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## Opinion Paper

# Being Who They Are at the Intersections: The Experiences and Contributions of Worldview Minority Women of Color on Campus

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**Abstract.** This article applies an intersectional lens and draws on data from the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) to illuminate the religious diversity experiences and engagements of worldview minority women of color.

**Keywords:** religious diversity; minority women.

Questions pertaining to the religious and spiritual dimensions of college students' lives have surfaced more frequently in education research for a number of years. Over the last two decades, lines of inquiry have evolved from general interest in examining students' religious and spiritual qualities to understanding how these dimensions connect to critical diversity issues evident in college and university settings. Whereas we once asked, "what does spirituality mean to college students and how much do they care about it?" Now the conversation has pivoted toward questions about how students with very different meanings of spirituality and very different ways of being religious or nonreligious can learn to appreciate and productively engage one another. My recent work has considered how we can make the most of educational opportunities in college to cultivate relationships and cooperation among students of very different religious and spiritual walks of life.

Recently, one of my doctoral students and research team members, Kevin, posed an important question that I've continued to ponder. He asked, "Are those of us

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who study spirituality and religion in higher education authentic about who we are in the context of our work?" In other words, scholars in this line of research are all about encouraging conversations around meaning, purpose, belief, and faith, but too often we do so without being forthright about our own identities and stories. Can we really expect others to be real about who they are if we as scholars don't take this critical step ourselves? I would argue, too, that one of the hallmarks of feminist scholarship entails coming to terms with our positionality and the ways in which who we are shapes the research that we do.

In that spirit, I want to offer some reflection on my positionality. First, I am a (relatively new) parent. My daughter, Emery Quinn, has changed my life in so many rich and beautiful ways, and given me renewed motivation to keep pushing for a more just and equitable world. She has also widened the scope of my reading selections as of late. Her most favorite book is Parr's (2016) "Be Who You Are." In this book, Parr invites readers to

"Be old, be young"; "Be a different color"; "Wear everything you need to be you"; "Be proud of where you are from"; "Be your own family." (Parr, 2016).

Throughout, Parr repeats the book's refrain,

"Just be who you are!" (Parr, 2016).

Parr's words, simple as they are, strike a chord with me as someone who studies spirituality, which ultimately is about being true to who we are. I would also argue that for those of us engaging in scholarship about social justice and equity issues, it is vitally important for us to be thoughtful about who we are and the role that our identities play as we contribute new knowledge and advocate for change. Ultimately, transparency is critical, because our identities, our positionality so to speak, informs everything from the research questions we pose to how we analyze our data to the audiences with whom we communicate findings.

For me, being who I am means contending with aspects of my identity—being White, cisgender, able-bodied, educated, and Christian—that translate into unearned privileges in society. What do I miss as a result of my privilege? Are there questions I fail to ask? How can I grow more conscious of the ways that my privilege influences me? Being who I am means at the same time navigating the parts of my identity that make me vulnerable to sexism and heterosexism. As a queer woman on the margins of my faith tradition, these identity dimensions, because of their salience in my life, have undoubtedly sensitized me to certain research questions, frameworks, and methodologies.

Being who we are is an intersectional exercise to say the least. In studying college students' experiences with spirituality, time and again I hear in students' stories, whether shared in interviews or in their responses to national surveys, a palpable intersectional narrative. That is, their religious and spiritual selves are

deeply connected to the many other social identities that play a salient role in their day-to-day experience—including their race, their gender identity, their sexual orientation, just to name a few examples. These identities do not exist in isolation, but interface in powerful ways within a person’s life. And just how these layers of identity come together for a person influences the degree to which they experience privilege and marginalization within educational settings and society at large.

Kimberlé Crenshaw who is credited with raising awareness of the notion of “intersectionality” nearly 30 years ago (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989), shared in a recent interview that

“Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things” (Columbia Law School News, 2017).

Moving to the crux of this article, how do we support students to be who they are on campus—in the fullness of the multiple identities that they bring? Specifically, this analysis employs an intersectional lens to take a closer look at how gender, race, and worldview come together in the experiences of first-year college women of color who identify with a minority religious tradition.

### **Background to the IDEALS Project**

Before exploring the experiences of these women, some background on the larger study is warranted. The findings that follow are based on research that examines the campus climate for religion and spirituality, most principally a national study, the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS). IDEALS addresses a number of central questions and goals. First, IDEALS establishes a national profile of entering first-year students, highlighting their potential for productively engaging religious and non-religious differences in a diverse society. Second, IDEALS enables us to examine student change and development in interreligious attitudes and behaviors across time (from the beginning of college to the end of the first year and to the fourth year of college). Third, IDEALS illuminates what students are observing and experiencing with regard to the campus climate for religious and spiritual diversity. Fourth, IDEALS reveals the collegiate experiences that make the greatest impact on students’ attitudes and abilities to cooperate with people of other worldviews.

