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Accommodations for Nonbinary Youth in Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts

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Accommodations for Nonbinary Youth in Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts

By Karen Brandt

Advisor: Korina Ramsland-Short

Date: 20 February 2022

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the requirements for the University Honors Scholar designation
at Johnson & Wales University

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Abstract

Objective: To understand what the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) and Girl Scouts of the United States of America (GSUSA) are doing to accommodate nonbinary youth in their organizations.

Method: Qualitative interviews with scouting management and nonbinary alumni and a discourse analysis on key scouting documents. **Findings:** Both organizations were open to nonbinary youth, but enthusiasm in welcoming them varied both between the organizations and across the country within each group. Girl Scouts self-classified as progressive while Boy Scouts did not; a nonbinary alumnus of Girl Scouts did not feel strongly about either organization.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the need for more research in this topic. It also suggests that Girl Scouts may need to come together as an organization to reach a unified decision about nonbinary policies for consistency across the country. Boy Scouts may need to unify in a different way, with an attempt to make the results from their new merit badge more consistent nationwide.

Key Words: Nonbinary, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Alumnae, Leaders

Introduction

Growing up, I considered my family relatively normal. I grew up with both my parents and four siblings (two of whom are twins), and my mom homeschooled all of us. We moved more than the average family would in my opinion (four times in twenty years), but we were all pretty actively involved in scouts and other youth programs, so we had some sense of consistency. Like all kids, we played, fought, and competed with each other.

Within the past three years, three of my siblings (60% of the kids) have come out as being part of the LGBTQ+¹ community. Some did not really surprise me (I had actually thought to myself on multiple occasions before she came out that if anyone was going to be gay, it would be my lesbian sister), some were mentioned as an afterthought (my bisexual sister nonchalantly mentioned it in passing on a video chat), and one I did not really know much about or expect – my nonbinary² sibling.

I am not ashamed to admit that one of the first things I did after finding out about my nonbinary sibling was look up what it meant. Unfortunately, the internet was no help - saying nonbinary means something different to everyone and to specifically ask the nonbinary person what it means to them. I did not want to do that. I wanted to learn about it without asking them so I could fully understand without needing to have that awkward conversation.

Awhile after my nonbinary sibling (they/them pronouns) came out, I saw them in pictures of a Girl Scout meeting. My mom had said they did not want to renew their Girl Scout membership, so I was confused. The membership lasts until late September, but I figured they would not go to any more meetings or events if they did not want to continue with the program at

¹ See Terminology in Appendix C

² See Terminology in Appendix C

all. That led me to wonder if they would have been **allowed** to continue in Girl Scouts, had they wanted to.

That is where my idea for this research project came from. Having personally grown up very active in Girl Scouts (with a pretty big Boy Scout presence in our house, too), I knew about the issues Boy Scouts has had regarding homosexual scouts and leaders. I also knew that Girl Scouts started out pretty progressively and has not had as much negative attention as Boy Scouts has. There has not been much talk in either organization about nonbinary people though, so I hope to **start** the conversation about it.

Literature Review

There has been controversy surrounding Boy Scouts and sexual orientation, but not much discussion on nonbinary people. No discussion, actually - there was neither research nor any articles regarding nonbinary people and either scouting organization. Therefore, this research is necessary because no one has done it before in any kind of capacity. Even searching with multiple spellings of *nonbinary* and similar terms such as *gender fluid* and *gender nonconforming* did not yield any more results. When the search results branched out to include other parts of the LGBTQ+ community, a little more research was uncovered. There was not anything for homosexuality in Girl Scouts. In general, there was actually much less on Girl Scouts than Boy Scouts - maybe because within the last twenty years, they have flown under the radar compared to Boy Scouts.

The only actual research article found was written by Kathleen Denny. She explored the differences in gender messages of the Girl Scout and Boy Scout Handbooks. To find these messages, she looked at the activities in the books in three ways: context, content, and approach. To rephrase, she looked at who the activities were supposed to be done with (alone or in groups),

the types of activities and badges offered to each gender (science and art), and the attitude scouts were expected to have approaching the activities. She found that girls were given much more group-oriented badgework than boys were, following stereotypical messages of girls being more social and boys being more independent (Denny 35).

For the content of the badges, she found that boys had significantly more science-related badges while girls had more art-related badges (Denny 36). Boys' badges were also plainer in titling and were more career-oriented, such as Geologist, Mechanic, and Astronomer. Girls' badges, on the other hand, were much more likely to have fun, playful, literary names like Rocks Rock, Car Care, and Sky Search. Finally, for content, girls had badges about stereotypical female activities such as sewing and childcare in addition to more modern ones about leadership and business. Boys did not have badges regarding sewing³ or childcare. For approach, Denny found that the girls' book tended to have an attitude of attempting while the boys' had an attitude of completing – no trying, just doing. One place these books strayed from gender norms was in the critical thinking and autonomy. The girls' books were much more likely to foster these qualities, while the boys' book gave them all of the information necessary to form a decision. Overall, Denny found that Girl Scout books had a mix of traditional and more modern messages. Boy Scout books seemed to facilitate an almost militaristic type of boy – one that is reliant on someone else for information (Denny 41-42).

Scouting for Miseducation, a peer-reviewed article about Boy Scouts, challenged how boys are educated about masculinity (Meinhart 213). Joseph Meinhart, the author, used Boy Scout texts as his main source because, in 2009, when this was written, Boy Scouts was the only organization to be “chartered by the U. S. Congress to educate boys for manhood” (Meinhart

³ While there are no merit badges involving sewing, Scouts are encouraged to sew awards (like merit badges, rank advancements, and other patches) onto their uniforms.

213). The first topic he brought up was wording - specifically *scouting*. The founder of Boy Scouts, Lord Baden Powell, specifically chose this word for its impression: that of adventuring and learning and gathering information. Information that could be used to make decisions about future choices. Meinhart also brought up BSA's history with sexuality (Meinhart 215). He asked questions about whether masculinity had changed through editions of Boy Scout books and if the opportunities offered were open-minded. He also mentioned that sexuality was found in a chapter on health in earlier Boy Scout handbooks and had more recently moved to a different chapter about becoming a man. He then pointed out that the current handbook's section on sexuality now has overt religious tones, which Lord Baden Powell considered "dangerous and outside the concern of scouting" (Meinhart 215). Potentially, Meinhart's most emphatic point was that Boy Scouts encourages boys to learn about different cultures, just not anything about sexual orientation (Meinhart 215).

There were more articles than just the few above, but, as this is a very polarizing issue, most of them were fraught with bias. More religious people tended to agree with Boy Scout's initial decision to exclude gay people from scouting, and gay people who were in scouting or wanted to be, obviously did not agree with the decision.

History of Scouting

Boy Scouts

In 1908, Robert Baden-Powell started Boy Scouts in Great Britain (Boy Scouts). Previously, the cavalry officer had written a book, *Scouting for Boys*, filled with information and techniques he had used to train his officers. This book became the guide for British Boy Scouts, but how did Boy Scouts come to America? According to the eleventh edition of BSA's Boy

Scout Handbook, Boy Scouting was brought to America when a British Boy Scout helped the lost American William Boyce (Boy Scouts of America, *The Boy Scout Handbook* 431). Boyce was so impressed by the scout's refusal of money for his good turn that he sought out Baden-Powell and brought his Boy Scout ideals back over to the States for American boys.

Based in its military founding, Boy Scouts included a multitude of outdoor activities like learning knots, practicing first aid, and tracking. Over time, merit badges reflected changes in American culture with cooking, entrepreneurship, journalism, music, woodwork, finance, citizenship, and more.

As Boy Scouts grew in popularity, the program itself grew, too. The original intent was a program for boys aged eleven to about fifteen, but new programs were developed in America for both younger and older boys. Eventually, young women aged fourteen to twenty were allowed to join some of the programming for older boys, and, as time passed, girls were allowed into Boy Scouts at younger and younger levels. As courteous as Boy Scouts has been to include girls in programming as early as 1969, they have not always been so inclusive with other groups of people (Boy Scouts of America, *History*). Up until 2014, homosexuality was banned in Boy Scouts – no participation opportunities for boys or volunteer opportunities for adults. Someone who had dedicated their whole life to Boy Scouts could be thrown out simply because they loved someone of the same gender. Eagle Scouts⁴ could have their prestigious rank stripped if they were found out, and scoutmasters could be banned from meetings. To anyone unfamiliar with Boy Scouts, this may not seem like a big deal, but the BSA had been fighting lawsuits from disgruntled would-be scouts, parents, and volunteers since the late 20th century (Donohue 59-60;

⁴ See Terminology in Appendix C

Pynes 53). So, fourteen years in the making, the decision was finally overturned in 2013 and 2015 for gay youth and leaders, respectively (Zaveri).

Girl Scouts

Juliette Gordon Low, a socialite from Savannah, Georgia, started Girl Scouts in America after learning about family friend Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts. Low, nicknamed Daisy, was always more of a tomboy and wanted to start a program for girls like her who liked to be more active and not quite so ladylike (Girl Scouts of the United States of America, Brownie Girl Scout Handbook 10). Girl Scout's first handbook was much more varied than Boy Scouts', including the expected housekeeping and cooking right along with the less expected "how to stop a runaway horse and how to tie up a burglar with eight inches of cord" (Girl Scouts of the United States of America, Brownie Girl Scout Handbook 10).

Even though Girl Scouts was based on Boy Scouts – which was, in turn, based on the military – the style and approach was not at all militaristic. Girl Scouts, from the beginning, was pretty progressive. In addition to teaching girls what they were "supposed" to learn about – cooking, sewing, entertaining guests – they also learned about more active, "boy" activities, like playing basketball and going camping. Of course, badges and activities kept up with the times, just like Boy Scouts. Now there are badges on everything, from finance to photography to science.

