

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Expanding on the Experiences of Transgender Nonreligious People: An Exploratory Analysis

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Building on research that points out the specific forms of marginalization that transgender and nonreligious people face in contemporary U.S. society, this exploratory analysis focuses on the experiences of transgender nonreligious people who were raised in religious households. Utilizing interviews with eleven formerly religious, now nonreligious, transgender people I draw out some of the future pathways scholars of nonreligion should take to better account for the lives of transgender nonreligious people in scholarship on nonreligion. Specifically, scholars of nonreligion should begin analyzing transgender nonreligious people's experiences in religious settings, with family, and with organizations and networks outside of religion. I conclude by discussing the ways this study can shed light on the broader processes by which inequality is reproduced and make suggestions for nonreligious leaders to make room for and listen to transgender people in nonreligious spaces.

In recent years, the lives of transgender¹ people have gained unprecedented attention (Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Serano 2007; Spade 2011; Stryker 2008; Sumerau et al. 2016). Thus far scholarship on transgender individuals has primarily focused on the experiences of transgender people in the workplace (Connell 2010; Schilt 2010), family (Pfeffer 2010), public space (Doan 2007), health (Miller and Grollman 2015), and, very recently, religion (Sumerau and Cragun 2015). As these writers note, those interested in unearthing and challenging gender inequalities need to pay heed to the experiences and disparities of transgender people in contemporary U.S. society (Grant et al. 2011; Schilt 2010). Thus, the invisibility of transgender people within the social sciences to date is beginning to shift into recognition of the importance of this population for understanding any facet of contemporary society (Jauk 2013; Sumerau et al. 2016).

In a similar vein, scholars of religion and non religion have started to look at discrimination that atheist and non-religious people face in their everyday lives (Edgell et al. 2006; Mudd et al. 2015). These scholars note that atheists are potentially considered the ultimate "other" in a society dominated by Christian norms (Edgell et al. 2006). While atheists and nonreligious people do experience heightened levels of discrimination in a social context where not only Christianity, but *religiosity* is the norm (see also Barton 2012), little is known about the ways gender may influence such marginalization (Smith 2013) or visa versa.

In this exploratory analysis, I seek to weave together these parallel developments in the fields of gender and nonreligion, and call for scholars of nonreligion to more seriously

incorporate the experiences of transgender nonreligious people in future studies. Specifically, I use interviews with eleven transgender nonreligious people who were raised in religious settings to outline some arenas in which non-religious scholars can begin this venture. For the purposes of this study, "nonreligious" refers to transgender respondents who do not identify as religious and who are not active in an organized religious community or congregation. I do not, however, intend to generalize the findings of this study to all nonreligious transgender people. Rather, I demonstrate some important avenues for scholars of (non) religion to explore in future research.

Additionally, since the study from which these data come focuses primarily on experiences with gender and beliefs about contemporary understandings of gender, experiences with religion and nonreligion make up a relatively small component of the overall interview schedule. Thus, I am unable to comment in depth on the nuances involved in the respondents' experiences leaving religion, how large or small of a role being nonreligious plays in their everyday lives, and the familial dynamics related to respondents' leaving religion. Furthermore, these data do not lend themselves to an analysis of the similarities and/or differences between transgender nonreligious people and transgender religious people. While the data for this study cannot address these questions it still provides fruitful insight into some of the dynamics that transgender nonreligious people have to navigate in their lives, and can provide a starting place for other nonreligion scholars to address these questions in future analyses.

Literature Review

Sociologists have pointed out that gender is a social institution and while specific gendered meanings shift based on time and place, the social institution of gender

is a persistent force that structures our interactions and experiences (Martin 2004). Scholars have also pointed to the ways gendered meanings in our current social context tend to privilege men over women (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). The elevation of men over women in the institution of gender leads women to be subordinated in a variety of social contexts and situations (Garcia 2012; Hlavka 2014; Sumerau, Padavic, and Schrock 2015). While sociologists of gender have discussed this imbalance of power for decades (West and Zimmerman 1987), attention to the specific subordination of transgender people is a relatively recent development in sociological analyses of gender (Serano 2007; Sumerau et al. 2016).

