Differences in secondary adjustments among monks and nuns

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Abstract
How do monks and nuns manage expectations regarding how to ‘open their hearts’? What alternatives do they have and what are the consequences? Based on a multi-sited case study of Cistercian monasteries in France, this article compares the different situation of nuns and monks. The analysis shows how monks are free to choose who they will 'open their heart' to, whereas nuns are expected to rely on the abbess. While certain ways that nuns circumvent these expectations are illegitimate, some ways of distancing from the abbess align with, rather than diverge from, other central tenets of monastic life. Compared to monks, nuns face a double-penalty, being less free and facing more ambivalent expectations within this restricted space.

Keywords
Expectations, monastery, resistance, secondary adjustment, total institution

Introduction
Entering a Catholic monastery is supposed to be the starting point of a journey of conversion, and a life together with others who also strive to create a utopian Christian community (cf. Séguy, 1971). Contemplative Catholic monasteries can therefore be seen as examples of ‘reinventive’ institutions which people enter to cultivate a new social identity alongside like-minded others (Scott, 2011). Because monks and nuns aim for conversion, we would expect a great deal of identification and internalization of organizational expectations among them (see also Scott, 2011: 53). It is indeed well-established that monks are
supposed to internalize demands (Hillery, 1969: 146) and that nuns ‘want to be as good nuns as possible’ (Cregård, 2013: 78). This reveals little about how monks and nuns manage to live up to these expectations in relation to concrete practices, however.

This article zooms in on two specific and related issues in the monastic context: the relationship between the monastic superior and ordinary members, on the one hand, and expectations on open and sincere communication, on the other. The superior, the abbot or abbess, is of central importance in monasteries. And scrutiny of inner thoughts and feelings are of prime significance for the spiritual progress of monks and nuns. Foucault (2010) used the Rule of Saint Benedict, the book of precepts guiding both Benedictine and Cistercian monasticism until the present day, to illustrate the early Christian practices of self-awareness and the role of the abbot as ‘shepherd’ in relation to his ‘flock’ (Foucault, 2010: 172ff.). The Rule unquestionably provides insights into longstanding ideals and rules that have to be acknowledged to understand monastic life, but by definition, the Rule only provides insights into how the relationship between the superior and the subordinates should be characterized.

Much recent sociological work on Catholic monasticism focuses on how modern trends affect various aspects of monastic life, such as the socialization process (Clot-Garrel, 2016), the meaning of asceticism (Jonveaux, 2018) or the development of new communities (Palmisano, 2015). Of specific relevance in the present context is Hervieu-Léger’s (2017: Chapter 3) remarks on the symbolic (and theological) changes related to the abbot office, but an analysis of what the relationship between monks and their abbot and between nuns and their abbess looks like in practice, and what consequences this has, is still missing. In addition, there seem to be important differences between female and male monasteries in this respect, even in monastic orders where the constitutions and regulations for nuns and monks at the community level are almost identical (e.g. Cistercians, Benedictines). In a unique comparative study of monks and nuns, Jonveaux (2015: 27) remarks that ‘[t]he hierarchical structure appears much more rigid and centralized to the person of the superior in female monasteries’, but goes little further in examining this beyond noting that monks depend less on the superior’s permission compared to nuns.

In this article, I expand on these insights by inspecting the relationships ordinary monks and nuns have with their superior more closely. More specifically, the article addresses the following questions: In what ways do the position and role of abbots and abbesses differ with regard to expectations on whom to open up to? How do monastic members deal with such expectations? What alternatives do they have? In the following analysis, I show how monks are free to choose which monk they will ‘open the heart’ to, how nuns are expected to rely on their abbess, and what consequences these differences have. By addressing these questions, this article contributes with a comparative analysis of the conditions for monks and nuns which brings the sociology of monasticism into dialogue with more general sociological debates on organizations and institutions.

**Pastoral power, expectations and secondary adjustments**

Abbots and abbesses play a central role in monastic communities, not least by being responsible for assigning the different positions of the other members and for much of the
everyday decision-making. Monks and nuns have to ask for permission to do many things adults are normally entitled to do, and the knowledge superiors have about their subjects influence what they decide in such individual matters (cf. Sundberg, 2019a: 1154).

Foucault highlighted the intimate link between knowledge and governance in a broad perspective, for states (e.g. Foucault, 1991) as well as for individuals (e.g. Foucault, 1982). What Foucault (1982: 783) refers to as pastoral power ‘cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people’s minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets. It implies a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it.’ The original form of pastoral power is connected to the Christian striving for salvation, but Foucauldian scholars have also analysed ‘confessions’ as a more secular, organizational practice involved in, for example, appraisals (Townley, 1995) and counselling meetings (Fleming, 2005: 1478). At a general level, secular ‘confessions’ in organizational contexts are likely to be facilitated by expectations in a contemporary ‘therapy culture’ where disclosure and sharing is advocated as part of emotional well-being, seducing individuals to open up (Furedi, 2004). If this is believed to facilitate personal progress of some kind, not least spiritual progress, incitements are even greater (cf. Scott, 2011). Yet authentic disclosure to someone presupposes confidence, and trust cannot be decided upon or ordered. Consequently, expectations of openness in relation to an authority are delicate.