Comparison

In some ways, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts are very similar because one was based on the other, but in other ways they are very different from each other. First is the obvious military influence in Boy Scouts that is almost completely absent in Girl Scouts. Boy Scout troops are divided into smaller patrols of boys to help them learn leadership skills, organization, and scout

skills from older scouts. Their advancement levels (Tenderfoot, First Class, and so forth until Eagle) are called ranks, just like the military. In her study, Denny points out that the boys' handbook, compared to the girls', provides more information in itself, which limits "opportunities for critical and autonomous thinking. ... [therefore] foster[ing] intellectual dependency and passivity," (Denny 38-39).

All organizations have their founding principles and core values; Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts are no exception. They both have laws and a shorter oath/promise. Figure 1 through figure 4 show the Girl Scout Promise and Law and the Boy Scout Law and Oath. These are

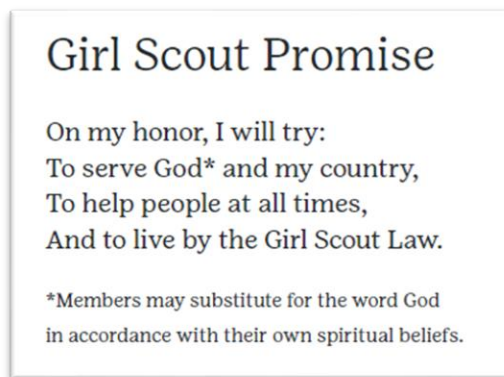


Figure 1: Girl Scout Promise (Girl Scouts of the United States of America, Promise and Law)

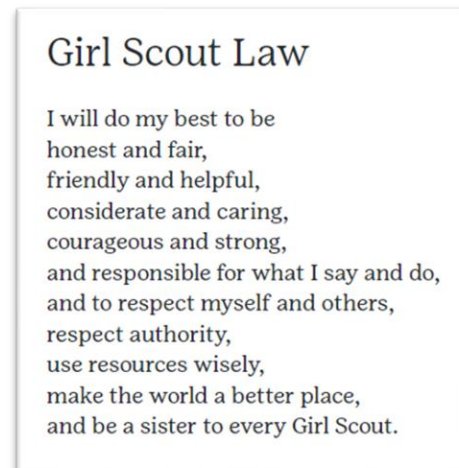


Figure 2: Girl Scout Law (Girl Scouts of the United States of America, Promise and Law)



Figure 3: Boy Scout Law (Boy Scouts of America, The Foundation of Scouting)



Figure 4: Boy Scout Oath (Boy Scouts of America, The Foundation of Scouting)

pretty similar; almost everything in one matches up to the corresponding document in the other. The major difference to note here is the strictness in regard to the religious aspects. The Girl Scouts have only one reference to God, while the Boy Scouts have an arguable three. At the bottom of the Girl Scout Promise (figure 1), is an asterisk about the reference to God. Girl Scouts includes a note that members are allowed to substitute “God” with other word(s) that are in line with their religion or beliefs. Boy Scouts have no note with their Oath or Law and nothing readily apparent or easily discoverable on their website or in the newest edition of the handbook regarding word substitution. Boy Scouts also allows religious awards on the uniform but did not recognize Unitarian Universalist (UU) awards until 2016 (Unitarian Universalist Association). Unitarian Universalists were critical of Boy Scouts’ original stance on homosexual scouts, so the Boy Scouts cut ties with them, not recognizing them as a religion anymore, until 2016.

Methodology

The plan is to interview Boy Scouts of America (BSA) and Girl Scouts of the United States of America (GSUSA) at the national level in their headquarters and in lower levels at the council (state) level. I will also interview at least one nonbinary alumni of scouting to get the point of view from someone who participated in one of the organizations. Last but not least, there will also be a section of discourse analysis on certain terms used by the Boy Scouts and/or the Girl Scouts: *transgender* in a section of the official GSUSA website, then *morally straight*, *mentally awake*, and *reverent* as part of the Boy Scout Oath and Law, found on their official website and memorized by each scout.

Recruitment Plan

1. I will email the national headquarters of both organizations and both Boy Scout and Girl Scout councils in the following areas to ask them for interviews. See Appendix B for email drafts.

- Burlington, VT
- Boston, MA
- New York City, NY
- Philadelphia, PA
- Charlotte, NC
- Jacksonville, FL
- Columbus, OH
- Chicago, IL
- Houston, TX
- Los Angeles, CA
- San Francisco, CA
- Portland, OR

2. I will also email some nonbinary alumni and ask them for interviews. See Appendix B for email drafts.
3. I will wait seven days from the date the emails were sent out for a response.
4. After a week, I will send a follow-up email to anyone who has not responded. See Appendix B for email drafts.

Administration Plan

1. If anyone declines to participate, I will thank them for their time and for responding. See Appendix B for email drafts.
2. For people who respond positively, I will email them back to set up the interview – the date, time, and type of interview (email, phone, or video). I will also send over the consent form so they can read it before the interview.

3. Once the interviewees decide the type of interview they would like, I will let them know the additional consent form information they need based on the type they selected. If the interview will be through email, I will let them know that I will need the signed consent form back before I send them the questions. If it is a phone or video interview, we will discuss the consent form at the very beginning of the interview, and they will give verbal consent to the form. See Appendix B for email drafts.
4. If too many people for me to be able to interview respond, I will courteously let those who got back to me later know that I have already received all the responses I have time for. See Appendix B for email drafts.
5. I will then conduct all interviews. See Appendix A for the lists of interview questions.

Data Plan

1. I will collect and compile all of the responses from all of the completed interviews.
2. Any interviews that were not transcribed while the interview took place will be transcribed using Otter.ai.
3. Ideally, the minimum number of responses will be four within the scouting organizations, two from each, and the most I think I could handle would be eight interviews in the scout realm.
4. I will look over and highlight any important or repeating information.
5. I will gather all of the comments about the three discourse analysis terms together and look at all of those as a whole.
6. If any participants comment on, or I am able to see any reasoning behind, decisions made by Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts, I will collect those together in a grouping as well.

Findings

Pre-Interview Thoughts

Before any of the interviews were even conducted, a few things about the responses stood out. In addition to the national headquarters of both organizations, twelve Boy Scout councils and twelve Girl Scout councils in the same geographic areas were emailed. Neither organization at the national level ended up actually interviewing; one never responded to the email request, and the other said that they could not provide an interview.

Of the twelve councils of each organization, seven Girl Scout councils and two Boy Scout councils responded. Of those responses, four Girl Scout councils initially agreed to interviews and one Boy Scout council was open to an interview. Of the Girl Scout councils

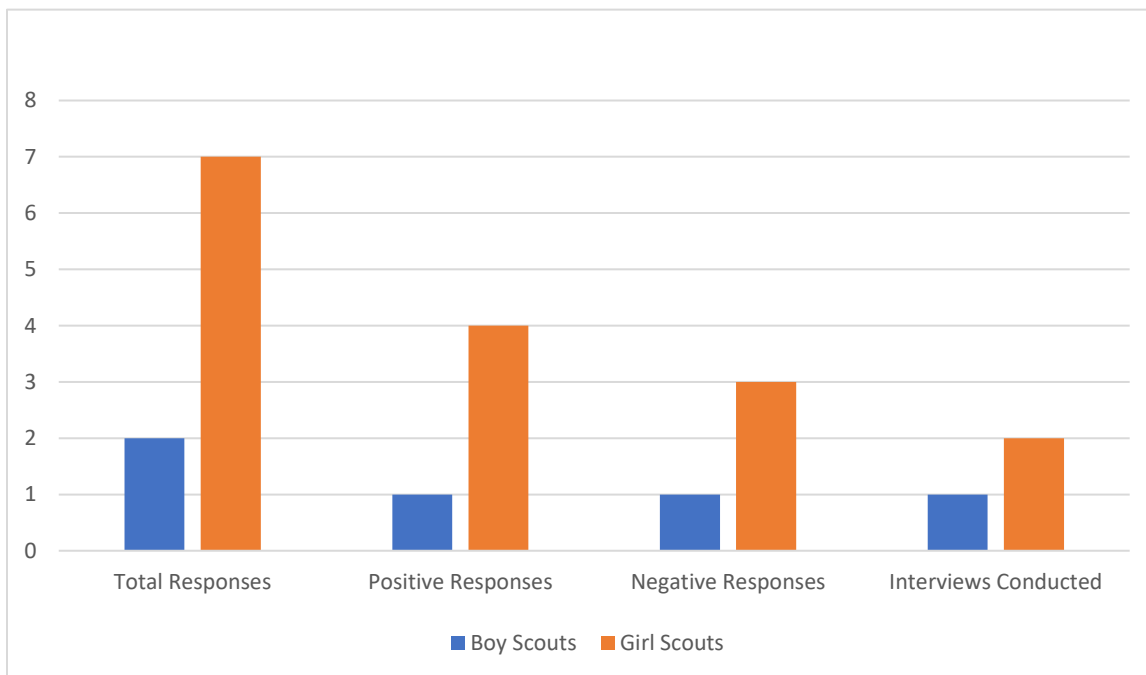


Figure 5: Interview Statistics

willing to interview, only two ended up interviewing. For a full breakdown of the interviews, please refer to figure 5 above.

One Girl Scout CEO had some personal troubles and was not able to interview and the other council decided not to continue with the interview after seeing the list of questions. The reasoning this council gave for not continuing was that the questions pertained to Girl Scouts at the national level, so that council's CEO would not be the correct person to interview. Some of the questions included asking the council CEO how they interpreted some national policies, or about their council's feelings on some official national policies or statements, but some questions were also specific to the council. See Appendix A for interview questions. A follow-up email pointed this out, but that council never responded. The other CEOs interviewed did not have any qualms about answering any questions, but if any of them had been uncomfortable with a question, it would have been noted and skipped over, as noted in the consent form.

Another response that needs a little explanation is the single negative Boy Scout council response. It is classified as negative because it did not lead to an interview, but in reality, the CEO did not mention the interview at all in his response. Instead, he gave a little bit of information – a general response of how they place nonbinary youth in troops and have added some gender-nonspecific bathrooms – but that was it.

