

An Interactionist Approach to the Social Construction of Deities

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This paper examines the ways people construct and signify deities. Utilizing responses from an ethnographic study as well as analyses of existing studies of religion, we elaborate ways people construct the existence and characteristics of deities by engaging in "deity work," which we define as the work people do to give meaning to deities as well as to themselves, others, or social phenomena related to deities. In so doing, we demonstrate how people may accomplish this in many settings by engaging in strategies of identity work including (1) defining, (2) coding, and (3) affirming the meanings of a given deity in social interaction. In conclusion, we draw out implications for understanding (1) the importance of examining deity work, and (2) some ways a focus on deity work processes may expand existing religious and interactionist studies.

Keywords: deities, religion, generic processes, identity work, supernatural phenomena

Since its inception, sociology has grappled with the influence of varied deities (i.e., gods, goddesses, supreme beings, and other sacred symbols) upon people (see, e.g., Durkheim [1912] 2008; Marx [1843] 1970; Weber [1922] 1993). Researchers have documented, for example, ways people adopt and adjust interactional presentations in relation to deities of many sorts (see, e.g., Dunn and Creek 2015; Mead 1938; Wolkomir 2006), ways beliefs in varied deities influence social organizations, institutions, and traditions (see, e.g., Bush 2010; Robinson and Spivey 2007; Sumerau and Cragun 2015), and ways ideologies rooted in belief in a certain deity shape racial, class, gendered, and sexual patterns of inequality (see, e.g., Collins 2005; McQueeney

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Symbolic Interaction, Vol. 39, Issue 4, pp. 577–594, ISSN: 0195-6086 print/1533-8665 online.

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DOI: 10.1002/SYMB.257

2009; Sumerau 2012a, 2012b). While these studies have expanded our understanding of the ways people utilize deities to make sense of their experiences, they have thus far left unexplored the social construction of such phenomena. How do people create and signify deities and what insights might an interactionist approach to such processes reveal about society?

We examine these questions via analyses of responses from an ethnographic study and findings from studies of religious interactions. Specifically, we analyze how these sources reveal a process we call deity work, which we — following Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock's (1996) elaboration of identity work — define as anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to a potential deity as well as themselves, others, or the social world related to the existence of said deity. Rather than focusing on the ways people signify religious selves (i.e., processes of religious identity work), we direct attention to the strategies whereby they signify the existence of deities themselves as part of their affirmation of religious selves (see Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams 2015). In so doing, we synthesize and extend interactionist and religious studies by demonstrating how people construct and signify the existence and characteristics of deities. Rather than attempting to generalize our findings to a given population, we elaborate strategies whereby people may establish the existence of deities in interaction (Becker 1998a, 1998b).

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DEITIES

Over the past six decades, interactionists have demonstrated that people construct, negotiate, and signify a wide variety of individual and collective meanings through interaction (see, e.g., Brissett and Edgley 2005; Goffman 1959; West and Zimmerman 1987). Rather than inherent qualities located in people or nature, these studies demonstrate meanings arise out of “joint action” (Blumer 1969) wherein people define, signify, maintain, and believe in newly created or previously established interpretations of social and biological phenomena. These studies also show people may adjust their meanings by working to establish and maintain credible interpretations in relation to existing behavioral and structural norms (Schwalbe et al. 2000). As such, people engage in many strategies of identity (Snow and Anderson 1987), emotion (Hochschild 1983), body (Goffman 1967), and ideology (Wolkomir 2006) work to fashion desirable selves and social worlds. Overall, these studies suggest understanding any phenomena requires interrogating the work people do to convince themselves and others that such entities are real (Blumer 1969).

Interrogating such work requires analyzing how people signify types of meaning. Following Goffman (1959), this process involves the dramaturgical work people do to establish and affirm specific forms of self and other (see also West and Zimmerman 1987). We may thus conceptualize self and other as the result of mobilizations of symbolic materials. Symbolic materials are signs, cues, codes, and other established “impressions” that people construct and draw upon to signify certain types of self or other (see also Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Although the specific symbolic

material mobilized may vary historically, culturally, and across different settings, all such materials must first be established by social beings before they may be drawn on in the service of dramaturgical work (Goffman 1967).