Specifically, gender scholars have begun to analyze the way that the institution of gender is not only patriarchal (Martin 2004), but also cissexist (Serano 2007; Sumerau and Cragun 2015). Cissexism involves the widespread presumption that cisgender people are normal and real while transgender people are abnormal and inauthentic (Nordmarken 2014; Serano 2007; Sumerau et al. 2016). In a cissexist social context, transgender people experience heightened rates of violence, unemployment, homelessness, poor access to medical care, and suicide (Grant et al. 2011). Furthermore, transgender people experience discrimination in the workplace (Schilt 2006), public space (Doan 2007; Cavanagh 2010), and their own families (Grant et al. 2011).

Furthermore, while scholars began paying attention to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people's experiences in religious institutions decades ago (Thumma 1991), sociologists have only recently started to pay attention to the ways that transgender individuals navigate religious institutions (Rodriguez and Follins 2012; Sumerau and Cragun 2015; Sumerau et al. 2016). For example, in their study of transgender Mormons, Sumerau and colleagues pointed to the ways transgender people were marked as other, punished for their otherness, and erased in the church of Latter Day Saints. Sumerau and colleagues pointed out that, as an institution, contemporary religion often "cisgenders reality" by imagining and reinforcing a view of the world where only cisgender people exist (Sumerau et al. 2016). Additionally, in recent years various religious denominations have publicly decried the existence of transgender people. For example, since 2014 there has been an uptick in the number of religiously affiliated colleges seeking Title IX exemptions based on the premise that supporting transgender students violates the institutions' sincerely held religious beliefs (Stack 2015). Furthermore, in late 2015 the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors met for an initial discussion of the issue of "transgender confusion" (Urquhart 2015).

At the same time that religious institutions have begun to more publicly chastise transgender individuals, some leaders in the atheist community have followed suit. In 2015 one of the most famous atheist leaders, Richard Dawkins, expressed cissexist views on twitter by interrogating if transgender women were "really women" based on their chromosomes (Walker 2015). While much research has pointed to the fact that chromosomal markers of sex are far more complicated than public discourse acknowledges

(Fausto-Sterling 2000; Davis 2015), Dawkins' remarks reveal that atheism is not necessarily a safer space for transgender people to go after leaving religious contexts. Despite this possibility, no scientific examinations of the intersection of transgender and nonreligious experience exist to date in the growing secular literature.

Rather, previous studies of nonreligion have pointed to the ways that people who do not participate in religion are looked down upon in American society (Edgell et al. 2006; Mudd et al. 2015; Wallace et al. 2014). Scholars have also started to observe the fact that nonreligious people are gaining increased attention in the present social context (Baker and Smith 2015; Cragun, Hammer, and Smith 2013), yet these groups still face discrimination (Wallace et al. 2014). In their 2007 study of "freethinkers", a collective label for atheists and secular humanists, Cimino and Smith outline the ways in which these groups construct their collective and individual identities in response to existing in a social context where religious norms and mores still govern much of society. Specifically, Cimino and Smith (2007) point to the ways freethinkers began to draw on the language of other minority groups in the US in order to position themselves as an oppressed group rather than an intellectual "vanguard" (Cimino and Smith 2007).

Following this research, Sumerau and Cragun (2016) analyzed the ways nonreligious people who are unaffiliated with major nonreligious movements (like the freethinkers) construct their identities. Sumerau and Cragun (2016) point out that the nonreligious people in their study demoralize religion and construct nonreligious "moral identities", or identities that position them as revered and respected (Katz 1975). As both Cimino and Smith (2007), and Cragun and Sumerau (2016) illustrate, nonreligious people exist as a marginalized group in contemporary society, as such they cultivate adaptive strategies to lend meaning to themselves and others like them to resist marginalization.

As noted above, transgender people also exist in a marginalized position in our society (Grant et al. 2011). Thus, it is important to investigate the ways that people who exist at the intersections of transgender and nonreligious identity experience, make sense of, and participate the cissexist and highly religious world around them. The insights from the present literature on both nonreligious and transgender experience show that the U.S. is a society dominated by religious norms (Barton 2012; Hammer et al. 2012), and that nonreligious people (both those affiliated with nonreligious groups and not) work against this marginalization through various identity construction tactics (Cimino and Smith 2007; Sumerau and Cragun 2016). Since religious institutions (Stack 2015; Sumerau et al. 2016) – and religious (Urquhart 2015) and nonreligious leaders (Walker 2015) – have started to reproduce cissexism in their discussions of transgender people, it may be time for scholars of nonreligion to pay close attention to the ways that transgender existence intersects with nonreligious identity. This is especially the case since both groups are gaining more visibility (Cragun et al. 2013; Sumerau et al. 2016) and are still marginalized by religious

(Cimino and Smith 2007; Wallace et al. 2014) and cissexist (Serano 2007) norms and expectations.

