Negotiating Identity and Power during a Crisis: An Analysis of 'Small Stories' told by Australian Christian Priests during the COVID-19 Health Crisis

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Abstract
The COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 and localised government responses have led to fundamental changes in the conditions in which organisations operate. This article draws on a social constructionist understanding of identity as *multiple* and *performed* (Angouri 2016; Butler 1990) to explore the experiences of a group of six Australian Christian priests during this crisis period. Drawing on in-depth interview data, the article presents a narrative analysis of the *storying* of identities and power relations within church communities whose everyday activities were suddenly curtailed. In contrast to linguistic studies of narrative which often focus on structural features of canonical discourse 'events', this article takes up Bamberg and Georgakopoulou's (2008) extension of narrative analysis to focus on 'small stories' which reflect the everyday, situated practices in which identities and power relations are negotiated and performed. This article contributes unique insights into the operation and practices of religious organisations in a crisis context.

1. Introduction

Well-established Christian religious organisations in Western countries including Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom usually operate with relative independence and little interference from government bodies. Generally, as long as relevant secular laws and regulations are followed, religious life and practices are largely considered to be personal, individual choices. However, regulatory responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have presented religious organisations with new challenges and restrictions in relation to how, where and when people are able to practice religion. This article explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on a group of Australian Christian priests in the state of New South Wales (NSW) by taking up

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Bamberg and Georgakopoulou's (2008) extension of narrative analysis to focus on a series of 'small stories' told by these priests during research interviews. These small stories reflect every day, situated practices in which identities and power relations were enacted, negotiated and performed as individual priests attempted to deal with the regulatory and practical challenges of complying with government directives aimed at making their churches and religious communities 'Covid Safe'. The analysis of these stories adds novel insights into how this global health crisis rippled through the everyday lives of these people and their congregations. I begin this article by outlining the context of the research and the nature of the COVID-19 crisis in the state of NSW during the data collection period. The next section then explores in detail the theoretical and methodological framework that shaped this study of identity and power as well as the rationale for using such an approach. The data analysis and discussion that follows presents an in-depth analysis of the interview data and small stories told by the priests. Finally, the article concludes with brief comments on how and why narrative analysis of small stories offers unique empirical insights into local impacts of this unprecedented global health crisis.

1.1 Context: Australia, COVID-19 and Government Regulation of Religious Practices
Australia is described as a Western, industrialised, democratic country in which the 'values' of personal freedom and a secular government dominate public discourse (Evans 2015). In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic declared by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in March 2020, the Australian governments[1] responded to the perceived threat of the virus by

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[1] The Commonwealth of Australia is governed through a federal system in which the Commonwealth government has responsibility for specific domains including immigration,

introducing a range of regulatory directives. Under Commonwealth biosecurity laws, national borders were largely closed with restricted access even for citizens, and State and Territory governments took responsibility for introducing and enforcing regulations associated with local infection control and public health. Some governments introduced curfews and stay at home orders for various periods and social distancing was widely enforced (Storen and Corrigan 2020). Compared to other countries, in these early months Australia was able to largely contain the virus and the associated mortality was limited (Sanmarchi, *et al.*, 2021). In the state of NSW which has a population of approximately eight million people (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021), by September 2020 there had been 3,747 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 53 associated deaths (New South Wales Government 2020).

The regulations introduced in Australia during these months of the pandemic were considered to be as extensive and restrictive (O'Sullivan, *et al.,* 2020). In relation to the curtailment of religious practices in NSW, restrictions included limits on the number of people at gatherings like funerals and weddings, bans on singing in groups, and mandates requiring wearing face masks and following social distancing measures for periods of time (Storen and Corrigan 2020). At various points churches and places of collective worship were closed altogether. As with other regions and countries, although *governments* introduced these regulations, *organisations* had a devolved responsibility for implementation and faced various

defence, biosecurity and aged care. The six State and two Territory governments have devolved responsibility for services including public health, hospitals and education (For information about the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia refer to https://www.aph.gov.au/infosheets/13).

penalties if individuals were found to be breaching regulations on organisational premises or through their activities.

