

## Article

# The Politics of Vulnerability Concerning Sexual and Spiritual Abuse in the Catholic Church

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**Abstract:** This article addresses methodological approaches to the study of vulnerable cohorts with specific attention to definitions of the term vulnerability. In particular, it investigates the issue of adults, particularly women, who have experienced abuse in the Catholic Church. Relevant analysis in this area is primarily interdisciplinary-based research and includes sociological and psychological perspectives and theological and historical analysis. This article critically analyzes the current definitions of vulnerability in Church and research contexts, and the methodological approaches utilized in defining vulnerable cohorts. It argues that specific ethical principles and methodological strategies are required to safeguard participants and researchers guided by the principles of feminist ethics. These include (1) attention to the uses and definitions of key terms by participants and researchers; (2) identifying the positionality of researchers as central to an ethical standpoint including their exposure to secondary trauma; and (3) establishing inclusive methods such as participatory research and sensitive recruitment. Paying attention to ongoing issues experienced by cohorts identified as vulnerable in research, including the stigmatization of their status, marginalization of their cases, and trauma of disclosure alongside ongoing risk assessment, is central to the research design process.



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## 1. Introduction

When researching the sexual abuse of adults in the Catholic Church,<sup>1</sup> it quickly becomes clear that vulnerable/vulnerability is a key concept. The term is used across different fields of inquiry, sometimes with differing meanings. This article aims to critically evaluate the ways in which discourses of vulnerability have been utilized in empirical research concerning adult women who are survivors of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, including the social and ethical implications of such usage. We identify research design and the methodological approach as key areas where the relationship between researcher and participant are established and understood. We question how vulnerability is framed in abuse research and argue that the establishment of appropriate and ethical methodological principles is essential when investigating cohorts identified as vulnerable. Ensuring that social research is ethical and just is a central indicator of effective and responsible contributions to knowledge. We argue that specific ethical principles and methodological strategies are required to safeguard participants and researchers and produce ethically

sensitive and just research. These include (1) attention to the uses and definitions of key terms by participants and researchers, especially the term ‘vulnerable’; (2) sensitivity to culturally specific uses of terms and social practices; (3) identification of the positionality of researchers as central to an ethical standpoint including their exposure to secondary trauma; and (4) the establishment of inclusive methods such as participatory research and sensitive recruitment.

This article engages with the politics of vulnerability and aims to interject in the current dominant discourse which situates affected women as inherently vulnerable. It proposes a new methodological approach that situates this discourse within a feminist ethics of care.

## 2. Method of Analysis

To further understandings of the ways in which adult victims of sexual abuse have been positioned in the Catholic Church and research discourses we begin with a review of the central texts and literature in which vulnerability is constructed and operationalized. We identify the term’s problematic use in Church contexts and assess the implications for victim-survivors. Examples from Australian and German safeguarding contexts demonstrate how texts can construe adult victims of sexual abuse as embodying qualities of weakness and disadvantage resulting from abuse. We show this construction situates victims in a narrow band of definition and is thus inadequate. Indeed, approaches that use a criterion of vulnerability based on individualized inherent qualities, reproduce unequal and inaccurate understandings of the power relations at play in discourses of abuse.

Utilizing discourses of abuse, we then critically analyze the idea that vulnerability is individual and related to notions of inherent weakness. We show how such an understanding produces an analysis that fails to recognize the complexity of power relations at play and embeds vulnerability in the research design and methodological approach. This means that the assumption that prevails is one where victims have individualized qualities of vulnerability that can be uncovered and discovered by the researcher who themselves are outside of the paradigm of constructions of what it means to be vulnerable.

Our framework of analysis is based on a systemic-situational praxis which understands vulnerability as a socially constructed discourse embedded in power relations, institutional practices, dominant voices, and unequal outcomes. That is, the current dominant use and understandings of vulnerability across Church institutions and in research agendas reproduces inequality and knowledge which continues to impact and marginalize victim-survivors. Research agendas must be critically analyzed and re-positioned in order to identify the experiences of victims of sexual abuse, recognize how systems of power locate victims as vulnerable, and understand the consequences and impacts of such approaches.

We argue that a systemic-situational framework provides the means to achieve a more equitable and ethical form of research practice. Herein, the discourse of vulnerability is key to this outcome, and we examine its use in relation to ethical research practice. We conclude with an account of the challenges and ethical implications of the process of researching Catholic Women Religious (CWR; also known as nuns, religious sisters) affected by sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

## 3. Definitions of Vulnerability

The term vulnerability is a prominent term in ethical discourses that discuss the origins and application of morality, matters of responsibility, and care. At the same time, vulnerability is an important term in research ethics where the investigation of ‘vulnerable cohorts’ demands specific ethical standards and safeguarding measures for research subjects (Coors 2022; Christmann et al. 2018). In the research of victims-survivors of sexual violence and abuse it is common to speak of a ‘vulnerable cohort’ (Christmann et al. 2018) and

apply the corresponding ethical standards (e.g., [Poelchau et al. \(2015\)](#) for the abuse of minors in pedagogical settings; *Australian Code for Responsible Conduct of Research* ([NHMRC et al. 2018](#))). In our research concerning adult women who are survivors of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, the question arises as to what extent should affected women be understood as a vulnerable cohort and what are the implications of this labeling for our research. We now review how the term vulnerability is defined in the research literature.

