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Complicating marginalisation: the case of Mormon and nonreligious college students in a predominantly Mormon context

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ABSTRACT

There is now compelling evidence that both nonreligious individuals and members of minority religions report feeling marginalised in the United States. However, to date, no one has explored whether a shift from minority status to majority status influences perceptions of marginalisation. In this paper, we explore whether Mormons, members of a minority religion in the USA who perceive marginalisation nationally, contribute to the marginalisation of other minority religious/nonreligious groups when they are the numerical majority. Using data from a survey fielded at a predominantly Mormon university in a predominantly Mormon community in the American West, our data suggest that nonreligious students in a predominantly Mormon context report significantly higher levels of perceived marginalisation. Our findings illustrate that minority status is an important determinant of perceived marginalisation and that numerical minority or majority status should be taken into consideration when examining perceptions of marginalisation.

KEYWORDS

Mormon; nonreligion; prejudice; minority

Introduction

An emerging line of research documents significant marginalisation faced by nonreligious people in contemporary American society. Studies in this vein reveal that nonreligious people are often seen as less American than their religious counterparts (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006), they are also victims of similar forms of harassment and prejudice faced by racial, gendered, and sexual minorities (Hammer et al. 2012), disadvantaged in employment markets and job application evaluations (Wallace, Wright, and Hyde 2014), and shunned or otherwise negatively evaluated by family, friends, and religious people they encounter in their lives (Sumerau and Cragun 2016).

There are other well-researched examples of minorities experiencing marginalisation in American religions. Perhaps the best researched illustrations of experiencing marginalisation in contemporary American religions are sexual and gender minorities. Exploring the experiences of sexual and gender minorities helps illustrate the nature of marginalisation in a religious context. Transgender Christians, for example, often experience processes

of erasure, othering, and punishment within religious traditions (Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016), and often experience negative evaluations from both religious and nonreligious people (Cragun and Sumerau 2017). Similarly, a multitude of studies have revealed significant marginalisation faced by lesbian, bisexual and gay (LBG) religious people within and between a wide variety of religious traditions (see, e.g. Barton 2012; McQueeney 2009) as well as the ways such groups may marginalise nonreligious people in their religious activities (Sumerau 2016). Further, researchers have noted similar experiences of religion-based marginalisation experienced by members of minority religious traditions including but not limited to Judaism (Avishai 2008) and Islam (Haddad, Smith, and Moore 2007). In fact, researchers have also noted some ways members of minority Christian traditions – such as Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism, and LBG Christian denominations – feel and experience marginalisation in relation to more dominant or mainstream American Christian traditions (Brinkerhoff et al. 1991; Campbell, Green, and Monson 2012; Warner and Kiddoo 2014). Taken together, these findings reveal complex and nuanced experiences of religious and nonreligious marginalisation embedded in contemporary American social interactions, structures, and norms.

Much of the research on religious and nonreligious marginalisation in contemporary America is limited by the tendency to analyse religion, minority religious traditions, the nonreligious, and race-class-gender-sexual minority experience with religions in isolation from one another (Avishai, Jafar, and Rinaldo 2015; Stewart, Frost, and Edgell 2017; Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016). Comparative information is usually not available in such studies. Studies of each of these elements in isolation allow researchers to note the specific patterns in each of these domains, but prevent scholars from ascertaining the nuances, intersections, and variations contained in concrete social situations where elements of more than one of these domains blur. The relationship between health, religion and nonreligion, for example, takes very different forms depending on whether or not researchers compare more religious respondents to less religious respondents or religious respondents to nonreligious respondents (Cragun et al. 2016; Nowakowski and Sumerau 2017). Comparative research designs offer this opportunity, which may allow a more nuanced understanding of the ways marginalisation operates, changes, and takes shape within and between religious and nonreligious intersections and locations (Stewart, Frost, and Edgell 2017).