As a means of facilitating compliance, the NSW government introduced a state-wide program called 'COVID Safe'. The program set out regulations that organisations, including religious groups, had to follow to be allowed to operate. In terms of those specifically related to places of worship, regulations were linked to physical distancing, the number of people allowed in a particular space (referred to as square metre rules), ventilation, record keeping, self-isolation and quarantine (New South Wales Government 2021).

Like many programs that seek to direct behaviours of population groups, Covid Safe policies were developed by the NSW government but implementation relied on the mobilisation of community-level organisations. The links between government regulation and localised implementation of policy reflect a process described by critical scholars as translation (Li 2007; Rose 1996; Rose 1998). This can be conceptualised as the movement of policy out from its source and into the communities, homes, and daily lives of citizens (Reich and Turnbull 2018). This process and movement is neither linear nor continuous as the multiple components – that is, people, institutions and programs – can be out of alignment with one another (Grove and Pugh 2015). Thus, points of translation become instances of contestation, modification, negotiation, adaptation (Dean 2010) and, of particular importance here, intense individual identity work.

2. Governing Through a Crisis: Identity and Power

Identity has been examined from multiple theoretical perspectives. In this article, I draw on a social constructionist understanding of identity as multiple and performed through language, communication, and social interaction (Angouri 2016; Butler 1990). This conceptualisation

considers identity - and coterminous notions such as self and role - as "something we all 'do'" in contrast to positivist or essentialist approaches that may position identity as "something people 'have'" (Angouri 2016: 38). Butler's (1990) influential work on gender and identity posited that individuals perform identity(ies) and when doing so draw on and reproduce broader narratives, discourses and understandings. This allows identities to be salient and to 'make sense' in places and at certain historical time points. Butler (1990) argued that identity is permanently in flux and emphasised that the repetition of identity performances is what allows it to solidify even transiently. Thus, the repetition of certain acts or rituals become connected to social identities. These social identities draw on relations or connections that bind individuals into groups and facilitate the (re)production of relevant ways of thinking, talking and acting (Butler 1993; Foucault and Lotringer 1989). Within these groups, individuals negotiate and express identities through the relations that connect them, the authority with which they speak and act and the sources of authority they draw on to legitimate their enactments (Angouri 2016). This view of power differs from structural representations of status and authority - identity and power are bound together and expressed through everyday language and communication acts or performances.

Viewed from this perspective, the identity 'work' of the Christian priest can be seen as inherently complex as it requires ongoing attempts to balance multiple and at times potentially misaligned personal, social, and institutional identities (Creed, *et al.*, 2010; Ramarajan and Reid 2013). Successful identity work can be seen in outcomes such as the ability of the priest to draw together diverse individuals to form congregations within the physical and spiritual boundaries of a church community (Kreiner, *et al.*, 2006; Walker 2014).

Restrictions associated with COVID-19 have brought significant challenges to religious communities. Researchers have noted that many well-established religious organisations have been largely supportive of government regulations during the pandemic despite the restriction of interpersonal contact and collective worship (Bawidamann, *et al.*, 2021; Simonsen, *et al.*, 2020; Wildman, *et al.*, 2020). These groups have often drawn on medical, scientific and government discourses to rationalise these restrictions to community members (Bawidamann, *et al.*, 2021) and promote community adherence to these measures (Wildman, *et al.*, 2020). In addition to challenging dimensions of collective religious practices (Sulkowski and Ignatowski 2020), COVID-19 regulations have also altered the "ritual workings of religion (and) the function it performs for wider society" (Bawidamann, *et al.*, 2021: S648). Restrictions have not only affected how, where and when religion could be practiced but also limited the comfort religious organisations were able to offer their communities – "While usually, religion can communicate a special competence in cases of misfortune and catastrophes through the performance of rituals (*cf.*, Geertz 1973), this was not possible in the emergency brought about by the coronavirus" (Bawidamann, *et al.*, 2021: S648). This context of crisis and complex, sudden change can be predicted to have far reaching impacts across societies. The following analysis of priests' stories about their identity work during this time provides insights into some of these effects.