### 3.1. 'Vulnerability' in Research Ethics

The term 'vulnerability' began to appear in discussions of research ethics in the biomedical field in the 1970s, implying a special need for the protection of specific groups ([Coors 2022](#); [van den Hoonaard 2018](#)). Whereas the early use of the term lacked definitional detail, later studies in the field of medicine and healthcare defined vulnerability as a limitation in autonomy and an inability to take care of one's own interests ([Coors 2022](#); with regard to [CIOMS 2002](#); [Hurst 2008](#)). This understanding of vulnerability, focused mainly on deficiencies, has been justifiably critiqued. Cordula Dittmer and Daniel Lorenz ([Dittmer and Lorenz 2018](#)) advise caution, "It is precisely in the scientific construction of helpless vulnerabilities, which research ethics claims to be oriented towards, that a scientific distancing is revealed that undermines any authentic recognition and reciprocity between researchers and research subjects from the outset".<sup>2</sup> Such an understanding of vulnerability underlines and cements a power imbalance between researchers and participants, rendering the latter as objects of research.

In its present usage, how certain groups are determined 'vulnerable' in research ethics is centered around a concern for their well-being and safety. However, differences in definitions of 'vulnerability' have the potential to impact relations between researchers and participants and the extent and form of measures placed to safeguard certain cohorts. Indeed, the designation of 'vulnerability' can result in the opposite of what is intended, affirming and enlarging vulnerability instead of ensuring protection and safety ([van den Hoonaard 2018](#)); this phenomenon is called 'vulnerabilization' ([Keul 2024a, 2024b](#)).

### 3.2. 'Vulnerability' in Research Settings

In the social sciences, the concept of vulnerability as situational and relational is more prominent. For example, [Luna \(2009\)](#) purports "This concept of vulnerability is a relational one. That is, it concerns the relation between the person or a group of persons and the circumstances or the context. It is closely related to the situation under analysis. It is not a category or a label we can just put on" (p. 129). Here, vulnerability is defined from the position, the person or group has in a specific situation and relational setting. Vulnerability is not an essentialist attribute of a person but, as [von Köppen et al. \(2020\)](#) state, "is viewed as something that arises from a socially constructed, structural disadvantage" (p. 23). In studies on the sexual abuse of adults in the Catholic Church, similar definitions exist. For instance, in an Australian study, [De Weger and Death \(2017\)](#) distinguish between "positional and personal vulnerabilities" (p. 139). In this context, positional vulnerability refers to the situation of victims in society, influenced by, for example, gender, or the positionality of those seeking pastoral care from a priest. By contrast, personal vulnerability refers to, for example, previously experienced trauma or stressful life situations of the individual. [McPhillips and McEwan \(2022\)](#) identify the various forms of vulnerability that CWR are embedded in, and the ways their positionality has been appropriated by clerical power.

Understanding vulnerability as a response that has both situational and relational aspects invites a critical reflection of the research setting as a significant site for the construction of vulnerability. For instance, [Christmann et al. \(2018\)](#) defines the vulnerability

of their cohort (minors that experienced sexual abuse) directly in relation to the research method. They claim, “these individuals are particularly vulnerable to the potentially damaging effects of participating in research, such as re-traumatization” (Christmann et al. 2018). From this position, research is understood as a potentially dangerous site for victims (Iphofen 2009), with the researchers being aware of the potential power imbalance and their responsibility towards participants. Such an understanding of vulnerability has led to higher ethical requirements for research and independent evaluations by research committees. Indeed, research with vulnerable groups should be justified and combined with appropriate safety measures. For example, the availability of information on psychological support services, time limits for interviews, or scheduled breaks in the interview process.

There is some critical debate around the impact of research on participants. One such argument is that positive outcomes for participants are not taken into account. For example, van den Hoonaard (2018) contends that the interview process can help participants make sense of their own experiences and achieve some public awareness of their possibly marginalized reality. Other scholars maintain participants’ agency is denied when there is too much emphasis on inequalities in power relations between researchers and participants and possible damages to participants through research processes. They hold that participants are not helplessly exposed to the interview situation but may actively shape it to their own advantage. For instance, Russell (1999) shows how elderly people demonstrated agency by guiding the interviewer towards topics they feel more comfortable with, using the interview for their own interests; they made the most of having someone who listens to them and tried to find a companion in them (pp. 409–14). Further, van den Hoonaard (2018) asserts participants might be more resilient than researchers anticipate. Thirdly, by focusing only on the vulnerability of the participants and the risks research might constitute for them, the vulnerability of the researchers and their well-being tends to be left out of ethical discussions and the research design. This objection underlines that not only are participants understood as vulnerable but so are the researchers (van den Hoonaard 2018; Dickson-Swift et al. 2008).

Broader ethical discourses also critique concepts of vulnerability centered on the deficiency of the ‘vulnerable’ subject and provide support for a definition of vulnerability as a situational and relational category. For example, Gilson (2022) conceives concepts of vulnerability centered on a deficient subject as committed to a liberal logic. She contests a failure to question the dynamics of power that determine who is vulnerable and who is not and asserts a need to shift responsibility to vulnerable persons who, in being aware of their own deficiencies, have to take care of their own safety and well-being (Gilson 2022). Contributions from feminist ethics and philosophy propose a different kind of understanding.