It is particularly important to begin better clarifying experiences of marginalisation in mainstream religious, minority religious, and nonreligious populations at present because recent studies exploring religion and nonreligion together demonstrate nuanced and complicated experiences with marginalisation. Examining religious and nonreligious college student experiences on a secular campus, for example, Cragun et al. (2016) found that both groups experienced similar levels of acceptance and marginalisation on campus, but nonreligious students experienced more marginalisation when venturing away from campus. Similarly, Kolysh (2017) noted some ways public spaces could be marked Christian or nonreligious in relation to existing racial, gendered, and sexual norms in those places, and pointed out similar and different ways religious and nonreligious people interpreted such spaces. Further, examining social attitudes of religious and nonreligious respondents, Cragun and Sumerau (2017) noted that while religious and nonreligious people disagreed on their evaluations of each other, many of them shared similar views of sexual and gender minorities. Additionally, researchers have outlined similar patterns of marginalisation experienced by transgender people in both religious (Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016)

and nonreligious (Mathers 2017) settings and contexts. Rather than a simple, unidirectional mechanism, these studies suggest that marginalisation may take disparate and nuanced forms within and between varied religious and nonreligious contexts. It may be useful to begin exploring the ways religious and nonreligious people experience or create religious-based marginalisation in concrete settings and cases, and in relation to differential local, national, regional, and international norms and power structures (Barton 2012).

Considering potential variations in the experience of religious-based marginalisation leads us to many questions currently missing in existing literatures. If, for example, minority religion practitioners and nonreligious people both feel marginalised at the national level, what happens when one or the other of these groups obtains more legitimacy or power in a specific local context? Would the group with power in such a local circumstance embrace other marginalised communities or themselves marginalise other religious or nonreligious groups? Similarly, if a specific religious or nonreligious group experienced marginalisation in national discourse, would that group repeat the same types of marginalisation directed at others in their own local endeavours or do things differently? Stated another way, would a victim of marginalisation at the national level of religious hierarchies and discourse seek to challenge the victimhood of another marginalised group in a space where they possess local or regional power or would their local context be as oppressive for other groups as the national context is for them? Following intersectional scholars over the past few decades (Collins 2005) as well as recent calls for greater intersectional focus in sociologies of religion (Avishai, Jafar, and Rinaldo 2015) and nonreligion (Stewart, Frost, and Edgell 2017), is it possible for nonreligious and minority religious groups to be *both* victims of broader patterns of marginalisation *and* oppressors creating the marginalisation of other groups at other levels of social structure?

The purpose of the present study is to explore this question by examining the ways (1) members of a minority religion who feel marginalised at the national level (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012) and (2) nonreligious people who feel marginalised at the national level (Cragun et al. 2012) (3) both experience a local context wherein the minority religion marginalised at the national level holds tremendous legitimacy and power. We utilise a survey of Mormon and nonreligious college students attending an American university situated in a predominantly Mormon locality composed of predominantly Mormon students, faculty, and administration. Specifically, we compare and contrast the experiences of Mormon and nonreligious students – both of whom belong to groups marginalised at the national level – in a local context wherein Mormonism is the dominant – rather than a minority – religion. We seek to offer an illustration of the ways religious-based marginalisation may vary between local and national contexts while presenting opportunities for further examination of the nuances, intersections, and contextual effects that may shape complicated experiences of marginalisation within and between religious and nonreligious communities.

Method

Hypotheses

Based on prior research, we have two competing hypotheses for this study. It is possible that members of minority religions, having felt marginalised themselves, when they are in

a numerical majority status will try to minimise any sense of marginalisation members of other minority religions might experience. Thus, even when members of a minority religion find themselves in the position of being the numerical majority, their own experiences with marginalisation in society may result in efforts to reduce the marginalisation felt by those who are the numerical minority. Our first hypothesis, then:

H1: When or where members of a minority religion are or become the numerical majority, individuals who are in the minority in that context will not report significantly higher levels of perceived marginalisation.