3. Narrative Analysis: Big and Small Stories

Labov's early work (1972) on narrative was instrumental in shaping the analysis of how people talk about life events and, in the process, story their identity(ies). Narrative analysis has been subsequently extended through the contrasting of the content and purpose of stories and narratives and a noted shift in data sources from narrative texts to narrative practices (De Fina

and Georgakopoulou 2008; Fetzer 2010). This later work has been particularly productive in the study of how 'stories' embedded within longer narratives can be viewed as performances of identity (Fetzer 2010). De Fina (2013) underscores the importance of stories and storytelling as part of a process mobilised as people work to make sense of themselves within their macro and micro contexts:

> Stories reflect the teller's idealized views of self and also provide the means to bridge the "here and now" of the storytelling episode to the broader sociopolitical context within which the teller makes sense of self (41).

Of particular relevance to this article is the work done in relation to narrative positioning in identity analysis using interview data (De Fina 2013). Bamberg (1997) extended early work by Davis and Harre (1990) to explore three levels of positioning in terms of how the narrator presents their identity(ies). Level one reflects the storied self, level two indicates the relationship between the story-teller and the listener, while level three considers the discourses and narratives that the story-teller reproduces as they perform identity work. That is, level one and two relate to the local and immediate context in which the story is being told while level three reflects "how the speaker/narrator positions a sense of self/identity with regards to dominant discourses or master narratives" (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008: 385). By making these relevant to the 'here and now' the storyteller constructs themselves "as a particular kind of person" (De Fina 2013: 43). Considering positioning in narrative analysis complements a social constructionist approach as it allows identity to be viewed as a process or performance that entails "discursive

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work" embedded within "concrete and specific interactional occasions (and) yields constellations of identities instead of individual, monolithic constructs" (De Fina 2013: 42).

3.1 'Doing' Small Stories Research

Small stories narrative research involves moving away from the 'big stories' or overarching narratives and instead focusing on "small stories-in-interaction" (Norton and Early 2011: 421). Small stories do not necessarily create or convey a "coherent sense of self" but rather draw attention to the "diverse identity positions in everyday interactive practices" (Norton and Early 2011: 421). The analysis of small stories draws out instances in which people use short, disjointed and/or incidental examples and "interactive engagements to *construct* a sense of who they are" (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008: 382).

These short identity performances occur across longer narratives and 'make sense' by drawing on dominant circulating discourses of significance in a particular time and place. Georgakopoulou (2010) set out a taxonomy of small stories by referring to habitual, generic and once stories. This differentiation is based on what is recounted in the content of the stories and the links that can be drawn between the story itself and the identity claims made by the speaker. *Habitual* stories recount events that are considered to be typical – that is, "that have happened or do happen over and over again" (Georgakopoulou 2010: 126). *Generic* stories, in contrast, lack specific characters and are "normally recounted with referential choices such as 'you' or 'one' that represent generalized actors" (Georgakopoulou 2010: 126). *Once stories* "illustrate the pattern of events and actions recounted in the preceding generic or habitual story with the telling of one specific episode or series of events involving specific characters" (Georgakopoulou 2010: 126). From a linguistic perspective, *once stories* usually begin "with a marker such as 'like' or

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'for example,' which serves to emphasize the illustrative function of the story to follow"
(Georgakopoulou 2010: 126). These small stories unfold around a logical storyline and because
they are short in duration often have limited structural variation and few characters but describe
specific certain situations and interactions (Fetzer 2010; Grossi and Gurney 2020). Despite their
brevity, De Fina notes that analysis of these stories can indicate patterns and discourses that are
invoked as the storyteller talks about "identities, actions, duties and rights" (2013: 58). Within
these stories, the positioning of characters, interactional links between speaker and audience and
the reproduction of broader narratives provide important insights into perceived social reality at a
point in time.

3.2 Small Stories: Data Collection and Method of Analysis

The data discussed in this article consists of six in-depth interviews with Australian Christian
priests conducted in August and September 2020. Participants were recruited via social networks
and using convenience sampling (Meltzer, *et al.*, 2012). These interviews were collected as part
of a larger, cross-cultural project that explored communication, grief and bereavement during the
COVID-19 pandemic. This project was granted human research ethics approval by the relevant
body at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University[2]. Interviewees gave written, informed consent to
participate in the cross regional study prior to undertaking any research activities.

