



Advancing the Study of Nonreligion through Feminist Methods

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, nonreligious people face stigma, prejudice, and discrimination because they are viewed as immoral and distrustful. This is partly because of othering, by which nonreligious people are subjugated to a minority status. Othering also occurs in academic research and writing. Applying feminist principles can improve research about nonreligious populations. Grounded in results of a US-based online study, we recommend two feminist principles to facilitate the study of nonreligion: (1) rejecting othering of minority groups, and (2) intersectionality. As a result of applying these principles, the nuanced differences between nonreligious groups can be better understood and the complex identities of nonreligious people can be more accurately represented. Researchers benefit from increased accuracy and understanding of nonreligion via better informed theoretical and methodological decisions and nonreligious people benefit from their more accurate representation in academic research.

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INTRODUCTION

The growing number of people in the United States (US) who do not identify with any religion has led to an increased interest in studying these populations (Bullivant 2020). People belonging to this group are often broadly called religious nones (Wilkins-Laflamme 2015), irreligious (Campbell 1972; Saroglou 2014), religiously unaffiliated (Hackett et al. 2015), and nonreligious (Lee 2015), among other labels. These broad categories include diverse secular identities, including those who are atheists, agnostics, spiritual but not religious (SBNR), humanists, and secularists (Lee 2015).

In the United States, atheists face stigma, prejudice, and discrimination because they are seen as morally inferior (Edgell, Gerteis & Hartmann 2006; Edgell et al. 2016) and distrustful (Barb 2011).¹ That stigma, prejudice, and discrimination spills over to other nonreligious people including SBNR, agnostics, and other nonreligious minority groups (Edgell et al. 2016; McClure 2017) and occurs most often in social interactions and within families (Cragun et al. 2012). The spillover of stigma and prejudice is interpreted as a moral boundary-making process by which nonreligious people are defined as an immoral subordinate group in comparison to the religiously moral population of the US (Edgell et al. 2016). This process is problematic because it can cause nonreligious people to constantly self-monitor their identity presentation (e.g., Lee 2017) to manage their experience with stigma in the face of discrediting stereotypes (Burke 1991; McClure 2017; Snyder 1974). The concept of *othering* can explain, at least in part, why such a stigma about nonreligious people exists (Jensen 2011; Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Othering refers to the process by which dominant groups, characterized by group size or group power (i.e., social status), define into existence subordinate groups in a reductionist way, ascribing problematic and inferior characteristics to them (Jensen 2011; Schwalbe et al. 2000). Othering is apparent in academic scholarship. In academic research and writing, othering is most common through decontextualization, or in other words, extracting specific information from its context for analysis (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi 2012; Schwalbe et al. 2000). Othering occurs when the researcher takes the role as the expert, controls the research subject's narrative, and re-tells it in a new way for publication (hooks 1990/2015; Krumer-Nevo & Sidi 2012).

Othering contributes to problems within social science fields, including research on nonreligious populations. Mischaracterizing a diverse group of people in research is one area that has garnered considerable attention in the nonreligion field of study. Currently, researchers are beginning to grapple with the heterogeneity within the broad nonreligious category to move away from a homogenous conceptualization of nonreligious people, but method, measurement, and data limitations

restrain this effort to some extent (e.g., Baker & Smith 2015; Cragun 2019; Frost 2019). Further, researchers have proposed different operationalized terms to refer to various nonreligious populations within and across disciplines (e.g., nonreligious, religious nones, irreligious, religiously unaffiliated) in an effort to move away from a homogenous conceptualization of nonreligious people (e.g., Baggett, 2019), but this effort needs more attention. Many fields in the social sciences are challenging the implicit othering process and attempting to solve problems in their respective fields by adopting research practices from feminist scholarship traditions.² We argue that the nonreligion field can also benefit from doing so.