In contrast to the first hypothesis, it is also possible that when members of minority religions become the numerical majority they adopt the privileges that come with such a status (Blumenfeld 2006; Blumenfeld, Joshi, and Fairchild 2008; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Schlosser 2003). As a result, the actions of members of the minority religion when they are the numerical majority may result in individuals who are the minority in this context feeling marginalised. Our second hypothesis runs counter to our first:

H2: When or where members of a minority religion are or become the numerical majority, individuals who are in the minority in that context will report significantly higher levels of perceived marginalisation.

Participants

Data for this study derive from a survey fielded at Utah Valley University, a university where the majority of students are Mormons. The university is not owned or operated by the LDS Church, but is located in a Mormon-majority community and the majority of the students at the university are Mormon (see methods section below).

The first author – who is employed at the university where the data were collected – developed the questions included in the survey. The initial survey included 19 questions related to religiosity and marginalisation. When the first author submitted the study to her institutional review board, a member of that review board noted that the survey instrument aligned with an institutional initiative that was currently underway for the university to be more inclusive. As a result, the first author's survey was co-opted by the university and was fielded as part of the Spring 2015 omnibus survey.

The omnibus survey drew a random sample of 12,000 students at the university and invited them to participate. The survey was administered online from March 27th through April 13th. Of the 12,000 students who were sent invitations to complete the survey, 1,484 students began the survey and 1,197 students completed it, for a response rate of 9.98% (a typical response rate for omnibus surveys at the university).

The questions of interest were not a core part of the omnibus survey. Rather, they were included as an optional set of questions and students had to indicate whether or not they wanted to answer these questions before they were shown them. Of the 1,197 students who completed the omnibus survey, 390 indicated that they were interested in participating in this optional portion of the survey. None of the questions in the omnibus survey required that students answer them, which means the number of people who responded to any given question varied slightly.

The demographic information we have about the survey participants comes from questions that were included as part of the omnibus survey, which is to say that we did not

control the wording or response options of these questions. Of those who completed the questions of interest in the omnibus survey, 51.6% identified as female; 48.4% identified as male. Of note, participants were not given the option to select another gender option (e.g. transgender). Had we been allowed to design the demographic questions, we would have included an option for the participants to choose another gender. The vast majority of participants identified as White, 85.9%; 6.9% identified as Hispanic or Latinx; 1.0% identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; 2.6% identified as Asian; 1% identified as Black; 0.7% identified as Native American; 1.9% indicated their race/ethnicity was unknown or other. The omnibus survey was sent to students at all levels of matriculation, including graduate students, who made up 1% of the survey participants; Freshmen were 18.3% of respondents, Sophomores were 22.4%; Juniors were 23.3%; Seniors were 35%. Unlike students at many other universities, a sizable proportion of the students at this university were married, 34.1%; 42.7% were single; 18.9% chose not to answer this question; 4.3% were divorced, separated, or widowed.

Measures

The independent variable for this analysis was religious affiliation. Participants in the omnibus survey were asked the following question, 'Which best describes your religious preference?' They were then presented with 14 response options: Latter-day Saint (Mormon), no declared religion, Protestant, Other, Catholic, Other Christian, Islam, Buddhism, Lutheran, Other Non-Christian, Baptist, Sikhism, Hinduism, Judaism. Due to very limited responses for most of these options, we collapsed many of these categories. Figure 1 shows the religious affiliations of the individuals who completed the portion of the survey of interest to us after the categories were collapsed. Of particular interest in Figure 1 are two groups: 58.2% of respondents indicated they were Mormon/LDS and 13.3% indicated they had no religious affiliation whom we label 'nonreligious' (following Cragun 2016; Lee 2012). Given the small sizes of the other groups, we do not include them in the analyses below; the analyses are limited to just the Mormon and nonreligious students.

The 19 questions developed by the first-author with help from her class were developed with the aim of capturing four types of marginalisation or privilege both on and off campus: (1) marginalisation that results from the actions of class instructors; (2) marginalisation in the classroom that results from the actions of other students; (3) privileges that certain students have in the classroom that other students do not perceive themselves having; and (4) marginalisation and privilege outside the classroom. Of interest to us in this paper are the first three types of marginalisation or privilege (we plan to explore the fourth type in a separate paper). All of the questions were Likert-type questions with the following response options: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree.

