Language as Power:
A Labeling Theory Perspective on Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse Discourse

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Abstract

This article explores how labeling theory can aid victim-survivors, religious leaders, and the public in understanding the impact of language used in discourse addressing adult clergy sexual abuse (ACSA). The #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements have led to increased exposure of abuse of power, challenging prevailing narratives and language. While clergy sexual abuse of minors is widely recognized as egregious criminal behavior, less is understood about clergy sexual abuse of adults, which is currently illegal in 13 states and D.C. in the United States. This article highlights the adverse impacts of language that disguises abuse of adults by clergy as consensual "affairs," causing further harm to survivors and disregarding power dynamics. Embracing labeling theory, the author suggests that sociologists, akin to prophets, who critically analyze the Church's use and misuse of power, can aid religious leaders in establishing a unified language informed by existing multidisciplinary research that accurately represents the essence of ACSA. This article emphasizes the potential of labeling theory to empower religious leaders who act as agents of social control with the ability to define and apply labels of deviance with the critical insights needed to establish a cohesive language capturing the abusive nature of ACSA.

Keywords: adult clergy sexual abuse, sexual misconduct, #churchtoo, #metoo, labeling theory, institutional betrayal, trauma-informed practices

Introduction

In the literature on clergy sexual abuse against adults, there is no standardized terminology to describe the issue. No universally accepted term is used consistently across the literature and research on the topic. Researchers employ various terms, including "clergy or clerical sexual misconduct," "pastoral misconduct," "clergy sexual exploitation," and "clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse of adults" (Flynn 2008; Kennedy 2009; Garland and Argueta 2010; Pooler and Frey 2017; Leimgruber 2022; de Weger 2022; Woolston 2023). For the sake of consistency, this article will use the term "adult clergy sexual abuse" (ACSA).

Despite the terminological discrepancies, researchers agree on the defining characteristics of ACSA. It involves individuals past the legal age of consent and is currently criminalized in 13 states and the District of Columbia in the United States ("Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse Criminal Statutes" n.d.; Pooler and Barros-Lane 2022). A power differential between the clergy member and the parishioner is a critical factor in ACSA (Pooler 2023). This imbalance of power, tipped in favor of the clergyperson, compromises the parishioner's ability to provide meaningful consent, rendering the act inherently non-consensual (Garland 2006a; Pooler and Frey 2017).

In religious communities, clergy members are entrusted with substantial authority and receive deference due to their leadership roles and spiritual responsibilities. This authority and influence extends beyond spiritual guidance to include social, institutional, and sometimes financial and political spheres, both within and outside their religious communities. This broad spectrum of influence exacerbates the power imbalance, further magnifying the issue of consent in cases of ACSA.

The elevated status and inherent trust in religious leaders make it difficult for those under their spiritual care to recognize or challenge inappropriate behavior (Garland 2013). Church members are often "socialized to trust the pastor and somehow going against him feels wrong" (Pooler 2023). Moreover, as with any helping professional, "it is always the responsibility of the person with more power to define and maintain boundaries that keep everyone safe" (Pooler 2023).

In addition to the inherent power imbalance, research reveals that abusive clergy often target and groom their victims, many of whom are in particularly vulnerable situations, such as individuals seeking counsel (Kennedy 2009; Garland 2013; Leimgruber 2022; Baylor University n.d.). Abusive clergy also prey on those who are deeply spiritually devoted (Flynn 2008; Martin 2023). Although spiritual dedication is typically viewed positively in religious communities,

these clergy members exploit the target's spiritual commitment. The "perpetrator identifies the strengths and assets of the victim and seeks to possess and feed off them" (Martin 2023).

It is essential to recognize that individuals under spiritual care and leadership are inherently vulnerable due to their reduced power and the expectation to defer to those guiding them spiritually. This vulnerability does not imply that these individuals are naive or inferior; it reflects the power dynamics and trust inherent in the caregiving relationship. Understanding this, it becomes evident that all those under spiritual guidance are at risk of exploitation or misuse of power, which is a grave violation of trust and a breach of fiduciary duty (Toben and Helge 2012; Pooler 2023; Richardson 2023).