Words like feminist and othering can carry with them an assumption of pursuing a specific agenda of discrediting research findings because of a disciplinary bias (Strathern 1987) which can turn some researchers and readers away from these perspectives' arguments. Feminist scholarship, however, provides certain principles which researchers can implement in their own research practices (i.e., an interdisciplinary approach) without sacrificing their findings (Strathern 1987).

Feminist principles are discussed across many fields in social science including family science (Bermúdez et al. 2016; Murray 1993), community psychology (Cruz & Sonn 2011; Dutta 2018), public health (Simonds & Christopher 2013), youth, community, and social work (Paris & Winn 2014), race (Yuval-Davis 2006) and gender studies (Goff & Kahn 2013). Previous publications have also explicitly listed and described key principles in feminist scholarship from multiple disciplines (Webb, Allen & Walker 2002). Feminist principles, however, have not been explicitly applied to the study of nonreligion.³ By expanded application of principles from feminist scholarship to the study of nonreligion, researchers of nonreligion will be better able to: (1) Capture the nuances between the various groups within the broad "religiously unaffiliated" category as they interact with other identities and statuses, and (2) Elucidate the complexities of nonreligious identities.

PRINCIPLES FROM FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP

This paper discusses two feminist principles which apply to the study of nonreligion. Although feminist principles vary in their definitions across publications (e.g., Webb et al. 2002), the basic ideas behind them remain constant. The two principles discussed in this paper are: (1) Rejecting the othering of minority groups in research (Campbell & Wasco 2000; Frost & Elichaooff 2014; Westmarland 2001); and (2) Allowing for intersectionality to be accounted for and measured in research (Miranda Samuels & Ross-Sheriff 2008; Yuval-Davis 2006). To better illustrate these principles, we first discuss how feminist scholarship

challenges the dominant epistemology in social science via a critical epistemology (Naples & Gurr 2014) and later discuss how incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods can facilitate implementing these feminist principles (Campbell & Wasco 2000; Hesse-Biber 2014; Westmarland 2001).

EPISTEMOLOGY

Epistemology refers to what we know and how we know it and serves as a philosophical standpoint which guides researchers and their scholarly activity (Creswell & Plano-Clark 2018; Naples & Gurr 2014). The primary epistemology to most social science research is empiricism, which reflects (or embodies) a Western perspective that all knowledge is based on experience through the five senses of the human body, that truth and knowledge can only be found through objective scientific methods and validated as true through replicable measurements (Naples & Gurr 2014, pp. 58–59; Westmarland 2001). What is considered objective and how measurements are constructed and validated, however, is determined through an empiricist perspective which tends to downplay or discredit the experiences of non-dominant groups (Campbell & Wasco 2000; Westmarland 2001).

Feminist scholarship follows a critical epistemology, which challenges an empirical epistemology and traditional views (Webb et al. 2002). Through a critical epistemology, researchers argue that empiricism is not the one and only way of obtaining knowledge or reflecting reality (Campbell & Wasco 2000; Frost & Elichaooff 2014; Marshall & Rossman 2016; Naples & Gurr 2014). This argument does not negate empiricist science, nor does it argue that empiricism be wholly abandoned. Rather, challenging empiricism gives space to value minority groups' own accounts of their experiences by addressing the limitations within an empiricist epistemology (Campbell & Wasco 2000; Marshall & Rossman 2016; Westmarland 2001).

Much of the nonreligion field currently reflects the perspective that all people have some relation to religion, religiosity, and spirituality (e.g., Lee 2015; Smith & Cragun 2019); in particular, Christianity (Loewenthal 2000). This reveals an underlying assumption that nonreligious people are in an active response against religion, further adding to the stigma and prejudice that they face (e.g., McClure 2017). This also fails to acknowledge the possibility for a complete indifference to religion (Hedberg & Huzarevich 2017). Further, the prevailing discourse of religion and spirituality in the social sciences reflects Western ideologies like individualism (Zaloudek, Ruder-Vásconez & Doll 2017) and fails to acknowledge other valid ways of being.