If members are expected to share their inner thoughts with an authority, how are we supposed to interpret them refusing to do so? One alternative is to consider such refusal as a subversive form of resistance. Shifting viewpoints on what should be recognized as resistance have led to increasing scholarly attention to subversive types of resistance, not least in organizations. Scholars have begun to recognize more mundane, ‘distancing’ actions as resistance (Fleming and Spicer, 2003) against corporate identity control (e.g. Collinson, 2003), but this literature pays little attention to organizations other than workplaces (Mumby et al., 2017) and tends to ignore the question of intent. Not even the opportunistic, individual gestures of rule violations that commonly occur in coercive total institutions (cf. Goffman, 1961) can automatically be labelled resistance (Rubin, 2015). Consequently, without any evidence of intention, there is a risk of imposing the notion of resistance in ways that are questionable both from the point of view of the actors (Rubin, 2015), who may not consider themselves as ‘being up against something’ (Ewick and Silbey, 2003: 1330), and of the targets (cf. Hollander and Einwohner, 2004: 545). The role of intentions is important in relation to all forms of (potential) organizational resistance but it is particularly crucial in high-commitment settings where members can be assumed to share the same strong value orientation (Hillery, 1969: 145) and commitment to norms (cf. Kanter, 1968: 501) and also retain a vested interest in convincing themselves of their belief in the institution (cf. Scott, 2011: 51): nuns and monks promise to live the monastic life in all its parts as they become full members of a community, involving many restrictions and regulations. Under such conditions, it is particularly intriguing how members manage expectations they have trouble to live up to.

Goffman (1961) presented a useful distinction between two different ways in which socialized members cope with expectations in organizations: primary adjustment refers to how members who have learned the official rules act in accordance with organizational expectations, whereas secondary adjustment refers to the tactics and strategies
through which members use unauthorized means or achieve unauthorized goals (or both). What constitutes each form of adjustment depends on the institutional arrangement, but both forms exist across all forms of organizational life (e.g. Mumby et al., 2017). Secondary adjustments may also range from being perceived as mildly legitimate to seriously illicit, both among the actors and the targets (cf. Kirke, 2010). The following analysis distinguishes such nuances with regard to how monks and nuns ‘open their hearts’, tracing the contextual meaning of the secondary adjustments that occur. Monasteries are archetypical sites for confessions and normative control where the subordinate’s respect for the superior is expected to be extraordinarily strong. By exploring such a case, this article contributes to the understanding of what secondary adjustments are employed in high-commitment organizations and what they mean.

Case, method and data

This article is based on material collected within a qualitative study of social relations within Catholic monasteries as total institutions. Despite their old history and perhaps presumed marginality in contemporary society, there are still a considerable number of Catholic monasteries around the world. Because of the interest in monasteries as total institutions, it follows that the study must focus on a cloistered, contemplative order. Cistercians are some of the strictest cloistered and contemplative orders of the Catholic Church. The Cistercian order was founded in 1098, but divided into two orders in 1892. Cistercians of the Common Observance remained loyal to the original form whereas the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO), commonly known as Trappists, detached itself to follow the Rule of Saint Benedict more strictly. Nowadays, OCSO is a larger order than the order of Common Observance, and variation between individual communities can be greater than differences between the orders. Regarding the topic of the present analysis, the orders are sufficiently similar for being dealt with as one case. Because of decisions during the planning of the study, the analysis is primarily based on material on OCSO.

To become acquainted with the monastic setting and tailor an adequate research design, I visited two monasteries in France. I stayed about one week each in the guest-houses of one monk monastery within the Cistercian order of Common Observance and one OCSO monastery for nuns respectively and interviewed two monks and one nun in these monasteries. I also interviewed a monk in a different community within the Cistercian order of Common Observance and one former member of this community. Based on this preparatory work, I decided to concentrate on OCSO in France exclusively, because France is the country with the largest population of OCSO communities. There are currently 178 OCSO monasteries in the world, 76 for nuns and 102 for monks (2017). There are 92 monasteries situated in Europe, with 27 being in France. On average, a French monk monastery has 24 members and a French nun monastery 26 members. Although members are supposed to stay in one community for the rest of his/her life, there is some inter-monastery mobility, mainly nationally. On a national level, superiors have regular contact. Focusing on one country therefore facilitates selection and access because members, especially superiors, can share useful information and offer helpful recommendations regarding other communities. The choice of France maximized available options along this principle.
In selecting communities to contact for the main study, I aimed for variation concerning gender, size and strictness. I visited one large nun monastery four times and one average sized nun monastery and two average sized monk monasteries once. I stayed almost a week in each guesthouse, and focused primarily on interviewing. Interviews include 20 nuns between 35 and 87 years old, with eight to 68 years of experience of Cistercian monastic life, and 15 monks, between 39 and 78 years old and with nine to 51 years of experience of Cistercian monastic life. To follow up specific themes, I interviewed four members twice and one member three times. The members held various positions and were involved in various types of work. I interviewed all present superiors, four priors (the deputy superior) and five former superiors (three former abbesses, two former abbots). The interviews typically lasted for about an hour and a half (ranging from 45 minutes to 2 hours) and they were recorded and transcribed verbatim, except for the first, three early interviews when I took notes. All interviews were semi-structured, including questions on entrance to monastic life, work, decision-making, relations and contact with other members, including the superior, and contact with outsiders. Questions were also adjusted to incorporate emerging insights in subsequent interviews.

