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The Public Identity Work of Evangelical Christian Students

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As part of a larger investigation into the experiences of 25 evangelical Christian student leaders at two public universities, students were interviewed to determine how they conceptualized their religious identity as well as how that dimension of their identity impacted their roles and responsibilities as students. Results suggest that the public identity work of these students may involve two interrelated, yet distinct, processes: identity revelation and "identity authentication."

The identity of college students has long been a topic of interest in the field of higher education. Widick, Parker, and Knefelkamp (1978) defined identity as "the organized set of images, the sense of self, which expresses who and what we really are" (p. 2). Much of the research that has been conducted about college student identity has focused on the development of various dimensions of identity. Theories that have been proposed include those that address the development of social identities such as ethnic identity (e.g., Phinney, 1990; Ruiz, 1990), gender identity (e.g., Downing & Roush, 1985; Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992), racial identity (e.g., Helms, 1990; Helms & Cook, 1999; Root, 1990) and sexual identity (e.g., Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994).

Interestingly, in spite of the fact that religion has been identified as one of the most important topics of exploration during the self-examination period of adolescence and young adulthood (Sciarra & Gushue, 2003), there is a lack of research about the religious identity of college students. Though definitions of religious identity are scarce, McEwen (2003) stated that religious identity "refers to whether or not one views religion as an integral part of one's identity" (p. 222). Most of the research that currently exists related to religious identity focuses on the broad concepts of religious orientation, motivation, and/or attitudes of college students (e.g., Buchko, 2004; Sanchez & Carter, 2005; Sciarra & Gushue, 2003) or upon their spiritual interests and/or identity (e.g., Astin, Astin, Lindholm, & Bryant, 2005; Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005). Because research suggests that many college students are quite involved in religion and report a significant degree of commitment to their religious beliefs and practices (e.g., Nash, 2001), scholarly inquiry related to this dimension of social identity is necessary.

Amidst the diversity of religious identities represented in American higher education, the presence of evangelical Christian students cannot go unnoticed; the popularity of evangelical Christian organizations on many college and university campuses has been well documented (e.g., Carroll, 2002; Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001; Lowery, 2001, Mahoney, Schmalzbauer, & Youniss., 2001; Swidey, 2003). As a result of the numerical presence of these students, a handful of scholars have recently conducted investigations into the experiences of evangelical Christian students on various college and university campuses. These investigators found that some evangelical Christian students report experiencing intolerance and antagonism from others on

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campus but that they find refuge and support in Christian organizations both on and off campus (e.g., Bryant, 2005; Hulett, 2004; Lowery; Schulz, 2005). Additionally, Magolda and Ebben (2006) conducted an ethnographic investigation of one Christian organization at a public, 4-year residential campus and highlighted the involvement and mobilization strategies utilized by that particular organization. The focus of these investigations has been on how evangelical Christian students navigate the culture of their campuses rather than upon an in-depth conceptualization of the evangelical Christian religious identity itself.

In an effort to build upon some of the research reviewed above, two colleagues and I conducted an investigation into the experiences of some evangelical Christian student leaders on two public university campuses in the Midwest. We recently reported that a number of evangelical Christian student leaders experienced culturally incongruent environments on their public university campuses in that they espoused different values, beliefs, and behaviors than those of many other students (Moran, Lang, & Oliver, 2007). We chose the phrase "social status ambiguity" (p. 35) to describe the interesting phenomenon of these students being perceived differently, in the same setting, as a result of their religious identity. In effect, the evangelical Christian students in our study viewed themselves as being oppressed as a result of their religious identity, while they believed that others in the higher education environment viewed them as being privileged due to this dimension of their identity.

Though aspects of religious identity such as values, beliefs, and behaviors were highlighted in that study (Moran et al., 2007), the evangelical Christian students' conceptualizations of their religious identity itself were not presented. Nor were the insights concerning the impact of their religious identity upon their

roles and responsibilities as college students discussed. The purpose of this article is to present additional themes that emerged from the data collected in the aforementioned larger investigation. The following research questions guided this aspect of the study: How do evangelical Christian student leaders at two public universities conceptualize their own religious identity? How does their religious identity impact the way they view their roles and responsibilities as students?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this aspect of the larger investigation into the experiences of evangelical Christian student leaders includes concepts and insights from literature regarding invisible social identities. According to Deaux (1993), "social identity" refers to "roles, such as parent or friend, or membership categories, such as Latino or women, that a person believes is representative of oneself" (p. 6). Jones and McEwen (2000) presented a conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity in which they highlighted the existence of intersecting social identities. They proposed that dimensions of social identity are externally defined, internally experienced, and become more or less salient as they interact with contextual influences such as family background, socio-cultural conditions, current experiences, and career decisions and life planning. Moreover, social identities exist in two categories: visible and invisible (Tsui & Gutek, 1999). Visible characteristics include race, sex, and age; invisible characteristics include occupation, illness, and religion. Dimensions of social identity, whether visible or invisible, that are created within social hierarchies of domination and oppression are conceptualized as being socially constructed; race, class, and gender are examples of socially constructed dimensions of identity (Weber, 2001).