Following a critical epistemology, researchers can challenge the assumption that nonreligious people have a relationship to religion and, as Taves (2018) writes,

researchers can begin with the “big questions” about nonreligious people, including questions about the substantive content of their worldviews and meaning-making systems. Such substantive content can then be viewed in relation to the intersection of identities and contexts in the experiences of nonreligious people. This critical foundation of feminist scholarship informs the two principles that we will now turn to. By researching nonreligious populations from a different epistemological perspective than empiricism, rejecting othering and accounting for intersectionality are possible as these two principles from feminist scholarship come out of a critical epistemology.

REJECTING OTHERING OF MINORITY GROUPS

The first principle for discussion is rejecting othering of minority groups. Othering is a multidimensional and interactional process which regenerates inequality through explicit (e.g., defining a group as morally and/or intellectually inferior), implicit (e.g., identity work which upholds the idea of the “powerful”), or defensive (e.g., those seeking membership in a dominant group or those deflecting stigma and misrepresentation by the dominant group) processes (Schwalbe et al. 2000). Othering has been studied in the contexts of immigration policy (Huot et al. 2016) and forced migration (Grove & Zwi 2006), gerontology (van Dyk 2016), religious minorities in Europe (Silva 2017), race and ethnicity (hooks 1990/2015), sexuality (Weis 1995), history (Spivak 1985), and in academia (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi 2012). In academic research and writing, it is the implicit form of othering that is most common (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi 2012; Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Implicit othering in academia occurs throughout the research process. Although othering is not the explicit goal of researchers, it is traditionally a consequence of the empirical epistemology that frames publications; labeling certain participants as “other” or abnormal and deviant from another group of participants who are seen as the norm and used as the baseline for comparison in research questions and statistical analyses. Implicit othering also occurs when the researcher publishes a participant's narrative in a way unintended by the participant (hooks 1990/2015; Krumer-Nevo & Sidi 2012). This often decontextualizes participants' responses (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi 2012), removing the behavior and experiences of the participant from the social structures in which they naturally occur.

In the study of nonreligion, implicit othering contributes to the devaluation of nonreligious peoples' experiences. For example, scholarly publications and presentations often use nonreligious people as the other; comparing nonreligious people to religious populations, investigating majority groups' attitudes about nonreligious people (Edgell et al. 2016), and by explicitly calling them “other” (Smith & Cragun 2019). Such research further supports

the othering process by claiming scientific findings to be objective and autonomous of other influences (Campbell & Wasco 2000; Westmarland 2001). These consequences are a result of the framing of research questions, methodology decisions (e.g., sampling, questionnaire and measures, and survey design), and the labelling of participants in relation to the comparison group (e.g., nonreligion, religious nones, religion's other).

Feminist scholarship rejects implicit othering by valuing the viewpoints and subjective experiences of people belonging to minority groups (e.g., people of color, women, LGBTQ+ communities, and others) (Campbell & Wasco 2000; Marshall & Rossman 2016; Webb et al. 2002; Westmarland 2001), which includes nonreligious people. Valuing subjective experiences necessitates an understanding of minority group experiences, a condition which is often not reflected in scientific research and academic journal articles (see Simonds & Christopher 2013). This means that certain methods, measures, and instruments need to be reevaluated and potentially reconstructed to accurately reflect nonreligious peoples' experiences, and by doing so, academic journals will need to reevaluate their criteria for scientific studies, broadening beyond the standards of traditional empirical studies. This is not a novel conclusion, as Baker and Smith (2015), Cragun (2019), Frost (2019), Järnefelt (2020), and Park and Davidson (2020), among others, have written on this very subject.

Example of Implicit Othering

The following discussion describes results from a US-based online study conducted by the authors. The study's purpose was to collect data on the worldviews of people who belonged to various groups within the nonreligious population to provide evidence on the heterogeneity of their worldviews. Similar to Brown (2011), Lee (2015), Taves (2018), and Frost (2019), one goal of the study was to move the field away from a narrative of loss, or a deficit-model conceptualization of nonreligion, to a substantive conceptualization of the diverse worldviews which exist within the nonreligious population as they stand regardless of religious worldviews.

