Power Relations Influencing Catholic Religious Sisters' Identity Construction: A Study of Intersubjective Exchange in Religious Community Living

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Abstract

Catholic religious sisters live community life in which they encounter communal relationship with each other, intertwined with power relations and dominance. The religious community context provides the sisters with on-going dialogical relationships laden with the discourse of religious obedience and practices associated with diverse status of being 'superior/formator', 'senior/older sister', 'final professed' or 'temporary professed sister'. Within this discourse and practice of the vow of religious obedience, superiors/formators and senior/older sisters hold the power to instruct others on what to do. Thus, each of these statuses influences the sisters' voices whereby some voices dominate others. Using 18 sisters' self-narratives (based on a doctoral thesis) collected from two religious congregations in Nigeria this paper argues that the dominated voices negotiate their sense of identity either as resistant or submissive. Based on the I-positions dynamism of appropriation or rejection of positions, these sisters negotiate their self-identity either by subjugating their own voice, in which case they allow their voice to be silent or by presenting themselves as resistant, in that they oppose the voices that position them into subordinate or subservient roles. As a consequence the sisters' construction of identity manifests itself in tension, in which the polar opposite status of superior/formator, and final professed sister dominates the voice of other sisters.

Keywords: Catholic religious sisters, identity, I-positions, religious obedience, resistance, submissive

1. Introduction

The construction of identity is a process that is ongoing and shaped by different identity markers including gender, ethnicity, religion and interpersonal relationships (Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). Accordingly, Catholic religious sisters, who are a cohort of women called by God to commit their entire lives to the service of God and humanity, in their narrative interviews indicated that one of the key factors influencing their performance of identity is interpersonal relationship within the religious community.

This paper draws from a doctoral thesis which focused on identity construction of Roman Catholic religious sisters within the context of living religious life in the Church and in the wider Nigerian society. The sample population is made of 18 sisters from two religious congregations in Nigeria. This sample population of 18 participants represent different categories of sisters that live religious life such as temporary professed sisters and final professed sisters including leaders who are charged with the responsibility of taking care of others. It is important to note that among these final professed sisters are some sisters who based on their years of membership designate themselves as senior/older sisters. Conversely, this hierarchization of senior/older sisters is not an ideal of religious life rather could be a mark of respect wherein such show of respect is expected to go with responsibility of reciprocity. That means that the senior/older sisters in turn return mutual respect to others. The inclusion of these various categories of sisters as participants acted as triangulation of sample aimed at reaching information rich cases (voices), affirming the reliability (trustworthiness) of the findings (Patton, 1990).

The research tool used was narrative interviews, wherein thematic analysis were used to present the multiplicity of I-positions that the sisters take up in their construction of identity. The concept of I-position comes from Dialogical Self

theoretical framework signifying how individuals, in the process of identity construction, present 'who they are' based on internal (personal) and external (others) voices (perception) (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans & Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). Successively, these I-positions were reflective of personal positions taken indicating how each sister constructs 'who I am' based on her personal agency revealing how she understands self and the meaning she makes out of that understanding, including how others position her. Interestingly, some sisters' I-positions present a couple of rejected I-positions, which nonetheless, form part of how others construct them, therefore, are presented as integral aspects of their personal/religious identity (Gregg, 1991). The rejected I-position could best be understood as those positions which a sister do not consider as a description of 'who she is' yet that is how the other sees her; therefore, she disowns the position though the position forms part of her self-understanding, particularly in the external realm of 'who she is'.

Accordingly, the sisters' I-positions present instances of conflict revealing the prevalence of power relations they encounter in their day-to-day relationships with one another. In this context, power relations reflect the experiences of struggles and compromises the sisters encounter in their daily relationships with one another in the context of living religious life, as the norms and up-date of religious life offer leaders (superiors/formators) the privilege of making decision for and on behalf of others (PC #14)[1]. Consequently, the sisters are invited by their norms of religious obedience to abide by whatever the leader instructs based on the ideal understanding that the leader speaks on behalf of God (Can: 212; 573-746). As a result, the leader's voice (including senior sisters) is influential wherein it has the power to dominate other voices. As it were, the sisters' narratives portray instances of dilemmas of identity construction based on their conformity or resistance to the demands of being temporary or final professed including position of being a leader (superior/formation). In this regard, the sisters' narratives present the tension existing between the polar opposite of being a leader (superior/formator) versus final or temporal professed; being older/senior sister and final professed versus being a temporary professed sister. Focusing on the reality of the findings, this paper makes some recommendations toward revisiting the sisters' understanding of religious obedience as way of minimizing the tension that comes from its observance and practice.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the research is interdisciplinary including theology of religious life which provides contextual information regarding who Catholic religious sisters are, as well as insight towards understanding the discourse of religious obedience. Dialogical Self Theory serves as the conceptual framework through which the sisters' multiple I-positions are examined and interpreted.

1.1.1 Theology of Religious Life

Religious sisters live a form of consecrated life within the Catholic Church. This life form is marked by consecration of life of the faithful, in this context women, who feel called by the Spirit to devote their entire life totally to God and to the service of others (PC #1). In doing so, the sisters live in community and are bonded to God through the evangelical counsels (vows) of consecrated celibacy (chastity), poverty and obedience (PC #1, 2). The primary identity of every religious is modelled on the example of Christ as presented in the Gospels. In this way, the religious replicate the life of Christ in terms of developing an intimate relationship with God and others, whereby the act of living community life is an integral part of their personal and religious identity (CICLSAL, 2007, 2008; PC #15). The religious community life, therefore, provides the centre for "interrelatedness" through which the religious is called to live her life (O'Murchu, 1998, p.77).

In other words, it is the religious communities that provide the context through which every religious sister lives out her commitment. In this sense, the community equally provides the background experience and instruction for personal/religious identity construction. As a result, the religious community is the bedrock through which the religious develops and negotiates her sense of person. No religious lives in isolation from the community (GS #12).[2] In this perspective, the religious community is a "powerful determinant of behavior and decision" (Schneiders, 2000, p.60). Consequently, interpersonal relationship within the religious community is pertinent in the process of religious sisters' identity construction.

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[1] All use of PC refers to *Perfectae Caritatis, a document of the Second Vatican Council on Up-to-date Renewal of Religious life* found in A. Flannery (Ed.). (1975). Vatican Council II: The Counciliar and post Counciliar documents. New Delhi: St Pauls.

[2] All use of GS refers to Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World-Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, a document of the Second Vatican Council.