As a woman, I would never have been admitted to stay within the cloistered spaces of a monk monastery, but during one of the visits to the large nun monastery, I stayed four days within the community, and joined the community in all its daily activities (offices, meals, work, meetings, etc.). Cistercians gather seven times in church each day, and throughout my fieldwork, I have attended 94 such offices in total. Although the silent atmosphere of monasteries significantly reduces opportunities for the informal chats that are typical ingredients of ethnographic research (cf. Irvine, 2010; Sbardella, 2014), staying at monastic guesthouses gave me the opportunity to talk to other guests. This provided information and ‘gossip’ about the communities which helped in the selection of communities to visit. In addition, I studied regulatory documents including the Rule of Saint Benedict and the Constitutions of the order, books on Cistercian spirituality, and webpages of the order and individual communities.

My original intention in this study was not to compare monks and nuns, but data collection revealed significant differences: one was the relationship with the superior that I address in this article. I coded all interview transcripts and fieldnotes in NVivo iteratively and thematically, successively moving from broader to more specific codes. In a first round of coding, I identified dominant themes in the material. For this specific analysis, I then started from material that had been sorted broadly into dealing with the relationship to the superior and relationships between members respectively. I sorted it in more detail by surfacing, for example, authority problems and relationship with a spiritual guide. As it became evident that male and female monasteries differed in important respects, I began a more systematic comparison of these differences. I present the situations in monk and nun monasteries separately and I focus on expectations on to whom and how members should open up and what consequences this has for secondary adjustments with regard to such practices. The analysis highlights monks’ and nuns’ subjective understandings. Although it is often sensitive to disclose transgressions, not least when a high degree of internalization is expected, asking for specific examples reveals different layers of meaning (Pugh, 2013) and accounts in the form of justifications or
excuses presume that an act or approach is questionable (cf. Scott and Lyman, 1968), even if informants frame their answers to present themselves in an admirable light.

To retain the confidentiality of quoted members, I provide limited information regarding quoted nuns and monks. I make an exception when quoting superiors. Their position cannot be neglected when interpreting their statements and precisely because this is a position of power, it is also less problematic to reveal their standpoints. Different monastic affiliations are identified consistently with randomly given numbers (M1–M7), and so is each cited interviewee (e.g. M1-1). I have translated the presented quotes from French.

‘Opening of the heart’: The entry process and beyond

Monastic entry is a stepwise process (see e.g. OCSO, 2017) which spans several years. It involves formal education as well as successive integration into the community – the novice lives apart from the rest of the community until giving temporary vows, becoming a full (professed) member first after the final vows. During the entry process, an essential question is to find out if the candidate has the ‘right vocation’ for Cistercian life. The principal person for the candidate to discuss this with is the novice director, who is responsible for the education of new members. Frequent, often weekly, conversations with the novice director (and less frequent conversations with the superior) are therefore obligatory during the entry process. Although revelations are encouraged, novice directors should not be pushy. One novice director (M3-6) explained:

A relation of trust has to be put in place. A very important dimension of monastic life since the origins is what we call ‘opening of the heart’. It’s that the brother can really tell what he experiences inside, what is his combat, his joys, his difficulties, in the life of prayer, at work, fraternal life, with himself. . . . Because one enters in a school. . . . Saint Benedict says the ‘school of the service to the Lord’, but the first school one enters is a school of getting to know oneself. And to get to know oneself, it is obligatory to accept an exterior look, not only that will look for you, judge, but that accompanies you, to allow you to little by little enter into a better knowledge of yourself, be able to reread certain experiences, be able to reread certain events.