The study consisted of an online survey using Qualtrics (2020) survey software and was advertised and distributed in two manners: (1) Using a university participant pool (i.e., SONA system) of a mid-sized US university, and (2) Posting an anonymous survey link on the "atheist" subreddit thread (see Shatz 2017) which is an online forum for atheists, agnostics, and generally secular people within Reddit.⁴ This sampling technique obtained convenience samples of the nonreligious population. Convenience samples are largely nonrepresentative of any population, however, this study was to serve as one step toward providing evidence of diverse nonreligious worldviews. It did not have the goal of generalization to the entire nonreligious population since university

pools and online forums disproportionately attract some subpopulations, making the data nonrepresentative of the broader nonreligious population.

The online survey included four components: (1) the "Twenty Statements Task" in which participants respond to the statement, "I am ___." by filling in this same stem 20 times (e.g., sister, athletic, funny, atheist, Latino, student) (Kuhn & McPartland 1954); (2) a collated worldview measure, developed to address a nonreligious population, in which respondents indicated on a seven-point Likert-type scale the extent to which they agreed with 107 statements, such as "I become more religious or spiritual in times of need," "Being religious or spiritual is not central to who I am;" "I actively work towards making the world a better place to live;" and "I face the prospect of death with courage and calmness" (Nynäs, Kontala & Lassander 2021; Koltko-Rivera 2000; Koltko-Rivera 2004); (3) a demographic questionnaire, and (4) an open-ended question to give participants the opportunity to provide additional information or feedback. The study was determined to be of minimal risk by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and following IRB approval, data were collected for three weeks in the Spring of 2019. The following discussion focuses on the latter distribution's subset of responses which come from the "atheist" subreddit thread sample. This subreddit is described as suited for a range of secular people.

The sample obtained from the subreddit thread ($N = 66$) was largely unusable for the original purpose of the study. Fifty-eight (88%) cases of the total sample were valid, but only 18 (31%) of those 58 cases were usable to some capacity (e.g., the participants completed most or all survey items). The resulting sample of nonreligious respondents ($N = 18$) included 10 participants who identified as male (55.6%) and 8 as female. It had a median age of 38 years and was majority White ($n = 11$); however, two respondents identified as Latino, four as multi-racial, and one as "human." Half of the resulting sample ($n = 9$) completed high school or some college, four completed an associates or bachelor's degree, four completed a graduate degree, and one did not respond to the education question. The majority of the sample ($n = 14$) identified as atheist, while two identified as "other," one as agnostic, and one as satanist. We included 26 (non)religious or spiritual identity options, with a text-entry option for "other." The two "other" entries included a self-identifying Pastafarian, and one participant stating, "I believe older regions [sic] hold some truth but the stories are metaphors." The issues affecting participation and survey completion were identified by participants in the valuable criticism of the measures and method which were left in response to the open-ended question in the survey or as a comment on the recruitment post itself.

Because of the small sample size, a systematic coding technique typical of larger-scale qualitative studies was

not possible. Instead, both authors met to discuss the comments left in the survey and on the recruitment post (in the subreddit forum) to address the issues participants wrote in their feedback. The following is a discussion of these comments considering the argument of implicit othering in academic research.

Feedback from participants primarily concerned the “Twenty-Statements Task” and the various worldview items. One participant addressed the “Twenty-Statements Task” by writing, “I dropped out [of the survey] at the “I am a” questions...for me, when I dropped Christianity I also dropped a lot of labels for myself and others. I am not excited about the type of judgementalism and identity politics that question implies.”

Comments about the various worldview items included a concern that the study had a hidden agenda because of the implicit suggestions that the worldview statements held that nonreligion exists only in relation to religion. This perception occurred among participants despite the original authors of these established instruments creating items which they intended to measure the diversity of spiritual, religious, and nonreligious worldviews (Nynäs et al. 2021). One respondent wrote, “In addition, some of the questions assume the person taking the survey has some level of religious belief... It seems to be the type that is trying to create a result that ‘proves’ atheists are just confused or ‘hurt’ individuals who need a deity.”

