

Power, betrayal and moral injury:

Survivor participation as moral recovery in Christian faith communities

Ioannis Athanasiou

Church of England - National Safeguarding Team

Introduction and Citation Guidance

This paper brings together practice-based insights, academic literature, and reflective learning from work within the Church of England's National Safeguarding Team. Its purpose is twofold. First, it aims to support ongoing reflection and discussion among practitioners, survivors, and professionals engaged in safeguarding and participation work. Second, it forms part of a wider academic project currently being developed for submission to a peer-reviewed journal.

Readers are welcome to engage with, share, and reference this work in their own practice, teaching, and research. As the ideas presented here are part of an evolving scholarly contribution, any citation should acknowledge the author and context of this version.

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1. Introduction: Speaking about power

This paper is written in recognition of the courage it takes for victims and survivors of abuse to share their experiences, and with a commitment to ensuring that their contributions meaningfully inform safeguarding practice, institutional change, and the pursuit of moral recovery. The paper advances the argument that survivor participation in Christian faith communities is fundamentally shaped by power and therefore cannot be assumed to be inherently reparative. Drawing on reflective social work practice within the Church of England, this paper examines how survivor participation can both

support moral recovery and reproduce harm. It argues that survivor participation must be understood not as a neutral or technical process, but as a relational and ethical practice embedded within institutional power dynamics.

Survivor participation is understood here as activities and moments when victims and survivors of abuse take part in safeguarding developments and changes that aim to make everything possible to keep people safe in the Church¹. While this reflects an important institutional commitment, it does not in itself guarantee ethical practice, nor does it ensure recovery. The central argument of this paper is that survivor participation is structurally ambivalent. It can enable recognition, agency, and transformation. Yet, when embedded within unchanged systems of authority, it may reproduce the very dynamics - silencing, exclusion, control - that underpin moral injury.

2. Conceptualising moral injury in Christian faith communities

Moral injury is not reducible to trauma alone. It involves a disruption of meaning, identity, and relational trust. It is experienced as betrayal - often by those in positions of authority - and is accompanied by shame, anger, disorientation, and a collapse of moral coherence. Moral injury is increasingly understood as a form of suffering arising from the violation of deeply held moral beliefs (Shay, 1994; Litz et al., 2009). It involves enduring experiences of guilt, shame, anger, and disorientation following acts of betrayal, transgression, or complicity (Litz et al., 2009). Shay (1994) locates the core of moral injury in experiences of betrayal by legitimate authority in high-stakes situations, where what is 'right' is fundamentally undermined by those entrusted to uphold it. While initially conceptualised in military contexts, moral injury has since been identified across a range of settings, including healthcare, social care, and faith communities.

Moral injury provides a powerful lens through which to understand abuse within Christian faith communities. In such settings, authority is not only organisational but moral, spiritual and relational. In church contexts, the moral claim to represent care, justice, truth, and compassion intensifies the wound, when institutional responses appear exclusionary and defensive. Unlike secular organisations, churches invest authority with moral and spiritual significance; as a result, betrayal is experienced not merely as service failure but mostly as a rupture in moral order and belonging.

¹ For more information on Church of England's Survivor Participation, visit this webpage: [Survivor participation | The Church of England](#)

When abuse occurs within this context - and when institutional responses fail - the injury is not experienced merely as harm, but as betrayal of moral order. Survivors frequently describe not only the abuse itself, but the institutional dynamics that follow:

- being disbelieved
- being managed rather than heard
- being silenced
- being excluded from processes that affect them

In such contexts, the perpetrator may come to represent more than an individual. They may symbolise the institution, and, for some survivors, even God. This creates a profound rupture in meaning, identity, and faith. These dynamics help explain why recovery is often prolonged and fragile. Safeguarding procedures, however necessary, are insufficient for moral repair. What is required is not only protection and accountability, but a reconstitution of trust, meaning, and relational integrity.

3. Power as relational and embodied

Understanding these dynamics requires a relational conception of power. Drawing on Foucault (1980), power is not simply possessed; it is exercised through relationships, norms, and institutional practices. It permeates the social body and shapes what can be said, who can speak, and what counts as truth.

Within survivor participation, power operates in multiple ways:

- the power to decide (who sets agendas and makes decisions)
- the power to separate (distinguishing between “survivors” and “professionals”)
- the power to polarise (creating oppositional identities)
- the power to harm (through exclusion, containment, or misrecognition)

These forms of power are often subtle. They are embedded within organisational cultures and professional routines. They are enacted through language, structure, and expectation. Power is also embodied. Survivors often describe participation as exposing, exhausting, or retraumatising. Participation requires speaking, being visible, and engaging emotionally. These are not neutral acts.

When moral injury is felt in the body, participation does not attend to embodied safety risks, reactivating harm rather than repairing it.