As intersectional scholars have long pointed out, it is important to understand how existing at multiple axes of inequality shape the specific life experience of multiply marginalized people (Collins 2005). In a cissexist society that privileges religion and especially religious traditions predicated upon cisgender belief structures (Sumerau et al. 2016), transgender nonreligious people are multiply marginalized. In this study, I seek to highlight some of the ways nonreligious scholars can more meaningfully incorporate this information into their examinations in order to both portray a more accurate picture of who nonreligious people in American society are, and how to challenge cissexist and nonreligious discrimination.

Methods

Data for this study come from the Growing Up in the 21st Century interview study (see, Risman Forthcoming). The research was a collaborative project including methods practicum courses at two universities in the Midwestern United States. Students and faculty worked together to design the study, develop an interview schedule, conduct interviews and help problem solve as issues arose. Semi-structured life history interviews were conducted with two modules: one which focused on the life history and background of participants, and a second module designed to capture 21st century youths' understanding of gender. With IRB approval, participants were primarily recruited from introductory sociology courses at the universities. Participants were also recruited at LGBTQ centers on university campuses and via snowball sampling to increase the number of participants who self-identified as gender non-conforming. One hundred and sixteen interviews were conducted with individual interviews lasting from less than an hour, to over three. The average interview was approximately an hour and a half. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and field notes were written for every encounter. Each participant chose the location of the interview and most interviews were conducted in campus coffee shops or offices. Data are available from the principal investigator, Barbara Risman, for further analysis.

In this paper, I focus solely on the eleven interviews with participants who are transgender, raised in a religious family setting, and currently nonreligious. In this sample there are five genderqueer respondents, four transgender women, and two transgender men. All of the respondents came from a religious, and specifically Christian background. The specific denominations include Catholic, Evangelical Christian, Evangelical Baptist, Methodist, and Lutheran. I conducted an inductive analysis of the data, where I began with open coding and refined my coding framework as themes emerged in the interviews (Charmaz 2006). Eventually, I arrived at three main themes in the data: previous religion, family experience, and social networks outside of religion. In the following sections, I outline the findings this analysis as well as suggest directions for (non)religious scholars in order to better incorporate transgender perspectives in the study of nonreligion.

Previous Religion

All eleven respondents were raised in an environment where religion played some role in their lives. For some respondents this meant that religious influence primarily came from extended family, such as grandparents. For example a transgender woman explains the role that her Catholic upbringing played in her everyday life as a child:

My mother wasn't Catholic. My father was but was not very religious. Where it came into my life mostly was through my father's parents who were very Christian, very Catholic and as a result I was in Sunday school for most of my grade school years. And was baptized Catholic and was expected to go for holidays.

In this example, even though her parents were not very religious, the influence of her grandparents led her parents to enroll her in Catholic school. For other transgender nonreligious people, their upbringing in a religious context manifested in occasional church attendance for important holidays, as this respondent exemplifies:

We went to Church on Easter, Christmas, and sometimes Thanksgiving. We are technically Methodist. In about 2004 or 2005, I turned 13, my parents seemed to become to feel a little guilty that they didn't really brought me up Christian enough. Because they are both Christians and they believe in God. We tried finding a Church, not much success. My parents newly discovered liberal views made it somewhat difficult in this location and community.

Similarly, a genderqueer respondent recalls how their family's religious affiliations manifested in control over Halloween costumes, but otherwise wasn't "that strict":

When I was born, my dad was actually a preacher and we referred to ourselves as nondenominational Christians, which I guess you can even call it Evangelical... It wasn't that strict. It was, I mean, it was pretty, I don't know, the stereotypical Evangelical, but not that strict. We still celebrated holidays. My parents let me dress up for Halloween, though I wasn't able to be anything occult which is no devils, stuff like that. But for the most part pretty normal, I guess. Stereotypical.

In these responses it is clear that religion, though not the most important factor in these respondents' youth, was an underlying factor in the conditions in which they grew up. While religion was not necessarily the main force that structured their experiences in youth, it still provided a backdrop to their upbringing that they would later shirk in adulthood.

In contrast to the respondents mentioned above, other transgender nonreligious people grew up in highly religious settings. For instance, a transgender man describes his experience being raised in an Evangelical Baptist setting:

The church that I grew up in was Evangelical Baptist. The combination of, I don't want to say the two craziest, but the two most renowned sects of Protestant Christianity... I was the kid that was always there at the church three or four times a week. I did something called AWANAs. This is basically like the Christian equivalent of Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts. I also did a thing called Winglets, which is, well, Wings is our church's female group for adult women. So Winglets was supposed to be teaching different values for women from the Bible.