Other participants wrote similar comments, including “A lot of questions seem to presume some level of religious belief and are awkward to answer if you have none.” “A number of questions seemed to assume that I’m religious or believe in the divine and thus were hard to answer adequately given that I’m an atheist.” and “As an atheist, it was hard to know how to answer some of the questions that were asked with an assumption that we know and agree on what “spirituality” means.”

These comments reflect participants’ unease with the “Twenty Statements Task” and the collated worldview items, which to them, suggests a hidden agenda by researchers. As noted by the participants, the items in the “Twenty Statements Task” assume that people self-categorize themselves into clearly defined groups, and the collated worldview items assume that a person has a relationship to religion in some way. Although some items do ask about spiritual and religious beliefs, these beliefs are not entirely out of the realm of possibility for nonreligious individuals and were preserved in the scales from the original authors.

This feedback and overall suspicion from participants are not surprising given that much of the scientific research implicitly other nonreligious people by presenting them as one homogenous group, or in binary opposition to religious people. By implementing the feminist principle of rejecting othering, we can examine nonreligion from a perspective which can more accurately inform measures

to reflect the beliefs and identities of the participants. Therefore, some measures, like the “Twenty Statements Task” and the collated worldview items, will need to be reevaluated to accurately reflect how participants see themselves. One way that measures can be edited to accurately reflect how participants see themselves is to account for people’s intersecting identities and statuses which influence their experiences.

INTERSECTIONALITY

The second principle for discussion is intersectionality which has been widely adopted within social science sub-disciplines (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Grzanka 2020; Miranda Samuels & Ross-Sheriff 2008; Yuval-Davis 2006). Intersectionality serves as a lens through which people’s experiences can be better understood as they relate to power structures in society (Collins & Bilge 2020). Intersectionality⁵ refers to the “product” of a person’s combination of identities and statuses and the context the person is situated in. This intersectional “product” describes the unique experience a person has because of the interaction between their identities and their context (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Grzanka 2020). For example, one’s experiences are not the result of race, or of class, or of gender, or their additive effect (Bowleg 2008). Those experiences reflect the intersection of these such that the experiences of Black lesbian women would not be expected to be the same as those of Latina bisexual women. Intersectionality does not refer to accounting for “multiple identities” although it is often operationalized in that manner (Grzanka & Miles 2016; Grzanka 2020).

Some social scientists (e.g., McCall 2005) proposed methodological techniques to address the complexities of incorporating intersectionality into social scientific research. This often risks merely accounting for “multiple identities” and there remains a risk of extracting intersectionality from its own context, that of Black Feminism⁶ (Collins & Bilge 2020; Collins 2009), which is attentive to how power relations shape knowledge. McCall (2005, p. 1788, note 23) writes that quantitative data are superior to qualitative data in the study of intersectionality with respect to a “burden of proof,” an argument rooted in empiricism. Although quantitative data are useful in many respects, as explained thus far, methods and measures used in quantitative data collection are subject to biases which can interfere with the goals of feminist scholarship.

Oftentimes, people are not given the opportunity to express their intersectional experiences in research studies because one identity is often assumed to be of primary interest when, in actual practice, one identity does not hold the sole influence in social interactions and institutions (e.g., Crenshaw 1989). Consequently, scientific findings often fail to reflect the reality of people’s lived experiences. For example, some social psychological studies do not accurately represent the

intersections of race and gender because measures of racism and sexism ignore the influences of one another (Crenshaw 1989; Goff & Kahn 2013). This lack of attention to intersectionality is evident in our own findings reported earlier, such that the existing measures we used for studying identity and worldviews failed to reflect contemporary nonreligious people and experiences derived through their intersecting identities.