Research conducted by several scholars

who study organizations (e.g., Leary, 1999; Matthews & Harrington, 2000; Reimann, 2001) suggests that the management of information about invisible social identities is a central concern for many people. This concern exists due to the fact that invisible social identities can be a basis for status as well as for stigmatization (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005). College students with at least one salient invisible social identity may experience challenges related to the expression of that dimension of their identity. This aspect of the larger investigation into the experiences of evangelical Christian students was conducted to gain knowledge about the public expression of one type of invisible social identity: religious identity.

The conceptual framework underlying this study also includes insights related to public identity work, a concept of focus in the field of social psychology. According to Johnston, Larana, and Gusfield (1994), people engage in public identity work by negotiating a perceived public image and by trying to enhance its positive aspects. In this effort, individual and collective identities are influenced, in part, by the perceptions of others. A tool often used to construct a public identity is that of impression management. According to Goffman (1959), impression management involves individuals making efforts to control or to manage the impressions that others have of them. Public identity work, then, involves the construction and expression of a public identity rather than the individual development of a particular dimension of identity. The public identity work of evangelical Christian students, rather than the development of an evangelical Christian religious identity, was the focus of this aspect of the larger investigation.

METHOD

As was mentioned earlier, this study was part of a larger investigation into the experiences of evangelical Christian students at two public universities. Due to the focus of the investigation, a social constructionist epistemology served as the framework upon which the study was grounded, and it was within this framework that the data for this particular aspect of the study were viewed and analyzed. The basic premise of this epistemological perspective is that social realities are understood as a result of a collective, rather than individualist, process of constructing meaning (Crotty, 1998). Social life "is produced by its component actors precisely in terms of their active constitution and reconstitution of frames of meaning whereby they organize their experiences" (Giddens, 1976, p. 79).

Consistent with the assumptions underlying the social constructionist epistemology, an interpretive theoretical perspective informed the methodology of this investigation. Interpretivism was conceived in reaction to positivism, as an "effort to develop a natural science of the social" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 125). By utilizing this perspective in this study, I was "uncritically" looking for "culturally-derived and historically-situated interpretations of the social life-world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 64) of the evangelical Christian student participants.

Finally, a phenomenological methodology provided the framework for the design of this study. A phenomenological study "seeks to understand lived experience phenomenon through language that is pre-theoretical, without classification or abstraction" (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002, p. 453). The aim of phenomenology is not to acquire factual representations of experiences but rather to describe "the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998, p. 51) and to bring about "plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world" (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). The phenomenon of interest in the larger study was that of the

experiences of evangelical Christian student leaders at two public university campuses. For this portion of the investigation, and within the broader investigation into the phenomenon of the participants' experiences, I was interested in determining the participants' conceptualization of their religious identity and the impact of that dimension of identity upon the roles and responsibilities of the students.

Participants

Phenomenological assumptions suggest that key informants are those who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 1998). Therefore, all of the participants in this study were involved in leadership in at least one evangelical Christian campus organization (e.g., Campus Crusade for Christ, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Chi Alpha Christian Fellowship). Consistent with the process of criterion sampling, leaders from these organizations were chosen on the assumption that they, even more than other members in their respective groups, would espouse a strong evangelical Christian identity and would most likely be able to clearly articulate the conceptualization of their own religious identity. I also utilized the maximum variation sampling technique, commonly used in phenomenological research (Creswell), in order to incorporate a broad array of perspectives that could be analyzed in the aggregate.

The final sample consisted of 9 male and 16 female undergraduate, traditional-aged students, with a variation of freshmen through seniors. Though diversity in terms of gender and academic classification (e.g., freshman, sophomore, etc.) was represented in this investigation, the conceptualizations shared by the respondents did not differ in relation to either of those aspects of diversity. Only one student in the sample was non-White; she identified herself as African American. Though I recognize that the racial identity of the stu-

dents may likely impact the conceptualization of their religious identity, I did not attempt to investigate that intersection in this study due to the lack of representation from racial minority groups within the primary evangelical Christian student organizations on these campuses.

Furthermore, all participants were students at either the University of Missouri–Columbia or the University of Kansas. These two public, research-extensive institutions were purposefully chosen as the settings from which to draw the participants in that they are located in rural, politically conservative regions within the Bible Belt. The Bible Belt, a description first used by Baltimore journalist H. L. Mencken in the early 1920s, is the geographical region in the south and mid-section of the United States wherein evangelical Christianity is a dominant part of the culture (Foster, 2005). Throughout this narrative, pseudonyms are used for the participants to ensure the confidentiality of their responses. The names of the institutions, however, are identified in order to provide important contextual information concerning the sites from which the participants were recruited.