Going back to a more general overview of the interviews, Boy Scouts in general seemed a little easier to contact, although they had a track record of responding less. Of the thirteen Boy Scout emails sent, only one council had a “Contact Us” form. For Girl Scouts, on the other hand, there were seven “Contact Us” forms – including the national headquarters (see figure 6 below).

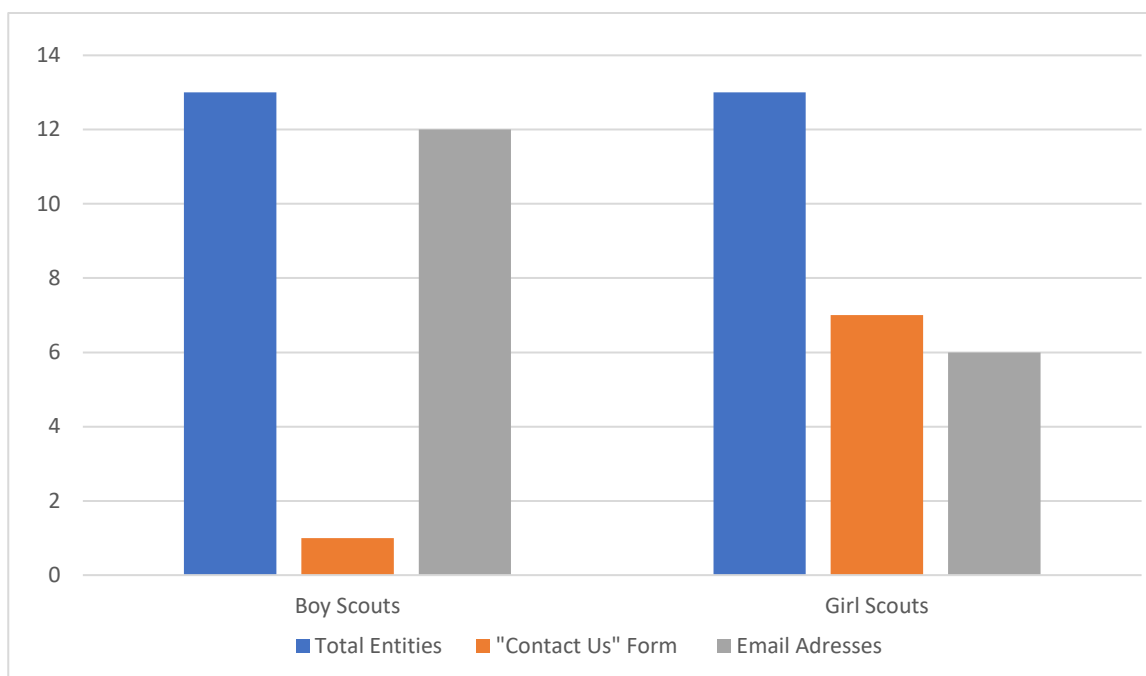


Figure 6: Email Addresses Vs. "Contact Us" Forms

Boy Scouts also had a generally faster response time; a couple of Girl Scout councils were particularly slow. One took fourteen days to deny the request, although she did send two emails during that time to say they were still processing the request. To compare, both Boy Scout councils responded to the weekly follow-up email the same day it was sent out. See Appendix B for email drafts.

Lastly, the Girl Scout councils had a tendency to point out that Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts are separate organizations. The initial emails to both organizations included a personal introduction indicating I was in Girl Scouts for thirteen years as a youth, earned the Gold Award⁵, and became a lifetime member right after high school – so I am fully aware that Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts are not affiliated with each other. Because that background was given in the emails, maybe the councils who mentioned it skimmed the email more, rather than fully reading it. The email could also have been phrased in a confusing way, but if that were the case,

⁵ See Terminology in Appendix C

one would have expected more than two of nine people to point this out. Possibly one of the reasons Girl Scouts felt the need to clarify that they are not Boy Scouts is that Boy Scouts now accepts girls, so, to the uninitiated, there is less of a difference between them. It makes sense that Girl Scouts would care more about separating themselves from Boy Scouts since both of them accept girls now.

Please also note that some of these points – particularly the later ones – may only be true based on how few responses there were. If someone were to try again, results and nuances noticed will most likely vary.

Interviews

Girl Scouts

Interview 1

The first Girl Scout interview was with a CEO in the southern part of the United States. She has been CEO of her council for about seven months but is a former participant herself. It is her opinion that “the Girl Scouts is a progressive organization to the extent that they can be ... being an organization that is over one hundred years old. There’s a lot of tradition that goes along with that.” She said, in regards to Girl Scouts being accepting of nonbinary youth, that they do not really ask “those questions”; nonbinary children are welcome. “I think barring young people from being able to participate in activities that are going to strengthen their character, their confidence, and ability to positively impact their community – I think that’s a detriment to all of us.” The next question was about nonbinary youth being officially included in Girl Scouts; she said the national headquarters would be making those decisions. Her council did not have anything specific like policies, meetings, or training that they held regarding nonbinary youth, probably because, “I don't know what steps that, as a whole, we could do beyond what we're

doing now, which is to provide a safe space and a supportive environment for young people to develop in a positive manner” (Anonymous, Personal communication with Girl Scout Council 1.)

Interview 2

The second Girl Scout interviewee is a lifelong Girl Scout; she started in the program at seven, following it all the way through to earn her Gold Award. After that, she was not actively involved again until her oldest daughter turned five, when she volunteered in her daughter’s troop. Over time, she became more involved as a volunteer, until she eventually left her career to work for the organization. She has been a Girl Scout employee for seven years and CEO of her council for five years (Anonymous, Personal communication with Girl Scout Council 2.).

“I always have felt that it [Girl Scouts] has the actual power to be very progressive. Here in [my state] and under my leadership, I focus on making sure that it is focused in a progressive manner.” In her council, Girl Scouts is very accepting of LGBTQ+ youth; they focus specifically on ensuring that girls or anyone “from a marginalized gender” feels welcome in Girl Scouts in their council (Anonymous, Personal communication with Girl Scout Council 2.). They have a special program focus on LGBTQ+ youth and currently serve some nonbinary youth as well.

“We have conversations to have as an organization overall – both at the national level, but very specifically at each council level.” She feels they need to define much more specifically who they are catering to. “I feel that it [Girl Scouts] should be the place ... for anyone who’s not ... cis[gender]⁶ male” (Anonymous, Personal communication with Girl Scout Council 2.). She thinks that barring nonbinary youth from Girl Scouts goes against Girl Scout values.

⁶ See Terminology in Appendix C

Currently, they have specific training for all of their volunteers. For most youth, volunteers are the first point of contact, so volunteers may be the first Girl Scout person an LGBTQ+ child could come out to. It is very important to this council that volunteers are trained to handle situations like that according to Girl Scout values; in fact, “if volunteers personally do not support, we hug and release. You know, to be part of our organization here, we need that [a welcoming, supportive environment] to be what they’re coming into. ... we need to have that represented throughout our volunteers.” All of their camp policies surrounding nonbinary youth are very clear, and safety, along with comfort, are top priorities. For youth who identify openly, they hold some special programming and open community discussions so that youth “are able to come in and talk about it from peer to peer, and to figure out their own ways, whether it’s the Silver Award or Gold Award, to spread those conversations, and open up those conversations around the city” (Anonymous, Personal communication with Girl Scout Council 2.). Lastly, they have a dedicated diversity, equity, inclusion, and antiracism director.

As part of their inclusivity and diversity efforts, they are working together with the other councils in their state on a full statement “to make sure that we are aligned in openly welcoming nonbinary [youth] ... it’s not public ... we don’t advertise for it ... and we need to be more proactive, to be more welcoming, for those who don’t know whether they are welcome or not. And, so I think we need to take a much more active role” (Anonymous, Personal communication with Girl Scout Council 2.).

In addition to this statement, they are also “assessing all of [their] language, to make sure that it is inclusive,” including changing pronouns on all of their public materials, such as their website. “It is a process – I wish it could happen quicker, because I think that the need ... is there, but ... I will say that we are moving quite actively on that.” Their staff is leading by

example – all employees include their pronouns in email signatures. The CEO then gave another example of pronoun use – this one by youth.

I was with a group of girls who were presenting their Silver Award project to me that they've been working on during COVID. ... they created a YouTube channel, and they do a little, like, introduction ... Each one of them starts their introduction with their pronouns first, and it was this beautiful palette of pronouns. And I was just like, this is a perfect example like, for when ... I take these conversations to board level or to other councils or other communities to say, like, "This isn't me saying this, right? Like, this is the voice of the youth and the young people that we serve, of how they identify and it's – it's their choice." And then ... it's our choice to become welcoming to that or not, so it's refreshing to see that we are being responsive to it and changing as quickly as an old nonprofit can. (Anonymous, Personal communication with Girl Scout Council 2.)

Obviously, this council is doing a lot to try to accommodate nonbinary youth, but the CEO feels like the national headquarters can do more than they currently are. What does she think they can do? "Policy, policy, policy. Big, loud, bold statements." There are recommendations or best practices but no official policies. She compared Girl Scouts with other organizations, like Girls Inc, "who also successfully has been able to keep girls in their title, and in their brands, but be much more forward facing about how and who they serve. They have a strong national policy. If you don't agree with it? Okay ... there's so many options, right?" (Anonymous, Personal communication with Girl Scout Council 2.).

But because of our core values, instead of National saying it's up to you as a council, like, depending on your area, because there's still this assumption that in certain areas, it's more prevalent ... I actually was at a leadership conference a few months ago, where

I sat at a table with a board chair from a more southern state and they said, ‘Well, we don’t have that problem in our council.’ And I’m like, ‘First of all – problem, number one,’ right? And ... I would love to see the data that shows that and clearly, then, you’re not creating an environment for young people to feel comfortable and be open about who they are and identify. So **that’s** the problem. ... in order for a federated model like ours to have that consistency, and draw the line, there needs to be an actual policy statement from GSUSA. Otherwise, it is inconsistent. (Anonymous, Personal communication with Girl Scout Council 2.)