The quote above provides a description of what the notion of ‘opening of the heart’ refers to in the monastic setting, and in this article. The quote is also a distinct example of pastoral power in relation to prospective and new monastic members. They are expected to, indeed obliged to, reveal their inner thoughts to a confidant they have not chosen, giving the confidant the right to interpret what is revealed and to promote their vision of it (cf. Muller, 2017; Townley, 1995). This article centres on how and to whom the monks and nuns are expected to ‘open their hearts’ once they have become professed members, and what alternatives they have then.

According to the OCSO constitutions, the superiors should be available to all members for conversation (paragraph C 33.3 in the constitutions for both nuns and monks). Both parties have the right to introduce topics, which could concern everyday matters such as work practicalities, current reading, or permissions, but also more profound issues. While constitutive regulations are similar regarding these matters, the following analysis reveals significant differences between how monks and nuns within OCSO are expected to share and communicate with their superior.
Decentralized relationships among monks

Monks have individual meetings with their abbot to discuss practical matters or for permissions. In the monk monasteries I visited, the abbot offered slots on a certain day of the week and it was up to the monks to book a time when they felt the need. This was typically quite rare, unless for practical concerns. ‘I don’t have anything special to tell him’, as one monk said (M4-5). For the sacrament of reconciliation, monks select their confessor, typically among the priests within their community. They are also allowed to change. The role of the confessor is to listen to confessions of sins, but some monks also ask their confessors for more general and practical guidance. In this way, they relate to the confessor more as a spiritual guide, sometimes also referred to as spiritual father.

It is primarily in relation to the spiritual guide that a monk is expected to ‘open his heart’, in the sense that the practice is discussed in this article. Spiritual guidance is a form of mentoring relationship, where the primary role of the spiritual guide is to discuss with and help the accompanied monk in his spiritual progress. Thereby, the spiritual guide replaces the novice director. The monks may select a spiritual guide among any one of the permanent members. As a defence of free choice, one monk (M3-6) emphasized that ‘real accompaniment . . . requires a lot of confidence. And that’s something that one can’t buy at the supermarket.’ Unlike the confessor, a spiritual guide does not have to be a priest. It is recommended to pick someone else than the novice director, but he still remains an obvious alternative. ‘He knows me’, one monk (M3-7) explained his choice to have his former novice director as a spiritual guide. In addition, the new member hardly knows any other member, and may ask the abbot for advice about whom to have as a spiritual guide, but it is not a requirement. The abbot is typically informed about these relationships, however, and can intervene in the guidance they provide. The following quote from an abbot (M3-1) provides an example of intervention:

One brother chose an old brother to confide in, and the old brother really had ideas from before the [Second Vatican] council. So I said ‘listen, it’s not helpful if you integrate the conceptions of the past that aren’t valid today, that are very formalist regarding the Rule, observances, penitence etc. We live differently today. So you have to find someone else, with another spirit, to guide you.’

This quote exemplifies how spiritual guides exert influence and that there are potential conflicts between the spiritual guide, offering individual directions, and the abbot, who is responsible for the general spiritual direction of the community.

Some monks seemed to easily adapt to available alternatives, selecting a spiritual guide without much trouble. When I discussed spiritual guides with one monk (M4-5) with 45 years of experience of monastic life, he casually said that ‘I’m on my fourth’. Other monks expressed difficulties in finding a spiritual guide. One monk (M3-2) related to me that prior to his entry into the monastic community, he used to have a Jesuit as his ‘spiritual father’. Although he had ‘really tried’ to find a new spiritual guide in the community to replace the Jesuit, his experiences were not ‘satisfactory’. From the monk’s
perspective, it was the supply of potential guides that was problematic, not his demand. Yet this monk felt he could receive support from his peer-monks, and even if he did not share more intimate details with them, he emphasized that,

... spiritual life in a monastery, ... it’s not so single focused, centred on one person who accompanies you. There can be a brother who really matters for you at a certain time, and then another one after. And everyone will bring something.

This is not to indicate that communication between monks is frequent.8 Speech is restricted in all OCSO monasteries. There is a general prohibition against ‘superfluous’ small-talk and gossip, and besides talk necessary to carry out work efficiently, Cistercians should only speak when engaging in a community discussion or when discussing spiritual progress with a superior, confessor or spiritual guide. If monks have a specific reason, they are also entitled to speak privately with another monk. In the words of one abbot (M4-1):

Everyone can go and talk with whom he wants, but not wherever or in whatever way. If I want to exchange with a brother I ask him ‘hey, I would like to talk to you regarding this question or ...’. And one spends a moment together and talk. That could happen.

When we discussed this topic, the abbot suddenly recalled a monk who had ‘asked to talk and we talked for about an hour’, as if this was an extraordinary event during his 28 years as an ordinary monk.