Code-Switching, Self-Monitoring, and Managing Stigma

A related issue in research concerns accurately representing a participant in a study. Code-switching refers to behaviors (e.g., communication, speech, and language; body language) that change because of interactions with in-group or out-group members in specific contexts (Cross 2012; Frost 2011). Code-switching is often applied to research on racial and ethnic minority groups (i.e., non-White) and their explicit need to use code-switching to obtain employment, education, and medical care in a Euro-centric society (Cross 2012, p. 198). Code-switching can be conceptualized as a form of self-monitoring, one that is specific to a racial/ethnic minority context. We extend the process of self-monitoring to other groups whose minority status is not as visible as race, including nonreligious groups.

Self-monitoring by nonreligious people is seen in Lee's (2017) field work, in which interviewees in London, England indicated that they would modify how they identify given who they were interacting with. Some indicated that they self-identify as spiritual or vaguely nonreligious when not wanting to offend the person they are talking to because if they were to self-identify as atheist, the conversation would end because it is a more "aggressive" label (Lee 2017, p. 30). They also pointed out that neither the spiritual nor nonreligious identities reflect how they actually see themselves. In the US, atheists are stigmatized (Edgell et al. 2016) more so than in the UK (Lee 2017), and often conceal their atheist identity to avoid the stigma and possible discrimination that comes with it (e.g., McClure 2017; Smith 2013).

This subject of self-monitoring is also relevant for current efforts to define nonreligion in a manner that moves away from the deficit-model approach. Lee (2015, p. 32) provides a substantive definition of nonreligion, however, this definition is not used across all studies of nonreligious populations for various reasons including data availability (Baker & Smith, 2015) and survey methods (Järnefelt 2020). Lee (2015, pp. 203-204) also provides a list of 16 terms commonly used in the study of nonreligion. The terms are contingent on how the researcher defines religion, theism, and spirituality and how the participant understands religion, theism, and spirituality themselves (Lee 2015, p. 203). It is likely that the definitions for nonreligious identities commonly used by researchers are not accurately representative

of the populations that researchers assume belong to them. For example, Americans' understanding and conceptualization of "spirituality" is far more varied than the definition often used in research (e.g., Lee, 2015, p. 204), and the proposed binary between religion and spirituality commonly used in research does not exist widely among lay people (Steenland, Wang & Schmidt 2018).

Considering this disagreement of definitions between the researcher and participant, Frost (2019) argues that applying an identity label to a heterogeneous group of people is not as helpful for research because it can mischaracterize a diverse group of people as a homogenous group. Taves (2018) suggests that researchers begin with "big questions" about nonreligious populations (e.g., their worldviews) which can then clarify and account for the heterogeneity among the many nonreligious groups represented in the literature.

Given that there are many different identities to consider in the study of nonreligion (Lee 2015), and that these identities are expressed and understood differently by people depending on a given social interaction, accounting for intersectionality and self-monitoring can help researchers capture the richness of people's unique combination of identities and statuses, including one or multiple nonreligious identities if applicable, that would have otherwise been concealed or not accounted for in research. By measuring the intersections of people's identities, and by accounting for the social context which might influence how a person feels they *can* identify, scientific studies will better represent nonreligious people's lived experiences accurately.

EXAMPLES OF FEMINIST PRINCIPLES IN NONRELIGION RESEARCH

Many recent publications in the nonreligion field apply the principles and suggestions that we have discussed so far. This discussion is not exhaustive, rather it serves as a jumping-off point for implementing feminist principles into research. Frost (2019) discusses, in detail, how existing paradigms in the nonreligion field limit measurement of nonreligious populations and how this can misrepresent nonreligious people in research. Frost (2019, p. 68) writes that using a catch-all label "can work to perpetuate inaccurate and negative stereotypes about the nonreligious." Further discussions and critiques on methods include Park and Davidson's (2020) discussion on decentering whiteness in survey research, and Cragun's (2019) writing on constructing better survey questions to ask nonreligious people in order to obtain better estimates from this population, an argument furthered by Järnefelt (2020). Järnefelt (2020) identifies assumptions built into survey research (e.g., an expectation of a clear distinction and stable definition

of religion and nonreligion) and offers a new starting point for research that does not begin with a reliance on categories of nonreligion and religion, rather one that is set in the context of people's worldviews and meaning-making systems, a position supported by Taves (2018) and one we attempted to accomplish in our online study of nonreligious worldviews described earlier.