However, to understand the Catholic religious life means appreciating the essence of the Evangelical Counsels, which is espoused in the three vows that the sisters commit themselves to. These are vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. In the view of the Church the three vows are interwoven and stand out as identity markers for each sister who commits herself to radical identification with the life style of Jesus Christ in line with the gospel truth and constitutions of their religious congregations. But, in this paper, the vow of religious obedience is given prominent attention based on the influence the sisters' narratives accord to its impact in their process of identity construction. Theologically, the Church uses the discourse of imitation of Christ who was obedient unto death to describe the religious who vows obedience (PC # 14; cf. Phil 2:8). Hence, Vatican II's norm of religious obedience emphasises:

> *By their profession of obedience, religious offer the full dedication of their own wills as a sacrifice of themselves to God, and by this means they are united more permanently and securely with God's saving will. After the example of Jesus Christ, who came to do his Father's will (cf. Jn. 4:34; 5:30; Heb. 10:7; Ps. 39:9) and "who taking the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:7) learned obedience through what he suffered (cf. Heb. 10:8), religious moved by the Holy Spirit subject themselves in faith to those who hold God's place, their superiors. Through them they are led to serve their brothers [sisters] in Christ…Religious, therefore, in the spirit of faith and love for the divine will should humbly obey their superiors according to their rules and constitutions (PC #14).*

According to the above quote a sister who vows obedience does so as an act of loving desire to do God's will as Jesus did. On the one hand, a sister is expected to discern God's will in collaboration with her religious leader (superior/formator); on the other hand she is equally expected to perceive her leader as God's representative. She, therefore, ought to comply with what the leader says. This understanding of religious obedience greatly informs how the sisters whose voices are presented in this paper construct both personal/religious identity. In this context, the discourse of religious obedience proffers further understanding regarding the struggles and compromises the sisters encounter in their relationship with one another, with particular reference to leaders who are conferred with the responsibility of making decision on behalf of others. The concern focuses on whether these leaders elicit the cooperation of the sisters through collaboration/dialogue or total compliance in carrying out instructions given (Can. 619; CICLSAL, 2008; Chittister, 1995; Crosby, 2005; PC #14; Schneiders, 2011). Therefore, the discourse of religious obedience facilitates the understanding of the sisters' identity construction based on their lived experience of relationship with one another, and its demands.

1.1.2 Dialogical Self Theory

Dialogical Self Theory conceives identity as the product of dialogue of a multiplicity of I-positions (Hermans, 2003; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). The expression I-positions refer to the different ways people understand 'who they are' as well as 'are becoming' based on internal and external voices. From this perspective, it is assumed that I-positions emerge from dialogical relationships within the self (internal) and between relationships with others (external). Therefore, people construct identity using numerous I-positions based on how they view themselves and how others view them. These I-positions facilitates understanding of the sisters' identity construction based on the multiplicity of voices they use to present 'who they are', as well as 'who they are becoming'.

Theoretically, it is assumed that the individual's I-positions could reflect contradictions, oppositions and differences as is found in the wider society in which the self is located (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). What this means is that a sister's I-position could portray differences in opinion regarding how she perceives 'who she is' and how others perceive her. Sometimes these differences reflects power relations indicating how some voices dominate others (Hermans, 2001a, b, 2003; Linell, 1990). Whenever, a voice is dominated; that voice is regarded as subordinate (subservient). In some dialogical relationships wherein domination of voices occur, it portrays instances of power-relations reflecting how the dominated voice is smothered, leading to construction of identity in a field of tension (Hermans, 2001a, 2003 & Sampson, 1993).

Ideally, the individual nonetheless, is perceived as having the capacity of integrating mutual and opposing voices/positions into the construction of a coherent sense of 'who I am' (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; McAdams, 2001; Raggatt, 2006). It means that the individual has the ability to dialogue as well as negotiate with the different voices whilst constructing identity, reflecting what Gregg (1991) calls 'identity-in-difference'. In this context, the sister either use self-consultation or self-persuasion to negotiate her construction of identity (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). The act of self-consultation reflects instances where the individual dialogues with itself on what is the right course of action (position) to take. This act of self-consultation has links with self-persuasion/agreement, wherein the individual resolutely decide to hold on to personal convictions in spite of being aware of the opposition encountered. On this basis, the individual is able to harmonize the different voices/positions toward constructing a coherent sense of self. In some cases too, the sister might simply construct identity through meta-position, meaning that the sister focuses on personal relationship with God as the only facilitating factor

influencing her perception of self.   In this perspective, the I-positions as proposed by dialogical self theory helps a great deal in understanding the sisters' narratives as presented in this paper based on the positions (voices) they accept or reject; bearing in mind that both accepted positions and rejected positions are integral parts of 'who they are', and 'who they are becoming' within the context of living religious life. Thus, sisters construct their identity with a multiplicity of I-positions.

2. Empirical Literature Review: Religious Community and Identity Construction

Catholic religious community has been identified as "*Schola Amoris*" (a school of love) that facilitates human growth (CICLSAL, 2007). The community is expected to provide quality interpersonal relationships empowering its members to create meaning in life. As such, Mangion (2007) posits that the two formal stages of religious formation (training) of postulancy and novitiate are the 'Good Strong Foundations' through which the sisters are prepared for spiritual, vocational and communal aspects of religious life. She postulates that at this stage the "solid foundations of virtues" (p.409) of religious life are laid: virtues such as the meaning of poverty, chastity and obedience. Furthermore, she points out that the novices are specifically trained to be obedient and docile leading them "to be indifferent to whatever employment are (sic) given them, always to prefer the work which obedience puts into their hands as a sign of humility" (p.410). In this regard, formation programmes are tailored to develop a sense of submissiveness among the novices, a passivity of spirit of belonging to a religious family.

The theme of religious obedience raises the question: to whom is/are novice/s supposed to be obedient? In Mangion's discourse, obedience required of the novices was meant to be channelled toward the congregation by obeying the authority figures. In other words, obedience to the congregation is constructed as obedience to God. She argues that such obedience is an expression of "self-abnegation" which serves as a sign of 'privation and difficulty that must be withstood in order to become a 'good nun' (p.410). This may effectively mean that the sisters are invited to subjugate their views and interests. But according to Catholic Cannon law (212), when obedience to the congregation explicitly or implicitly jeopardises God's will, the sister should elect to do God's will. That means the sister has the obligation to do God's will based on the argument that all authority proceeds from God; therefore, no level of authority can ever properly subjugate God's voice (Can. 573–746). Whenever the use of authority risks obedience to God, anyone has the right to resist (Can. 212; Berchmans, 2005). In such situations, resistance is a virtue.

Furthermore, Mangion (2007) argues that "dutiful performance of rigorous manual labour" is an essential element of obedience, which if missing is considered a sign of lack of vocation to religious life (p.406). If this be the aim of religious formation then it can be argued that the formation programme does not only orient the novices to imbibe an identity of submissiveness, but also distracts them from on-going development of their personal/religious identity. In this way, religious formation reflects institutional positioning that influences the sisters' behaviour.

Stuber (2000) conducted a qualitative study with a Catholic religious community in the USA in an attempt to understand how participation in the religious community shaped the individual life of the sisters. She used a dialogic retrospection approach, which she explains as a process where participants are interviewed, and later they review the analysis of data and provide feedback for the researcher. In analysing the findings, Stuber reported that the participants presented themselves as being "strongly shaped" (2000, p.515) by the three-year formation programme, in which they were trained, moulded and educated in the life of the religious community. She argues that on the basis of this formation process the participants position themselves as identifying with the religious community's values, such as self-giving, care, hospitality, love of work and family spirit. She stated that these values are characteristics of the community's fundamental values which were lived by their founding father and mother.

