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LIVING WITHOUT GOD: FEMALE ATHEISTS AND STIGMA MANAGEMENT IN THE SOUTH OF THE UNITED STATES

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THE SOUTH OF THE UNITED STATES

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By
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Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Shaunna Scott, Professor of Sociology

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

LIVING WITHOUT GOD: FEMALE ATHEISTS AND STIGMA MANAGEMENT IN
THE SOUTH OF THE UNITED STATES

This study focuses upon the experiences and perceptions of women Atheists in the
Southern U.S., a region which is highly religious and, therefore, has comparatively low
numbers of Atheists. Taking a Symbolic Interactionist approach, I examine how these
Southern Atheists understood what it means to be an "Atheist," how they became Atheist,
their strategies to manage their stigmatized identity as Atheists, and finally the role
gender has in managing this stigma. I utilize a Feminist methodology to investigate and
foreground women's experiences. I conducted participant observation at 23 Atheist and
Humanist meetings in two southern cities in two different states; I also interviewed 51
Atheists, 40 female and 11 male.

I found a variety of definitions for Atheism, though all participants agreed that they do
not believe in god. This identity is also informed by political ideologies and philosophies
that cultivate pro-social behavior. Participants also discussed what they perceived to be
the best things about what it means to be an Atheist.

I also examined the stages by which Atheists come to this identification especially as this
relates to the importance of place and their experiences in educational, religious and
family institutions and how these affected their decisions to self-identify as Atheist.

Additionally, I investigated how Atheists undergo stigma management (and negative
interactions) by selectively concealing their identity, which they based on what they
believed others assumed about Atheists. Many strategies were used to assuage feelings of
being uncomfortable. As a stigmatized group, they discuss the importance of community
and social support. In addition, Atheists saw several parallels between their experiences
and the LGBT community such as similar language and face prejudice and
discrimination, even though they said that the Atheists can more easily "pass."

Atheist women manage their stigma by utilizing various tactics to avoid hurting the
feelings of others. Female Atheists walk a fine line between being masculine and
assertive when they identify as masculine and caring about the feelings of others.
Participants also discussed the role gender plays in self-identifying as Atheist. Lastly,
they explained that it is harder to be woman and an Atheist.

KEYWORDS: Atheism, Gender, Religion, Stigma, Stigma Management

Jamie Pond_____

October 12, 2015_____

LIVING WITHOUT GOD: FEMALE ATHEISTS AND STIGMA MANAGEMENT IN
THE SOUTH OF THE UNITED STATES

By

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I would like to dedicate this dissertation to all of those who have been my support system.

First and foremost, my husband has been the most understanding and supportive person. He has listened to me gripe about transcription, he has watched our daughter while I attended meetings and conducted interviews, and he has given me space to work in his office.

Secondly, I would like to dedicate this to my lovely daughter. May you grow up to be stronger than me, twice as bold, and as someone who questions the world around you. As I tell you every day, you are my favorite person and I love you more than you will ever know.

Next, I would like to thank my other family members for your encouragement throughout the years. You always instilled in me to get an education and challenge myself and I am very grateful for you.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Being Atheist in America

Almost without being aware that we are doing it, we, as human beings, make

assumptions about others. Many of these assumptions are about people who belong to

groups that we have connection with personally. Because these assumptions are

misinformed, they are often inaccurate and hold negative connotations. As such, it is not

entirely unusual for those who belong to these groups to be stigmatized. In America, one

group of individuals that currently face stigmatization are Atheists. For example, a

number of Americans believe that being an Atheist means that you are of low moral

character. To some, you are almost un-American if you are an Atheist. As such, people

may feel like it is socially acceptable to act on prejudicial beliefs and discriminate against

those who self-identify as Atheist. In addition, many people (unbeknownst to themselves)

make Atheists uncomfortable by including religious dogma and rituals in the workplace

or in other seemingly secular settings. One reason why this occurs is because religion has

played a significant role in the construction and maintenance of American society.

The interplay between religion and national identity in the United States has

greatly impacted modern day citizens and their interactions with each other including

those who profess religious belief and those who self-identify as Atheist. These

interactions have been fairly conflict driven and rooted in historical conflict. For

example, according to James W. Fraser (1999) "The majority who came [to the North

American colonies] for religious reasons came for the freedom to practice their own form

of religion and to impose it on all other residents of their colony" (p. 9). Fraser's

examination of religion and national identity goes on to discuss how religious faith

became an integral part of United States education. Fraser also contends that religious freedom in the Northern American colonies happened "by compromise and accident" (p. 17). He explains that "full religious freedom and equality came to the new nation because it was everyone's second choice […] Since it was clear from the beginning that no one group could get a majority vote for its own faith as the established church of new and already diverse nation, all factions reluctantly agreed that religious tolerance was preferable to the establishment of someone else's church" (p. 17). Despite these efforts, over time mainline Christianity became more and more prominent within U.S. culture. The debate over religion's place within the U.S.'s national identity has been ongoing since Europeans began settling here and remains to this day a controversial subject. Recently, the relationship between religion (specifically Christianity) and national ideology in the U.S. has been under debate. This debate is prominent for several reasons, but one reason it has been newsworthy is because of growth in the number of nonbelievers, including Atheists, in America. In addition, the likelihood that your son will bring home an Atheist to dinner or for an Atheist to run for office is going up. According to The American Religious Identification Survey (2008) and the Pew Research Center (2012), the population of nonbelievers is growing and has been steadily growing for the past twenty years—from 8.2% of the total population in 1990 to 15% in 2008 to almost 20% in 2012 (Kosmin and Keysar, 2009; Pew, 2012). Despite this growth, Christianity continues to serve as a hegemonic presence in America. Not only does the United States' President traditionally say "God Bless America" at the end of every speech (and has since Nixon in 1973), American currency says "In God We Trust" (added in 1956), and the pledge of allegiance contains "under God" (added in 1954); this

deity is assumed to be the Judeo-Christian god. Judeo-Christian teachings and principles

also suffuse public school classrooms, legislation, and the workplace. The presence of

religion in public civic life may be problematic for those who do not believe in god or

identify as Atheist.

Additionally, Edgell et al. (2006) note that examining Atheism in the United

States may prove interesting since religion serves to unify American citizens. They note

that "Americans construct the Atheist as a symbolic representation of one who rejects the

basis for moral solidarity and cultural membership in American society altogether" (p.

230). In this vein, Atheists are viewed as deviating from cultural standards that serve to

unite people. Furthermore, Gervais (2011) notes that "nearly half of Americans believe

that moral living is impossible without belief in God (Pew Research Center 2002)" (p.

545). According to this, many view Atheists as without morals and un-American.

Much like non-Christians such as Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and Wiccans,

Atheists and other nonreligious individuals "feel subordinated or oppressed" by the

Christians who surround them (Church–Hearl, 2008; p. 2). Furthermore, regional history

and legacy of a particular location (e.g. The South/Bible Belt) may have specific religious

ideology that may be especially salient for Atheists and their perceptions of religiousness.

In line with this, Cragun et al. (2012) found that reported discrimination of those who are

non-religious (including Atheists) varies depending on the region in which these

individuals live. Interestingly, they found that "relative to the South Atlantic states,

individuals who live in New England, East North Central, West North Central, and

Pacific states are all more likely to report experiencing discrimination" (p. 116). What I

find really interesting about this finding in particular is that there are more non-religious

individuals in New England, East North Central, West North Central, and Pacific states compared to Southern regions (p.111). Are nonreligious individuals more likely to report discrimination in these regions because they have found more likeminded people and also solidarity with other nonreligious individuals than those in the South? Cragun et al. (2012) also found that "individuals [Atheists] living in East South Central and East North Central states are at increased risk of experiencing discrimination in the workplace context, compared to individuals living in South Atlantic states, which is consistent with at least some other studies on regional differences in religiosity (Ellison and Musick 395; Heiner 16; Sherkat 455; Stump 220)" (p.119). According to Cragun et al. (2012) the social context of the region matters. For example, they found "Regional variations in reported discrimination are also significant in the social context, with individuals living in East South Central states [which includes Southern State 1 for my study] having the greatest likelihood of reported discrimination" (p.120). Other researchers, Ellison and Musick (1993), agree that context as well as individual factors need to be considered when examining religiosity in the South, in particular East South Central states. This makes me wonder, how do Atheists who live in the South perceive their interactions with others and how does this affect how they see themselves, especially since they may be fairly aware of their stigmatize identity?

One demographic of the Atheist community that may face additional prejudice, stigma, and discrimination is women. One reason why women may be more likely to encounter prejudice and have to manage their stigma is because of their low numbers. For example, the "None" population, or those who do not affiliate with religion which includes Atheists, has a different gender composition in comparison to their religious

counterparts. The American Religious Identification Survey (2008) indicates that women make up 40% of the "None" population whereas women comprise of up to 58% of other religions. In addition to these statistics, Freese (2004) and Miller and Hoffman (1995) indicate that women as a group are more religious than men. On the other hand, men have made up a significant portion of the most vocal nonbelievers in America including men like Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Dan Dennett, and Richard Dawkins[1]. This male public presence and the fact that men make up the majority of nonbelievers (currently and historically), suggests that nonbelievers in general and perhaps Atheism[2] in particular is androcentric –that is, led by men and centered upon them. In addition, this male presence suggests that identifying as Atheist is an example of masculine behavior since it is rejecting gender norms that link women (and femininity) with religious belief.

Religious and nonreligious women, despite being underrepresented (in overall numbers and in positions of power, specifically in the clergy), have nevertheless played a significant role in creating organizations for the nonreligious to come together[3] and have fought for the separation of church and state. Even though women tend to be more religious than men (Freese, 2004; Miller & Hoffman, 1995), they only make up a small percentage (18%) of religious clergy (Association of Theological schools, 2011; Bureau of Census, 2011). This relative absence of female religious and nonreligious leaders reflects the lack of acceptance of the authority of women in society, broadly, including in government and corporate leadership positions.

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[1] Even though Dawkins is British, he has greatly impacted American Atheism and disbelief.
[2] I have chosen to capitalize "Atheism" and "Atheist" since religions like Christianity receive capitalization and many can argue the Atheism has religious properties despite the lack of a belief in a deity.
[3] Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF)—was co-founded in 1976 by two women: Annie Laurie Gaylor and her mother, Anne Nicol Gaylor. American Atheists was founded in 1963 by Madalyn Murray O'Hair.

In order to be accepted as authority figures, women who become leaders must balance their authority (and therefore legitimacy) with being nurturing. For example, Lawless (1988) found that in order to be accepted, Pentecostal women preachers had to nurture their congregations as well as emphasize their "call" to preach when leading the congregation. One way Pentecostal women preachers balanced this was by taking on multiple gender roles, which was not an expectation for male preachers. Lawless notes specifically that:

> If the pastor was woman, she invariably also served in the church as a Sunday School teacher, as evening devotional leader, as Tuesday night youth leader, as Wednesday prayer meeting leader, often as pianist or song leader, Thursday night visitations leader, as nursing home visitor, shut-in visitor—the list seemed endless. Rarely, in churches pastored by men, have I observed the same evidence of total leadership and responsibility as is the case with a great many of these women pastors. (p. 101)

In addition to taking on these feminine gender roles, many of the women Lawless examined had to legitimate their authority as preachers by emphasizing their call to this profession rather than their own personal desire to preach. Furthermore, their positions as authority figures were less problematic if these women were mothers and therefore did not challenge other feminine duties and social norms. Not only did these women behave masculine by taking leadership positions within the church, but they also were expected to remain feminine by nurturing their congregations. These female leaders were accepted because they were able to walk a fine line when it came to challenging gender norms.

Gender norms, which stipulate that women should behave feminine and men should behave masculine, not only pervade politics and religion, but according to online Atheist and science blogs, *The Huffington Post*, and *Slate*, also pervade the Atheist community. That is, Atheist women have encountered and continue to encounter sexism

within Atheist and skeptic circles. The sexism encountered by many of these women is based on the premise that women should be submissive (or accepting of male advances as noted in the ElevatorGate). Specifically, Elevator Gate refers to an incident in which Rebecca Watson received unwanted advances by those in the skeptic community. Furthermore, women who self-identify as Atheist seem to struggle with their sense of self as they interact with the family and socially constructed notions of gender (Block 2005). For example, Block (2005) explains "that women were more hesitant than men to call themselves [A]theists reflects the influence, not of some inner essence of feminine piety, but of wider norms of respectable womanhood" (p. 65). Women who do not believe in god or participate in religious rituals may be viewed as less feminine as a result of this identification. It may also be particularly stigmatizing in part because women who choose to deviate from gender norms, like believing in god and participating in religious rituals, may be viewed as lacking morals. As such, women may feel like they do not belong to their community. Since women are overrepresented within certain religious organizations and are underrepresented in Atheism, it is important to learn more about how they came to construct this identity –one that may be especially controversial and stigmatizing for women. As such, Atheist women may walk a fine line between being assertive (self-identifying in opposition to societal expectations) and being submissive.

In addition, societal gender norms are embedded within a society's institutions. Particular institutions, such as education, religion, and family, are also correlated with the decision to self-identify as Atheist (Block, 2005; Ecklund and Scheitle, 2007; De Vaus and McAllister, 1987; Sherkat and Ellison, 1999; Sherkat, 2008; Zuckerman, 2009; Bainbridge, 2005). For example, education—specifically scientific education, is not only

pervasively gendered, but plays an important role in whether someone self-identifies as Atheist. Baker (2012) found that perceptions of science, specifically how much faith individuals have in science to answer social problems, are correlated to Atheism. Furthermore, Ecklund and Scheitle (2007) note that "about 52 percent of the scientists see themselves as having no religious affiliation when compared to about 14 percent of the entire GSS population" (p. 297), which suggests that religious and scientific ideologies may conflict. This conflict also highlights the gendered opposition embedded within these ideologies, which emphasizes that religion is feminine and science is masculine. This is subsequently supported by quantitative findings. Women represent the majority of religious congregations (Kosmin and Keysar, 2009), whereas men are more likely to participate in science. For example, men make up the majority of computer science (81.8%) and engineering majors (80.8%) (NSF, 2002-12). In addition, 24% of college aged men major in various "hard" sciences[4] whereas only 11% college aged women do so. Even though it is important to remember that these are not mutually exclusive bodies of knowledge, the conflict present displays the gendered framework of these ideologies. The gendering of these ideologies supports their oppositional construction.

Research Questions

For this research project, I address the following research questions: what do the micro level interactions amongst Atheists reveal about what it means to be "Atheist"? For example, what beliefs (political or otherwise) inform how Atheists see themselves and their relationships to others? In addition, what interactions and what structures and socializing institutions (e.g. education, family, religion) have affected a person's decision

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[4] These include: Agriculture sciences, Biological sciences, Computer sciences, Earth, atmospheric, oceanic sciences, Mathematics and statistics, and Physical sciences.

to self-identify as Atheist? For example, did this decision come about as a part of a process and through various interactions, as Smith (2011) and Church-Hearl (2008) suggest? How do Atheists manage any perceived stigma that they might encounter? In addition, do Atheists see any parallels between their experiences and those of other stigmatized minorities? Next, do female Atheists perceive or report that they seem to face different interpersonal consequences when they identify as "Atheist" than males do? Finally, how do these individuals explain women's overrepresentation among religious organizations and the underrepresentation in Atheism?

What is an Atheist?

Before I even attempt to answer these questions, I discuss "What does it mean to be an Atheist?" This is a question that is often asked by my colleagues, my friends, my family, my students and even the occasional stranger who happens to ask me what I research. In addition, it is a question that I ask the women and men in my study. An *Atheist* is literally someone who has the absence of belief in a god. In other words, it is someone who does not believe in god or someone who undergoes everyday activities without the inclusion of a "God." One of the reasons this definition causes some confusion is because there are agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, and skeptics who may or may not also be Atheists. Agnostics are those who are not entirely certain if god exists. Humanists are individuals who have "a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspect to the greater good of humanity" (American Humanist Association, 2003). Freethinkers are those who chose to use reason to guide their interactions with others without the inclusion of biblical texts or biblical arguments. Skeptics tend to

question, examine, analyze, and search for various forms of truth. Whether one labels oneself a humanist, a freethinker, or a skeptic tends to be based on personal preference than anything else. As I stated previously, not all of these people are Atheists, but some Atheists consider themselves agnostics, humanists, freethinkers and/or skeptics. For example, there are humanists who are spiritual and feel connected to the earth and world around them, but they do not consider themselves Atheists. Some Atheists are also humanists because this is a positive way to define oneself (adhering to a belief system) rather than in the negative (absence of belief). Some Atheists are agnostic since they may not have proof the god does not exist, but still contend the evidence of his existence is not sufficient enough to prove that this being is real. All of these labels connote nonbelief in organized religions to an extent especially when it comes to questioning belief as well as interacting with others without a religious ideology. In addition, those who identify as Atheist range in their degree of proselytizing. There are what some of my participants labeled "flaming Atheists" and also "closet Atheists." "Flaming Atheists" are those who are loud and proud and attempt to de-convert or at least argue with the religious. I personally think of the recently deceased Christopher Hitchens as a good example of this. On the other hand, closet Atheists are those who keep their non-belief to themselves and avoid conversations about religion. These individuals may also choose not to seek out other Atheists like themselves.

In addition, whether one chooses to even capitalize the term, Atheist, is also complicated. I have explicitly chosen to capitalize the term "Atheist" when I use it. I have chosen this tactic in part because religions, like Christianity, are capitalized. Now, many may argue Atheism is not a religion, so treating it like one may be ill-advised, but it is

important to examine Atheism in relation to the religious presence within U.S. society in order to see how Atheists deviate from cultural norms as well as if Atheism is a coherent movement or social group. Furthermore, it is also important to keep in mind that this dissertation is written from the Christian point of view because of my own personal experiences with Christianity and also because of the Christian hegemony present within the U.S. I was raised in a fairly liberal Christian home where going to church was something that was not required of all of us (my dad rarely attended services), but highly encouraged. When my brothers and I became teens, my mother let it be our choice to attend church and I did. I attended church mainly because I developed friendships with those who attended and this became an avenue to socialize. I discuss these personal experiences in more detail in Appendix A and how they have played a role in my point of view as a former Christian. In addition, it is important to see how these experiences have also shaped my understanding of the relationship between Atheism and religion (particularly Christianity).

In the next chapter, I will discuss my use of sociological theories developed by Symbolic Interactionism (including dramaturgy) to examine the questions I have proposed. I will also discuss the feminist theories I use in my analysis. In addition, I will discuss what research methods have been used to collect data to answer these research questions.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Approach and Methodology

Theoretical Approach

Symbolic Interactionists like Mead and Goffman focus on how people interact with one another and how meaning is created through these social interactions. This approach is sometimes referred to as "social psychological" because it attends so closely to the relationship between micro level social interactions and identity construction. Mead and Goffman particularly examine how individuals navigate certain social situations as well as how an individual's self-concept or identity changes and develops depending on her interactions with others.

Symbolic Interactionists, including Mead and Blumer, delve deeply into an individual's psyche and how this has social implications. They examine the importance of language and labels in these interactions. Blumer (1969) explicitly notes that "symbolic interactionism sees meaning as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact" (p.5) A Symbolic Interactionist examines how meaning is created through the interactions people have (Mead, 1967), thus, making it appropriate for this examination of how female Atheists understand and explain their decisions to identify as Atheists. Mead (1967) theorizes that people's interactions affect their self-perceptions and how they view others. For example, Mead argues that the self is inherently social since one creates the generalized other in order to participate in social situations. The generalized other is the predicted behavior of another person who will react to one's own behavior. As individuals interact with others, the self develops and is shaped by her understanding of how others (more specifically the generalized other) will react to her. According to Mead (1967), the self is composed of

the "Me" and the "I." "Me" is the aspect of someone's self that is reflective and is the byproduct of socialization; this is also how someone is perceived by others (p.140). On the other hand, the "I" is the aspect of someone's self that responds to others, has agency, and is how the individual perceives herself. According to Mead, the "Me" and the "I" together make-up the self, which is always reacting and adjusting to society. Blumer (1969) notes that being reflexive is a key element in Mead's self, stating "this reflective process takes the form of the person making indications to himself, that is to say, noting things and determining their significance for his line of action" (1969; p. 63). The development and socialization of the self is tied to the interactions she has. It is then perpetuated and reinforced by the generalized other (i.e. society) accepting or punishing this behavior. When this behavior is considered contrary to norms, or deviant, this will also affect the development of the self. Atheists, who live in the U.S. South, a region that is predominantly Christian (Protestant or Non-Catholic)[5], may be particularly reflexive and affected by the norms of the Christian community and their interactions with those who view them as deviant.

Importance of Language and Labels

One essential aspect of social life is communication, according to Mead (1967). Humans communicate through the use of language and gestures. Language is inherently social and, since we cannot have thought without language, that means that human thought is inherently social as well. The construction of meaning, Mead argues, depends upon the achievement of a common understanding through communication, which

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[5] According to ARIS (2008), for Southern State 1, 66% of the population is composed of "Other Christians;" for Southern State Two, 73% of the population is composed of "Other Christians." "Other Christians" includes all denominations of Christianity besides Catholicism. It is also important to remember that both Southern cities may not reflect this religious composition.

consists of gestures and language. Language, thought, and social interactions are interdependent. Individuals constantly negotiate with the boundaries of social life and are also shaped by the boundaries constructed and maintained by members within society. These boundaries are signified with the use of language and terms. Labeling theorists examine how people with power (perhaps due to their alignment with hegemonic culture, like Christianity) use labels to signify difference and also deviation from cultural norms (Schaefer, 2012; p113-114). For example, the term "Atheism" would be unnecessary in a society that is secular. Schaefer (2012) notes that for labeling theorists, "it is the response to an act, not the behavior itself, that determines deviance" (p.114). Many people who do not believe in god, but also do not consider themselves Atheists; and these individuals may encounter less stigmatization than those who adopt the label of Atheist. Labeling theorists, building from Symbolic Interactionism, examine how these labels affect the self-perceptions of those who are labeled. In addition, the directionality of labeling is very important. Whether someone labels herself as "X" or someone else labels her as "X" suggests authority and power on the behalf of the one doing the labeling. An individual self-labeling connotes embracing an identification whereas when someone else labels her connotes subjugation. Ferguson (2002) found that school teachers view African American boys as adults with malicious intent, often labeling them as "criminals" and/or "looters." These labels generated fear of all African American boys and men. With this in mind, how might the label "Atheist" affect those who actively self-identify with this label? Because Atheists identify themselves with a label that has a negative connotation, they seem to be choosing a position that is contrary to social norms. This may affect how Atheists see themselves in either positive or negative ways. Atheists who identify with

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the label may come to accept and embrace it, regardless of its negative connotations and its impacts on their social support networks and interactions.

Goffman and Self-Presentation

Although Erving Goffman refused being labeled a Symbolic Interactionist, his dramaturgical perspective draws upon Symbolic Interactionist concepts such as Mead's "self" as well as builds upon Kenneth Burke's theories that propose that humans are "symbol using animals" (1966, p.16). Goffman extends these theories by examining the symbolic meaning of interactions between people as performances. These performances are based on how an individual perceives her audience and how she believes this audience will interpret her behavior. One's presentation of self, which includes one's gender, is situated specifically around one's audience. Specifically, he views these interactions as "social situations" (1963; p. 12). These social situations vary though especially in terms the extent to which the actors are of being observed or monitored by others. He argues that an individual (or actor) varies her performance in relation to being "on" (someone's front stage performance) to being herself without feeling like she is being evaluated or watched by others. For example, someone who is at home or around intimate others may be more relaxed and may do certain things that could be read as inappropriate. One's front stage performance demands that the performer be aware that there is an audience and she should manage her performance on the fact that she is being perceived by others. Additionally, there are also different levels of how one manages one's front stage performance. For example, one may be aware that what is being presented is surface acting versus deep acting.[6]

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[6] Hochschild coined the terms, surface acting and deep acting in her *The Managed Heart* when she discusses how flight attendants manage their interactions with their "customers."

The main difference between surface and deep acting is dependent upon how conscious the actor is of her performance and her audience. Deep acting refers to when an individual is less conscious of the meaning created by her actions and surface acting refers to when an individual is actively aware of the actions she is doing and the meaning behind these actions. This type of acting can also be applied to enacting particular religious rituals or "doing religion." For example, Mahmood (2004) examines how surface and deep acting are done within Muslim communities and how this behavior is read as being genuine/authentic/good Muslims. One group of the women in Mahmood's ethnography believe that by doing certain rituals that they will begin to feel more spiritual and connected to god. Others in her study believe that one can only do the rituals once one has established her spirituality and closeness to god. In addition, Mir (2009) highlights how female Muslim students regulate their bodily and gendered behavior and interactions in order to be perceived by the Muslim community as a whole as good young women. In public, several of the devout Muslim women physically segregated themselves from young men in order for others to read their behavior as appropriate for young Muslim women. On the other hand, several of these women circumvented certain gendered prescriptions and adapted their behavior to allow for unsegregated behavior to occur. For example, even though young Muslim men were not allowed in the rooms of young Muslim women, they would use the Internet to allow for discussions to occur in private while still being physically separated from one another.

From this perspective, meaning comes from interactions (or performances) and this shapes our perceptions of ourselves (our identity) and/or our future interactions with others. More specifically, Symbolic Interactionism examines people as agents (or actors

for Goffman) who have agency and create their own meanings. Pevey et al. (1996) found that despite being devoutly religious, many Southern Baptist women appeared to be flexible in applying their church's teachings to their personal lives. In addition, Bartkowski and Read (2003) found that even in Evangelical and Muslim communities in which many families believe in submission, but each family could decide what this submission means within the family. These researchers look at how women rationalize and create their own meaning within religious circles. Furthermore, their identities are shaped in conjunction with these micro level interactions.

Identity

Goffman examines the complicated relationship between self-presentation and identity construction. Specifically, he notes that an individual's identity is composed of one's virtual identity and her actual identity. One's virtual identity is how others perceive this person and one's actual identity is how she perceives herself. He argues that these aspects of one's identity (both virtual and actual) are not always seamless nor mirror images of each other. In addition, he notes that one's identity is tied to "identity pegs" or what is viewed as unique markers to this person's identity as well as one's personal biography. He argues that personal biography is not simple. He claims that biography is not about a single story, but is multifaceted and complex. Part of the reason why personal biography is complex is because a good deal of one's personal biography is linked to biographical others and their perspectives. He argues that when we think of someone's personal biography we want to make direct connections (casual inferences), but we cannot "really" do this because we do not know the entirety of the various perspectives made by onlookers or biographers. In order to examine the complexity behind identity,

Goffman suggests that social scientists should examine individuals and groups who are stigmatized.

Stigma

Goffman's (1963) pivotal work on stigma and stigma management explains that being stigmatized or being perceived as having a stigma is undesirable. Specifically, he notes that "stigma […] is really a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype" (p. 4). These stereotypes and the stigma embedded in these stereotypes are created and managed through our interactions with others. Goffman notes that those who are perceived as being different and who are subsequently stigmatized are viewed as "not quite human" (p.5). He states explicitly that "we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce [her] life chances" (p. 5). As a result of this potential discrimination, many individuals undergo stigma management. Goffman's theories on stigma and how individuals manage their performance accordingly and how they are perceived may also be quite beneficial when analyzing Atheism. According to Gervais, Shariff, Norenzayan (2011), one group that is widely stigmatized is Atheists. Atheists tend to be viewed by their dominant society as more distrustful than other marginalized or deviant communities (including rapists) (Gervais, Shariff, Norenzayan, 2011). Since Atheists may be aware of their stigmatization, they may manage their performance accordingly especially in mixed contacts. Individuals who are believed to be different (especially when they face discrimination) may attempt to conceal this aspect of their identity. For example, the United States is predominantly Christian and those who are not Christian may be classified as deviant and treated differently because of their

stigmatized or spoiled identities (Heiner, 1992). Stigmatized groups have been examined in terms of visibility and non-visibility (Taub et al, 2003; Frank, 1988; Saxena, 2013; Winnick and Bodkin, 2008), stigma management strategies used (Jellison, 2004; Garneau, 2012; Fitzgerald, 2003), as well as how long individuals have been stigmatized (Snow and Anderson, 1987).

Goffman (1963) explains that visibility is a key component of dealing with one's stigma. In particular, he argues that there are two types of stigmatized individuals: those who are discredited and those who are discreditable. When stigma is visible, then stigmatized individuals are viewed as "discredited." On the other hand, individuals who are less visible are "discreditable." The difference, although subtle, is important. If you are discredited, the stigmatized person may have to be more mindful of and manage her behavior and presentation accordingly. On the other hand, those who have less visible stigma symbols may chose to manage one's stigma by engaging in various forms of information control. Information control can be done consciously by the stigmatized individual or by those around her. For example, one's family may choose to control information about someone's stigmatized identity by creating and maintaining a "protective capsule" to protect their loved one (p. 32). Goffman notes that when a family protects this person, she may find out about her difference when she begins public school and interacts with peers. On the other hand, a stigmatized individual who becomes aware of this stigmatization, she may choose to blend in with society in order to not draw attention to her actual identity. In this way, she is maintaining both her virtual identity and her actual identity by managing information directly tied to her stigmatization.

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Community

One aspect of social life that exposes the importance of interactions and identity can be found in one's community. As members of society, individuals need positive social interaction, and fulfill that need by participating with other social actors in a community (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Goffman explains that those who are stigmatized or suffering from some perceived moral failing may find community with others who are also stigmatized (with someone's "Own"). These individuals may form the basis of someone's "real" group. Within this group, certain codes of conduct or behavior may be advocated for or warned against. Goffman notes that those who are stigmatized and have formed a group may be "warned against attempting to pass completely," "minstrelization," and "normification" (p.109-110). Minstrelization is when a stigmatized individual behaves in a manner that draws upon common attributes that are perceived to be attributed to this group. On the other hand, normification is when a stigmatized individual completely takes on the norms of society or "engage in careful covering" (Goffman, 1967; p. 110). Failing to abide by these codes of conduct may call into question someone's group membership or her "authenticity" (p.111). This group membership allows for these stigmatized individuals to have a place in which their stigmatization is less of an issue, which allows them to blend in and to be themselves (or engage in what Goffman would consider back stage performances). Even though an individual who is stigmatized may choose to avoid group interactions (and also these codes of conduct), she may still interact with those who are "wise" (as Goffman labels them). These "normals" are keenly aware of stigmatized others because they are related to someone who suffers from the same stigmatization. For example, Goffman notes that

normals who are "Wise" may be able to read certain behavior as an attempt to circumvent differential treatment because they have witnessed this behavior before by people who they know who face similar stigmatization. Furthermore, as people begin to interact with others who are different and labeled as deviant, their prejudices of this group of individuals diminishes. Goffman notes that "the whole problem of managing stigma is influenced by the issue of whether or not the stigmatized person is known to us personally" (p. 55). Gervais' (2011) contends that as people get to know those who belong to a stigmatize group, like Atheists, one's perceptions of what it means to be Atheist changes.

Stigmatization Management

As Atheists come to identify with stigmatized labels and become conscious of how this label affects their interactions, they may proceed to manage their behavior when interacting with others. Specifically, Goffman calls stigma management a form of information control and that those who are stigmatized utilize various techniques to affect how others perceive them. In addition, Goffman explains that those who are stigmatized undergo various phases as they attempt to manage their stigma. The first is "learning normal point of view and learning that [s]he is disqualified according to it" (p. 80). The second phase is learning to cope. Finally, he notes that those who are stigmatized learn to pass.