Baggett (2019) emphasized the importance of listening to participants' own accounts (i.e., their acquisition narratives) of becoming a nonreligious person while accounting for their situational context. By doing so, Baggett (2019) rejected the implicit othering of participants by characterizing nonreligious experience within situational context, although this study was not explicitly connected to feminist scholarship and the specific principle of rejecting othering.

In other studies which aim to better represent nonreligious populations, Baker and Smith (2015) employ an intersectional perspective in their analysis of secularism in the United States by connecting nonreligious people's experiences to other power structures centered on race/ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexuality. A focus on intersectional experiences within the nonreligious population is further explored by Baker (2020) and Hutchinson (2020). Baker (2020, p. 295) argues for an intersectional understanding of atheism in the US by writing that, "atheism must be considered in relation to other stigmatized social statuses to understand both the sociological patterns of theistic disbelief and its related social disclosure or concealment." Hutchinson (2020) argues that not only do researchers need to account for people's other stigmatized social statuses, but researchers also need to address race, gender, and sexuality within the broader nonreligious population, as these continue to be divisive flashpoints in the majority White nonreligious population in the US.

Feminist principles, although we argue have not been explicitly applied in the nonreligion field, have been implicitly integrated into studies about nonreligious populations. The benefit of explicitly connecting research on nonreligious populations to feminist principles is that feminist scholarship provides a clear framework and epistemology to help researchers address the implicit othering of participants by explicitly rejecting othering and by better representing participants' intersectional experiences. Further, feminist scholarship provides a framework to identify and address weaknesses in conceptualization and measurement, issues identified by many researchers in the nonreligion field.

IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Particularly for scholars of nonreligion, we suggest eschewing some of the assumptions that are currently reflected in research stemming from an empiricist

epistemology. This takes careful attention to the assumptions held in research designs and assumptions constructed in measures (e.g., Cragun 2019; Järnefelt 2020; Park & Davidson 2020). The prevailing assumptions contribute to the othering of nonreligious people and to the inaccuracies in research findings stemming from current measures, designs, and methodologies. As evidenced by the feedback left on our own study, inaccuracies and epistemic assumptions in the pre-existing measures led participants to believe that we were othering them and that we had a hidden agenda rooted in religion. Of course, this was not our intention, but it brought the concerns discussed in this paper to our attention.

Some ways to implement feminist principles and avoid making inaccurate assumptions include: (1) Allowing participants to freely write in how they identify or; (2) Giving participants the option to choose multiple identities (e.g., atheist and humanist). If implicit othering is a particular concern, we suggest (3) Designing the demographic questionnaire using display logic, in Qualtrics (2020) software for example, such that participants are not exposed to identities that do not apply to them which could prime feelings of "otherness." Using display logic, a participant would first be asked, "Are you religious and/or spiritual?" The options following this question would reflect only those relevant to their answer (e.g., Muslim or Christian if participant marked "yes", atheist or agnostic if participant marked "no"). This will hopefully give the participant a sense of respect as an active and valued participant (i.e., not a subject) of the research process. We also suggest (4) Using mixed methods to triangulate data and conclusions, which can help accurately represent participants' beliefs, identities, and experiences in your data.