Five items were designed to capture the first type of marginalisation – marginalisation that results from the actions of class instructors. The five items were: (1) 'It happens fairly regularly that because of in-class discussion, I become aware of the religious affiliation of my instructors.' (2) 'My instructors purposely skirt or avoid religion even when discussing it would be beneficial.' (3) 'My instructors introduce the subject of religion with good reasoning when appropriate.' (4) 'I would seek assistance from my instructor even if I knew he or she had different views than mine on religion.' (5) 'An instructor has treated me

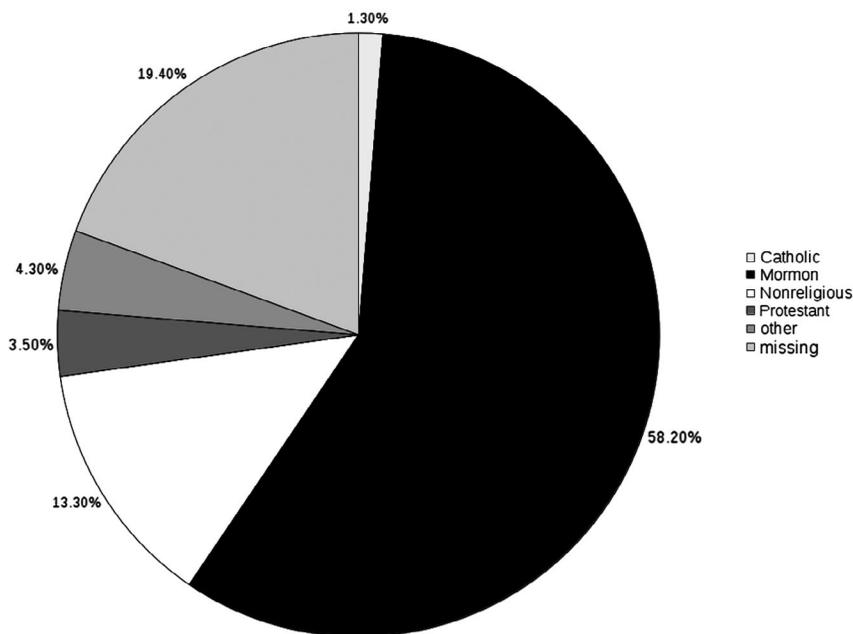


Figure 1. Religious Affiliations of survey participants.

unfairly because of my religious views.’ These five items did not combine well-enough to create a single-scale measure. The inter-item reliability coefficient was well-below accepted standards for a scale measure (Cronbach’s Alpha = .106). This is not surprising given that the question wording of some of the items (question 3 in particular) does not reflect a clear direction related to marginalisation. As a result, we examine these five questions separately.

With the other two types of marginalisation or privilege we examine in this paper, we were able to combine the items into scales with sufficiently high metrics of inter-item reliability. The five items that make up the majority privilege in the classroom measure were: (1) ‘I have decided not to make a relevant comment in class because of other people’s religious views.’ (2) ‘I have felt excluded from discussions, in class or elsewhere on campus, because of my views on religion.’ (3) ‘I have felt like a religious minority in class.’ (4) ‘I sometimes feel intimidated in class because of my views on religion.’ (5) ‘It happens fairly regularly that because of in-class discussion, I become aware of the religious affiliation of my classmates.’ Cronbach’s Alpha for these five items was .831 (\bar{X} = 3.62 and sd = 1.03).