An advantage of speaking with different monks depending on the time and topic, rather than relying on one single guide, is that it avoids the risk of relationships of dependency. One monk (M3-9) with less than 10 years of monastic life underscored that it was ‘not easy’ to find a spiritual guide because there are ‘certain personalities who are a bit ... possessive and in the accompanying relationship ... very often ... the possessive dimension will express itself’. This monk had chosen to work on his spiritual progress alone, primarily through reading, and avoided the risk of a dysfunctional relationship that he associated spiritual guidance with. One abbot (M3-1) also mentioned the risk of developing relationships of mutually reinforced dependency: ‘Those with a bit of an anxious temperament need to talk a lot. And there are spiritual guides who need recognition, being always recognized, and who provoke them to come to them.’ In other words, the abbot highlighted the potential risk for a spiritual guide to exploit the needs of the monk who sought his guidance.

Monks should ideally have a spiritual guide because it is considered good for their spiritual progression, but it is also legitimate not to have one. More generally, it is not good to need someone to rely on: ‘When one can’t live alone, one needs the support of the other, but if one doesn’t know how to live alone, in fact, either one attracts the other towards oneself to comfort oneself, either one gets caught up with someone who reassures you’ (monk, M4-4). This monk also emphasized that monastic life is a collective life in solitude. The Rule of Saint Benedict encourages monks to ‘place your hope in God alone’ (Chapter 4, see Fry, 1981: 13) and to ‘prefer nothing whatever to Christ’ (Chapter 72, see Fry, 1981: 69). Considering the alternatives monks and nuns have in terms of
whom to ‘open their hearts’ to, how they are either encouraged to or left to place their hope in God alone differs.

Dependency and centralization among nuns

To a much larger extent than monks, nuns are expected to share their thoughts with and ‘open their hearts’ to their superior. One nun (M1-6) explained the necessity of such conversations:

[An abbess] represents Christ so . . . so the bond with the abbess is strong because . . . it’s the bond of obedience for . . . and obedience has to be lived well . . . it has to be very . . . that the relation with the abbess is really clear . . . open . . . it’s not always easy but . . . it’s an apprenticeship to enter into that relation.

According to the Rule of Saint Benedict (Chapter 2), the superior of a monastery is both a formal, social authority and a representative of Christ, the divine authority, in the community. Consequently, obedience to a monastic superior is associated with faith, and monasteries involve an intricate blending of social and divine authority, because obedience to the monastic superior is linked to the love of Christ (cf. Rule of St. Benedict, Chapter 5; see also Sundberg, 2019b). The point in relation to the quote above is that being open with the abbess is associated with obedience. Personal incompatibilities are irrelevant when it comes to opening up. One former abbess (M1-2) explained that one could have an abbess ‘who’s different, or who doesn’t have the same interior experience or the same sense, but it’s not important, there is always a terrain where one can share profoundly. One has to find, one has to ask, so that the relation bears fruit.’ Adaptation to one another is a mutual responsibility of both the ordinary nun and the abbess, but sharing is an aspect of obedience.

Significantly, professed nuns should also drop the confidential contact they, supposedly, had with their former novice director. While professed monks may pick their former novice director as spiritual guide because they feel that he knows them, this is precisely why nuns must cut the tie with their novice director. According to one abbess (M2-3), this is because

. . . it shouldn’t be that there are other sisters that take themselves for abbess (laughter). And who would like to keep power a bit . . . then there’s the stories of power that could happen if she stays attached to [the former novice director] and it’s that sister she will see, who will give advice, who knows.

The former novice director knows the professed member, and can provide support on the basis of a lengthy relationship, but being the most knowledgeable in relation to individual nuns, and exercising power over them, is to be ‘taken for’ abbess. The abbess may offer recently professed members to speak with an elderly nun for senior support, but the abbess typically proposes only a few alternatives, and guidance is for a limited period of time. Unlike monks, ordinary nuns must ask their abbess for permission to have private conversations with other nuns. One abbess (M2-3) said that she ‘maybe’ permitted such
requests if she considered the conversation partner to be ‘sensible’, a good advisor, and likely to report if permitted conversations did not go well in some respect.

**Forms of adjustments**

The normative pressure for nuns to open up to the abbess is great, yet it remains an empirical question to what extent nuns embrace this expected practice (cf. Mueller et al., 2011: 554). Are there circumventions and what is their meaning in this context? From an abbatial perspective, nuns’ difficulties to open up constitute an ‘authority problem’. Such reluctance to open up can manifest itself in different ways. One nun (M2-9) admitted that she did not feel comfortable about sharing things with her superior: ‘One can’t exchange everything with the abbess, you know. It’s still an authority role.’ The vertical relation hindered openness, and the nun also mentioned that her abbess was too ‘controlling’. In order to handle that, ‘one has to play diplomacy. One has to be very diplomatic’, the nun said and laughed. This also suggests a strategic response to the abbatial gaze that could conceal what the nun was really thinking or feeling (cf. Collinson, 2003: 538ff.). Cynical compliance is often part of the repertoire of well-socialized members (cf. Goffman, 1961), and consequently, nuns may also learn to ‘play it cool’. Being ‘diplomatic’ is hence a ‘survival practice’ (cf. Collinson, 2003: 538ff.) for keeping the abbess’s confidence.