Interviews were conducted remotely using free Internet services (Skype and Zoom). Four
interviewees chose to use video connections and two selected audio services only. Interviews

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[2] Reference number HSEARS20200805002-01.

were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim by the interviewer. Transcripts were checked for accuracy by another member of the research team prior to analysis. Interviews ranged in length from 18 to 40 minutes with an average duration of 28 minutes. Interviewees were asked three broad questions in relation to requirements to follow infection control regulations and how this affected their ability to fulfil their role within the community.

Three stages of analysis were undertaken following the work of Georgakopoulou (2010: 2015). Stage one involved line by line reading of transcripts and identification of 'small stories' based on the content of what was said and linguistic framing devices used (*e.g.*, opening phrases such as like, you know, for example, etc.). Stories were required to be temporally ordered, reflect past events (*i.e.*, verb phrases were in past tense), contain identifiable story-internal characters and position the narrator as a key character within the events recounted. During stage two analysis stories were further coded according to Georgakopoulou's (2010) taxonomy of generic, habitual and once stories. Stage three coding involved thematic analysis of 59 'once stories' in relation to the research themes of identity and power. The software program Nvivo Pro 12 was used for data management.

4. Small Stories of Multiple and Mismatched Identities

Thematic and lexical analysis of the 'once stories' revealed patterns in how priests 'storied' their identity performances during this period of the local COVID-19 crisis. In telling a majority of these 'once stories', speakers opened with phrases such as *for example, you know, like* or *so* that indexed or linked the information to follow with elements of the preceding discussion. When telling these stories, the speakers usually used the first-person pronoun *I* to position themselves centrally within the interaction that was being recounted. The other characters in the stories were

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usually referred to as *they* and were positioned at a relational or situational distance from the speaker in terms of the actions or events that were discussed (Grossi and Gurney 2020). Occasionally other story characters were referred to with gendered pronouns such as *he/she* but this was infrequent.

In addition to the lexical structure of these stories, the analysis identified patterns in the ways and places in which priests storied the (re)negotiation of their identity and relational connections with their parishioners in light of the implementation of COVID-19 restrictions. Three key themes were identified and will be discussed in detail in the following sections. These themes related to (i) the impact on identities that were directly linked to changes in the places and times in which religion was practiced; (ii) (re)negotiation of identity as priests worked to be 'COVID Safe' and implement government regulations, and (iii) the performance of new and different identities as individuals modified their practices to incorporate regulations and to express solidarity with their communities. Embedded within these small stories were linguistic markers of loss and displacement that were linked to *both* the regulations and the requirement to implement the restrictions within local church communities. These stories were also marked with concern for the future of these communities and the likely lingering effects of the crisis.

4.1 Identity Work That Is Out of Place and Out of Time: Conflict and Disappointment

Documentary analysis has previously identified the fundamental importance of the dimensions of copresence, time and place to the fabric of religious communities (Bawidamann, *et al.*, 2021). These dimensions are linked to the performance of priests' identities as community leaders who draw people together to practice religion in specific sites and through these practices establish and maintain a sense of community coherence (Walker 2014). The impact of the limits on time

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and place associated with the COVID-19 restrictions were storied in relation to a change in identity of priests and a loss of links with both rituals and community members. These stories highlighted the connections between performative practices that expressed the identity of the priests and that linked rituals of the group (Collins 2004) and the places or sites associated with such practices. Interviewees repeatedly referred to the loss of certain rituals embedded within the Church service. The sharing of the bread and wine during the Eucharist, the sign of the peace and singing during the services were often noted within the stories priests told.