Interrogating the use of symbolic materials, however, also requires making sense of social inequalities (see, e.g., Goffman 1963; Kleinman 2007; Schwalbe et al. 2000). Even though all symbolic “truths” or “claims” are ultimately created by people, dominant “truths” are generally constructed by those in power, and their socially constructed nature is typically hidden from plain sight to all but those subordinated by such “claims” (Collins 2005). As such, many powerful meaning systems may escape the notice of people in an environment wherein they occupy dominant statuses (see, e.g., Collins 2005; Goffman 1963; Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Historically, one dominant interpretive claim may be found in the assertion of deity existence (see, e.g., Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Hammer et al. 2012; Sumerau 2014). Since scholars have only recently begun to analyze assumed belief in deities built into contemporary American structure and social relations (Barton 2012; Wallace, Wright, and Hyde 2014; Wooffitt 1992), the characteristics of such deities have generally escaped systematic scrutiny (but see Cerulo (2009) for emerging studies of interactional relations with other types of nonhuman entities). In this paper, we argue such scrutiny may be developed by exploring the ways people construct deities via processes we call deity work — individual and collective efforts to create and signify the existence of deities in everyday life.

Previous studies of religion imply this process is taking place across the world every day. While survey instruments sometimes seek to gain insight into “what” or “who” respondents think deities are (but see Froese and Bader 2007), case studies of religious groups typically suggest the members of a given group share — on some level — an interpretation of what their version of the deity is, which shapes their religious identity work processes (see, e.g., Becker 1998a, 1998b; Marti 2009). Furthermore, such studies suggest that people may develop both individual notions of deity characteristics and collective notions of the deity shared with a group (see, e.g., Moon 2004; Wilcox 2009). In fact, even studies of atheist identity work imply they utilize some interpretation of what others think deities mean to signify nonreligious selves (Smith 2011). Scholars of religion, however, never appear to deconstruct (or at least report) what these interpretations include.

Interactionist scholarship on religion also implies people develop interpretations of deities. McQueeney (2009), for example, reveals ways people reshape dominant notions of Christian gods to make room for sexual minorities. Likewise, Sumerau and Cragun’s (2015) analysis of Mormon teachings suggests church leaders believe they know both what god is and what it wants. Furthermore, Sharp’s (2013a) study of prayer implies believers feel there is something out there — beyond other people — that makes their efforts worthwhile. Once again, however, these and other interactionist analyses (see, e.g., Coates 2013; Healey 2010; Sumerau 2012a, 2012b) focus on the ways people construct themselves and other people (i.e., religious identity work) while leaving the construction of the deity itself mostly unexplored.

A cursory glance at contemporary American society, however, reveals the importance of ascertaining what (if anything) people think deities might be. Whether we look at the ways various god's demands are mobilized to justify anti-abortion (Kimport 2012), ex-gay (Wolkomir 2006), abstinence-only (Fields 2008), welfare (Heath 2012), or anti-gay (Powell, Quadlin, and Pizmony-Levy 2015) campaigns or the ways public officials regularly announce belief in deities in election cycles, the proclaimed influence of deities is all around us. In addition, regular statements on social media, in political campaigns, or in daily life that paint deities as everything from a loving embrace to a cold shoulder reveal variation in such interpretations (Barton 2012). No matter where we look, deities appear to be in the minds and actions of many people (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Wooffitt 1992), and thus their relative absence from sociological inquiry appears striking.

In fact, this observation echoes Wooffitt's (1992) assertion that supernatural elements of various types are often taken-for-granted in much social experience and scholarship (see Cerulo (2009) and Sayes (2014) for similar assertions regarding other nonhuman phenomena in social life). While only mentioning supernatural entities in passing as part of a larger analysis focused on interpretations of the unexpected and focused primarily on nondeity supernatural phenomena, Wooffitt (1992:168) argues that supernatural effects and entities (defined as paranormal or otherwise) emerge from conversational efforts wherein natural experiences are "explicitly" granted supernatural significance. While this observation suggests the usefulness of unpacking the interactional creation of claims about deities alongside emerging studies of other supernatural phenomena (see, e.g., Thomas 2015 for examples of such studies related to nondeity supernatural phenomena), religious and interactionist studies have thus far left the social construction of deities unexplored.