Similarly, a study conducted by Gallivan (1994) focusing on maintenance of adult identity in the context of community living reported that community living is of central importance to sisters' identity construction. She drew her sample from five different congregations in the USA, using 10 sisters who have lived religious life for at least 10 years. These sisters were interviewed to explore how they saw themselves before they entered religious life and how they perceived themselves at the time of the study. All the participants in Gallivan's study described themselves as idealistic at the time of their entry into religious life. At the time of the study the participants position themselves as content, aware of their strengths, and aware of the need for further growth in the newly acquired state of life. In the analysis, Gallivan reported that the participants describe their relationship with their religious congregation, including individual communities, as being of central importance in their lives. This emphasises that the religious community is an environment in which the sisters' sense of self is formed and in which they are socialised through continuous formation to become who they ought to be. In describing this process, Gallivan noted that religious life acts as a social institution, and like any social organisation holds power in relation to an individual's identity formation.

Another study conducted by Van Deusen (2009) examined factors influencing happiness in women religious in one religious order in the USA. The researcher used a random sampling and a semi-structured interview to invite the

participants to narrate their stories of religious life. The study aimed at examining the participants' level of happiness, communal living, ministries and ministry preferences. The results showed that the participants who reported happiness were those working in a variety of ministries. The participants also reported that religious communities provided them with supportive relationships which enhanced their performance of identity. However, this study did not explore the nature of these supportive relationships, thus it is not specific what these relationships are.

That notwithstanding, there are some autobiographies which express that often, experience of communal life does not enhance sisters' position as agents of their own self-construction. For example, Armstrong (2005) writing her autobiography presented her experiences in a Catholic religious community where the formation processes devalued her worth as a human person:

> *Our training had been an initiation. We too had been segregated from the world, deprived of normal affection… The training was designed to make us wholly self-reliant, so that we no longer needed human love or approval… Of course we were not buried alive in a tomb or anything of that sort, but we were constantly undermined, belittled, publicly castigated, or ordered to do things that were patently absurd (p.45).*

Based on the above quote it is clear that Armstrong's description of formation within the religious community is humiliating which she describes as making her "become less than human" (p.46). The experience she presented was such that it paved the space for self-abnegation as was argued by Mangion (2007). Armstrong went further to say that formation training twisted to the negative her capacity to love, in that she began to find it difficult to receive and return love:

> *The training seemed to have worked… My capacity for affection had either atrophied or been so badly damaged that it could not function normally. I felt frozen and could see what people meant when they said that their heart had turned to stone…I had become a person who could not love and who seemed incapable of reaching out to others. Whether I like it or not, I was now a garden enclosed, a well sealed up (p.44).*

Although Armstrong's experience is subjective but it seems to resonates with current observation that within women religious community the superiors, under the discourse of the vow of obedience subjugate others into submissive positions, particularly young sisters who have no voice of their own (Okure 2009, 2010). This kind of situation has been described as lacking the communal identity of 'right-in-relationship' which embodies the sincere acknowledgement that the other needs to be treated with dignity; according to the Church's teaching of giving each other pride of place (cf. Rom 12:10; PC #15)(Okure, 2010; O'Murchu, 1998).

Based on this premise, some studies had identified that religious community relationship has produced identity of anger or a sense of emptiness among its members. One of such studies is Malone's (1991a, b) qualitative study, that invited 21 participants from an international congregation in USA, Central America and Canada, focusing on addressing the issue of anger and conflict and the meaning the sisters give to these terms. All the participants were well educated, holding at least one degree.

Although the sisters in this study reported that they have experienced conflict in their relationships with their peers (including others in the community and those in authorities) they presented themselves as suppressing their own voice, which means subjugating their own interests. The researcher interpreted this result to mean that the sisters have internalised the image of 'the good sister' whereby they constructed conflict as an inappropriate behaviour/emotion that sisters should not experience, especially with regard to interpersonal relationships. Based on their governance structure the participants indicated that authority figures are persons who must be obeyed, reflecting the fact that peace must be maintained at all cost. There were some participants who acknowledged that they experience emotions such as hurt, frustration and fear which they resolved by using strategies such as confrontation, avoidance, cynicism, explosion, and third party mediation.

The results also revealed that the young sisters in the study reported that they are constrained by the fear of being labelled troublemakers or being seen as difficult to deal with by authority in their congregation to subjugate their voice of anger. According to Malone, the inability of the sisters to express anger emerged from the notion of 'good sisters' which she interpreted to mean that the sisters have been socialised in their training not to express anger.

Another study conducted by Souci, Kamara, Nyawira, and Gerbalet's (1998) carried out among 278 young Kenyan religious (a mixed group comprising of men and women, a total of 134 Africans and 144 participants from international congregations), among other things, found that young African religious do not feel at home in religious communities. In particular, they found that the young religious do not feel at home in religious communities in connection to personal interaction with others in the community. In explaining the result, they posited that young religious feel like 'strangers'

in their own communities because sometimes no one cares about them, which is contrary to relational situations in their family-of-origin, where everybody at home gives time and attention to others and their concerns. They express that in a religious community most people appear to be too busy to spend time with their brothers and sisters. They argued that this lack of care impacts on African religious performance of cultural and religious identity which by extension is part of his/her identity.

In addition, the researchers reported that another issue associated with 'at homeness' of the young religious focused on the vows, particularly the vow of obedience, which they found to be a huge challenge, particularly when there is no constructive dialogue or the dialogue remains dialogue without change. They emphasise that superiors and/or formators under the discourse of religious obedience do not respect others but rather treat others as children, who must obey all instructions given. This kind of obedience, the researchers pointed out is contrary to African culture where the young are expected to respect the elders or authority figures but in turn the young expect the elders to respect and listen to them. Consequently, the researchers reported that the structure of religious communities seemed "designed to make adults to keep acting like children" (p.28). They stated that this happens when community superiors want to know what is happening at all times. In this regard, they concluded that the freedom to move and grow is lacking and equate community life to "boarding school for older people" crowded with rules and regulations. On the whole, such argument makes religious life appear as a domineering environment that hinders its members' process of identity construction. And if religious life by any chance assumes the position of a domineering environment then it defeats the popular definition of it as a school of love that facilitates its members' identity construction. Following such argument this paper hopes to interrogate what kind of influence emerges from religious life, particularly within African context and how does it impact on its members' process of identity construction.

3. Research Question

The key research question is: How do Catholic religious sisters in the context of living religious life construct identity? Based on this broad question, the sisters' presentation of power relations embedded in their lived reality of religious life as an experience that influence their construction of identity is addressed in this paper. Hence this paper examines Catholic religious sisters' identity construction in relation to their intersubjective experiences within religious community living.

4. Method

This is a qualitative interpretive research study which aims at capturing the participants' in-depth wealth of experience (Riessman, 2008; Ulin et al., 2002). The choice for interpretive approach is governed by the assumption that the participants' act of meaning-making regarding 'who they are' and 'who they are becoming' is a subjective experience (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999). Thus, the participants are considered to be in the best position to voice their narrative of religious identity construction (Baylin, 2002; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). As such it uses narrative interviews to invite the participants to tell their own stories of living religious life with the aim of examining the participants' act of self-construction from their own point of view (Babbie & Mouton, 2005).