Passing

Stigma management occurs when those labeled as different feel compelled to alter their behavior in order to manage stigma. Those who are not Christian may manage their performance of self (how they "do" religion) when they interact with Christians in order

to avoid negative consequences. The same is true of Atheists who may have more motivation to alter their behavior than non-Christian religious adherents. For example, one study finds that Atheists are one of the least trusted groups in America (Gervais, Shariff, Norenzayan, 2011). Atheists, who are aware of the negative attitudes toward non-believers, manage their self-presentation accordingly by attempting to "pass" as Christian or generally avoiding religion as a topic of conversation. Goffman notes that individuals can pass by: avoiding stigma symbols, controlling who knows about one's stigma, and/or taking on "another" attribute, such as someone who is hard of hearing takes on "daydreaming" in order to cover up this disability. Someone's attempts to pass can be risky though, especially since one can be discredited by those who know and as such, an individual may have to exercise tact when it comes to engaging with individuals who know this sensitive information.

Because of this stigmatization, Atheists manage their behavior in order to avoid negative repercussions. Since Atheists are not easily identifiable in terms of their visibility, many avoid disclosing in order to "pass" as Christian. In addition, Atheists may use subtler strategies for avoiding negative interactions when compared to individuals who perhaps suffer from mental and physical disabilities (like the ones discussed by Goffman himself). Some Atheists may use label substitution in a quest to avoid negative interactions. Label substitution occurs when an individual chooses a more acceptable label in order to evade the negative consequences of the identity she embraces. For example, at least one participant called herself a Buddhist and others labeled themselves as Humanists in order to avoid the stigmatized label "Atheist." Atheists often describe themselves as going in and out of the closet, depending up on the social context. Since

"passing" appears to be a way for Atheists to manage stigma, it may be helpful to look to the LGBT community as a comparison case; they have also used similar strategies to avoid stigmatization. Hylton (2006) when examining queer and bisexual individuals, found that denying and avoiding this identification was fairly common. In addition, Siegal et al (1998) examined how gay and bisexual men with HIV managed stigma through multiple strategies including proactive measures, like education, as well as reactive measures, like hiding one's HIV status. The LGBT community in particular seems to play a significant role in role modeling behaviors and strategies that Atheists use in their interactions. This will be discussed further in chapter five.

Fitzgerald (2003) identifies four ways that Atheists manage stigma in today's society: 1) selective concealment; 2) selective disclosure, 3) open disclosure; and 4) complete disclosure" (p. 127). In addition, she divides these management strategies even further when she explains the subtypes of these strategies. She contends that within the strategy "selective concealment" there are subtypes including: passing, the use of direction, and nondisclosure (p. 127). She argues that even within these subtypes there are various types of passing, for example. She notes that these types of passing include: avoidance (avoiding the topic/conversation), assumptive passing (letting people assume he/she is Christian), and contradictory activity participation (participating in religious activities to avoid conflict with others, primarily family). The use of indirection strategy involves various tactics including: "label substitution, and the telling of half-truths" (p.129). Within "selective disclosure" she notes that there are various forms of selective disclosure including: "responses to inquiry" and "political disclosure for educational

purposes" (p.132). Finally, Fitzgerald notes that the last strategy used by her participants was the use of open and complete disclosure.

Unfortunately, the region in which these individuals live goes unexamined by Fitzgerald. Ten years later, Garneau (2013) found that secular individuals (including Atheists) in the Midwest manage their perceived stigma by utilizing secretive strategies (in the form of avoidance), negative strategies (denying it), and proactive strategies (being open about this aspect of their identity). The strategies chosen by Atheists affect their interactions with others, especially those who are religious including "distress related to having a secular status" (p. ii). Although Fitzgerald's and Garneau's work are very thorough, they do not examine the role of gender within this stigmatized group. While it might seem like gender is insignificant to non-religious stigmatization, gender should be examined in order to understand any underlying meaning created when individuals self-identify as Atheist as well as the effect being Atheist has on both men and women.

Atheism and Gender

Atheists, and women who are Atheist in particular, may find their defiance of cultural and gender norms meaningful. Atheists, like other social actors, find meaning through their interactions and perceive certain interactions particularly salient in forming their identities. For example, some Atheists may have formerly participated in religious rituals, but found that these rituals failed to generate meaning for them. In addition, since Atheists are perceived to be amoral, immoral, distrustful, hostile, and perhaps even Communists (see chapter three), this identity appears to conflict with the society in which they live. To be an Atheist means to defy normative constructions of morality in the U.S.,

as it has been constructed by the Christian Right since the 1980s. In addition, this self-identification presumes an assertive stance that places the person in direct opposition to her culture, especially in the United States. This assertion tends to come with a presumed gender, masculinity. In the United States, not only is it more expected for women to participate in religious rituals, it is also expected that they will conform to normative gender prescriptions, which include passivity rather than defiance or agency (Kimmel, 2013). Therefore, women who self-identify as Atheists, are defying normative constructions of femininity. Not only is it suspect for *anyone* to deviate from societal norms and self-identify as Atheist, but since women are already placed in a disadvantaged position in patriarchal systems like the U.S., why would they add to their subjugation and difference? Furthermore, since women are not always liked for being assertive (even when it is a part of their job description), this gendered behavior tends to be patronized rather than accepted. It is very likely that Atheists could perceive or report that women seem to face different interpersonal consequences when they identify as "Atheist" than men do. Furthermore, female Atheists may actively avoid any perceived stigma that they might encounter because of these potential consequences. Women in the U.S. (as in many countries) are expected to take upon the childcare duties, which include teaching morality. As such, how could individuals who are perceived as lacking morality, instill this in their children?

Gender also affects identity construction and, like religion, is not a "thing" but a set of relational practices (Kimmel, 2011). Connell (2005) notes gender is socially constructed primarily because it is set of "social practices" (p. 79). These social practices or behavior serve to construct someone's masculinity or femininity in relation to the

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gender order within society. As such, gender is, not only believed, but it is done (West and Zimmerman, 1987). It is complex, historically situated, and a process. To "do" gender is to manage one's physical, psychological, and social behavior including one's social interactions, which are based on one's social situation and one's social location. West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that "gender […] is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (p. 5). Furthermore, "to 'do' gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behavior *at the risk of gender assessment*" (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p. 13 original emphasis). Risk assessment is especially important when it comes to doing gender. When others judge one's behavior as either normative or deviant, there are real consequences. Regardless, the individual constantly interacts and does gender in her everyday life. Whether one's gender is considered normative or deviant is based on how society perceives this enactment. In addition, an individual may become conscious of how her gender is being done (in particular how it is being perceived) if she receives negative sanctions because of this behavior. An individual only has as much agency as the social structure will allow because pre-existing norms and customs may restrict her ability to act. West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that gender is based on someone's interactions and these interactions are not necessarily limited to a particular social location or social moment; they are historically and contextually situated. Gender is an on-going process that develops as we grow and interact with others and our socializing institutions.

In addition, researchers like Avishai (2008) extend West and Zimmerman's theories of doing gender to examine women's religiosity by reframing it as a constructed

status or as "doing religion." In "'Doing Religion' In a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religious and the Question of Agency," Avishai makes an analogy between "doing gender" and "doing religion" and uses this as a heuristic device to "emphasize the constructed nature of religiosity and the enactment of religiosity in the context of social norms and regulatory discourses" (p. 413). Specifically, she argues that religion, like gender, is also something that one does and is accomplished. She notes that doing gender is viewed as an unconscious performance whereas doing religion is "semiconscious, self-authoring" (p. 413). In her examination of gender and Orthodox Jewish rituals, she argues that religion is done through specific rituals performed in order to adhere and perform niddah (a cleansing practice related to menstruation). Furthermore, Avishai notes that religiosity is the process of becoming religious and that religiosity appears to require agency on the part of the believers. In addition, several of the women attempted to define their actions in opposition to the persistent image of the secular other. Finally, she contends that it is not "necessarily strategic, oppressive, empowering, or an ethical exercise of docility" (p. 428). The women in this article view practicing niddah as a part of who they are and they do not see it as a simple process, but one that is done in order to show their religiosity. As such, being religious is a constructed status. In line with this, if being religious is a constructed status, then being nonreligious or Atheist is also a constructed status. Atheists undergo certain behaviors (such as rejecting god and self-identifying as Atheist) and this stance requires agency on the part of the individuals. In other words, being an Atheist also a conscious enactment that is done, viewed, and constructed in relation to its opposition. In addition, the actions of questioning religion, rejecting god, and "coming out" as Atheist may be perceived as masculine behaviors,

especially since these behaviors go against normative expectations of women. Even though Avishai argues that the analogy between "doing gender" and "doing religion" is not "seamless" (p. 413), this theoretical framing aids in the examination of religiosity as something that it constructed in relation to one's interactions and actions.

In addition to gender being "done" and constructed, it is also commonly viewed under an "either-or" paradigm. Under this paradigm, one is considered either masculine or feminine. Masculinity and femininity are positioned as opposites. Kimmel (2011) notes that masculinity historically has been examined in relation to what is feminine. He explains that "historically and developmentally, masculinity has been defined as the flight from women, the repudiation of femininity" (p. 138). He argues that as boys develop they are "supposed" to reject feminine behaviors in order to prove their masculinity and also their heterosexuality. Distancing oneself from feminine behavior and rejecting this behavior is one way to define oneself as masculine. Failure to successfully prove one's masculinity, especially if you are a boy, can be quite problematic. In a patriarchal society, this also means that masculine behavior is most valuable and desirable. Despite this, women who distance themselves from feminine behavior and behave masculine (when compared to men who behave masculine) may be viewed as suspicious because they deviate from gender norms.

Even though Atheism is a stigmatized identity, it is likely to be more stigmatizing for women than for men. This is because U.S. gender ideology defines masculinity as assertive, rebellious, and independent. When a man flouts social conventions, even religious ones, he does not defy gender norms. When a woman, on the other hand, ignores social conventions, it is doubly stigmatizing. Since Atheists manage their

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perceived stigma, they undergo risk assessment regardless of their sex. If Atheism equals assertiveness (depending on the level of disclosure) and men are supposed to be assertive, then despite going against religious norms, they are not defying their gender norms. On the other hand, women are challenging both. This may also be why women are less likely than men to identify as Atheists (Zuckerman, 2009).

In addition, history suggests that women, like other minority groups, have been constrained and guided by norms, law and social contexts – even by physical force. These constraints effectively regulate a large portion of women's interactions. They have guided women's career choices, their dress, body language, comportment, use of public space, educational attainment, political and economic power, and reproductive freedom.[7] Furthermore, since patriarchy continues to block women, as a group,[8] from powerful positions, their subjugation persists. These norms and regulations have over time become normal and generally accepted by society at large. Despite the rise of individualism that has occurred over the past century in the U.S., women may be less likely than men to believe that they can act on their own. Women, who identify as Atheist, as I will discuss in chapter three, find their identification with this label "freeing."

As I suggest here, there is a gendered path embedded within U.S. culture and provides the context in which someone may be motivated to become and identify as Atheist. In West and Zimmerman's (1987) theories, gender is all encompassing and cannot be distinctly separated into situated moments.

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[7] It is no coincidence that women's reproductive rights are intertwined with religious and political rhetoric since both have historically dictated women's decisions.

[8] Women are still considered minorities and tokens within the highest branches of the economy and government.

Furthermore, Patricia Hill Collins (1986) suggests that certain groups of people may be more keenly aware of their status as minority members within a given community and, therefore, may provide an interesting perspective to examine. Specifically, she explains that many Black women throughout history have been required to become immersed in the lives of white families because they were expected to work for and inside the homes of whites. Over time this allowed for these women to become aware of how whites perceived Blacks, which allowed them to become "insiders" to an extent. Due to their race, they could never fully "pass" as an insider, but instead resulted in the development of an "outsider-within" perspective. Researchers such as Schlit (2011) have used this theoretical framing to examine how FTM transgender individuals function as a group with this "outsider-within" since they can "pass" as men. Specifically, Schlit found that several of her stealth participants could see how their experiences as women and their experiences as men compared as well as revealed subtle forms of sexism within the workplace. Atheist women may be a group who can have this "outsider-within" status since they live in a society that expects women to be religious. As such, these women may be acutely aware of the "contradictions between the dominant group's actions and ideologies" (Collins, 1990; p. 12). Their perspectives as both insiders (due to their visibility as women) and as outsiders (due to their status as Atheists) may allow for researchers like myself to examine some of the nuances related to being Atheist and stigma management they undergo.

In order to examine the nuances discussed above in terms of Atheism and gender, one must observe everyday interaction and this can be done from a Symbolic Interactionist perspective. A Symbolic Interactionist approach has allowed me to examine

how Atheists see themselves and their relationships to others as well as how they explain women's overrepresentation in religious organizations and their underrepresentation in Atheism.

Research Design

Feminist Methodology

In addressing these research questions, I draw upon various qualitative and feminist research strategies. As Smith (1990) suggests, being aware of my positionality as a woman who identifies as an Atheist is vital to my investigation. As such, I recognize that my own beliefs (including my own gendered and nonreligious beliefs), how my personal history has led me to do research on this topic, and how my interactions with others have shaped the course of my conversations with other Atheists. With this in mind and as a Feminist, this does not mean that my experiences are not valid or relevant; instead, they have been recognized as socially created and treated as being subjective (Gottfried 1996; Harding 1987). My interactions and my sense of self are socially constructed. My identity, including my gender, is as socially constructed as is participants'. Therefore, it is vital that I am reflexive about my own interactions and my sense of self. What I see as being "correct" or "valid" are based on my interactions with others as well as my interactions with institutions. Furthermore, my sense of self (how I see myself—Feminist and Atheist) is shaped by these interactions. For example, I have internalized particular structures, been disciplined to look for specific things, and have to make conscious effort to be aware of my own ideological bias (Feminist, sociological),

my personal background in relation to particular socializing institutions (religious, familial, and educational), and my interactions with others.[9]

Being objective is something most researchers would say is of the upmost importance. As Smith and other Feminist theorists and methodologists would argue, being completely objective is very difficult; recognizing subjectivity is not necessarily problematic when conducting research. Smith notes that sociologists cannot "stand outside" of a socially constructed world (1990; p. 22). This positional approach allows for the researcher to consider her own standpoint while focusing on others. Smith particularly notes that the "bifurcation of consciousness" that is expected of sociologists is problematic since it attempts to circumvent their own experiences (1990, p.17). Much like Smith, Morgan and Smircich (1980) argue that researchers are active participants during the research process. "Scientists can no longer remain as external observers, measuring what they see; they must move to investigate from within the subject of study and employ research techniques appropriate to that task," they observe (Morgan and Smircich 1980, p.498).

As an insider, I have had access to female Atheists, who are a fairly "closeted" group.[10] This insider status comes with benefits and potential costs. One benefit is that I have rapport with this community and have been considered an equal and an "insider." One potentially negative consequence of my insider status is the increased risk that I could take advantage of participants and not engage in reciprocity (Gottfried, 1996; p. 69); but this would be the case in any research project. Because of the risks associated

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[9] Please see Appendix A for a discussion of my journey and my reflexivity.
[10] I use this term intentionally since one trend that has emerged from these participant observations of Atheists and Humanists and focus groups of female Atheists is the similarity between how Atheists see themselves and self-identify and how the LGBTQIA community has also used this term.

with research amongst a stigmatized group, I have been honest and respectful in my interactions with study participants to maintain rapport and trust. In addition, I have been clear about my intentions and goals as well as the limitations of my study. Thus far, I find that I share with my study participants a desire to increase understanding and acceptance between religious people and Atheists and between male and female Atheists. However, we both must acknowledge that these are lofty goals that may not be reached. Finally, I have been reflexive in my interactions, interpretations and reporting of my conclusions. It has been important that I acknowledge my social position as an Atheist and a Feminist to the study participants and to my readers, so that they can evaluate my intentions and interpretations accordingly.

Furthermore, since Smith (2011) suggests that the interactions and formation of an Atheist identity occurs over time and through various stages, utilizing qualitative measures, including in-depth interviews and observations, have assisted in my understanding these interactions in greater detail. Qualitative research, specifically interviews and participant observations, have allowed for me to develop personal and friendly (as well as professional) relationships with individuals who may have been hesitant to discuss their personal stories and experiences as they pertain to the development of their Atheist identities.

As a Feminist, I wanted participants to be active in the research process. As a result, I have asked them to review the transcripts of our conversation. If they wanted to add or correct anything that they mentioned in our conversation, they did so. If they wished to clarify or expand upon something that they mentioned, they had the opportunity to do so. Reviewing the interviews with them not only gives them

opportunity to provide further insight into their experiences but it improves my study, by helping me to validate my interpretations of these experiences but also offering an opportunity to learn more about how meaning is created in their lives. Even though I may not always change my interpretation and conclusions based on these reviews, this process has allowed me to develop a greater understanding of their standpoint as a result of this type of interaction. I did not share my field notes on micro-level interactions, however. This is because these notes were based upon focus groups and group meetings that may not include every participant; therefore, they did not necessarily have the context to interpret this work. It also would be a breach of ethics to share information about one study participant with another. I have, of course, discussed with them some of my overall findings and any particular themes that have interested them. For example, my local Humanist Forum asked me to present my findings to the group one Sunday evening.

As a Feminist researcher, it is important for me to consider the role men have in this project. In order to understand how Atheist women manage their stigmatized identity, I must compare these to experiences men have had. With this in mind, the research I did with this group may also be limiting because of my sex. For example, how serious were my concerns listened to by a mixed-sex group of Atheists? In addition, did male participants give socially acceptable responses when asked about their relations with women because I am a woman? On the other hand, women may have been able to view me as an ally. It is also possible that my presence as a researcher could have seemed threatening to this community. Female participants may also be more willing to disclose sensitive information to me because I am a woman. Since this research began before and after I had a child, this experience may have also influenced how participants respond to

some of my questions. For example, would they be less willing to discuss their reasons for not wanting to have kids if they know that I have a child? As a society, we tend to define women by marital and parenthood status moreso than men.

Research Methods

My findings are based on data collected from 51 one-on-one interviews, 28 participant observations (14 Humanist Forum meetings—11 from southern state one, three from southern state two, 10 Atheist meetings from southern state one, and four public events from southern state one) and four single-sex women only focus group meetings from southern state one, which ranged from three to fifteen participants per session. I have analyzed documents handed out at Atheist and Humanist meetings and events in two southern cities located in college towns. I began this study using snowball sampling to recruit participants amongst the people I met at these meetings. Then I started introducing myself and my research and passing out my card to solicit a wider range of study participants. Across two separate southern cities, I conducted forty interviews with self-identified female Atheists and eleven interviews with self-identified male Atheists. I intentionally oversampled from the female population since they are the focus of my study (despite being a small portion of the entire Atheist community) and I wanted to get as many varied perspectives from this group as possible. In addition, women's voices within this community appear underrepresented (Kosmin and Keysar, 2009; Baker, 2012; Cimino and Smith, 2007). As such, I based my decision to finalize data collection when I reached thematic saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The interviews focused on the process and consequences of becoming an Atheist: when and how that happened, how she[11] has developed a sense of morality, how she was raised, and if she has had any negative experiences because she is an Atheist. I also asked for general opinions about women, children and childcare, and current political events.[12] In addition, I asked how their beliefs affect or have affected their relationships with coworkers, family, and their friends. During the interview, I actively listened and participated through appropriate and relevant self-disclosure. My upbringing, for example, was often relevant to our conversation. Gottfried (1996) notes that self-disclosure is a necessary part of having a Feminist methodology since it builds rapport and establishes my intentions and investment in the project. Researcher self-disclosure may influence whether people participate in my study as well as how they responded to my questions. I have considered this throughout my study, especially while interpreting the women's stories (Maxwell, 2005). As I examined the transcription of the interviews, I noted patterns and trends that emerge from the interviews (Glaser and Strauss 1967). I then identified themes in their remarks. In addition, I paid close attention to how Atheists describe themselves. For example, many Atheists have used the phrase "coming out" to describe the extent to which others know their nonreligious beliefs.

In addition to interviews, I have conducted participant observations of Atheist and Humanist meetings. By examining both Atheist and Humanist groups, I aimed to identify some of the micro level interactions amongst Atheists and how these reveal about what it means to be "Atheist." For example, political beliefs as well as various philosophies may inform how Atheists see themselves and their relationships to others. Furthermore, there

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[11] I'm intentionally using the female pronoun since women represent the majority of my sample.
[12] See attached questions in appendix

may be some differences and similarities between the Humanist and Atheist groups. Many Humanists may not consider themselves Atheists, but some Atheists may consider themselves Humanists. Because the meetings I have attended include both men and women, this also provides me an opportunity to observe the gender composition and dynamics of these groups. In one southern city, I was able to attend Atheist and Humanist meetings, but in the other southern city there was only a Humanist Forum. The focus groups, in contrast, were female-only. I made this choice because I wished to create a safe space for women to share possibly sensitive information about gender roles and relationships. I actively participated in the focus groups, as a female Atheist myself. I arranged these meetings and advertised them. I went to these focus groups with some questions/topics to get the conversation going such as their concerns or issues they wished to discuss regarding their nonreligious beliefs and experiences. I allowed the conversation to go in whatever direction the group wanted. During meetings and focus groups, I noted the basic demographic (estimated age, race, and sex) information of those who participate. I also identified themes and patterns present in these interactions. For example, I documented recurrent topics, and principles/ideals that seem to be valued by the group. I did not collect names of those who attended meetings or focus groups nor did I record audio.

In addition to interviews, participant observations, and focus group meetings, I examined public materials collected at Atheist and Humanist meetings. In my examination of these documents, I have looked at patterns and trends presented in the language as well as how these documents supplement ideas presented during the meetings themselves.

Context and Sampling Strategy

My analysis, though focused on the micro-level interactions of women Atheists and their self-reports of self-identifying as an Atheist, also includes social and historical context and place to make sense of their self-identity and social position. I examine the broader history of Atheism in the U.S., with particular emphasis on the role of women and the construction of gender in American Atheism, generally (see, for instance, Zuckerman 2009; Gervais et al 2011; Gervais 2011; Edgell 2006; Block 2005; De Vaus and McAllister, 1987; Ecklund and Lee, 2011).

I have taken as inspiration Fraser's (2000) examination of the history the separation of church and state in the United States as well as ethnographies (Scott, 1995; Leathwood and Read, 2009; Lowe, 2005) that place communities in a historical context in order to understand current dynamics even though participants may not have been knowledgeable of this history. In particular, American gender ideology and its relation to religion and Atheism may affect how female Atheists see themselves. Block's (2005) research on irreligious women in the Pacific Northwest from 1950-1975 indicates that being a woman and being an Atheist seem to conflict with societal gender prescriptions. These gender prescriptions also suggest that it is more socially acceptable for men to identify as Atheists than women.

The demographic composition of the two southern college cities also provides an important part of the context through which these women Atheists' experiences and identity construction must be interpreted. Based on the U.S. Census, one city has about 300,000 people, and the second has about 110,000. Both are college cities. The second

city has about 13,000 students (12 percent of the city's population). The racial

composition of the universities is similar.

Since Whites and Asians are more likely to be Atheist than are African Americans

and Hispanics (Zuckerman 2009), racial and ethnic composition is an important factor.

Based on the 2012 U.S. Census, the racial composition of both cities is comparable. Both

are predominately White, though the second city has a higher proportion of Blacks and

the first has a somewhat higher percentage of other racial/ethnic minorities (see Table 1).

Table 1: Racial/Ethnic Composition of Southern City I and Southern City II.

	Southern City I	Southern City II
White	73 %	71 %
Black	14.5 %	20 %
Other	12.5 %	9 %

Sources: U.S. Census 2010_____

Education also has an effect on identifying as a "None" (and being an Atheist for

that matter) (Sherkat and Ellison, 1999; Zuckerman, 2009). For example, Sherkat and

Ellison (1999) note that "Educational attainment increases the likelihood of relinquishing

affiliation with religious organizations, and exceeding the educational attainment of peers

in the denomination of origin prompts apostasy and religious switching (Sherkat 1991

and Sherkat and Wilson 1995)" (p. 368). In 1990, 28% of U.S. college graduates over the

age of 25 considered themselves "Nones." In 2008, this percentage increased to 31%

(Kosmin and Keysar, 2009). In the first city, 39.3% of the population has Bachelor's

degrees or higher. In the second city, 37% of the population has Bachelor's degrees or

higher. Again, the two cities are similar. Although the above average rates of college

educated residents might lead one to predict an higher than average Atheist / None

population and greater tolerance for Atheism in these cities, both of them are located in

the Southern "Bible Belt," an area characterized by Protestant religious fundamentalism and social conservatism. In addition, Zuckerman (2009) found that belief in god was strongest amongst southern states such as in Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, and Louisiana.

Based on the American Religious Identification Survey from 2008, these two cities are located in two similar states that are also similar in their religious composition (Kosmin and Keysar, 2009). Both states have seen a slight decrease in the "Other Christians" population as well as a growth in their "Nones" population. This variation does not necessarily suggest that "Other Christians" become "Nones" though. For example, these statistics do not account for migration, which would affect the demographics of each population. It is also important to remember that the religious composition of the college towns may not reflect their state's demographics.

Table 2: Religious Composition of Southern State I and Southern State II

State	Catholic	Other Christians	Other Religions	Nones	D/K	Total
St. I 1990	13	77	1	7	2	100%
St. I 2008	14	66	1	13	5	100%
St. II 1990	6	86	1	5	2	100%
St. II 2008	9	73	2	10	6	100%

In sum, though the second city is only about a third of the size of the first, in most other ways these cities provide similar contexts for studying female Atheists.

Age is also another factor that I have had to account for in this study. Zuckerman (2009) notes that the majority of Atheists are young (18-34) where as only ten percent are over the age of 65.

Table 3: Age Composition of Southern City I and Southern City II

	Under 18	18-24	25-44	45-64	65+
Southern City I	21.3%	14.6%	33.2%	20.9%	10%
Southern City II	18.4%	17.2%	28.5%	20.6%	15.3%

The median age for Southern City I is 33 years and the median age for Southern City II is 34.

I started attending Atheist meet-ups in the first southern city in 2011. I have participated in ten participant observations of Humanist meetings since January 2012 and eleven Atheist meetings since June 2011 in the first southern city. In addition, I have held four women only Atheist focus groups. I began to examine female Atheists in the spring of 2011 with IRB approval. I completed thirty interviews in the first city in July 2013. In the second southern city, I interviewed 10 Atheist women and 10 Atheist men during the summer and fall of 2013. I have attended three Humanist forum meetings.

Transcription of interviews began in July 2013 and finished in March 2014. As transcriptions were completed, I have made every effort to contact the person I interviewed to see if she or he was interested in reviewing the transcript. She or he was given the opportunity to clarify or expand upon points made during the interview. In addition, I might have had a few follow-up questions (to help clarify my understanding of our conversation). Since the first southern city is a college town, many people graduate

and move away. In addition, since I began my study in 2011 and transcriptions were completed in 2014, it is possible that a few people will have moved or lost contact. I have been very fortunate to have kept in contact with a several of the participants (17 out of 30) in my study (via Facebook and e-mail). I was successful in hearing back from 83% of participants (or 25 out of 30) from the first southern city. In the second southern city, I heard from 81% of participants (or 17 out of 21).

Since the Fall of 2013, I have attended Humanist meetings in the second southern city. Since I was new to the area, I had to establish rapport with this community. The Humanist group in this city gave me the opportunity to meet more Atheist women and men. Since both cities are college towns in the South, the Atheists I interacted with in both towns have proven to have striking similarities. These similarities have helped me identify micro-level variations and factors that are important to the understanding of female Atheist identity development and gender performance.

Demographics of my Sample

Over the course of three years, I interviewed 51 participants in two southern cities, forty of these were female and eleven were male. I intentionally wanted to have women's experiences at the forefront of my research in part because this group is a small portion of the None community and I wanted to make sure that my investigation highlighted women's experiences.

The women in my study ranged in age from twenty to seventy one. The majority (22 out of 40 or 55%) of these women were between 20-30 years old. The men in this study ranged in age from thirty-two to eighty eight with the majority (6 out of 11) of these men over sixty-five.

In terms of racial composition, the majority of participants were white (82 %) while four female participants noted being of mixed racial heritage, one female participant was originally from India, one female participant was white, but from Europe, one female participant was white, but from Russia, one male participant noted being Hispanic, and one male participant was white, but from Europe. Unfortunately, there were no African Americans who expressed interest in participating in my interviews. Furthermore there were only a handful of African Americans who occasionally attended Atheist meetings.

The majority of my sample (82%) professed being heterosexual (female and male participants), but nine female participants noted their sexual orientation as either lesbian, bisexual, or queer. Twenty-four participants were married including one lesbian couple. Five were divorced. One was separated/single. Seven were in long-term relationships or in a domestic partnership. One was engaged. Ten were single. One was a widower and one was a widow. Amongst those who were in relationships (married, engaged, or long-term relationships/partnerships), eight participants claimed that their significant others self-identified as agnostic; twenty-three participants noted that their significant others

were Atheist (I was able to interview three couples); one participant believed that his wife would probably classify as an Animist.[13] Twenty-six participants had kids. Five female participants noted that they did not want to have kids. One male participant noted that he wanted kids, but is married to a woman who does not want kids. Nineteen participants did not have kids.

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[13] Unless the spouse participated in my study, I did not ask them to speculate on their significant others' experiences.

Educational background was also an interesting variable. Amongst women, one had only graduated high school, one had technical training, three noted they had "some college" whereas 23 had at least a bachelor's (or were in pursuit of this) and twelve participants had or were in the process of obtaining a Ph. D. The majority of the male participants (7 out of 11) had at least a bachelor's degree (only one had just a high school education and at least four of them had a Ph. D or professional degrees). These professional degrees ranged in disciplines including English, Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy, and Dentistry. Two female participants were in the military.

Table 4: Educational Attainment of Participants

	High School	Technical Training	Assoc. Degree	Some College	BA/BS	Post-bacc	MA/MS	Ph. D
Women and Men	2	1	3	4	15	1	9	16

The largest group (14 out of 51=27%) of participants were raised Catholic (practicing and non-practicing). The next largest group (10 out of 51=20%) of participants were raised in nonreligious households including someone who noted that she was raised "Secular Jewish." Nine participants were raised in Christian households (nondenominational). Four participants were raised Jewish. Four were raised Lutheran, four were raised Baptist, two were raised Episcopalian, one was raised Methodist, one was raised in the Unitarian Universalist church, one was raised in the Church of England, and one was raised Mormon.

The following chapters will discuss these demographics in relation to themes identified in the interviews, participant observations and focus groups. Chapter three will

discuss the beliefs (political or otherwise) that inform how Atheists see themselves and their relationships to others. Chapter four will briefly discuss what structures or socializing institutions (e.g. education, family, religion) have affected the decision to self-identify as Atheist as well as the process in which people come to identify and self-label as Atheists. Chapter five will discuss the stigmatization of Atheists and how Atheism deviates from cultural norms, which will include how the nonreligious community compares to the religious community. In addition, I will also discuss if there are any perceived similarities between Atheists and others who have a minority status such as the LGBT community. Chapter six will examine the role of gender and stigmatization. It will address whether or not gender is significant in terms of any perceived stigmatization Atheists have encountered. Finally, chapter six will examine how participants explain women's overrepresentation among religious organizations and the underrepresentation in the Atheist community.

Chapter Three: Defining Atheism

[…]
Atheists just sing the blues.
[…]
But no one ever wrote a tune.
(Wrote a tune)
For godless existentialism.
(For godless existentialism)

For Atheists,
There's no good news.
They'll never sing,
A song of faith.

In their songs,
They have a rule.
The "he" is always lowercase.
The "he" is always lowercase.
[…]
Atheist songs add up to nada.
(Up to nada)
But they do have Sundays free.
(Have Sundays free)

[…]
Atheists,
Just take a pass.
Watch football in their underpants.
Watch football in their underpants.