Despite the non-consensual nature of ACSA, such incidents are often mislabeled as "affairs," a term that implies mutual consent (Flynn 2008; Kennedy 2009; Garland 2013; de Weger 2022; Woolston 2023). Mislabeling the abuse as an "affair" benefits the perpetrator, not the victim, as "it is often much easier to dismiss or excuse an affair than an abuse of power" (Garland 2013:111). Research indicates that ACSA is frequently traumatic for survivors, which points to the profound impact of this abuse of power and betrayal of trust (Pooler and Frey 2017; Woolston 2023). Mislabeling the abuse as consensual or an "affair" exacerbates the harm (Garland 2013; Woolston 2023).

This paper will use the pronouns he/him for the abuser and she/her for the victim-survivor, in alignment with research indicating that clergy who abuse adults are predominantly heterosexual married men, with most victims being women (Pooler and Barros-Lane 2022; Pooler 2023). However, it is important to recognize that clergy sexual abuse transcends gender identities and sexual orientations (Pooler 2023). Additionally, clergy who abuse can be any religious leader, whether ordained or not, including seminary professors, itinerant preachers, televangelists, or other congregational leaders who hold religious authority and spiritual influence over others (Garland 2006a).

Outcomes of Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse

Research reveals that adult clergy sexual abuse has devastating effects on survivors, drawing attention to its non-consensual nature (Woolston 2023). Symptoms of post-traumatic stress are common (Garland 2006a; Flynn 2010; Woolston 2023). "Institutional betrayal," a term coined by psychologist Jennifer Freyd, is prevalent in these cases (Smith and Freyd 2017; Woolston 2023). This form of traumatic betrayal refers to situations where an institution a person depends on fails to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings, such as clergy sexual abuse (Smith and Freyd 2017). For instance, when a church protects the abuser instead

of supporting the survivor, it exemplifies institutional betrayal, exacerbating the harm experienced through the abuse (Woolston 2023).

Additionally, survivors often suffer from moral injury, a concept usually associated with soldiers' experiences in combat (Mescher et al. 2022). A study by Xavier University measured moral injury caused by clergy sexual abuse and its concealment within the U.S. Catholic Church. The researchers state, "moral injury results from a betrayal of trust, disrupting one's beliefs and moral compass. It comprises persistent psychological and emotional distress, moral confusion, spiritual anguish, social alienation, and distrust for institutions" (Mescher et al. 2022:1). Furthermore, the loss or decrease of faith among survivors whom their religious institutions do not support is common, and often accompanied by a loss of their spiritual community (Mescher et al. 2022; Woolston 2023).

In a recent study surveying 108 women who experienced ACSA, researcher Krystal Woolston discovered that when churches respond with high institutional courage—believing and supporting the survivor—and a low level of institutional betrayal, the survivor's spirituality tends to remain higher (2023). Conversely, when institutions fail to support survivors, responding with low institutional courage and high institutional betrayal, there is a marked decrease in the survivor's spirituality (Woolston 2023). These findings have significant implications for religious communities focused on evangelism and discipleship, particularly those concerned about members deconstructing their beliefs and potentially leaving the faith, highlighting the need for religious institutions to reassess and improve their responses (Zamora 2024).

Sociology as a Prophetic Voice

In his 2013 article, Dennis Hiebert argues that sociology has the potential to be prophetic in addressing the Christian establishment from its margins. He contends that Christian sociologists critique the religious establishment's messages and rituals, acting as change agents who urge the faithful to aspire to higher standards (Hiebert 2013). Supporting Hiebert's view, Jason Martin (2023) argues that research on ACSA can be enriched when examined through a sociological lens.