As a result, we build on these insights to begin the process of submitting religious people's constructions of deities to systematic analysis. To this end, we utilize Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock's (1996) generic processes in subcultural identity work to reveal the ways people may engage in the same processes to accomplish deity work. Throughout our analysis, we draw both on a specific case and existing literature to demonstrate the usefulness of an interactionist approach to the study of people's deity work, which may aid in our understanding of both the ways people experience religion, and the ways interpretations of deities may impact concrete realities in varied social contexts.

SETTING AND METHOD

Data for this study derive from two sources. First, we utilize responses gathered as part of an ethnographic study of a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Christian Church. Specifically, the first author spent thirty six months actively participating in and observing the church while conducting informal interviews and conducting twenty formal life history interviews with members of the Church. The church in question was a member of the Metropolitan Community Churches (an

international denomination committed to the integration of Christian and LGBTQ traditions) located in a suburban area of the southeastern United States dominated by Evangelical religious organizations. The Church was initially quite diverse in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality even though the bulk of members were from Evangelical backgrounds, but midway through fieldwork the church (like many other LGBT churches, see Wilcox 2009) shifted to a population of mostly male, mostly gay, mostly middle and upper class, and mostly white members from Protestant backgrounds.

In the course of the overall project, the first author explored the efforts of members to, for example, signify masculine (Sumerau 2012a), moral (Sumerau 2012b), and embodied (Sumerau and Schrock 2011) selves; transform their diverse organization into a male dominated Evangelical congregation over time (Sumerau, Padavic, and Schrock 2015); interpret being religious (Sumerau 2014); and manage interactions with religious and nonreligious others (Sumerau 2013). In so doing, the first author noted that all of the aforementioned efforts relied upon shared and shifting ideas about the meaning of god in the Church, and we began recoding and analyzing all data for what or who members thought this deity was and how these meanings emerged in social interaction.

In the process of this collaborative examination, all three authors observed two surprising patterns, which led to the incorporation of existing studies of religious interaction as a second source of data. First, our respondents echoed other Christian people from a wide variety of traditions instead of seeming to have conceptions of deities implicitly or explicitly tied to their LGBT status. Put simply, as other scholars have noted, religious opinions shared by our LGBT respondents were quite similar to those expressed in heterosexual- and cisgender-dominated Christian traditions (Moon 2004). Second, existing studies of religious identity work — as well as studies utilizing other frameworks to ascertain the social construction of religious selves — all contained statements from religious people that suggested an understanding of their deity, but never explored where these understandings came from or how they emerged in interaction. As a result, we went back through studies in this area exploring what respondents in such studies said their deities were during interactions to outline generic or common ways Christians — LGBT or otherwise — created deities by engaging in strategies of identity work.

With initial coding and analysis of both of these datasets revealing widespread patterns of identity work outlined in relation to religious and other types of selves, the analysis continued in an inductive fashion. Specifically, we coded responses in our ethnographic data and existing religious literature for themes and patterns in the ways religious people talk about deities, and came to see these efforts as examples of defining, coding, and affirming a “deity” claim. Recognizing this pattern, we sought to outline “the work people do” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996) to bring deities to life. Throughout our analysis, we show both how our respondents accomplished deity work, and the ways previous literature suggests many others are doing the same types of labor in other settings.

DEITY WORK PROCESSES

Following Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996:115), identity work refers to the process whereby people create the signs, symbols, and codes necessary for identity categories to exist (see also Ezzell 2009). From this observation, they define identity work as “anything people do, individually and collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others.” Rather than elements of natural personhood, identities are symbolic assertions that “evoke” the existence of certain types of “objects” or “things” recognizable to others (Goffman 1967). While Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) — as well as others adopting identity work approaches in the study of religion (see, e.g., McQueeney 2009; Wolkomir 2006) — offer some examples whereby people utilize ideas about deities to create religious selves, this focus leaves the constructed version of the deity such people utilize in religious identity work unexplored.