A common assumption among social scientists is that feminist principles can primarily be implemented in methods designed to collect qualitative data (Murray, 1993; Westmarland 2001). Although this assumption is understandable because feminist principles were previously incorporated into social science research primarily by findings from qualitative data (e.g., Bell 2014), it is no longer an accurate assumption (e.g., Campbell & Wasco 2000; Westmarland 2001). In fact, Hesse-Biber (2014, pp. 440–441) argued that mixed method research designs that include the ability to collect both qualitative and quantitative data help researchers achieve feminist research goals by exploring multiple understandings of social phenomena and by obtaining subjugated knowledge that might not have otherwise been collected. Feminist principles can inform any method (e.g., surveys or interviews) used to collect both qualitative or quantitative data because the focus is on valuing the participants' experiences and giving participants the opportunity to explain their experience fully. Although this research approach might take longer,

it is preferable to get meaningful and accurate data than to get misleading results quickly.

CONCLUSION

What do feminist principles accomplish beyond their individual parts? We opened this paper by considering issues researchers in the nonreligion field are facing and addressing. Researchers are beginning to acknowledge the nuances between nonreligious groups and reconsider the terminology used to describe nonreligious populations within and across disciplines. As a result, the complexities of various nonreligious groups remain as an area for future investigation. By explicitly implementing the umbrella of feminist principles into future investigations, we argue that results from future work will avoid the implicit othering of participants and account for their diverse experiences as nonreligious people with other intersecting identities and statuses, all while providing a clear feminist scholarship framework to consumers of that research. This proposed approach will contribute to debates about terminology, as well as enrich our understanding of the many varieties of nonreligion.

We do not attempt to clarify and identify the various concepts, labels, terminology, and identifiers in nonreligion in this paper because we encourage researchers to implement feminist principles into their research in manners that allow participants to determine how they identify (e.g., open-ended demographic questions) and what that identity means to them (via focus groups, interviews, Q-Sort, text-entry in surveys, etc.). Through this, researchers will get more accurate conceptualizations and operationalizations of the various terms to use in the study of nonreligion, increasing the accuracy with which these populations are studied and understood.

Current empirical and non-empirical epistemologies, methodologies, methods, measures, and research findings have an important purpose and place in the field. The literature as it stands today is informative in many ways and can inform the approach we advocate for in this paper. However, implementing the framework of feminist principles in the study of nonreligion will not only build upon the current literature, but it holds the potential to increase the accuracy of future studies. Feminist principles have been applied to many disciplines and areas of study with success. These principles advance the understanding of concepts, processes, and shortfalls of scientific research – which are all necessary in order to advance any field. By applying overarching feminist principles to the study of nonreligion, scholars can advance the theoretical underpinnings, perspectives, methodologies, and measures used in the field and encourage others to begin advancing the field in a similar way.

NOTES

- 1 This pattern holds, but to a less pronounced, extent in some contexts and situations in other English-speaking parts of the world as well, including in Canada (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme 2020) and in the United Kingdom (Lee 2015).
- 2 Feminist scholarship is a part of a push to decolonize research methods in the social sciences (Bermúdez, Muruthi & Jordan 2016). Decolonizing research methods refers to a pursuit of challenging Western ideologies, epistemologies, and paradigms which have guided researchers' questions, methods, and interpretations in social science (Hesse-Biber 2014; Paris & Winn 2014). Feminist scholarship was born out of the feminist movements of the 1970s and gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s (Campbell & Wasco 2000). Feminist theories followed and proposed specific principles to guide a variety of areas. These principles, and feminist scholarship broadly, come out of a particular epistemology that requires the researcher to be aware of their own subjectivities (e.g., beliefs, values, and emotions) in order to understand how reality for their participants is constructed (Campbell & Wasco 2000).
- 3 Many studies do implement feminist principles without explicitly calling them feminist, as we illustrate in the paper.
- 4 All recruitment posts, comments, and feedback are no longer posted on the subreddit thread "atheist" to protect participants' anonymity.
- 5 For further discussions on intersectionality and psychology, see Grzanka (2020) and Moradi and Grzanka (2017). For a discussion on how traditional approaches in psychology impede on intersectional thinking, see Goff and Kahn (2013).
- 6 See Cooper's (2016) discussion on "post-intersectional" and "post-Black feminist" arguments that are in some social scientists' publications.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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