IDEALS launched in summer and fall 2015 with a survey of first-year students to establish a baseline for their capacity for interfaith engagement and positive attitudes toward religious diversity. These same students received a follow-up survey a year later, as they were completing their first year of college or beginning their second year. In the final year of the project (Spring 2019), while

the cohort is in their fourth year, they will complete a third survey. Altogether, the data from the three survey administrations will offer a longitudinal view on how college shapes interfaith attitudes and behaviors.

The focus of this article includes women whose intersectional identities with respect to gender, race, and worldview create unique experiences on campus. These students are in their first year of college, are women of color, and identify with a minority religion or worldview (defined below). They are not a large group; of just over 7,000 IDEALS participants, 357 identify as worldview minority women of color. Yet, there is great value in disaggregating the IDEALS sample to understand the distinctiveness of different social identity groups. When aggregated, much texture and nuance is lost—and erased are the differentials of power and privilege that powerfully shape experiences at the intersections of identity.

### **Identities and Experiences of Worldview Minority Women of Color**

Who are worldview minority women of color? It turns out they are a vibrantly heterogeneous group. One of the first questions in the survey asks students to tell us about their worldview, a term that we intentionally use in place of “religion” or “faith” with the goal of including multiple perspectives that span religious and non-religious frameworks. The IDEALS instrument encourages students to think of worldview as their foundational outlook on life that helps them make sense of the world; or, more specifically, “A guiding life philosophy, which may be based on a particular religious tradition, a nonreligious perspective, ideological views, aspects of one’s cultural background and personal identity, or some combination of these.” Students select their worldview from a list of various religious and non-religious identities and are offered the option to write in a response if none of the available categories apply.

About 48% of the IDEALS cohort consists of Christian, or “worldview majority,” students (Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox) whose worldview is well-represented proportionately and culturally in the U.S. and likely on their campuses. Non-religious students, who may identify as atheist, agnostic, secular humanist, or simply “none,” are a growing population, and the IDEALS cohort reflects this trend with 30% in the non-religious category. Worldview minority students—who these women represent—come from faith traditions that have a smaller number of affiliates in the U.S. and on campus, such as Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam (among others) and together they make up about 18% of the IDEALS cohort. Finally, 3% of students identify with another worldview. Worldview minority women of color identify with a number of different traditions. About one in five (22%) claim religious identities as Latter-Day Saints or Muslims. Other perspectives with a larger share of adherents among worldview minority women of color include Buddhism (16%) and Hinduism (13%). Approximately 9% of these women don’t identify with a religion per se but nonetheless call themselves “spiritual.”

IDEALS participants also report where their worldviews come from—what influences them to believe and practice as they do? From a list of possible influences, 66% of worldview minority women of color chose “family background and traditions,” 56% chose “religious beliefs/values,” and another 51% chose “cultural background and traditions” as one of their top three influences. Clearly, family is playing a central role in how worldview minority women of color craft a worldview identity. As IDEALS follows these women into their fourth year of college, will other influences become increasingly important as they move further into adulthood?

When asked to report how they see themselves in relation to religion and spirituality, the largest group relates to both dimensions: 44% of worldview minority women of color said they were both religious and spiritual. Others, about one in three (31%), prioritize spirituality over religion. Smaller numbers noted they were religious but not spiritual (13%) or neither spiritual nor religious (12%).

As with worldview, the women represent an array of racial and ethnic identities. Just under half of the women (45%) are Asian or Pacific Islander, nearly one-quarter (23%) are African American or Black, 8% are Latina, and 2% are Native American. Another one in five are either multiracial (16%) or identify with another race or ethnicity (5%).

Of the women who report their sexual orientation, a larger percentage than the IDEALS sample—17%—identifies as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or something else. I also considered gender identity in the analysis with the goal to include alongside the women people who identified as non-binary. However, there were fewer than 5 individuals who were worldview minority nonbinary people of color—and with numbers that small anonymity can be compromised. I did not include them in this analysis. However, about 1% of the IDEALS sample is non-binary—so even though it is not possible to look at their experiences from an explicitly intersectional perspective, the research team is committed to learning more about this group over the course of the study.

One final characteristic to consider is political identity, a facet of personal identity that is often interwoven with one’s religious worldview. The largest group in terms of political ideology is moderate (41%). However, worldview minority women of color are generally left leaning: 38% are liberal and 17% are very liberal. Very few identify as conservative (5%) or very conservative (<1%).