In the following sections, we build on these insights to outline processes whereby people may engage in similar strategies of “joint action” (Blumer 1969) to, as Wooffitt (1992) puts it, create supernatural phenomena relevant to their social lives. Rather than focusing on all forms of supernatural phenomena (see Wooffitt (1992) and Thomas (2015) for examples of such efforts), however, we specifically outline the joint actions people may engage in to specifically create deities. We call these processes deity work to demonstrate their connection to other forms (i.e., identity, emotion, body, and ideology based) of meaning making and to signify the socially constructed nature of the results. In each section, we outline identity work processes (i.e., defining, coding, and affirming), and use our case and existing literature to demonstrate each process in the construction of deities. In so doing, we aim to establish a framework whereby other scholars may analyze and critique varied forms of deity work.

Defining

Although they note these processes may take many forms, occur at different times or at the same time, and involve varied sequences, Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) argue that any identity must first be defined into existence by social beings. In so doing, people establish a claim to a certain type of self — whether that self has existed in some form before or not — by articulating what it “means” to be an X type of being. Adams (2011), for example, notes that gay men learn early on what it means to be “gay” before they are able to apply this “label” to their sexual desire. Similarly, studies have shown how many identities we take for granted, such as race, class, and gender (West and Fenstermaker 1995), are ultimately reliant upon their initial construction. Once defined into existence, such “identities” may be mobilized, adjusted, and used in a wide variety of ways to tell others and our selves who and what we “believe” exists (Goffman 1959). For deities to exist, people must first define them as an element of social life with recognizable qualities.

Our respondents defined their deity in various ways. While they did so regularly without provocation, this also occurred at times when they sought to convince the first author — who disclosed their own nonbelief and skepticism both when gaining permission to study the group and throughout fieldwork — of deity existence (see also Sumerau 2016). In either case, they used their observations to suggest their deity must exist. As one put it: “Look at the trees and the beauty of the sunset, and you just know God played a role in that. I mean, where else could that kind of beauty come from?” Another echoed this assertion: “To see God, all you have to do is look at the beauty of the world. Its in every handshake, every smile, God wants us to be kind to each other and love each other the way he loves us and I know deep down you can feel that too.” Another added: “God is the answer — you know all those questions we can’t understand like where the world came from, why we are here, what it all means, the answer is God.” Similar to ways people “interpret” biological variation to argue there “must be” a thing called “sex or gender” even though other interpretations are equally possible (West and Zimmerman 1987), respondents “interpret” (Wooffitt 1992) the beauty of the world to define a deity into existence even though none of these observations require such an entity to exist.

Our respondents’ definitions of their deity also changed over time. As noted above, gender norms in the church changed over time, and in the process the deity shifted as well. During earlier fieldwork, for example, worship service programs contained a note that read: “We encourage all people to label the creator as they see fit in service whether this be as Father, God, Creator, or any other term,” but as time went by this note was removed from the programs and the “Creator” became “Father” in all services. Rather than a genderless being, the deity acquired a gendered character over time without anyone ever explaining the change. The deity itself only became a gendered being through the meaning making efforts of the people in the church, and in so doing, mirrored the demographic and cultural shift taking place within the church at the time.

On an individual level, such changes were also apparent. During earlier fieldwork, respondents defined their deity in a wide variety of ways from “the caring father I always knew as a child,” to “a spirit that infuses the world with meaning,” to “an abstract idea that makes life meaningful,” to “our creator and guide in this life,” to “a motherly force of good and peace,” and to “an idea that brings me comfort.” As the church became more male defined over time, however, the deity became a “caring father figure” or a “stern and powerful leader” for the people who remained active whereas people with other definitions left the church (see Wilcox 2009 for similar patterns of departure in churches). Rather than immutable, the deity was a product of ongoing interpretation and interaction.