Procedure

The first step in identifying potential participants was to contact the campus ministers from each of the evangelical Christian campus organizations on these two campuses. This information was gleaned from organizational web sites. Upon explaining the purpose of the study, I asked these campus ministers for the contact information of the student leaders in their organization. Next, I sent an e-mail message to each of these students to explain the purpose of the study and to request their participation in it. Other students were purposefully selected through the use of snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) after the identification of initial participants. I asked

each respondent to participate in one interview. By identifying myself as an evangelical Christian at the beginning of each interview, I was able to establish rapport with each of the respondents. As a result of that rapport, the respondents openly shared their conceptualizations of their own religious identity. In discussing the concept of saturation of data, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended sampling to the point of redundancy. Qualitative researchers often conclude the data collection process at the point at which no new information is coming forth from participants. Saturation of data, for all aspects of the larger investigation, was reached after interviewing 25 students.

Interviews

Each of the interviews was conducted in a quiet location, chosen by the respondent, in the student union of each institution; furthermore, each lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour and was audio-recorded. Though none of the interviews were conducted in private locations, the students seemed at ease while discussing their religious identity. The background noise in the student union appeared to preclude the possibility of anyone overhearing the interviews. The interview protocol was semistructured with open-ended questions designed to elicit conceptualizations of their religious identity as well as their thoughts as to the impact of this domain of their identity upon their roles and responsibilities as students. Sample interview questions included the following: How would you describe your religious identity? How do you express your religious identity on campus? How does your religious identity impact your responsibilities as a student at this university?

Data Analysis

In an attempt to alleviate the possibility that my identity as an evangelical Christian might lessen the credibility of the results of this research, two colleagues provided assistance with the data analysis phase of the project. Both were doctoral students at the time, trained in qualitative research. Neither of the co-analysts self-identify as evangelical Christians; in fact, both question many of the doctrines of organized Christianity. All interpretations of the data were negotiated among the three of us. Consistent with phenomenological methodology, we attempted to "bracket" (Creswell, 1998, p. 32) our preconceptions in order to accurately represent possible meanings of the participants' responses. The participants' own language is used throughout this narrative to illustrate these meanings and resulting themes.

The data set for this study consisted of 25 interviews, which were transcribed verbatim. Upon completion of the transcription phase of the project, I developed data charts from the transcripts. Each chart contained the respondents :' exact comments about specific topics discussed in the interviews. My two co-analysts and I subsequently used these charts as the basis for the data analysis. To analyze the data, we relied upon Lincoln and Guba's (1985) inductive method of qualitative data analysis. First, from the data charts, we each unitized the data by searching for an element (phrase, sentence, or paragraph) that was heuristic, or "aimed at some understanding" that we, as data analysts, needed to have (Lincoln & Guba, p. 345). Once the data were unitized, units that related to the same content were grouped together into provisional categories. This categorization was achieved through the constant comparative method. In other words, units were compared to each other to establish whether they were similar and should be put in the same category, or different and should be put into different categories. Finally, each category was reviewed for consistency, and categories were compared

to make sure each was unique. The goal was to have categories that were "internally as homogeneous as possible and externally as heterogeneous as possible" (Lincoln & Guba, p. 349). After developing categories for each chart, we met as a group to negotiate and to reconcile discrepancies in our work. From these discussions, themes emerged that accounted for the cross-analyzed, categorized data. These themes form the headings and sub-headings in this article.

Trustworthiness of the findings was enhanced through three validity-enhancing techniques: analyst triangulation, member checking, and the establishment of an audit trail. Analyst triangulation involves the use of two or more people who independently analyze the same qualitative data and compare their findings (Patton, 2002). As mentioned earlier, two colleagues and I analyzed the data for this project, thus utilizing this strategy. Member checking, another strategy used, involves taking the data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In this study, respondents were sent, via email, a copy of their own interview as well as the summary outline of the final results of the study. They were then asked to provide feedback about the accuracy of our interpretations. Finally, an audit trail was established. An audit trail is the maintenance of "precise records of who said what, when, where, and under what conditions" (Whitt, 1991, p. 45). I clearly documented, via hand-written and typed notes, all research decisions and activities throughout the course of this project and maintained files of all interview transcripts and data charts.

FINDINGS

From the data, a number of themes emerged that shed light on how the evangelical Christian students in this study conceptualized their religious identity and the impact of that dimension of identity upon their roles and responsibilities as students. The first theme expressed by the students in this study was that of the importance of having a "relationship" with Jesus Christ. Within that theme, students spoke of their need to choose to believe in and to demonstrate a "heart" for Christ. Students also shared about how their religious identity is not just a "compartment" in life; this was the second theme that emerged. In this regard, they expressed their thoughts concerning the life-changing and life-defining nature of their religious identity. The final theme that emerged directly related to their roles and responsibilities as students. In this regard, they shared that they must view their collegiate experience as being "for Christ's glory" by setting a "Christian example" for others and by prioritizing "ministry" responsibilities on campus. The aforementioned themes and sub-themes are described below.