To summarize, the Girl Scout councils that were interviewed both classified their organization as progressive. They both admitted that, because it is so old, traditions could sometimes hinder progressive movement, but they had a great power for progression. One council, with no extra inclusion-specific programs, thought that Girl Scouts is a welcoming place for nonbinary individuals as-is. The other council had quite a few programs and accommodations but felt the truly important policy changes needed to come from the national headquarters.

Boy Scouts

The Boy Scout CEO interviewee has been in Boy Scouts for a long time. He started in the program himself at eight years old and has continued helping out pretty much since, except for a short stint in graduate school. He is in a bit of a special position, as he was a volunteer who stepped up to be the interim CEO for his council; he had been a volunteer for a long time prior (Anonymous, Personal communication with Boy Scout Council.).

His answer to the first question – Would you say that Boy Scouts is a progressive organization? – was very surprising. “No, I would not. We’re not cutting-edge on most social

issues” (Anonymous, Personal communication with Boy Scout Council.). Such raw honesty was not expected, but having to balance views from all over the country requires compromise.

After that, he talked a little about the history of Boy Scouts – how they “were late to come around to” allowing gay youth and volunteers, but, as he pointed out, “accepting is a different word than allowed to join, right?” For transgender⁷ and nonbinary youth, kids are not just stuck in any troop or pack. “[A] home for them within scouting [is found] that was accepting of their ... situation. ... Not all units are able to work with kids that have ... unique situations, so matching them up with the right troop or pack is also important.” To prepare for the interview, he reached out to the head of diversity to ask for official nonbinary policies. “What a surprise – maybe I shouldn’t be surprised; they sent me the transgender policies. I said, ‘No, that’s not what I’m asking for.’ And I do believe they understand the difference” (Anonymous, Personal communication with Boy Scout Council.). He thought that the national headquarters had learned their lesson with the ban on gay youth and that they were quicker with related issues now.

One of the reasons the battle regarding whether or not to allow gay youth and leaders was so long and hard was that “Most of our scouting units are sponsored by religious organizations. And so ... [each] has their own view ... sexual identity is a thorny topic for them” (Anonymous, Personal communication with Boy Scout Council.).

While the Boy Scouts do accept girls now, the organization really is not co-ed, like one might think, until participants are about fifteen years old. Cub Scouts and Scouts BSA⁸, which includes children from six to seventeen years old, both allow girls, but in troops separate from the boys. Boy Scouts’ programs aimed at fourteen- to twenty-year-olds are fully co-ed, with girls

⁷ See Terminology in Appendix C

⁸ See Terminology in Appendix C

and boys in the same troops (Boy Scouts of America, Scouting Programs). The earlier years in Boy Scouts, then, can present a problem for placing nonbinary youth; if a child identifies with no gender, which troop do you put them in? A girl troop or a boy troop? If a child is genderfluid, do you let a girl walk into a boy troop or a boy walk into a girl troop every so often? The CEO said, “I don’t think that’s so much a problem for us, but it might be a challenge for the young person” (Anonymous, Personal communication with Boy Scout Council.).

When asked what he thought about nonbinary youth being officially included in Boy Scouts – such as with pronoun acknowledgement in policies and official handbooks – the CEO did not seem too hopeful for the future. “Would [we] adopt all of the policies, like you say, and pronouns where progressive institutions would? That would surprise me; I don’t think we will be early in going there” (Anonymous, Personal communication with Boy Scout Council.). He mentioned again that some people would push back against a change like that, while others would welcome it.

One of the last portions of the interview was asking about some terms used in the Boy Scout Oath and Law. First, one that has come up a lot in arguments about the ban on gay people, is the phrase *morally straight* from the oath.

Well, ... I think that *morally straight* was part of ... the hang up ... going back to the issue of getting gay scouts. ... [T]he religious connections that many of our ... volunteers have, that’s where ... the issue of sexual orientation, in their minds, is a moral issue ... [and a] false idea that it’s a lifestyle choice, as opposed to something you’re born with ... and so ... we’ve got to bring those folks along in a way that is acceptable for them. (Anonymous, Personal communication with Boy Scout Council.)

He went on to say that those people may also “think nonbinary is actually sort of ... exploration ... being done by ... young people and don’t, I’m guessing, don’t believe that it’s real.” He ended with this: “So, I mean, different people have different interpretations, but ... this definitely gets caught up in that why. Why ... anything sexual, gets pulled into that. ... So yes, that is definitely ... a complicating factor and one where interpretation is left ... in the eye of the interpreter, shall we say?” (Anonymous, Personal communication with Boy Scout Council.).

The last question was whether he thought it was un-scoutlike to discriminate against nonbinary youth. He said he did think that was un-scoutlike behavior and mentioned a brand-new merit badge, Citizenship in Society.

So when there's been objections with that new diversity merit badge I mentioned ... We're not teaching you anything. It's simply emphasizing friendly, courteous, and kind, right? That ... any young person, whether they're in Scouting or not, that's ... the way a scout should behave towards that person. So, excluding somebody is not, sort of, in line with the Scout Oath and Law. That's really what that merit badge is all about, as opposed to trying to make some political statement. (Anonymous, Personal communication with Boy Scout Council.)

This new diversity-centric merit badge, the first new badge to the program since 2017, was officially introduced on November 1, 2021, almost four months ago at the time of this writing (Introducing Citizenship in Society, the BSA's newest merit badge). This merit badge was developed in the wake of George Floyd’s death; this July, it will become an Eagle-required merit badge (Anonymous, Personal communication with Boy Scout Council.). While all merit badges differ in the difficulty and time necessary to complete, Eagle-required merit badges are generally considered harder badges to earn and require scouts and leaders to be more meticulous

and thorough. According to the Fact Sheet for this merit badge, it will be Eagle-required because “we believe that learning to respect and understand people with different identities and perspectives is foundational to becoming a good leader.” It also says, “The Eagle Scout Rank ... embodies a commitment to leadership and service” making sense of the Eagle requirement (Boy Scouts of America, Citizenship in Society Merit Badge Fact Sheet). Like the new Citizenship in Society merit badge, all of the Eagle-required merit badges (see figure 7) incorporate basic life or scouting skills.

Eagle-Required Merit Badges	
Camping	Emergency Preparedness OR Lifesaving
Citizenship in the Community	Environmental Science OR Sustainability
Citizenship in the Nation	Family Life
Citizenship in the World	First Aid
Communication	Personal Fitness
Cooking	Personal Management
Cycling OR Hiking OR Swimming	

Figure 7: Eagle-Required Merit Badges

One of the more interesting points discussed with the Boy Scout CEO was that this invitation to speak with him was the first time nonbinary youth had come up in his council, which does seem to be forward-thinking, based on his interview. He also mentioned that a few of BSA’s partners in his council, such as the public school system, were starting to ask more questions about transgender children. “[They are asking about] how we would accommodate transgender kids and I’m sure nonbinary is not far behind in that conversation, which is good” (Anonymous, Personal communication with Boy Scout Council.).

To summarize, Boy Scouts is not progressive according to the council interviewed. The CEO acknowledged the organization's exclusive past, but they have since moved forward. That does not currently include any official nonbinary policies, but this council does believe discriminating against anyone is un-scoutlike behavior. Scouts BSA has a new merit badge with the goal of having scouts explore diversity and inclusion as it relates to Boy Scouts.

Nonbinary

The nonbinary interviewee is an alumnus of Girl Scouts. They were in the program technically for fourteen years – they started in a pilot program for preschoolers that is not available anymore. They came out when they were seventeen years old and finished out that year of Girl Scouts, which happened to be the last year before they aged out. That last year, they were still a Girl Scout, but they became much less active because meetings were more uncomfortable for them (Anonymous, Personal communication with Nonbinary Alumni.).

While they came out to family and friends, they only came out to one Girl Scout person – their leader. What made them uncomfortable was the general group of participants being referred to as girls or ladies and being referred to as Miss a couple of times by the leader they told (Anonymous, Personal communication with Nonbinary Alumni.). Possibly because they only told one person in Scouts, they did not feel unwelcome **because** they were nonbinary.

When asked how they thought Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts compared to each other, they said, based on Boy Scout's recent decision to accept girls into their program, that "[they] assume that [Boy Scouts] would also accept nonbinary children, but [they] don't have any knowledge or evidence to actually back that up" (Anonymous, Personal communication with Nonbinary Alumni.). They rated their knowledge of both Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts as minimal, but noted they did know more about Girl Scouts, because they were in that program. They did also mention

that they do not know how overly religious Boy Scouts is, which may affect allowing nonbinary scouts. As for Girl Scouts, they are not sure where, as a whole, the national organization stands.

Overall, the nonbinary alumnus interviewee seemed to feel about the same about Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts; they did not seem to have a preference for either. While they felt uncomfortable in meetings because of gender generalizations made about the whole group of participants, they did not feel uncomfortable about being part of a group of girls. They did not experience any negative comments or backlash about being nonbinary from girls or parents, but they also did not come out to any of the girls or parents.

Analysis

Discourse Analysis

The purpose of this discourse analysis is to analyze what is meant by scouting organizations when they use certain terms, whether on a website, in a book, or part of a foundational scouting ideal. Past handbooks will also be sampled to see how, if at all, the meanings behind the terms have changed over time. Lastly, a few snippets from the interviews will be included to try to see what the organizations at the council level interpret the meaning to be.

Transgender in Girl Scouts

On the official national Girl Scout website, a FAQ on Social Issues mentions Girl Scout's position on transgender girls (see figure 8). To try to determine what is meant by *transgender* here, the two interviews with Girl Scout councils will be analyzed. Before that is done, some clarification is required about what was included in the questions (See Appendix A for interview

What is Girl Scouts' position on serving transgender youth? ▲

Girl Scouts is proud to be the premiere leadership organization for girls in the country. Placement of transgender youth is handled on a case-by-case basis, with the welfare and best interests of the child and the members of the troop/group in question a top priority. That said, if the child is recognized by the family and school/community as a girl and lives culturally as a girl, then Girl Scouts is an organization that can serve her in a setting that is both emotionally and physically safe.

questions).