### 3.3. ‘Vulnerability’ in Feminist Ethics and Philosophy

In an analysis of the precarity of populations who lack recognizability in institutions, structures, and systems, Butler (2018, 2020) investigates vulnerability as a theoretical construct. Butler (2018, 2020) argues that when a person is not recognized or counted as a self, the result is a type of bodily vulnerability shaped by the discursive relations that either constitute or exclude that body. Herein, vulnerability should not be seen merely as a subjective state, but rather as a constructed element of shared or independent lives (Butler 2020). This perspective proposes that vulnerability arises from how people are valued or devalued in a particular system of power. Accordingly, vulnerability is thus not a deliberate choice but a reaction to normative power that exists before any possibility of self-definition or action. This does not imply that vulnerability equates to passivity. Within the process of performing a certain identity, new or unexpected formulations of

identity can emerge as a response to any norms assigned (Butler 2018). Butler (2020) clarifies the following: “Vulnerability ought not to be identified exclusively with passivity; it makes sense only in light of an embodied set of social relations, including practices of resistance. A view of vulnerability as part of embodied social relations and actions can help us understand how and why forms of resistance emerge as they do” (p. 131). There exists an interdependence between the condition of vulnerability and the structures and systems that create it. Butler (2020) explains “the relational understanding of vulnerability shows that we are not altogether separable from the conditions that make our lives possible or impossible” (p. 39). Vulnerability is part of a relational system, a denial of subjectivity, which infers vulnerability, also produces a certain mode of agency. Butler (2020) states, “We are never simply vulnerable, but always vulnerable to a situation ... a social structure, something upon which we rely and in relation to which we are exposed ... To be dependent implies vulnerability ... If that is so, we are not talking here about my vulnerability or yours, but rather a feature of the relation that binds us to one another and to the larger structures and institutions” (p. 46). Butler does not understand vulnerability as something that is added to a person’s constitution, as if there were a pre-existing untouched integrity. Instead, for Butler, vulnerability is a basic component of human existence and a social construct at the same time.

The theologian and ethicist Haker (2020) also addresses the complex interrelations between vulnerability and agency. She argues against undifferentiated and one-sided assessments of those affected by abuse, which either recognize their agency and at the same time place the responsibility for the acts of abuse on them or emphasize their vulnerability and present them as purely passive victims (Haker 2020). Instead, Haker (2020) asserts that an inherent ontological vulnerability is common to every human being. “Ontological vulnerability refers to human’s affectability as the ‘openness to the world’ as part of the human condition. Vulnerability stresses the risk that affectability and openness entails” (Haker 2020, p. 139). Haker (2020) differentiates between two further dimensions of vulnerability. Firstly, the possibility of being violated by others, which she calls moral vulnerability, and secondly, structural vulnerability, which illustrates the influence that institutions and structural conditions can have on our ability to act (Haker 2020). In the case of sexual abuse, both women’s moral and structural vulnerability are exploited. Even though Haker (2020) understands vulnerability as an openness to particularities that might harm and limit human agency, she also maintains that vulnerability and agency are not to be understood as opposed to each other. Since a certain vulnerability is common to all human beings, they are necessarily intertwined and there is no agency without vulnerability. Haker (2020) thus refers to ‘vulnerable agency’.

The implications of definitions by Butler and Haker raise important questions for the research process. For example, in Butler’s account, how does the attribution of the term vulnerability influence who is understood as a possible research subject in the field of the sexual abuse of adult women in the Catholic Church and who is not? With Haker comes the consideration of the interrelations of vulnerability and agency. How do different understandings of vulnerability distribute agency between research participants and researchers? And how do conceptions of vulnerability contribute to constructing and enforcing or deconstructing power relations in the research setting?

Some of these questions have been addressed in the context of theology and religious studies. Indeed, vulnerability has become a key concept in the broader analysis of abuse and studies of abuse in the Catholic Church (Gilson 2021; Cahill 2021; Keul 2021a; Leimgruber 2022). For instance, Keul (2021b) theorizes a contrast between vulnerability, weakness, insecurity, and passivity on the one hand and security, reliability, resilience, and strength on the other is far too simplistic. De Weger and Death (2017) contend that “clergy sexual



misconduct against adults (CSMAA) within ... the Roman Catholic Church ... does not occur because there is a vulnerable adult but, rather, because there is an abusive cleric willing to misuse their powers to abuse adult vulnerabilities" (p. 129). They assert that not only personal vulnerabilities (e.g., the talk of 'people in need of protection and help') but also pastoral power relations should be included in analysis. This is the only way to place responsibility where it lies, with the perpetrators.

In response to these questions, some scholars have introduced the neologism 'vulnerance' into the discourse (Keul 2021a, 2021b; Leimgruber 2022) to explain the systemic-situational framework of vulnerability. The term vulnerance avoids the difficulties that arise with regard to vulnerability by de-individualizing the context and including overall systemic factors. We will come back to this concept in more detail in Section 5.

#### 4. Deconstruction: The Meaning of 'Vulnerable Persons' in Church Texts

The extent to which adults can be accepted as victims of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church remains controversial. Typically, children and adolescents are identified as victims of sexual abuse with adults less often in the focus. This is especially so in Church law and safeguarding documents, where the textual and definitional focus is primarily on minors. However, almost all documents also mention adults, albeit within certain restrictions. In other words, it is accepted that adults become victims of sexual abuse in the Church, but only under the following conditions: if they are 'vulnerable', and in rarer cases, if they become 'vulnerable'. This is problematic as it identifies vulnerability as a condition belonging to the victim.

##### 4.1. Vatican Texts

This is particularly evident in the following two Vatican documents:

(a) The Apostolic Letter "Vos estis lux mundi" (Pope Francis [2019] 2023) regulates the procedures for preventing and combating sexual abuse in the Church. In the first and the latest 2023 version, "Vos estis lux mundi" explicitly mentions 'vulnerable persons', regardless of age, as potential victims of sexual abuse within the scope of the relevant norms. Herein, a 'vulnerable adult' "means any person in a state of infirmity, physical or mental deficiency, or deprivation of personal liberty which, in fact, even occasionally, limits their ability to understand or to want or otherwise resist the offence" (Art. 1 §1 a, § 2 b). Therefore, in order to be classified as 'vulnerable', an adult must be in a state of physical or mental deficiency.