"Relationship With Jesus Christ"

According to the evangelical Christian students represented in this study, the basis of Christianity involves having a "personal relationship" with Jesus Christ. When using this language, the students spoke in much the same way as they would if they were referencing a relationship with a friend or family member. For instance, they spoke of being "committed to" and "communicating with" Jesus through prayer and Bible study. Moreover, they believe that they should develop their relationship with Jesus by maintaining that commitment and communication over time.

Although many people in society claim to be Christians, the students in this study stated that "authentic" Christianity involves more than simply being born into a certain family, culture, or religion; it involves having a relationship, as described above, with Jesus Christ. According to these students, there is a

difference between being a "casual" Christian and being a genuine Christian. Sherri's comment exemplified this line of thinking:

> I think that morals and our culture, in general, point people towards Christianity. There are a lot of people whose families went to church. I was raised in a home where we went to church, but I wasn't really a Christian until my senior year of high school. I think the difference is if you really have a personal relationship with Christ.

In discussing the relational aspect of authentic Christianity, Keith distinguished between knowing *about* God and actually knowing God:

> I think a lot of people have the knowledge that Jesus is God, but they don't apply it to their lives. It's kind of like knowing Michael Jordan. You could say every statistic and everything about Jordan. But, you really don't know him. I could say everything I know about what Jesus did . . . how He died for my sins, He healed people, and He did all of these miracles. But, that doesn't mean that I know Him.

According to the students in this study, those who are authentic Christians have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ because they have chosen to believe in him and to live a life that demonstrates a "passionate devotion" to him.

Choosing to Believe. The students in this study shared that one is not born into a relationship with Christ; rather, one must choose to believe in Jesus Christ and in the "salvation" message of His life, death, and resurrection. In effect, this decision involves believing that Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world and accepting this gift of salvation. Stuart's comment below illustrates this volitional component of evangelical Christianity:

I think most people think of Christian as not Muslim, not Buddhist . . . "I'm not an atheist. I'm a Christian. I go to church on Sundays." Okay [laughing]. That's just a tag you apply to yourself. The classic analogy to point out why that doesn't work is that "if you live in a garage, it doesn't make you a car." I think there's a big difference between people who identify themselves as Christians and those who actually have a commitment to Christ . . . and following Him as their Savior and their Master.

When speaking in terms of "following" Christ, the students in this study referred to an ongoing commitment to maintain a relationship with Him after deciding to become Christians. It was after Jeff met other Christian students on campus that he understood the need to make a decision to become a Christian and to follow Christ:

> When I got here to Mizzou [the University of Missouri-Columbia], I saw genuine Christians in my campus ministry. I saw people who were Christians because they wanted to be, and it wasn't just a label. It formed and shaped their whole lives. And, I understood that *that's* what Christianity is all about. It was no longer a cultural thing to me, but it became a personal decision. And, it's my decision to strive to follow Christ.

According to the students in this study, then, a person who desires to be a "sincere" Christian makes the decision to believe in, to be committed to, and to follow Jesus Christ.

Demonstrating a "Heart for Christ." The students in this investigation also believe that evangelical Christians are expected to act in ways that demonstrate their sincere, committed relationship with Jesus Christ; that is what they meant by stating that they need to demonstrate a "heart for Christ." In their opinion, belief should translate into obedience. They stated that obedience to Jesus Christ involves

spending time with Him through prayer and reading the Bible as well as taking time to grow close to other Christians who are also striving to obey Christ. These religious activities are done out of a love for Jesus Christ rather than out of obligation. Sherri shared how her actions demonstrate her religious identity:

> I spend time in the Word [Bible] daily and in prayer daily, and I'm actively involved in a ministry. All of those things kind of divide people who are really living for Christ from other [people who self-identify as] Christians.

Rhonda stated that sharing her faith, or talking to others about her relationship with Jesus Christ, is a crucial aspect of demonstrating her commitment to Jesus Christ. She mentioned that the presence of religious artifacts found in society does not relinquish the responsibility of Christians to talk about their religious faith. She expressed this sentiment in the following way:

> Going to Wal-Mart and seeing Veggie Tales stuff *does not mean* that I'm in a Christian environment [laughing]. A lot of people who would answer in a survey, "Yeah, I believe in God," would never actually go up to someone on campus and try to share their faith. It wouldn't even be in the top ten things they'd say about themselves. It doesn't even come up in conversation. You are either walking it or you are not.

The phrase "walking it" was used by Rhonda, above, to describe the responsibility of people who self-identify as Christians to obey the commands of God as revealed by Jesus Christ, including that concerning speaking to others about their relationship with Christ. According to the students in this study, authentic Christians should demonstrate their commitment to and relationship with Jesus Christ by participating in activities that reflect their religious beliefs.

"Not Just a Compartment in Life"

Moreover, the students in this study believe that the decision to follow Jesus Christ is life changing and life defining. These students stated that their lives completely changed after they made this decision. Furthermore, Christianity became the center of their lives in such a way that it impacted their entire identity. In this regard, these students shared that their religious identity involves more than surface-level religious activities and nominal religious titles. Kelly stated this sentiment in the following way:

> I have learned in the past couple of years that being a Christian doesn't mean that you just attend church. It affects every part of our lives. It's not just a hobby or a little compartment in my life. My life is centered around the fact that I'm a follower of Christ.