According to the American Psychological Association, the term nonbinary falls under the umbrella term of *transgender* (Gender). The Girl Scout leaders were asked, based on figure 8, which was provided, what they thought GSUSA meant by *transgender* in this context. They were also asked if they thought a nonbinary individual would be able to sign up for Girl Scouts with the definition provided by GSUSA.

The first CEO interviewed said that she thought nonbinary people were included in this definition; she was aware that nonbinary was included under the umbrella term *transgender*. She

Figure 8: Transgender on GSUSA Website (Girl Scouts of the United States of America, Social Issues)

also thought that nonbinary youth would be able to sign up with this definition (Anonymous, Personal communication with Girl Scout Council 1.).

The second Girl Scout interviewee was unaware that nonbinary fell under the definition of *transgender*. About the statement (see figure 8), she said, “that is exactly what I was referring to ... like weak policy or statements, right? There’s so much interpretation that can happen in

that kind of statement.” She went on about specific terms, “case by case? No, no ... we need to make a statement. ... [T]he individual should be the priority.” She explains, “The reality is ... there are people who are uncomfortable with it, but they shouldn’t be the ones who are dictating ... where we stand on our values; we should be standing on our values as an organization.” Continuing, she said, “That [the statement], to me, that seems very binary. ... and it’s not inclusive across the spectrum.” When asked her opinion on whether or not a nonbinary person would be able to sign up for Girl Scouts based on this definition, she stated, “I think they would be hesitant.” She thought that nonbinary people who have come out after becoming a Girl Scout would feel a sense of connection or belonging and hopefully feel supported, as they would already have established bonds in their troop. However, a nonbinary person coming into Girl Scouts for the first time, with no connections or history in scouting, would probably not come in and say, “Oh my gosh, this is a place for me!” (Anonymous, Personal communication with Girl Scout Council 2.).

Mentally awake in BSA Oath

The first term for Boy Scouts that will be examined is *mentally awake* from the Boy Scout Oath. The definition or explanation Boy Scouts gives in the most current handbook is as follows: “Develop your mind both in and outside of the classroom. Be curious about everything around you, and never stop learning. Work hard to make the most of your abilities. With an inquiring attitude and the willingness to ask questions, you can learn much about the world around you and your role in it” (Boy Scouts of America, Scouts BSA Handbook for Boys 12). Another section of this handbook gives tips on how to stay mentally awake. Most are just short exercises to help stimulate the brain, such as making up jokes, playing memory games, and learning a foreign language.

The original 1911 edition of the Boy Scout Handbook does not give any explanation for specific terms in the oath. It is important to note, though, that the verbiage of the oath has not changed; word-for-word, the oath is exactly the same in the handbooks from 1911 and 2022 (Boy Scouts of America, *Boy Scouts Handbook: The Original 1911 Edition* 14; *Scouts BSA Handbook for Boys* 11). The Boy Scout CEO said that he thought *mentally awake* means “hopefully science-based ... intelligent and, you know, looking at the facts to reach intelligent decisions” (Anonymous, Personal communication with Boy Scout Council.).

Morally straight in BSA Oath

Similar to *mentally awake*, *morally straight* has no explanatory text in the original 1911 Boy Scout handbook. “Your relationships with others should be honest and open. Respect and defend the rights of all people. Be clean in your speech and actions and faithful in your religious duties. Values you practice as a Scout will help you shape a life of virtue and self-reliance” (Boy Scouts of America, *Scouts BSA Handbook for Boys* 12). This is the current handbook’s explanation of *morally straight*. It also has another, separate section – expanding on *morally straight* as “simply ... knowing the difference between right and wrong and choosing to do the right thing.” It goes on to say, “With the Scout Oath and Scout Law to guide you, you can make ethical decisions even when problems are difficult and even if you must stand alone. There might be times when peer pressure could tempt you to bend the rules, but you know you won’t because that’s not the way you want to live.” One last passage applies here: “Many ethical questions are easy to deal with ... but some questions are more difficult to answer. These are called ethical dilemmas because the right action to take isn’t always obvious. ... Discussing ethical dilemmas like this with your fellow Scouts is a good way to explore what it means to live ethically” (Boy Scouts of America, *Scouts BSA Handbook for Boys* 101).

Morally straight was also brought up in the course of the Boy Scout interview. The CEO's overall comment was that interpretation of *morally straight* is really just in "the eye of the interpreter" (Anonymous, Personal communication with Boy Scout Council.).

Many people who stood with Boy Scout's decision to ban gay youth and leaders cite *morally straight* as at least part of the reason why they should have been banned. Hans Zeiger, an Eagle Scout against allowing gay people in Boy Scouts, wrote a book in 2005 titled *Get Off My Honor: The Assault on the Boy Scouts of America*. An entire chapter in this book is dedicated to the phrase *morally straight*.

If his views were not apparent before, Zeiger makes them crystal clear in the "Morally Straight" chapter. "Morally straight means many things, and it includes a regard for the traditional, heterosexual marriage relationship" (Zeiger 63). Yet, in the sentence **just** before this, he says, "The Boy Scouts have defined morally straight to mean a certain type of character, and only the Boy Scouts of America can define what that type of character is" (63). In 1991, Boy Scouts released an official interpretation of the phrase – "We believe that homosexual conduct is inconsistent with the requirement in the Scout Oath that a Scout be morally straight" (qtd. in Zeiger 66). Speaking of the phrase itself, it is old – very old; it was part of the original 1911 Boy Scout Oath. *Straight* was first used in the heterosexual meaning in 1941 in an American psychiatrist's book, three **decades** after Boy Scouts used it in their oath (Bainbridge). Over time, obviously, the meaning has changed, but the original meaning had nothing to do with sexuality.

In another chapter, "Separation of Scout and State," Zeiger says, "Every president since Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft openly supported Scouting" (Zeiger 119). The original Boy Scout Handbook has a letter from Theodore Roosevelt written in 1911, after his presidency had ended. It expresses much support for Boy Scouts, with praise for items like

“consideration for others, and courage and decency,” “applying the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule in the ordinary affairs of every-day life,” and “Let[ting] the boy stand stoutly against his enemies both from without and from within, let him show courage in confronting fearlessly one set of enemies” (Boy Scouts of America, *Boy Scouts Handbook: The Original 1911 Edition* 355). Zeiger’s words and ideas do not seem to match up to what Theodore Roosevelt praised the Boy Scouts for when he says, “the Boy Scouts are under increasing pressure to become politically correct, watered-down, feminized, and secularized. Inevitably, these changes would come at the expense of such virtues as duty to God, moral cleanliness, bravery, and reverence” (Zeiger 13).

The book is full of emotionally charged words, and the points he is trying to make can get lost behind them sometimes – perhaps because he was only twenty years old when he wrote it. The same section brings up a 2000 executive order issued by Bill Clinton banning discrimination in the federal government based on sexual orientation among other reasons. “The executive order meant nothing less than a full severance of ties between federal government agencies and the Boy Scouts” but, “[u]nder intense public pressure, Reno responded that the BSA could continue to use federal lands” (Zeiger 120-121). Basically, the organization and anti-homosexual members lobbied the federal government into making an exception for them. As discussed earlier, Boy Scouts encourages scouts to stand up not only against what they think is wrong but also in the face of peer pressure from others. They thought it was wrong, so Boy Scouts condoned peer pressure in that sense, but take almost any other part from the Boy Scout Oath or Law (figure 9) and all of those would condemn this action. This is what one might call an ethical dilemma. Barring or removing gay people from Scouts is not friendly, nor loyal; definitely not courteous or kind; not reverent, either; and an argument could be made that it is not cheerful,

thrifty, or brave. It is also not a help to other people, mentally awake, or morally straight, given BSA's definitions in the eleventh edition of the Handbook.

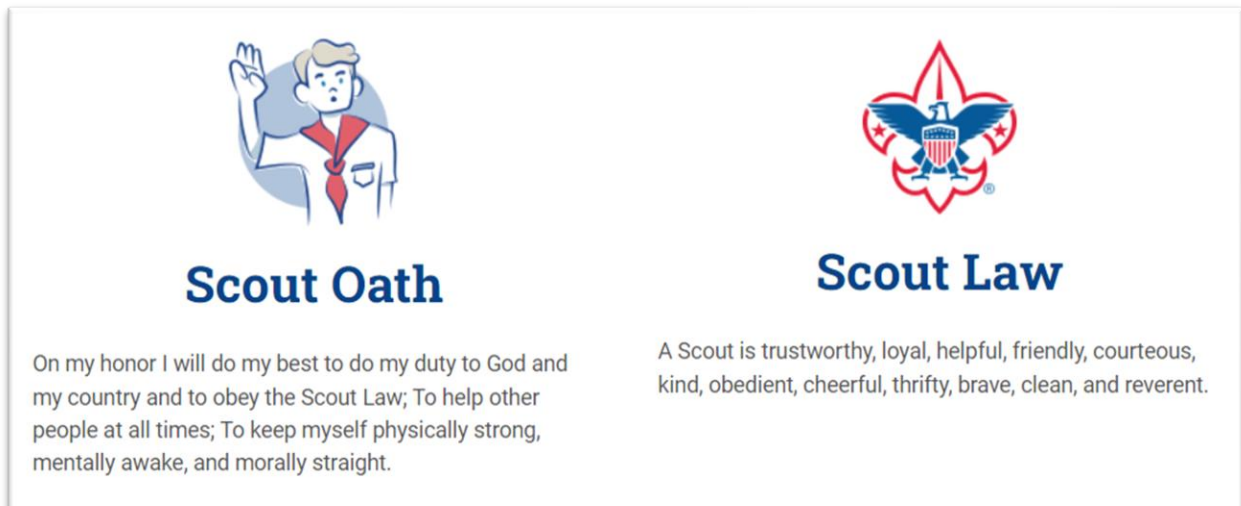


Figure 9: Boy Scout Oath and Law (Boy Scouts of America, The Foundation of Scouting)

Rick Perry has also written a book, *On My Honor: Why the American Values of the Boy Scouts Are Worth Fighting For*, about Boy Scouts and the culture wars they have faced. He includes a section about a certain part of the Oath: “‘Morally Straight’ – What Does It Mean?” He points out that *straight* was originally meant with no relation to sexuality. “I do not believe the teaching of sexual preference fits within the parameters of Scouting’s mission. The defining characteristic of homosexuality and heterosexuality is sex. Scouting is not intended to advance a discussion about sexual activity, whether of the heterosexual form or the homosexual form” (Perry 69). He goes on to say later, “We would no more want an adult Scout leader talking about his heterosexual exploits in front of young Scouts than we would homosexual activity.” (70).