(b) The 2021 revision of Church law (the codes of canon law) follows a similar line of thought (cf. Hahn 2022). Herein, the sexual abuse of minors is reclassified as a criminal offense against human life, dignity, and freedom (Can. 1397–1398). In a close reading, both the abuse of minors and adults is addressed by these rules, on the condition that the adult has a certain deficiency, as follows: a "person who habitually has an imperfect use of reason or with one to whom the law recognizes equal protection" (Can. 1398 § 1, 1). Even though the revised Canon does not refer to 'vulnerable persons' directly—as does "Vos estis lux mundi"—it similarly requires an imperfect use of reason or 'equal protection', which typically refers to the protection of people with mental or physical disabilities. Accordingly, if adults are not in a deficient state, they are not included under the specific protection of these revised norms.

Reading these Catholic Church documents, it can be stated that they almost exclusively focus on an essentialist understanding of vulnerability that is inherent in the person, presenting no understanding which generates vulnerability systemically or situationally (Luna 2009; von Köppen et al. 2020; Leimgruber 2022, 2024; Haslbeck et al. 2020). Adults are assigned the status 'vulnerable', and thus, in the sense of the relevant documents,

they must fulfill a requirement in order to be considered victims of sexual abuse. The Church's recognition of abuse victims follows a particular logic as follows: the person who is recognized as a victim of sexual abuse must differ in a certain way from the 'normal, non-vulnerable adult'. Just as children and adolescents can be classified as victims of sexual abuse solely on the basis of their age, adults must therefore have a similar 'characteristic' or 'attribute'. Given this, sexual violence against adults which does not fall under the Vatican's definition of 'vulnerable' cannot be considered sexual abuse but only a violation of the special obligations of the clergy (1395 §3; [CIC 1983](#)), and consequently, the victims would not be considered harmed ([Hahn 2022](#)).

#### 4.2. Regional Norms for Germany and Australia

In other documents of the Catholic Church, the meaning of vulnerability is less essentialist and more systemic. Here, we include two examples (from Germany and Australia) that allow for a more nuanced understanding.

(a) The German Bishops' Conference document "Ordnung für den Umgang mit sexuellem Missbrauch Minderjähriger und schutz- oder hilfebedürftiger Erwachsener durch Kleriker und sonstige Beschäftigte im kirchlichen Dienst (Interventionsordnung)" (Regulation for dealing with the sexual abuse of minors and of vulnerable adults by clergy and other Church staff) ([German Bishops' Conference \[2019\] 2022b](#); equally [German Bishops' Conference 2019](#)) refers to "minors and vulnerable adults".<sup>3</sup> In addition to the essentialist understanding, the text expands the definition of "vulnerable" to "persons who are subject to a special relationship of power and/or dependence. Such relationship can also exist or arise in a pastoral context" ([German Bishops' Conference \[2019\] 2022b](#), No. 3). Herein the bishops apply a systemic view on vulnerability which they understand as being produced in power and dependency relationships. This allows for the possibility of asymmetries evolving in pastoral care. Adults are therefore particularly vulnerable when they find themselves in such situations—regardless of their physical or mental condition. However, while the regulation recognizes this systemic construction of vulnerability, it fails to formulate it as a clear and legally effective factor with regard to sexual abuse. This ultimately re-subordinates vulnerability to the guiding perspective of individual subjectivity, which can lead to difficulties in the concrete application of the legal order. Nevertheless, the discussion of these difficulties in Germany has led to a further clarification by the bishops. The German Bishops' Conference document "In der Seelsorge schlägt das Herz der Kirche" (In pastoral care beats the heart of the Church) ([German Bishops' Conference 2022a](#)) states, "It should be remembered here that in a pastoral care relationship ... sexual contact can never be described as consensual and can never be tolerated. This is because the pastoral care relationship, like other professional educational, medical or therapeutic relationships, involves a power imbalance and thus a dependency in which the pastors are granted authority, skills and competencies that are intended to help the person seeking pastoral care". This describes the power imbalances within the pastoral care setting which can facilitate sexual abuse and refrains from diagnosing vulnerabilities on the part of the care seekers. Furthermore, it determines sexual abuse in pastoral care settings analogically to sexual abuse in medical, therapeutic, or educational contexts, which involves persecution under Church and state criminal laws ([Leimgruber 2023a](#)). The clarity of this statement is only clouded by the fact that its implementation is in reference to the above-mentioned regulation for dealing with the sexual abuse of minors and of vulnerable adults by the clergy and other Church staff.

(b) A similar systemic understanding can be observed in the *Australian National Catholic Safeguarding Standards* ([ACSLTD 2022](#)). The Standards, which were initially created in 2018–2019 in response to recommendations from the Australia's *Royal Commission into Institutional*

*Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* (2012–2017) with a focus on safeguarding children, have been expanded to incorporate the concept of safeguarding adults (ACSLTD 2022, p. 5; RCIRCSA 2017). The Standards state that “Every person has the right to be protected from harm, to be listened to, to be taken seriously, and to have a say in matters that affect them” (ACSLTD 2022, p. 8), while also acknowledging that “some adults experience greater vulnerability than others” (ACSLTD 2022, p. 8). Vulnerabilities are recognized as both situational and related to particular (permanent or transient) physical or mental conditions (as per “Vos estis lux mundi”). The document defines and uses the terms ‘adults at risk’ and ‘adults with diminished capacity’ interchangeably to signal situational risk factors, with the loci of vulnerability located in individual identity or life-stage characteristics (e.g., diverse sexuality, diverse cultural or linguistic background, homelessness) (ACSLTD 2022, pp. 40, 47) rather than a particular setting. Therefore, while the Standards recognize both individual and situational constructions of vulnerability, they do not give adequate attention to the way that vulnerability is produced in power and dependency asymmetries which can evolve in pastoral care and other Church-based settings. In short, they fail to identify Church settings as a situational risk factor. This puts Church organizations at risk of repeating patterns of abuse with poor oversight from internal and state sources (McPhillips 2020).