4.1 Study Sample

The sampling technique employed in this study was purposive, restricted to Roman Catholic religious sisters in Nigeria. It was purposive because there is a predefined group of participants who are the specific focus of this study (Patton, 2006; Trochim, 2006). The sampling was drawn from two religious congregations: Daughters of Divine Love (DDL) and Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ). DDL is a diocesan congregation founded in 1969. Diocesan congregation means that its foundation began in Nigeria though membership has spread to include sisters from other nations and it is recognized by the Vatican, thus, has pontifical status. SHCJ is an international congregation whose foundation started in England in 1846 and has spread to America and Africa.

From the two congregations, three categories of sisters were invited to participate as shown in the Table below.

Table 1. Demographic table describing characteristics of the participants

Participants	DDL	SHCJ	Participants' Age
Temporary professed	3	3	30-35
Final professed	3	3	30-50
Leaders: (superiors/formators)	3	3	35-60

This selection takes into consideration the different categories of sisters who live religious life in order to represent different voices, which act as information-rich cases affirming the validity and reliability of the narratives (Patton, 1990). The temporary professed are young sisters who do not have permanent membership, while the final professed and leaders are permanent members of religious life. They were drawn from across Nigeria ranging from Abuja, Bauchi,

Enugu, Jos, Lagos and Otukpo representing different geographical locations and participation was voluntary.

4.2 Data Collection

An in-depth open-ended (semi-structured) narrative interview was used to collect data (Riessman, 2008; Silverman, 2005). The choice to use a narrative interview was primarily governed by the qualitative nature of the study and was further informed by the theoretical framework of dialogical self which strongly affirms that identity and self are narratively configured (Hermans, 2001b, 2003; Hermans, Kempen & van Loop, 1992; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). This is in line with recent developments in psychology proposing the self be studied from the perspective of 'narrative' or 'story' (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Crossley, 2000; Riessman, 2008; Sarbin, 1986).

4.3 Data Analysis

The 18 participants' interview narratives constituted the data set used for this research analysis. Thematic analysis was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with the aim of interpreting and deconstructing the participants' I-positions reflecting the sense they make out of their lived experiences of religious community life (Boyatzis, 1998; Ulin et al., 2002).

Reflexivity – Two of the authors are religious sisters, researchers with both an insider's and outsiders voice (Pillow, 2003). This has both merits and demerits. From the merit point of view it allowed for easy access with the gatekeepers and also facilitated the position of co-construction as we could easily identify with some of the issues the participants presented (Riessman, 2008). On the demerit side, subjective positioning could influence the data collected (Heron, 2005) but this was addressed by keeping a research journal which enable the two authors to record issues arising from subjective point of view, and these issues were discussed with the third author, which helped to ensure that they did not constitute sources of bias.

5. Findings and Discussion

The major dilemmas to the sisters' (participants) identity arise from issues surrounding religious obedience within the context of living religious life. A good number of the participants reported that the main challenge they encounter emerges from interpersonal relationships with their leaders (such as superiors/formators, and senior/older sisters), who subordinate them to the subservient position of a group of people who need to be controlled and directed. In this regard, their narratives revealed instances of power relations leading some of the sisters to construct themselves as constantly fighting the battle of warding off the institutional surveillance channelled through these leaders. But on the other hand a number of the sisters positioned themselves as accepting the status quo of being subordinates, though unhappily. As such, they construct themselves as submissive. The findings and the discussion for this paper is presented in four sub-units representing the sisters' major subjective experiences as follows: religious life as space for status and power relations, construction of self as angry and disappointed, the use of submission and resistance as strategies to deal with interpersonal relationships, particularly with leaders of religious life.

5.1 Religious Life as Space for Status and Power

Many of the sisters experienced religious life as space for rank or class distinctions. This class distinction they presented as a core feature of their lived experience, which they argue is in conflict with the ideals of communion in accord with the Gospel values (CICLSAL, 2007; PC #15; Rom 12:10). A good number of the sisters reported that their experience of religious life constantly involved being reminded of the distinctions between temporary and final professed, formator/superior and others, young and old; with power belonging to the finally professed, particularly the leaders such as superiors/formators and sometimes senior/older sisters. These differences determine whose voice is heard and whose voice is silenced. In this way, the sisters present religious life as surprisingly oppressive, in which case they indicated that they felt undermined. Accordingly, many of the sisters maintained that they feel taken for granted, whereby they reported that their humanness is ridiculed. For example a temporary professed sister expresses her plight as follows:

> One thing I noticed in Religious life is that...When one is temporarily professed, you know, some people can take advantage of you, take you for granted and say all sort of things to you. Some people can come and say one ...rubbish to you and go away with it.

In this text, the emphasis is that temporary professed sisters are not considered worthy of attention and respect, therefore, they share a common plight of being taken advantage of (Armstrong, 2005; Malone, 1991a, b; Okure, 2009; 2010). Hence, "some people" talk to them in a manner that is considered inappropriate. "Some people" here refers to superior including formators, senior/older sisters who talk inappropriately ("say…rubbish to you"). This kind of intersubjective experience portrays how some voices dominate others, reflecting the impact of power relations on the sisters' interpersonal relationships (Hermans, 2003, Sampson, 1993). This kind of relationship foreshadows religious community as a constraining environment that impacts on the sisters' work of identity. Although, the temporary professed sisters report their voices as being silenced and subjugated by those who are leaders, senior/older sisters, the story is not very different from the final professed who are not leaders. According to the sisters' narrative there are

situations where the whole religious community, including final and temporary professed, have been positioned as a group that is malleable. For instance this final professed sister describes how the superior under the disguise of religious obedience coaxes the whole community into subservient positions:

> *...in this house it is only fish we will be eating, no meat and if you are going to eat meat it must be only on Sundays...it's not a health issue but YOU (superior) because you want it: fish others must eat. So it must be eaten at the time you want it to be eaten and the money budget is...meant for the whole community and not for you alone but the fact that ... you are the head or the local leader, so that must come from you. So whether we like it or not, this is what I have said and in many instances, she came across like this, this is how I want it and that's how it should be.*

In this extract, this final professed sister deliberates on how the superior (head or the local leader) has positioned the whole community as subordinate in dictating what must happen (Okure, 2009, 2010; O' Murchu, 1998). The superior declares that the community must eat fish except on Sundays, and no space is given to the community to contribute their own opinion. The superior draws on the discourse of obedience to subject the community to subordination and control (Armstrong, 2005). This sister emphasises that the superior positions herself as having power, "the fact that ...you are the head or the local leader, so that must come from you" (PC # 14). In consideration to status and power difference between the community and the superior, the superior positions the community to "this is how I want it and that's how it should be". In this way, the community's voice is smothered and submerged; they are not given any free space to make contributions to what concerns them.