Atheists
... Atheists
... Atheists
Don't Have No SONGS!
(Don't Have No Songs)

----"Atheists Don't Have No Songs" by Steve Martin and the Steep Canyon Rangers

Even though Atheists may appear to have "no songs" as Steve Martin and the

Steep Canyon Rangers contend, they do sometimes meet in churches. In fact, one of the

first times I met a large number of Atheists (who primarily identified as Humanists) was

in a historic home that was a part of the Unitarian Universalist church. The crowd was quite large (about twenty- five in all, I estimated that eight of these participants were in their 20s to 30s and the rest were fifty and above, and everyone was white except for one Asian American man). As the discussion began and as more and more people joined (and literally grabbed chairs and sat wherever they could including the hallway), our moderator suggested that our next meeting occur within the church's great hall next time. Since I had never been inside this particular church, I was filled with anticipation. What would the inside of this church look like? How would this space affect our interactions? I had been to various churches before including large "megachurches" as well as a church that was basically a trailer. From this experience, I concluded that most of those who attended were critical of religion primarily based upon topics of conversation which ranged from "when is it critical to call religion out?" to the line between church and state.

The next month, I arrived with notebook in hand and ready to take notes. As I walked from the parking lot, I saw signs outside the building for the Humanist Forum and also signs for a yoga club, which used another part of the church. As I entered the lobby, I turned to the right and saw a few tables lining the walkway filled with brochures, pamphlets, and stickers on Humanism and Atheism. In addition, the group's moderator greeted people as they entered. The room was a large circle and about ten rows of chairs were arranged in a semi-circle. There was a podium at the front of the room for a guest speaker to present. Tonight's meeting was to celebrate "Darwin Day." Specifically, our guest speaker was a local paleontologist who was going to discuss how scientists have studied rocks and how scientific evidence found in various layers of the earth debunk creationist arguments. Despite this, in all honesty, being one of the most boring talks I

have attended, I could understand how this topic was important to everyone who came. Our speaker discussed how examining the formation of rocks and fossils could show how species evolved over millions and millions of years, which utilized Darwin's theory of evolution. Even though this evening's meeting was a bit different than the normal meetings, which I found out later were more discussion based rather than presentation or lecture based, it allowed me to make inferences about some of the core components of Atheism. Specifically, this presentation suggested that engaging in scientific inquiry and critical thinking (primarily in the form of asking questions and examining evidence) is important to Atheists. In order to find out how Atheists perceive Atheism (directly from their perspectives rather than just making inferences based on discussions and lectures), I proceeded to conduct one-on-one interviews with self-identifying Atheists.

Throughout this entire process, the distinction between agnostic and Atheist was important to these participants. This distinction became apparent because our conversation would often begin with a brief discussion of these terms. This conversation would either end in me giving them my contact information, scheduling a meeting, or a clarification that I am only interested in those who self-identify as Atheist. During my conversation with participants, I explicitly asked them: "What does being an Atheist mean to you?" This question allowed for me to get a better understanding of who they are and exactly what they believe. In addition, a few participants clarified for me what they believed are the differences between Atheism and agnosticism. For example, Ivy[14], a thirty-six year old white woman who is in the military, explained that, "I think as an agnostic you are still looking for a right answer…you know, "without knowledge" and so you are kind of going back and forth and weighing the decisions." More specifically,

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[14] All names have been changed to protect the identity of these participants.

Jackie, a forty-seven year-old woman originally from India, added that, "And technically, people say if you don't know whether god exists, that's agnostic; and if you think god doesn't exist, then you're Atheist." This distinction is important since Atheists appear to be "taking a position" on their identity whereas agnostics do not believe they have enough evidence to prove or disprove the existence of god. For example, Eve, a thirty-four year-old white woman explained when comparing her position with her husband's, "I'm more taking a position, 'this is where I stand.'" Denise, a twenty-seven year-old white woman, explained the firmness of this label and position by suggesting that, "The label Atheist seems like a strong label: "I know there is no god." Agnosticism seems a little softer, because it seems to be more about saying that a god is just un-knowable." As Ivy, Jackie, and Denise explain here, agnostics seem a bit more skeptical in their own belief than Atheists, who appear more resolute in their stance. In addition, several participants noted going though "agnosticism" to eventually get to Atheism. Agnosticism, to many of them, referred more to questioning their religious upbringing or belief system before eventually identifying as Atheist. For example, Ivy explained:

> I think I began to be agnostic in my late teen years and that really stuck with me for a long time until I guess about 29 or so is when I decided to go full Atheist. My husband at the time for Christmas had given me *God Delusion* and I was on my way to my first tour to Iraq. I read it before I got on the plane because I didn't want anyone to see me reading it. And so my experience through Iraq and seeing the atrocities and all of that I was finally like "Okay, you know, this is ridiculous. I am just going to come out of the closet and be an Atheist."

Not only was Ivy aware of potential stigma this skepticism could have, she altered her behavior accordingly since she did not want anyone to witness her reading one of Richard Dawkins' books. In addition, Ivy's former husband appears to have supported her nonbelief though she does not note if he was agnostic or Atheist at this time.

Furthermore, Ivy's phrasing "full Atheist" suggests that identifying and feeling comfortable identifying herself as Atheist was something she was actively undergoing. For individuals, like Ivy, her journey from agnosticism to Atheism helps in highlighting the slight difference in these classifications and her journey. Later, her experience in war helped her confirm her disbelief in god.

When I asked other participants about their Atheist identity, twenty individuals noted that being an Atheist means that they do not believe in god or any supernatural elements controlling or impacting their lives. For example, Kathleen, a thirty year-old racially mixed mother of one, noted, "I think it means just not believing in any supernatural being out there controlling your actions." One participant made an important distinction as he clarified his definition of Atheism. Andrew, a sixty-seven year-old white man, "For most Atheists, it's not someone who believes there is no god but someone who doesn't believe in god, which is an important distinction." As I understood his explanation, an Atheist is not someone who knows that god does not exist, but rather someone who does not believe that a supreme being controls or curbs human action. Andrew defines individuals who believe that god affects their actions as "theists." This particular identification would be considered an "agnostic Atheist."[15] This label means that despite believing that there is no evidence to prove or disprove the existence of god, these beliefs do not require certainty. A few others discussed their disbelief in god in terms of morality. For example, Sarah, a thirty-five year-old white mother of three, explained, "Being an Atheist means I don't look to the supernatural for answers or morality." For Sarah, like several others, looking towards realistic and logical

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[15] This is not a term I coined, but one of many used amongst the Atheist community.

explanations for why things happen as well as thinking about what is right and wrong outside of religious principles are key aspects of being an Atheist.

Asking questions and finding answers outside of religious teachings helped many participants feel empowered as well as self-reliant, as nine study participants emphasized. For example, Gwen, a thirty year-old white woman, explained her stance by first explaining what she believed the differences are between being an agnostic and Atheist. Gwen noted:

> I guess I should clarify what I think agnostic is; like [believing that] there's something out there, but it's not for you to know. [on the other hand] I think Atheist [means] even if there is something out there, there should be some way [god] should let us know. And what [does] it even matter if there is something because it shouldn't control your life. So I just don't believe in anything, I honestly just believe in "you do you," you're in charge of your own destiny.

This feeling of empowerment and defining your own future reinforces their sense of agency, or having the power to enact change in their lives. Henry, a forty year-old Hispanic man, asserted that, "being an Atheist, to me, means that my will is my will. And my choices are my choices." For several individuals, this stance is freeing. For example, Karen, a twenty-seven year-old white woman explained that to her being an Atheist means:

> Freedom. I have felt so controlled by religion. "You must do this, you must never do that." And being an Atheist means that I am free to make my choices based upon my own mor[als]. This is especially true not only for actions, but also thoughts. I don't have to agree with people. It's perfectly fine to say something is bullshit without fearing a heavenly reprimand.

Karen, like many others, noted that the freedom to examine and question the world, especially as it relates to fear, helped her feel like it was okay to be different. This feeling also allowed others to examine their beliefs from various perspectives.

Several participants noted that being an Atheist has allowed them to be open to various perspectives. For example, Helen, a sixty-three year-old white woman, explained, "Atheists try to go beyond the narrow mindedness of strict, dogmatic religion because life is much too complex to fit within the narrow confines of most religions." For individuals like Helen, looking for various explanations in the world around them allows them to examine their questions by utilizing various ways of thinking that are not limited by religious beliefs. Hannah, a thirty-eight year-old white mother of two, explained that, "I think [Atheism] gives me the freedom to analyze things in a broader perspective." Later, she added:

> I feel like sometimes it's kind of powerful because I feel like I have a good moral compass. I'm a good person. I'm very helpful. And I have no reason other than I want to be a good person and I want to see everybody be a good person. And I don't need the threat of hell and I don't need any guidance from a book to tell me. It's here. It's your conscience, it's your gut. And I understand some people call that god.

For Hannah, like others, being able to examine and analyze things, as she states, from a "broader perspective" seems tied to her feeling empowered as well as her morality.

A few individuals noted that being an Atheist means that "there is no god." It is important to remember that this assertion (there is no god) is different from how many others defined Atheism for themselves. One individual, George, a sixty-three year-old white man, explicitly noted that Atheism is not "a religion." Another participant, James, a sixty-one year-old white male, noted that he likes to think of himself as a "non-theist." He explained that being a non-theist means that he:

> [does] not to fill in blanks with imaginary ideas and you know transcendental figures and... [JP: Supernatural elements, stuff like that.] Yeah. And it may not just be religion that falls into that category of exclusion. You know it could be several other things as well. So I think it's sort of an overarching idea. That this happens to be, manifests the religious part as an Atheist.

For James, being a non-theist means that supernatural explanations do not play an important role in his everyday interactions. One participant, April, a twenty-four year-old white woman, noted that being an Atheist is about choice. She explained that, "Being an Atheist, to me, is a very personal choice. And I do see it as a choice, one that could change as I change, since my spiritual beliefs have in the past been flexible and I think it's important to reevaluate such beliefs periodically." April's reflection here suggests that Atheists like herself examine and question their own beliefs (including their disbelief) and these may change, they may grow stronger, or they may disappear since she states that they are "flexible."

Throughout this study, participants noted having varying definitions of Atheism, including those who believe that a god does not exist and those who do not believe that a supernatural being controls their actions. Those who do not believe in a god define themselves in opposition to those who do believe in a god. On the other hand, those who believe that there is no god argued that there is no evidence to prove or disprove a god's existence. It is also important to note that the divisions noted above are malleable, but reflect the language used by participants. In addition, a few mentioned that their cultural background, primarily their experiences with their families (such as having Jewish heritage) or being raised in other countries (such as Russia, Austria, India, and England) affected their identification.[16]

Morality

One key aspect of Atheist identity is related to how others perceive Atheists as lacking morals. As Goffman (1963) indicates one's actual identity (how she see herself)

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[16] As I note in chapter four, several participants had families that served as a "protective capsule," which later affected their identification (Goffman, 1963).

and one's virtual identity (how others perceive this person) are not always the same. For example, research indicates that the general public views Atheists as individuals who do not have a moral compass or a guide for determining what behavior is right and what is wrong (Zuckerman, 2009; Gervais et al, 2011). On the other hand, Atheists would not agree with this assessment. With this in mind, I asked participants how they developed a sense of morality. The majority of participants (26 out of 51) noted that they believed they developed their sense of right and wrong from their parents or other family members (like grandparents). For example, Bettie, a twenty-three year-old white woman from Russia, explained that she developed her morals from "family modeling." She added:

> There still is the "treat others the way you wanted to be treated" and I didn't even know that was a religious thing until last year. To me, it was just something that was said in the community. Just my grandparents spending time telling me how people acted, and a lot from reading. I would read literature and we would talk about how people acted, stuff like that. I think I developed my moral beliefs just fine. So that was never a concern for me. I have morals and values because I know I do. I know right from wrong. I learned them from my family.

As Bettie explained here, her interactions with her family, which included reading and discussing literature, helped develop her understanding of right and wrong. A few others noted how specific family members, in particular their mothers, guided their sense of morality especially since it was not directly tied to religious principles. For example, Paula, a thirty-seven year-old white mother of one, explained:

> It was 100% from my mom. I mean, don't get me wrong, she gets on my ever lovin' last nerve. […] but I remember at one point we had gone to the grocery store [and] we had checked out but something got left in the cart that didn't get rung up. It was actually dog food left at the bottom of the cart and the person didn't see it. So we're walking and my mom goes "I don't think we paid for this." And I was like "yeah," and she was like "I sure as hell would have remembered lifting something this heavy" and so we looked at the receipt and we hadn't and she goes "okay," and […] we need to go in and pay for it and I was like "mom." I just wanted to get home. And so you have to stand in line and she did it. And I've done the exact same thing with [my daughter]. I mean it's just stuff like that that I

remember. When I was four or five, I wanted a picture frame and my mom said no and I put it in my pocket and then we got in the car and I was like "look." And she was really upset and she made me go in and apologize. So yes, so my mom's morals were not based because of a book because it was a Christian thing. Or the Jewish thing to do or the Rabbi tells us or the priest tells us. All of the morals were never like that. It was "this is because this is the right and human thing to do." If there is a spider in the house, you don't kill it. You put it in a cup and put it outside. If there's someone alone on the playground and doesn't have a friend, you go over and say hello to them you know that, all that came from my mom.

Paula, like a few others, believes that her mother modeled morality, but also made sure she understood what is socially acceptable and what is not. Paula's understanding of morality is also tied directly to her humanity, as she explains when she says, "'this is the right and human thing to do'" rather than moral values linked to any particular religious teachings. As a mother myself, I find Paula's lessons in morality particularly striking, especially as my daughter learns phrases like "not nice." These experiences and reflections show me how individuals who do not believe in religious principles convey to their children what is the right thing to do and how these actions affect others. Experiences like these also can suggest to those who do believe in god that role modeling, especially on the part of the parents, can instill morality without having to refer to religious teachings. These reflections of experiences and the meaning they have for these participants are vastly important to understanding Atheism and how Atheists are social actors within society primarily because this suggests that many of them do not define themselves through ideological frameworks directly, but through their interactions with others and their understanding of their obligations as human beings within society.

Several participants noted that they learned right and wrong from their overall socialization with others. Heather, a twenty-three year-old racially mixed woman, noted

that her development of morality was just like everyone else's, through her socialization

with others. She recollected:

> I think that I developed a sense of morality the way everybody does and that is
> through learning that you don't treat people like you wouldn't want to be treated.
> […] I learned my morals just like everybody else did you know. You get hurt by
> someone else when you're a kid and you realize, that's not the way you should
> treat people. So you should be a living example of how you would want people to
> be treated… how you want the whole world to treat each other.

Heather, who was raised in a nonreligious home, was not alone in believing this. Another

participant, Bonnie, who is a fifty-seven year-old white woman, explained that her

morality was shaped through her socialization with various aspects of society. She noted,

"I got my morals the same way that everyone does. Laws, regulations, community

culture, my parent's ethics and morals, and role models." Though Bonnie does not label

her acquisition of morality as stemming from socialization, the fact that she is calling

upon various sources suggests that her morality developed over time and through her

interactions with others.

Several other participants noted that their morality was something that came from

within themselves. Four of these individuals referred to evolutionary psychology to argue

that morality is already embedded in human nature. For example, Brian, a seventy-three

year-old white man, explained:

> We evolved a code of conduct really to help us live together as a group. And so a
> lot of the way we interact with people, treat people aren't learned; some are. But I
> think the basic drive to be nice to another person, to help other people and on the
> downside, selfishness; it's all evolutionary traits. So that morality is not a blank
> slate. That, and if you look at all the cultures, they all have a lot of commonality.

Unlike Brian, Debra, a twenty-five year-old white woman explained morality in a slightly

different way when she asserted that, "I think everyone comes with an innate sense of

what's right and what's wrong." Two others noted that their morality stemmed from their

empathy. For example, Chris, a twenty-eight year-old white woman who is from Austria explained:

> I think a lot of my sense of morality comes from my sense of empathy. Seeing somebody else in pain or seeing that somebody else is miserable makes me miserable. And knowing that if I was doing this, would make this person feel bad or hurt that person, I think that's kind of what… in a way triggers all the rules I've set up for myself of things not to do. I'm sure there are societal influences, but I kind of think that's what it comes down to. "You didn't take somebody else's stuff because you'd feel miserable if somebody took your stuff." So, you've just developed that rule: don't take other people's stuff. I think it's kind of like an absolute that you don't do to other people what you don't want them to do to you.

The Biblical "golden rule" has become a secular trope in the U.S., appears to be a major guiding philosophy that helps Atheists navigate moral issues. Another individual noted that although she does not know where her morality comes from, she explained that she has a strong moral core. Rebecca, a sixty-six year-old lesbian woman and who was raised Catholic and almost became a nun, explained:

> I remember going on a high school retreat and seeing a movie, the movie about the liberation of the concentration camps by the allies and the bulldozing of bodies. And I remembered, I think that's the moment I became a moral philosopher. It was just so clear to me that that was wrong. That anything that would justify that would be wrong. You know, just sort of basic, rock-bottom bedrock moral commitment and that was not ever tied to things like god's will or anything like that. I mean, I wasn't that kind of a religious person, and it was fairly easy for me to give up religion. And I think that that's partly because somewhere, somehow, I had a really strong moral core.
>
> You know, my dad was a nice guy; my mother was not so nice. You know, I don't know if I had strong role models. I just, I don't know where it came from. But trying to do the right thing. And then when I ended up in philosophy I ended up in moral philosophy. So I don't think that my morality is in any way tied to religion. And I think that it's not admirable when morality is tied to religion. Um, if you're doing things to avoid punishment after death…[JP: It doesn't seem like the right reason to be doing it.]
>
> You know, you do it because it's right, because other people deserve it. So, I don't think that religion, even though religion does dictate morality for a lot of people, tells them what's right and wrong, I just never seemed to have that idea. I got in trouble in the convent with the priest for… theology. For not agreeing. So, I

was willing to say, "that can't be right." So I think the philosopher was always there, that's what's much more at my core.

For Rebecca, despite having very specific memories of atrocity, she could not necessarily say where her morality came from nor refer to god to contextualize her understanding of these events. On the other hand, she recognized that her morality is liked to the premise that you do something because it is the right thing to do, not because religion told you to do it. Rebecca also concludes that one of her major reasons why she got into trouble was for disagreeing with the priest. She also appears to view religion in relation to the hierarchy present in Catholicism, especially when she fails to agree with the authority figures. Another participant, Amanda, a seventy-one year-old white woman, explained that her morality was tied to her being thoughtful which included asking her parents "why." Gina, a sixty-eight year-old white woman, recalled that:

> I've always tried not to step on other people's toes or take more than my share; I just feel internally motivated that way. I've never felt a need for any external motivation for that. I guess like I said, I was an only child and my parents were both intelligent people and they raised me to just be sensible, fair minded, [and] not selfish.

Not only does Gina give credit to her parents, who socialized her to be a conscientious social actor within society, but she also believes that her morality may have been "internally motivated." Gina appears to be conscious of the impact her parents had in assisting in the construction of her identity, but she also seems to be implying that this internal motivation may have been pre-wired into her being. Even though many of these participants did not explicitly say that their morality was innate, the way in which they described their values and their perception of justice were linked to some innate feature associated with the human species.

A handful of participants said that education played a major role in shaping their morality. Abby, a twenty-five year-old white woman, explained that, "I was always a big reader and I was really into education. My aunt was a kindergarten teacher so I think most of it came from that [education and school] instead of religion." Francis, a twenty-nine year-old white woman, noted that "a child learns morals from their parents, school, and those raising them. Church does NOT have to be a part of a child's upbringing for them to have a solid moral foundation, be a good, upstanding citizen" (original emphasis). Since one of the purposes of education is to instill civic responsibility, which includes how to treat others, Francis' and Abby's explanation aligns with the goal this institution.

Another handful of participants (all men) explicitly said that their religious upbringing shaped their understanding of right and wrong. For example, Andrew, a sixty-seven year-old white man, explained that his religious upbringing affected his understanding of what is right and wrong. He noted:

> I was and continue to be greatly impressed by the Christian notion of 'love your neighbor as yourself.' In fact, it's an amazing philosophy actually. To love one's neighbor as oneself as oneself. That seemed totally noble and the complete opposite of sordid; and I've admired that, not that I'm in any way saintly. I've got many negative traits, but that is my view. I was influenced by my religious upbringing, but I know many children who were raised in a non-religious household and have exactly the same viewpoint.

Andrew suggests here that his religious upbringing affected him greatly, but he also recognized that many individuals who were raised without religion have the same understanding. Four participants said that they did not know where their morality came from. One participant said authority in general shaped her morality. Finally, one participant said that someone once gave her advice when it came to being in a position of

power by telling her to "not be an asshole." Although this piece of advice was given by a colleague, she noted that she has used this philosophy to help guide her interactions with others more generally.

Overall, the major explanations participants gave when discussing how they developed their morality included: family, socialization in general, an innate sense of morality, education and religion. It is important to remember that socialization in general occurs over time and individuals are influence through their interactions with various institutions and their interactions with each other.

What Informs the Atheist Identity?

Just as Atheists base their morality upon a variety of sources, they also base their identity on a diverse set of perspectives and experiences. By examining these perspectives and experiences in more detail, we can determine what is meaningful for Atheists. These perspectives and experiences include political ideology, philosophy, and literature. Although I have decided to foreground the interviews I conducted during this process as my main source of understanding the nuances behind this identity, I also attended over twenty-five events, meetings, celebrations, or conventions on Atheism, Humanism, or Free Thought. During this time, not only did I take notes during these interactions, but I also collected a number of pamphlets, magazines, manifestos, articles, programs, stickers, drink cozies, keychains, and one member even gave me a copy of his book on Humanism. This information, in conjunction with the actual events, allowed me to see how these supporting materials supplemented and/or confirmed what was presented during the interviews.

The most common theme in the interviews, meetings, and meeting materials was an emphasis on pro-social behavior (behavior that is intended to help others). For example, there were explicit attempts by all the groups I observed in both southern cities to be active in the community. This community activism included participating in Highway Trash Pick-up, volunteering at shelters to feed the homeless, having a booth at the annual Gay Pride parade, as well as maintaining local parks and trails. Related to this pro-social attitude was an identification with the Democratic Party, though historically, it would be difficult to argue that the Democratic Party has been more pro-social than the Republican Party. Republicans helped women win the right to vote in 1920 and a Republican president Abraham Lincoln helped end slavery. However, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, a shift occurred in modern politics. During this period, the "Moral Majority," led by religious leaders such as Jerry Farwell, became more politically active. This Christian conservative organization formed political action committees or "PACS" in support of mostly Republican candidates. Over time, this organization became one of the most influential conservative forces in the 1980s. As a result, the Republican Party became associated with fundamentalist Christian values, including opposition to abortion and gay marriage rights. As a result, Atheists may find it difficult to identify with the Republican Party of today.

During the interviews, more than half of these participants (31 out of 51) self-identified as liberal, progressive or Democrat. Seven participants noted that they are socially liberal, but fiscally conservative. Eleven participants specifically identified various issues when they discussed their political views, which included economic issues, separation of church and state, immigration, health care, environmental concerns, as well

as the death penalty. For example, all fifty-one participants supported same sex marriage and gay rights, including adoption and health care benefits. Of these eleven, three described themselves as moderate or just slightly left of center. In addition, two individuals align more with the Green Party than the Democratic or Republican Parties.

All participants believed that pro-social behavior was beneficial to society as a whole. In addition, all participants believed that women should have safe access to legalized abortion. A few qualified this stance by suggesting that ideally people should be responsible for their actions, but ultimately noted that women should have a choice when it comes to their own bodies. Not only did they believe that pro-social behavior was important, twenty-seven participants indicated that these beliefs affect their actions since they volunteer in their communities. These efforts range from working with the local food bank to teaching English to nonnative speakers to political activism to supporting the LGBT community. Another seventeen noted that they do not currently volunteer, but used to do so. Two individuals explained that they are currently looking for more volunteer or community outreach groups. Only four individuals explicitly indicated that they do not currently volunteer. Although it is important to keep in mind that it is not uncommon for participants to give socially acceptable responses, it is very possible that I may have had selection bias since a large portion of participants were recruited from community based groups. Despite believing that pro-social behavior is important, their active engagement within their communities suggest implicitly that for the majority of these participants their behavior and their actions are central to their identity as these relate to their humanitarian efforts within their own communities.

Since I was curious to see the extent to their pro-social behavior and the boundaries they set for themselves, I asked participants if they would be willing to cooperate with religious individuals and organizations and if so, what social issues could they address. Fifteen participants noted that the religious and nonreligious communities should be able to come together and work with one another when it comes to humanitarian issues including natural disaster relief and helping to end poverty. Eight individuals also noted that these two groups should be able to put aside their differences and work towards finding common ground. Another eight individuals noted that it is possible that these two groups could come together, but some of this may occur through the existence of already formed and active groups.

On the other hand, several participants noted that when it comes to dealing with political issues, this collaboration may become problematic and difficult. When asked directly, these participants noted that they believed it would be difficult for these groups to address creationism, women's rights, and issues directly tied to science. Since these issues are not only political, but also are linked to religious beliefs, these participants believed that interacting with those who are religious may prove complicated and perhaps problematic. A few individuals noted that unfortunately there are too many divisions between these groups for them to come together to be effective. From this perspective it seems like since this group is so diverse, it may be hard to find a common cause to fight against, resist, or create change within society.

Other Ideologies?

Even though I did not directly ask participants what other ideologies have affected their worldview, many offered this information during our conversations. In addition,

many of those whom I interviewed were recruited to participate in my study at Humanist

functions. The ideologies that seemed to supplement their existing Atheist stances

included Humanism, feminism, and Buddhism.

Almost the majority of participants (twenty-three participants; eleven in Southern

City I and twelve in Southern City II) noted that they identify with Humanist principles.

One participant, Daniel, a sixty-seven year-old white man, explained how he came to

Humanism when noted:

> And it took me until I was 40 years of age before I even felt comfortable about
> my own beliefs. And one of the major things that sort of crystallized my beliefs
> was Humanist Manifesto when I first read that. Because of it, I found humanism
> at an early age and it said everything that I believe that, in one simple page and
> pretty much everything. And I thought, "Who are these people?" Anyway, that's
> where I eventually got involved with the movement.

The Humanist Manifesto III, which Daniel refers to here, is a revised version of its

predecessor originally developed in 1933. I found this document at several Humanist

meetings. From the beginning, it notes, "Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life

that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of

personal fulfillment that aspect to the greater good of humanity." This also specifically

lists and discusses several creeds. The major six listed exclaim (the information in the

brackets, which has been omitted, are a few sentences discussing the creed):

> Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational
> analysis. […] Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided
> evolutionary change. […] Ethical values are derived from human need and interest
> as tested by experience. […] Life's fulfillment emerges from individual
> participation in the service of humane ideals. […] Humans are social by nature and
> find meaning in their relationships. […] Working to benefit society maximizes
> individual happiness.

These creeds emphasize scientific principles as well as how Humanists engage in service

to help others. In addition, participants, like Daniel, noted that he preferred to define

himself in the positive (actually what he stands for and who he is) rather than in the

negative (a-theism or without god). He explained:

> It's my Humanism that defines me; it's that I don't believe. Atheism is what I
> don't believe; Humanism is what I do believe. And Humanism is really based
> more on my values, not my beliefs and all those values came about believing in
> freedom, reason, conscious, appreciation for this world----[this] beautiful world
> that we've got.

Out of all the participants who discussed identifying as a Humanist, Daniel was probably

the most descriptive (in part because he has written a book on the topic and is very well

versed in the literature).

Another ideology that informed participants' worldview is feminism or believing

in the equality between the sexes. During our conversations, eighteen participants self-

identified as feminists, among them one male. (A second male participant discussed

feminism, but never directly called himself one). During our conversation regarding

women's rights to their bodies, Francis, a twenty-nine year-old white woman, exclaimed,

"I'm very feminist, very pro-woman, own your body, the right to abortion, the right to do

what you want…stripping, I'm opposed to men going to strip clubs, but if women want to

be on the stage stripping and it's their choice…I'm more pro women doing what they

want." Later on, she also noted that she is for "equality for all." Another woman, Olive, a

twenty-eight year-old white woman, noted during our conversation on Atheism and being

a woman:

> I'm sure people find me more… threatening or off putting because I'm both a
> woman and an Atheist. Claiming the A word feels very "in your face" and "no
> apologies" to a lot of people. I've known people that weren't upset by my beliefs
> but were really upset that I insisted on actually identifying as Atheist. I think
> there's an assertiveness linked to the term that is kind of seen as "unbecoming for
> a woman." But I'm a feminist, and I'm off-putting to people for so many reasons
> that it's hard to keep track of them all.

During this casual exchange with Olive, she explained that being a woman and an Atheist can be "threatening," but she also noted that it may be hard to accurately determine what people get upset about when she challenges gender norms. Is it her Atheism or her feminism that people find off-putting? It may be both since these identities may reinforce each other, especially as they relate to being assertive and standing up and speaking one's mind, but this also varies depending upon one's religious traditions. As I discuss these findings, I think is important to keep in mind that I am easily identified as a feminist. I have short hair; I am very vocal about my stance for equality between the sexes; and I teach classes on social inequality as well as classes in the Women's and Gender's Studies Department. If participants asked me what I do, I would say, "I am a sociologist and I teach Women's and Gender studies classes." One would think that, since this is how I present myself, more participants would have self-identified as "feminist" in our discussions since they may have read me as an audience accepting of this perspective; but this was not the case. Now, with this in mind, I do believe that if I directly asked participants about women's equality, they would have readily agreed that women and men are equal and should be treated equally. I was a little surprised that I did not have more men claim to be feminists since I am fairly identifiable as a feminist. In Appendix A, I talk more about my stance as a feminist and my interactions with participants more thoroughly when I discuss my journey to Atheism and also this subject matter.

Another philosophy that resonated with several participants was Buddhism. Specifically, thirteen participants had been affected in some way by Buddhist principles. Thankfully, I felt fairly well versed in this subject matter since I had studied and practiced Buddhism for a short time. Three out of the thirteen participants noted having

examined or studied mindfulness principles. For example, Lynn, a twenty-six year-old white woman, explained mindfulness as it relates to Buddhism when she noted:

> It's essentially just Buddhist philosophy. I identify as a functional Buddhist, but I don't believe in god, definitely Atheist, but like in terms of belief system. It doesn't require belief in anything, and that's what I like about it. It's fully consistent with science and is fully consistent with Atheism. Pema Chödrön has this awesome quote that I feel like totally sums up why I'm an Atheist. She says, "The difference between theism and nontheism is not whether one does or does not believe in god...Theism is a deep-seated conviction that there's some hand to hold: if we just do the right things, someone will appreciate us and take care of us. It means thinking there's always going to be a babysitter available when we need one. We all are inclined to abdicate our responsibilities and delegate our authority to something outside ourselves. Nontheism is relaxing with the ambiguity and uncertainty of the present moment without reaching for anything to protect ourselves... Nontheism is finally realizing that there's no babysitter that you can count on. You just get a good one and then he or she is gone. Nontheism is realizing that it's not just babysitters that come and go. The whole of life is like that. This is the truth, and the truth is inconvenient... From this point of view, theism is an addiction. We're all addicted to hope-- hope that the doubt and mystery will go away. This addiction has a painful effect on society: a society based on lots of people addicted to getting ground under their feet is not a very compassionate place." It's like the idea that meditation and mindfulness of everyday life is rooted in non-avoidance of that, fear of the unknown.

The Buddhist philosophy as discussed by Chödrön helps her to accept ambiguity and be mindful and present in her interactions.

Another participant Elizabeth, a fifty-nine year-old white woman, explained that some of her moral teachings derive from her studies of Buddhism. She noted, "So I've gotten some sense of morality from my upbringing; I've gotten some of it from studying Buddhism and taking Bodhisattva vows. And taking a vow not to harm any living being and just karma." In addition, Elizabeth explained that in many ways being a Buddhist and an Atheist are mutually interrelated when she added:

> I've studied Buddhism a lot and so I have a tendency to really find value in those teachings. And in those teachings there is no god, there's no divine being. So it doesn't make me a bad person. I don't believe that any Atheist is misguided or bad or "sinful." Or any negative judgment.