Our respondents also grappled with other people’s impressions of deities that define LGBT people as inferior or stigmatized (Goffman 1963). Some of them handled this by redefining the deity in much the same way previous studies have

shown religious minorities revise scripture (McQueeney 2009). A respondent noted: “Other churches just don’t understand God. God wants us all to be happy because she made us all the way we are.” Another echoed this thought: “God doesn’t care about sexual stuff; God cares about how we treat each other. Other churches have just misinterpreted what God is all about.” In other cases, they defined God as a tester of human resilience who used people as examples for the world.

What if God’s an asshole? Think about it, all the shit that Jewish people, Black people, and now us have been through, maybe God is simply making a point and our job is to suffer while remaining obedient to God’s will even if we cannot understand it. To a human, this might appear harsh, like maybe God’s a jerk, but it could be a simple piece in his master plan that we just do not understand. We just have to have faith that God knows what he is doing even if we do not have a clue. Whether they defined their deity as ultimately caring or not, our LGBT respondents — like their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts in other Christian churches (Wilkins 2008) — managed other people’s deity claims by working to make sense of these experiences in relation to their own interpretations. In so doing, they were able to maintain the existence of their version of the deity despite “counter claims” (Goffman 1963) from others.

Our respondents also dedicated specific activities to defining the deity into existence. In regular Bible Study meetings, for example, members came together to debate and outline what the deity desired of each individual and the church as a whole. As one respondent put it during such a meeting: “The whole point of studying the Bible is to learn who God is and what God wants from us here on this earth. We all believe, but we need to be united in our understanding and desire for God’s will to thrive.” During another meeting, another respondent added: “It is not enough to know that God is here. We must learn exactly what God wants so we are able to serve Jesus the way we were meant to in our lives.” Rather than an obvious meaning everyone would somehow just know, the characteristics of the deity represented a set of lessons members taught one another in the context of their own church.

Previous studies echo the patterns noted above. Researchers have found, for example, that people describe “what they think” their deity wants from them in various ways. Wilkins (2008), for example, notes that respondents believed God — as well as other people — expected believers to be happy. Researchers have also noted changes in deity interpretation over time (see, e.g., Marti 2009; Moon 2004; Wilcox 2009). Moon (2004), for example, found that individuals developed “everyday theologies” to make sense of experiences in their lives that did not quite fit others’ beliefs about their deity, and congregations shifted their impressions of deities in relation to cultural debates. Furthermore, studies regularly find that interpretations of deities (or at least religious teachings) shift over time in relation to social conflicts (Sumerau, Mathers, and Cragun 2016). While each of these studies focuses on the people or specific issue rather than the construction of the deity, in all such cases believers — echoing the examples from our case — are defining deities into existence.

Coding

Once an identity is defined into existence, people must also create ways to signify this claim to themselves and others (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Put simply, people must create rules or codes for showing themselves and others said identity exists in the “real” world (Goffman 1959). If we look at gender identities, for example, we note that once gender is defined as a real thing, people must then learn ways to dress, speak, interpret their biological qualities, and otherwise signify they “have” a gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). While the elements of signification (or codes) can vary dramatically, the point lies in the ability to convince the self and others that an identity one seeks to claim “really” exists. While there are likely a multitude of ways people may code deities (i.e., establish activities that signify deity existence to the self and others), our two data sources reveal at least three processes likely to be found in many religions.

The first way people may signify deity existence involves the telling and retelling of stories demonstrating a deity’s effect upon natural life (Wooffitt 1992). In such cases, people interpret their experiences as evidence of the existence of a deity, and share this interpretation with agreeable others (see Fields 2001 for a similar strategy of nondeity identity work). Such efforts establish the “realness” of deity claims by defining deities as active elements in social life. As a respondent noted:

I know there is a God because of the life I’ve lived. There were so many times I don’t think I would have kept going without the guidance of God and the fact that I was loved no matter how far I fell.

Another added:

I remember how lost I was going from party to party, but God spoke to me, a little at first and then more and more, and that led me back to the Church and the path I should have taken all along.