Kristin also focused on the idea that evangelical Christianity cannot simply be a compartment in the lives of Christians. In particular, she mentioned that the lifestyle of Christians, referring to how they use time and money, is impacted by their religious identity and should demonstrate that dimension of identity. In her statement, below, she specifically focused on the amount of time that Christians should devote to their religion:

> I think there are a lot of people who would say that they are Christians but who really are not. It doesn't really show in their lifestyle. Many people are really good at compartmentalizing their lives. "I'm a Christian on Sunday . . . and maybe Wednesday night."

Life-Changing. Moreover, these students expressed the idea that as a result of the "ongoing relationship" that they have with Jesus Christ, authentic Christians develop a "changed heart" in that their attitudes and emotions about other people and about life in

general change in a positive way. The time that Christians spend obeying Christ results in "becoming more like Christ" in terms of learning how to think, to speak, and to act in a manner perceived as being positive and admirable. Amber described this phenomenon of obeying Christ and being changed in the process as "living under the lordship" of Christ:

> I think it's sad that a lot of people who call themselves Christians aren't really living for Christ. I don't want to view myself as better than them, because I realize that it's only by grace [that I can live for Christ]. But, the only thing I did was open up and let Christ change me. I think a lot of people are not really living under the lordship of Jesus. They may have committed their lives, but the evidence of a changed life isn't always there.

Susan, like many others who participated in this study, believes that living under the lordship of Christ should result in a changed life that, then, becomes an indicator of authentic evangelical Christianity: "You have to live a life that shows the change. A lot of people may say that they are Christians, but a change hasn't occurred."

Life-Defining. According to these evangelical Christian students, various lifestyle decisions—once again referring to those related to the use of time and money—should be impacted as a result of embracing an evangelical Christian identity. Decisions about social relationships (e.g., with whom to spend time) and about choices concerning style of clothing to wear, types of movies to watch, and appropriate forms of language to use should all be informed by, and should demonstrate, the religious beliefs of evangelical Christians. Rhonda shared the following: "It's not just saying, 'I'm a Christian.' It impacts my entire life. It impacts everything . . . like every

decision I make, the way I talk, the way I dress, who I am friends with. . . ."

Beverley spoke about the impact that one's Christian identity should have upon romantic relationships and service to the needy:

> There's this general belief that Jesus died on the cross, and He did that to save people, but "that doesn't affect my life. I go to church. I believe it, but I go out and have immoral relations with my boyfriend or girlfriend. Or, I don't care about the poor." That's not Christianity.

Other students stated that decisions about academic majors and career paths should also be made in ways that acknowledge "Christ's will" for their lives in hopes of using their talents and skills in ways that please Christ. This idea is further elaborated within the next theme, presented below.

"For Christ's Glory"

As "stressful" as it can be at times, most of the evangelical Christian students in this study reported that they strive for the best in their academic work. They stated their belief that the manner in which they conduct themselves as college students should be a reflection of the work of Christ in their lives. And, because they believe that Christ has a reason for allowing them to be in college and that He has given them the "gifts and abilities" that they have, they shared that they try their best to give Him "glory" as they work towards their degree. Stuart explained this idea in the following way: "We are called to glorify Christ in everything we do. So, that's incentive to do my best while studying and in every task that I take on. I try to do my best." Jeff focused on the fact that he believes God provided the financial means for him to attend the university, and that therefore, he needed to please God while enrolled:

> God has graciously provided me the funds to come here, so I try to take advantage

of that. I try not to waste any of it. It's His money. I try to do with it what He would want me to do. Even the major I'm in . . . I'm in it, because I believe that's what He wants for me. And, He wants me to use it to grow His kingdom.

Setting a Christian Example. The evangelical Christian students in this study believe that students who are not Christians are watching them to see how they live their lives—to see if their attitudes and actions truly demonstrate the religious identity that they claim to espouse. For that reason, they believe that they need to set an example of what it means to be an authentic Christian. Stephanie stated, "I need to be aware of my witness." In using the term "witness," Stephanie was referring to how her attitudes and actions should provide evidence for the authenticity of her religious identity. She went on to say that she thinks that other students will link her efforts as a student to her evangelical Christian identity. She shared that she works hard in an effort to avoid having others think negatively of evangelical Christianity: "I need to do as well as I possibly can so that there's no reason for anyone to say that someone affiliated with Christ, or even Christ Himself, is bad." Similarly, Grant stated, "I need to do well, so that others can see the Christian behind that." Amber's comment also resonated with the aforementioned sentiments expressed by Stephanie and Grant:

> I need to do everything as if I'm doing it for Christ. They [classmates] know that I'm the Christian girl in class. And that way they can think, "Well, she works hard, and she makes good grades . . . maybe not the best all of the time . . . but she tries really hard." That's more of a motivation to do well.