There exists a dilemma; whereby, on one hand the community is subjected through power and dominance to subjugate their own interest and voice: "So whether we like it or not, this is what I have said ... this is how I want it and that's how it should be" (Malone, 1991a, b). This indicates that a leader must be obeyed at all cost, as mark of being 'good sisters' (Mangion, 2007). On the other hand, on behalf of the community, this sister questions and criticizes "because you want it: fish others must eat". Thus, she uses contradicting and opposing voice in narrating the lived experiences of religious communal life revealing its impact on their development of identity (Gregg, 1991; Hermans, 2003; Raggatt, 2006). This is a shared experience of the community as many sisters have reported that often superiors/formators use their position of power to treat them as puppets. For that reason, one final professed sister says:

> *When we were to buy laptops... she (superior) told the man (supplier) the type of laptop to bring though we have made a choice of...the quality of laptop we wanted to buy...we told the man to bring a smaller printer we can move about but the man brought a different thing and he said, "that was what he was asked to bring...", when we asked who told you (him)? He said, "this sister (superior) that's what she wants"...and he must bring that one.*

Again, this sister used the discourse of subordination to describe how every member of the community was positioned by the superior as subservient members who have no right to contribute meaningfully to what concerns them. Explicitly, the underlying reason for such kind of control is based on the discourse of religious obedience which positions the superior as having the veto power to decide what happens (PC #14). In other words, the superior under the disguise of religious obedience deems it fit to command others on what to do; otherwise these other sisters could be clarified as disobedient sisters who do not follow instructions given (Malone, 1991a, b; Souci et al., 1998).

5.2 Sisters' Construction of Self as Angry and Disappointed in/with Religious Life

Majority of the sisters presented themselves as angry as well as disappointed in/with religious life. The major source of their anger and disappointment emerges from their intersubjective experiences with others (particularly with superiors/formators and senior/older sisters), who they speak of as maltreating them, especially in using the discourse of religious obedience to construct them as subordinates and passive members of the congregation. In response to these experiences the sisters present themselves as angry and disappointed. One final professed sister, who was forcibly removed from office as school principal constructs identity through anger:

> *I was in my office in the school when the phone rang and that was my superior calling... she commanded me to leave the office immediately and get ready for my reposting that another sister is on her way to take over from me. I was angry...what? ... I took it that way... but I was really angry and I avoided the superior...*

This sister's construction of identity reflects 'I-as angry' when she was commanded to leave the office without prior notice. The superior gave her instructions over the telephone and that was quite humiliating. Her exclamatory question "what?" captures her displeasure but under the obligation of religious obedience she conformed to the instruction given by the superior irrespective of her status as final professed sister. This kind of conformity presents her as a 'puppet' who could not dialogue over instructions given (Malone's (1991a, b). This resonates with some of Souci et al., (1998)

participants' voices, wherein they emphasized that within the context of religious life there is no room for dialogue with authority figures over instructions given or dialogue remains fruitless. However, this final professed sister used avoidance as a strategy to negotiate her anger (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010).

Interestingly, her use of avoidance may be paradoxical: on the one hand, it demonstrates the level of anger and yet it may also serve as a way of self-subjugation, which reflects Mangion's (2007) argument that religious life forms its members to develop an attitude of self-abnegation as a mark of being a 'good sister', wherein the self warmly welcomes pain and suffering. In this case, she resolves to avoid the superior in order to avoid expressing her anger yet she is vexed. However, there are some sisters who expressed anger openly because they felt that some of their intersubjective exchanges were defamatory, which explicitly or implicitly threatened to destroy their entire sense of person. In response they displayed their anger in order to sustain a coherent sense of self. For example, this final professed sister (formator) constructs an identity of anger because she felt alienated by the community (represented by the provincial):

> *I could remember when I was asked to move from the community to the hostel. Not that I was up-set because I was to move to the hostel but...would I say the circumstances surrounding that movement. The way it came to me: I was really very angry because the first time I was asked to move I said I'm moving. But later what I heard was that I said I was not moving and when I got that message; my provincial (superior) saying "I heard you said you are not moving", I was really upset, angry and disappointed because I have started making arrangement...and also when I moved a big problem again. That I moved without telling people I was moving. So it was really very-very sad...I felt that I was psychologically damaged, if I could use that expression... All of these made me feel not wanted or say wasting away but I had to hold on to my guts and trust that God knows about me and would see me through and thank God I managed through it.*

This sister presents herself as angry and disappointed based on the treatment she received from the community (superior). Within this space, her identity is that of a person who is not just angry but also alienated, which is conveyed in the use of expressions such as "not wanted", "wasting away" because the community treated her as less than human though she is a leader herself (formator). To account for her anger she argues that she felt "psychologically damaged". This instance of describing herself as psychologically damaged expresses the extent to which her sense of self was dented. But through the use of meta-position, she portrays her focus on God as the only support system she has, through which she was able to cope (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). Hence, she constructed identity with the I-position of 'I-as leaning on God' as means of survival. In a similar way, a temporary professed sister explains that she became angry when her superior tried to intimidate her:

> *...one day after school...at a community meeting it was like you know how they need more hands; see if you can go and help out. I said, "me, sister (superior) I'm not going back there" ...then she tried to explain, I said, "sister both of us are here...you saw what happened...I was there first and I was making them go late...and I left. I mean they were going earlier before I got there and I got there they were closing late...I was not productive so there was no point...you even moved me I didn't just go out, I didn't even request to go, you got fed-up and you sent me away... so, asking me to go back now does not make sense to me" and then we were still talking when she said to me: what if she commands me to go there. I said, "well sister if that happens I will only go there out of obedience but know it that ... I am not going because I would want to go...I am only going because I am being forced to, I am being compelled to go there". In fact I got very angry and it was clear to her that I was angry. I had to raise my voice, I think it was glaring to her that I was angry, in fact we never had that conversation again...it ended there.*

In this extract, the sister experiences intimidation into subservient obedience by the sister superior. The superior's stand is clear; "you go and help out as I have asked you" or else "I 'command' you to do so". The sister explains that the superior was going to use "force" to "compel" her to obey her commands and obviously this made her angry. The use of the word "command" means to dominate which by extension subjugates the sisters' active participation in decision-making (Armstrong, 2005; Okure, 2009, 2010; O' Murchu 1998; PC #14). Thus, she grapples between self-positioning and being positioned by the superior as obedient versus disobedient. The superior positioned her as one who must obey every instruction given but on the contrary she positioned herself as having the right to make meaningful contributions to decisions that concerns her (Hermans & Kempten 1993; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). In opposition, she negotiated her construction of identity with her 'anger' in order to resist the superior's push. As a matter of fact, they had dialogue but the dialogue was fruitless (Souci et al., 1998), hence she had to use her voice of anger to construct 'who she is' as well as 'who she is becoming'.