While other scholars have noted the importance of storytelling in religion (see, e.g., Loseke and Cavendish 2001; Weber [1922] 1993), they have generally focused on the ways stories help people make sense of their selves. Although this is one function of such stories, another function is the demonstration of deity presence in concrete situations, which signifies both belief and the existence of such deity.

We further see coding processes in the form of prayer. While prayer has received little attention in scholarly circles, recent analyses demonstrate some ways prayers may reinforce belief in deities for individuals and signify believer status or identity to others (Sharp 2010). Furthermore, casual uses of prayer (e.g., statements of intent to pray for another whether or not they are a believer or political leaders saying “our” prayers are with people despite the many nonbelievers in our nation) signify belief in deities in many circumstances. In all such cases, the action or promise of prayer reveals a taken-for-granted “rule” (Goffman 1967) — there is something to pray to.

Like Sharp’s (2010) informants, our respondents talked a lot about prayer. In fact, very few met the first author more than once without offering to pray for zir, and

prayers (individual and collective) were integrated into secular and religious activities. One noted:

We pray about everything because that's how you know God is there. I mean, you have to talk to God so you can be heard.

Another added:

Prayer is the power that gets you through the darkness and into God's grace. You pray for yourself, but for others too you know, because otherwise you might lose sight of God.

Another noted:

Prayer is how you demonstrate your commitment to God. You don't just believe, you have to be active and prayer is a way to do that so God knows you're trying all the time.

While respondents interpreted prayer as a way to let the deity know they were sincere, their efforts — especially during public events — also told others the deity was there by suggesting there was an invisible force one could speak to, and that such speech might matter.

As suggested in the notion of public or collective prayer, the third way our respondents coded deity claims involved collective ritual. Following Durkheim [1912] 2008, collective religious rituals are designed — implicitly or explicitly — to invoke the supernatural — whether in the form of a deity or otherwise — in the concrete lives of people. As a result, rituals provide opportunities for outlining the rules of deity claims for the self and others. Sometimes this deity coding is rather explicit:

God wants you to pray, to share your stories with others, and to live every day showing God to other people. God needs us to do his work, and to reveal his presence to any who do not yet know of his power and glory.

Another noted:

Rituals are the heart of God's world because in each action we connect to the power around us and bring God's unseen glory into view for the world.

Additionally, many songs sung in services integrate worship with rules of conduct related to the deity:

God wants us out there, God wants us free, God wants us to tell the world, how happy we can be. God wants us humble, God wants us true, God is here, but we gotta do what we should do.

Rather than simply collective interactions, rituals provide people with cues, rules, and responsibilities for demonstrating the existence and desire of deities.

We can see similar coding in other studies of religion. While the literature implying such deity work is vast, a couple of examples may be useful. Nelson (1996), for

example, demonstrates how church leaders and prominent members teach others to “feel” certain ways and “express” certain emotions as evidence of God’s presence. Similarly, Spickard (2005) found Catholic house masses often integrated interpretations of the divine into existing social problems to provide members with specific ways of recognizing the power of the divine, and placing their hope in the intervention of a deity and collective solidarity in support of a deity. While these (and other) studies focus on the effects such rituals have upon the people doing them, they also reveal the creation of rules for understanding (and connecting with) deities.

Affirming

After identities are defined and rules for signifying possession of said claims are created within and between social groups, people establish methods for affirming such “reality” (see, e.g., Goffman 1967; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996; West and Zimmerman 1987). Without affirmation, an identity can be easily dismissed or forgotten over time, and thus regular affirmation becomes a necessary component for continued belief in the existence of shared meaning (Blumer 1969). While affirmation may arise in many forms (i.e., interpersonal, legal, experiential, or any other established routine that carries legitimacy in the worldview of the identity claimant [Goffman 1967]), the ultimate requirement is that others accept the claim and allow the claimant to demonstrate the claim in concrete ways (West and Zimmerman 1987).

As Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) note, the creation of opportunities to affirm shared meanings is often found in codes. Within our previous examples of coding, we note when believers tell stories, pray, or engage in rituals they are ultimately both coding the deity *and* receiving affirmation from others of deity existence. As Wooffitt (1992:149) notes, interpersonal rituals may “effectively” attribute “supernatural” value to collective exchanges, and as a result, such rituals may affirm shared belief in a deity (or other supernatural force) for participants in concrete ways. While these are useful forms of affirmation for the construction of deities, people seeking to signify the existence and characteristics of deities may also accomplish this goal in other ways.

Following Goffman (1967), one of the primary ways people affirm shared conceptions of reality involves the mobilization of language to elevate some realities over others. In such cases, people offer seemingly neutral or common “ways of knowing or doing” in their speech that affirm (to themselves and others) the assumptions necessary for their self presentations and shared realities. Exploring gendered language, for example, Kleinman (2007) notes how the use of male generics (i.e., you guys instead of you, freshmen instead of first years, human instead of people, etc.) reinforces assumptions of maleness in everyday conversation by training people to expect and accept male as a generic representation and erasing the presence of others. People may also reinforce deity claims by, for example, offering blessings whenever another person (regardless of said person’s beliefs) sneezes or responding to negative

health or other social events via prayer offerings (whether or not the person suffering believes in prayer). In such cases, people affirm deity claims by embedding them into interaction patterns with others regardless of whether or not said others share the same claim.

Among our respondents, such efforts were commonplace within and beyond the church. As one respondent explained to the first author after a group prayer for the health of a member in the hospital, “We pray together for them whether they know it or not because God will allow them to feel our prayers and our love.” Similarly, members often, as one respondent put it, “checked in” on other members and people in their communities who were not or less active with religion “to provide an example of the benefits God has in our lives” and as another member put it, “share the way God’s presence fills up our days and nights together.” In so doing, members perform their deity belief for themselves and others in ways that affirm the place and realness of such beliefs in their own lives, in the church, and in the world. Furthermore, members regularly explained to the first author and each other how everything from political victories to parking spaces emerged, as one put it, “through God’s work for our world.” In all such cases, everyday events became affirmations for members’ already established conceptualization of the deity and its place within their world.

Another common strategy of affirmation involves specific rituals that mark one as a full member of a specific group (Durkheim [1912] 2008). Our respondents, for example, placed a lot of emphasis on Baptism, and even more on recognizing, celebrating, and announcing the baptism of others. As one put it: “We have to talk about it when people get baptized because that shows they now know God is a real force in their lives — they have signed up for service.” Another added: “Baptism is so wonderful because you go through it with everyone watching and cheering you on and so you know you’re not alone in your walk with God.” Another noted: “God already knows where your heart is, but its not real I don’t think until you have the courage to show it to other people because those other people are your family and can help you and learn from your example at the same time.” While religions have many “special” ceremonies for signifying milestones (Avishai 2008), such ceremonies affirm the existence of deities by providing believers with opportunities to bond over their shared claims. In fact, they also encourage believers to maintain the “impression” (Baumeister 1982) that such beliefs are “real” or “valuable” to avoid contradiction between their public declarations and their internal realities.

We can further see examples of deity affirmation in large-scale social patterns. When political leaders invoke deities (generally without disclosing what they actually believe such deities to be), they affirm the deity claims of others who may lend them support. Similarly, when religious leaders are called to weigh in on almost every major event in American society, such calls affirm the notion that people who believe in deities might have special insights (regardless of training) concerning social issues. Furthermore, when surveys find that most Americans state one must believe in deities to be fully American (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006), their results suggest failure to affirm deity claims may be cause for dismissal from society (see

also Durkheim [1912] 2008) for similar patterns in previous societies). In all such cases, people who create and code a version of a deity are likely to create and find affirmation for these efforts locally and nationally.