As this respondent notes, he was expected to attend church multiple times a week and participate in organizations through his family's local congregation. Similarly, a genderqueer respondent recounts a traumatic experience from their scripture class at a Catholic high school:

It was a scripture class. So we took one day out to explain homosexuality to the class. In a very insolent way. Made me very angry. It was basically all lies from what I remember. I still have them written down somewhere. But he basically gave us a list of statistics about homosexual people. 90% of homosexual people have AIDS... it was very, that was traumatic actually. And it was not only that he was doing this but then the rest of the class was agreeing with him.

This respondent's experience demonstrates that their religious upbringing in terms of schooling led to their existence in an educational environment where not only their teachers and authority figures, but also their peers, openly shared negative views of LGBT people. Elsewhere in the interview, this respondent recounts that their experience in Catholic high school was one of the lowest points of their life because they felt isolated and trapped in this highly religious setting: "[I]t was in a bubble. Even the high schools in the surrounding areas I feel would've been better for me. But this was kind of... it's in its own little world. Everything was very standardized, Catholic, white, straight. Nobody really branched out".

Thus, the data presented here suggests that transgender nonreligious people's experiences with prior religions can vary widely. Some respondents recounted having minimal involvement with local churches while others demonstrated feelings of isolation and highly regulated schedules due to their involvement in religious institutional contexts (such as school and local congregations). As such, it would benefit future scholars to analyze more deeply the complexities of these differing experiences. Does the degree to which one is involved in religion in youth influence other factors such as health and employment? While answering these questions is beyond the scope of the present analysis, these questions are worthy of attention in future analyses of nonreligion and transgender experience.

Family

Highly Religious Households

Similarly to the intensity of involvement in religious organizations, transgender nonreligious respondents also experience varying degrees of support from their family members. Respondents who were raised in highly religious households often described having a difficult time communicating with family members about their transgender identity and queer sexualities. For example, a genderqueer respondent notes that:

I guess at first when I came out to my mom that was kind of negative. She's really Catholic and she was really upset. And I mean it's kind of like she already knew but she just like hearing it like didn't... she didn't want to hear it, you know? So that was something that, I mean, it was really hard for me to do.

While this respondent is referring to sharing their sexuality with their mom, they further note "My dad was very cool about it. My mom like kind of forced femininity on me and uh yeah. I kind of rebelled for a while". This respondent details examples of their mother purchasing feminine clothes as an example of how their mother pushed unwanted messages of femininity onto them. As such, when their mom "forced femininity" on them, they responded with rebellion since they did not feel comfortable fitting into their mother's gendered expectations.

While the quote above demonstrates that parents often tried to get their children to fit into gender norms solely by their own efforts, other family members of transgender nonreligious respondents went a step further. In the sample of eleven, two respondents shared stories of getting sent to "conversion therapy" by their family members. For example, a transgender man who was raised in an Evangelical Baptist family described an argument he got into with his family when they suggested he attend "conversion therapy" and refused to use his correct pronouns:

Previously my mom had sent me an email from Exodus International saying these people suffer and struggle with the same thing that you do. You should look into this and read their stories and they will help you make the right decision. The right decision in my mother's eyes was to choose to be straight so to speak. That's how she saw it. They [his parents] see it as I chose a homosexual lifestyle at the time. That in itself was pretty gruesome and that was the first time in my life that I had really stood up to my parents and said no... The thing that kind of left us on really sour terms was she does this thing and she knows it makes me so angry and she does it anyways. She'll call me little girl. She's like look here little girl. I was just like, at that point, I really just shut down. We obviously weren't getting anywhere. They were stuck in their views. I had my views and that was it.

This same respondent was sent to counseling after he was outed to his family for discussing self-harm with a camp counselor:

I went to reparative counseling for a year and a half. That was every Monday. I drove all the way up to [a nearby state]... This lady gave me homework. Typically for the program, if you didn't do your homework three weeks in a row she would kick you out of the program. I remember I didn't do my homework three weeks in a row because I figured she wouldn't let me stay. She was then like, most times I kick kids out of the program. Part of me was really panicking because I can't do this. I don't know why I can't. I don't want to be here. It's obvious that I don't want to be here. I don't want to come out here anyone and I could easily get kicked out but then another part of me was panicking because if I got kicked out of the program my life would be infinitely worse because of my parents. So I just panicked and cried and told her I'm sorry and I won't do it again.