The three items that make up the minority marginalisation measure were: (1) ‘In the classroom I can be open about my religious views.’ (2) ‘I feel that the classes at Utah Valley University embrace the concept of religious diversity.’ (3) ‘At Utah Valley University I am able to study my chosen topic without inappropriate reference to religion.’ Cronbach’s Alpha for these three items was .783 (\bar{X} = 2.53 and sd = .915)

Analysis

The original plan for analysing the data was to examine the bivariate relationships between various demographic variables, the independent variable, and the dependent variables. We would then conduct multi-variate analyses (e.g. ordinary least squares regression) looking

to see how the various demographic variables were related to the dependent variables. However, the initial bivariate analyses indicated that just a single variable was statistically significantly related to the dependent variables – religious affiliation. In multi-variate analyses (not shown), none of the demographic variables was statistically significantly related to the dependent variables. Due to this, the results section below only presents the bivariate analyses between the independent variable – religious affiliation limited to just Mormons and nonreligious students – and the three types of marginalisation or privilege.

Results

Figure 2 presents the results of five independent samples t-tests, comparing the Mormon respondents with the nonreligious respondents on the marginalisation resulting from the actions of instructors items (see also Table 1). On three of the questions, there were no statistically significant differences by religious affiliation – seeking assistance from an instructor with different views on religion, an instructor treating students unfairly because of religious beliefs, and instructors avoiding discussing religion. However, on two of the items there were small but statistically significant differences between the two groups of respondents. Nonreligious students were more likely to agree that they become aware of their instructors religious affiliation as a result of in-class discussion than were Mormon students ($t = 2.98$, $p = .003$). Mormon students were more likely to agree that their instructors introduce the subject of religion with good reasoning when appropriate than were nonreligious students ($t = -2.984$, $p = .003$).

Table 1. Scores on marginalisation measures for Mormon and Nonreligious respondents.

	Mormons		Nonreligious		t	p-value
	mean	s.d.	mean	s.d.		
Marginalisation by Course Instructor Questions						
I would seek assistance from my instructor even if I knew he or she had different views than mine on religion	1.78	1.03	1.78	0.98	-0.064	.949
An instructor has treated me unfairly because of my religious views	4.31	0.99	4.35	0.84	-0.311	.756
It happens fairly regularly that because of in-class discussions, I become aware of the religious affiliation of my instructors	2.89	1.19	2.39	1.30	2.984	.003
My instructors introduce the subject of religion with good reasoning when appropriate	2.35	0.96	2.74	0.92	-2.984	.003
My instructors purposely skirt or avoid religion even when discussing it would be beneficial	3.56	0.87	3.70	0.86	-1.172	.242
Majority Privilege Scale (5 items)	3.95	0.78	2.58	1.12	11.482	<.001
Minority Marginalisation Scale (3 items)	2.35	0.79	3.20	0.88	-7.538	<.001

We likewise conducted independent samples t-tests for the two scale measures. The mean scores for the two groups we are comparing on the two measures are shown in Figure 3. On the majority privilege measure, the mean score for Mormon students was 3.95 ($sd = .775$) and the mean score for the nonreligious students was 2.58 ($sd = 1.12$). The difference in these mean scores was statistically significant ($t = 9.30$, $p < .001$). Nonreligious students were significantly more likely than Mormon students to report agreeing with the statements