Reverent in BSA Law

The current Scouts BSA handbook describes *reverent* as “A Scout is reverent toward God. A Scout is faithful in fulfilling religious duties. A Scout respects the beliefs of others.” Another paragraph goes further into details: “We show our reverence by living our lives

according to the ideals of our beliefs. You will encounter people expressing their reverence in many ways. It is your duty to respect and defend their rights to their religious beliefs even when they differ from your own” (Boy Scouts of America, Scouts BSA Handbook for Boys 16). The original Boy Scout handbook has this to say about *reverent*: “He is reverent toward God. He is faithful in his religious duties and respects the convictions of others in matters of custom and religion” (Boy Scouts of America, Boy Scouts Handbook: The Original 1911 Edition 16). The definitions in both Scout books are pretty similar; the main difference is that the newer version has removed he/him pronouns from the equation. A later section of the original handbook talks more about religion, which could change the meaning. “One important point, however, about them [religions] is that they all involve the worship of the same God. There is but one leader, although many ways of following Him. If a scout meets one of another religion, he should remember that he, too, is striving for the best. A scout should respect the convictions of others in matters of custom and religion,” (Boy Scouts of America, Boy Scouts Handbook: The Original 1911 Edition 249-250). Why they think all religions have only one God is unclear, because several (Hinduism, Taoism, and Shintoism to name a few) worship more than one god.

In his book *My Two Moms*, former Boy Scout Zach Wahls gives his life story in chapters named after the Boy Scout Motto, Slogan, and each section of the Law. In the “Reverent” chapter, he recalls when one of his mothers was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and one of his grandmothers died. “Faith became particularly crucial as we navigated the trials and tribulations of Terry’s multiple sclerosis, a journey made even more difficult by our knowledge at the outset that it could only be treated – it would never go away. Until her diagnosis, my faith had largely been a learning experience. ... My faith was now something upon which I leaned for support” (Wahls 73). He also had two friends who helped his grandmother, before she died, realize that

she should “live with her heart” (74) and attend his mothers’ commitment ceremony, even though she had some religious issues with it. These friends, who were also very devout Catholics, “set a striking example for me of what Christianity and reverence are all about. ... To me, they embody the best of all religions: thinking of others before themselves” (75). He had this to say about relating religion and reverence to Scouting:

Personally, I don’t really care what your religious views are as long as you aren’t inflicting needless pain on others simply because their beliefs are not congruent to your own. ... And while this is certainly a UU [Unitarian Universalist] belief, it is a Scouting belief as well. ... Scouting ... encourages us not to question one another’s motives or beliefs but to celebrate them and to learn about one another. (Wahls 80)

All of these points paint *reverent* in a religious light, but the actual dictionary definition has nothing to do with religion. Merriam-Webster defines reverence as “honor or respect felt or shown” or “a gesture of respect” (Merriam-Webster). In Boy Scout’s explanation of reverent (see figure 10), God is mentioned, but the Law itself, when recited by Scouts, does not include God. The Boy Scout CEO’s opinion was that nonbinary people can be reverent, but he knew that other people might question if they could. He did not mention it in relation to religion at all.

THRIFTY. Work to pay your own way. Try not to be wasteful. Use time, food, supplies, and natural resources wisely.

BRAVE. Face difficult situations even when you feel afraid. Do what you think is right despite what others might be doing or saying.

CLEAN. Keep your body and mind fit. Help keep your home and community clean.

REVERENT. Be reverent toward God. Be faithful in your religious duties. Respect the beliefs of others.

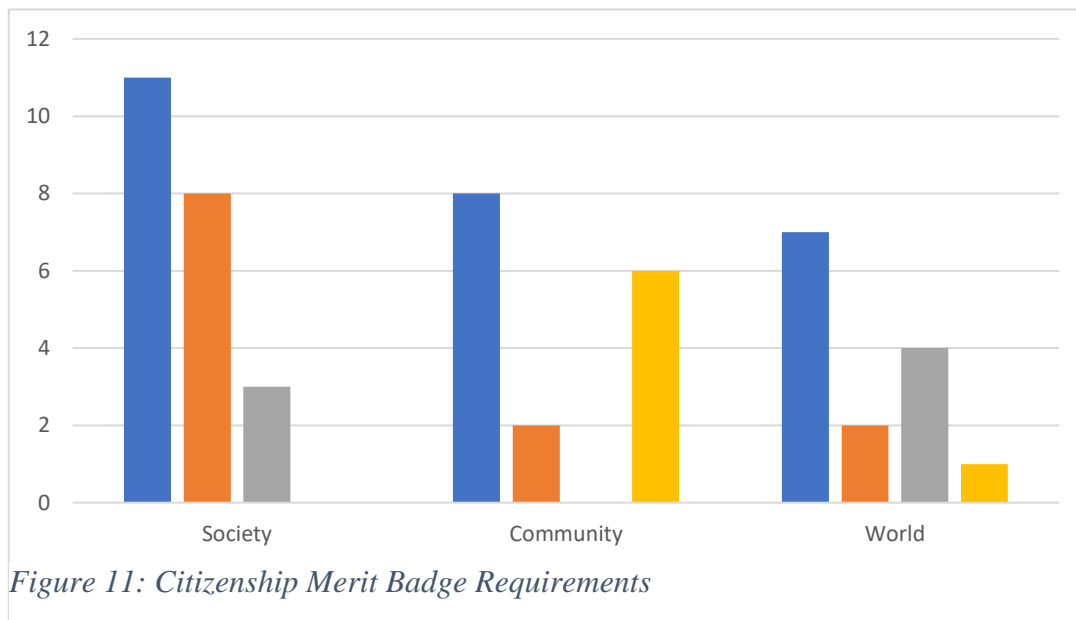
Figure 10: Reverent Law Explanation (Boy Scouts of America, What are the Scout Oath and Scout Law?)

Merit Badge Analysis

Here, will be an analysis of Boy Scout's newest merit badge, Citizenship in Society (Society), in much more detail. It was originally supposed to be a diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)⁹ merit badge but was changed to a Citizenship one (Anonymous, Personal communication with Boy Scout Council.). One of the first few sentences in the instructions for the new badge is a statement that it is not like all of the other merit badges (Boy Scouts of America, Citizenship in Society 7). Because it is supposed to be so different from all of the other merit badges, it will be compared to two other Citizenship badges, Citizenship in the Community and Citizenship in the World, to try to give a better understanding and analysis.

Comparison of Citizenship Merit Badges

First will be the basics: statistics. Society has eleven requirements, while Community has eight and World only has seven. The requirements fall into three separate categories: discussion, research, and activity. Some requirements may have elements from more than one category, so they are listed under the category for their primary purpose. For example, some discussion



⁹ See Terminology in Appendix C

requirements may need a little bit of research to understand some terms but are still primarily discussion. Furthermore, a decent number of the activity requirements tell the Scout to discuss the activity with the counselor once it is completed, but they are still predominately activity requirements. Society has eight discussion requirements and three research; Community has two discussion and six activity requirements, and World has two discussion, four research, and one activity requirement (see figure 11 above for a statistics chart).

Next will be content of the requirements – what general topics are covered. Society includes being welcoming, leadership, stereotypes and discrimination, ethics, and decision-making as some important themes (Boy Scouts of America, Citizenship in Society). Community is much less person-to-person, covering local governments, charities, and community (Boy Scouts of America, Citizenship in the Community). World takes a few steps further out, talking about national laws, government on a larger scale, and other countries' governments or laws (Boy Scouts of America, Citizenship in the World).

Merit badges each have a pamphlet of information to complement the content. The length of the pamphlet depends on the merit badge it matches; Community's pamphlet is just over thirty pages. World's, on the other hand, is almost one hundred pages long. Society does not have a pamphlet; that is one of the things that makes it so different from all of the other merit badges. The instructions say, "it intentionally places the responsibility of research and identification of resources on you instead of using a merit badge pamphlet," (Boy Scouts of America, Citizenship in Society 7). This was a very smart decision; if Boy Scouts provided the majority of information needed on the sensitive, polarizing issues that could come up in a merit badge about diversity and inclusion, it would seem like they are saying the information they provided is "right" or, at the very least, what Boy Scout's stance is on those matters.

While information is not provided in a pamphlet for Citizenship in Society, there are Counselor Guidelines. These guidelines stress “focusing on openness, objectivity, and inclusivity” and “asking questions without imparting your own feelings or views” (Boy Scouts of America, Citizenship in Society 3). The Counselor Guide gives a little more insight as to why this particular merit badge has no pamphlet. “We intentionally chose this approach as we want to encourage each Scout to explore information that is most relevant/most interests them to help optimize their learnings” (Boy Scouts of America, Citizenship in Society Merit Badge Counselor Guide 7). If Scouts only explore what interests them, though, how relevant will this merit badge be? A Scout may choose to skip over a certain type of diversity (such as gender diversity), which may be what they really should be learning about, or something they may find interesting, or even helpful.