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For Lynn and Elizabeth, like many others who mentioned having read some Buddhist philosophy, this perspective does not contradict their stance as Atheists, but instead helps to supplement their worldview. In many ways, these individuals utilize Buddhist principles to help guide their lives rather than feel like they have to define themselves from a negative or perhaps combative position.

It is also important to keep in mind that the philosophies noted here are not mutually exclusive. There were at least four individuals who brought up all three philosophies and many who referenced two. On the other hand, there was at least one woman, Betsy, explicitly noted that she does not like "isms." She explicitly noted, "I'm not into the philosophy of Humanism; I don't like isms. Or I don't like manifestos. I mean I support those ideas but I don't like to belong to organizations." Betsy's comments here not only suggests that she does not like "isms," but this also suggests that Betsy may not feel the need to belong to organizations in order to have some sense of community. In addition, Betsy qualifies her discussion of "isms" here by explaining that being linked to organizations rather than their beliefs is what is troubling for her.

Importance of Science

The types of interactions and events that I went to included highly publicized talks (Richard Dawkins came to a nearby university, for example), potlucks/dinners, Darwin Day celebrations, a talk specifically on Darwin, as well as meetings held by the local Humanist and Atheist groups that covered topics such as: education, perception of Atheism and activism, family issues, coming out, religion as child abuse, how to gain acceptance, examining other oppressed groups, and even gun control. Several of these events were quite informative. For example, one convention that I attended had a speaker

who thoroughly discussed evolution, one speaker who discussed her experiences as an Atheist Black woman, one speaker who spoke about the importance of the Scopes Trial, and another who spoke about religion and the military. There were a handful of events held at the local university, but the majority of these meetings were at local coffee shops or churches. Overall, science and scientific theory played a prominent role as an underlying belief system during these meetings. There were times when scientific terms like "string theory," "multi-verse," "natural selection," and "evolution" were mentioned, but not always fully explained. Familiarity with these terms seemed to be a pre-requisite for understanding the Atheistic point of view as well as issues. One of the most celebrated events throughout my entire investigation was Darwin Day. This celebration was held annually to honor the birth of Charles Darwin and talks on this day featured a presentation specifically on one aspect within science that utilizes Darwin's theory of evolution. In addition, cake and other festive goodies were provided. This event highlights how Darwin's theory of evolution is believed to be revolutionary amongst these individuals. Regardless, this theory it is not essential to being an Atheist. In addition, not all those who discuss evolution are Atheists. Again, one of the most important themes noted in all of my research was this openness to various perspectives.

Best Things About Being Atheist

Thirteen participants noted that among the best things about being Atheist was the sense of freedom this identity has. For example, Christy, a twenty-four year-old white woman, explained, "I love being a woman and I love being an Atheist. These things are both a part of who I am and it feels good to be yourself and not constrained by societal expectations." In relation to this, another eight participants noted that being free from fear

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(primarily being judged) and being grounded in reality were, to them, the best things about being an Atheist. For example, Jasmine, a forty-two year-old white mother of one, exclaimed:

> I think it's just that I'm not afraid and I'm not scared of things. To me, I'm so certain in what I believe and what I know that it's just not frightening to me. Life isn't frightening. Life is the exciting part of being here. I think I enjoy my life more than the average person who has all these worries and things like that. There's no fate chasing you, you didn't do something that caused something else. It's not: "why me?" It's why not me? That kind of thing. To me, it's just a free thing because even though 15 years ago I decided I don't believe in this, there is still an evolution within me that my eyes open wider and I gained more freedom in inner thought on it that it changes my inner being.

This feeling of freedom was something that resonated with several others. For some, this freedom allowed them to feel more empowered. Six individuals noted that identifying as Atheist has allowed them to feel more self-reliant and empowered to create change in their world. For example, Gwen, a thirty year-old white woman explained, "I think the benefits are just being a little bit of a lighter spirit. You don't have this weight of 'if I decide to do this then I have to confess' [or] that 'I've thought these thoughts or done these things or not done these things.' I think the best thing is that you're responsible for yourself. I keep saying 'You do you, worry about yourself.'" Another six individuals noted that being around likeminded individuals and forming friendships was a benefit of identifying as Atheist. For example, Daniel, a sixty-seven year-old white man, responded:

> The best thing is I get to be with some of the most, the brightest, creative people who I …. What was interesting is when I was young, I got involved with a humanist group and a lot of, like today a lot of the humanists were older, but I found them younger at heart and mind and spirit than any of the young people I was with. They had already closed off their minds. And here I'm talking to this 85 year old woman who is reading all of this stuff and just excited about life and I'm going, "That's who I want to be like."

For individuals like Daniel, being around interesting and creative people and calling these people friends makes life exciting and full of wonder.

Conclusion and Significance

Overall, this chapter extends our previous understanding of what it means to be an Atheist. For example, the fact that Atheists in my study do not entirely agree upon the meaning of the term "Atheist" shows how varied this group may actually be. Participants' experiences and their understanding of their self-identification highlight the complexities behind this identification. This may also be part of the reason why studying Atheists is a complicated task. Not only do they dispute amongst themselves the definition of Atheism, which may prove troublesome from a quantitative perspective since classifications tend not to leave room for ambiguity, but they also have their morality shaped from various sources. Despite these nuances, there are also many similarities including a strong desire to help others. This desire to help others and attempts at being pro-social aid in changing assumptions that Atheists are selfish and only concerned with present day issues. Throughout this examination and as I met more and more people and talked about their beliefs and their perspective on life, the more commonality I saw. They are individuals full of wonder and questions. They are individuals who not only want to live for today, they care about their fellow human beings. In the next chapter, I will discuss how Atheists come to this identity, and in what social settings this occurs.

Chapter Four: Becoming an Atheist

The previous chapter discussed several aspects of what it means to be an Atheist. This chapter will extend this discussion by describing and contextualizing the process by which someone comes to identify as an Atheist. In particular, I will examine their experiences with religion, family, and education because previous research suggests these particular institutions provide the context in which people may be motivated to self-identify as Atheist (De Vaus and McAllister, 1987; Block, 2005; Sherkat and Ellison, 1999; Zuckerman, 2009; Bainbridge, 2005). These are also the institutions that Blumer (1969) identifies as key decision-making contexts for social actors, generally. Of course, social structures by themselves do not determine one's actions, but instead provide the framework in which decisions and actions are made. In addition, Goffman (1963) indicates a group may choose to insulate one of their own if this person may be perceived as having a stigma. Since my primary focus is to examine the motivation and process behind identifying as Atheist, I will be utilizing Symbolic Interactionist theories to examine the meaning behind the decision to self-identify as Atheist. From this perspective, understanding why participants chose to deviate from cultural expectations is a central question. Building on this theoretical perspective, I will focus on how participants reflect upon their decisions to identify as Atheists. Furthermore, I will be mindful of social location and if and how it may become meaningful when they discuss their experiences. The majority of participants have lived in various states and regions within the US and some participants have lived overseas. As such, they may provide insight into how geographical place may influence their interactions with others as well as the construction of their Atheist identity.

Previous Research

Particular social institutions, such as religion, one's family, and education, are related with the decision to self-identify as Atheist (De Vaus and McAllister, 1987; Block, 2005; Sherkat and Ellison, 1999; Zuckerman, 2009; Bainbridge, 2005). In addition, perceptions of science are correlated to Atheism (Baker, 2012); Ecklund and Scheitle (2007) note that "about 52 percent of the scientists see themselves as having no religious affiliation when compared to about 14 percent of the entire GSS population" (p. 297), which suggests that religious and scientific ideologies may conflict. In addition, Ecklund and Scheitle (2007) also note that "academic scientists who are women, when compared to men, are not significantly more likely to believe in God, believe that religion provides truth, or to regularly attend a house of worship" (p. 300). This finding helps to explain how science relates to the decision to identify as Atheist while also considering how gender differences relate to the decision to identify as Atheist. Furthermore, Sherkat and Ellison (1999) and Zuckerman (2009) argue education in general plays an important role in identifying as Atheist since higher education is correlated with disbelief. Overall, education, and in particular science, appears to relate to likelihood an individual will identify as Atheist.

Other researchers (Keysar and Kosmin; 1995) have also found that religion is connected with the educational levels of women, albeit indirectly. Keysar and Kosmin (1995) argue that religion is linked with women's decisions directly related to family including: marriage and child bearing; these in turn affect how much education a woman gets. One interesting finding they discovered was that white Conservative Protestant women and women who selected "No Religion" were quite similar in educational

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attainment. This suggests that education, at least for women, does not necessarily play a causal role in their decisions to identify as Atheist. In light of this, there may be some prominent gender norms and factors within our society (not directly nor exclusive tied to education) that affect and influence a woman's decision to identify as Atheist. This research also indicates that more qualitative and in-depth research investigating Atheist women's experiences is needed.

Another aspect of women's lives that play a significant role in women's religious identities is family. For example, Edgell (2005) has noted a strong relationship between family and religion. Specifically, she found that religious organizations provide familial support including childcare as well as a sense of community for those who participate with this institution. The family, as a primary socializing institution, serves to provide moral guidance that may stem from (and be reinforced by) a family's religious community. When individuals self-identify as Atheist, they may lose access to this support system and community, which then impacts their social interactions. For example, Bainbridge (2005) contends that secularization of societies is related to declining social obligations, which includes their interactions with their families. On the other hand, Hunter (2010) suggests that "social and social psychological factors […] need to be considered" in order to understand the complexity behind this identification and their interactions with others (p. 24). According to Hunter, both the environment for social interactions to occur needs to be addressed as well as how individuals feel in these situations. For example, one reason why Atheists may be perceived to have declining social obligations is because they do not want to participate in activities that make them feel like they do not belong. Atheists may be less inclined to participate in these activities

(such as family holidays, family reunions, or church services with family members),

especially if religion plays a role in these activities (like praying, singing, or phrases like

"Amen" being used). In addition, the role of family as well as the presence of children is

related to how one identifies as Atheist (Block, 2005; Ecklund and Scheitle, 2007).

Ecklund and Scheitle (2007) found that scientists who have children are more likely to be

religious. Block (2005) notes that women who are mothers find "it most difficult to

maintain stable, secular selves" (p. 66). Having children, as it relates to an individual's

interactions with her family, affects an individual's religious or nonreligious

identification. The addition of children appears to impact women's identity as they gain

social responsibilities related to child rearing and as such, they may believe their

identification as Atheists contradicts (or at least complicate) their identification as

mothers.

In addition, Ammons and Edgell (2007) found that religion influences men and

women differently when it comes to work and family trade-offs. In particular, they

suggest that religion is just one of the socializing institutions that reinforce gender

normative behavior within U.S. culture. They note that for women, "influences on

employment and family trade-offs begin early in life and stem from multiple sources,

being 'overdetermined' by structural conditions and cultural frameworks" (Ammons &

Edgell, 2007; p. 821). In many ways, religion is just one aspect of U.S. culture that

reinforces divisions between men and women and the decisions they make.

In addition to particular social institutions providing the context for individuals to

act, Smith (2011) and Church and Hearl (2008) suggest that the decision to self-identify

as an Atheist unfolds over time as the result of a series of interactions with others. Smith

(2011) notes that there are four major aspects of the construction of an Atheist identity including: "(1) the starting point: the ubiquity of theism, (2) questioning theism, (3) rejecting theism, (4) 'coming out' atheist" (p.219). On the other hand, Church and Hearl suggest that there are six stages of "adopting a minority identity" (p. 21). These include:

> 1. Negative experience with mainstream religion or religious doctrine and/or clergy person's inability to answer questions, 2. Questioning mainstream belief systems, 3. Research on mainstream belief systems, 4. Research on minority belief systems, 5. Rebellion against mainstream beliefs or antagonism towards those holding mainstream beliefs, 6. Redefined concept of god/spirituality and acceptance of newly found beliefs/pride (Church and Hearl, 2008; p. 21).

Despite the similarities between the Atheist identity model and the minority identity model, I find Smith's model more helpful, because his framework emphasizes the construction of this identity rather than just the adoption of this identity, which is important distinction especially as it relates to doing gender and doing religion (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Avishai, 2008). The fact that Smith's model is broader and less specific than Church and Hearl's allows for greater application especially as it relates to examining the various degrees stigma impacts identity construction. Regardless, examining Atheism as a process has allowed me to identify the motivation for Atheist identity and the process by which this identification occurs.

To examine this further, I have chosen to apply Smith's model to examine the process by which participants constructed their Atheist identity. First, I will identify participants' starting points. Next, I will discuss when and why participants started to question the existence of god. Third, I will examine the process of rejecting theism. As I will note later, for the majority of these participants, geographic region did not necessarily become meaningful as they constructed their Atheist identity, except for when

it came to coming out. I will discuss participants' "coming out," as Smith calls it, in

chapter five since this relates to the perceived stigma of an Atheist identity.

Stage One: Starting Point; Religious Upbringing

The primary religious group that my sample was raised in was Catholic (14 out of

51 or 25%); the next largest religious upbringing was nonreligious (10 out of 51 or 22%).

Out of the ten participants in my sample who reported that they were raised in

nonreligious households, seven were native US citizen participants. Several of these

individuals noted that despite being raised in nonreligious households, they still

experienced religion (primarily from grandparents and friends). The third largest

religious group was those who were raised in Christian nondenominational (9 out of

51=18%) households. This group includes those who did not necessarily attend church,

but grew up learning about god from their parents. The next largest groups (4 out of 51 or

slightly less than 8% for each group) were those who were raised Jewish, Baptist, or

Lutheran. The remaining six participants varied in their Christian denominational

upbringing. Two were raised Episcopalian, one was raised Methodist, one was raised in

the Unitarian Universalist church, one was raised in the Church of England, and one was

raised Mormon.

Table 5: Religious Starting Point of Participants

Religious Upbringing	Number of Participants
Catholic	14
Nonreligious	10
Christian nondenominational	9
Jewish	4
Baptist	4
Lutheran	4
Episcopalian	2
Methodist	1
Unitarian Universalist	1
Church of England	1
Mormon	1
Total	51

Within these groups, several individuals noted growing up in fairly religious households. For example, Rebecca, a white sixty-six year old philosophy professor, went to Catholic school, spent six years in a convent, and almost became a nun. Another participant, Henry, a Hispanic forty-year old male, noted that his mother and his mother's family had strong familial ties with the Catholic Church. Henry noted that Catholicism, in particular, was very important to his family. He said that:

> My family was, is very influenced by the Catholic religion. I think when I was young going to church was a big ordeal. It was something that you actually led to, it was led into. So I was really happy to go. That's when I saw my cousins. That's where I saw my aunts and my uncles. It was beautiful until I got in there. And

then after that, I had to be diligent and be quiet. It's not; I don't think that I ever got any of the information from the priest. The priest at that time was (inaudible). And this was in [name of city omitted] Mexico. And later on I found out some other things from this priest. But the thing was that…it was a routine that I sort of looked forward to, because I would see my cousins. And after… being patient for like an hour and a half…we would go play and we would go eat. And it was really nice. And my cousins are very, so very Catholic.

For these individuals, family was closely tied to their religious upbringing. One individual, Frank, a white twenty-nine year old, was raised in a strict Mormon household in which he was expected to go on a mission when he reached 18; instead, he went to college. Another participant, Lynn, who was raised Baptist, was very active with the church and also had very strong religious beliefs when she was growing up. She explained:

We [my family] were heavily involved in this community that was very fundamentalist Baptist, but not as fundamentalist as you can imagine but somewhere in the middle of pretty serious. So I learned my religion mostly from just being a church a lot. The preachers the Sunday school teachers, my parents, to some extent my family; but I think that I was more the teachers at church.

Another participant, Isabelle, a twenty-year old white woman, explained:

[M]y family is very, very religious, and I was too up until pretty much college. I was still pretty religious when I graduated high school with doubts and the doubts kind of expanded. But yeah, so Christianity, non-denominational, not really anything in particular. It was just the church we went to was very modern, really big church in [my hometown] just one of the ones that's a little bit more, I wouldn't say progressive, but in terms of churches progressive.

These experiences laid the foundation for some participants to later ask questions about these beliefs or to examine these beliefs in more depth when they went to college, especially since these beliefs were central to their upbringing and their family lives.

Several participants noted being raised in a religious, but liberal family. For example, Helen, a sixty-three year old white mother of two, went to church occasionally with grandparents and did so more for the social benefits and experiences more than

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anything else. Helen noted that she was raised in a small community where everyone

went to church and she attended because of the social activities associated with her

community. Additionally, Elise and Ivy were raised Lutheran, but their families were not

strict adherents. For example, Elise noted:

> Yeah well, we were raised Lutheran, German family background, so it's kind of a
> familial thing. So, when we lived in Sacramento, so until I was about 10, we
> attended a very large, very beautiful cathedral-esque Lutheran church. I guess it
> was large in terms of congregation size, but it still felt very personal like, we went
> to Sunday school, and the pastors were all very nice, there weren't a ton of them.
> And I mean, that was the main thing. So we went to church every Sunday. Mom
> certainly sincerely believes in it. I believed in it then. But we weren't in this
> super religious thing. It was like a fact of daily life, but it wasn't like a constantly
> emphasized thing. I believed in god. I assumed everyone else did. That's just
> kind of how it was.

Ivy reported infrequent church attendance: "I was baptized Lutheran. My parents had a

Lutheran Catholic background, but didn't go to church. So, I wasn't forced to go to

church, so I was considered more spiritual at that point and the only church I really went

to was when I went with friends." Many of these individuals grew up learning about god,

generally. For example, Jasmine, a forty-two white mother of one, noted that she grew up

with a vague understanding of god. She noted that

> My mom […] believed in god and Jesus, but was not at all religious. So, the thing
> I remember about being a little kid was if I was doing something I was told not to
> do, they would say "baby Jesus is watching." So, I knew there was this thing with
> god and baby Jesus; but as far as religion went, there really wasn't any kind of
> learning process. We didn't go to church or anything like that. As I got older, I
> learned things from other people like commandments and things in the Bible and
> this is what you're supposed to do and not supposed to do. It was random, a
> hodgepodge.

This understanding of religion later stimulated Jasmine's personal investigation into

religion.

As noted previously, the second largest portion of my sample (10 out of 51 or 22%), were raised in nonreligious households. Regardless of this upbringing, these individuals still interacted with friends, extended family members, and the communities who were religious, primarily Christian. Unlike their religious counterparts, these individuals grew up in households where religion was a "non-issue." For example, Debra, a twenty-five year-old white woman noted that

> [Religion] was not really a thing in my family. I never really knew about church until I started spending the night with my friends and they would go to church and I'd go with them. The most I ever learned about religion as a child was the Catholic religion. And I thought it was boring. [JP: Okay, a lot of sitting there and…] So, yeah. I never really read the Bible or any, I never knew anything about it. So I never felt the need to feel any certain way about it, you know.

For individuals like Debra, religion was neither presented nor reinforced in their daily interactions with their families. This lack of religion within these participants' families served as a "protective capsule," which helped to insulate them from being treated differently (Goffman, 1963; p.32). Many of these participants did not begin to realize how their own families differed until they began interacting with children their own age (through school and neighborhood interactions), which I will discuss in the next section. Even though their parents may not have intentionally insulated their children from religion, this insulation allowed for these individuals to learn about religion from other sources including peer groups and education.

Three non-native US citizens noted that their family's nonreligious upbringing played a role in their own identification as an Atheist. For example, Bettie, a twenty-three year old white woman who was raised in Russia, has a mother who is both a scientist and an Atheist. "I'm following my mom's example," she explained. "I kind of started to introspect on the subject and then I realized: 'No, I really do not believe. So I should

probably label it appropriately [as Atheism].'" Chris, a twenty-eight year old woman who

was raised in Austria, also said that her mother's and father's nonreligious views and her

native country's nonreligious culture eased her decision to identify as Atheist. Chris

noted that in her native country being an Atheist is quite common, but it is more assumed

than stated. Jackie, a forty-seven year old woman who was raised in India by two

nonreligious parents noted that for her, being an Atheist was almost a given. Both Bettie

and Jackie had religious grandparents, so they grew up with some knowledge of religion

and religious traditions. Regardless, all three non-natives noted the country in which they

were raised played an important role in their construction of the Atheist identity. For

example, it was only after coming to the U.S. where Christianity was hegemonic that

Chris adopted the label of "Atheist." She recollected that:

> I think I consciously formed the words, "I don't believe there's a god" when I was
> 10-11. I don't think I actually defined myself as an Atheist until I came over here
> [the U.S.] about five years ago. I just never felt the need to put that label on
> myself until I came over here and noticed all this religious pressure from all sides,
> and felt that I had to define myself as "not like you."

For Chris, defining herself in opposition to those around her (especially when she came

to the US) was key in explicitly labeling herself as an Atheist. Later Chris explained that:

> I grew up in Austria, where even though the majority of the population is
> Catholic, I did not feel like my life was greatly affected by being an Atheist. I
> lived in Spain for a year, but in a large metropolis (Madrid), so I did not have any
> conversations about religion, or interactions with religious traditions at all. Living
> in the US now, religion is suddenly far more present in my every day life. People
> expect you to be more sensitive to religious feelings, and public discussions of a
> lot of questions (political, moral, scientific) suddenly involve religious arguments.
> As an Atheist I find it hard to accept the seriousness with which religion is
> incorporated into public life here.

Chris, like others in my study who were raised in nonreligious households whether it was in the US or abroad, appears to be fairly aware of the presence of religion and how it impacts the society in which she lives.

Several of those who were raised in nonreligious households were raised or had lived for several years in places such as California where religion appears to less apparent and meaningful in everyday interactions. According to ARIS 2008, fourteen percent of the population in California in 1990 self-identified as a part of the "NONES" or those who are agnostic, Atheist, or unaffiliated with organized with religion and by 2008 this percentage had increased to eighteen percent (these percentages are almost twice those in Southern State 1 and 2).[17] A few participants who had lived in California, such as Bettie, Francis, and Paula, lived in cities that were very populated such as San Francisco. Amongst these individuals, they noted that religion was not widely apparent in their everyday interactions. Instead, it was not until they moved to other locations such as Southern State I where religion became much more apparent and public.

Some individuals, like Bettie, a twenty-three year old white woman originally from Russia explained that "And when I moved to San Francisco, I only had a handful of friends who ever went to church so for me, I didn't quite hit church areas until I was 18 and moved to Arkansas." Shortly after, she noted that despite religion seemingly more apparent, it had little affect on her interactions. She recollected:

> I was really nervous coming from San Francisco to the Bible Belt, thinking everyone was going to drive me to church. They didn't. I had one lady in an airport tell me that I should have…I'm not really good at answering questions sidestepping, I haven't found one I like yet. I kind of sidestepped that question. I realize people only want to share positive things in their life so I was never angry

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[17] According to ARIS 2008, Southern State 1 "Nones" made up 7% of the population in 1990 and 13% in 2008. In Southern State 2 "Nones" made up 5% of the population in 1990 and 10% of the population in 2008.

if they would suggest their church or community because it was something that they liked. One lady adamantly told me I needed to go somewhere. Other than that, most people were fairly understanding, and when I didn't feel comfortable at that point yet to tell people that I didn't…that's when I was agnostic. I didn't go to church but I wasn't denying [it].

Unlike Bettie, who had fairly mixed interactions (most of which were positive), one participant, Paula, a thirty-seven year old white woman, described how her interactions in large cities which were more nonreligious affected her decision to come out as Atheist when she moved to southern city one. She stated:

Devin and I got loud and proud about it when we moved [to Southern City one] in 2006 because after living in New York and San Francisco, nobody asks you about religion, nobody invited you to bible study. Nothing, it was so great when I first moved to San Francisco after living in [Southern State I] that on Sunday morning it wasn't like a ghost town. People were doing stuff, people were walking their dog, they were at coffee shops, they were in the park, they were just out and about. We never really talked about [religion] when Devin and I got married. Devin certainly did not want any god mentioned in our ceremony. And I was kinda neutral about it. I guess I would say neutral/agnostic about it. And then when we got here we were just like 'no'. I would have to say definitely since I moved to San Francisco 2000ish. I don't know if I ever really put it together like 'I'm an Atheist', I certainly knew what it meant, but I didn't feel the need to really come out because again, it was just such a non-issue with everybody. Nobody gave a damn. It wasn't until that I got here that I was like 'fine, I'm going to have to be an Atheist, I'm going to have to put on a bumper sticker, and tell these people to fuck off.'

For Paula, her experiences in Southern City I were very different than her experiences when she lived in the North and in the West. It is also important to note that many participants, like Paula, noted living in cities like New York, San Francisco, and Chicago, which are much more populated and more diverse[18] than Southern cities one and two. As these individuals came to this identification, several noted that the public presence of religion (or even the absence of religion) within the regions in which they lived had little

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[18] According to the U.S. 2010 Census, New York city population 8, 175,133; Chicago's population 2,695,598 and San Francisco 805,235. The white population in New York is 44%, in Chicago it is 45%, and in San Francisco it is 48.5%.

affect directly on the construction of this identity, except when it came to proclaiming oneself "Atheist" to others.

Several participants explained that having lived in the Mid-Atlantic region within the US in states such as New York or Pennsylvania and within big cities made being nonreligious of little importance. For example, Caroline, a sixty-one year old white woman, commented that religion did not really matter. She explained that,

> Well I lived in New York, I lived in Chicago, I lived in Ann Arbor, I lived outside of New York City in the suburban areas. How did it affect?
> [J: Like being an Atheist, how were your interactions you know; any kind of?]
> C: They didn't come into play. Because it was a very liberal society that I was constantly in. My college friends, my, so religion played no part in anything in my life or in my friends' lives.

For Caroline, religion was not something that impacted her interactions with others, primarily her friends when she lived in places like New York. Other participants noted similar experiences even outside of the Mid-Atlantic region. Several participants had lived in the Midwest region (including Illinois and Michigan) and explained that religion played little role in their everyday interactions. For example, Jessica, a twenty-nine year old racially mixed woman who went to school in Chicago, explained that "Like no one really talks about god up north; it's kind of like: "do your own thing on Sunday, keep it to yourself, shut your mouth, pray for you," whatever." On the other hand, she noted that in the South religion is discussed much more openly even within the workplace. She recalled that:

> It's really funny because when I moved down here, I really about like died in my first full year as a therapist, like there's questions they ask when they want to get to know you when your perspective. It was like what's this and that and. It was for a children's center which was Christian; it's a Christian based but whatever, I've taught at Christian based facilities before no big deal. But they actually asked me like, "well, what church do you go to and what religion are you?" And in Chicago, they never would've; like that's information that someone would've

been sued if they had asked me that in Chicago. So I'm sitting there like not quite knowing like should I answer this; "can I answer this?" and just remember just feeling very taken off guard.

In part because of her experiences in Chicago, being openly asked about her religiousness at work while in the South surprised Jessica. In addition, having worked for places that were Christian based previously did not prepare her to be directly asked about her religious preferences. Another participant, Olive, a twenty-eight year old white woman, explained that religion was less obvious or present when she lived in Michigan (primarily in urban areas) in comparison to when she lived in the Southern City I. While in Southern City I, she

> found our English department very Christian, like abnormally Christian, and the people who were Christians weren't [Southern State]ians, it was odd in that way. But the program here [in MI] is not like that at all there are no people who talk about going to church together except for those women in the [omitted] department. But not the English department I never run into anyone talking about going to church at all so it's just different.

Despite this insulated space within Olive's university, she explained that she has become aware of the religiousness of her neighborhood. Olive stated that "religiousness is not really prevalent at the university. The neighborhood I live in is fairly religious though--- all of my neighbors seem to go to church a *lot*" (original emphasis). Another participant, Danielle, a twenty-one year old white woman, explained that she believed that her age appeared to affect her interactions perhaps moreso than where she lived. She noted that

> [While] living in California, I was too young for my faith to affect my interactions with others. Without a word for Atheist I just knew that I didn't agree, and I didn't push it. I knew it was different so I kept it under wraps. In Ohio, I was a little more argumentative about it. I think that was because I was a teenager and teenagers argue EVERYTHING. I wanted everyone to know I was right all the time. Coming to [Southern State 1] I learned really quickly that I couldn't be vocal about my beliefs. Even the most accepting Christians alienate Atheists. (original emphasis).

For Danielle, like other participants and as I will discuss more in chapter five, how vocal she was about her nonreligious beliefs and how much they mattered or appeared meaningful was related to her age. Despite Danielle believing that her age was the major contributing factor when it came to expressing her identity, it is hard to know definitively whether or not geography played a role in her interactions. Furthermore, she explains that she learned quickly after moving to Southern State I that she could not express herself as freely as she wished. Danielle seems to simultaneously acknowledge the role of age (particularly being a teenager) and geography and how these affect how expressive an Atheist may be. It is also important to remember that Danielle grew up in a nonreligious household so geography played little role in the construction of this identity but rather how expressive she could be about it. For many of the individuals raised in nonreligious households, their surrounding environments (states, cities, or countries) reinforced this identity by being secularized or strictly defining religious identity and practice as strictly personal and private matters. In a sense, they were doubly insulated because neither their immediate family nor their broader social environment suggested that religion was directly relevant to their lives and their interactions.

Despite their parents' insulating role, a few noted that grandparents would infiltrate (or bypass the parents' wishes) and attempt to teach them about religion. For example, Francis noted that her grandmother, who was Methodist, began teaching her about Jesus despite Francis' own parents being Atheists. These religious teachings became very important to Francis as she tried to deal with her mother who was ill and died when she was young. She stated:

> When I was two, she [my mother] was diagnosed [with ALS], and from two to nine she was really sick—bedridden; and I was hanging out with my grandma so I

was religious. I accepted Jesus, and my mom was dying and I would go to my mom and be like "Have you accepted Jesus?" or whatever because I wanted her to go to Heaven, and she flat out told me "no, I don't believe in that." You know, seven years old, she told me "No, I don't believe in god. I am not accepting Jesus." I was a little seven-year old, hysterical, being like "Mom, please accept Jesus so you can go to Heaven and I can see you when we both die" and she said "no."

This experience greatly affected Francis, but not negatively as one may assume would be the case. She explained:

I so greatly respect her for doing that [being honest]. I would do that right now, if I had a kid and I was dying. I don't believe in that; and I think it took a lot of courage for her to do that. So she was Atheist. She was totally turned against it and didn't like her mom pushing it down her throat.

In addition to grandparents, others were exposed to religion by their friends. Amanda, a seventy-one year old white former nurse, recollected:

My parents were Atheists. Secular Jews. So I learned a little bit of, very little about Judaism as a child. I was always told there was no god, knew nothing about Christianity except I thought it was weird. I learned more about Judaism as I grew older, actually after I was married. Because I always lived in Jewish neighborhoods so my friends would tell me stuff. Okay, because and all growing up, I only knew of three major holidays. Well maybe four; Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Hanukah and Passover. I didn't know there were any others. And all I knew about them was food.

For individuals like Francis and Amanda, despite having parents who were self-identified Atheists, they were still exposed to various religious teachings and rituals through their extended families and their friends. Nevertheless, their parents' nonreligious views appeared to supersede other viewpoints. In the next chapter, I will discuss the importance of place in more as it relates closely to "coming out."

Stage Two: Asking Questions

Youthful questioning and curiosity was an important process through which these study participants came to identify as Atheist. For example, George, a sixty-three year old retired white man who was a dentist, noted:

> We went to church every Sunday, Sunday school every Sunday. Lutherans have a program similar to Catholics and Jews. Where when you're 11 and 12 and 13 you go to school once a week. And then Lutherans become confirmed just like Catholics do. So at 12 and 13 when I was taking those classes, I started to question; this is a bunch of BS, you know? The lady that taught the first year, we had a course on swearing. […] And in the second year, it was actually with the minister. And I mean I'm 13, but I knew a fair amount about science. And the discussion on heaven and hell and all that […] I started questioning; and he'd give me some BS answer again.