In other cases, nuns reveal their ‘authority problem’ by choosing to open up to the prior, instead of to the abbess. At least officially, this is a possibility for nuns who for some reason do not want to discuss something with the abbess. The following quote from one abbess (M2-3) is illustrative of the relationship between the abbess, the prior, and the ordinary nuns, as they played out in the community she was in charge of.

There are sisters who confide . . . where the support is more by the prior than by me. . . . But often they don’t tell me that ‘I prefer to speak with the prior.’ . . . They come and see me, but with me it remains a bit superficial. And when they have some trouble they would rather see the prior. . . . Well, of course it is better . . . well, it’s good if they have sufficient confidence in me to open up with me because I’m the abbess. But it can happen that there are difficulties because I represent in their eyes, I don’t know. . . . It’s not even my fault, they have images of authority or something and so they will . . . they are more comfortable with speaking to someone who is less of an authority figure.

Let me elaborate on two points here. First, the abbess tolerated that nuns spoke with the prior and did not condemn those who preferred to do so. It was a legitimate, but undesirable alternative. Second, the nuns did not have to ask for permission to speak with the prior. The abbess still knew that they did, however. This indicates that the prior kept her informed. Later on in the interview, this abbess also stressed her confidence in her prior and that the prior would speak to her if there was anything she needed to know about a nun. Such reports were one of the reasons why one nun (M2-12) did not turn to the prior instead of the abbess. This untypically critical nun mentioned to me on repeated occasions her troubles with ‘authority’ and said that she ‘refused’ to talk to the abbess, because she did not have a ‘very happy relationship with her’. Illicitly, the nun opened up to ‘a sister who is very discreet and who repeats nothing’ instead. The ‘discreet’ nun supposedly
differed from the rest, who were suspected to report to the abbess: ‘everything passes through the mother abbess and everything, everything, and a lot of our speech and our doings are repeated to the abbess’, the critical nun said. Other nuns in this monastery also expected that most of what was going on in the monastery would come to the abbess’s attention, in one way or another. For example, another nun (M2-10) seemed suspicious about my statement that I would be the only one listening to my recordings and said, ‘surely, surely the abbess will ask you’ what had been said. Importantly, the reliance on the abbess as a conversation partner may result in a blurring between vertical reporting and horizontal gossip (cf. Scott, 2011). While offering much information, this is ambivalent from a monastic perspective. Too much ‘friendly’ gossiping may undermine hierarchical difference, and small talk is forbidden, as mentioned above. Significantly, the abbess (M2-3) also complained to me about how she tried to avoid appointments with a few ‘pathological cases’ (of nuns) who wanted to talk with her all the time, without having anything ‘important’ to say.

In the monastery discussed above, the abbess had fixed appointments with every nun, at different time intervals depending on what she or the nun thought was needed (e.g. every second week, or every month), thereby maintaining a relationship with everyone. In another community, the abbess made appointments only if she had something specific to inform or discuss with a nun. Otherwise, it was up to the nuns to book meetings with the abbess when they felt the need, and they rarely brought up their spiritual life. ‘I have, without a doubt, to improve my manner, right’, the abbess (M1-1) said, thereby excusing her own lack of ability to encourage sharing. While these features indicate less abbatial control compared to the female monastery discussed above, it is notable that speaking with the prior was less accepted in this community. According to one nun (M1-5), ‘it’s a relationship of confidence to build with [the abbess] which is necessary for the community to work well, because if I always pass around . . . that would . . . what would that mean?’ The last part of the quote suggests that any ‘passing around’, even to the prior, would be questionable in practice. Sometimes ‘one has to accept to not share with anyone, it’s a trial but it doesn’t kill you (giggle)’, as another nun (M1-2) said.

When discussing opportunities for sharing, one nun (M1-6) described what can be seen as an example of such a ‘trial’. This nun admitted that she was not ‘happy’ about having to go through a difficult period alone, unable to share with the abbess. This was because she experienced, and regretted, that the relationship with her abbess was too superficial and distant. Consequently, the nun’s isolation was not intended as a refusal or concealment. In relation to her experience, she had pondered a great deal on why monks could have horizontal relations whereas nuns could not. It is, in fact, monastic common knowledge that there are differences between how nuns and monks relate to their superiors, but there is no folk explanation for why (see also Jonveaux, 2015: 28). The nun (M1-6) seemed to consider the difference unfair, but also tried to convince herself that there were benefits to nuns’ situation:

When one has no human support . . . the relation with Christ inevitably grows. So sometimes it’s painful but it’s . . . to have traversed a bit of that, I tell myself that it’s a grace, because I have learnt to march alone. It’s also that. Well, ‘alone’: With him of course, but with less human support.
This nun also mentioned a book by a former abbot, who claimed that ‘the flaws of an abbot or abbess sometimes permit the brothers and sisters to grow’. In this view, superiors’ shortcomings are ultimately positive if they push nuns (and monks) to ‘the world of Christ’, which is the purpose of living in a Cistercian monastery. Consequently, (too much) reliance on the abbess is, in fact, problematic from this perspective (which the remark on nuns who constantly seek to speak with their abbess also indicated). In line with this, one nun (M1-3) described her purposive distance in relation to her abbess, simultaneously emphasizing what at good relationship they had:

> When entering, when you see certain small things . . . I said to myself . . . ‘I’m not going here to look for [a mum]!’ *(laughter)* You understand what I mean? Because for me, I wanted my heart to really be with the Lord not . . . Because sometimes one becomes too attached . . . I always have a bit of distance. You see? I get on very well with mother Marie Thérèse, I love her a lot, I get on very well with her, *but* I’m not . . . you mustn’t be small girls, right. You understand what I mean? . . . We are consecrated to the Lord and one mustn’t . . . because, in our closed life, that’s a bit the tendency, right? To . . . to want . . . to seek compensation in a superior, well, me . . . I want a *good* friendship, something very loyal, very frank, but with a bit of distance.

In this excerpt, the repeated search for support (‘you understand what I mean?’) indicates consciousness of the distant approach could be questioned as objectionable. The nun justifies her reserve vis-a-vis the abbess as a way to let her ‘heart be with the Lord’, rather than clinging to her mother abbess like a ‘little girl’. In doing so, she underlines her identity as a nun, rather than distancing herself from it (cf. Scott and Lyman, 1968: 60ff.). The nun’s account is reminiscent of monks who mentioned the risk of dependency problems with spiritual guides, but the situation is considerably different: nuns are expected to open up to and rely on their abbess. Yet even if the abbess represents Christ (the divine), and her decisions should be obeyed (because she is in a position of social authority), loving the abbess should not overshadow the love of Christ. The nun asserted her distance as permissible since it serves a higher end (cf. Scott and Lyman, 1968: 51). Ultimately, it is also consistent with the purpose of leading a Cistercian monastic life.

**Conclusion**

This article set out to explore how the relationship of ordinary monks and nuns to their superior differ, specifically when it comes to expectations on ‘opening of the heart’. The analysis shows the subtleties of how members deal with these expectations, and how nuns primarily rely more on their abbess, whereas monks have more alternatives. While refusals to comply with expectations to open up are unsurprising in some organizations, such as when prisoners refuse to speak with their ‘moral instructor’ (chaplain) (Rubin, 2015: 31), it is more intriguing how monastic members accept or circumvent expectations to ‘open the heart’. My analysis illustrates how relatively small differences within the same type of institution have significant consequences in this regard (cf. Goffman, 1961).
When it comes to ‘opening of the heart’, monks have no need for secondary adjustments. Monks are free to select a spiritual guide, who they may also change. If they do not find anyone they consider appropriate and trust, it is legitimate to not have one at all. In addition, they are free to talk with whichever member they want, not only their spiritual guide. Male monasteries are therefore likely to exhibit a larger variety of relationships, involving a larger degree of voluntariness, compared to their female counterparts. Future research on monastic resistance could explore whether and how this situation affects the likelihood of alliances and collective forms of resistance among monks, not least if spiritual guides provide advice that conflicts with abbatial directives.

Unlike monks, nuns are prohibited from looking for mutual support from ordinary members. Effectively, nuns have fewer legitimate alternatives compared to monks. Because nuns are primarily assigned to the abbess if they want to ‘open their hearts’ (beyond confessions to a priest), it is more likely that abbesses become epicentres of communication, gaining more insights into community relations compared to abbots. While the idea(l) is that ‘there is no way round’ an abbess, as one abbot (M4-1) put it, my analysis reveals different ways that nuns circumvent what is expected of them in relation to the abbess. These adjustments include isolation, purposive distance, cynical compliance and turning to alternative confidants. While it is unmistakably illegitimate to share and discuss with another nun without permission to do so – a form of ‘refusal to cooperate’ (cf. Goffman, 1961) – there are local variations in how legitimate it is to turn to the prior.

Focusing on the contextual meaning of and intention behind adjustments is especially critical in high-commitment organizations, where members strive to live up to ideals and try to explain their failure to live up to them, rather than justify why they would be against them. Transgressions may prove to be resilience and individuality in certain settings, but in monasteries, both refusal and cynical compliance may be poor, even detrimental, coping strategies, or ‘survival practices’ (cf. Collinson, 2003: 538ff.) if they put sincere devotion at risk (cf. Scott, 2011: 51). If a nun perceives her distance relative to the abbess as a purposive and legitimate choice, serving the ultimate end – to rely on God alone – it may not threaten devotion to the same extent. (It may also feel less like a failed apprenticeship in terms of learning to trust the abbess.)

