets of their identity. My choice had advantages and disadvantages. Because, when asked, I told respondents that I was not a member of any of these parishes and was not a Catholic, respondents felt they had to explain the inner-workings of the parish more carefully. Further, because I was not an actual member of the parish, I perceived many respondents to actually feel more comfortable in telling me about their experiences.

See (Collins 2000) p. 68-69 for a further explanation of "either/or" dichotomies.

REFERENCES


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