#### 4.3. Consequences and Impacts

The consequences of differing definitions and understandings of vulnerability for those affected by sexual abuse are profound and far-reaching. For example, in the case of Ellen Adler, who reported being abused by clergy as a young adult (Haslbeck et al. 2020), differing decisions by two German dioceses were reported in 2021. One diocese issued a statement asserting that it was “very doubtful whether the person concerned was a vulnerable person in need of protection”, effectively deciding that the incident did not qualify as sexual abuse under ecclesiastical norms. This meant that Ellen Adler would not be recognized as a victim of sexual abuse in that diocese; meanwhile, the other diocese had decided otherwise. Keul (2021a) describes this as a “repression of vulnerability” (p. 106), stating that people are reluctant to confront vulnerability and instead choose to deny, downplay, or conceal it.

The lack of comprehensive frameworks and/or the narrow scope of existing regional concepts addressing the sexual abuse of adults in pastoral care creates fertile ground for hermeneutical injustices (Fricker 2007). Church laws often fail to adequately reflect the lived experiences of victims, such as Ellen Adler. As a result, testimonies of sexual abuse are frequently dismissed. Catholic Church officials interpret these accounts through a specific hermeneutic lens, enabling them to apply regulations and laws in a manner that can frame incidents not as sexual abuse, but merely as violations of celibacy—frequently to the detriment of the victims’ interests. When Church officials reject claims of sexual abuse, the consequences for the survivors are severe. For instance, rejections of claims can lead to the denial of financial compensation, a lack of accountability for perpetrators, and, symbolically, a repetition of the abuse. By dismissing survivors’ accounts, the Catholic Church can undermine the agency of the affected people, invalidating their perceptions and perpetuating the harm inflicted upon them.

Another important aspect is that this lack of recognition extends beyond Church leadership. Survivors themselves often require time to identify their experiences as sexual abuse. This delay can partly be attributed to psychological mechanisms, such as denial or the suppression of traumatic memories. However, it is also influenced by the following hermeneutical issue: when language or conceptual frameworks to understand what constitutes sexual abuse are not available, those affected are prevented from making sense of



their experiences (Fricker 2007; Hürten 2025; Hürten and Leimgruber 2024). Without these tools, they may misinterpret their experiences, internalize guilt, and assume responsibility for the abuse, which further hinders them from seeking the support they need (McEwan 2025; McPhillips et al. 2022).

## 5. Our Conceptual Framework: Vulnerance—A Situational-Systemic Approach

We assert that regulations which define ‘vulnerable adults’ in a limited, essentialist way as possible victims of sexual abuse are inadequate. This narrow understanding of vulnerability has been critiqued elsewhere (Heyder and Leimgruber 2020; Leimgruber 2022, 2023b). In the following sections we propose and conceptualize a situational-systemic approach for researching cases of the sexual abuse of adults that is premised on a feminist ethical approach to vulnerability.

### 5.1. Vulnerability Beyond the Label ‘Vulnerable Person’—Vulnerability as a Social Construct

As we have argued above, in the context of abuse in the Catholic Church, vulnerability is predominantly understood as an individualized and essentialized concept (e.g., Vatican texts and Church law), with systemic factors generally ignored or ‘added in’ to the central definition (e.g., German regulation and ACSLTD). Institutional regulations do not take the necessary step of effectively addressing situations of unequal power that create the conditions of vulnerability and its multiple impacts. Furthermore, the focus on the victims’ vulnerability (or their ‘need for protection and help’ and/or their personal deficiencies) is an inadequate approach to understanding the conditions in which adults experience sexual abuse. We assert that the texts show an inherent contrast between vulnerable (as ‘in need of protection’) and non-vulnerable (as ‘not in need of protection’) and produce exclusions of certain supposedly ‘non-vulnerable’ people. Further, they also inscribe a dangerous essentialization of the concept of a victim in the discourse of sexual abuse. We critique the label ‘vulnerable person/adult’ and propose a conceptualization of vulnerability understood in its complexities, accounting for individual and institutional aspects and interdependencies. For example, Fernández (2021) maintains “Vulnerability is not to be seen as a deficiency of the disciple, but a necessary condition of discipleship, which always implies an asymmetrical relationship. Actually, the assumption that the victims may have been abused because of their psychological deficiencies is rejected by scientific research. Hence, adult victims should not be labeled as ‘vulnerable adults’” (p. 8).

A shift in focus away from the condition of the adult victims of sexual abuse as ‘vulnerable’ and a turn towards the *vulnerance* of the systemic conditions and the situations in which ‘vulnerability’ arises permits a situational-systemic methodological approach that has the capacity to locate agency and resilience with both researcher and participant.

### 5.2. Vulnerance and Situationally Constructed Vulnerability

We have shown that there are various approaches to the concept of vulnerability. Most claim vulnerability arises in and out of a situation, for example, out of hierarchies, exclusions, barriers, and dependencies. For instance, a person might be particularly vulnerable in one situation but not in another. This is true of all people. To capture the complex contexts of constructed vulnerability in situations of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and to name the risk constellations that produce vulnerabilities, we use the neologism *vulnerance*.