Despite his efforts to “fail” out of the program, this respondent was forced to continue attending the sessions. When he tries to address the dissatisfaction he feels with the conversion counseling program his parents sent him to, his mother demonstrates resistance to the idea:

I told my mom that I wanted to talk to some of the counselors at school and she was like don't do that. I asked why and she said because they are not going to approve with how we deal with things, i.e. if the school counselor found out that I was self-injuring and you did not take me to an actual psychiatric care facility; I would have been taken from [her].

Another respondent shared a similar experience after the pastor in his childhood congregation “called him out” for being gay one day during church:

[E]very Sunday, we would get there at 7:30 and I will spend an hour and a half with the pastor's wife, talking about why I need to get rid of this homosexual sin... Thank god it wasn't electric. Basically she would talk to me about my past. I'm a victim of domestic abuse and so she will make me re-tell those stories over and over. It was hell because I would have to relive all these memories that I have repressed a child and were suddenly coming out as a teenager. She would make me go over these and gave her details. She basically is like okay.. we need you to forgive this. I don't even know what is happening. I don't know what is going on. It eventually got to the point where me and mom will start fighting everyday about this. You need to present more feminine. If you don't, then this is just gonna be a whole mesh of anger. You're just destroying yourself if you are not feminine.

Furthermore, in addition to sending him to reparative counseling, this respondent's family practiced at home religious regulations if they felt that he was not living up to proper expectations of femininity:

As punishment, they used to make me do the push-up position and read the bible while holding the position. This is not feminine at all! (haha) I don't understand (haha). Because my family is very into athletics... they are like if you are not going to read it on your own, we're gonna make you read it in an uncomfortable fashion. So you could either read it on your own or you can hold the push-up position while reading the bible.

Later in the interview, this respondent describes finally being able to help his mother understand his existence as a transgender man, however, he was only able to do this through religious references:

I never said God did anything wrong with me. I am telling you that this is how me and God talked. God gave me an obstacle to overcome but I need your help to overcome it. So eventually, my mom was like... okay. I can understand that. That made sense to me. She would feel insulted that I would think that God made a mistake with me. I got myself out of that mentality because there was no mistake. My God knows what is best for me so my God took care of me in the way and knew that I would develop as a better person by going through this. I explained this to my mom in these religious ways and associated it with God so she would understand.

While it is heartening that this respondent's mother eventually understood his transgender identity, the fact that he had to explain it to her in religious terms highlights the prominence of religious norms in contemporary US society (Edgell et al. 2006). Furthermore, this demonstrates how the implications of religious institutions “cisgendering reality” (Sumerau et al. 2016) is felt in the confines of transgender people's families, particularly if their families are highly religious.

The responses from transgender nonreligious people in highly religious families demonstrate the ways that religious family members responded to their children's non-cisnormative gender presentations. While some very religious parents responded with disappointment and attempted to “force femininity” onto them, others went so far as to send their children to religious counseling to try and eradicate the “homosexual sin” from their children. Conflating transgender existence with homosexuality is not uncommon in a cissexist society like the contemporary US (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). This conflation stems from the societal interpretation of gay and transgender people (and particularly transgender women and gay men) as similarly deviant and threatening to the dominant, Christian, sex/gender/sexuality order (Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Sumerau et al. 2016). This conflation and misinterpretation on

the part of family members can be extremely difficult for transgender nonreligious people since being read as gay or lesbian instead of transgender is yet another way families delegitimize respondents' existence. By reading their family members as "really gay", they are implicitly saying that they are "not really" the gender they say they are. Instead, this interpretation suggests that family members see respondents as the gender they were assigned at birth, even if it is a "deviant" version of that gender. Sometimes, as the latter respondent demonstrates, parents also supplemented religious counseling with painstaking religious punishment at home and were only able to comprehend their children's existence through the framework of "God's plan". In all of these examples, religion informed family members' decisions to attempt to regulate their transgender children's bodies, lives, and choices.