Using a sociological lens is beneficial because many Christian institutions tend toward binary thinking (Allen 2024), often categorizing social issues as either sin or not sin, with little consideration for the complexities in between. Issues are frequently judged through biblical or criminal lenses, limiting categories and hindering a nuanced understanding of complex social issues. For instance, in attempts to comprehend ACSA, leaders might seek a biblical definition, questioning whether it constitutes adultery, fornication, or immorality. They might label the

woman involved as a temptress, a Jezebel, or Potiphar's wife—familiar biblical terms that paint her as a seductress (Garland 2006a 2013; Garland and Garland 2007; Collier et al. 2017; Doss 2018). If the survivor does not describe a violent rape or sexual assault, and she is not a child, religious leaders often find it difficult to categorize the event. ACSA may be illegal in their state, though the religious leaders may not be aware (Clergy Sexual Misconduct n.d.).

As a result, religious leaders frequently mislabel ACSA as consensual, treating it as a sin issue—a violation of sexual ethics that reflects poorly on the perpetrator and victim, on whom blame is also laid (Flynn 2008). This misinterpretation ignores the reality that ACSA "is not an issue of sexuality but rather one of a power imbalance that negates any possibility of 'consensual' mutuality" (Flynn 2008:217). These limitations in understanding significantly impact the treatment and perception of ACSA within religious institutions, a topic that will be further explored in the subsequent sections.

Theoretical Framework

Labeling theory offers a theoretical framework for understanding how language, power, and social reactions shape perceptions and responses to adult clergy sexual abuse. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, labeling theory examines the social construction of deviance—behavior that deviates from established social norms—and posits that societal reactions shape this deviance (Rubington and Weinberg 2003). It explores how the consequences of stigma influence one's self-concept and life chances (Berk 2015). Early pioneers of labeling theory include Tannenbaum (1938), Lemert (1951, 1967), Goffman (1961, 1963), Scheff (1966), and Becker (2018).

Labeling theory also introduces the concept of moral entrepreneurs—those who create and enforce societal rules (Becker 2018). Becker stated, "When we study how moral entrepreneurs get rules made and how enforcers apply those rules in particular cases, we study the way super-ordinates of every description maintain their positions" (2018:117). This theory presents a framework to understand better three aspects of ACSA: 1) the power dynamics involved, highlighting how clergy, as moral entrepreneurs within their community, apply labels; 2) the stigmatization effects, demonstrating how these labels shape identities and social interactions; and 3) survivor empowerment, illustrating how survivors resist stigmatizing labels and reclaim their identity.

Literature Review

Rev. Marie Fortune's 1989 book is considered a seminal text on ACSA. Since Fortune's case study, the literature on ACSA has expanded across various disciplines, including social work

(Garland 2006b; Flynn 2008; Garland and Argueta 2010; Pooler and Frey 2017; Pooler and Barros-Lane 2022), religious studies (Garland 2006a; Garland and Garland 2007; Chaves and Garland 2009; Collins 2009; Leimgruber 2022), legal studies (Toben and Helge 2012; Richardson 2023), and social sciences (Chaves and Garland 2009; Garland 2013; Martin 2023). The #MeToo movement, initiated by Tarana Burke, along with the subsequent #ChurchToo movement, has further encouraged survivors to share their stories on social media and through media coverage, thereby providing additional data for researchers.

Though research on adults abused by clergy remains limited, several studies have gathered primary data on ACSA, proving invaluable in understanding the experiences of survivors, the traumatic impact, and typical institutional responses. In the early 2000s, Flynn documented the accounts of 18 women abused as adults across various denominations (2008, 2010). Garland and Chaves conducted a study at Baylor University, utilizing the General Social Survey to estimate the prevalence of clergy sexual advances toward adults (2009). This study also included interviews with 42 women from various Christian and Jewish backgrounds (Garland and Argueta 2010).