Keith, in describing those who truly are "walking out" Christianity by striving to obey the commands of Christ, also discussed his perception that other students are watching the evangelical Christians to see if they are "excellent" students. Similar to Stephanie, he spoke as if others were watching him in order to determine if his religious identity was authentic, as demonstrated by admirable academic standards:

> If you are walking out Christianity, you need to be excellent not only as a Christian but also as a student. I have to be on my heels as a student. People are looking at my life now more. They saw my life change. So now, they are looking at me. As a student, I need to be excellent.

Others in this study stated that they often try to set a Christian example by incorporating their Christian beliefs and values into the papers and projects that they are assigned. For instance, when given the opportunity to choose a topic for a paper, many students stated that they write about a topic related to their religious identity.

Keeping Ministry First. Although the evangelical Christian students in this study stated that they are serious about their academic responsibilities and that they strive to reflect Christ in their work by doing the best that they can, they believe that, ultimately, they are on campus for ministry reasons. "Ministry" was a term used by most of the students in this study to designate any activity that involved developing their relationship with Christ, building relationships with other students, or sharing their religious beliefs. According to these students, ministry is another way in which to glorify God, and to express their religious identity, on campus. Greg shared this belief in this way:

> I think my homework is important, and I'm going to do it to the best of my ability. But, it's not going to interfere with anything that's ministry-related. So, when I have time where there's not ministry, I get as much of it done as possible and out

of the way, so that when there *is* ministry, I won't have to sacrifice my performance in classes.

Kelly stated that reading the Bible and praying, as methods of developing her relationship with Christ, should be prioritized over academic work. Her statement indicates that there are times when one might feel compelled to participate in one of these ministry activities rather than to pursue a certain academic task:

> My goal in life is to be a doctor. When I became a Christian, I still kept that goal. But, it's not what rules my life. I'm a Christian first. I read my Bible, and I pray. And, I know some people who are medical students who don't. So, sometimes instead of studying, I feel like I need to pray [in order to keep Christ first].

Additionally, "building relationships" with students on campus is believed to be a form of ministry that should take priority over everything else. This is because these relationships may provide the opportunity for evangelical Christian students to share their religious beliefs with other students. Linda explained:

> I am here for the purpose of glorifying God and doing His work. Homework and all of that is just secondary and is what has to happen, being in the student role that I'm in. Being on this campus, there are a lot of opportunities to get into discussions about religion and faith and all of these different things. The most important thing is the relationships that are out there to be built with people in my classes [so that discussions about religion and faith can occur].

Whenever there is a conflict between expectations related to academics and those related to ministry activities, these students feel that they need to choose ministry. "You can't serve two masters," stated Beverley, indicating that an evangelical Christian student's life can be dictated by either academic work or by Christ and that the latter "master" is the appropriate one.

DISCUSSION

In responding to questions related to their religious identity, the evangelical Christian students in this study focused on the concept of having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In that regard, they stated that one must choose to believe and to trust in Jesus and should demonstrate a heart for Jesus by obeying His commands. Moreover, the students stressed the idea that sincere Christianity is life-changing and life-defining. These evangelical Christian students believe that they have a responsibility to set an example for other students in how they do their academic work but that they must always prioritize opportunities for ministry above all else. The themes that emerged shed light on the process by which the evangelical Christian students in this study worked to construct and to express a public identity on their respective campuses. The results of this study suggest that this public identity work may involve two interrelated, yet distinct, processes: identity revelation and "identity authentication." These students not only worked to reveal their identity as evangelical Christians but also attempted to authenticate that dimension of identity.

Identity Revelation

Frable, Blackstone, and Sherbaum (1990) stated that people with invisible differences are likely to "think strategically about whether, when, and how to reveal their differences" (p. 81). The phenomenon of identity revelation has been a topic of inquiry in relation to invisible social identities in several academic fields (e.g., Clair et al., 2005; L. Foley, 2005;

Johnston et al., 1994). Literature in higher education suggests that college students are often reluctant to reveal invisible dimensions of their social identity due to the prevalence of various stigmas, stereotypes, and perceived and/or real forms of discrimination and oppression (e.g., Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Evans & Broido, 1999; Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004; Rhoads, 1997; Stevens, 2004). Even when they do choose to self-disclose, they often must provide clarification and explanations about their identity as part of the identity revelation process.

Recent research, including that already published based on data from this study, suggests that many evangelical Christian students may feel reluctant to reveal their identity as Christians due to perceived and/or real forms of antagonism on some public university campuses (e.g., Bryant, 2005; Hulett, 2004; Lowery, 2001; Moran et al., 2007; Schulz, 2005). Yet, many choose to do so in spite of their reticence. When the evangelical Christian students in this study chose to reveal their religious identity, that process seemed to consist of differentiating their religious identity and performing in accordance with that identity.