5.3 The sisters' act of self-construction through submission

In constructing identity a significant number of the sisters (including the temporary and final professed) used the strategy of submission. They maintained that under the discourse of religious obedience they were expected to surrender to whatever the superior (be it senior sister, formator or leader) said. Apparently, they privilege the authority figure as having the super-voice to decide what they have to do (Malone, 1991a, b; Mangion, 2007; PC #14). The final professed sisters account for their submissiveness by maintaining that the superior has the grace of office, and must therefore be obeyed. By grace of office, this group of sisters explains that the superior is representing God's interest and voice. As a result, they construct themselves as obeying God when they subject themselves in obedience to superiors. This final professed sister was submissive to a superior who subjected her to teach Christian Religious Studies (CRS) instead of music, a subject she is knowledgeable about:

> …there in the community I was sent to teach music …But when I came there, you know …it was a different thing all together I met…she (superior/principal) refused the teaching of music. She said bluntly that she hates music…she said that I should teach CRS (Christian Religious Studies) …I took it…that was the first time I'm teaching the course; a subject that is not mine. When I met with my spiritual director she said okay since you have accepted it…accept it with love and try to do it the way you would have even teach the music and that advice I took. I now took this particular course…I dramatized it…I put it to music so that the students begin to enjoy the subject. The first time that the students begin to do very well in the subject in external exams… I mean my beginning to teach CRS I got my first A student… Now the CRS is gaining greater grounds …she (principal) had to come to me: started pleading that, please, the students requested that I will be taking…CRS from JS1-SS3…I accept with all pleasure but I know… it's pain and suffering on me…eventually…I won the incentive for producing the best result in the school and external exams… it is just that God really wanted to compensate me I think for the way I was treated, I thank him, it is also by his grace that I handled the matter the way I did because I think for Christ it wasn't smooth but he endured so I too…

This sister used the discourse of religious obedience to construct herself as submissive to a superior, who subjected her to teach CRS instead of music in which she was proficient. This placed her in a conflicted position of teaching an entirely new subject that she had no skill in. Her submission was based on the awareness that Christ is her model: Christ did not find things easy but he endured, so as a religious she constructs an identity of following in Christ's footsteps (PC #1). This construction of a Christ-like identity acts as a meta-position through identification with the person of Christ, which she arrived at by self-persuasion, indicating a process of deliberate personal choice (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). Another strategy she presented as facilitating her submissiveness was alliance (consultation) with the spiritual director, who encouraged her to accept the teaching of CRS with love. The spiritual director was a resource channel that affirmed her willingness to be submissive. In this way, the spiritual director formed an allegiance with her, affirming and supporting her submission (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). Also her musical skills provided her with resources, acting as a third-position that unified and facilitated the process of teaching the new subject.

The musical skills facilitated her teaching of CRS such that across time and space she was brilliant to produce the best results both internally and at external examinations. This earned her recognition in the school, particularly recognition from the principal/superior. Her submissiveness has won her great honour but not without pain and discomfort. Again, this reflects Mangion's (2007) instance of self-abnegation – joyful acceptance of suffering. In other words, she became triumphant though she endured pain and humiliation, which was evident in her narrative where she combined mutual but opposing voices and positions to construct a coherent sense of self (Gregg, 1991). In this case, she is able to integrate her knowledge of music into teaching a new subject, and thus, became triumphant. In summary, she constructed a unified sense of identity through a multiplicity of contrasting and opposing voices.

Another final professed sister (superior) presented herself as experiencing pain and discomfort over frequent transfers yet she submitted willingly to it, based on the understanding that it is God's will for her at that particular space/time:

> I have also experienced pains in terms of…transfers. I could remember when I came back from studies I was asked to take my leave – for three weeks. I called home to inform my mother that I am coming home. But that very night our Provincial (superior) landed in Jos to say get ready tomorrow you are going to a community. There is a sister who will be going for studies and she…will hand over to you tomorrow. So you get ready; for me…it was just not funny. I thought sister was joking and I went back to her to say: <u>Are</u> you saying that I am going to a community tomorrow, not going home again. She said yes, you got it correctly. I know it was painful but at the end I just said God let your will be done.

She presents herself as willingly obeying God's will by submitting to the painful experiences of constant transfers, particularly in this case where her plans were changed abruptly. The provincial (another leader from whom she takes instructions) only informed her that evening that she was going to a new community which closed the opportunity for her to go home for annual holidays as initially planned. She was pained at this new development but never voiced any objection; rather she submitted on the grounds of letting God's will be done (Can. 573-746) as the mark of a good religious (Mangion, 2007). That means her submission was an act of obedience which was indirectly offered to the Provincial but directly to God (Can. 573-746; PC #14). It is an act of meta-position, in which obedience was conveyed as act of loyalty offered to God in accordance with religious obligation of the vow of obedience in agreement with her congregational constitutions. In this situation whatever the superior says is constitutive of God's will and she is willing to go along with it.

The final professed sisters were not the only ones who constructed their sense of self using submission; there are also a number of temporary professed sisters who presented themselves as having no option but to do whatever the superior said. They did so based on the fact that they were afraid to challenge the superior/formator and senior/older sisters, lest they be labelled deviants, unfit for religious life (Malone, 1991a, b). Hence, under the discourse of religious obedience they present themselves as subservient. In this regard, they cooperate in silencing their own voice, though temporally, only within that space of being located as temporary professed sisters. This group of sisters, however, hope to change this position when they make their final profession. One temporary sister in constructing an identity of submissiveness to whatever the senior sister says, presents her compliance as temporary:

> *This sister (senior sister) is my cooking partner and we are washing vegetables and she says wash that thing very well...and I am washing it. She comes again I have warned you this and this and that. I said okay, sister, show me how do I wash this vegetable and she screams, at this age you don't know how to wash vegetables. I look at her and I thought in my head, oh God help me not to be angry because if I allow myself I may give it back to her also, but you know that, in this our set-up (religious life)...often (delete often) what rules is final profession...when you have made your final profession nobody talks to you anyhow. You see, with final profession you have roots and stands: these days that is what is reigning (she demonstrates by showing the finger that wears the profession ring) nobody will take it away from me, so when I make my final vows no more shouting at me. If you shout I will shout back at you...*

This sister allows the senior sister who is her cooking partner to shout at her because she has not taken her final vows. In this way, she shows that in religious life being a temporary professed sister means being a subordinate with no rights. According to her there are two different spaces in religious life, i.e. temporary and final professed spaces, which are levelled with hierarchization of status and power. Each of these spaces determines 'who you are' (Armstrong, 2005; Malone, 1991 a, b; PC #14; Souci et al., 1998). Being temporary professed positions you as a puppet to be controlled by others but being a final professed sister positions you as a person who is respected and assertive. Interestingly, as a temporary professed sister she aligns (meta-position) herself to God in order to accommodate her submission; it is God that she prays to in order not to talk back or scream back at the senior sister. But supposedly as a finally professed sister she will have "roots" and "stands", establishing the fact that she now belongs to and forms part of the religious community; therefore, she will have the privilege that legitimatises screaming back at anyone who screams at her. Symbolically the temporary professed sisters are constructed as outsiders or as the marginal group that is 'rootless' and must wait for final profession in order to become insiders and members of religious life.