CONCLUSIONS

Most sociological research focused on religion investigates the ways people experience and make sense of their interactions with and structural locations in relation to others. Such research has produced a wealth of knowledge concerning the ways people experience deities while engaging in forms of identity, emotion, body, and ideology work to create religious selves and groups, but it leaves unexplored the construction of the deities themselves despite implicit suggestions in the literature that this facet may be important and varied. While Sharp (2013b) and scholars focused on LGBT religious people (see, e.g., Barton 2012; McQueeney 2009; Wolkomir 2006) importantly reveal variation in conceptions of deities and some ways people manage confusion related to belief in specific deities, they reveal little about the processes whereby people construct these and other versions of deities.

We have drawn on interactionist approaches to identity work (see, e.g., Goffman 1967; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock; Snow and Anderson 1987) as well as conversational analysis suggesting supernatural claims — deity-based or otherwise — are socially constructed (Wooffitt 1992) to outline processes whereby people breathe life into deities through social interaction. Specifically, people create the existence and meaning of deities by engaging in what we call deity work — individual and collective efforts to create deities (i.e., suggest they exist in some form) and grant this creation meaning in their concrete experience. Like other forms of dramaturgical work, they accomplish this by defining their claim into existence, and both coding and affirming this claim in interactions.

Our analysis demonstrates some ways deity work may be accomplished in many settings and contexts. First, as Wooffitt (1992) suggests, people define the supernatural into existence by assigning characteristics to supernatural forces to explain natural events. We demonstrate a similar initial process taking place specifically in relation to deity creation. However, once people have defined one or more deities into existence, they will then establish and maintain processes for coding (i.e., signifying) and affirming (i.e., giving and receiving support) the deity in their interactions. Finally, this process may continue indefinitely and allow enough flexibility for shifting the meaning and characteristics of any constructed deity over time and in relation to broader patterns of social change.

These findings have implications for understanding deities. While researchers have consistently demonstrated that much of the identity, emotion, bodily, and ideological management people do relies upon and utilizes beliefs about deities, much of the variation in these processes (even within groups) may derive from varied constructions of “what” or “who” the deity is. If one seeks to understand, for example, why an

otherwise progressive religious individual constructs identities via the use of homophobia or racism (McQueeney 2009), the answer may lie in homophobia or racism that is attributed to the deity this person has been taught ze must please. Similarly, if researchers seek to understand why political candidates rarely explain their specific deity claims even though they generally claim some form of belief in a deity, the answers may lie in the variation of deity claims in society, and the inability of any one candidate to gather a large voting bloc with one specific deity claim. Finally, if researchers seek to understand the marginalization of nonreligious people — and especially atheists — in America (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006), the answers may lie in the nature of deity claims, which rely heavily on continued affirmation. In all such cases, our articulation of deity work may aid sociologists seeking to understand the wide variety of ways claims about deities impact experience within and between concrete settings.

Despite its mobilization in almost every political campaign, public policy debate, and response to natural and people-created tragedies, deities are the proverbial “elephant in the room” in scholarship, and until they are subjected to systematic scrutiny, their influence upon social patterns of oppression and privilege will continue to operate with little resistance. In the same way that interactions are where people “do” race, class, gender (West and Fenstermaker 1995), sexualities (Adams 2011), and religion (Avishai 2008), people “construct” deities via interaction, and it is within interaction that deities — such as race, class, gender, sexualities, and religion — can be “undone” or transformed into more equitable forms (Goffman 1963). To accomplish such a transformation, however, researchers will need to illuminate the many ways people create deities. Our analysis thus extends Wooffitt’s (1992) call to interrogate the taken-for-granted power of unseen forces by providing “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer 1969) people may draw upon to systematically scrutinize deity work in concrete settings.

Finally, unpacking deity work is also important for understanding the complexity of religion and nonreligion. Since people act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them (Blumer 1969), processes of deity work may reveal foundational elements of varied religious traditions, the reasons many people leave or join religions at some point, and an understanding that religious beliefs — like their secular counterparts — are the result of ongoing social endeavors susceptible to revision and adjustment over time. As the nonreligious population grows (Kosmin et al. 2009) and religious populations seek to make sense of shifting American cultural norms and values, explorations of deity work may reveal concrete strategies religious and nonreligious people utilize to maintain or change the role of religion in contemporary American society.

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