The term *vulnerance* was originally introduced to abuse research by Keul (2021a) and has been used in the discourse ever since (Keul 2021b; Leimgruber 2022, 2024). While vulnerability refers to the susceptibility of individuals, groups, or systems (i.e., personal

and positional) and thus expresses a more passive component, *vulnerance* refers to the active capacity to injure. *Vulnerance* “concerns the personal-existential level (confessor, pastor), but also the institutional, systemic level (Church, institution, religious community, family)” (Karl 2021, p. 172). Vulnerability and *vulnerance* are not mutually exclusive polarities. People in the Church, and especially in pastoral care, are in asymmetrical power relations. Pastoral care is never simply harmless, healing, and helpful. On the contrary, it is a misunderstanding that pastoral care is per se healing and helpful. Pastoral care is a relationship between two unequal people in a system that has its own unequal power factors. These asymmetries create serious structural *vulnerance* (Leimgruber 2022). That means pastoral care relationships are *vulnerant*, and the people in them are *vulnerable* because of the *vulnerant* situation in which they find themselves (and not only because of their individualized, essentialist deficiencies). The moment a person enters a pastoral care relationship with a priest or a spiritual counselor, they are in an inherently *vulnerant* context, and therefore, they are in a state of *situationally constructed vulnerability*.

Accordingly, *vulnerance* lies in the Catholic Church as an institution, in its theologies and in the pastoral situation itself—beyond any personal interdependencies. *Vulnerances* exist in the complexity of different intersecting realities (pastor–client–pastoral situation/systemic condition–cultural conditions etc.). Different forms of social and pastoral interactions in the Church reveal a power to harm that facilitates certain forms of abuse for pastors, clergy, and lay people in power positions. Any essentialist focus on a ‘vulnerable person’ falls far short. Intersectionality is key and individual, socio-cultural and gender identities alongside theological and institutional standpoints must be considered when it comes to understanding vulnerability and *vulnerance*.

Any reflections on the situational-systemic *vulnerance* of pastoral care settings and other Church practices must be integrated theologically and institutionally into the discourse about abuse; otherwise, they lead to overcoming the simplistic juxtaposition of a vulnerable victim on the one hand and a violent (individual) perpetrator on the other (Hallay-Witte 2020). Abuse always takes place in a context that is ambiguous, characterized by power and dependencies, and is therefore potentially violent. In the discourse about the systematic background of abusive acts, this is a factor that should not be underestimated. There is no such thing as an ‘innocent’ pastoral situation; no pastoral relationship takes place ‘on an equal footing’. In other words, it is not simply a matter of categorizing the vulnerability of the persons involved, then recognizing it accordingly, and then (paternalistically) ‘protecting’ the affected person. As necessary as the protection of particularly vulnerable people is, with regard to the abuse of adults, it falls short when it stops at that. The mistake lies in separating the situation from the people involved or seeing the people involved independently of the situation.

We argue that it is crucial to recognize that vulnerabilities stem from *specific risk constellations*. When pastoral care workers fail to act appropriately with trauma sensitivity, when they exploit their hierarchical position for personal gain, or when theological authorities lack adequate understanding, vulnerability, as well as *vulnerance*, is activated. Prevention policies that overlook these risk constellations and instead rely on a limited, essentialist notion of a ‘vulnerable’ adult person contribute to a higher risk of harm in pastoral settings.

Vulnerability is not merely inherent but is constructed, shaped by prevailing images and assumptions about certain cohorts or groups. With adult victims in Church settings, it is often suggested that they were not vulnerable. As a result, they are not seen as victims of abuse in the first place (Hürten and Leimgruber 2024). As Leimgruber (2024) states, “The fact that adult victims—mainly women—were not seen is also due to a further, systemic level of invisibility. This is caused by the need to prove one’s own vulnerability and victimhood in a special way” (p. 117) This underscores how those who define vulnerability also

influence which risks become visible or remain hidden. The danger inherent in Church practices is not addressed when one looks at the personal vulnerabilities of the alleged victims. As noted above, this allows the Catholic Church to engage in a politics of institutional self-protection and promote policies of vulnerability that continue to stigmatize victims.

## 6. Challenges for the Research Process

As in the pastoral care relationship, the social research relationship is produced within systemic forms of power. Therefore, the politics of social research requires careful analysis of its own power dynamics. Qualitative research, which typically focuses on direct interaction with small cohorts, either in groups or individually, is susceptible to reproducing unequal power relations between participants and researchers (Cohen Millar and Boivin 2021). This means that research which investigates sexual abuse in the Catholic Church can be particularly susceptible to inequalities of power. For example, a participant can typically be identified as a victim and the researcher as an outsider. Even when a researcher also identifies as a victim, their positionality as a researcher provides institutional status. At the center of power relations between a participant and researcher is the question of knowledge and who is recognized as a ‘knower’. Fricker (2021) maintains that the epistemological status of women as knowers who produce truth has been subject to processes of institutional and cultural sexism and marginalization. We argue that this places particular responsibility upon the research environment in which ethics and methodology are taught and practiced.

### 6.1. Vulnerability of the Cohort

From our understanding of vulnerability as stemming from situational-systemic vulnerability, it follows that, as researchers, our responsibility for the safety of participants in our research projects must be foremost. Evaluating positionality in the research setting and assessing how it might be influenced by vulnerability and vulnerability is critical in the development of the research method and accompanying ethical provisions. We argue that testimonial justice is a useful framework from which to build an effective and ethical empirical research design (Fricker 2007). That is, when gathering and analyzing testimonial evidence of adult victims of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, the research process must reflect processes of recognition, trust, and empowerment. In particular, it must recognize that any accounts that women survivors provide are produced in vulnerable conditions.