> *.. and you know ... people now can only receive the wafer at church, so they must come forward to where we're standing and receive the wafer and then go back to their pew and remove their mask in their pew and consume the wafers. So when we first started with the Covid they could sort of just, before we had masks they could stand in front of me and take and eat their wafer there but now you have to take it back to your pew. And so you see everybody walking back with a clasped hand with their wafer sitting in it. (Int_06[3])*

> *We also can't sing in church. Which some people have stayed away because they say, ah, you know, if we can't sing at church that's what we go for, you know. We also can't have we have bread and wine for communion. We can't have the wine, we just have the bread. So some people won't come because they can't have both. So I feel the weight of like I'm*

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[3] Details in parenthesis indicate the number of the interview that is the source for the extract, *e.g.*, Int_06 is an extract from interview number six.

letting people down because you can't do these things. But that's their choice, too. So we

can't sing, but we just say the words of songs. (Int_10)

The limits imposed on time and place to perform these identities were storied in terms of loss but also a change to the practice and purpose of religion itself. The stories often detailed the response of parishioners to this loss and the 'telling' of this loss to the priest:

For example, one of our parishioners loves to sing. Now, when we got back to church,

there are no hymns and that's affected him. Because he says to me every Sunday oh

father, can't we just have one hymn because he's got a lovely voice. He loves singing, so

that's affected him. (Int_08)

In addition to limited access to church sites, interviewees also illustrated that their identity of priest was enacted through the performance of these practices in other sites like hospitals and care homes which were extensions to the church and the parish community. Once again, these stories demonstrated a connection between the performance of the ritual practices of religion (such as prayer and Communion) and the comfort the priest sought to provide to these members of the community in a variety of places. The performance of these practices was tied to physical copresence even in these other sites. The loss of this opportunity was told in stories that indicated heightened emotion:

So the aged care had to close down. And I have five people in there who receive

communion on a regular basis. Well, the first time we were closed for I think for about 12

weeks. Then it reopened and then it closed again for about six weeks. And that upset…Well, I'm not saying upset, but that the people that were in the aged care facility really felt as though they were isolated from the parish and they saw me as the parish representing the parish. (Int_08)

A significant number of the 'once stories' focused on the loss of opportunity to perform the pastoral care aspects closely tied to the identity of the priests. The restriction of incidental interactions with community members were discussed in relation to the loss of time and availability:

It is because you are directed to leave the church and leave the grounds straightaway, not to linger and talk. (Int_06)

But they don't ring up and say, oh, father, I have this terrible problem I want to discuss. They as they're leaving, they say, oh my son was there all day today. And you're supposed to say, oh, yes, why was that? Oh, well, he just walked out on his wife and you know what I mean. (Int_02)

See, they don't know how their friend is in the church because I can't say to them when they say, well, I was like, Mary Smith, I can't I can't get there to tell them. They want to know how Mary is because they've been mates for years and years and years. (Int_08)

Despite this loss of the usual time and place of religious practice, priests told stories of trying to maintain communication and contact through new and alternative modes of communication including online and recorded services. The interviewees, however, described these new modes of communication as usable but lacking in terms of fulfilling the purpose of face-to-face contact within the context of religious practices. Additionally, some parishioners did not have access to computers so for those people it was not an alternative:

> *And they don't have access to a computer and a printer and they couldn't get their pews slip because I couldn't take it and give it to somebody because I touched it. (Int_08)*

These patterns in the once stories about time and place suggest that aspects of the priests' identity were closely tied to being able to perform or engage in religious practices in particular sites and at often unscheduled times with their parishioners. The COVID-19 regulations limited the ability of the priests to enact these practices, and this was storied in ways that suggest a sense of loss for the individual priests as well as concern for the breakdown of the community.

4.2 "We're COVID Safe" – Stories of Power and Identity at the Interface Between Government and Community

As with other community sites including schools, churches were directed to close altogether for a period of time and were then allowed to gradually reopen following a range of the governments' 'COVID Safe' guidelines (New South Wales Government 2021; Storen and Corrigan 2020). Interviewees told stories that about new roles and responsibilities that directly related to curtailing everyday religious practices to implement and demonstrate compliance with these

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government regulations. Interviewees generally accepted that the regulations were reasonable in the circumstances but that enforcing such rules and regulations conflicted with their established identities as priests within their communities and the need to perform unscheduled and relatively unstructured work. In contrast to the usually open and accessible nature of religious sites, priests had to work to restrict access and ensure compliance with regulations.