In the United Kingdom and Ireland, Kennedy surveyed 63 women and conducted 19 interviews (2009). Another significant study from Baylor University, directed by Pooler, surveyed 159 women from diverse denominations and interviewed 27 respondents (Pooler and Frey 2017; Pooler and Barros-Lane 2022). De Weger conducted two studies in Australia focusing on adults abused within the Roman Catholic Church (2016, 2020, 2022). Most recently, Woolston surveyed 108 women from different Christian denominations and interviewed 10 participants (2023).

Common Labeling Experiences of Survivors

When reviewing the literature on ACSA, a typical labeling process emerges, shedding light on how survivors are perceived, how perpetrators are perceived, and how survivors perceive themselves. To understand when and how these labels are applied, the survivor experience can be segmented into several stages, though individual experiences may differ.

The initial stage includes targeting, grooming, and sexual misconduct, which involves sexualized talk and contact (Garland 2006a, 2013; Kennedy 2009). The following phase is disclosure or discovery, when the survivor either discloses the abuse or others uncover it (Garland 2006a; de Weger 2020; Woolston 2023). Next is the leadership response, which includes how the leadership addresses the abuse privately and publicly if the matter becomes known to those outside the religious leadership (Garland 2006a; Kennedy 2009; de Weger 2020; Woolston 2023). Afterward, the congregational response pertains to how church

members react to the information the leadership shares (Garland 2006b). Finally, survivor negotiation involves how the survivor responds to the label applied to her immediately after the event and in the years after. These stages collectively help frame how this paper will explore the labeling process and its impact on the survivor and the broader community.

Grooming and Sexual Misconduct

Research shows that abusive clergy typically target and groom their victims, making it difficult for victims to name what is occurring due to the power differential, manipulation, and lack of appropriate language (Garland 2006a, 2013; Kennedy 2009). Garland highlights this issue in her research, explaining that victims and secondary survivors who sense something is amiss "had no cognitive categories for understanding a religious leader who was acting sexually toward them or a loved one, so they labeled the behavior as something they did have a category for—their own overactive imaginations or sensitivities" (Garland 2013:107). This typical response often marks the beginning of self-blame for the abuser's behavior (Garland 2006b).

Flynn notes, "evidence of grooming included the language constructions, reasoning, hinting, and nonverbal communication the abuser used to gain trust, win their affection, and establish a close allegiance before making more overt and covert sexual overtures" (2008:230). Garland further observes, "because he is controlling the definition of reality at least to some extent, he can define the situation as mutual consent, thus leaving the victim feeling responsible" (Garland 2006a:46). Additionally, the abuser "co-opts religious and spiritual language into an agenda designed to meet his own needs" (Garland 2013:98). In this context, the pastor, acting as the moral entrepreneur, leverages his position to impose his label on the situation. This dynamic significantly impacts the victim's self-concept, as illustrated by the survivor's experience described below.

> Susan described herself as a seductress, but in fact she was the victim of clergy sexual abuse. She sought out her pastor for counsel, and he used her vulnerability as an opportunity to exploit her. The fact that her pastor allowed her to carry the blame for their sexual involvement was an additional abuse of his power as a spiritual leader. (Garland 2013:95)

Garland explains that survivors "often label their experience as an affair, which is the label given their experience by the perpetrator of their abuse. Almost certainly, they will not call their experience 'clergy sexual abuse"' (Garland 2006a:41). This example demonstrates how the imposed label can distort the survivor's understanding of her experience.

Disclosure or Discovery

This label significantly influences her interactions with leadership when she discloses the abuse or when someone discovers it, as demonstrated in the following scene.

> As she talks with an investigating committee or board of elders or trustees, her language may fall short of naming her experience in a way that reflects the deep damage done by her predator. As a consequence, they may hear her name it and thus they label the relationship as a consensual "affair." (Garland 2006a:57)

Women who have experienced ACSA have often lacked the shared language to recognize their ordeal as a professional boundary violation and a form of systemic violence rather than merely a profoundly personal challenge (Flynn 2008). This discrepancy in terminology and understanding can influence how her account of the events is perceived and, consequently, how the leadership addresses it.