How do worldview minority women of color perceive different aspects of campus climate compared to their peers? Considering general perceptions about the compositional diversity of the campus there are more similarities than differences. Like other IDEALS respondents, worldview minority women of color tend to see their campuses as fairly religiously diverse and as relatively welcoming of people of various religious and nonreligious backgrounds. Whereas 70% of students on the whole say their campus is religiously diverse, 74% of worldview minority women of color agree. Likewise, students at large

are quite optimistic that their campus is a welcoming place for people of different religious and nonreligious perspectives (81% agree), and worldview minority women of color tend to be similarly convinced that that their campuses are welcoming (79% agree).

Fortunately, religious divisiveness is not particularly rampant on the 122 IDEALS campuses in the study, but there are indicators that it exists to a certain degree—close to one in five students—whether they are worldview minority women of color (20%) or not (18%)—observe interreligious conflict at their institution.

So far this article has considered students' observations of campus in general—essentially their birds-eye view of the dynamics on campus, but it is important to bring their personal experiences into focus. We ask students whether they have heard insensitive comments about their worldview from peers, faculty, or staff. Fortunately, frequent insensitivity is not the norm for anyone—the percentages reported here reflect whether students *ever* heard such comments, even if only rarely. The first point to note is that when insensitive comments do happen, it usually comes from other students. Faculty and staff also make some missteps according to student reports, but to a lesser degree. Worldview minority women of color have heard insensitive comments from peers, even if rarely, to the same degree as other students (79%). However, the women are somewhat more likely to hear insensitive comments from faculty (55%) or staff (47%) than are other students, for whom the percentages are 49% and 42%, respectively.

Adding another layer of nuance—specifically, sexual orientation—to consider the experiences of queer worldview minority women of color, differences in the rate of insensitive comments become much more pronounced. Nearly all (97%) queer worldview minority women of color have at some point heard insensitive comments from peers or friends about their worldview and around two-thirds have at some point heard faculty (67%) or staff (64%) relaying an insensitive remark. Likewise, the more marginalized identities a student holds, the more likely they are to have experienced mistreatment—even if rarely—on the basis of their worldview: 40% of queer worldview minority women of color, 36% of worldview minority women of color, and 32% of all other students have been mistreated on campus because of their worldview.

Several IDEALS questions tap into intersectionality. That is, do students feel that religiously-motivated discrimination ever targeted their gender identity, sexual orientation, or race? Here again, we find that worldview minority women of color face more religiously-based discrimination than other students—and this is especially true for queer worldview minority women of color most poignantly in the realms of gender identity and sexual orientation.

When we shift from birds-eye view to personal experience, we can begin to appreciate that worldview minority women of color—and particularly those who are queer-identified—have markedly different experiences with oppressive actions taken by others on campus. The shaping influence of social location on

how students experience the collegiate environments that they occupy is evident. There is not a single reality, but many. Who students are sets the stage for what they see and how others respond to them. Those who occupy places of privilege in terms of their race, worldview, gender, and sexual orientation may not be as aware of or directly affected by religious insensitivity manifesting on campus compared to students who feel on the margins.

The final observation about campus climate concerns the availability of space for support and spiritual expression. The good news is that even in the midst of the insensitive comments or discriminatory behaviors that worldview minority women of color observe from time to time, they still feel that, on the whole, their campus is a safe place for them to express their worldview. In fact, they don't differ very much from other students in this regard. When asked whether the campus is a safe place for them to express their worldview, 83% of worldview minority women of color and 84% of all other students agree. Even so, a demonstrably smaller share of worldview minority women of color (73%) than other students (81%) agree that, "There is a place on this campus where I can express my personal worldview." In the end, the campus may be a generally safe place for worldview minority women of color to express their worldview, but they don't unequivocally agree that they have space for that kind of expression.

Space for support and spiritual expression is critically important. From a developmental standpoint, such space helps to foster positive attitudes toward other groups (Rockenbach, Mayhew, Morin, Crandall & Selznick, 2015; Rockenbach, Mayhew, Correia-Harker, Dahl, Morin & Associates, 2017) and helps students cultivate stronger and more thoughtful commitments to their own worldview (Mayhew, Rockenbach & Bowman, 2016). From an equity and inclusion standpoint, we send a message to students that community building among people of different worldviews is a priority when we commit resources and spaces to facilitate productive interactions.

The narrative to this point has illuminated some of the potential challenges with campus climate that worldview minority women of color uniquely face. But there is much more to this complex storyline than the challenge narrative would suggest. Worldview minority women of color come to college prepared to engage some of the most pressing diversity issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and make meaningful contributions to conversations about religious and worldview diversity on campus.

In addition to revealing how students experience campus climate, IDEALS sheds light on students' attitudes toward religious diversity—a measure known as "pluralism orientation." In a number of ways, worldview minority women of color express values and commitments that signify their pluralist positionality. As one example, these women report high levels of global citizenship, an aspect of pluralism that illustrates their care and compassion for others around the world. Students in general are globally-minded, but this is a particular strength of worldview minority women of color: 84% of these women say that they

frequently think about the global problems of our time and how they will contribute to resolving them, compared to 75% of the student body as a whole. Not only are they thinking about such issues—they report doing something about them too—more so than other students: 64% are currently taking steps to improve the lives of people around the world (compared to 55% of all other students), and 71% are actively learning about people across the globe who have different religious and cultural ways of life than they do (compared to 64% of all other students).