> *I've got a notice board at the front of the church now. So when people arrive there, it hits them, you know, "Are you well? We're COVID Safe" and things like that. And people just if they haven't come with their own mask they just walk in, sanitise, pick up a mask out of the box. (Int_06)*

This story and those that follow include new aspects of work involved in demonstrating compliance. This new work increased the volume of job tasks and introduced a degree of uncertainty in relation to what could be done, when and where:

> *For example, at the moment, we're unable to use our church for regular Sunday worship. We're having our services in the church hall because it gives us more flexibility about how to use the space and how to clean the chairs and all of the things that are that we're obliged to do. We have a team of volunteers who have done the majority of the work in health and safety planning around this. And they have a lot of communication that they have to do back and forth with a diocesan work, health and safety representative. And probably one of the hardest things about all of often these things are changing and*

evolving. So it's just keeping up, doing all the work of getting something in place. And then it changes again two weeks later. (Int_01)

These small stories suggest that during this time period the priests were predominantly enacting practices and identities associated with being enforcers of the rules associated with demonstrating adherence to COVID Safe guidelines. This was storied in ways that positioned the identity of the enforcer of rules as contradicting their identity as priests and pastoral carers. The examples given below illustrates this:

And, you know, the first thing I have to do in the service is like a flight attendant, you know, the escape things are here here and here or like wear your mask, sanitize your hands, don't touch each other. (Int_10)

So we will have a 45 we can only be at church for an hour. So we'll have a 45 minute service originally it'd take us an hour to clean everything after that service. I think we've got it down to half an hour now… we're quite pedantic about making sure it's okay for the next lot of users. So there's that as well, not being able to shake hands or hug at the door just to wave people through in one door, out the other. Thanks for coming. See you next time. Then it really is awkward and disconnected. (Int_10)

There were also stories describing conflict when priests were performing these new identities associated with enforcing government regulations particularly in places like churches, care homes and hospitals. The following stories show the contradiction and conflict between

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these identities that extended to instances of heightened tensions with members of the parish community:

> *And I think we had a fellow turn up Assistant Bishop [NAME] was at church three weeks ago and we're just about to go in and we have the masks on and we were standing there, in the foyer. And this younger man turned up, I suppose he was late thirties and he said, what's with the masks? And we didn't comment. And [NAME] said, welcome, come in. And I said, I grabbed the sign in sheets and said, Can I just have your name and number? (He said) I don't need permission from the government to go to church… that's about how we're kowtowing to the government conspiracies, and if this church does that, then it's not a church for him and this is quite confronting at the beginning of the service. (Int_05)*

> *And I said, OK, have you got the doctors' certificate? And they were like oh no we can just come in here anyway. I said, well, actually, you can't. And we've got to I'm going to shut this down until we can get this sorted out so. Well, that was a huge, huge kerfuffle and was really disappointing to have to do that. But like I said, I am the accountable person here and I have sort of flown the flag for them and saying, you know what, we need to keep you safe and like the conditions of entry on all our entrances. (Int_10)*

In recounting these stories, the priests draw attention to the times they had to enforce restrictions on gatherings at funerals. Again, the enforcement of these regulations brought with it contradiction and tension:

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But the strange thing is we were trying to limit it to the 25 and make sure it was only

family and a couple of people lied and said they were family as they went in and we sort

of just got to look at them and say, well I can't start an argument here. (Int_06)

The enforcement of regulations was storied in terms of increased workload as there were a

greater number of tasks and a need to find alternative ways of connecting with parishioners such

as through online services and newsletters. However, the stories of additional and different work

were not often repeated within the interviews. Of greater significance in relation to the

performance of identity, were the examples repeatedly given of enforcing these rules in sites and

places of religious activity. In terms of frequency discussed, key experiences involved enforcing

distances between worshippers during church services, stopping singing during services and not

allowing people to gather after services. Following these regulations detracted from the pastoral

care work of the priests and impacted upon feelings of community.