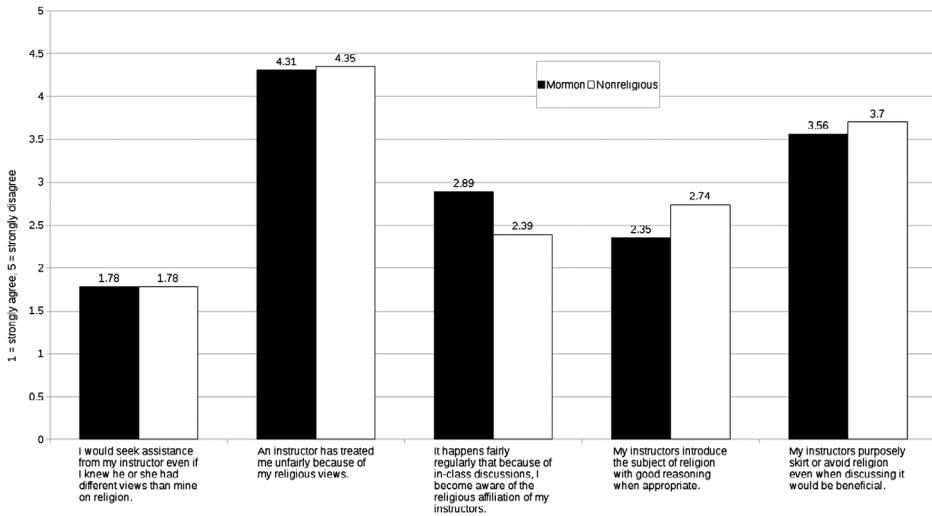


Figure 2. Mormon and nonreligious Means on Items Related to Marginalisation by Course Instructors.

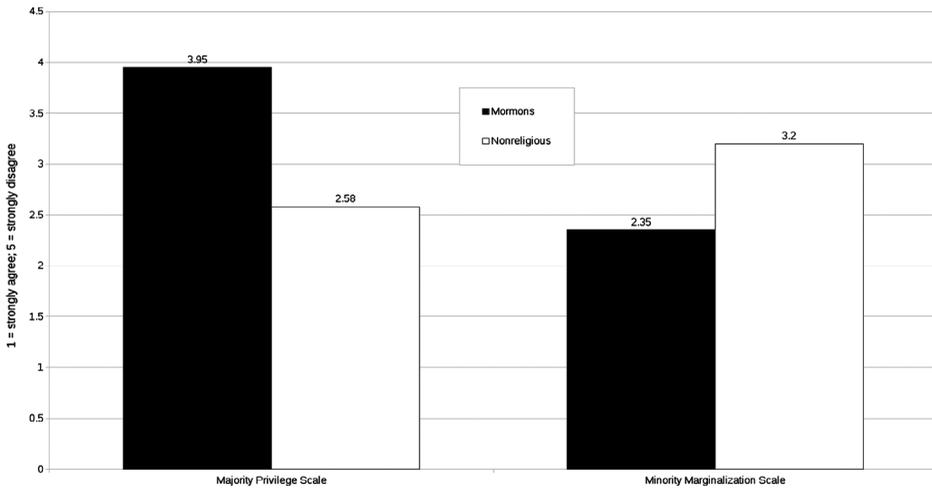


Figure 3. Mormon and Nonreligious Means on Privilege and Minority Marginalisation Scales.

that make up this scale measure, such as feeling like a minority in their classes, feeling intimidated in classes, and feeling excluded from class discussions.

On the minority marginalisation scale, the mean score for Mormon students was 2.35 ($sd = .79$) and the mean score for the nonreligious students was 3.20 ($sd = .884$). The difference in these mean scores was statistically significant ($t = -7.04, p < .001$). Nonreligious students were significantly more likely than Mormon students to report disagreeing with the statements that make up this scale measure, such as feeling like they could not be open about their religious views and that the classes at the university embrace religious diversity.

Discussion

Using data from a university where Mormon students were the numerical majority, we compared Mormon students' and nonreligious students' perceptions of marginalisation. Our results largely support our second hypothesis over our first hypothesis; when or where members of a minority religion are or become the numerical majority, individuals who in that context are the numerical minority report significantly higher levels of perceived marginalisation. This finding was supported when exploring this question using three different measures of marginalisation – marginalisation that results from the actions of class instructors (partially supported), marginalisation in the classroom that results from the actions of other students, and privileges that certain students are perceived to have in the classroom that other students do not feel they have.

Given that we have data from just a single, rather unique sample, we are wary to generalise beyond the sample. Even so, our data suggest that it may be the case that perceptions of marginalisation by members of religious groups are closely tied to context and whether members of that religion are in the minority or majority. Assuming the perceptions of marginalisation reported by the nonreligious students in our study are indicative of how context matters, this would suggest that members of minority religions are not immune to assuming the privileges that come with majority status. Our data suggest that members of numerical religious majorities feel like they can be more open about their religious views, which results in members of minority religious/nonreligious groups feeling like they cannot openly express their (non)religious views and feeling intimidation and marginalisation. Ethnographic research in similar environments would be ideal to confirm this finding. For instance, in communities with large Orthodox or Hasidic Jewish populations, are non-Jewish or Reform Jewish individuals marginalised?