In terms of the monastic virtue of ‘placing hope in God alone’ by not sharing with others, it should be clear that there is a difference regarding how monks and nuns are pushed to it and what it means if they do it. If a monk does not trust his fellow monks enough to share with any one of them, keeping to himself can be seen as a pure virtue. If a nun does not feel that she can share with her abbess, because of a lack of trust or other reasons, she is pushed to rely on God alone. Yet hesitation to share is by no means trivial in the context of a female monastery and the situation for nuns is more ambivalent than for monks. Monks recognize that relationships of dependency are problematic, and can choose to avoid a relationship of guidance out of fear of this. Nuns’ dependency relationship with their abbess is assigned and nuns have to strike a balance between being sufficiently open while not too needy and/or gossipy. In this sense, nuns face a double-penalty, having fewer alternatives and facing more ambivalent expectations within this restricted space.
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Notes

1. Although Goffman (1961) presented primary and secondary adjustments within the context of a discussion of a specific coercive total institution (mental hospitals), applying these analytical tools is not the same thing as saying that monasteries share the oppressive and controlling characteristics that are specific for such coercive total institutions (cf. Asad, 1993: 125ff.).

2. My study was accepted because I promised anonymity and because superiors recommended other superiors to accept my request. My own religious affiliation has never been brought up during ‘negotiations’ with the superiors. Less than a handful of members asked me about it during interviews (to which I replied that I am a non-practising Protestant), and primarily to probe my knowledge of Catholicism, rather than to certify my faith.

3. Consequently, it is not an analysis of gender per se or of the relationship between men and women (e.g. clergy and nuns) in the Catholic Church. See Muller (2017) for a historical analysis of spiritual direction in France from a gender perspective.

4. Discernment is the process of finding one’s religious vocation. From this perspective, entering a monastery is not a voluntary act, but a calling.

5. In monk monasteries, priests are generally ordained on the basis of the needs of the community, but some are priests already when they enter.

6. For an historical overview of spiritual direction, see Filoramo and Zarri (2008).

7. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) brought immense changes for Catholicism and monastic life.

8. On the possibility of friendship in Cistercian monasteries, see Sundberg (2019a).

9. All female monasteries depend on a priest for the sacrament of reconciliation (and for leading daily mass), but the nuns never mentioned any conversations with their priest and rarely mentioned their priest at all.

10. During my stay inside the cloistered area of this monastery, it was evident that the nuns’ requests for permissions and approvals kept the abbess very well-informed. For example, what I first assumed to be spontaneous gestures, such as lending me a warm sweater, had often been cleared with the abbess earlier. See also Jonveaux (2015).

11. Members are permitted to ask superiors for professional psychological counselling. This suggests that it is the control of community relations which is central, not to avoid any human support.

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**Résumé**

Comment les moines et les moniales répondent-ils aux attentes concernant la manière d’« ouvrir leur cœur » ? Quelles sont les possibilités qui s’offrent à eux et quelles en sont les conséquences ? À partir d’une étude de cas de plusieurs monastères cisterciens en France, cet article compare les différences entre la situation des moniales et celle des moines. L’analyse montre comment les moines sont libres de choisir à qui ils vont « ouvrir leur cœur » tandis que les moniales sont censées s’en remettre à l’abbesse. Alors que certains des modes employés par les moniales pour contourner ces attentes sont illégitimes, certaines façons de prendre ses distances avec l’abbesse sont en adéquation avec d’autres principes fondamentaux de la vie monastique, plutôt que de s’en écarter. En comparaison avec les moines, les moniales font face à une double peine dans la mesure où elles sont moins libres et sont confrontées à des attentes plus ambivalentes dans l’espace restreint qui est le leur.

**Mots-clés**

Adaptation secondaire, attentes, institution totale, monastère, résistance
Resumen
¿Cómo manejan los monjes y las monjas las expectativas sobre cómo ‘abrir sus corazones’? ¿Qué alternativas tienen y cuáles son las consecuencias? Basado en un estudio de caso de varios monasterios cistercienses en Francia, este artículo compara la diferente situación de monjas y monjes. El análisis muestra cómo los monjes son libres de elegir a quién ‘abrirán su corazón’, mientras que se espera que las monjas confíen en la abadesa. A pesar de que algunas de las formas en que las monjas eluden estas expectativas son ilegítimas, algunas formas de distanciarse de la abadesa se alinean con, en lugar de divergir de, otros principios fundamentales de la vida monástica. En comparación con los monjes, las monjas enfrentan una doble penalización, siendo menos libres y enfrentándose a expectativas más ambivalentes dentro de este espacio restringido.

Palabras clave
Ajuste secundario, expectativas, institución total, monasterio, resistencia