In the following section we raise concerns and provide an insight into the current state of our reflections with regard to future research. These remarks are intended to spark dialogue beyond our research group. They are not intended as, nor do they represent a comprehensive overview of the ethics of the social research process.

#### 6.1.1. Vulnerance of Religious Life

The focus of our joint research is the sexual and spiritual abuse of CWR. Research of this cohort requires consideration of the contextual power relations in which CWR live and work. The lives of CWR are highly diverse and their positionality can vary significantly. For instance, the situation of a consecrated virgin living and working in a secular job varies substantially to a cloistered nun living a contemplative calling. Further variations between religious institutes and orders in terms of size, age, mission, and global context make direct comparisons difficult. However, we argue that vulnerable factors can be identified. For example, research has shown that CWR who experience abuse often live in communities with problematic power structures (Haslbeck et al. 2020; Lembo 2022; Leimgruber and Haslbeck 2024). The hierarchical nature of the communities in which CWR live can have implications in the context of research. For instance, even congregations founded after the Second Vatican Council promote “a radical renunciation of one’s own freedom and

autonomy in the monastery ... as a sign of an 'authentic' monastic life and as a sign in the fight against secularization" (Jonveaux 2019). As a result, superiors can assume absolute authority in their communities, with obedience playing a very significant role. This can impact the right of CWR to the secrecy of correspondence or access to hygiene products (Jonveaux 2019). The decision of a CWR to participate in a research project can be dependent on the approval of her superior and it is questionable whether leaders in such vulnerant systems would approve of research and participation. In addition, it might include the necessity of the affected CWR to disclose her abuse experience to her superior if she has to share information on the topic of the research. Furthermore, in communities where chastity is a high ideal, the fact of having experienced sexual abuse can be a threat to the identity of a CWR as a 'good nun', especially when victim blaming sets in and the survivor is perceived as having consented to sexual activities (Figueroa et al. 2023; McPhillips and McEwan 2022). When planning a research project, these and other considerations regarding the particular individual, collective, and contextual vulnerability of CWR should be taken into account, with specific provisions for minimizing the risks of participation included in the project design. For example, a mixed method design, where an initial anonymous quantitative survey on a broader topic identifies potential participants, can facilitate consent for further contact for a qualitative interview on the topic of abuse. Online interviews can present the possibility for CWR to participate without having to let anyone know or raising suspicion by leaving the convent under a pretext to meet with the interviewer.

#### 6.1.2. Vulnerance of Disclosure

Cahill (2021) refers to the "shimmering moment of disclosure" (cf. p. 197) to demonstrate the potential for help and for harm that lies in the sharing of one's own abuse experience. Even though disclosure can be a moment of regaining interpretive sovereignty over one's own life towards rebuilding relations of trust and the starting point to receive support or claiming justice, there is the potential for further harm. The disclosure of sexual abuse can result in a repetition of the initial breach of trust and a repetition of the abuse experience where the hearer, like the perpetrator, disregards the survivor's perception and right to self-determination (De Weger 2022). Unfortunately, negative reactions to survivors' disclosures are not rare. There are currently no empirical data on disclosures by CWR. However, in a study on the abuse of adult women by Christian clergy members, Pooler and Barros-Lane (2022) showed that only one in three women was believed when she first told someone about the abuse. Furthermore, around half of the women reported that members of their Church community accused them of being responsible for their abuse (Pooler and Barros-Lane 2022). With Fricker (2007), we can name these experiences as grave injustices against the capacity of the survivors to act as a subject of knowledge. We contend that because every disclosure bears the risk of a participant reliving injustice, and researchers must be responsible for actively building trust with the research participants and acknowledging any prejudices that might lead to epistemic injustice. Participants must be acknowledged as trustworthy and competent knowers with regard to their own experiences, with their testimonies recognized as a truthful interpretation of their experiences (Fricker 2007). To be able to assess the veracity of testimonies, researchers should be aware of the hermeneutical resources that are available to the participants in conjunction with possible gaps. While awareness of how trauma can impact memory and recall is important, it is also crucial to not prematurely assess the testimony as not truthful (Kavemann 2016).

#### 6.1.3. Assumptions of Vulnerability

Assumptions and social conceptions of women as victim-survivors of sexual abuse can generate vulnerability and impact the research process. Research shows that abuse

does not happen because of a deficiency or fault on the side of the victim but is the result of continuous grooming strategies by the perpetrators (Fernández 2021; Oakley and Kinmond 2013). Yet, as van den Hoonaard (2018) cautions, researchers must be aware of potential bias, including the way they phrase their research questions, which might “artificially create a vulnerable person” (p. 317). For example, questions such as ‘Why do battered women stay?’ rather than ‘Why do men batter?’ have implications for pre-traumatization. For instance, instead of asking ‘Why women that have experienced child sexual abuse also experience abuse as adults?’, researchers should consider how perpetrators use existing experiences of abuse to groom the victims into further abuse situations.

#### 6.1.4. Vulnerability and Traumatization

As important as it is for researchers to be trained in trauma sensibility and to be prepared for participants to possibly show signs of trauma during the research process, it is vital researchers are aware that being a victim-survivor does not automatically mean being traumatized. The process of dealing with abuse experiences is individual and not all abuse has a lifelong impact on victims. If research depicts victim-survivors as traumatized from the outset, there is the possibility of selection bias where only people who identify with the proposed image of victims respond to the call for participation. Furthermore, understanding victim-survivors as traumatized people can result in the omission of certain questions perceived as potentially retraumatizing (Kavemann 2016). The classification of traumatization can lead to an overt focus on the dangers and risks of research and the vulnerabilities of the participants. Instead, understanding that participation in research can have benefits for both traumatized and non-traumatized survivors creates the opportunity for participants to develop their own strategies and resiliencies to deal with the potentially burdening effects of disclosure, as shown in the next section.