The broadest implication of our study is tied to our hypotheses. Having experienced the marginalisation that results from being part of a minority group does not guarantee that such minorities will not, once they become a majority or gain some degree of privilege, take advantage of that privilege to marginalise others. Similar patterns of marginalisation have been reported by bisexual and transgender individuals at the hands of lesbian and gay individuals as LG individuals have gained privilege and acceptance in the broader society (Eisner 2013). Another setting where a study like this could be undertaken would be in some of the neighbourhoods in England, France, and other European countries where Muslims make up a large percentage of the population. Given the widespread marginalisation Muslims experience at the national level given their minority status (Agirdag, Loobuyck, and Van Houtte 2012; Maxwell 2006), scholars could ask the same question we have: do Muslims when in a majority position attempt to minimise the marginalisation of non-Muslims or do they – intentionally or otherwise – contribute to the marginalisation of non-Muslims?

Scholars interested in minority religions may also draw upon the findings in this study to recognise that the marginalisation reported by members of minority religions does not prevent such individuals from likewise marginalising others (Bromley 1998; Schwalbe et al. 2000). As prior research has shown, intersections between context and identity matter a great deal when it comes to marginalisation, as when members of LGBT religions challenge the morality of nonreligious individuals (Sumerau 2016) or when nonreligious individuals marginalise racial and gender minorities (Miller 2013). Minority status is always relative, as are perceptions of marginalisation and the privileges that come with majority status.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are a number of limitations to this study. The first is that this is data from a single university. Our findings suggest the relationships we observed between religious affiliation and perceptions of marginalisation are fairly robust, particularly given that we tried to capture multiple types of marginalisation. Even so, it is possible that data from another university or from a different context in which members of what is a minority religion in a broader context (e.g. national) are or become the numerical majority may indicate something other than what we found. Future research should explore whether similar patterns emerge with other religions and in other contexts. Another limitation of our study is that we did not use validated measures of perceived marginalisation (c.f. Brewster et al. 2016). While we believe the measures we used capture the perceptions of marginalisation that were of interest to us, it is possible that validated measures could both do a better job of capturing perceived marginalisation and find something other than what we did. Future research should explore whether validated measures of perceived marginalisation provide different insights into the relationship between minority/majority status and marginalisation. Future research may also approach this question from a qualitative perspective. Interviews and ethnographies are ideally suited to examine whether individuals who are part of a minority in one context but part of a majority in another take their minority status into consideration when part of the majority.

Conclusion

Using data from a survey fielded at a predominantly Mormon university, we found that nonreligious individuals at that university reported significantly higher levels of perceived marginalisation. Specifically, nonreligious individuals reported feeling like they could not openly express their views on religion, that instructors at the university could have done a better job of expressing their views on religion, and that class conversations that included discussions of religion intimidated and marginalised them. Our findings suggest that members of what are often considered minority religions may assume the privileges that come with majority status when they are the numerical majority, creating an environment and context that results in the perceived marginalisation of individuals who are not part of the majority religion.

More broadly, our findings suggest that the Mormon individuals in our study do not seem to extend lessons learned as marginalised minorities to their behaviours and attitudes when they are in a majority context. Mormons have experienced significant levels of discrimination in the past (Bowman 2012) and continue to feel marginalised in the American context (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2012). Yet, where they are the majority, Mormons adopt the behaviours and mannerisms of the majority and assume the concomitant privileges that come with being in the majority. Our data, of course, are limited to a single example of this type of behaviour. It does not behove us to generalise beyond our data, but our findings do raise the question of how widespread this phenomenon is and whether it is part of human social behaviour more broadly.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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