4.3 *Stories of Negotiating and Performing New and Different Identities*

In addition to small stories that showed evidence of identity work linked to limitations on time,

place and copresence, interviewees also told stories about performing new practices to express

solidarity with members of their communities. In these stories, priests talked about how they

adapted regulations beyond what was considered necessary for the benefit of community

cohesion and solidarity. Some stories also illustrated attempts to foreground care and community

concern even in the restricted context. For example, one priest told a story about deciding to have

all people at church sit one and a half meters apart even after the restriction had been partially

lifted. In this story, the priest described their awareness of the loss of community and the desire to reduce the way in which the isolation of individuals could be made more visible through the enforcement of social distancing regulations:

So one of the rules of church is that families can now sit together in groups. But the original entry level for us to get in was that chairs had to be four square metres apart. Well, but the rules have changed so that family groups, if you live under the one roof, you can still you can sit in your family group. But we've made the decision to keep all the chairs in the one point five metres apart from each other, because we have a lot of elderly people at church who are on their own. And we thought, what would life be like for that person living on their own in this virus to then have to come to church and see families sitting together, but they have to sit on their own? (Int_10)

Similarly, another interviewee told how they chose to wear a face mask at times as a material demonstration of their membership of the congregation:

you know, I'm I'm not up behind the altar so I'm like probably five or six meters away from everybody else. But I thought while we're listening to the readings then if I put that on, that shows that I'm part of them. I'm not exclusive. I'm not special because I'm up in the sanctuary, sort of thing. (Int_05)

Within these stories was a pattern of concern for the community and future of the church parish. The identities and relations that bound the communities together were damaged and altered by

the restrictions and thus new connections needed to be formed. Just as some priests told stories of adapting regulations to demonstrate a sense of community solidarity, others told stories of concern about if and how the parish would reform after the crisis had passed. The multiple 'losses' suffered by the community were predicted to have a lasting but unknown impact:

You know, even when people say ah well we'll get out soon and it will be alright. People say well it might be alright there but it's not going to go back to normal. (Int_02)

There was also, however, an optimism within some stories that was linked to the potential for the priests to rebalance their identities of priest and community leader even within the regulated environment. This optimism was linked to physical copresence:

it's very sterile now. You know, it's you can't there's just not a whole lot of things to, you know, with the singing, there's no music or it's all a bit flat, I guess. But when we first met together, when we still meet together, the real joy was just in being together again. After three months of not being able to see each other, that was absolute joy. (Int_10)

5. Concluding Comments: Small Stories about a Crisis of Community and Identity

The small stories analysis that I have discussed in this article details instances of times and places in which priests negotiated identity and power relations during these months of the COVID-19 crisis. Taken together these stories draw out the tension and stress experienced by the interviewees who contended with disruption to the fundamental links of place, time and copresence that define their religious communities. It is of note that the nature of the virus and

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regulatory responses changed the balance of their identities. During this period the priests' role in enforcing government regulations was foregrounded.

Considering the small stories that these priests told about their experiences of identity work during this period highlights considerations for the future recovery of these parish communities as well as social groups more broadly. Some interviewees raised concerns that the fundamental disruption to their parish communities in terms of the loss of collective worship made reforming and returning to the community after the crisis less likely. There were also risks associated with the role the priests had taken on in terms of implementing government regulations and the tension this evoked with members of the community who were sceptical and distrustful of this new position. Priests also told small stories about identity disruption and negotiation, conflict and loss. Optimistically, however, there were also stories of adapting identities to build a new solidarity with parishioners and to begin processes of reconnecting their communities within a 'COVID Safe' context.

I have argued in this article that the narrative analysis of small stories offers unique insights into how this global health crisis has impacted the identity work of individuals. Rather than focusing on broader questions of what happened, analysis of these small stories facilitates consideration of *how* the crisis unfolded for this group of individual priests. This granular analysis shows how the global crisis became a lived, embodied experience for individuals. Additionally, using this framework for analysis draws attention to how the policies of government that were formulated in response to the health crisis translated out and into the lives of individual priests and their communities. This type of analysis underscores the pervasiveness of the crisis and the impact on communities even in the relative absence of the virus and disease itself. This approach to narrative analysis and its focus on small stories has limitations in terms

of its representation of the crisis beyond the local context of the research. Despite this limitation, the analysis of the small stories told by this group of Christian priests provides novel insights into how organisations were co-opted into the crisis response and the impact this had on the identities of individuals and their relationships with their communities.

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