Worldview minority women of color resonate with many other facets of pluralism to a greater extent than other students. In the following examples, we can get a better sense of the distinctions between the two groups by looking at those who “strongly agree” with each statement. On measures of goodwill and acceptance, worldview minority women of color are more inclined than other students to “strongly agree” that they respect people who have religious or nonreligious perspectives that differ from their own (80% versus 67%), that there are people of other faiths or beliefs that they admire (70% versus 61%), and that interreligious understanding will make the world a more peaceful place (62% versus 54%).

Worldview minority women of color have stronger proclivities than other students for appreciating interreligious commonalities and differences, as evidenced by over half of the women strongly endorsing such statements as “My faith or beliefs are strengthened by relationships with those of diverse religious and nonreligious backgrounds” (55% versus 42%) and “world religions share many common values” (56% versus 47%). They also express commitments to interfaith leadership and service to a greater degree than their peers: 57% of worldview minority women of color “strongly agree” that their worldview inspires them to serve with others on issues of common concern (a 12% difference from other students)—and 44% “strongly” agree that they are committed to leading efforts in collaboration with people of other religious and nonreligious perspectives to create positive changes in society, which amounts to a 13% difference from other students.

Why might this be the case? What accounts for the stronger tendencies toward pluralism that we see among worldview minority women of color? There’s certainly something to be said for the ways that membership in multiple marginalized communities may inform attitudes toward religious diversity. As women, as religious minorities, as people of color—key life experiences from childhood to young adulthood may make them more sensitive to or feel kinship with people from other marginalized communities. And such experiences may also make the goals of pluralism all the more salient and important.

We also know that worldview minority women of color are making choices in the first year of college to engage in activities that help to enhance pluralism and positive attitudes. For instance, they are somewhat more likely than other students to attend religious services for a worldview other than their own (26% versus 20%), participate in interfaith or religious diversity training on campus



(10% versus 6%), participate in interfaith action such as having an impact on critical issues like hunger or poverty (11% versus 6%), and work with students of other worldviews on a service project (41% versus 31%). Beyond these formal interfaith activities, they are more inclined than other students to engage informally across religious lines: more than two-thirds (68%) had conversations with people of other worldviews about the values they share in common, and almost all (91%) socialized with someone of a different worldview; 56% and 85% of all other students did the same. There is also evidence showing that worldview minority women of color seek close friendships with other religious minorities more so than their peers—for example, with Buddhists (25% versus 22%), Hindus (41% versus 23%), Muslims (50% versus 36%), multifaith people (22% versus 15%), and spiritual but not religious individuals (62% versus 57%)—which may again further their appreciation for people of other worldviews and their pluralism orientation in general.

### **Future Directions for Research and Practice**

What can we take from these findings and where do we go from here? An intersectional lens showed us that being who they are on campus brings both challenge and opportunity for worldview minority women of color. On the side of challenge, worldview minority women of color, especially those who are queer-identified, face insensitive treatment more so than students in general. There also seem to be uneven occasions for worldview minority women of color to find space for spiritual expression. Clearly, we have work to do, particularly when it comes to encouraging honest but sensitive discourse between students of different worldviews and walks of life. How can we weave educational moments to develop religious literacy, interfaith engagement skills, and appreciation for intersectionality into existing curricular and co-curricular programming? Moreover, there is much room for growth in our institutions when it comes to making space for spiritual expression among worldview minority women of color. To do this well, the data presented might simply be a springboard for future conversations with this heterogeneous group of women—what “space” means and what the specific needs are might vary across the worldviews and racial identities represented in this group. These data are merely a starting point—future research and assessment work might involve qualitative efforts to gather input from this group of women by hearing their personal stories firsthand.

On the side of opportunity, I am heartened by the unique contributions that worldview minority women of color make through their global-mindedness, their respect and goodwill toward people of other faiths and worldviews, and their earnest commitment to interfaith leadership and service. They seem poised to reach across differences and build bridges to help heal some of the divisiveness we feel in our communities and world today. While their devotion to these causes is inspiring, we also must be cautious, as the hard work of interfaith engagement should not fall predominantly on the shoulders of these students. Too often students of multiple minoritized identities are called upon to be the exemplars, to be the educators. It is critical that we raise the expectations for everyone on campus—students, faculty, and staff alike—so that we can all

share the responsibility in contributing to these important efforts. What can we all do to ensure that people in our educational communities can be who they are at the complex intersections of worldview, race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, among other identity dimensions?

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