Identity Differentiation. According to Clair et al. (2005), "differentiating" occurs when people highlight their invisible social identity and how it differentiates them from others. In the process of conceptualizing their religious identity, the students with whom I spoke engaged in identity differentiation by describing what sincere evangelical Christianity is *not* as well as what it is. For instance, they mentioned that it is not simply a family label, church attendance, or knowledge about the religion but rather that it involves having a relationship with Jesus and walking out that religious identity to demonstrate its salience. These students believe that their conceptualization of Christianity is different that that

of many others. Underlying this discourse is their perception that society-at-large has a misunderstanding of evangelical Christianity and that others are inappropriately using that religious label to describe themselves. During the interviews, the evangelical Christian students in this study demonstrated a need and/or desire to differentiate sincere Christianity from what they believe to be faulty perceptions of that religious identity.

This finding is not completely surprising given that people with invisible social identities often use various strategies to distance themselves from perceptions of identity with which they do not want to be associated. Many people with social identities establish "boundaries" by identifying with the shared characteristics of a group. According to Johnston et al. (1994), "boundaries can be thought of as activities and definitions that reinforce the we–they distinctions, which are often marked by differences in physical appearance, speech, demeanor, and other behaviors" (p. 20). In the case of the evangelical Christian students in this study, the process of clarifying to me that "we are not like them" and describing specific characteristics of genuine Christianity was a method by which these students attempted to establish boundaries in an effort to distance themselves from what they believe to be society's inaccurate image of a Christian. Bosson, Prewitt-Freilino, and Taylor (2005) stated that being seen in a manner inconsistent with one's self views is aversive, even when the erroneous impression of the self that others hold is not stigmatized per se. Research suggests that many evangelical Christian students believe that others hold inaccurate stereotypes about their religious identity (e.g., Bryant, 2005; Hulett, 2004; Moran et al., 2007), and thus, this differentiating process may be the means by which these students attempt to create an accurate and consistent understanding of this dimension of their identity.

The Performance. As they responded to questions regarding their roles and responsibilities as students in the university setting, the evangelical Christian students in this study expressed a desire to reveal their religious identity by doing their best in their academic work and by choosing to write papers on topics related to their religion when given the opportunity to do so. Moreover, they discussed the responsibility to engage in ministry on campus as a way of demonstrating their religious beliefs to God as well as to other students. The evangelical Christian students in this study felt that expressing their religious identity in these ways was critical due to the perception held by most of the respondents that other students were watching them as a result of knowing that they self-identify as evangelical Christians.

In Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach to impression management, the foremost principle is that of the performance. In this context, the act of performing is not to imply acting superficially or hypocritically; rather, it implies a subconscious attempt to be true to one's sense of self while presenting an idealized public image. The evangelical Christian students in this study appeared to be performing in light of their beliefs about their own identity and how they wanted other students to see them; they revealed their religious identity by attempting to be good students and by engaging in ministry activities. Moreover, they recognized the potential of disrupting the performance (e.g., by putting forth little effort in their academic work), which would also disrupt the boundaries between their sincere Christianity and the perception of Christianity that they believe to be held by others in society-at-large. In effect, they needed to present an idealized public image; otherwise, they would disrupt their performance.

Identity Authentication

As mentioned above, the evangelical Christians students in this study often mentioned the perception that their peers were watching them to see if their academic effort, in particular, reflected the religious identity that they claimed to espouse. One reason why the students in this study may have felt as though other students were observing them could be due to feelings of marginality. According to Schlossberg (1989), feelings of self-consciousness often result from feelings of marginality—of not fitting in with a certain group. In an earlier article, my colleagues and I shared how these students perceived their religious identity as being incongruent with the culture of the public university in which they were immersed and felt marginalized, to a certain extent, within their respective public university environments (Moran et al., 2007). This perception of marginality may have resulted in a high level of self-consciousness that precipitated their feelings of being watched by other students.

Bosson et al. (2005) suggested that a fear of being misclassified may result in a heightened sensitivity to others' evaluation of the self and that this fear is especially relevant to individuals with invisible social identities. An increased sensitivity such as this likely could result in a perception of being observed. Though a specific fear of misclassification was not mentioned by any of the evangelical Christian students in this study, the data presented in this study do suggest a strong desire to be correctly classified as authentic Christians. This was demonstrated by the efforts undertaken by these students to differentiate their identity. However, future research is needed to determine if, and to what extent, evangelical Christian students experience such a fear on public university campuses.

Regardless of the reason, it seems that the evangelical Christian students in this study felt a burden of proof to represent the authenticity of the religious identity that they claimed to espouse—to prove that they were who they said they were. These students appeared to be engaging in an aspect of public identity work that was distinct from, yet related to, the revelation of their public identity as evangelical Christians. I refer to this process as "identity authentication" and conceptualize it as the ongoing process by which the evangelical Christian students in this study attempted to establish the authenticity of the religious identity that they were revealing. Before they could prove the authenticity of their religious identity, the students in this study needed to reveal what they believe to be authentic Christianity. Only when others know what is supposedly "the real deal" (i.e., authentic Christianity) can they authenticate something or someone else. The students in this study spoke as if this burden of proof was ongoing. In this regard, they gave no indication that they would ever reach a point when their religious identity would finally be viewed by others as authentic such that there would be no need to engage in a process of proving that they were who they claimed to be in terms of their religious identity. This identity authentication process appears to be a significant part of the ongoing public identity work of these evangelical Christian students.