Another temporary sister constructs herself as submissive to a superior who positioned her as subordinate, and made her kneel down and beats her with a cane. She accounts for her submissiveness under the guise of the discourse of religious obedience in which superiors must be obeyed:

> *...the superior KNEELS me down as old as I was...was beating me with cane...and so it makes me to feel as nobody...a slave who does all the works in the house. I go to school where I was combining three-two classes in the school. I do all those things with all my heart ...with my strength and everything. I come home I can't find peace in the community; I have learned how to live on my own... I couldn't imagine living with a superior, who knelt me down for an hour plus... I was kneeling down in the night...for the things I don't know, (she claps her hand to show her feelings and sighs also)... I must obey my superiors...whatever they say. Our superiors are elders and you may not survive if you challenge them...I was just soliciting for, when you say forgiveness ... sister, forgive me but this thing you are asking me about I don't know... she insist I must kneel there with a heavy cane sounding on my skin–okay! If...in a normal situation I would just have fought her that night. It was not real me...I don't know what ...The only thing, you know, if I fight as my father founder would say, if you fight, you go ...the vocation is so precious to me.*

This temporary professed sister justified her compliance to kneeling down and being beaten by the superior as an act of religious obedience (Mangion, 2007; PC #14), and she did so based on her eagerness to preserve her vocation to religious life. She was enraged by the treatment she received from the superior to the point of wishing she could fight back, yet she was submissive because her "vocation is so precious" and if she challenged the superior she would not survive, coupled with father founder's saying "if you fight, you go".   In other words, formation in religious life has conditioned her to become docile (Gallivan, 1994). As a result, her construction of self is 'multi-voiced', composed of the fear of losing her vocation embedded in the consequence of dismissal (Malone 1991a, b), and obedience to congregational constitutions reflected in the words of father founder. Since her vocation is of great value she presents herself as malleable to any kind of humiliation in order to succeed. In other words, the fear of being forced out of religious life led her to be submissive although she felt like "nobody" and a "slave", which are descriptive of the feelings of dejection which she experiences (Armstrong, 2005). This resulted in the identity of a loner, as she constructed: "I have learned how to live on my own." She is a loner in religious life though she lives a communal life with others. This challenges the understanding of religious life a school of love that facilitates its members' process of identity construction (CICLSAL, 2007).

5.4 The Sisters' Construction of Identity through Resistance

As much as there were sisters who constructed their identity through submission, so were some who used the strategy of resistance to construct their sense of self. This group of sisters presented themselves as confronting and relegating to the background the voice of authority figures which positioned them as a group that needs to be controlled. This is common among the temporary professed sisters from the international congregation. They maintained that in religious life the temporary professed are often taken for granted and treated like nobodies, which ridicules their humanness. In response they present themselves as resisting being treated as non-human. One sister presents the struggles she encounters with a superior who used the discourse of the vow of religious obedience as a vehicle to subordinate her into the subservient position of a house servant, which she resisted:

> *...both of us will finish eating and she (superior) will wait for me to carry the plates to go and wash-Imagine! She will sit down for me to go and be the one to carry the plate to go and wash for her as her servant or what?   ...things that she is supposed to do, she will sit down there and cross her legs waiting for me to do them for her. Sometimes...I will be in my room and she will call me to come...and do those things for her. I was just doing it to the extent that my head was full, like bursting and I said if I don't react at least this person will not know that I am a human being...one day...I was washing my plates and she decided to bring out...so many other plates for me to wash. But...I decided in my mind that, that day I was not going to touch any of those plates she brought out or wash any extra thing...So I finished washing and left. Later, she...started telling me hey-hey that she expected me to have washed those other things she brought out... that after all I have started washing before she brought them out. I told her that I just came back from somewhere and she could see that... So I decided to wash the ones my mind has accepted... In my mind I told myself that even if I wash those plates, I am doing it grudgingly so I was not going to do it and I don't need to do it to please somebody...that was why that day I decided not to do it. At least I want her to understand...that it is not a must that I will do it, that this is not us (SHCJ spirit) ... Let her understand that I am not here to obey and serve her...*

In this extract, the sister presented a strategic approach of resistance achieved through self-consultation and persuasion (Hermans & Herman-Konokpa, 2010). In constructing her position of resistance she made a deliberate decision regarding the line of action she must take in order to assert her sense of person which she thought has been thwarted (Armstrong, 2005). In her perception, she had been treated as a servant so she needed to define 'who she is'. Once she had made that decision she moved a step further by making an internal resolution (self-agreement) to put her decisions into action which led her to refuse to wash the extra plates the superior brought out for her.

Across time she had obeyed the superior's order but internally she felt conflicted as she expressed that her "head was full, like bursting". The expression that her head was full depicts metaphorically the nuisance she experienced while being positioned by the superior as the servant. Her expression "if I don't react at least this person will not know that I am a human being..." captures the dilemma she faces between positioning herself as a human person versus being positioned as a less than human servant. Thus, her resistance was justifiable because it was an attempt to reassert her worth as a human being. It was in resisting the superior's treatment of treating her as a servant that she asserted her worth as a human being. She used the discourse of congregational spirituality ('this is not us (SHCJ spirit)') to legitimatise her resistance. She held on to her affiliation with the congregational discourse, in terms of their ethics of human relationship, (cf. Rom 12:10; PC 15), which in her interpretation, meant that she is not in religious life to serve any superior. She identifies with this ethos in order to invalidate the superior's unreasonable control over her. This

allegiance with the congregational spirituality serves as a third-position (unifying position) through which she resolves the dilemma of being positioned as inferior or subordinate. Based on the collective voice of congregational spirituality she constructs her personal and religious identity of resisting the superior's positioning of her as servant.

Another temporary sister performs her work of identity by resisting a superior, who positions herself as solely deciding what has to be cooked for the community meal:

> *She (superior) tells the cook to prepare spaghetti for lunch, to make one bag of spaghetti for five people and by the time we come back from apostolate (work), you just see something small on the table for five people. Sometimes she can tell the cook to prepare soup for three days; we can eat it for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. She was doing that and one day I said to her, Sister, you know we go to apostolate and we come back, I don't know if we can increase the quantity of food that we eat...maybe we can eat something heavier because supper is pick-up. She said who am I to tell her what to cook. I said no, I'm not telling you what to cook but I am just suggesting... if we can increase the quantity a little...and when I said that she insisted and said who am I to tell her what to do... because she did that kind of thing I snubbed her. I just didn't mind her any longer and when I come back even if she is there I just go and cook whatever I want. And the rest of us were happy and we will eat and be satisfied...she told me that I will make final vows: that I will meet her there and I told her that...I am not in religious life for report writing. They can go to hell with their report. I think I vowed my life to God.*

This sister encounters a superior who positioned her as not worthy (less human) to make suggestions about issues concerning their communal life. This indicates instance of power relations; presenting how when you are temporary professed sister your opinion (voice) does not count (Armstrong, 2005; Malone, 1991a, b; Souci et al., 1998). The superior relegated her voice to the background. But she resisted cooperating with the superior in subjugating her own voice and interest. Her resistance was achieved through self-consultation, by reflecting upon and evaluating the superior's attitude towards her, which involved not only avoiding addressing her suggestion but also that of telling her that she is a 'nobody' and therefore not worthy to make suggestions. In response, this sister resolved to snub the superior, failed to acknowledge her voice/character (Can. 573-746). She decided (through self-agreement) to cook whatever she wanted.