Moderately Religious Households

Despite the fact that the families of nonreligious transgender people in moderately religious households were not as deeply connected to religious institutions, respondents in these situations still reported some negative experiences with family members. For example, one genderqueer respondent who was raised in a "non-denominational Evangelical Christian" household that ze describes as "not that strict" notes that ze has not disclosed zir gender identity to zir parents because doing so would mean ze "would probably have a lot more awkward conversations with my parents". Similarly, a transgender woman describes why she keeps a photo of her from Halloween as her Facebook profile picture in order to avoid conversations about her gender identity with her family:

The only other issue I think would be I'm not comfortable with my parents and my family, see. That is why I've kept my profile on Facebook to be that photo of me with makeup on, because that is the only way I can have a profile photo of me kinda dressed how I want to be but also have an explanation for it. Oh, this was unique... and I'll probably keep that one until Halloween at which I would probably have another one with me. I did this because of the circumstances. I'm not totally ready for my family and parents to see, although they'll be cool. But I'm not totally ready for them to see that aspect of me.

Despite the fact that she thinks her family will be "cool" with her gender, she still uses Halloween as an "account" (Scott and Lyman 1968) for her use of makeup in her Facebook profile picture. Contrary to these examples, other respondents suggested they received support from family members for their gender presentation, as the following quote from a genderqueer respondent exemplifies:

They certainly didn't forbid me from cutting my hair or wearing boy's clothes. They never said a

word about it ever in my childhood. So they were pretty accepting of whatever I was.

In another example, a transgender woman who describes her family as "loosely Christian" shares her positive experience coming out to her father:

When I came out to my dad... I was very very worried that he would not want to talk to me anymore or something. Because this is just something that you internalize in a culture of homophobia and transphobia. Despite anything, how wonderful he was when I was growing up, I did think that he wouldn't want to have anything to do with me after that. But, he said 'the only things I ever wanted you to be were kind, brave, true to yourself and happy'. And those were his words. So he wanted us to be ourselves and he wanted us to be good to other people.

Based on the variety of familial interactions, it is difficult to discern any concrete patterns about transgender nonreligious people's interactions with family members. This exploratory analysis suggests that transgender nonreligious people who come from more religious households may experience a more difficult time getting their families to understand them, or may be subjected to religious "counseling" to "cure" them of what their families interpret as homosexuality. This is relevant for scholars of nonreligion to address more meaningfully in future analyses since research shows that family support is one of the main factors in determining whether or not transgender people will experience housing instability and mental health stress (Grant et al. 2011). Additionally, since most of the questions on this interview schedule are geared more directly towards gender than they are nonreligious identity, these data cannot speak as directly to the specific nuances of the nonreligious component of transgender nonreligious people's interactions with family members. However, understanding that complex relationship is an important avenue that scholars of nonreligion should explore in the future.

Finding Social Support Outside Of Church

Since church is often cited as providing people with emotional and social support (Ellison 1989) and these respondents left the various institutionalized religious contexts where they grew up, they often forged social support networks outside of religion that they found to be just as beneficial. Some of the time this occurred while they were still in high school through clubs and activities. For example, when talking about an organization that really mattered in her life, a transgender woman said that, "I guess theatre. Being involved in theatre continuously, especially in high school years, gave me a creative outlet. A sense of doing something". Similarly, a genderqueer respondent noted that poetry club and softball were two important social spaces for them during high school:

I was in the [Creative Gathering] and it was like the poetry writing club. I really liked that because uh writing has always been important to me so um yeah... And softball was really important to me. My first like real girlfriend was on my softball team.

Another genderqueer respondent notes that ze “Did have a very good time in Girl Scouts”. Thus, even when they were confined to the space of their religious parents’ homes, nonreligious transgender respondents were able to utilize outlets other than religion for social support.

Transgender nonreligious people continued to forge networks outside of religion even after high school as this transgender man demonstrates:

My family now is a family of close friends. It’s me, it’s my partner, who is a transman and another transman who is our roommate. We jokingly call ourselves, our apartment is called the Lion’s Den. There use to be a place called the Queer Den where all the big events happened and that’s kind of transferred to our apartment. It’s not quite as frequent, but we do have a lot of people over. We jokingly call ourselves the papa lions because there are a lot of our friends who have been in bad places and they stay with us or if there is anything we can do. That way regardless of how old they are, we kind of take them under our wings and make sure that they are doing okay. Kind of taking care of them. That family is actually kind of big.

Thus, by engaging in the practice of cultivating a chosen family, this respondent builds the social support into his life he did not receive from church. In response to a question about an organization that has really impacted their life, another genderqueer respondent shares zir experience organizing a local group for genderqueer people:

[Genderqueers R Here] is a group that I have been in, I’m going into my 4th year of, and I’ve been organizing for them for almost 6 months after I started going, I started organizing for them. It is a safe place where people can come to talk about gender or whatever the topic is that week. So by organizing I check the emails, I facilitate the meetings, thinking of topics to talk about, I maintain the blog, the Facebook group, finding spaces...