#### 6.1.5. Benefits from Research and the Resilience of the Survivors

In the context of sexual abuse, where perpetrators can succeed in impairing the victim’s judgment, and victim-survivors remain silent for years due to shame, speaking about their experience in trauma-informed research contexts can be empowering. For adults who have experienced abuse, recounting the injustice experienced can be understood as a shift in power where victims in an interview setting are able to experience agency and sovereignty over their own lives (Berra 2020). Participation in research can be accompanied by the hope that their testimony might help other survivors and contribute to the prevention of further harm (Hoff 2020). However, it is necessary here to challenge any assumption that speaking out is the only way for affected adults to assert agency (Gott 2022; Parpart 2009). A distinction can be made between ‘choosing to be silent’ and ‘being silenced’. Ahmed (2009) observes, “Sometimes silence is a strategic response to oppression; one that allows subjects to persist in their own way; one that acknowledges that, under certain circumstances, speech might not be empowering, let alone sensible” (p. xvi). Examining the reasons for silence, including the perspective of what and whose words are (not) being spoken and heard, is critical in understanding how gendered power dynamics are interacting with other systemic and structural oppressions and discriminations to empower and disempower victim-survivors. Although there is no research yet on the specific coping strategies of CWR who have experienced sexual abuse, it is fair to assume that, like other survivors, many have learned to cope with potentially difficult and re-traumatizing situations (cf. Kavemann 2016). Effective feminist-based ethical research can create conditions for survivors to enact their own agency by recognizing and encouraging individual coping strategies.



## 6.2. *Vulnerance and Vulnerability of Researchers*

As we have explored above, research is a vulnerant process which produces specific forms of power relations and is embedded in institutional cultures. In the previous section, we have asserted that the researcher has a particular ethical duty to understand the vulnerant conditions of the research methods. What is less clear is the vulnerability of researchers, which is rarely acknowledged, let alone analyzed, in both the literature of research design and the institutional practices engaged with approving and managing ethical research implementation. Decision-making processes that characterize the social research process around ethics approval, the recruitment of participants, data collection and analysis, and the communication of findings and results all contain elements of risk for the researcher. For example, the process of researchers collecting accounts of harm from participants contains the potential of vicarious trauma being triggered. This, in turn, can have a significant impact on a researcher's mental health and safety. There is little research in this area yet understanding how researchers manage trust and safety in their work is essential. While social researchers are trained to develop reflexivity of self in relation to the process of data gathering, typically through journal writing, positionality, supervision, and ethics applications, their systemic vulnerability as part of a wider university research process is generally ignored. Indeed, they are often positioned simplistically as those with power, rather than as potentially those at risk.

Shifting social research into a discourse of vulnerance results, firstly, in a more complex understanding of the specific risks of engaging in qualitative and quantitative research for both participants and researchers, and secondly, in understanding research as part of a systemic-situational framework. Returning to the concept of testimonial justice, it is possible to see that when interviewing women who have survived abuse in Church contexts, the importance of valuing the voices of participants as a crucial part of not just the research process but also of survivor resilience is essential, as is the voice of the researcher. Participatory forms of research are particularly relevant here as they allow for a more democratic engagement in the research process and are effective at building trust and safety (Aldridge 2014). Where researchers are also activists working for change in affected organizations, participatory research can provide a means of building connections.

## 7. Conclusions

In this article we have argued that a new ethics of social research is needed in order to understand how power operates in research environments and with cohorts of participants who have been classified as vulnerable. Building on a constructivist approach and utilizing the systemic-situational framework provides the tools for engaging in a deeper understanding of adult abuse within the Church. Recognizing vulnerability as a socially constructed concept allows for the avoidance of exclusions while also enhancing our understanding of the varying forms and degrees of vulnerability. The concept of 'vulnerance' is particularly helpful here. Vulnerance is based on a causal interpretation, that is, situations must be analyzed and accepted with their vulnerance risks. Risks must go through a process of social recognition (Beck 2022). This process, in turn, creates social and legal contexts of responsibility. One of the most important tasks for the Catholic Church today is to go through this process of recognizing that pastoral care and other Church practices produce vulnerability; they are 'vulnerant'. Research on vulnerability and vulnerance must eventually serve as the foundation for safeguarding measures and legal regulations to effectively prevent and address abuse.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Usually the term “Clergy sexual misconduct” (CSM) or “Adult clergy sexual abuse” (ACSA), is used to describe any sexualized behavior on the part of a religious leader toward a person under his or her spiritual care. However, because not only religious leaders and clerics/priests are perpetrators, but female/non-clergy perpetrators are also known, we do not use the specification “clergy”.
- <sup>2</sup> All quotes that were not originally English were translated by the authors of this article.
- <sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that the German term ‘vulnerabel’ (‘vulnerable Erwachsene’ is in English ‘vulnerable adults’) does not appear in the German original, but it does in the officially approved English translation. In the German version, the bishops use the term ‘in need of protection and help’ (dt. ‘Schutz- und Hilfebedürftigkeit’). Since the bishops offer the English translation on their homepage, it can be assumed that the two terms ‘vulnerable’ and ‘in need of protection’ can be understood to be congruent.

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