Participation requires individuals to bring their experiences into spaces that may feel unsafe, exposing themselves emotionally and psychologically. Without careful attention, this can become retraumatising. Furthermore, power is shaped by belonging. Who feels legitimate? Who feels safe? Who is heard? Participation is always mediated by these questions. Survivors' capacity to participate is therefore not only determined by formal opportunities, but by whether they experience themselves as belonging within those spaces. Where belonging is fragile or contested, voice becomes constrained, conditional, or withdrawn.

4. The limits of participation and co-production

Participation and co-production are widely promoted as progressive practices. However, literature suggests that without attention to power, they may reproduce inequality (Arnstein, 1969; Rose and Kalathil, 2019). Burgess and Choudary (2021) emphasise the importance of “phase zero” - the relational groundwork required before meaningful participation can occur. They highlight that co-production cannot begin at the point of engagement, but must be preceded by sustained attention to histories of harm, power asymmetries, and the absence of trust. Coproduction often reproduces dominant knowledge systems, privileging professional expertise while marginalising experiential knowledge.

Social work ethics scholar Banks (2020) points at the risk of co-opting “expertise by experience,” where participation becomes selective, controlled, or tokenistic. In such contexts, survivors may be included, but only in ways that do not disrupt institutional norms.

In practice, participation may:

- follow predetermined agendas
- limit challenge and emotional expression
- prioritise institutional comfort
- fail to influence outcomes

This produces a central paradox: Participation is visible, but power remains unchanged.

5. The National Survivor Participation Framework in the Church of England

In response to these challenges, the National Survivor Participation Framework² seeks to address power explicitly (Athanasiou, 2025). What is important for this discussion is not simply that such a framework exists, but what it attempts to do in relation to power. The following points show how it responds to institutional risks of moral injury.

- A trauma-informed approach recognises that power is embodied, and that participation can retraumatise.
- The emphasis on choice redistributes the power to decide.
- The commitment to inclusive spaces challenges the division between “us and them.” The framework explicitly resists the power to separate - the division between “survivors” and “professionals” that reproduces hierarchy.
- Ensuring that voices influence decisions resists tokenism.
- Listening to multiple voices, recognising that no single survivor represents every lived experience, resists the creation of “stronger voices” or “acceptable survivors” (those who can participate without disrupting institutional comfort).

In this sense, the framework is not simply a guide for participation; it is an attempt to reconfigure the conditions under which power operates. However, the existence of a framework does not resolve these tensions. It makes them visible and requires continuous ethical work.

6. Reframing participation as moral recovery

This paper proposes reframing participation as a relational process oriented toward moral recovery. Drawing on Herman (2015), recovery is fundamentally relational. It involves recognition, connection, and the restoration of trust. Participation can contribute to this when it:

- restores agency
- validates experience
- enables influence

² The National Framework can be accessed here: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2026-03/national-survivor-participation-framework-v2.pdf>

- rebuilds relationships

However, when participation is performative - when it is structured to preserve control - it can reproduce moral injury. A shift is therefore required: from power over to relational forms of power that are shared, negotiated, and, at times, relinquished. For co-production to contribute to moral recovery, continuous reflection is required.

- 1) Where do I hold power?
- 2) How do I use it?
- 3) Where must I relinquish it?

A more nuanced understanding of power is essential. The challenge to transfer power from one group to another risks reproducing the same hierarchical dynamics in different forms. Rather, moral recovery calls for a shift from “power over” to relational forms of power that enable shared agency. In this sense, participation becomes a space not only for redistributing power, but for transforming how power is lived and negotiated in relationships.

7. Conclusion: Power, humility, and the possibility of moral recovery

Survivor participation within Christian faith communities is not a technical solution. It is an ethical and relational practice shaped by power. It can support recovery - but only if the conditions of participation are transformed.



Priam at the Feet of Achilles (1809) by Jérôme-Martin Langlois

An image that captures this transformation can be found in Homer's Iliad. After the death of his son Hector, King Priam enters the camp of Achilles, the man who killed him. He kneels before him and kisses his hands - the hands that took his son's life.

In this moment, power is not asserted but relinquished. Priam, a king, kneels. Achilles, a warrior, weeps. What emerges is not resolution, but recognition. A shared encounter with grief, vulnerability, and humanity.

Homer reminds us that true power is not found in dominance or authority, but in the capacity to recognise the other - to listen, to feel, and to respond with humility. In contexts of moral injury, particularly within institutions that claim moral authority, this is critical. Repair cannot be achieved through procedure alone. It requires the courage to encounter pain without control, to listen without defensiveness, and to be changed by what is heard. Because ultimately, in the aftermath of harm, there are no true victors - only wounded relationships, and the fragile possibility of repair.

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