While the previous respondent demonstrates that forging local connections were important to zir, another genderqueer respondent points to forming extra-religious networks of support that span state lines. In this example, the following respondent recounts their journey to an out of state music and art festival:

Well there were just people from all over the US that, you know, identified as queer and it was a very safe space and people were just really comfortable with their bodies and like really friendly and it was just really nice to be there with people that I

identify with that I don’t really get to hang out with like that much around like in the [city where they live] especially.

Thus, the networks that transgender nonreligious people forge with one another may not necessarily be local connections (like a local congregation would be).

Other times, the extra-religious networks transgender nonreligious people formed were online. A transgender woman recounts how important her online social networks were for her, especially during high school:

I made an [online] group that got together to talk about web comics and stuff. Now we are just hanging out and a lot of people don’t even care about that sort of thing. So just hanging out. Occasionally, I use it for emotional support but not so much lately because I’ve been involved in therapy and I don’t need to do that. That was really important to me. Some of the people I know on it are very important to me now. The whole group is incredibly important to me in that year, 2011. The last half of my senior in high school year, which was a very bad point for me. It was incredibly important to me then because it gave me some people to talk to and prevent me from going insane.

Either way, since we know that part of the reason people like religion is because it provides a place of social support (Ellison 1989), it is crucial to understand where trans non religious people go for those resources after they leave religion. Simply because a space is not religious doesn’t mean it will be welcoming to transgender people (Schilt 2010). Thus, it is crucial that scholars pay attention to all of the dynamics that could potentially shape the nonreligious arenas of social support transgender nonreligious people go to after leaving religion.

Conclusion

In this analysis I have expanded on a previously unexplored component of nonreligious scholarship, the experiences of transgender nonreligious people. Specifically, I highlighted three aspects of transgender nonreligious people’s lives that warrant further analysis by scholars of nonreligion. These three facets of life include previous religious affiliation, family experiences, and membership in groups outside of religious organizations. I will conclude by suggesting some more specific ways that future scholars of nonreligion can address these issues, and what this research might mean for understanding how marginalized groups participate in broader society.

While there were some differences in response based on previous membership in specific religious denominations in this sample, this would be a clear place for scholars of nonreligion to start their studies of the lives of transgender nonreligious people. For example, there were no respondents in this sample who were raised in Jewish or Muslim households. How might their experiences be similar and/or different than the experiences of respondents detailed here? These questions are particularly pertinent in US

society where Christianity is the dominant religious system (Sumerau et al. 2016). Additionally, there are a wide variety of Christian denominations not represented in this sample. Thus, scholars of nonreligion could add more knowledge to the experiences outlined here by gathering larger sample sizes of transgender nonreligious people who used to be members of multiple Christian denominations.

Furthermore, scholars of nonreligion could compare the experiences of transgender nonreligious people who were raised in religion versus those who were not. This could lend deeper insight into the relationships transgender nonreligious people have with the nonreligious organizations they may or may not elect to be a part of. As scholars have previously noted (Cimino and Smith 2007; Sumerau and Cragun 2016), the manners in which group-affiliated nonreligious people (like “freethinkers”) and non-affiliated religious people resist religious dominance can differ. However these studies only focus on cisgender nonreligious people. In fact, as Smith (2013) notes, present nonreligious scholarship is almost completely devoid of discussion of race, class, gender, and sexual diversity in secular communities (but see Dunn and Creek 2015; Sumerau and Cragun 2016). Scholars should investigate whether patterns found in studies of cisgender nonreligious people hold for transgender identified nonreligious people.

Following this logic, scholars of nonreligion should look into the ways previous religious denomination shapes transgender nonreligious peoples’ experiences with family. For example, do the parents of formerly Christian nonreligious transgender people respond similarly and/or differently than the parents of formerly religious, but not Christian, nonreligious transgender people? Furthermore, how do families who are already nonreligious respond to their transgender children? Moreover, understanding the complex relationships to religious extended family members could be another pathway of study for nonreligious scholars regarding the lives of transgender nonreligious people. For example, how do religious (and nonreligious) grandparents, uncles, aunts, siblings, and cousins respond to their nonreligious transgender family members? Since we know that family support (or lack thereof) significantly benefits transgender people (Grant et al. 2011), understanding familial dynamics beyond the parent/child relationship could lend insight into the ways transgender nonreligious people do or don’t maintain connections with their families after coming to identify as transgender and nonreligious.