Leadership Response

The label of "seductress" readily aligns with the leadership's established framework for categorizing sins. Flynn explains that ACSA is often

> normatively misunderstood and believed to be one of sexual ethics rather than professional misconduct. This formulation of the problem often places blame on entrenched notions of the woman's deviant or seductive character rather than on the aberrant behavior of the offending clergyman… The language used is a powerful cultural and social tool that can influence perception. The language… reveals deeply ingrained social attitudes and, coupled with religious leadership's power to name and define, often wrongly describes this abuse as 'consensual.' (2008:217)

Even if the survivor does not explicitly state that the abuse was consensual, it is common for leaders to frame it in this way to protect the institution (Garland 2013; Woolston 2023). Woolston's qualitative research highlights this issue, noting that "all 10 participants identified institutional responses during the reporting process that were harmful to them and their healing… (1) prioritized institution, (2) support withdrawn, and (3) narrative control" (2023:56–57). Woolston adds that "Beth's experience of the church sharing a narrative, particularly a narrative that calls the abuse an affair, is shared with several participants in this study" (2023:62).

Congregational Response

The language that religious leaders as moral entrepreneurs use to label the situation directly influences how both the survivor and the perpetrator are perceived and treated by their community. Communities "almost universally blame women for the fall of a beloved religious leader, calling his abuse an 'affair'" (Garland 2006b:18).

> This worldview, which holds women equally or more responsible for the abuse than the clergyman perpetrating the abuse, influences not only how survivors view their abuse but how it is viewed by the community at large. An informed vocabulary, therefore, innately broadens the awareness of sexual exploitation of women in church as a pervasively entrenched social problem. (Flynn 2008:218)

One source of significant anguish felt by survivors is how the abuse "affected their personal relationships, including with themselves" (de Weger 2022:20).

Survivor Negotiation

The final phase, survivor negotiation, examines how survivors respond to the labels assigned to them immediately and over time as they reflect on their experiences. It is crucial to recognize that survivor experiences are complex and never black and white. Many aspects of their experiences are imposed upon them rather than being a matter of personal choice. For instance, in Flynn's study, some survivors "were removed from committees, verbally attacked, shunned, threatened, and disregarded in other ways" (2008:230).

Over time, survivors come to recognize their agency and capacity for response. Their reactions can generally be categorized into two primary responses: if a survivor accepts the label imposed on her, she may remain within the group. Conversely, if she rejects the label assigned to her, leaders and community members may push her into the outgroup.

For instance, by conforming to the group's expectations and accepting a temporary stigmatizing label such as "sinner," "adulteress," or "Jezebel," a survivor may be able to "repent" and remain within the group. Her story could even be reframed as a testimony of overcoming immorality through repentance, thus preserving group solidarity and aligning with the narrative of a pastor who "fell into sin," repented, and was reinstated, sometimes with a story of overcoming marital problems. Conversely, if she challenges the moral entrepreneur's label and narrative, she risks receiving a permanent stigmatizing label, such as "troublemaker" or "demon-possessed," which may lead to her exclusion from the group and mark her as a threat to its cohesion.

These so-called choices impact the survivor's social standing. Survivors often adopt strategies that may appear as conformity to protect themselves from further harm. Researchers found that some college students weighed the social risks of reporting and labeling their experiences as sexual assault (Khan et al. 2018).

Those who chose not to report cited several reasons: negative impacts on internal and external identity; the belief that a survivor identity is "abject, politicized, and necessarily deeply traumatized;" the refusal to view themselves in a "disempowered state;" the desire to sustain their current identities and allow for future ones; and the need to retain social relationships and group affiliations (Khan et al. 2018:432, 441–42). Some "eschew the label of survivor because they perceive it to be a strategy to preserve a particular sense of self" (Khan et al. 2018:456).