Later when he went to college, George had several of his questions answered when he took a comparative religions course. George relayed, "So by the time I got to college, I took a comparative religions course. And I said, 'Well, they're all the same; they're just trying to explain the universe because they don't understand it. And now we can understand it through science.'" Several participants noted that there might even be a relationship between education (in particular science education) and disbelief. James, a sixty-one year old white man, recollected that he began having questions early on and the religious instruction classes he took did not quite answer the questions he had. He explained:

> And then I was 6th grade and I went to religious instruction class every, from the school; they drug us to a place that was nearby. And I remember going there and asking the instructor a question once and I don't remember the question but I remember I said, well how can you say that; to her; it was a woman. And she said, well that you have to just believe that. It was the last time I went there. And I think that was the day I decided there's something really wrong here. It's not; it doesn't make sense. And then I guess my preconceived ideas fell into place and I said, yeah right, that's all wrong. They're not doing it right. And you know I'm very, all my life I've been very oriented towards science and towards mathematics

and those types of studies versus other kinds of studies. And I'm not saying there's a relationship, but I think there might be.

James was not alone in his experiences. Betsy, a sixty-three year old white woman, noted that her father influenced her to start thinking scientifically about the world, despite the fact that she did not get much formal training in science. In Southern City I, eleven out of 30 women said that education in general and science, in particular, were important factors that contributed to their self-identification as Atheist. Hannah, a thirty-eight year old white mother of two, also noted that being exposed to social science, like sociology, as well as learning about other religions caused her to question her beliefs. She recollected:

> I was introduced to Sociology. And it was like I was able to embrace my lack of belief more. I had an awesome advisor who, he helped me look at religion you know more analytically. I remember taking a religion class in college […] And I just, I love learning about different religions. But I just never, I feel like I had a good foundation; I had enough information. I just never bought into the unrealistic part of it, I guess. I've explored some of this like other dimension.

Jessica, a twenty-nine year old racially mixed woman, also finalized her stance after taking a religious studies course. She explained:

> I probably fully made the jump [away from religion and god] when I was a college freshman. I had a, it was a religions of the world class; it was taught by a Daoist which was really cool. And we did Muslim, Daoism, Buddhism, a bunch of other kind of quirky Asian religions and kind of seeing what else was out there. She was very much of the mindset of are you a good person because of what you do or because the book tells you to or because you have your own inherent set of morals. And that's kind of I think when I took it upon myself to be like, hey, no you don't need god to be good; you can be good because you know that's right. And just kind of that essentially just taking responsibility for yourself.

Rather than take formal classes at college, a few individuals took it upon themselves to investigate various religions on their own. For example, Jasmine noted that when she wanted to find community, she started investigating religion and thought:

> "Hey, I'll find a church. I'll join a church. That's what I'll do, that sounds like a good idea!" I wanted to figure out who I was and what kind of church I would go

to, Pentecostal church or Catholic…so I got this idea and I started checking out books at the library on different religions. I would start reading things and I would be like "that is the craziest thing I have ever heard" and I would close the book and move on to another religion. So when I got done the last two books I checked out were Buddhism and Scientology. I think I got through 10 pages of each and it was like an epiphany, I was like "none of this is true, everything conflicts and nothing makes sense." For the first time I thought about religion and what it was saying, I had never done that before. It was at that point that I was like I don't believe in this anymore and from there on, and I'm always really open about it. I don't go around being like "hey I'm an Atheist."

For Jasmine, the act of questioning and investigating religious teachings were interrelated with identifying as Atheist. The majority of sample two (15 out of 20) also noted that asking questions, learning about other religions, and education overall helped facilitate their nonbelief. Learning about other religions as well as being exposed to science seem to help participants feel comfortable being an Atheist, especially for those who were raised in religious households.

Another participant, Olive, a twenty-eight year old white woman, became upset during her childhood when she realized that her loved ones might go to hell. Olive recollected:

[M]y parents raised me sort of loosely with a concept of hell and heaven and a god. I would ask questions and in second grade I became convinced that I and everyone else in my family, we were all going hell because my mom took the Lord's name in vain, and because you know, all those little things. And I was convinced that everyone was going to hell, and maybe I wouldn't be going to hell but I would never see my mom again because she was gonna go to hell, which of course with a seven year old's imagination that was like that was sort of my mom burning in eternity forever. So what happened really was that was sort of the starting point. And I basically cried myself to sleep every night for a year trying to figure out if I actually believed that or what I was gonna do with that. And I remember towards the end of the year my mom wanted to send me to a therapist because I kept asking her all these religious questions all the time, which she couldn't really answer and I kinda just came out of it realizing I just didn't really believe all of that and it stuck. It sounds funny now.

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Having unanswered or incompletely answered questions stimulated several study participants to search outside of mainstream religion for answers. For example, a few participants noted that other philosophies, like Humanism, helped address their questions. One explained that he "found humanism at an early age and it said everything that I believe[d], in one simple page and pretty much everything. And I thought, 'who are these people?' Anyway, that's where I eventually got involved with the movement." For these participants learning about other religions, asking questions and having them answered sufficiently (rather than just being told to have faith) helped them later reject theism altogether and identify as Atheist.

A few individuals noted that the hypocrisy that they encountered in the church raised questions in their minds. For example, Edward, a fifty-one year old white man, began to question his faith and his belief in god when he started noticing the hypocrisy within the church. He explained:

> As I said, I grew up in the church and I saw a lot of hypocrisy: folks who were all, you know, one way on Sunday; and then I would run into them in the community and they would be a totally different person. And I was like, "Well, you know boy, that's not who I thought you were at all." And it was things like that started making me question. […] I don't really see all that many people walking the walk. You know. And so things like that started making me question and I, finally I came to, and this wasn't an overnight thing.

Seeing individuals who went against the religious principles being taught on Sunday allowed these individuals to see gaps within their religious teachings. In addition, a few individuals noted that questioning authority (in general) led them to walk away from their religious upbringing. For example, Henry noted that he began to take issue with Catholicism, especially in terms of authority, when he started getting into punk and rock and roll. He noted that "when I was young and when I was 18 years old, by that time I'd

been reading some more interesting writers and then I got into punk rock and rock and roll. And so that was a major influence because it taught me to think for myself. And to maybe question a few things; question authority, number one and what greater authority is there." In addition, Caroline also took issue with religious authority when she was young. She explained that:

> I came from a fairly dysfunctional home, [and] god became just another authority that I had to… and I just, it's like 'who needs that?' I had my parents [and] that was enough, you know. Telling me what to do and this and that and I think that's probably why I just never bought into it. Because I, you know I didn't want another authority. And again, in Judaism there's no, you know I am not sure there was even a hell. There's like no down side.

Caroline suggests here that her own disbelief stems from taking issue with authority, including religious authority and she felt like not believing anymore would not condemn her to hell since, for Jews, it does not exist. This second stage in Smith's model, asking questions, especially when it came to questioning authority, was especially important when it came to them later rejecting theism.

Stage Three: Rejecting Theism

Asking questions and exposure to education were preludes to a self-identification of as Atheist. In Southern City I, eleven out of 30 women said that education and/or science were important factors that contributed to their self-identification as Atheist. For example, Helen noted that education explicitly played a significant role in shaping her Atheist identity. Helen recollected, "I became a nonbeliever, by the time I became an adult…undergraduate school. I lost all those concepts that at one time I would have believed as a teenager." When I asked Helen if there was any particular incident that made her question her beliefs, she noted:

No, it was simply just studying history and studying religions and like "wow" and having an "ah ha" experience as an undergraduate. I had already given up church attendance, but I wasn't really thinking about my belief system. And this education got me thinking about my belief system; and I realized this didn't make any sense, this stuff I had been indoctrinated with. I couldn't just accept it [on] faith alone because that didn't make any sense to me either. I lost my faith; I lost my beliefs; I lost my indoctrination from education, not because of some trauma.

Lynn also stated that education and more specifically science helped solidify her waffling beliefs. When asked explicitly about when she became an Atheist, Lynn noted a few significant educational experiences. She explained:

I think Psychology happened; I think science happened. I think that was really the point. Yeah, I have a couple of things that seem important to that question, so there was a social psychology class that I took one of the first classes I took in my major […] and I was like whoa we can use physiology to explain your behavior on this really complicated level and these findings are really robust. Why would a god program us that way? It seemed…. I was getting so many answers that I wanted for so long without referencing god and that like having god in my life had not help me to answer and I was getting all those answers and it just felt so good and a world that felt like chaotic and without a master at the strings was more comfortable than all the leg work I [was] having to do to maintain this belief. So, there's that. Those were an uncomfortable couple of years questioning shifting back and forth. I say 2007, I think that was when I was like "I can't go back" but probably two years before that in 2005, I was like starting to go back and forth "oh I don't know if I can believe this anymore, oh no, I must believe it."

Anyway, the second memory that I have, I think it was cognitive psychology class the beginning of my senior year, the beginning of 2007. My professor was an Atheist and he invited the class [to attend another lecture] because there was another class on the philosophy of mind. One philosophy profs was teaching and Dr. [omitted name] went and was lecturing on that class on "why Atheism made sense" basically and like how science can help us understand the mind, why we didn't need god to understand the mind. And, so he invited us to all go to that. And I almost didn't go, which is interesting. And it was basically a very concise a 15-minute talk on Occam's razor and other things and he said "if you need god to explain something, awesome" and you can provide any proof at all that that's a reasonable explanation great but if neither of those things are true, you've got science. I remember so clearly, that he said "if you don't have any evidence for your belief jettison the damn thing." I was like, Oh, so where does that put Christianity?….I also had so much respect for him and the people that were sitting around the table who I could tell were like [eh]. It was a really conservative school, it's like a crazy Republican institution so much the people on the table were Christians and so for him to have to get up and say that in front of them was

kind of ballsy. And for people to sit there and nod their heads was kind of ballsy. So that was my moment that I became an Atheist; that was my moment. I became an "unborn" again.

Even though education (science and religious education, in particular) greatly affected these individuals' worldviews and how they self-identified, some individuals lost their faith in different ways. For example, Daniel noted that his loss of faith occurred when he was fairly young. He stated:

[W]hen I was about 11 years old and I had a very rough childhood; my father was beating me and I was small for my age. I went into school a year early and so that made it even smaller you know and so. I was picked on and life was just not going well. And also I was already starting to see the inconsistencies of religion. I just couldn't figure out, I was having a problem of theodicy. I realize there's evil in the world. And it came to me, my revelation, my humanist revelation came to me in the back of church actually. I was in church praying, then I realized, you know, none of this makes sense and it's all bullshit. And none of these people know what they're talking about. And I don't either. But I decided for myself: I don't care what the truth is; I'm going to seek it no matter what. And if it's hell, so be it. You know because, if you doubt, you go to hell.

Daniel's experience of physical abuse led him to question the nature of evil and wonder why god would let it exist. Andrew, a sixty-seven year old white male who went to a religious college, could not reconcile the existence of a loving god with the notion of hell. He recollected that he "at least the first [doubt I had] was that I could not reconcile hell with the notion of an all loving god. [The existence of] a merciful god and everlasting punishment -- it just did not compute. At the time, […] Catholicism was a closed system. Once one part is removed, then everything becomes questioned." For individuals, like Daniel and Andrew, the act of questioning religion itself led them to ask more questions and eventually identify as Atheist.

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A few individuals noted that a liberal religious upbringing actually made it easier for them to reject religion all together. For example, Caroline noted that she found it easy to relinquish Judaism. In her words:

> But Judaism really, it's I think one of probably the easiest religions to give up a belief in a higher power because it doesn't really talk much, that much. I mean it doesn't, you do. There's a god in there. But it's really kind of, you better be good here. Now. It's a very living kind of religion. You know it's not a real praying, I mean at least the way I learned it. And so being good, doing good was really what was important and it really didn't connect with god or religion; it just had to do with who you were individually. [JP: Your character?] Yes, who you were; that's, that was the big thrust. And then the religion just you know, my parents wanted me to get religious training, they wanted me to go to Sunday school, they wanted me to go to Hebrew school, they wanted me to get a bat mitzvah; none of which I did. And they didn't really press so.

Christy, a twenty-four year old white woman, was raised Jewish by religiously mixed parents. She reported:

> Another thing I noticed, that probably occurred but I didn't pick up on as much when I was younger, is that being half Jewish kind of makes you left out of both religions. We've never practiced Christianity and there was a lot of conversation on the trip [to Israel] about how lacking a Jewish mother means you're not really Jewish.

This complication of not fitting in within the Jewish community seems to have eased Christy's transition into Atheism.

In addition, a few individuals noted that their experiences with religion made them begin questioning their faith. For example, April, a twenty-four year old white woman, noted that despite being involved with the church, she never felt connected to god. She explained:

> I worked at a Christian bible camp for four years, and you know a part of that was that we always had to read lots of scripture. We had to attend church every day. We had to lead devotionals; but I just never felt it, you know? Like everyone talks about having this very …like a connection. They feel something greater than themselves and I never felt that; and so it was kinda like: "Okay, I guess I don't believe in god."

On the whole, only a handful of individuals noted specific moments, like the one

described above, that served as epiphanies. Among them was Henry whose brother's

sudden death facilitated his transition from agnosticism to Atheism. Most of the study

participants came to this identification over time as a part of an "intellectual journey."

Overview of the Process of Becoming Atheist

Earlier I noted that Smith (2011) developed a model in which to examine the way

in which individuals come to identify as Atheist. He noted the first stage was the starting

point (presence of god in family and society); in my study, 41 out of 51 participants were

raised with some religion and the remaining ten still had to deal with religion and god in

their interactions with other family members or their communities. Those who were

raised in nonreligious households were insulated by their immediate families from

religion. In addition, several of those who were raised in nonreligious households, their

geographical location (states and cities) further insulated them from viewing religion as

meaningful. In terms of the second stage in this process, asking questions or questioning

religion, in my study, 34 out of 51 participants (19 from Southern City I and 14 from

Southern City II) noted that questioning, learning about other religions, or taking classes

in science or religion, which cultivate critical thinking, helped them question their beliefs.

The third stage, rejecting religion and god, was apparent in my study since all participants

rejected god. Some did take on Humanist philosophy to help guide their lives, which was

discussed in more detail in chapter three. Of course, all participants self-identified with

being Atheist because I only studied Atheists. I will discuss Smith's final stage (coming

out as Atheist) in more detail in the next chapter since this relates to the importance of

place.

My examination of the process by which individuals become Atheist highlights that this identification does not come about overnight without much reflection. In addition, this research disputes the notion that Atheists come to this identification because of some trauma. Instead, individuals were affected by the presence of religion in their socialization (primarily from their interactions with family and friends). This religious presence varied from fairly nonexistent to the general idea of god to participating in religious rituals very frequently. Educational interactions that promoted critical thinking affected this process as well. These educational experiences varied from formal classes on religion to informal investigations. One striking similarity amongst all participants was a desire to know more and seek answers to their questions.

Importance of Place

The majority of participants had lived in various other states (California, Texas, Illinois, and Massachusetts) or other countries (India, Austria, Russia, and Australia) prior to our discussions. For many of these individuals place (primarily geographical location) did not become important until they began interacting with others who were religious. On the other hand, those who were raised in nonreligious households and in states or cities or countries that were also fairly nonreligious helped to further insulate them from realizing they were different. In addition, very few participants explicitly noted how place affected the construction of their Atheist identity (at least as it applied to asking questions and rejecting theism---Smith's stage two and three). As stated earlier, participants seemed to discuss the role of education, family, and religion as affecting the construction of this identity as they began to ask questions and then reject theism. For example, many participants noted that education regardless of where this education took

place (in New York, Chicago, the suburbs of North Carolina, on religious southern college campuses, or in informal settings) prompted them to ask questions and impacted their decision to reject theism and then later self-identify as Atheist. As a social construction, Atheist identification is constructed through interaction especially in relation to social differences. As Goffman (1963) suggests, when individuals who have a stigmatized identity are insulated from "normals," they often do not realize they are any different from the rest of society. In this study, this identification did not overtly emerge through these participants' interactions (as they related to place) until they began interacting with religious others. It is also possible that religious pluralism (the growth of various types of religious beliefs) that has occurred in the United States, which pushes religiosity (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985), did not affect some participants' interactions since there was little need for an oppositional religious identity.

Importance of Context

Since the experiences noted by participants were tied to specific structures, such as one's family, education, and religion, these structures formed the foundation on which individuals came to identify as Atheist. For example, the majority of participants (41 out of 51) were raised with some religious upbringing and this framework did not determine their continued religious participation. Instead, their motivations for self-identifying as Atheist came as a result of their interactions and experiences. From these participants' perspectives these interactions include those that occurred in religious settings and with religious people as well as those they experienced within education (such as religious and/or science courses as well as informal education), and also their experiences tied to their familial upbringing (such as having nonreligious or Atheist parents). These

interactions included questioning religious beliefs, engaging in critical thinking, and interacting with other nonbelievers. These structures were important in the lives of these participants, but these structures also had their limitations and did not control or determine their religious or nonreligious behavior. Instead, the structure provided the foundation for these interactions to occur. This is subsequently supported by other research (Ecklund and Scheitle, 2007; Sherkat and Ellison, 1999; Zuckerman, 2009), which indicates that education and self-identifying as Atheist are correlated, but are not causally related.

In addition, since these structures are gendered themselves, participants' interactions were also gendered. For example, many participants noted that science played an important role in self-identifying as Atheist, but this institution has been and continues to be fairly male dominated. Even when these individuals participated in fields that have recently become feminized, such as the field of psychology, the history of the field as a male profession suggests that participants' interactions within this field were viewed in relation to this heritage. In addition, engaging in critical thinking and asking questions are fundamental behaviors within the field of science. The family also was an important context since several participants had parents who self-identified as Atheist or nonreligious. More specifically, having a mother or father who self-identified as Atheist appeared to make it more acceptable for them to question religion and also self-identify as Atheist. By interacting with parents who professed disbelief provided them the opportunity to question religious belief within the society they lived.

Lastly, my research also attempts to utilize Smith's model to illuminate the experience of constructing an Atheist identity. As my research indicates, Smith's model

is beneficial even though it presupposes the presence of religion in individuals' lives. This became a little problematic in my study since several participants were raised in nonreligious households. There are additional limitations to Smith's model since it does not suggest that some Atheists may continuously undergo the "asking questions stage." Although many participants noted that self-identifying as Atheist was a stance they were taking, many also noted that they are constantly questioning the world around them. Furthermore, a few noted that if evidence becomes available that there is a god, they would be willing to change their position.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how Atheists manage their stigmatized identity. As an important part of this discussion, I will examine the importance of place, particularly the U.S. South. Furthermore, I will also examine the role gender plays in this identification and the gender differences as it pertains to stigmatization and stigma management strategies. Additionally, I will examine the social consequences of identifying as Atheist. Finally, I will also discuss how the stigmatized identity of Atheist compares to the stigma encountered by the LGBT community, *as perceived by* the Atheists whom I interviewed and observed.

Chapter Five: The Stigmatization of Atheists

Everyone at the Humanist Forum sits in the great hall of the Unitarian Universalist Church with our chairs in a semi-circle in Southern City I on March 14, 2012. As my husband and I listen to the women in their 50s who open the meeting, we begin to feel uncomfortable. One at a time they discuss their spiritualism and their beliefs, as they repeatedly insist that Humanism is not just for Atheists. Specifically, one woman states, "this is a freethought discussion group." As the meeting continues, we remain fairly quiet. Finally, the meeting concludes; we feel compelled to keep to ourselves and we go to our car. On our way home, we briefly discuss how awkward it was for us to sit and listen to people differentiate themselves from Atheists in a manner that implied that Atheism is a wrong-headed, stigmatized identity. With that as the opening, we did not feel comfortable participating in the discussion. Our attempt to commune with likeminded others had failed. We felt like outsiders even though we shared a humanist identity and similar race/ethnicity to the mostly older forum participants. This experience made me reconsider whether it was wise to come out as "Atheist" to others in this city.

During the previous chapter, I discussed three of the four stages in the process by which someone comes to identify as Atheist. This chapter will focus on the fourth stage: "coming out." This fourth stage is strongly related to the stigmatization of Atheists. Not long ago, I was reminded of this stigmatization. While I was browsing my Facebook feed, I came across an article in *Slate* magazine entitled "Americans Will Tolerate a Variety of In-Laws. One exception: Atheists." In this article, journalist Amanda Marcotte cites research done by the Pew Research Center (2012) that shows that parents do not

want their children to marry an Atheist. Marcotte suggests that this intolerance persists because of ignorance rather than experience. Other research (Gervais et al, 2011) has found that Atheists are unfairly viewed as immoral and untrustworthy. Furthermore, a recent Pew Research Center survey (2014) indicates that White evangelicals, Protestants, and Black Protestants view Atheists more negatively than any other religious denomination.

It is difficult to determine definitively when Atheism became a stigmatized identity in the U.S. One possibility is the 1950s, when Joseph McCarthy and others linked Atheism with Communism during their persecution of citizens deemed to be un-American. It was during this historical era that "In God We Trust" and "Under God" were added to currency and to the pledge of allegiance (see chapter one) as well. Discrimination against Atheists continued throughout the 1960s, when Madalyn M. O'Hair fought to remove religious references and endorsements from American public schools. As she advocated for the separation of church and state, she was harassed and called many negative things including a Communist (*Freedom Writer*; 1989).

Clearly, in the U.S., there is stigma associated with being an Atheist. This chapter will discuss how this stigmatization is managed by individuals in the South, during the "coming out" phase and beyond. In addition, I will examine the social consequences that result from this stigmatization. Lastly, I will discuss how participants have attempted to find and build community of their own and find likeminded others or their "Own."

Stigma

According to Goffman, those who deviate from cultural ideals may be viewed as having a "spoiled identity." Spoiled identities are social constructions: institutions and

individuals within a society create classifications and identifying markers to signify differences such as in-group and out-group (stigmatized) status. After categories have been created, our interactions serve to maintain and reinforce these differentiated categories. Even though these categories are socially constructed, they are generally believed to be natural and, therefore, go unquestioned and unexamined by many members of society. There are costs tied to being in the "out group" / stigmatized category and benefits tied to being in the "in group" / normal category. Because "we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human," we effectively, often unthinkingly, reduce [her] life chances" (Goffman 1963, p. 5). Those who are stigmatized encounter differential and often unfair, discriminatory treatment. There are different kinds of stigmatized or "spoiled identities," however. Some groups are stigmatized because of some visible sign of their deviance from the "norm" or "ideal" –such as skin color or physical disability. Those Goffman says, are "discredited" groups. Black males in the U.S. may be seen as a discredited group, for example; and they certainly have reduced life chances to demonstrate this, including lower earnings, wealth, earlier deaths, and higher incarceration rates (Schaefer, 2012; Grusky, 2008). They may be questioned by police and teachers, and viewed as suspicious just because of their skin tone. Indeed, as recent events have shown, Black males are proportionately more likely to be subjected to search, arrest and physical violence by police officers than are whites. Racist interactions may affect how Black males see themselves and how they behave. For example, if I were Black, I would be aware that society views me as threatening; and I may begin to believe that something is wrong with me or I may also behave in ways to counter this perception. I may actively resist or challenge these assumptions.

Those whose bodies do not display visible signs of the source of their stigma are called "discreditable." Since Atheists may be less visible (in terms of being easily identifiable by bystanders), they would be considered "discreditable." The difference between these classifications are important in part because people whose stigma is not physically visible, like Atheists, may control information related to their stigma in order to avoid negative interactions and a reduction in their life chances. This is an option not generally open to discredited groups, such as Black males. Atheists, for example, seem to have escaped many of the tangible negative economic consequences of being stigmatized. According to the Pew Research Center (2012), "44% of [A]theists and agnostics have at least a college degree, compared with 26% of those who say their religion is "nothing in particular" and 28% of the general public. And about 38% of [A]theists and agnostics have an annual family income of at least $75,000, compared with 29% of the general public." Even though Atheists may be not be trusted or desired as in-laws, they are nevertheless educationally and economically successful. Nevertheless, in order to avoid the negative consequences of stigmatization, Atheists like other stigmatized individuals must constantly and actively manage how others perceive them; this requires hyper-vigilance and, at times, deception.

Individuals who are stigmatized must always cope with the disjuncture between how they see themselves (their "actual identity") and how others perceive them (their "virtual identity"). Those who are visibly defying cultural norms are "perceived as failing to use available opportunity for advancement in various approved runways of society; they show open disrespect for their betters; they lack piety; they represent failures in the motivational schemes of society" (p. 144). As such, these "[s]ocial deviants, as defined,

flaunt their refusal to accept their place and are temporarily tolerated in this gestural rebellion, providing it is restricted within the ecological boundaries of their community" (p.145). Those who are not visibly stigmatized must constantly make a choice about whether and how to control information so as to avoid negative consequences. As a result, many of those who are stigmatized desire to find or create a community of their "Own" or sympathetic others who may be more accepting of them and share their experiences of mistreatment.

Finding a community of likeminded others or their "Own" allows for those who are stigmatized to come together to blend in and be around others who are also stigmatized. Goffman (1963) explains that "here the individual will be able to be at ease among his fellows and also discover that acquaintances he thought were not of his own kind really are" (p. 81-82). Finding this community can also be risky, though. This community and interactions with those associated with this community can lead the individual open to being discredited. For example, a gay man who passes as heterosexual (perhaps he is married with children), but frequents gay bars to meet other men leaves himself open to being discredited if he sees someone who knows about his wife and kids. In addition, those within this community may feel compelled to prove themselves as authentic community members by taking on various attitudes related to "normals." As such, they may become "'situation conscious'" when they are in mixed social contexts (Goffman, 1963; p.111). Finding and creating community for those who are stigmatized comes with potential risks especially if this community is viewed as a threat or as if they could contaminate others.

Stigma Management

In addition to discussing stigma generally, Goffman (1963) also notes various ways in which individuals manage a stigmatized identity. One way individuals who are stigmatized manage this identity is to pass. In order to pass, stigmatized individuals must actively control information about their actual identity and take on attributes of the normal society. The ability to successfully pass will be dependent upon how visible stigmatizing markers are, how well these individuals can control information related to these markers, and how well they can blend in with normal society. These markers might be as obvious as publically interacting with a known stigmatized person. As a result, passing comes with risks. Goffman notes that "he who passes leaves himself open to learning what others 'really' think of persons of his kind" (p.84). In addition, "he who passes can find himself called to a showdown by persons who have now learned of his secret and are about to confront him with his having been false" (p. 85). Relationships may become managed, but some intimates may serve as a "protective circle" for individuals (Goffman, 1963; p. 97). Goffman suggests that these "wise" individuals know these stigmatized individuals personally and maybe family, colleagues, or friends.

For an individual pass and avoid being "outed," Goffman contends that several things may occur. An individual may actively divide up who knows her identity into two groups. The first group is a large group and these individuals are kept in the dark about her "actual identity." The second group is a more intimate, trustworthy group with whom the individual has close relationships. Besides being conscious of who you can trust and who you cannot, one aspect of managing this stigma is related to how well she accepts herself. Goffman notes that her acceptance of herself will make it easier for normals to be

at ease. This acceptance is based in part if the person has adjusted to normal society. Goffman notes that this "good adjustment" tends to be rewarded with "phantom acceptance" (p. 121-122). In line with this, an individual's identity may be bifurcated. Someone who is stigmatized, but accepted may realize that she is "a member of the wider group, which means [s]he is normal human being, but that [s]he is also 'different'" (p. 123). As such, an individual who is stigmatized actively undergoes managing this identification.

Previous research (Garneau, 2013; Fitzgerald, 2003; Hylton, 2006; Siegal et al, 1998) indicates that individuals manage their stigmatized identity by engaging in various tactics, which include avoiding the topic or denying the status itself as well as actively challenging stereotypes. Unfortunately, many people base their perceptions of others on stereotypes, which often lead to justifying prejudice and therefore the continuation of discrimination. For example, Harper (2007) found that "nonreligious people can quite easily be categorized as troublesome outsiders who reject normative, religious life in favor of criticizing the pious majority" (p. 549). By stereotyping nonreligious individuals in this way, this can lead to overt forms of discrimination primarily because these stereotypes align with a stigmatized identification (Biernat and Dovidio; 2000). Cragun et al (2012) has found that non-religious individuals are more likely to report discrimination with family and socially than discrimination at the workplace; Atheists status did not change the effect. In addition, Cragun et al (2012) note individuals who self-identify as Atheists increases the likelihood of reporting workplace discrimination. On the other hand, other research (Gervais, 2011) has indicated that the more widespread Atheism is

perceived to be, the less prejudice Atheists face. Taking this into consideration, how do

Atheists in the South, an area known for being religious, manage their identity?

Assumptions about Atheists

In order to gauge how Atheists' virtual identities (or how they believe others

perceive them), I asked all participants: "What do you believe are some common

assumptions about what it means to be an "Atheist?" In other words, how do you think

society perceives "Atheism"? What is the source of these assumptions?" Almost all

participants noted that Atheism has negative connotations. For example, Bonnie, a fifty-

seven year-old single woman, explained that Atheists are viewed as:

> Immoral, criminal, all around bad people. They get those impressions from their
> churches, who always say Atheists are sinners/bad/evil and will burn in hell. Or
> they get those messages from conservative media – print media, talk radio, FOX
> News, etc. Also from politicians trying to play the "god card" to get elected – "I
> believe in god, therefore I'm the better candidate/person and most electable."

Bonnie not only credits religious teachings with these negative assumptions, but also the

media. Like Bonnie, I have also witnessed Atheist-bashing on Fox News, particularly by

Bill O'Reilly. In addition, Atheist television characters, such as the doctors in *House* and

Bones are portrayed as cold, overly scientific, and morally questionable. Although Bones

is not as morally corrupt as House, she is not well-liked. One participant, Ivy, a thirty-six

year-old mother of one who has served in the U.S.'s armed services, agreed with Bonnie.

She explained that Atheists are viewed as:

> Immoral Satan-worshipping heathens. Some common assumptions are that we
> lack a moral basis for decision-making. Also, the assumption is that Atheists are
> god haters who want to dismantle religion for everyone. I've recently listened to
> people say they are soldiers of god and they must fight to take back their country
> from nonbelievers. For the more intelligent religious fundamentalists the
> assumption is that we are leftists' liberals with an antireligious agenda. I get a lot
> of these impressions by posts I see on social networking from friends and family

members. Overall, I think they forget that they actually know an Atheist, or two, and post some pretty aggressive anti-Atheism memes. That and Fox News.

Ivy echoes several themes mentioned by Bonnie, but also notes that Atheists are perceived as not having a guide for making moral decisions. Another participant noted that Atheists are perceived as immoral and, therefore, they must engage in bad behavior. Amanda, a seventy-one year-old white woman, exclaimed that people think Atheists are assumed to be:

> Immoral. Or completely without morality, you're going to do bad things if you don't have something. Right, I can go screw around all I want. Well no, I don't think so. [JP: Right, but without that, like someone looking over us, we're going to, you know we, that Atheists need that someone looking over us to, in order to act like a decent human being.] Right, I have the good and the bad sitting on my shoulders. [JP: Right, exactly, right, yeah. Let's see. So where do you think people get these kind of impressions from, that atheists are immoral or?] From their religious teachings, I'm assuming.

Amanda's response also has a slight gender twist on Atheism since she uses similar language to "slut shame" women for sexual activity. For example, as a society we link women's morality with their sexuality. According to Jessica Valenti, author of *The Purity Myth* (2009)*,* women who do not abide by normative gender roles (which include being sexually passive and pure), are viewed as less valuable and less moral by society than their peers who have remained chaste. As a result, these women are made to feel dirty or shameful for engaging in behavior that is normal and expected of young men. The language in Amanda's response suggests a gender-dimension to Atheist stigma.