This burden of proof concerning the need to establish the authenticity of an invisible dimension of identity seems strikingly similar to that carried by students with various hidden disabilities, such as learning disabilities. As a result of the unbelief and/or skepticism of others (N. E. Foley, 2006; Kravets, 2006), students with hidden disabilities often must prove that they are truly disabled in addition to self-disclosing and communicating the nature of their disability to others on campus.

Frequently, evidence to establish the authenticity of the disability is presented via official documentation after intensive testing. Even then, there appears to be an underlying concern that this documentation is "bought" for the purposes of accommodation rather than being viable, authenticating evidence (Kravets, p. 24). So, students with hidden disabilities may also be faced with an identity authentication process of their own, similar to that of evangelical Christian students. Does either group ever reach a point at which they feel as though their invisible identity has truly been authenticated? The extent to which the public identity work of students with hidden disabilities, as well as that of other students with invisible social identities, is similar to the identity revelation and identity authentication processes in which the evangelical Christian students in this study engaged, however, remains a topic for further investigation.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations of this research include the fact that other dimensions of social identity were not investigated in combination with religious identity. It is likely that the racial or ethnic identity of students, for instance, may impact how these students attempted to authenticate their identity as evangelical Christian university students or whether the identity authentication process even applied to them. Also, though generalization is not a goal of qualitative research, including respondents from more than two public universities in the Midwest may have also strengthened the study.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In spite of the limitations mentioned above, useful implications and directions for future research exist. First of all, higher education administrators and faculty members should be aware of the nature of the public identity work

in which evangelical Christian students appear to be engaged. Only through awareness can professionals in higher education support these students as they attempt to reveal and to authenticate a public identity. McEwen (2003) aptly summed up the importance of this awareness by stating:

> Along with the privilege of working with college students go our responsibilities . . . to understand the complexities of college students' social identities and how these identities are differentially meaningful to students and in what contexts. (p. 228)

Furthermore, Nash (2001) stated that

> American universities ought to enlarge their understanding of pluralism to include open, challenging, spiritually and educationally revitalizing conversations about genuine religious difference. (p. 4)

He went on to suggest that "unbounded religious dialogue" be encouraged on campus, meaning that we "do not ask adherents of the various religious and nonreligious narratives to bracket their own strong beliefs" (p. 75). Such dialogue could even occur in classroom settings when issues of identity are being discussed as well as in out-of-the-class environments. Opportunities such as this may serve to enable evangelical Christian students to reveal their public identity and to lay the foundation for further authentication.

Research suggests that individuals may feel shame, depression, and personal devaluation if they experience misclassification as a result of failing to live up to a cherished self standard or group standard (Blanton & Christie, 2003). In the process of attempting to authenticate their public identity as evangelical Christians, the possibility exists that these students may believe, at times, that they have failed in this regard. Students need to know that safe places exist to make meaning of and to learn to cope with such experiences as they arise. Student

affairs administrators and faculty members should be knowledgeable of various campus resources (e.g., counseling centers, campus ministry organizations) wherein this type of support is provided so that students can be appropriately referred to these resources as needed.

Moreover, there might be a need to reframe our thinking about how and why evangelical Christian students work so hard to express their religious identity on public university campuses. Rather than focusing on the proselytizing motive held by many of these students, higher education professionals should be mindful that these activities are part of the public identity work of these students. The freedom of religious expression granted to students may actually serve to help them reveal and authenticate their religious identity. Additionally, faculty and staff could provide occasional positive feedback to these students in which they acknowledge explicit efforts to do well in their classes and/or to engage in campus ministry. Such acknowledgements may provide a further impetus for the public identity work of these students.

Numerous opportunities for future research exist beyond those already mentioned. For instance, how do students who are not evangelical Christians describe the evangelical Christian religious identity? To what extent do students who are not evangelical Christians actually watch evangelical Christian students with the intent of determining whether or not they are authentic in their religious identity? To what extent do evangelical Christian students experience stress as a result of this ongoing authentication process? Does their academic work end up suffering as a result? How does this identity authentication process relate to the individual development of an evangelical Christian religious identity? Do students representing other religious identities experience a similar type of identity authenti-

cation process on public university campuses?

It was been well documented that increasing numbers of students are practicing their religious beliefs and attempting to openly express their religious identities at various types of higher education institutions (e.g., Kuh & Gonyea, 2005). As mentioned earlier, evangelical Christianity has become increasingly more salient as the number of groups on public university campuses steadily increases. We should continue to investigate the religious identity of these students, as well as the identity of students of other religious traditions, in an effort to better meet their needs and to facilitate their growth and development during college.

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