Additionally, due to societal trauma such as racism, individuals from marginalized groups may choose to remain silent to protect their group from further stigmatization or may face pressure to stay quiet from members of their marginalized group to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes (Gómez 2023). Black feminist trauma researcher and race scholar Jennifer Gómez, who developed Cultural Betrayal Trauma Theory (CBTT), discusses this phenomenon in her 2023 book.

Rejecting the survivor label can preserve their inclusion in the community. In a blog post by a survivor of ACSA, she notes, "It would actually be easier to just go back to the testimony of an inappropriate relationship, of falling into sin, and of being forgiven" (Not in Our Church 2021). This perspective arises when survivors acquire new language to accurately describe their experience—adult clergy sexual abuse—and find that using this more precise language negatively impacts their experiences within their religious community.

This strategy of accepting the moral entrepreneur's narrative and labels becomes increasingly intolerable for survivors when they acquire new and more accurate language through education on ACSA. Researcher David Pooler notes, "many early on, would not call themselves a victim… Most of the instincts of people is to protect their abusers, to protect the church because they've been socialized to do that" (Roys 2024). A secondary survivor described his experience of discovering the appropriate language to articulate what his wife endured.

> It took me, what, eight months post-abuse before I came across the term 'adult clergy sexual abuse,' and it took an attorney who specializes in it to give it to me, and the moment I plugged that into Google, there was a wealth of information dating back thirty years. (Pooler 2024)

There is a unanimous consensus among researchers who study ACSA on the importance of using proper language.

> Language is critical. It makes all the difference in the world to call her experience 'abuse' instead of 'an affair,' and to call her 'a victim' rather than 'an adulteress' or 'mistress.' Otherwise seemingly innocent conversations by friends who do not know her role in the congregational crisis and who use the language of 'affair' and 'that woman' create repeated shame and trauma. (Garland 2013:102)

Once a survivor recognizes that what occurred to her constitutes abuse, she must renegotiate her label. This process often leads to the loss of her social group and brings about several significant effects: a "new and painful understanding" of her situation, grief over the loss of friends who "galvanized around the perpetrator," and the loss of her congregation, which was a primary source of support, resulting in a profound sense of betrayal (Pooler and Barros-Lane 2022:131).

Embracing a new label can impact her marriage and lead to career loss if she is employed by religious leaders who do not acknowledge the abuse as non-consensual (Garland 2013; Woolston 2023). This process can lead to considerable distress and a "sense of dislocation" (de Weger 2022:20).

Woolston explained how a survivor lost the support of her community when she acknowledged her experience of abuse.

> Initially, she felt like the elders of her church supported her, but when she said she would not use the term affair to describe her abuse, the support she had previously received was gone. She stated, 'So from then on, the elders didn't care for me. Now maybe some of them did, but then it was, if you're not gonna say you had an affair. You're really not of much use here.' (Woolston 2023:60–61)

The loss of her social group may lead her to seek a new in-group. This new group might include those who identify with a deviant subculture—individuals who deviate from the norms of the religious community and reject the narrative imposed by moral entrepreneurs (Becker 2018). Movements such as #MeToo and #ChurchToo provide support for those who reject labels that wrongly imply complicity with their abuse. Research indicates that appropriate labeling is crucial for healing, and self-identification as a "survivor" can be empowering (Garland 2013; Khan et al. 2018:442). Within supportive groups, members who are believed and validated are often empowered in their healing process (Pooler and Barros-Lane 2022).

Applied Sociology

Analyzing the experiences of adult clergy sexual abuse survivors through the lens of labeling theory highlights the necessity for unified and precise language when addressing this abuse. For instance, in the U.S., the term "child sexual abuse" is widely understood to refer to a criminal act, though misconceptions may still exist, such as the erroneous belief that it can ever be consensual. Although ACSA is explicitly illegal in varying degrees in only 13 states and D.C., it is crucial that the language surrounding the sexual abuse of adults by clergy accurately reflects the abusive nature and criminality of these acts.