Not only did participants indicate that society perceives them as immoral, but also as "lost." Several individuals noted, like Abby, a twenty-five year-old white woman, that people think Atheists have just lost their faith or "lost their way." Several felt like the assumption that Atheists are lost is condescending and patronizing. This assumption

portrays Atheists as immature, unsure, or in need of "saving," rather than individuals who

have thought long and hard about this identity and this label. For April, a twenty-four

year-old, she noted that this patronizing tone is evident in her interactions with her

mother. She explained that:

> I think my parents have struggled with it, my mother especially, she's not really
> religious per se, she's spiritual, and whenever it comes up, she's just says that she
> doesn't believe me, that I may think I'm this, but I'm not really that, "you may
> think you're an atheist, but I don't believe you and I don't think you believe that
> if you really think about it," which is really frustrating and sort of patronizing.

The patronizing tone made these participants feel less-than, especially when the

patronizing came from family members who are supposed to love them.

More participants noted that people assume that something traumatic happened in

their lives to make them hate god. Andrew, a sixty-seven year-old white men, noted:

> Well I think certain members of the religious community like Fundamentalist
> Christians…they've a developed set of notions about Atheists. I mentioned earlier
> some of them such as, people like on websites; five questions Atheists hate. You
> know like "why do you hate god?" You don't hate god, you don't believe in god,
> and that seems impossible for many theists to understand. That you must be
> rebelling against god you know. You know because something happened in your
> life. I don't believe there is no god; I just don't see evidence that there is a god.

As Andrew, like many others noted, Atheists cannot hate god because they do not believe

he exists; and, if he does not exist, he cannot be hated. In addition, several noted in

interviews and during participant observations that the very vocal and intolerant Atheists

who get publicity are outliers and give people the impression that all Atheists are hostile.

In one meeting that I attended, the term "flaming Atheist," was even used to describe

Atheists who appear to have an outspoken agenda. Flaming Atheists may be reacting with

"hostile bravado," in the words of Goffman (p.17). Goffman notes that "instead of

cowering, the stigmatized individual may attempt to approach mixed contacts with hostile

bravado, but this can induce from others its own set of troublesome reciprocations" (p. 17). One example of how this hostile bravado has been interpreted by society (especially as it relates to Atheism) is to equate Atheism with Communism. A few individuals in my study also noted that Atheists are assumed to be Communists. Ian, a sixty-eight year-old white male noted, "And if you suggest that you're a nonbeliever, well first thing they want to say is, well are you a Communist too." This misidentification with Communism reinforces the notion that Atheists are not only socially deviant, but also un-American.

Many participants noted that society tends to view them (e.g. their virtual identity) as different (and more negatively) than how they see themselves (e.g. their actual identity). As discussed above, several explained that they are viewed as devious, immoral, and of low character by society in general. As noted in chapter three participants developed morality from various sources. They see themselves as moral actors who care about the world around them as evidenced by their activism in the community as well as their political ideologies. This suggests a significant disjuncture between their "virtual identity" and their "actual identity." Since this is the case, they encounter various uncomfortable interactions and/or deal with reduced life chances. These interactions became apparent as participants reflected upon their experiences and how place (the South in particular) affected their interactions with others.

The Importance of Place

For the majority of participants, place became meaningful in their interactions with others, especially in terms of how visible religion was in their community. Many participants noted that the public display and openness of religion (and religious discourse) in which they lived (in the South) made them desire finding a community of

their "own" or a community of likeminded others. Goffman expresses that those who are perceived as having a stigma may desire to find community and sympathy in those who also possess a stigma. This "back place" or community allows for those who are stigmatized to blend in (1963; p 81). In many ways, the Atheists may perceive their presence as unwanted or undesirable because of the visual markers of religiousness within their community or due to religious pluralism as Stark and Bainbridge (1985) suggest. Some of these markers include the presence of churches, as well as the discourse used in their common exchanges with strangers, and billboards on major interstates.

On a recent trip to visit my parents, I was easily reminded of what it means to live in the South and the role religion plays in this region. While traveling from Richmond, VA to southern North Carolina, I saw at least two prominent billboards on major interstates that proclaimed, "In the beginning, God created" while crossing out a visual depiction of evolution. Signs, like this one, definitely send a message about the role of religious fundamentalism in the region. This particular sign suggests that science (or rather evolution more specifically) and religion are competing ideologies, though some disagree –for instance, Kenneth Miller, a Catholic and a biology textbook writer. It is not uncommon for individuals who favor the inclusion of evolution in the science classroom to be labeled (often wrongly) Atheists.[19] In addition, images like this, as well as the prominence of religious language (as noted by Amanda below), reinforce Atheists as being "different" and "outsiders." In particular, the anti-evolution campaign noted in the billboard suggests that those who believe in the theory of evolution (including Atheists, but not exclusively) are wrong and need to find the correct means (e.g. the Bible) for explaining creation.

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[19] This phenomenon was noted frequently in the documentary *Judgment Day: Intelligent Design on Trial.*

Nonbelievers (including Atheists) have chosen to fight back by supporting their own billboards including ones that exclaim: "Don't Believe in God? Join the Club" or "Good without God." These billboards have been found in various states including Ohio, Kentucky, California, Colorado, and Illinois. Secular billboards, especially with phrases like "join the club," create awareness for individuals to know that they are not alone. This billboard created controversy in Southern City I.

*This photo is courtesy of Nathan Lowe

An individual[20] who was pivotal in this billboard's installation received negative publicity, hate mail, and death threats after he went on local radio shows discussing the billboard, which was sponsored by the United Coalition of Reason, a nonprofit national group that seeks to improve the visibility of local nonbeliever groups. This particular billboard was in a prominent area of the city and received so much publicity that a local church later put up its own sign exclaiming "We believe in God! Join the right club." The billboard the United Coalition of Reason sponsored enabled several individuals to contact their local Humanist or Atheist groups. While attending participant observations in this city, several new members attended the meeting because of the billboard. Many

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[20] Intentionally unnamed and not the individual who provided this photo.

exclaimed that they were happy to find like-minded individuals, especially in an area so entrenched with religion.

Some individuals noted fairly obvious examples of being made to feel different, which they associated with being in the South. For example, Amanda, a seventy-one year-old white woman, described when she first moved to the South. She asked someone:

> "What do you do here for; what kind of things go on at New Year's Eve here?" And the lady said, "well, you can come to our church." I'm like, "no thank you." Everybody here is, "come to my church." Everybody is, "have a blessed day." I mean, "no thank you." You don't have to; "well I'll pray for you." I'm like, "no you don't have to do that." It is totally, I mean I knew it [the South] was going to be different. But I didn't realize and it's uncomfortable at times.

For Amanda, the constant presence of religion makes her feel uncomfortable, patronized, and out of place. As a result of interactions like these, which made her uncomfortable, Amanda became more active within the local Humanist and Freethinker group.

For participants, being in the South in particular was especially salient when it came to disclosing their status as Atheists, especially since religion is very visible in this region. April, a twenty-four year-old white woman explained:

> I would say it was the biggest adjustment moving to [southern state] particularly because people so openly talked about their religious beliefs in the setting of a university classroom and public more generally, which was very unusual for me. Growing up in Michigan, I think was used to just sort of knowing how people identified religiously or spiritually because I grew up in a small town where such things were common knowledge. That being said, it wasn't on the table all the time – wasn't something that people prefaced statements with as some sort of explanation. Religion seems more public, something to be performed as Goffman might say, in [southern state] than it did in my youth and childhood. That being said, I also see the world with very different eyes now.

For April, religion appears to be more present in her surroundings than in other places that she has lived. Several participants shared similar experiences---a few even had some

exceptional ones. Another participant, Gina, a sixty-eight year-old married mother of

two, upon moving to the South recollected:

> The first day we were on the farm, I was out in my driveway and it's a rural road and this guy pulls up in a pickup truck, an older man, I was about 26; older man, he was 58ish, whatever. And he said, are you, have been born again, are you saved? I didn't know what he was talking about because in New York, people weren't. So I asked him what he meant and he said, "well then if you don't know what that is, you're going to hell." So you know and he's in my driveway; I don't even know who he is, I don't know anything about him and he's telling me this. So I told him to "get lost" and I think I told him to "go to hell." Anyway, you know I said something to the effect that he was perturbed and what are you doing here and get out of here.

This interaction made Gina feel unwelcome in her new hometown. Within this

hometown, she had to keep quiet about her nonreligious views because there could be

real tangible and financial consequences:

> I couldn't say a word, I was always in the closet, I didn't tell them anything about it and, well they probably pried out of me that I didn't regularly go to church, but that was about it. I mean I never you know at work. [JP: You just didn't touch it, right?] Yeah, I tried not to. Well, actually, I was in a meeting once when my immediate boss and a stupid coworker asked me what church I go to. It was like, you know it was in a room at a round table, with higher management people in the room and they asked me that….[JP: What'd you say?] I said, well I'm not active right now but I used to be. Yeah I'm not going to you know lose my job over this.

Gina's fears about losing her job were real. Two other participants noted similar

experiences. According to Bonnie, a fifty-seven year-old white woman, she lost her job

as a nurse in part because she spoke out against the integration of religion and work.

Edward, a fifty-one year-old white male, witnessed a friend discussing religion with his

boss and, within a week, this coworker lost his job. He explained that:

> I saw a buddy of mine who foolishly got into a discussion with our boss about religion. And he was fired within a week. Not for that reason but within a week he no longer was there. And this was you know 30 years ago. And from that point on, I kept it out of, completely out of my work interactions unless, you know unless it comes up in a casual way with a coworker.

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Although Edward explained that his friend's dismissal from his job was not the direct result of that conversation, this series of events demonstrated how difficult it was to discuss religion in the South. The fear of negative consequences caused individuals to remain silent about their Atheist identity at work, especially when interacting with their superiors. This was even true for Bonnie, a very proud Atheist. She, too, hesitated to disclose her identity in future workplaces.

An exception was James who complained to his boss about a pre-meeting prayer. As he recollected:

> So we went into the room for the meeting and 8:30 or 9:00 o'clock in the morning one morning and so everybody's kind of milling about, sitting and waiting for the director to start and he says to one of the women there, "okay go ahead." And everyone bows their head and she says a prayer and I'm, you can't imagine how that felt; well maybe you can. But I was like, "what the hell is going on here." I'm looking around, everybody's head is bowed and their eyes are closed and they're all murmuring this prayer together and I was stunned. So I don't know if that's that culture, if it's this geography, if it's changing times because of you know. But it was stunning to me. I don't think that would ever have happened north in even Pennsylvania or in New York I don't think.
>
> I went to my supervisor after this event and I said, "I just want to let you know, no big deal; I just want to let you know that that prayer made me very uncomfortable." And I know that was the word I used because I carefully thought about what word I would, would I use. "That made me very uncomfortable; I'd rather not participate next time. Please call me in after that so," because it happened a second time. I didn't tell you that; it happened a second time. And she was surprised. I said, "please don't share this with anyone; just help me out here and just send me an instant message when you're ready and I'll come in then." Well apparently she talked to her boss who talked to the director and he came and he was in my office later and he tried to convince me that I was wrong about objecting to this. And he said, "it's no big deal; it's just a tradition; we're just all doing the same thing." And I said, "well I'm not comfortable doing it." He said, "well can't you just do it because it's part of what we always do? " And I really took my job on the line when I told him how wrong he was. And I was pretty vehement about it and I said "you know do you want to hear what religion has done to the world; it's done this and this" and I just went, and I babbled on and on for about 5 minutes and he realized that he wasn't going to change my mind and he left and we have not talked about it in these past 18 months. [JP:

And you still have a job?] I still have a job. Well, actually I'm fairly good at what I do so I guess that's probably why.

Even though James felt uncomfortable with this situation, he still felt that he could express his feelings to his boss. Despite voicing these concerns, he was still asked to not challenge tradition. James also seems to believe the fact that this incident occurred in the first place could be related to being in the South. These incidents shocked James, but unlike Bonnie and Edward's friend, he was able to retain his job. Now, whether James' gender played a role in his ability to retain his job goes unexamined. One may assume that James' position as a male may give him some leeway or perhaps even some privilege when it comes to being nonreligious especially since men, in general, are less religious than women (Freese, 2004; Miller and Hoffman, 1995; Kosmin and Keysar, 2009). Overall, feeling uncomfortable heightened these individuals' awareness of their marginalized status. As they became more conscious of how others perceived them as outsiders, they became more wary of revealing their status.

Feeling Uncomfortable

As I interviewed individuals and then reviewed our conversations, I noticed that feeling uncomfortable was a prominent theme. I explicitly searched for various forms of the word "comfort" to see in what contexts participants discussed this emotion and their experience. In addition, I also searched my comments in which I noted any feelings of discomfort that participants described.

In both cities, the presence of religion in meetings, in the workplace, and in everyday interactions were amongst the contexts in which the term "uncomfortable" was used. Sarah a thirty-five year old white woman, explained: "I came out as an Atheist while living in [town name omitted], and found it very isolating. My daughter had a hard

time making new friends. It seemed like the first thing parents and kids wanted to know was what church we attended." Not only did Sarah note feeling isolated, but when she attempted to build relationships and social networks related to homeschooling her children, she was confronted with religion. She noted:

> So any homeschooling family I met always always—you know, if we were having an activity or something they just assumed I was religious. So that was when I had to kinda start saying, "Hey I'm not." And it was, it was uncomfortable 'cuz they would usually be like, "Oh, why not?" You know, or , "How can we change that?" […] It was hard for them to understand 'cuz they didn't normally encounter non-religious homeschoolers. They just weren't expecting it. They just assumed.

This assumption on the part of those who were religious, especially those who also homeschool their children made Sarah feel like an outsider and uncomfortable. These experiences were amongst those in which Sarah became conscious of her identity as an Atheist primarily because she felt different. Another participant, Caroline, a sixty-one year old white woman, explained:

> Since I've been down here, I've been, my hackles have been raised. By the fact that there is four churches on every corner and people hold their belief like it's their identity. And it makes me a little crazy. It makes me feel very radical and it makes me feel like you know I get sensitive now. I'm sensitive when you know because the world is, there's, the believers, there are so many more believers. I never realized how few non-believers there were. Although it's getting to be a bigger population from what I read. But I was surprised only because it's not something I ever thought about because I was always in this area where religion played no part at all. In people's lives per se. But down here it's like, and I started you know getting very sensitive to that and annoyed and angry.

Although Caroline does not explicitly use the word "uncomfortable" in this discussion, her emphasis of feeling different and having her "hackles" raised definitely suggests that she is very conscious of her difference. In these interactions her identity as Atheist becomes meaningful because of the region in which she now lives.

In addition, participants often talked about how religion seems to comfort the religious, which for the most part they could empathize with. During these experiences, participants referenced their interactions with friends (and also semi-strangers or acquaintances), going to church with family/friends, and the presence and/or frequency of prayer at public events. During our conversation Bettie, a twenty-three year old woman who is originally from Russia, explained that she was a bit surprised by the presence of prayer at secular events. She recalled:

> When I was in Arkansas, it made me uncomfortable how often prayer happened before what things I would assume were secular ceremonies. Like my graduation possibly, my school was affiliated with the Methodist church but not really. But events in the community, like my ex-husband's graduation from basic training in the air force, had a mass prayer before that. And there were a few other situations where, to me, it was uncomfortable when everyone else was praying because I just stood there quietly. But, I have gone to church for special occasions like when a child was being baptized to show support and most the time I didn't feel uncomfortable because I knew I was learning and the message was good. I kind of feel uncomfortable being in churches with people who are strong believers because I feel like I'm cheating because I'm not actually there for the same reasons.

Not only does Bettie use the word "uncomfortable" several times during this exchange to describe how she felt during events, but she also reveals that going to church and interacting with others within a religious setting can also be uncomfortable. As she notes, her feelings of discomfort appear to derive from the disjuncture between what she believes she is getting out of these interactions and what others are getting from them. Lynn, a twenty-six year old white woman, explained to me that a few years ago she was saddened by her inability to connect or go back to her former religious ways when she was at home celebrating Christmas. She recalled:

> I would listen to like Charlotte Church, do you know her? [J: No] But at the time, she said all this stuff in Latin—all these great 'ol Catholic songs right, there are some obviously religious songs, and I was sleeping under the tree, and I was

listening to that in my headphones and I was crying because there was part of me that wanted to go back and I couldn't, and that was uncomfortable. [J: about what time/age was this] About 2006. But, you know, since then Christmas is just been a time to see family and it is less enjoyable. But I realize now that is not the emotional gratification that I wanted, it's a babysitter, it's a hand to hold, it isn't real.

As Lynn reflects here, she believes that she was really struggling emotionally and trying to utilize religion to help her connect to her past. This reflexivity also allows Lynn to analyze what she believes the purpose of religion to be: comfort. Another participant, Betsy, a sixty-three white woman, during our conversation discussed how religion and religious teachings comfort people. She explained, "You know one of my favorite phrases that you hear all the time is: 'everything is going to be alright' and that seems to be what drives religions for a lot of people. 'Right now this really sucks, but everything is going to be alright eventually.'" Here Betsy contends that religion gives comfort to individuals who are perhaps going through tough times.

In addition, many participants explained that becoming comfortable with ambiguity was important to them. For individuals, like Lynn, finding comfort in ambiguity was important to them. When Lynn and I were discussing "nontheism" she references Pema Chodron's work in which he states, "Nontheism is relaxing with the ambiguity and uncertainty of the present moment without reaching for anything to protect ourselves" (Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart*). This relates back to what Lynn mentioned previously about religion being comforting to many. Unlike these religious individuals, Lynn contends that Atheism means finding comfort in uncertainty. Like Lynn, Daniel, a sixty-seven year old white man, explained that "we [Atheists] have to […] be comfortable with ambiguity and realize it's okay, so there's no right answer, but there are choices and there are consequences." This state of self-awareness and

understanding that sometimes there are no correct answers are deeply philosophical. As I reflect upon this, I remember my own experiences as a student learning these things and I also can empathize with my own students who want definitive answers to questions rather than understand that thinking critically and reflecting upon our own roles as moral actors is a part of the great complexity of our humanity. This complexity and ambiguity is something we as human beings also do not like. We want to classify and categorize things, but as our interactions show, social life has a lot of grey (or ambiguous) areas. Determining what is right or wrong is not always so clear-cut and as Lynn and Daniel note above, being an Atheist (at least for them and some other participants) is about finding comfort in the unknown. Finding comfort on their own terms appears to help participants cope with the negative experiences related to their everyday lives, some of which can perhaps be more emotionally troubling than others.

Negative Experiences

The most common problem, especially for female participants, was the strain that constructing an open Atheist identity had caused with family members, particularly their mothers. For example, April, Isabelle, Karen, Tina, Felicity, and Jessica all noted that their interactions and their overall closeness with their mothers has been strained since they identified as Atheist. These individuals noted that their mothers were often patronizing of their disbelief in god. For example, April, a twenty-four year-old white woman, noted earlier that she felt frustrated and patronized by her parents. Individuals recalled being told things like "oh, you really don't believe that." Some said that their mothers believed they would "come around" eventually. A few other individuals noted that their interactions with other family members were also strained. These include

interactions with grandparents, with their own children, and with extended family. In total, ten women (eight from Southern City I and two in Southern City II) noted issues with family when asked about their negative experiences. In addition, three men (out of eleven) noted negative familial interactions. Two participants, Mary, a forty-nine year-old married white mother of two, and Daniel, a sixty-seven year-old white married father of three, noted concern regarding their children's welfare. Mary and Daniel were concerned that their children would be mistreated if other kids found out that their parents were Atheists. While examining this data, I saw parallels between the reactions of family members to Atheist relatives as have been reported by LBGT youth when they "come out" to their families (e.g. Barton 2012). Despite the cultural ideal that one's family should be a source of strength and support, many gay, lesbian, transgender, and Atheist individuals fear rejection from their loved ones.

Ten participants noted that they have had no negative interactions with people mainly because they have avoided disclosing their Atheist status to others. A few of these individuals noted that they mostly interact with fellow academics so being an Atheist a "nonissue." By avoiding the conversation or avoiding disclosing their disbelief, these individuals were actually, in some sense, "passing" or undergoing selective concealment (Fitzgerald, 2003). It is also possible that these participants have remained mindful of who they reveal their stigmatized identity to. As noted earlier, Goffman argues that those who are stigmatized may engage in various forms of information control including reducing risks by dividing groups into those who know (typically a large group) and those who do not (typically a small more intimate group). When neighbors or coworkers ask what church they go to, they responded by saying "I haven't found one yet," which

Fitzgerald (2003) classifies as "assumptive passing" (p.127). By responding in this

manner, they are circumventing a status disclosure, conflict or hurtful feelings. They are

also keeping particular individuals in the dark about their identity while also protecting

themselves and others from discomfort. On the other hand, one participant, Elizabeth, a

fifty-nine year-old white woman, noted that one way she explains her perspective to

others is by framing it in terms of Buddhism. She explained that, "I can, at times, say

'from a Buddhist perspective' and then throw in some fact or you know idea about and

that seemed more acceptable than if I say from an Atheist perspective. It ends up being

the same idea, really." Later she added:

> I'm careful about how I talk to people. You know, I don't get stupid about it; I
> don't get angry or I just kind of, like sometimes I'll say you know from the
> Buddhist perspective because I feel like that diffuses the situation sometimes. [JP:
> Yeah, they'll leave it alone.] If I, yeah, if I say from an Atheist perspective, then
> they're going to go right for me. And try to convert me.

This slight change in framing allows Elizabeth to avoid the negative stigma attached to

Atheism despite having the same content. Fitzgerald (2003) frames this type of strategy

as managing one's stigma by using indirection or more specifically "label substitution"

(p.130). Unlike many other participants, Elizabeth appears to have, not only the necessary

Buddhist jargon to frame her perspective, but also the cultural awareness and the

experience to know this can be utilized to divert her audience and avoid labeling herself

or coming out as Atheist to others. Elizabeth's comments also highlight her awareness of

how others perceive Atheists.

This self-identification became particularly problematic when it came to a few

participants' interactions with their friends. Specifically, finding out which intimates they

could reveal their identity to could be difficult. A few individuals reported that close

friends ended their friendship in response to the disclosure of their Atheist identities. Some were hurt when their friends said they were going to hell. Christy, a twenty-four year-old white woman, recalled:

> We were fighting. She sent me a text message one time that said "I wish you believed in god so that you could be my sister for real." And I was just really offended by that because it had never been an issue in college before and I feel like interpersonal closeness has nothing to do with your religious beliefs whatsoever. And I found it really offensive that she would say something like that like, "I can't be close to you because of your [lack of] religious faith."

This tension and the potential for hurt feelings also affected several participants' friend selection. For example, Danielle, a twenty-one year-old white woman, noted, "Of course, people are just like, 'You're going to hell,' because the only way to not go to hell is to believe in Jesus, which has just made me really not want to be friends with them. I don't have a lot of Christian friends, because I think fundamentally they have to believe that I'm going to hell and I'm not going to be friends with people who think that." Some of these interactions made participants feel like they had to monitor future interactions. For example, Lauren, a racially mixed twenty-four year old woman, noted that

> I had, like, a friend in class, and somehow we got on the topic of god, and somehow we got on the topic that – me and another friend were there, and she was also atheist – and we got on the topic of not believing in god, and it was just – after that, she didn't speak to me again. And her behavior around me, it was like she was very distrustful of me, so that was probably – when I realized how, like, she started treating me, I was like, you know, maybe I really should keep this, like, on the DL [the down low].

Like Lauren, several participants noted that they tend to minimize how vocal they are about their beliefs (or disbelief rather) when they are around individuals who are religious. One individual, Heather, a twenty-three year-old racially mixed woman, noted that she feels more aware of her Atheist beliefs when around religious individuals. Danielle, a twenty-one year-old white woman, noted that she has minimized her

outspoken tendencies because she lives in the South and she is aware that religious

identity is important to people in this region. As a result of this experience, Danielle has

decided to manage her stigma by utilizing selective concealment. Many participants

noted that they wanted to belong and wanted to be honest and open with their friends, but

became hesitant to do this because of their previous interactions as well as the common

misconceptions regarding what it means to be Atheist. These experiences suggest that

figuring out to whom Atheists could reveal their identity to (and forming their group of

intimates) was a challenge.

Because they felt like outsiders in a regional context that emphasizes religious

identity, many participants reported that they experienced uncomfortable social

encounters and often felt lonely. Amanda, a seventy-one year-old white woman, felt

lonely when she first moved to the South because everyone she met would invite her to

church. These interactions have also affected the formation of friendships within her

neighborhood since she believes that they are Christian. Lynn, a twenty-six year-old

white woman, chose to remain silent about her views until she moved to a more

progressive location near an academic institution. Hannah, a white thirty-eight year-old

mother of two, really wanted to have conversations with people; but, when they would

bring up religion, she felt she could not move forward in her relationships with these

individuals. Hannah noted that, "I was just talking to a friend who adopted a child. And I

was like, 'so what made you decide to adopt?' 'Well it was God's will.' What the fuck

does that mean; what does that mean? And so it's just like I just shut down." Another

participant, Danielle explained that:

> Living in California I was too young for my faith to affect my interactions with
> others. Without a word for Atheist I just knew that I didn't agree, and I didn't push

it. I knew it was different so I kept it under wraps. In Ohio, I was a little more argumentative about it. I think that was because I was a teenager and teenagers argue EVERYTHING. I wanted everyone to know I was right all the time. Coming to [southern state] I learned really quickly that I couldn't be vocal about my beliefs. Even the most accepting Christians alienate Atheists. My boyfriend, his mom, and siblings know I am an Atheist, but no one else I am around regularly knows. It is isolating.

For these participants, their Atheist stance affected their interactions with others and resulted in feelings of isolation or loneliness.

When asked to share negative reactions to the disclosure of their Atheist identities, two white male participants over the age of 65, chuckled and said things like "how much time do you have?" One woman, Gina, a sixty-eight year-old white woman who grew up in the north, noted remembered being bullied growing up. Gina explained that:

And I must've said something about not believing in god or probably there isn't any god and I was blackballed. I mean, I wasn't allowed to play with this kid, I wasn't allowed to play with her friends. Yeah, I got locked in a root cellar one time by them. I was bullied. [JP: Really?] Yeah, yeah really and I was afraid of the dark. [JP: Oh goodness, that's horrible.] For about an hour.

She felt ostracized by the neighborhood kids and finally was able to find a like-minded friend, which helped assuage any hurt feelings caused by the bullying. Olive, a twenty-eight year-old white woman, resented her father for disrespecting the Atheist views of her brother after he died. Olive explained that her brother:

[w]as very out very, very out, everyone knew he was not theist in any way. And when he died, my dad gave him a catholic funeral. I can't tell you how sore of a spot this is for me. The day of the funeral was one of the worst days of my life. That was atrocious, but it does touch on the family thing, which is why I'm saying it now. I think my dad would have a hard time, like you know he'd be bummed out I'm not baptized and he can't bury me catholic either. Because everybody knew it was against my brother's wishes, I mean there was a crucifix in my brother's coffin there was priest who gave a long talk about how if you didn't believe in Christ how horrible it would be. A lot of Atheists in the room, and an Atheist in a coffin and he's talking about how if my brother wasn't Christian he'd

be going to hell to burn forever and ever -and my brother just died- but since my brother was Christian and embraced god we'd all see him again. And of course my brother wasn't Christian and didn't embrace god so that goes to show you how my dad is. I still don't think I can forgive my dad for pulling that shit. I almost walked up and punched the priest in the fucking face, if I could've stopped sobbing long enough. I mean I don't believe in the afterlife, but I don't need someone to pour salt in the wound when I've just lost my brother.

This incident was traumatic for Olive and damaged her relationship with her father.

Overall, the negative experiences reported by participants ranged from nonexistent (mostly because they avoided self-disclosure and concealed their identity) to loss of employment to loss of friends to feelings of loneliness to feelings of strain within their families. In relation to their experiences, I asked participants if they had any fears about disclosing their Atheist status to others. The majority participants reported that they were not afraid to disclose. However, several noted that they were hesitant to disclose their Atheist perspective to others. When asked to explain this hesitation, participants said were feared potential loss of job opportunities. As I noted earlier, Bonnie lost her job as a nurse, Edward was suspicious about his colleague's dismissal, Gina felt forced to remain silent at work, and James felt uncomfortable with the infiltration of religion into the workplace. So, it appears that the possibility that Atheist disclosure would hurt one's career prospects and earnings in the South has some bearing in reality. A few reported that they were no longer fearful but used to be. Ivy, for example, noted that over the years she became more comfortable disclosing this to others when the topic came up at work. In addition, several noted that they tend to wait until people know them before disclosing this aspect of their identity.

Goffman suggests that as an individual grows more accustomed with her stigma, she is likely to become "more adept at managing" mixed social interactions. This appears

to be the case for many participants. Those who reported being fearful or hesitant were in their twenties or early thirties, and were just beginning to establish their careers. Several older individuals noted that they used to be fearful, but no longer feel that way. Nevertheless, some of these still avoided disclosing their Atheist identities, though for motives other than fear. Since several participants noted that they had little fear disclosing this status to others, I was curious to find out under what circumstances they would disclose this information. Many participants explained that they would be honest with anyone who asked. A few individuals noted that this topic does not come up in many of their daily interactions with others. Those who said that they would attempt to avoid the subject also noted that it could be difficult at times. For example, Olive, a twenty-eight year-old year old white woman, recalled:

> In [Southern City I] I felt like there were a lot more situations where I had to do things to hide it because people would be talking about church all the time and it would even come up sometimes with professors, but I can't think of a specific example. I did feel like I needed to have strategies to avoid questions because I don't like to lie but yeah not so much here [has moved to a non-Southern state]. It's a nonissue most of the time.

Despite noting that most of the time disclosing one's Atheist identity is a "nonissue," Olive qualifies this by stating that religion often came up in her interactions, even at the university. Several others noted that they would avoid revealing their Atheist identity to particular family members, including grandparents who may become upset or stressed by this disclosure. Karen, a twenty-seven year-old white woman, noted that she would refuse to tell her uncle and his wife. She explained:

> Um…because I like going to family Christmas (laughing). No, I think that of all my family members who are the most strongly religious, they are also the people, I'm the least close to, so there would be less of the "I still love you, I'm really close to you, I know you're a good person" and it would be more like "oh my gosh, you're an atheist! I have two young children and you're not allowed to

come around them!" That is the reaction I would expect. But lately my attitude has been more you are more than welcome to prove me wrong. So if we came across it and he decided to tell me he would be okay with it, fine, I wouldn't mind. But no, I would not ever tell him if I could help it.

Later on in our discussion, Karen explained that her family would react negatively because of misinformation about Atheism, such as Atheists hate god. Several participants also noted that they would avoid discussing their Atheism with coworkers as well as neighbors. These participants noted that telling coworkers may cause difficulty at work; and they did not want to discuss religion in the workplace in general. The participants who indicated that they would avoid telling their neighbors explained that it could cause hurt feelings, which may make their daily lives more difficult. In addition, a few individuals explained that disclosure depended upon whether they felt safe or shared the same political views with others. A few participants added that they would hesitate to disclose (at least outright) this information to a boyfriend and/or his family. Those who said that they would try to avoid this conversation with a boyfriend's family did so because they did not want to cause any trouble for him. The more I talked with participants, the more I understood that they did not want to create unnecessary conflict especially for the individuals who are important to them including their romantic partners, families, friends, coworkers, and neighbors. In addition, these participants suggest that Atheists, as a stigmatized group, are cognizant of those to whom they can reveal their identity. In addition, they work hard to form an intimate group of "wise" others, as Goffman (1963) suggests.

