

Relationship Management in Closed Structures: A Case Study of Psychological Abuse in Religious Communities*

Katarzyna BANC¹, Monika GUT-WINIARSKA² and Jacek WINIARSKI³

¹Gdansk, Poland

²University of Business and Administration; Poland

³University of Gdansk, Faculty of Economics; Gdansk, Poland

Correspondence should be addressed to: Katarzyna BANC, katarzyna.banc@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study investigates relationship management mechanisms in closed religious structures that facilitate psychological and spiritual abuse, examining their impact on women's decisions to leave religious communities and subsequent psychological consequences. While previous research has documented psychological effects of spiritual abuse, there remains a significant void in analyzing specific organizational relationship management practices that either facilitate or prevent psychological violence in closed religious institutions. This study addresses this gap by examining how formal hierarchy, ritualization, and religious language function as tools of control and exclusion rather than spiritual growth. A mixed-methods study of 275 former nuns from Polish religious communities was conducted using an original diagnostic survey comprising demographics, a 25-item Community Experiences Scale measuring psychological abuse frequency on a 5-point Likert scale, and qualitative open-ended responses. Data were analyzed using correlation analysis, ANOVA, t-tests, and thematic analysis, collected via online platform from November 2023 to February 2024. Results revealed a significant positive correlation between length of stay and psychological abuse levels ($r = 0.166$, $p = 0.009$). Women leaving after perpetual vows experienced significantly higher abuse than those departing earlier ($t = 2.78$, $p = 0.007$, Cohen's $d \approx 0.65$). A strong correlation emerged between relational abuse and resolution of physical symptoms post-departure ($p = 0.449$, $p < 0.001$), indicating psychosomatic manifestations of chronic stress. These findings demonstrate how spiritual authority mechanisms designed for growth become instruments of systematic oppression, providing critical insights for organizational psychology and religious institution reform.

Keywords: organizational dysfunctions, closed structures, relationship management, power relations