The consequences of mislabeling the abuse can include additional trauma and potential loss of faith (Woolston 2023). The power to apply and communicate these labels lies with moral entrepreneurs who influence the narrative within the religious group and the broader society through public statements and media. The spiritual leadership, possessing "the power to name and define" within their religio-cultural context, must exercise this authority responsibly and precisely to ensure that the true nature of ACSA is recognized and addressed rather than obscured or misrepresented (Flynn 2008:217).

Martin emphasizes the theological basis for Christian sociologists addressing ACSA, stating, "The prophets speak frequently about the scourge of clericalism and abuse of power" (2023:59). Sociologists, akin to prophets, can drive cultural change through various strategies. These include conducting and presenting research, particularly qualitative studies that amplify the voices and experiences of survivors. Interdisciplinary collaboration with theologians, social workers, legal scholars, and other professionals allows for a multifaceted approach to the issue. Developing educational resources for stakeholders—seminary training, tools for laity, survivor support resources, and counseling materials—is essential for informed intervention. Advising on church policy and best practices contributes to effective policy development. Additionally, public awareness campaigns are crucial for community outreach, and providing research to support legislation criminalizing ACSA can drive legislative change.

Moral Entrepreneurs in Action

To illustrate the importance of appropriate labeling by moral entrepreneurs, consider the recent public statement issued by leaders regarding a pastor accused of sexual misconduct within their church.

> We want to inform you all that effective 4/1/24 Jordan Green's employment with Pursuit Church has been terminated. The decision to terminate Jordan Green was made unanimously by the leadership team of the church including the Elders, Staff, and members of the Finance Committee. This decision was made

> swiftly after church leaders learned of situations involving Jordan Green that were in direct violation of Pursuits Church's policy regarding workplace harassment. We want to be clear, Jordan Green committed acts of sexual misconduct which has deeply wounded his victims…On Thursday, Jordan initially confessed his version of the sexual harassment that he engaged in to two of our church leaders. This led to immediate meetings with all those who were directly involved… On Friday, Jordan called the staff together and confessed his version of the sexual harassment that he engaged in. Jordan's confession was no confession at all. In these meetings, Jordan told partial truths and manipulated the events to fit the narratives he so desired to control… One by one, brave souls began to share their personal stories of how Jordan had harmed them during their employment at Pursuit Church. (Kale et al. 2024)

The rarity and forthrightness of such statements were highlighted in a news headline: "Church's Harsh Letter to Congregants About Firing Pastor Accused of Sexual Misconduct Earns Universal Praise" (Protestia 2024).

> A church in North Carolina has earned universal praise after announcing on their website and social media pages that they were terminating the employment of their pastor for sexual misconduct, using decisive and ferocious language in clear contradistinction to most other churches in similar circumstances. (Protestia 2024)

Conclusion

In conclusion, labeling theory provides a robust framework for understanding the impact of language, power, and social reactions on perceptions of adult clergy sexual abuse. By examining how labels are applied and how they influence both the survivor's experiences and the broader community's response, this theoretical lens highlights the critical need for appropriate, precise, and unified language in addressing such abuse.

Sociologists, like prophets, can play a crucial role in analyzing and challenging the Church's use and misuse of power (Hiebert 2013; Martin 2023). By providing insights grounded in empirical research and reflective of survivors' experiences, sociologists can assist religious leaders who serve as agents of social control in establishing and advocating for unified language that accurately represents the nature of ACSA.

This language must reflect the true nature of ACSA to foster a more informed and compassionate response. Promoting this cultural shift requires commitment to ongoing research, interdisciplinary collaboration, and public education. By addressing these issues rigorously and sensitively, sociologists can contribute significantly to preventing ACSA and

supporting those affected by it, ensuring that the discourse surrounding such abuse evolves to better serve justice and healing.

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