Finally, adding more insight to the groups and networks transgender nonreligious people may rely on for support could provide crucial insights not only in terms of understanding transgender nonreligious people’s life experiences, but also in terms of helping them have more positive ones. As previous researchers have pointed out, social support is a crucial factor in determining the health outcomes of transgender people (Grant et al. 2011). Thus, scholars of nonreligion need to investigate how much or how little groups beyond religious congregations provide support to transgender nonreligious people. What groups do transgender nonreligious people most frequently turn to for support? Are nonreligious spaces and groups necessarily more supportive than religious ones? The data for

this study do not lend themselves to a deep analysis of potential nonreligious group affiliation, but it is important for scholars to attend to this question in the future.

While the exploratory analysis that I present here is just the beginning of understanding transgender nonreligious experience, it can also shed light onto some broader areas of sociological inquiry. Specifically, the exclusion that transgender people face in religious institutions (Sumerau et al. 2016), and the ways nonreligious leaders, such as Richard Dawkins, perpetuate cissexism in their basic assumptions about what makes a person’s gender “real” are examples of the ways people in positions of power maintain boundaries between themselves and those who are seen as “less than” within an unequal system. Similarly, the manner in which nonreligious job applicants experience fewer call-backs than religious applicants reflects a similar pattern of boundary maintenance on the basis of religion (or lack thereof) (Wallace et al. 2014). As such the analysis I present here shows that these forms of boundary maintenance (Schwalbe et al. 2000) reflect broader processes in the reproduction of inequality. We know that some LGBT people who are able to identify with a community for support are more likely to have better health outcomes than those who don’t (Ramirez-Valles et al. 2010). For example, Ramirez-Valles and colleagues (2010) found that Latino men who sleep with men were more likely to engage in healthy sex practices if they had other gay or bisexual Latino men to volunteer and share their experiences with. As such, it is important for scholars of nonreligion to investigate the specific intersection of nonreligion and transgender identity since participation in nonreligious groups could benefit nonreligious transgender people similarly. We should be interrogating how welcoming nonreligious groups are to transgender members, and using this knowledge to reflect on the ways that making space for transgender people within nonreligious circles might lead to broader civic participation and alliances between transgender and nonreligious groups protesting religious and gender inequality. Furthermore, leaders in nonreligious circles should listen to what transgender people say they need in these spaces and work to lessen the barriers prospective transgender members might face when attempting to access nonreligious organizations.

In conclusion, we know that race (Schilt 2006), class (Grant et al. 2011), sexuality (Westbrook and Schilt 2014) and religion (Sumerau et al. 2016; Cragun and Sumerau 2014) all shape the experiences of transgender people. It is now time to better understand how folks who exist at the specific intersection of being transgender and nonreligious experience their lives in a social context where Christianity and cisnormativity dominate. A deeper comprehension of these dynamics is especially important given the fact that both nonreligious and transgender people are experiencing increased visibility in broader society (Cragun et al. 2013; Sumerau et al. 2016) and yet still experience multiple forms of marginalization and discrimination (Edgell et al. 2006; Grant et al. 2011). Using the present study as a jumping off point, scholars can and should investigate these dynamics and hopefully produce information that will lead to a more equal world for transgender nonreligious people.

Notes

- ¹ Transgender is an umbrella term that refers to people who identify as a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth. For example, if someone was assigned by doctors and family as a little boy at birth, but later grows up and let others know they are actually a woman, this person would be considered a transgender woman. Genderqueer people are transgender people who do not identify as men or women. Cisgender is a term that refers to people who grow up with a gender identity in line with the one they were assigned at birth. So, if a person was determined by doctors and family to be a little girl at birth and throughout the rest of their life they continued to identify as a girl/woman, this person would be a cisgender woman. For more on this terminology see (Nowakowski et al. 2016; Sumerau et al. 2016).
- ² Ze, zir and zirs are a set of gender-neutral pronouns commonly used by genderqueer people. Ze, zir and zirs are used similarly to she/her/hers and he/him/his. Additionally, in this paper I alternate between using ze/zir pronouns and they/them pronouns for genderqueer respondents. I do this intentionally to lend equal legitimacy to both sets of pronouns utilized by genderqueer people. For more on gender-neutral pronouns see (Sumerau et al. 2016).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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