The guide also includes ground rules for counselors to share, like “value everyone’s thoughts and opinions, ... treat one another with respect, ... there are no stupid questions, ... [and] everything discussed during the sessions is confidential,” (Boy Scouts of America, Citizenship in Society Merit Badge Counselor Guide 10). In addition, “Scouts should feel free to discuss any identities they wish. Parental approval should be granted for sensitive subject matter.” It goes over all of the requirements in detail, giving some examples and hints on how to cover material with Scouts. The counselor’s guide does include some resources about diversity and inclusion, which are meant only for counselors and parents to educate themselves. These resources do come with a few notes: they are not sanctioned by Boy Scouts, and they should not be directly shared with scouts. If Scouts are struggling to find resources, the counselors can share the resources with the parents, who, in turn, can share with the Scouts (Boy Scouts of America, Citizenship in Society Merit Badge Counselor Guide).

Evolution of Citizenship in Society

While researching what the scouting public's opinions on Citizenship in Society are, a "final" draft of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion merit badge – the original name for it – was found. The requirements are pretty different, too, given the fact that this was a "final" draft. First of all, there are only ten requirements in the draft, compared to the eleven in the merit badge (CynicalScouter). However, the content is where the draft and the badge really diverge; the original draft had a lot more specifics and an emphasis on race, while the merit badge now has more of an emphasis on leadership and is more general.

A requirement that discussed different types of racism, like institutional and systemic, was removed. Some terms were removed from a research-type requirement: *bigotry* and *intersectionality* were replaced with words like *discrimination*, *ethical leadership*, and *identities*. A requirement with some scenarios to discuss had some details pulled out of it – turning "perceived sexual orientation" into just "one of their identities" (CynicalScouter; Boy Scouts of America, *Citizenship in Society* 9). The draft also had more activity-type requirements: attend – or study – an event that promotes diversity and develop a presentation about DEI in the Scout's community. These were reworked in the merit badge to more discussion or research points.

The reason for a lot of the changes could be from councils who tested the merit badge. Some scouts in the Boy Scout council of the CEO interviewed participated in these pilot programs. He said, "the terminology was a turn-off. ... we really embraced [it] and it was a good experience, but other councils ... said that the language is so weaponized. [For example,] if you talk diversity in, you know, in Texas, they immediately think you're teaching critical race theory" (Anonymous, Personal communication with Boy Scout Council.).

Discussion Boards about Citizenship in Society

Comparing the new Citizenship in Society badge to some of the other Citizenship badges provides some interesting information, but what does the general Boy Scout public have to say about this badge? Two online discussion boards were debating the new merit badge: a thread on Reddit and a discussion on a Boy Scout Forum. Both of these discussions were had about a year before the merit badge was fully released, so these people were discussing the “final” DEI merit badge draft, which eventually, after much change, morphed into the Citizenship in Society merit badge.

As this is a polarizing topic, there were a multitude of different opinions expressed. The most concern about this merit badge was that it would be one-sided and liberal. “Conservative families ... may not want their children exposed to discussions about intersectionality¹⁰ (unless such discussions allow for criticism),” says MichaelK who started the BSA Forum (Concern over the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Merit Badge).

What are conservative scouts supposed to do when they don’t agree with the ideology behind the merit badge? How are they supposed to feel once they realize they can’t advance unless they express agreement with concepts they don’t accept? ... The BSA can alleviate conservatives’ doubts by assuring exemptions will be available to families and scouts who disagree with the content. (Concern over the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Merit Badge)

Many people offered suggestions to attempt making the merit badge more acceptable for everyone. Some suggestions were to add DEI requirements to the other Citizenship merit badges

¹⁰ See Terminology in Appendix C

(there are three others, all required for the Eagle rank) instead of making it its own merit badge. Others thought it was okay to have as a merit badge, just make it optional – not requiring it as an Eagle merit badge – so those interested could earn it and those opposed could avoid it. Some suggested adding requirements like having a family talk about DEI before discussing it in Scouts BSA so parents can share what they believe with their scouts first.

People who supported the merit badge also had some ideas for how more conservative families could approach this Eagle-required merit badge. Arabillie pointed out,

nothing says (so far) that parents can't hold it back to be the last badge earned, so that at least the scout is as mature as possible before starting the badge (and has had as much time as possible to take in what parents are teaching them). ... The best way we can educate our youth is to introduce them to the basics of all of the (plausible) possibilities, and then give them further information on what we believe is correct and why. ... I see the role of this merit badge as filling the first part of that – introducing them to the basics – with the responsibility of the caring, concerned parents to be following up with their youth, asking what they learned, what they thought of it, and discussing it with them to impart the information on what they believe and why. Then you end up with a young adult [that] knows **why** they believe what they do... (Concern over the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Merit Badge)

PeterHopkins also had a suggestion for those who are not thrilled with the merit badge: “If you or anyone else has any concerns that this merit badge might produce objectionable results, I encourage you to consider registering as a counselor for it. Our Scouts will not truly experience diversity if all the counselors for this merit badge are of one mind” (Concern over the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Merit Badge).

Similar to PeterHopkins, multiple other people brought up the integral importance of the merit badge counselor. Who is going through the requirements with the youth “will make about a 300% difference” (Concern over the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Merit Badge). Nobody could deny that a conservative counselor and a liberal counselor would approach it differently; hopefully, both would still cover both sides of the situation. “Execution will vary widely across the country, depending on how seriously counselors treat it, especially because there’s little source material and no pamphlet to go along with it” (De Socio, What it's like teaching the new Citizenship in Society merit badge). The quality of what a scout gets out of it will also depend on the counselor – a counselor excited for the merit badge will go more in depth and be more likely to answer questions than a counselor who is preoccupied with other things or would rather not be teaching that particular badge. “A whole lot of kids are going to get a poor version of what this should be, and that makes me sad” (qtd. in De Socio).

Conclusion

So, back to the main question: what accommodations are Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts making for nonbinary youth? The short of it is that it really depends on the council. In Girl Scouts, one council did not have any accommodations or programs and thought they were doing well, while another council had special training and community discussions, but wanted a strong statement from the national headquarters to hold every council to the same standard. The Boy Scout council interviewed was open to nonbinary youth, but felt that, across the country, not all councils would be; they also do not have any national policies regarding nonbinary youth. Furthermore, the way their younger programs (Cub Scouts and Scouts BSA) are set up is not

conducive to nonbinary youth, with separate troops for girls and boys – so where do nonbinary children fit in?

During the course of the interviews, Girl Scouts was defined as progressive, but Boy Scouts was not. This could be for many reasons. Boy Scouts seems to have a closer connection to religion than Girl Scouts, and generally more conservative people have issues with LGBTQ+ people in scouting. Boy Scouts has also had a much more tumultuous background regarding discrimination towards atheists and people of the LGBTQ+ community.

Scouts BSA has recently taken some strides to be more inclusive, resulting in the Citizenship in Society merit badge. This appears to be a sincere attempt, but it has fallen short. The requirements were watered down from earlier drafts; focus shifted from racism and other specific examples to leadership and generic ethics. They also removed some of the more activity-type requirements like making a DEI presentation and attending an event that promotes DEI, in favor of more discussion requirements. While there is nothing wrong with discussion, and it is inevitable with such a topic, the final merit badge is almost nothing but; so much discussion paired with generic requirements also lends itself to a lack of quality control across the country. Variance in quality will also be exacerbated by the fact that there is no pamphlet for this merit badge. It is understandable why the BSA did not want to include one, as it would seem that the information they provide would be what they say is “right,” but having no guidance at all is a detriment to the Scouts because, with no consistency, each Scout could be getting a vastly different experience and may not reach even a minimal level of exposure and understanding.

All in all, Scouts BSA has missed the opportunity with this merit badge to make a strong, clear statement that they do not tolerate discrimination of any kind; the Boy Scout Oath and Law, which have not changed since their inception in 1911, do not allow it, so neither should the

organization. Girl Scouts seems content to stay back in the unproblematic shade – they may not be attracting attention, but they are also not even attempting a definitive viewpoint, consistent across the whole country. What does all of this mean for nonbinary youth who just want to be scouts? Both organizations will accept nonbinary youth, but neither is going out of their way to welcome them. Girl Scouts seems more welcoming – depending on the area of the country one lives in – while Boy Scouts seems more welcoming in theory (and more consistent nationwide), but is, unfortunately, still falling short.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Girl Scout Questions

○ **Notes**

- An answer is for your council unless otherwise noted.
- For purposes of my research and data, I am defining nonbinary as anyone who does not identify solely as male or female. For example, a transgender woman (or man) would not count as nonbinary, per my definition. Neither would a cisgender man (or woman). Someone who feels they have no gender or identifying outside the binary of male and female would fit my definition. Someone who falls between male and female would count. Someone who identifies as somewhere between male and female and either male or female (or both) would also count. Someone who switches between male and female would count.

○ **Demographic Questions**

- May I quote you anonymously?
- How long have you been involved in Girl Scouts?
- What is/are your current role(s) in Girl Scouts?
- How long have you had that/those role(s)?
- If comfortable answering, how do you identify your gender?

○ **Main Questions**

- Would you say that Girl Scouts is a progressive organization?
- Would you say that Girl Scouts is accepting of the LGBTQ+ community
Particularly with nonbinary youth?

- Are nonbinary youth allowed in Girl Scouts in your council? If not, why? If so, are they formally allowed or is it more of a “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” situation?
- Do you think nonbinary youth should be allowed to participate in Girl Scouts? Why or why not?
- Do you see any issues with nonbinary youth **not** being allowed to participate? If so, what?
- Do you see any issues with nonbinary youth **being** allowed to participate? If so, what?
- Do you foresee nonbinary youth being officially* included in Girl Scouts in the future (in GSUSA overall or just in your council)? *An example of being officially included is pronoun acknowledgement in the organizational policies
- Do you think Girl Scouts (on both a national level and in your council) is currently doing a good job accommodating nonbinary youth?
- What does your council specifically do to accommodate nonbinary youth, if anything?
- What are some steps GSUSA as a whole could take to advance acceptance of nonbinary youth?
- Are you currently working on any new policies to help accommodate nonbinary youth?
- Did you know nonbinary falls under the umbrella term of *transgender*, according to the American Psychological Association?
- Based on the screenshot below, what do you think GSUSA means by *transgender* in this context?