When I asked participants about their dating experiences, several themes emerged. Several reported that they were honest about their Atheism from the beginning. In some cases, their boyfriends were also nonbelievers. On the other hand, a few

indicated that it became an issue when dating someone who was religious. Lastly, many

noted that the difficulties began to resolve themselves as the couple started developing

and reinforcing similar beliefs. For the most part, these individuals sought romantic

partners with similar views on politics, religion, and the desire to have children. A few of

the single individuals said that they would not consider dating a religious person; most of

these participants felt like if they dated someone who had similar interests and political

ideologies, they would most likely not be religious anyway. Gayle, a thirty-year-old

white woman, noted that she would make an exception for a partner who was Jewish. She

explained that:

> But if someone has religious beliefs and they are important at all to them, its
> pretty much a write-off right there for actually dating. Like friends, "sure." The
> only potential exception I think would be more flexible with someone who is
> Jewish because again that's something where its like I would at least consider
> talking to them. In part for two reasons. One is I know a lot of Jews who identify
> religiously as Jewish who don't really strongly believe in god who are reformed
> Jews. I would want to know and see where they really fall on that and how much
> it's a culture thing versus a real religious thing. Also because it is a religion that
> I'm really familiar with and comfortable with, I don't know maybe I could deal
> with that difference in belief with somebody if they were in that religion.

For Gayle, understanding that aspects of Judaism can be accepted as cultural rather than

religious give her a little flexibility when it comes to dating someone who may self-

identify with a particular religious group.

On the other end of the spectrum, a few men said that they would be open to

dating religious women if these women understood their positions and did not attempt to

convert them. Several individuals (both men and women) also noted that they had dated

religious people in the past but wound up not respecting them enough to continue dating

them. For example, Daniel, a sixty-seven year-old white male, explained dating a woman

who asked him his astrological sign, which led him to quip that he needed to set higher

standards in choosing partners. Only a handful of individuals stated that they would

reveal their Atheism before beginning a relationship –all of them because they were using

online dating programs, which allowed them to disclose before meeting a potential

romantic partner. Three women also noted that they did not date and one participant

(Karen) was actually told by her mother that she could not date when she was younger.

As a whole participants were conscious of their identity as Atheists as they formed

intimate romantic relationships mostly because they wanted to find a likeminded partner.

In addition to discussing romantic intimate relationships, I asked participants

about their experiences in the workplace as they pertained to disclosing their identity and

finding community. The most common themes related to this question were: people knew

their nonreligious beliefs, their nonreligious beliefs were a nonissue at the workplace, a

few others would discuss politics instead, and others were fairly quiet about their beliefs.

Eighteen participants noted that their co-workers knew their nonreligious beliefs and

some individuals within this group noted that they work in fields where they are around

other nonbelievers. For these participants their co-workers were amongst their intimates

who are aware of their stigmatization or are "wise" since they have intimate knowledge

of these individuals' identity, which could cause negative experiences. Those who noted

that religion in general was a nonissue at the workplace noted that the topic does not

come up. Six out of seventeen of those who said it was a nonissue noted that they

primarily work from home, however. For some participants religion was a nonissue. For

these individuals they do not have to interact with co-workers or religion does not come

up. For those with co-workers, their co-workers were not "wise" to their stigma. As such,

these participants seem to view their stigmatized identity as irrelevant when it comes to work.

In addition to asking participants about when they minimize or choose to avoid disclosing their identity to others, I also asked them if there were any times in which they felt that they were more self-conscious of their Atheism or that their nonbelief became more salient to them. Several participants noted that they feel more Atheist when they are discussing their beliefs with others, engaging in science, or are standing out because others are participating in religious rituals (like bowing heads during prayer) or if others were discussing religion and they had to remain silent. A few explicitly noted that they are "out" regardless of their environment. A few also noted that their nonreligious intensity varies depending on who they are around as well as how much they have been engaging with Atheist literature including blogs and podcasts. Several individuals noted finding and engaging with a like-minded community (or their "own") and friends helped them feel like they were not alone in their beliefs.

The Importance of Community

Many participants felt that it was important to build a community of their "own" in order to combat feelings of isolation and loneliness. On the other hand, several others noted that they do not attend Humanist and Freethinker or Atheist meetings despite being on a mailing list. In Southern City II, this community-building seemed more important to the women I interviewed than the men. Women in this secular community were the primary organizers of meetings, would often bring food for potlucks, and would often lead the discussions. It is also important to keep in mind that the majority of the women I interacted with during meetings were retired. On the other hand, only four men in this

same city noted that they attend secular meetings or events and only one of these four goes for the speakers the group brings in. The remaining seven men said that they see the importance of the group and are intrigued by it, but either no longer attend or have not yet attended. Despite this, a number of men regularly attend meetings and lead discussions. On the other hand, only a few women explicitly said that they do not attend any secular meetings. The other women noted that they benefited from these interactions in the form of socializing with like-minded individuals and the building of friendships. I often witnessed these friendships as several of the same women would participate in some of the same events such as organized walks in the park, trash pick-ups, or trips to the local Aquarium.

Within Southern City I, only seven of the thirty women I interviewed attended secular meetings. One thing that may affect the differences here between these cities could be the age range of those who attended the secular meetings. For example, women who are retired may be more active in the secular community because they may have more time to contribute whereas the women I interacted with in Southern City I tended to work, have young children, and/or go to school. Several women in this city noted that they would like more community and are trying to build community and friendships with other likeminded individuals. Not long after I moved from Southern City I, one group that I observed started an explicit "support" group for Atheists. Finding support was a common theme noted in my participant observations. There were several meetings where individuals would disclose their family upbringing and how they have to deal or manage their behavior and their Atheist identity in their everyday interactions. One explicit meeting in Southern City I focused on "coming out" and the organizers presented some

ways to "come out" to others. A few other meetings were almost like what I imagine addiction support groups to be like. We would sit in a circle, disclose our stories, and try to give support to those who spoke. Within Southern City I, there were at least two groups Atheists could attend. I attended both the Humanist Forum and an Atheist meetup. The Atheist meetup group would primarily meet in a local coffee shop (later they started meeting in a local bar). Unlike the Atheist meetup, the Humanist Forum met in a church and also provided childcare. Childcare was paid for with donations from those who attended the meetings; a collection/donation jar passed around at the beginning of the meeting reminded me of collection plates that circulate during formal church services. Only one group, the Humanist Forum in Southern City I, provided childcare, which may affect the number of young families active within this group. This was also the only group I observed that had more young women present during meetings and discussions. Only six women explicitly noted that they find support from their community through different interactions (like being active in the scientific community or participating in athletic groups). For these participants a finding community of likeminded others was important to them.

In addition, Daniel and other participants found comfort in other likeminded others as a source of strength. For example, Daniel described that one reason why he is so active within his local Humanist Forum is because the people are awesome "I get to be with some of the most, the brightest, creative people." This was one of the best things Daniel noted about being Atheist. This community served to help individuals who wanted to get support from others. This also allowed individuals to be recognized as a part of a community. Furthermore, this community helped them cope with negative experiences

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that they encountered in their everyday interactions. A few found community through the philosophy of Humanism, which enables them to self-define in a positive way – Humanist, rather constructing their identity around a *lack* of belief in god.

Taking this into consideration, I asked participants if they believed that Atheism is a social movement, and if so, what social change does Atheism seek. The majority (twenty-six) of participants noted that it is a social movement and there are several things that they would like to change. They would like to change the negative stigma Atheism has. In addition, they explained that this is also related to more people coming out and disclosing their identities as Atheists. Some individuals disagreed, stating that Atheism is not really a social movement per se, but does include a call for greater visibility and acceptance of non-believers. There were a few participants who noted that Atheism is not a movement because it includes too much variability within the group. For example, Chris, a twenty-eight year-old white woman, explained that they only thing that some Atheists have in common is that they do not believe in god. She noted that, "Turns out [that an Atheist] can be a Republican, or an outspoken racist, or a total hippie." Gwen, a thirty year-old white woman, explained that she believes that Atheism is a movement, but that the majority of Atheists are just keeping their heads down and trying to live their lives and avoid conflict. Gwen believes that there are some individuals who are organizing and attempting to create social change, but a lot of Atheists are not as vocal or active in creating social change. Since I left this question open to them to interpret, this may account for some of the variability in responses. In addition, some participants answered this as a follow-up question, which was answered through an exchange of e-mails.

How outspoken or how quiet Atheists should be came up as a topic in one very lively Humanist meeting. The topic of this meeting was: should Atheists take an "accomodationalist" approach to change? The discussion leader noted that an accommodationalist (or pragmatic) approach would mean that they would be willing to work with religious people to achieve progress. During this discussion participants discussed the negative connotation the term "Atheist" has and perhaps using the term "Humanist" first to present oneself in the positive rather than in the negative. It is also important to note that this was one of the most lively discussions that I attended. Not only did individuals discuss the importance of labels (Atheist versus Humanist), but the entire conversation was about social change and helping to provide support for each other by having a presence within the community (including at the legislative level). When we were bringing up our opinions regarding this matter, I brought up some historical examples of social change (women getting support from men to get the right to vote, for example). In addition, I remember discussing and talking about how in order for change to occur those in disadvantaged groups need to align with some individuals or groups that have privilege or power. For example, many campaigns that want to stop violence against women are specifically targeting men—not just because men abuse women, but men have the power to stop the violence because they are taken seriously rather than disregarded as being "too emotional" (Katz, 2012). This would suggest then that Atheists may benefit from working with groups that are religious if they are fighting for similar causes and they can put religion aside to deal with the bigger issue. This activism and awareness (especially as it relates to greater awareness and acceptance) also made me

wonder if these participants saw any connections between their experiences and the experiences of other stigmatized groups (in particular the LGBT community).

Being a Minority and Finding Community

As I noted earlier, after hearing several of these stories, I could not help but think about the LGBT community and their experiences. I explicitly asked participants if there were similarities between their status as a minority and other minority groups. The majority participants noted several similarities between being gay and being Atheist. These include feeling different, operating on a "Don't Ask/Don't Tell"[21] policy in order to avoid negative experiences, going in and out of the closet, and revealing to others one's minority status (or "coming out"). Several individuals used terms like "coming out" or being in the "closet" to describe how open they could be about their nonreligious views.

On a broader level, individuals noted that these two groups are very similar in terms of facing prejudice (as it relates to perceived stigma) and the potential for discrimination. Felicity, a white sixty-six year-old mother, noted that the similarities she sees between the two groups related to ignorance and prejudice. She explained that:

> There's a huge degree of prejudice against us. [There is] a huge degree of ignorance about who we are and what we are. And I think for those reasons, we relate to all these other minority movements. And I think the LGBT movement is a model for us in many ways in that if you don't speak out, you're going to continue to suffer the discrimination and not have the rights that other people have. For example, an Atheist can't run for public office. It's against the law in [this state].

Not only does Felicity believe that many people remain ignorant about the minorities around them, but this status, when left unexamined, becomes something to openly

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[21] A policy in the military instituted by the Clinton administration in 1994. This policy was eventually repealed in 2011.

discriminate against, especially when it comes to laws. When I asked Gina, a white sixty-

eight year-old mother, about this connection, she exclaimed:

> Oh absolutely! If more Atheists would kind of take a page out of the LGBT
> book… Well I guess we know that Atheists are more hated than gay people. […] I
> experienced discrimination like I said at a very young age because I spoke my
> mind and probably shouldn't have but who knew. And yeah, I see great parallels
> between Atheism, gayness, racial barriers too. So yeah, I see a lot of parallels
> there. And I, like I said, I was totally closeted as an atheist in [southern state]. I
> couldn't, absolutely wouldn't, tell anybody except my immediate family.

Much like gay individuals, Atheists like Gina and many other participants felt closeted in

that they could not tell anyone their nonreligious views. Olive, a white twenty-eight year-

old, recollected going in and out of the closet. Olive explained that:

> I've basically been in and out of the closet most of my life. When the worst stuff
> happened when I was 17, I went back in the closet for quite a while. I didn't tell
> people. When I started at [Southern university], I couldn't say exactly… it was
> more like the "don't ask, don't tell" policy of Atheism. By the second year I was
> there, I was out and [Southern State 1] is interesting actually because – it's funny
> because we know the same people- there's so many not just Christians, but like
> community based Christians, people that were all going to church together. Even
> as a 24 year-old adult there, people were nice, but there was tension.

Both Gina and Olive experiences going in and out of the closet were mainly due to

feeling different and feeling the potential for discrimination. For example, Olive also

explained that one reason she does not reveal her nonreligious status on even social

media was because she thought it may affect her job opportunities in the future.

Furthermore, George, a sixty-three year-old white man, noted that he could relate to their

situation. He had to wait until he retired to disclose his Atheist status because he worried

it would jeopardize his business. Due to fearing discrimination based on their Atheist

identity, there may need to be more legislation to protect nonreligious individuals. In

addition, these experiences call for greater awareness and understanding of Atheist's

experiences especially when it comes to the general public.

A few individuals noted that there is still the assumption that Atheists and gays can be cured. As the source of their stigma not physically visible, both groups are "discreditable" –that is, they are seen as morally lacking. As Karen, a twenty-seven year-old white woman, points out homosexuality and Atheism are seen as "wrong" and "correctable." She added that:

> However, people are a lot more used to homosexuality than they are Atheism. So it's a lot easier for people to accept homosexuality than atheism. I also have met people who feel that my being an 'Atheist' means that I want to change them. My Atheism is considered an attack against them. I haven't really had any horrible situations, but I have certainly surprised a lot of people. I just have to reiterate that "I don't care" and "I'm not going to try to destroy your faith".

Karen noted here the assumption that Atheists are trying to recruit more Atheists, just as homosexuals have been accused of trying to recruit in the past.

As noted earlier, many of the Atheists I interviewed would like to live in a society. Betsy, a sixty-three year-old white woman, noted

> I think that people just need to understand that we exist and nothing they, I mean they, you can't change somebody's mind about religion, you, but you can't, and you can't change someone's minority status. They are what they are and people I think, it'd be nice if people would just leave us the hell alone. And not feel compelled to… [JP: To proselytize?] To proselytize yeah or try to you know de-atheize us or something like that. I think that we can be and I'm sure we have been discriminated against when people think that we're not believers.

Henry, a thirty-eight Hispanic man, noted that he could also relate because these minority groups feel patronized. Henry explained that what he encountered seemed more like elitism than anything else. He noted, "They think they're better than me just because of that. And they want to save me, 'let's save his poor soul,' which I find that ironic because I would like to save them." These experiences and dealing with people who patronize them made several participants feel irritated and frustrated. In addition, a few individuals felt shunned. One woman, Sarah, a thirty-five year-old mother of three, noted that she has

been shunned by family members and her children struggle finding friends because they grow up in a secular home. Once again, this shunning as well as the struggles her children face in finding and building relationships, is similar to children of gay parents. On the other hand, these feelings of being different helped others, like Ivy, a thirty-seven year-old white woman who is in the military, identify with and help other minorities, especially those in the LGBT community. Ivy explained:

> In my opinion, to some of the other minorities are out there… I'm like, you know I have my own closet, so why don't you come out of yours and I'll come out of mine and you know we can… [JP: We can hug!] Yea, and peacefully so I've got a lot of close relationships with people that are part of another minority group because they trust me. They understand that I'm a minority in some ways too so there's better communication that way.

Not only did Ivy note this connection, but also explained that for her it is one of the most positive aspects of being an Atheist. Others, like Bonnie, have also used this identity to help change perceptions of Atheists, by opening coming out to others who bash Atheists. Bonnie, a fifty-seven year-old white woman, felt the need to "out" herself when a discussion became heated. During this conversation, she told me:

> I think I've quickly outed myself once, and it came up with someone making asshole remarks against Atheists/Atheism, and I said, "well, I'm an Atheist, you do now know an Atheist", and they kind of back peddled, and I said "there's more of us out here, there's 15% of us here in [southern state], and more other places" and I said "you're going to run into us, just like you run into gay people, you're going to run into us" and they shut up, so it didn't go really any further. It was kind of like… "hey wait a minute". It would be similar to, if I was gay, saying "well, I'm gay too." You know if somebody said that, if somebody made a remark about "Atheists are terrible" I'd say, "I'm an Atheist too, or a Democrat - or whatever".

Not only does Bonnie compare Atheists to gay individuals, but also emphasizes the overall presence of Atheists. For many, this presence (or visibility) could be more apparent though. Gina, a sixty-eight year-old white woman, noted "I think it would be

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nice if people could come out or kind of take a page from the gay movement you know: "We're here, we're queer get used to it." Gina's use of the word queer here is very appropriate. This word choice simultaneously aligns Atheists to the gay community and acknowledges that Atheists are different, unexpected, and unusual from the "normal" members of society. In addition, this visibility, according to these participants, is also key in terms of being treated with respect and avoiding prejudice and discrimination.

It is important to keep in mind that many religious groups, over the past decade or so, have been adjusting their stance on being gay. Kathleen, a thirty year-old racially mixed woman noted that, "It seems as if LGBT issues are coming around and a lot more religious folks are changing their minds on it. I think it is just a matter of time on that issue." The change and greater acceptance of the LGBT community suggested to several participants that greater understanding and acceptance of Atheists may start occurring, especially as more and more people come out as Atheist. Regardless, at least one participant, Lauren, a twenty-four year-old racially mixed woman, noted that it may be easier to be gay than to be Atheist and another, Danielle, a twenty-one year-old white woman, noted that Atheists deserve mistreatment whereas it is not okay to discriminate against gays (assuming that these individuals believe being "gay" is innate rather than a choice).

Twelve participants noted that despite similarities, there are some key differences between these communities. For example, according to many participants, it is easier for Atheists than gays to hide their identities. For this reason, several noted that they were hesitant to compare their experiences to the discrimination the LGBT community faces. Elizabeth, a white fifty-nine year-old white woman, explained, "As far as cultural, I mean

I would never compare an Atheist to a homosexual or African American or Hispanic, but I agree that yes, there, I think there's still a stigma and there's still the possibility of prejudice against Atheism if people find out." Another participant, Chris, a twenty-eight year-old white woman, noted that Atheism is a choice whereas being gay is not. Several also indicated that the LGBT community has more burdensome or taxing everyday interactions than Atheists.

I was very fortunate to have interviewed nine individuals (all women) who identified as lesbian, bisexual or queer. This gave me the opportunity to explicitly ask them about their experiences as individuals who deal with being both gay and Atheist. On an individual level, one participant, Lynn, a twenty-six year-old white woman, noted that it has been harder for her to be gay than Atheist. She explained:

> Because I'm like the lipstick lesbian or something, so for me in a cultural way, it is easy to be gay. I don't really feel, that's not really a source of stress for me, what is the source of stress is the generational thing. People back home not understanding in particular the idea that I'm causing pain to my parents. And that being the difficult thing, it feels much more difficult for them to deal with it socially the fact that I'm gay than the fact that I'm an Atheist. It's much less shameful, it's still bad in their community and difficult for them, but if you were to ask them, they would be like "the Atheist thing," but it's not true, you can tell by their emotional reactions and the time that they spend being worked up and talking about it is much greater for the gay thing than the Atheist thing.

Despite Lynn's family telling her that being an Atheist is more upsetting than her being gay, she feels like this is not the case. It is possible that Lynn's family is more likely to view her self-identification as Atheist as something to be dismissed and not taken seriously or even a phase because she is a woman. On the other hand, being gay may seem to have more real life consequences such as meeting her partner and potential safety issues. In addition, Lynn notes how her visibility as a woman who conforms to particular gender norms associated with heterosexuality (being a "lipstick lesbian") allows her the

flexibility to pass as heterosexual as she has experienced very little open discrimination due to her sexuality. Debra, a twenty-five year-old white woman, noted one similarity in:

> the fact that there's not that many people that are openly Atheist you know. I mean the number is getting higher but it's still hard to come across someone.[JP: So do you think there's any stigma like there is with?] There is. Yeah, I mean it's the same as being different in any other kind of way. You know people are afraid of being different.

Unlike Lynn, Debra did not believe being gay was any different from being any other type of minority. This perception may be slightly related to the fact that Debra's family is nonreligious whereas Lynn's family is still very active in their religious community. In addition, Debra also noted that the only time she would "out" herself as an Atheist is if someone told her she was going to hell because she is gay. She explained, "I mean the only time I would consider a good time to out myself would be like if someone was telling me I was going to hell because I'm a lesbian. I'd be like, well I don't believe in god or hell or heaven or anything so it doesn't really matter to me what you say." Helen, a sixty-three year old lesbian white woman explained:

> So coming out as a lesbian, absolutely turned me totally and absolutely against Christianity and any other dogmatic religion. After experiencing the hatred of the church turned against me, I felt antagonistic toward it as well. Now that the world is changing and gay people are getting more legal rights, and mainstream Christian religions are easing up some on their oppressive ideology, I have been able to relax more. I have gay friends who even participate in liberal Christianity, but it's definitely not for me. I had enough of Christianity growing up as a kid and certainly had enough of it as a gay person during the AIDS crisis of the 1980's.

For Helen, not only was Christianity a source of pain and oppression because of her sexual orientation, it was the source of damaging experiences that would keep her from feeling like she could ever go back to organized religion. Additionally, Helen noted that her partner "said one time she would rather come out as a lesbian in [Southern State] than come out as an Atheist." Like many in the LGBT community, many Atheists in my study

noted that they wanted to be accepted as normal. Lauren, a twenty-four year-old racially mixed woman noted:

> Christian people and people with religions can talk about their religion and everything that its accepted. I would love to be able to you know talk about it and be accepted because it's hard when your having a conversation with someone and your talking about so many different things and you can't bring up your opinion to offer anything.

Like many gay individuals who feel like they cannot bring up their partners in causal conversation, Atheists also desire an open line of communication where they can feel free to disclose this information to others.

Finding community and feeling like they belong can be difficult, especially for Atheist women. Since Atheism is stigmatized by society in general and perceived as a rejection of god (and to a degree religious rituals), then for women in particular, taking on this identity comes with risks. In addition, women who take on this identity may deal with additional risks as this stance challenges gender norms associated with being female (including passivity) especially as it relates to coming out or disclosing this identification to others. In the next chapter, I explicitly examine how gender affects their self-identification as Atheist.

Chapter Six: The Role of Gender and Stigmatization

"I don't give a damn 'bout my reputation
You're living in the past, it's a new generation
A girl can do what she wants to do and that's what I'm gonna do

[…]

I've never been afraid of any deviation
An' I don't really care if you think I'm strange
I ain't gonna change"

---Joan Jett "Bad Reputation"

"I don't feel like I need to hide or that it's something I should be ashamed of."

---Olive, a twenty-eight year old white woman and self-identified Atheist

"[s]he must face unwitting acceptance of [her]self by individuals who are prejudice against persons of the kind [s]he can be revealed to be" (p. 42).

--Goffman

As Joan Jett, Olive, and Goffman all note in different ways, people who are stigmatized may embrace their identities as empowering rather than feel ashamed about it. On the surface, this may seem difficult to believe. However, the more I interacted with Atheists, the more I realized how complicated this stigmatizing identity can be. In the previous chapter, I discussed how Atheists manage their stigmatized identity, how many Atheists seek community in likeminded others, and how this compares to another stigmatized group, the LGBT community. In this chapter, I examine the role gender plays in structuring the experience and meaning of being an Atheist and how women specifically manage being assertive about their identity as an Atheist while also caring about others.

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The Role of Gender

Normative expectations of women are intertwined with history and a society's culture. In the United States and in the South particular, women have had the unfortunate history of being treated like second-class citizens. For example, it was not until 1920 in which women primarily in the South were given the right to vote.[22] On the other hand, White men had this right since the United States declared its independence from Great Britain in 1776 and Black men were granted this right in 1870 with the 15th amendment.[23] Prior to women getting the vote, a woman's father or her husband was viewed as voting on her behalf. Since Southern states were amongst the last states to give women the right to vote, this indicates some deep-rooted paternalistic notions of gender and equality. Additionally, White Southern men who associated with organizations like the Klu Klux Klan claimed it was their duty to protect White women from Black men. During the late nineteenth century, Social Darwinists argued that women's fragile physique was in need of protecting (even from themselves to an extent). For example, Social Darwinists argued that if women were educated, then their reproductive health and success would diminish (Romanes, 1887). Even after women were given the right to vote and their labor was needed during times of war, society emphasized that their ideal place was inside the home primarily through media depictions of the ideal middle class household. These reinforced notions that White middle class women should not to want to work outside the home. On the other hand, women of color and working class women have always been

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[22] The states that granted women the right to vote in 1920 includes: Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, New Mexico, and Kentucky. Fourteen of the twenty-one states are located in the South Atlantic, the East South, or the West South Central regions of the United States. See http://constitutioncenter.org/timeline/html/cw08_12159.html
[23] It is important to remember that although many black men were given this constitutional right, many black men were barred from voting due to entrance tests.

expected to work.[24] When women worked outside the home, they were paid a fraction of what men earned despite legislative reforms like the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which prohibited employment and wage discrimination on the basis of race and sex (Collins, 2010). Even in the twenty-first century, women still earn a fraction of what men do despite the fact that women outnumber men in college and have since 1982 (Collins, 2010). The economic situation of women reflects the gender norms of the United States by emphasizing that women should depend upon men. Women are viewed as less valuable (at least economically) because they have less power in society including the power to control their own reproduction. Despite having fought for reproductive rights since the early twentieth century, women still struggle with obtaining adequate access to reproductive health. For example, a number of states have passed legislation to regulate (with the intent of shutting down) reproductive health facilities. In addition, one recent Supreme Court case Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc. (2014) ruled that companies can choose to deny their employees health care coverage that includes birth control. As such, women (and their doctors) are not expected to make decisions regarding their reproductive health. Despite the efforts of first, second, and third wave feminists, women's second-class status in this society remains engrained and overwhelming. Women are still expected to depend on others and to look for support outside of themselves. Over time, this dependence on others has reflected as well as shaped the gender norms of our society.

These norms of dependency, as they pertain to women, have also impacted religious institutions and religious behavior. As such, it is expected for women to rely

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[24] The U.S.'s dominant ideological gender roles have been modeled after the dominant group within society (white, middle/upper class/heterosexual). In addition, this gender ideology also poses men and masculinity as superior to women and femininity.

upon others, including religious leaders and religious deities for strength and support. For example, research has indicated that women are more religious (or observant) than men: they attend worship services and pray more frequently (Freese, 2004; Miller and Hoffman, 1995). Furthermore, women outnumber men in U.S. Christian congregations (Kosmin and Keysar, 2009). Concomitantly, women are slightly under-represented amongst non-believers, at only 40 percent. According to several researchers, religion and religious institutions in the U.S. over time have become a feminized space despite being centered around male religious figures and leaders. Leeming (2003) argues that as societies transitioned from polytheism to monotheism (primarily in Abrahamic traditions), women's presence as goddesses were eliminated and women became marginalized figures. This transition moved women from being visible and powerful (as goddesses) to being viewed as individuals in need of protecting. Over time, women's presence as members of religious congregations grew. This growth occurred as more and more men left their homes to find work outside the home and as Westward expansion occurred in the United States. In addition, Kimmel (1996) contends that depictions of Jesus as a soft featured and passive individual may have influenced people's perceptions of religion as feminine. Kimmel (1996) argues that due to the construction of the church as a feminized institution the rise of "muscular Christianity" took place in the early twentieth century in order to combat what people perceived to be the feminization of the church and Jesus (p. 177). Kimmel also notes that religious leaders such as Rev. Billy Sunday attempted to masculinize not only Jesus, but also reframe religion as manly. These institutional attempts tried to reposition and police religious activity as masculine and religion as a whole as a masculine domain. Despite these efforts, religion and being

observant of religious practices such as being submissive, caregiving, and empathic, which are tenets of many religions, have been construed as stereotypically feminine behaviors.

As West and Zimmerman (1987) argue, gender is something that an individual "does" and this behavior is viewed in relation to one's sex and the culture in which she lives. West and Zimmerman contend that one's gender is also an on-going process and something that we are often not conscious of until we step outside of our society's norms. Furthermore, Kimmel (2011) and Connell (2005) also note that gender is socially constructed and based in relation to one's culture and this culture's history. Kimmel and Connell, gender theorists and researchers who primarily focus on masculinity, suggest that as social actors we are constantly testing the gender boundaries of our every day lives. One of the mechanisms that serves to reinforce gender normative behaviors is gender policing that occurs in our every day experiences. Both Kimmel and Connell argue that gender policing is based on homophobia, especially as it relates to men and their perceived feminine behavior. Kimmel explains that homophobia and shame are vastly important in curbing men's behaviors especially as homophobia and shame are used to regulate men's behaviors so they fear stepping outside of gender normative behavior. For example, if the church and being observant of religious practices are viewed as feminine, many men may avoid attending church or openly expressing their reliance on god and/or religion since these are equated with feminine behavior. As such, men who defy gender norms may be subjected to various forms of gender policing to curb their behavior. In addition, many men may self-police in order to avoid being perceived as feminine (and therefore weak) because of underlining homophobia (if they

are perceived as behaving feminine, their masculinity and their heterosexuality may be questioned).

Women who defy gender norms are also subject to various forms of gender policing. Women who are labeled as being aggressive, assertive, or defiant and as such, are not viewed positively in the U.S. Pharr (1994) argues that women who step outside gender normative behavior do risk being labeled "whore" or "lesbian" (p. 635). Specifically, she notes that "to be a lesbian is to be perceived as someone who has stepped out of line […] as someone who can live without a man, […] [and] is perceived as being outside the acceptable, routinized order of things" (1994, p. 635). According to Pharr, women who are too masculine (or act like men), words, such as bitch, cunt, dyke, bulldagger, and other terms like these are used to police women's behavior when they are not behaving appropriately. As such, women who are Atheists are susceptible to similar gender policing. This policing attempts to reinforce gender norms within society.

Since gender norms greatly impact society and reinforce the notion that women should be submissive rather than have agency over their own actions, I propose that women may be less likely than men to question authority especially in societies that are patriarchal in order to avoid gender policing. In addition, the absence of questioning may result in fewer women identifying as Atheist since this is linked to rejecting theism. Furthermore, Atheism is viewed by many as an assertion of self-determination and power, which is an identification that is gendered. For example, young white men are more likely to self-identify as Atheist than women (Zuckerman, 2009). Women, who self-identify as Atheist, are also self-identifying and constructing their nonreligious identity as defying normative constructions of feminine passivity, which could be

particularly threatening and risky in Southern states. Southern states have a long history with differential treatment of others (often justified and maintained through religious efforts). The two Southern states examined in my study were amongst those that where belief in god was strongest (Zuckerman, 2009). Furthermore, Zuckerman (2009) notes that Atheists are least abundant in the South, which indicates that the South may be hostile towards the nonreligious. Sherkat (2008) found that lifelong Southerners "have more than twice the odds of being in more certain belief [in god]" when compared to others (p. 454). As discussed in chapter five, being Atheist is clearly a stigmatized identity that many see as a significant contributing factor to facing (and avoiding) various forms of negative experiences. As noted in chapter five, participants in my study noted feeling more stigmatized in the South (in part due to the presence of religion in their interactions) when compared to other regions primarily. In addition, because there are fewer Atheists in the South, there is less potential social support for individuals within this community. Furthermore, Atheist women since they challenge gender normative behavior may be at risk for more differential treatment. As such, Atheist women in the South engage in stigma management and risk assessment when it comes to revealing this aspect of their identity.

Furthermore, women within the Atheist community may appear to be "outsiders-within" (Collins, 1990). Since women are (and expected to be) more religious than men, the women in my study may be assumed to be religious by their society in part because it appears normative for women to be so. As such, they may be aware of their status as outsiders and also hesitant to reveal this to others. Due to their visibility as women and

their less visible Atheist identity, their management of their stigma sheds light on how complicated and costly their interactions can be.

Stigma Management Strategies and Gender

Several participants experienced only a few negative experiences (like job loss or overt discrimination), mainly because they "tempered their blasphemy"[25] and avoided interactions that would lead to negative experiences. In other words, these individuals managed their stigma by engaging in selective concealment strategies such as: nondisclosure, assumptive passing, telling half-truths like "I was raised 'X'" or avoidance (Fitzgerald, 2003). Twenty-seven women (about 68%) engaged in selective concealment. For many this meant avoiding the discussion of religion with family members. For example, Gayle, a thirty year-old white woman who was raised Jewish explained that:

> I have one grandmother currently alive and I would not tell her. It didn't even occur to me until this moment to think about telling her. You know what I mean? Because there is so much that I don't tell her. It's not really a relationship that is so disclosey at all. So, it's just one of the many things that I am just like "eh!"