Her resistance opened up the space for a contest between her and the superior, and the superior attempted to prove that she has the power, which this sister cannot ignore or counteract, that is, the privilege of writing a report about her, which will determine if she will be admitted to final profession (Malone, 1991a, b). By implication the superior's report determines if she will continue to be a religious or be dismissed. Therefore, the superior positioned herself as one in whom power is vested, revealing the polar opposite position from which they operated (Hermans, 2003; Sampson, 1993). In this regard, she attempted to use the report as a conquering weapon to clamp down on the sister's resistance. But the sister was determined in her resolve not to subjugate her own voice and interest, choosing rather to form a coalition (meta-position) with God, who she presented as the one to whom she vowed her life and the one who has the ultimate power to decide who lives or leaves religious life. By invoking that she vowed her life to God, this temporary professed sister invalidates the superior's power over her and not just this particular superior she was dealing with, but all religious leaders who make malicious decisions on her behalf. Her expression that "they can go to hell with their report" is a cynical remark, which depicts her displeasure for all authority figures that make illicit decisions based on the misuse of the discourse of religious obedience. Unlike Malone's (1991a, b) participants, she was not going to allow herself be intimidated into accepting the subservient position of being defined as a subordinate. Her act of resistance is proof that she is in religious life on the merit of being called by God, and in identification with Jesus Christ and no other (PC #1, 2).

Similarly, some sisters in resisting the superior's control over them do so by constructing their resistance as solely a reflection of their dependence on God. In other words, their resistance is an act of obedience to God (Can. 212). This group of sisters maintained that they are committed to God through prayer and service; therefore, they are attentive to what God asks them to do. In this way, they invest their energy in doing what God commands, which may sometimes be at variance with what the superior's commands (Berchmans, 2005; Can. 573-746). Consequently, these sisters construct commitment to God as their core identity, which invalidates and supersedes all other forms of control from others including leaders. Thus, this sister presents herself as disobeying a superior, who uses the discourse of religious obedience to detract her from doing what she sees as God's will:

> *A student was very sick...in the school at about 7.30pm and some other students rushed to the house to call sisters; they were screaming that a student is dying. I ran out to see what the situation is and when I got there.   I really saw that truly, that a student was really sick and I said*

Oh! We really need to do something. So, I rushed back to the house and I picked the car key and I ran out. But, then I remembered that oh! I have not said anything to the superior, so I went back. I went to her and said Sister, a student is very sick and I think she needs medical attention...and she asked, so where am I going to? I said, I'm taking the girl to hospital but she said <u>NO-O</u>- where is the principal ...that I should drop the car key. Well! I stood there and looked at her and I went out, and you know; I took the girl to the hospital.

This sister encounters a conflict between making the choice to take a sick student to hospital (a gesture of service and commitment) and obeying the superior's command. By her definition the act of taking the sick student to hospital is charitable work performed as part of doing God's will (Can. 212), but she was caught in the dilemma of obeying the superior's order which commanded her to drop the car key. In resolving the dilemma she first employed self-consultation (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). She had to dialogue with herself towards exploring what was the best line of action. Her expression, "I stood there and looked at her", was an act of self-consultation which embodied aspects of meta-position because it involved the process of assessing what God wills in the situation. In that brief moment she resolved to go ahead to take the student to the hospital which was a sign of commitment to doing God's will in opposition to the external position of obeying the superior's command. She chooses to disobey the superior in order to obey God (Can. 573-746).

Later in the interview data she noted that the superior defines her as 'disobedient' which she did not mind because she is convinced "God will not see it the same way she (superior) is seeing it." This sister was not bothered by the superior's definition of her as disobedient. Further in the interview data she says, "Yes let her continue to say I am disobedient but I know that I have saved someone's life (act of perfect charity) and if it happens again I will do exactly just that". The mere fact that she is resolved to disobey the superior in such matters shows that she is committed to doing God's will, which for her is the best option in comparison to obeying an earthly superior (Can. 573-746). In this situation, her preferred self-presentation is 'I-as obedient to God' in opposition to 'I-as disobedient to the superior'. As far as she was concerned, God will not describe her action as an act of disobedience and in this way she aligns herself to God in order to invalidate the superior's definition of her as disobedient. Thus, commitment and dependence on God becomes the decisive motive influencing her self-construction in opposition to obeying the superior's command.

6. Recommendation & Conclusion

Based on the sisters' interview narratives it is apparent that power relations and dominance impact on their construction of religious identity. For most of the participants, the relationship with the leaders, senior and older sisters are governed by polar opposite of being superior who gives orders versus subordinate who takes orders and complies (Hermans, 2003; Sampson, 1993). Consequently, a good number of the participants grapple with the issues of constructing their sense of identity by either being submissive or resistant. Whichever way they take, they are bound to encounter certain amount of contradictions, and conflicts through which they negotiate their sense of self. This reveals that their process of identity construction is a multi-voiced activity including self-positioning and self as positioned by others. Given such situations this paper deems it necessary to make some recommendations that need to be taken in consideration toward facilitating the sisters' development of identity construction within the context of living religious life.

In the first place, concrete effort needs to be made to address the issues of religious obedience. Such efforts should include proper understanding of what religious obedience entails; in this regard, both the leaders and the members of religious life are called to appreciate religious obedience for what exactly it is. No doubt, the documents of Vatican II and Constitutions of the congregations ought to serve as reference points from where this understanding must be based. In this way, there would be appropriate understanding of what religious obedience means, giving way to better uniform practice across members. Hopefully, this will minimise the many instances of conflicted I-positions regarding power relations and dominance that the sisters presented.

Furthermore, it is important that people elected or appointed to the office of religious leadership positions are those with clear-sighted vision of Vatican II's interpretation of religious obedience. Also it is important that leaders must work hard to remain abreast with the inspiration of their foundress/founders enshrined in their various constitutions and the up-date renewal of religious life. Besides, the structure of leadership in religious life could be reviewed to allow the temporary professed the space to take leadership positions; thus, there will be mixed generations of leaders. Each generation of sisters (young and elderly) will have their views being sought for and aired in the determination of policies to guide the life of the religious. This will go a long way to minimise the instance of living in perpetual fear as was presented by the temporary professed sisters.

Besides having a mixed generation of leaders, it is essential to encourage all religious leaders including superiors, formators and older sisters to be more self-reflective in terms of the impact their leadership style and action have on others. Let them be more consciously aware of how their actions impact on others. And if this awareness is constantly

created definitely it will bring about improved performance.

In addition, a concrete forum should be created within the structure of religious life for opportunities for religious conferences, seminars and workshops within which to dialogue about existing differences among sisters regarding appropriate ways to understand and practice religious obedience.

To sum–up, these recommendations and challenges reflect the urgent need for religious life as lived in Africa to re-assess its initial and on-going formation programme. Formation programmes should be designed to facilitate the ideal identity such as 'I-as-obedient to God', and 'I-as-relating with God' through relationships with others including leaders. It is anticipated that appropriate formation will no doubt lead the sisters toward construction of the ideal identity of being Christ-like in their day to day interaction with one another and the people of God at large.

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