What is Girl Scouts' position on serving transgender youth? ▲

Girl Scouts is proud to be the premiere leadership organization for girls in the country. Placement of transgender youth is handled on a case-by-case basis, with the welfare and best interests of the child and the members of the troop/group in question a top priority. That said, if the child is recognized by the family and school/community as a girl and lives culturally as a girl, then Girl Scouts is an organization that can serve her in a setting that is both emotionally and physically safe.

- Based on the screenshot above, do you think a nonbinary individual would be able to sign up for Girl Scouts with this definition/intention by GSUSA?
- Are there any other comments or notes you have that you'd like to share or want me to know?

Boy Scout Questions

○ Notes

- For councils, an answer is for their council unless otherwise noted.
- For purposes of my research and data, I am defining nonbinary as anyone who does not identify solely as male or female. For example, a transgender woman (or man) would not count as nonbinary, per my definition. Neither would a cisgender man (or woman). Someone who feels they have no gender or identifying outside the binary of male and female would fit my definition. Someone who falls between male and female would count. Someone who identifies as somewhere

between male and female and either male or female (or both) would also count.

Someone who switches between male and female would count.

○ **Demographic Questions**

- May I quote you anonymously?
- How long have you been involved in GS/BSA?
- What is/are your current role(s) in Boy Scouts?
- How long have you had that/those role(s)?
- If comfortable answering, how do you identify your gender?

○ **Main Questions**

- Would you say that Boy Scouts is a progressive organization?
- Would you say that Boy Scouts is accepting of the LGBTQ+ community?
Particularly with nonbinary youth?
- Are nonbinary youth allowed in Boy Scouts in your council? If not, why? If so, are they formally allowed or is it more of a “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” situation?
- Do you think nonbinary youth should be allowed to participate in Boy Scouts?
Why or why not?
- Do you see any issues with nonbinary youth **not** being allowed to participate? If so, what?
- Do you see any issues with nonbinary youth **being** allowed to participate? If so, what?
- Do you foresee nonbinary youth being officially* included in Boy Scouts in the future (in BSA overall or just in your council)? *An example of being officially included is pronoun acknowledgement in the organizational policies

- Do you think Boy Scouts (on both a national level and in your council) is currently doing a good job accommodating nonbinary youth?
- What does your council specifically do to accommodate nonbinary youth, if anything?
- What are some steps BSA, as a whole, could take to advance acceptance of nonbinary youth?
- Are you currently working on any new policies to help accommodate nonbinary youth?

[Home](#) > [About the BSA](#) > [FAQ](#) > What are the Scout Oath and Scout Law?

What are the Scout Oath and Scout Law?

Scout Oath

On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law; to help other people at all times; to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.

Scout Law

The Scout Law has 12 points. Each is a goal for every Scout. A Scout tries to live up to the Law every day. It is not always easy to do, but a Scout always tries.

A Scout is:

TRUSTWORTHY. Tell the truth and keep promises. People can depend on you.

LOYAL. Show that you care about your family, friends, Scout leaders, school, and country.

HELPFUL. Volunteer to help others without expecting a reward.

FRIENDLY. Be a friend to everyone, even people who are very different from you.

COURTEOUS. Be polite to everyone and always use good manners.

KIND. Treat others as you want to be treated. Never harm or kill any living thing without good reason.

OBEDIENT. Follow the rules of your family, school, and pack. Obey the laws of your community and country.

CHEERFUL. Look for the bright side of life. Cheerfully do tasks that come your way. Try to help others be happy.

THRIFTY. Work to pay your own way. Try not to be wasteful. Use time, food, supplies, and natural resources wisely.

BRAVE. Face difficult situations even when you feel afraid. Do what you think is right despite what others might be doing or saying.

CLEAN. Keep your body and mind fit. Help keep your home and community clean.

REVERENT. Be reverent toward God. Be faithful in your religious duties. Respect the beliefs of others.

- What do you think *morally straight* means in the BSA oath? **PI will remind interviewee of oath and then ask the question.**
- What do you think *mentally awake* means in the BSA oath?
- Do you think a nonbinary person can be reverent (from BSA Law)?
- Do you think, based on other parts of the law (particularly friendly, courteous, and even reverent), that discriminating against nonbinary youth (or anyone) is un-scoutlike behavior? Why or why not?
- Are there any other comments or notes you have that you'd like to share or want me to know?

Nonbinary Questions

- May I quote you anonymously?
- Were you a member of Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts?
- How long were you a member of scouts?
- Did you realize that you identified as nonbinary or did you openly come out (to family/friends or scouts) while in scouts?
- Did you decide to leave scouts after figuring out your identity or coming out?
- Were you forced to leave scouts if you came out to scouts?
- If so, how long until you made the decision to leave?
- Why did you decide to leave or to stay?
- Did you feel welcome in scouts as a nonbinary person?
- What were some things that could have been done to make you more comfortable?

- Were there any specific things or people that made you uncomfortable? (Other scouts, leaders, parents; comments, actions, feeling, people not using correct pronouns or name; etc.)
- How would you describe your knowledge of Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts?
- How do you think both organizations compare to each other in regards to accepting or welcoming nonbinary people? Is this based on personal experiences, second-hand or stories of others' experiences, or media/society?
- Are there any other comments or notes you have that you'd like to share or want me to know?

Appendix B: Initial Email Drafts

○ National Headquarters of GSUSA and BSA

Hello Sir, Madam, or Mx,

As a Gold Award recipient who's committed to equality in both gender and sexuality, I am encouraged by Girl Scout/Boy Scout policies including members of the LGBTQ+ community. This topic directly relates to why I've contacted you today.

My name is Karen Brandt, and I am a senior at Johnson & Wales University studying Baking and Pastry Arts. I am also in the honors program and working on my final thesis paper. These policies regarding the LGBTQ+ community have prompted me to pursue the question "What accommodations are being made by Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts for nonbinary youth?" as the topic of my honors thesis paper.

To help me answer this question, I'd be much obliged if you would be willing to meet with me and answer a few questions about where your organization currently stands

on this subject. I would not ask for more than 30 minutes of your time. Also, you can select the type of interview – phone, video call, or email – and I can send you the questions ahead of time if you would like.

Please feel free to reach out to me through this email address if you have any further questions. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Karen Brandt

○ **24 GSUSA and BSA Chosen Councils**

Hello Sir, Madam, or Mx,

As a Gold Award recipient who's committed to equality in both gender and sexuality, I am encouraged by Girl Scout/Boy Scout policies including members of the LGBTQ+ community. This topic directly relates to why I've contacted you today.

My name is Karen Brandt, and I am a senior at Johnson & Wales University studying Baking and Pastry Arts. I am also in the honors program and working on my final thesis paper. These policies regarding the LGBTQ+ community have prompted me to pursue the question "What are accommodations are being made by Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts for nonbinary youth?" as the topic of my honors thesis paper.

Please feel free to reach out to me through this email address if you have any further questions. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Karen Brandt

- **Nonbinary Alumni Email**

Hello _____,

(Insert one to two sentences of personal introduction based on the person I'm emailing.) I'm reaching out to you today to ask if you would be willing to participate in an interview for my Honors research project.

To provide a little background, I am now a senior at Johnson & Wales University studying Baking and Pastry Arts. I am also in the honors program, working on my final thesis paper, which is about accommodations Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts are making for nonbinary youth.

Back to the interview I'm asking you for, I would not ask for more than 30 minutes of your time. Also, you can select the type of interview – phone, video call, or email – and I can send you the questions ahead of time if you would like.

Please feel free to reach out to me through this email address if you have any further questions. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Karen Brandt

- **Follow-up Email Draft**

Hello _____,

I wanted to reach out again in case this interview request had fallen off your radar. To remind you, I am asking for an interview regarding BSA/GSUSA policies about inclusion of nonbinary children in the programming. If you have any further questions, please reach back to me through this email. If you would not like to participate, please let me know and I will not contact you again. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Karen Brandt

- **Negative Response Draft**

Hello,

Thank you for letting me know that you would not like to participate in my research. After this email, I will not contact you again. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Karen Brandt

- **Positive Response Draft**

Hello,

Thank you for your interest in my project! At your earliest convenience, please email me back with the type of interview you would prefer and your general availability (for phone calls and video calls). I have also attached the consent form to participate in my research. Please look it over; we will discuss it further in the future.

If you have any further questions, please feel free to reach out to me through this email address. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Karen Brandt

○ **No More Time Draft**

Hello,

Thank you so much for your response and interest in my research. Unfortunately, I have completed the data gathering portion of my research and am moving on to analyzing the responses I've received. If you would like, I would be happy to send you my results in the form of my final thesis paper once it is completed. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Karen Brandt

Appendix C: Terminology

- **Boy Scouts** – the overall organization that Scouts BSA, Cub Scouts, Venturing, etc. are part of; Scouts BSA used to be called Boy Scouts, but is no longer because they now allow girls
- **Cisgender** – a person whose gender identity is the same as their birth sex
- **DEI** – Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

- **Eagle Scout** – the highest rank in Scouts BSA; it includes having to plan and complete a service project
- **Gold Award** – the highest award a Girl Scout can earn; it can only be earned in high school
- **Intersectionality** – overlapping independent systems of discrimination/disadvantage created by the nature of social categories like race, class, and gender
- **LGBTQ+** - an all-encompassing acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, and other sexual orientations and gender identities
- **Nonbinary** – anyone who does not identify solely as male or female.
- **Scouts BSA** – the Boy Scout program for children aged eleven to seventeen years; it comes after Cub Scouts and was previously called Boy Scouts
- **Transgender** – a person whose gender identity does not match their birth sex