Even though Gayle noted that she would not tell her grandmother, later she explained that the importance her family puts on being Jewish also factors into her nondisclosure. Disclosing this identification to family members like her grandmother may be viewed as a rejection of her family's culture and traditions. Other women noted that they would avoid telling certain family members because it would cause stress and may create tension within familial relationships. In addition, three of these women noted that they would not tell neighbors. For example, Jasmine, a forty-two year-old white woman, explained that the one person she would refuse to tell would be her neighbor. She explained that:

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[25] One participant, Henry, used this phrase often in our conversation and I felt it was an interesting way to discuss selective concealment.

She's nice and sweet and really kind and her husband of 29 years just left her. I'm always offering "hey, if you want to come over and have an hour of a good time…sit by the pool and drink some wine or just come over and complain" because I know she doesn't have a lot of outside friends. So she sends me emails after emails of how blessed she is that god put her right next door to me and god bless me. I know if I looked at her and said, "you don't have to keep doing that because I'm Atheist" that she would probably just fall out and never look at me again. [JP: It would just be upsetting to her?] Right, and that's all it would be. It would just be me being mean saying, "hey, I'm an Atheist." Who does it benefit? So she's the one person who doesn't know and will never know. I will never discuss god with her, if it came to that I would say I'm an Atheist, but I'm just not going to do that to her. I really think that would be devastating her to find out her sweet Jasmine…(laughing) it would kill her.

Disclosing this identification to family members as well as neighbors could be especially troubling and problematic for Atheists. Those who indicated that they would not disclose this identification noted unnecessary stress towards others as their primary concern and why they would refuse to tell these people. Since the women in my study tended to factor in the emotional repercussions of disclosing this identification to others (especially as it pertained to nondisclosure), they are abiding by certain gender normative behavior.

On the other hand, several of these participants also engaged in another type of selective concealment when they engaged in passing behavior such as: assumptive passing or avoidance. For example, April, a twenty-four year-old white woman explained:

While my other coworkers (who are younger, and whom I don't directly work with) know that I'm an Atheist, I have not told the woman I supervise. She is deeply religious (Christian) who is very involved in her church and I fear that I might lose some of her respect and otherwise complicate our relationship. I just don't want it to be an issue, so when she makes assumptions about my faith, believing that I am a Christian, I let her.

Since April, like several participants, does not want to cause unnecessary harm or hurt feelings, she does not challenge the religious assumptions made by others. In addition, almost all participants noted that they avoid disclosing this status to others unless they

have established friendships with those who would not be bothered by it. It is also important to remember that the types of stigma management strategies enacted by participants are not mutually exclusive, but context dependent. For example, Francis, a twenty-nine year-old white woman, noted that she did not tell her grandmother while she was alive, but since her grandmother's death, she is open about this identification to others. Francis felt the need to selectively conceal her identity around her grandmother, but after she died there was little need to actively avoid or conceal this information about herself. Since her grandmother spent a good deal of time raising Francis (after Francis's mother died), she respected her and did not want to hurt her feelings. Even though I intentionally oversampled women, the gender differences noted here suggest that women undergo more selective concealment of their Atheist identity than men (68% of women versus 36% of men). I contend that one of the major reasons why this occurs is because women are deviating from normative gender prescriptions when they identify as Atheist and come out to others. In addition, the women in my study are abiding by gender norms that dictate that women should care about others and should not be intentionally hurtful. On the other hand, men may be less likely to engage in selective concealment because they may encounter less interactions where religion and religious practices come up. Even though women may be engaging in more selective concealment than men, both men and women are tactful to avoid hurting the feelings of others.

Utilizing Tact to Navigate Hurt Feelings

Instead of just being mindful of their own comfort, the vast majority of the Atheists in my study (both men and women) utilized tact to avoid hurting other peoples' feelings. As I reviewed our conversations, I looked for various keywords such as: upset,

hurt, pain, and offend[26] to see how they discussed their interactions with others. Specifically, I wanted to see if they were concerned how they managed information about their stigma around those they cared about. Many participants noted that they did not want to upset family members (immediate family members such as parents and grandparents). In addition, many noted that they did not want to intentionally make anyone feel uncomfortable or feel offended. As such, many of these individuals walked a fine line or utilized various tactics around family members, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and others in general to avoid hurt feelings.

Amongst those who noted that they did not want to hurt or upset their family members' feelings noted that they primarily did not want to hurt their mothers, fathers, and grandparents. One participant, Isabelle, a twenty-year old white woman who was raised religious, could not avoid the topic and when asked directly by her mother about her beliefs said that she could not lie. She explained:

> My mom got herself into it and I couldn't lie. […] This was actually just last year, fall semester. […] But she asked me "you still believe in the bible don't you?" And then I was just like, I couldn't lie, so that's how that started and she was very upset. She still loves me, I think that she pretends that I never said anything. So, [it is] better than being disowned.

Even though Isabelle did not want to hurt her mother's feelings, she did not want to lie to her mainly because she loves and respects her. With this in mind, her mother pretends that this discussion did not occur, which I would suggest reminds her of her hurt feelings and perhaps her own perceptions of her failure.

Upsetting family members, especially parents, was something several participants noted in our conversations and being mindful of one's parents feelings was not gender

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[26] Specifically, I looked for these words: upset, hurt, pain, offend, happy, damage, sad, feeling, and comfort.

specific. Ivy, a thirty-six year old white woman who was raised loosely religious, also

noted that she upset her mother when she found out. She recalled that:

> My mom was pretty upset about it, she was a weird kind of upset. Both my
> brother and I are Atheist[s] and she never could understand why. We're like,
> "well mom you didn't raise us in church and thanks, but this was just a natural
> progression for what was going to happen." We weren't brainwashed as children
> and so when we got to be adults we got to make the logical connection and go
> "well this is silly."

During this conversation, Ivy highlights the progression in which she came to this

identity when disclosing this to her mother. Even though Ivy does not necessarily blame

her mother for her lack of religious training, she seems to suggest that her mother could

have done more to influence her and her brother's belief system. One way that another

participant, Henry, a forty-year old Hispanic man, learned to avoid hurting his mother's

feelings by being tactful in his responses during particular rituals, such as blessings. He

explained:

> When they would say, "god be with you," I would always say, "likewise."
> Because god is G-o-d; it's three letters of the alphabet made by us, by us. [J: Uh
> huh.] You know the lowly servants of the Lord. But I understand that and so I
> became very, I became very cool with that. And I understand that when my
> mother wanted to bless me in the past, I would be blasphemous and that hurt her.
> And because I love her. I know how to temper that. You know what I mean? [J:
> Uh huh.] So what I did is I would just say, "likewise." And that's you and that's
> what we do and that's fine because that's where I'm from and I can't escape that.
> So I guess in a way we both compromise in a beautiful way.

For Henry, he "tempers in blasphemy" in order to avoid hurting his mother not only

because he loves her, but because he also respects her tremendously. During our

conversation, he noted several times that she is the reason why he is a good man. Because

he respects and loves her, he avoids intentionally hurting her feelings, especially when it

comes to an aspect of her identity that is very important to her. Another male participant,

Daniel, a sixty-seven year old white man, also avoided disclosing his beliefs to his

mother because he did not want to hurt her and finally when he did, it was painful. He

recalled:

> But I started doubting at an early age and it continued. Of course, I had to stay in
> the closet for many years. [J: Did you still like continue to go to church with your
> mom, mother and such?] Oh yeah, yeah up until high school and then I started
> drifting away; college I went a little bit. But it was a gradual process; it wasn't a
> total moving away. Mainly because I think it would hurt my mother. [J: So you
> went through the confirmation process and everything?] Yeah, oh yeah, yeah,
> yeah. And, but then when I really did come out, my parents rejected me entirely
> because of it and I had to be courageous about it and I didn't even talk to my
> mother for about a year and a half because of that because she wouldn't talk to
> me. So it was painful.

Even though Daniel tried to participate in religious rituals, such as confirmation and

attend church, he could not pretend he was something he was not even if it meant hurting

his mother's feelings. This experience suggests that Atheists, like Daniel, do not go about

disclosing this identity to loved one's lightly or without reservations. In addition,

Daniel's experiences also suggest that disclosing this identity could come with emotional

and support related risks.

Mothers were not the only immediate family members who were identified by

participants as becoming upset. Lynn, a twenty-six year old white woman, noted that she

really respects her parents (especially her father) so causing them pain also causes her to

feel guilt. She noted:

> I really respect my parents and I really respect my father and I think he's smart. I
> think that his faith is not necessarily a bad thing, while sometimes I think it is, but
> it's not necessarily a bad thing. I think I felt really guilty like they feel like I don't
> respect them and they've said that. "you don't respect us, you don't respect our
> faith," and while yes, there are some things I don't respect about Christianity, but
> that doesn't mean I think that you're dumb.

Even though Lynn's parents are Christians and feel disrespected, she still respects and

believes that they are smart people. In addition, Lynn's parents also seem to want to

avoid the topic and being upset. Lynn recalled that, "he [her father] also has been distraught by it in a very avoidant and 'I'm not going to talk about it, but have you found a church yet,' kind of way. 'I don't want to lie to you, but I don't want to talk about this.' So that's kind of upsetting too." These interactions suggest that both Lynn and her parents are being mindful of their differences, but also trying to avoid upsetting one another by being tactful although this does not always work. Another participant, Hannah, a thirty-eight year old white woman, explained that she did not want to hurt her father's feelings either. In our conversation, Hannah noted:

> It just was a matter of not hurting feelings to the point where my dad, a couple of years ago, his girlfriend was taking the kids to church and he said, [my youngest daughter] didn't want to go. And I was like, "well don't make her. Like, you know if she doesn't want to go, don't make her." And he's like, "she says you don't believe in god; is that true?" I had a hard time. I was like, "I don't think I believe in the same god you do." […] I couldn't say [that I was an Atheist] to my dad who, believe me I've had a million arguments with; no, I don't dad. Because to me, it's about taking away his comfort. Like I feel selfish.

For Hannah, being explicit about not believing in god was a difficult and perhaps emotionally trying experience. Through this exchange, we can get a general understanding that she does not want to come off as confrontational or intentionally hurtful. Instead, she walks a fine line to navigate any potential damaging feelings her father may endure.

Not only did participants note being tactful around their own parents, but also grandparents. Christy, a twenty-four year old white woman, noted that "I really did not want my grandma finding out because I just don't want her to be upset and she can't even speak very well so I wouldn't even be able to have a conversation with her about it." For Christy, like other participants, discussing this at all with her grandmother would be something to be avoided since they would not be able to communicate effectively and

would only cause her grandmother pain. Another participant, Lauren, a twenty-four year old mixed woman recalled, "As far as family knowing, I mean there is no way I would tell my grandparents. Just because they're older and I don't want to ruin that relationship. I want them to have a relationship with the kid[s], so I don't want to do anything that would hurt that." Like Christy, Lauren also does not want to cause unnecessary pain and in addition, she is especially conscious of it since it would hurt other family members. Isabelle, a twenty-year old white woman, also explained that her grandmother may even be flabbergasted if she learned that she is Atheist. She clarified that,

> Like my mom's family […] they're all very religious, very conservative, very religious. Like my grandma would be like so upset. She wouldn't know what to think though she would be like 'what, is that even possible?' That's how close-minded, well she's not close-minded, she was just born and raised in [southern town], [southern state] and she's 77 years old. She just doesn't have a clue what's going on in the world at all. That's her life. She's sweet as can be, but she doesn't have a clue. Um, yeah, I don't even know if she would understand the concept of not being religious because it's so much a part of her life.

Since religion and religious belief appear to be important aspects of several participants family members' lives, it serves as a barrier which prevents honesty and disclosure in order to keep the peace or to avoid hurting feelings unnecessarily.

A few participants discussed family members in general and how it would upset them if they found out. Abby, a twenty-four year old white woman, explained she would avoid telling some family members because they are religious. "I mean there's some family members that I wouldn't ever make it a point to tell them because I don't see the point because I know they're really religious and nobody's going to get anything out of this with me—it would just be upsetting them." Although Abby does not explicitly disclose which family members she is referring to, Abby views disclosing this

information to family members as being intentional hurtful or inconsiderate of others and their feelings.

Besides mentioning family, and friends, non-specific others were mentioned as being amongst those participants did not want to make uncomfortable. April, a twenty-four year-old white woman, explained that when she wanted to reconnect with a friend from high school, she approached the subject with caution. She stated:

> I just recently reconnected with an old friend from high school, and he and I talk a couple times a week. Kinda like catching up with where we're at, and we hadn't talked for four year, five years, probably even longer than that, since I was in high school, so I don't think he had any ideas about what I believed religiously. He just sort of assumed I was a Christian and he was talking about having a bible study at his house and I was like, "I don't want to make you uncomfortable, but I just want to let you know that I'm an Atheist and I don't want you to think that I'm judging you or anything like that, I'm not, but I just want to let you know." He kind of struggled with that for a few minutes and then it was kind of like, "well okay, you're still you, so I guess I'm not going to worry about it." But I felt like I needed to reveal it to him because as we're reconnecting and becoming close friends again, [and] I don't want it to come out in some other way that he feels ambushed. So even though it's not a big deal to me, I try to be conscious of people who I know may react adversely or will have a strong reaction and just kind of let them know on the side, "I'm not here to judge you, I'm not passing judgment on you, you believe what you want, I'll believe what I want, this is ultimately the right choice for me at this moment, and I'm not going to try to project it onto you and I expect the same from you."

Even though April's experience of coming out to her friend was very direct, she approached the situation and her friend with respect and honesty. She was also conscientious of his comfort. She did not want religion to be a factor in their friendship. In addition, a few noted that they have been made uncomfortable whether it is seeing other nonreligious people make those who are religious uncomfortable (Gayle), being turned down by a potential boyfriend, and losing friends. Because of these interactions these participants noted that they did not want to make others feel this way. Gayle, a thirty year-old white woman noted:

[College] gave me a lot of, I left with a lot of frustration with how Atheists treat religious people sometimes, especially when they are groups of people, like people were often really intensely disrespectful to religion. Which I realize it like goes the other way all the time too but it made me not want to be like that. Because I don't want to be a jerk to people…especially because there were plenty of people who like, the few religious people I know that would actually be in that environment were not people who deserved that?

As Gayle emphasizes here, nobody deserves to made to feel uncomfortable because of someone else's beliefs. As these conversations suggest, we, as human beings, should care about those around us and be mindful of how our behavior affects others.

Not only do these participants prioritize concerns of others, they also implicitly abide by Humanist principles noted in the Humanist Manifesto. In this it states "Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that […] affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity." Since avoiding unnecessary harm or pain, especially when it comes to interacting with others or the "greater good," the vast majority participants are engaging in Humanist principles. As noted in chapter three, almost the majority of those who participated in my study identified with Humanist principles and this is displayed in their interactions with others. In addition, these Humanist principles were not necessarily gender specific despite normative cultural expectations suggest that women care about others (even to the point of self-depreciation). It is also important to remember that men who utilized tact because they cared about the feelings of others were defying gender norms (behaving feminine) although this behavior was not obvious to others.

Gender and Self-Identifying as Atheist

Since one major aspect of this study was to examine gender, I explicitly asked all participants what they believed the role gender has on self-identifying as Atheist. The

most common theme noted was that being an Atheist and being a woman meant that these individuals challenge gender norms (including it being harder for women to be Atheist). For example, Lynn, a twenty-six year-old white woman, explained that:

> Being a female Atheist definitely labels you as someone who is not interested in just going along. I think people take that piece of information (i.e., she's Atheist) and generalize more about you in general (e.g., she must be very free-thinking, independent, etc.) when you're a woman, whereas for men those qualities are more assumed so being Atheist doesn't change people's perceptions of you as broadly.

Lynn suggests here that self-identifying as Atheist for a woman is an act of resistance and viewed as reflective of her character whereas this is not the case for men. Another participant, Christy, a white twenty-four year-old woman, also explained that Atheist women "defy" stereotypes associated with feminine behaviors. She commented:

> I think that many of the ideas of what a woman's "role" in the family should be come from religious teachings or expectations. People also tend to associate women with characteristics like "warm" or "nurturing," whereas Atheists may be thought of as cold or unfeeling. This could make people dislike women Atheists even more than Atheists in general because they defy the usual stereotypes.

For Christy, this assumption of defiance of stereotypic feminine behaviors when they are attributed to Atheist women may contribute to why people may "dislike women Atheists even more than Atheists in general." Lynn and Christy suggest here is that these assumptions appear more personal in nature and directed at their identity (dislike and character-based assumptions people make about women who identify as Atheist). Furthermore, it appears that there is a wider gap between Atheist women's virtual identities and their actual identities than Atheists in general.

In addition, other participants noted that Atheist women may be viewed as a threat to normative society and the status quo, especially as these relate to male dominance in society. Cody, a sixty-five year-old retired white man, exclaimed, "I think it is easier to

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be a male Atheist because women in our society have been objects of severe

discrimination and exclusion. Women who were "too wise" or challenged male authority

were labeled and burned as witches." In this light, Atheist women may appear to be

outsiders as intentionally subverting gender normative expectations and challenging

society. When women are viewed as challenging gender normative expectations, they

may be policed to curb these behaviors (and their identities) to conform. Elizabeth, a

fifty-nine year-old white woman, when asked what the role between being a woman and

being an Atheist was, explained that it is:

> A big one. Number one; my brother once said, "you're a woman; you should be married and have children." Okay, so right off the bat as a child, I heard "You're a woman; you're supposed to be married and you're supposed to have children. God said that's pretty much your role in life." Abortion---they're trying to make it illegal again. And they continue to bring religion into it. The law about abortion has already been decided. [JP: 40 years now, right?] Yeah, but it doesn't matter. So I think that religion has a tendency to interfere in a lot of personal decisions. So yeah, as a woman, you know I'm not allowed to make those choices. There's a lot of pressure from society that if I were to have an abortion, I either should kill myself or feel guilt for the rest of my life.

For Elizabeth, her views regarding women's rights (including their rights to safe

abortion) play a huge role in her political and nonreligious beliefs. Elizabeth also appears

to feel patronized by the fact that women are not supposed to have a say over their own

bodies and their own destinies. In addition, Elizabeth notes that women have clear-cut

expectations set out in front of them and if they challenge or go against these, they are

viewed negatively. Embedded in this discussion is the premise that women should have

agency over their lives rather than be told by others what they can or cannot do or even

who they should be. This notion of agency is also highlighted by Henry, a thirty-eight

year-old Hispanic man, who explained that:

So I think being a man is just easier. I think in my case there's going to be the macho thing. Alright, you know, "I'm my own man, my own boss," which is weird because in today's day and age, the woman is the one that says, "look don't tell me what to do, I'm a woman, hear me roar" and all that stuff. And it's funny I think but I think it's easier for a man to question these things.

Henry argues here US society's gender norms are related to individual agency. According to Henry, it is easier for men to determine their own destiny than women in spite of the Women's Right Movement of the 1960s-1970s. The continuation of these gender norms in spite of movements for gender equality appears counterintuitive to Henry. Since men wield power in this patriarchal society, men can utilize this power on an individual level with little question.

On the other hand, women who desire to be self-determining individuals and seek to be empowered may be subjected to gender policing. For example, some participants noted that women are more severely punished, if only informally, by society when they rebel than are men –and this is because of a gender ideology that defines men as rebellious individualists and women as pro-social, collaborative, pacifists. The gender policing that some of the women noted was in relation to their sexuality. As I noted in chapter five, Betsy, a sixty-three year-old white woman, explained that women who are Atheists may be perceived as "'loud women who are probably dykes.'" In this, the assumption that Atheist women are "dykes" is not only homophobic, but also implies that Atheist women are behaving too masculine. In addition, other participants such as Amanda, a seventy-one year-old white woman, noted in chapter five that women who are Atheists appear to have loose morals as well as be sexually promiscuous. Amanda noted that individuals assume that she "can go screw around all I want," when in fact she does not believe this. As such, self-identifying as Atheist for women can leave themselves

open to various forms of risks including assumptions being made about their sexuality and sexual availability. Danielle, a twenty-one year old white woman, explained:

> Atheist women are sexualized more than Atheist men. Even though Atheists tend to make better decisions regarding sex and have lower rates of STDs, unplanned pregnancies, etc, there is a feeling that Atheist women are "easy" because people think Atheists have no boundaries or morals. I feel like there are more Atheist men than women but I don't know if that's true. I think men probably have an easier time of it because their worth isn't tied to their chastity and "virtue."

According to women in my study, not only was it perhaps more problematic for women to self-identify as Atheist, but women who are Atheist are judged in terms of their character by outsiders as sexual and less virtuous. As such, those in my study noted that we link a woman's sexuality with her character and her value rather than to who she is. Olive, a twenty-six year-old white woman, also noted that being nonreligious by itself was not viewed as a problem by others. Instead, they seemed more upset that she self-identified as Atheist. She recalled, "Claiming the A word feels very "in your face" and "no apologies" to a lot of people. I've known people that weren't upset by my beliefs, but were really upset that I insisted on actually identifying as Atheist. I think there's an assertiveness linked to the term that is kindof seen as 'unbecoming for a woman.'" Defying gender norms by embracing an assertive position, especially labeling oneself as Atheist, for women can come with risks (being viewed likable or unlikable).

One historical Atheist woman who was viewed during her time who defied normative gender expectations was Madalyn Murray O'Hair. According to Bruce Dierenfield (2007), Madalyn Murray O'Hair was "the most hated woman in America" (p.62). Murray (she later dropped O'Hair to distance identification with her son) fought for the separation of church and state within education primarily in the form of public prayer. She was the founder of American Atheists, an organization that promotes the civil

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rights of Atheists. She also served as its president for over twenty years. Overtime the

media and people perceived her as loud, cantankerous, communistic, and defiant. In

addition, her son William when an adult, noted that she "'wasn't angry about God; she

was angry at God'" (Dierenfield, 2007; p.73). After she battled to remove prayer from

public schools, she was still viewed negatively by mainstream society. A few individuals

recalled hearing comments about Madalyn Murray O'Hair when they were young. Betsy,

a sixty-three year-old white woman, when asked about the common assumptions people

have about Atheists, noted:

> I think starting back with Madalyn Murray O'Hair, who was definitely a very
> loud and could be a very unpleasant person. And so she made everybody think I
> think, I think a lot of people looked at her and said, "Okay, all Atheists are loud
> women who are probably dykes." I think that the people think that Atheists are
> angry. Or angry at god even though it's kind of ridiculous because there is no,
> we're angry and we need to be helped if only we would listen to them and you
> know they would help us. So yeah, we're here to spoil the party; we're here to
> wage war on Christmas [which is ridiculous].

Betsy's recollection of past public Atheist leader Madelyn Murray O'Hair highlights the

gendered assumptions regarding what it means to be a female Atheist, which means to be

a woman and an Atheist you are loud, assertive, and potentially a lesbian. Currently, there

are a number of women who are in leadership positions within the Atheist community,

but none as vocal and covered by the media as Murray was. On the other hand, the most

visible proponents of Atheism are men. For example, the current president of American

Atheists is a man (Dave Silverman), and Richard Dawkins is one of the most visible,

vocal, and respected figureheads within the Atheist community.

Despite the risks the involved, some women found challenging these gender

norms to be empowering. For example, Debra, a twenty-five year-old white woman,

explained, "I think in our society especially women are expected to do a lot of things and

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one of them is to be a god fearing woman. And I think that the fact that I'm not has made me more empowered to do things that I'm not expected to do you know." According to Debra, it appears that several of our societal gender norms are tied to religious principles and defying these can be a source of empowerment. For Debra, like other women in my study, defying these gender norms can provide them the opportunity and experience to challenge other gender norms. In addition, several noted that this empowerment is related to having agency or the ability to determine their own destinies.

The relationship between agency and control also became prominent themes when I examined the language used by participants. Since I examined my data by drawing upon Symbolic Interactionist theories, I made sure to pay close attention to how participants used language to discuss their experiences. As I reviewed conversations with participants, I started noticing an interesting phenomenon. I began to pay close attention to how they used the word "control" in discussing their beliefs and interactions. Upon further analyzing, I noticed that four men used the word "control" to discuss why women are religious as well as religion in general, but never necessarily referring to themselves. For example, the closest one man, Henry, came to discussing control, as it relates to himself, said that "my will is my will. And my choices are my choices." He, like all the other men in my sample, never explicitly used the word control to discuss his own situation. Men, historically, have had more direct control over their lives and their actions than women have. Despite the fact that many male participants noted that men have more advantages than women, on a subconscious level, their choice in language suggests an implicit understanding of these gender norms. On the other hand, thirteen women (about 33% of my sample of women) used the word "control" to discuss religion in general, women and

religion, as well as their own control over their futures. One reason why these women may have chosen this word is tied to the larger societal discussion surrounding women's choices and their bodies. Furthermore, when these women discussed women's issues, they were implicitly discussing their own issues and choices. It is also important to remember that I did not directly ask participants if they have control over their own actions whereas I did ask all participants about their experiences and thoughts on women and religion. In addition, this language also suggests that the women in my study seem to have become aware of how women's bodies and their actions are meaningful in society. As such, these women may even embrace the Atheist label in an attempt to subvert and resist gender norms. This resistance and defiance are meaningful to these women because they view these actions as empowering rather than something to feel shameful of. Despite viewing this identity as empowering, a large number of female participants managed their stigma by engaging in information control including passing and selectively concealing their identity. As such, many of these women were "outsiders-within" since they were very aware of their difference and yet remained fairly quiet about it when it came to revealing this identification to others (Collins, 1990).

Gender and Being Religious

As "outsiders-within," several female participants discussed sexism and how sexist ideology (the belief that one sex is superior to another) is embedded within society and within religion. Several participants replied that women's long history of being treated like second-class citizens in the U.S. has resulted in internalized sexism. Internalized sexism occurs when women actually believe they are inferior to men and that gender roles are natural rather than socially constructed (Pharr, 1994). Bonnie, a fifty-

seven year old single white woman who was very active in the Atheist circles in sample one, stated that, "As women get "stuck" with paternalistic societies, the paternalistic hierarchy of religious communities is familiar to them. They've been "trained" to accept and support the male authority figures that tell them what to do." Bonnie, like several others, claims that the wage gap and the continued attacks on women's reproductive rights demonstrate women's second-class status in the U.S. This sexism primarily in the form of paternalism, she noted, also pervades religious institutions. One participant, Jessica, a twenty-nine year old white woman, added that Southern gender ideology reinforces this phenomenon. She stated:

> We expect the Southern heroine thing; you know, we expect women to be weaker and expect them to need something more. And there's also the machismo thing too. Men may do it [be open about their relationship with god], but I don't know if men would be outspoken about it. Because I mean men are just, especially down here, just taught to be more stoic because men don't cry. [They are supposed to be] a rock where women are, it's much more accepted down here for a woman to cry or pray openly or to show their emotions.

After this, I asked "So you think church might be in a sense, I don't want say a crutch but you know what I mean, like for men it's seen as a weakness…" and she responded by adding that "It's a weakness to go to church if you're a guy. And, yeah, I think men do participate in church activities but to *need* god in a situation would be a weakness in a man, where I think where it would be like, 'oh this woman's so great, she's looking to god.' [It's] more of a matter of perspective" (original emphasis). Jessica suggests here that being in the South, when compared to other regions, may reinforce certain gendered expectations of both men and women, especially as they pertain to religion, that are not as prevalent elsewhere.

As second-class citizens, women are socialized to rely more upon others (including god) than men. As a result of relying upon others, women may view their own experiences in relation to external forces that are guiding their behavior. When asked about women's religiosity, Brian, a seventy-three year old white male, explained that women's fates have historically been determined by men, thus, making religious adherence (and control by god) more acceptable. As he put it:

> I guess part of it is at least traditionally, women have had less control of their world than men. And religion another reason a lot of people give for [the invention of] religion is so you can try to control the world, especially in the old days. You didn't know why anything happened. Or you didn't understand about the sun or volcanoes or earthquakes or droughts or rain. I mean you knew those things affected your life but you couldn't, and well they affected your life but you didn't have any, but you didn't have any way to do anything about it. So clearly you needed to have some model, build a model where you could hope to or you know somebody'd get sick and die so you, you know you invented a way to control your world. Now, another of man's curses I guess is they can, you can see into the future, right. You can see as far in the future as you want to look. I mean it's not clear and you can make it, but you can see out there, right. I mean and you can imagine what's going to happen but, and you know what's coming; you know you're not going to… you're going to die eventually. So you know, how do I control this? [JP: External forces kind of?] Yeah. How can I control this? And you know I came up with, they came up with the idea and it's pretty clever actually that there's something out there and if I do the right things, this something will help me. So you're trying to control your environment and I think religion, women, you know they're more, they have been in the past more dependent on not only the vagaries of the natural world but on their husbands and their chiefs in the tribes.

Several women also noted that women do not have as much control over their experiences as men do. For example, Caroline observed, "I think because men feel that they rule the world. And that they can do anything. So what need do they have? I don't think it's, I think it's definitely an issue of women not feeling like they have control." One pamphlet that I picked up at a Humanist meeting by A. L. Gaylor entitled, "Why Women Need Freedom From Religion," explained that religion is the "greatest enemy of

women's rights" since religion continues to subjugate them. This pamphlet goes on to cite passages from the Bible that reinforce women's dependence on their husbands and god. This pamphlet adds that, "there are more than 200 Bible verses that specifically belittle and demean women." According to this literature, one of the purposes of religion and religious literature is to reinforce sexist ideology and normative gender roles and behavior. One woman[27] echoed this sentiment at the beginning of a women's only focus group when she chose to bring and start off our discussion by quoting Simone de Beauviour. She stated:

> 'Man enjoys the great advantage of having a God endorse the codes he writes; and since man exercises a sovereign authority over woman, it is especially fortunate that this authority has been vested in him by the Supreme Being. For the Jews, Mohammedans, and the Christians, among others, man is master by divine right; the fear of God, therefore, will repress any impulse toward revolt in the downtrodden female.'

In this passage, God appears to grant men domain and control over women. In addition, this passage asserts that fearing God's wrath will compel women into submission. Even though Durkheim (1897) contends that one of the main purposes of religion is to maintain social solidarity, this literature suggests that this solidarity may not be in a woman's best interests since it is attempting to thwart any personal desires to be a self-sufficient and self-reliant individual. In addition to having to rely upon others, both Chris, a twenty-eight year old white woman, and George, a sixty-three year old white man, argued that women may not be encouraged to question authority, as men are. According to participants, the cultural expectations that young girls should be passive (or accepting of authority) rather than active (or questioning authority) could be a part of the reason why women are more religious than men. Furthermore, one participant, April, noted that it is

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[27] I intentionally did not take names at these meetings in order to ensure anonymity.

easier to be dismissive of a woman's Atheist stance because her assumed naiveté. April, a

twenty-four year-old white woman, when she thought about her own identification as an

Atheist, believed gender may affect how she is perceived. She explained:

> I think [my parents] can dismiss my Atheism more easily than if my brother were
> to say, "yes, I am an Atheist mom and dad!" He actually identifies as a Christian.
> Because it's not something they've heard from other women they know, it's too
> unbelievable. My mother specifically just thinks I'm young and naïve, and that
> my views will change. And while she may be right, it's always preferable to feel
> accepted rather than dismissed.

This assumed naiveté of women is very pervasive in the United States. This naiveté is

part of why many people have issue with women in positions of authority as well as the

devaluation of women's work in general.

In addition to reinforcing social solidarity within their communities,

psychological researchers have also indicated one reason why women may be more

inclined to be religious than men is related explicitly with their psychological makeup

(Norenzayan et al, 2012). In my study, two of the three of these individuals who are

either psychologists or closely related to one, explained this perspective further. Christy,

a twenty-four year old white woman who has a Ph. D in psychology, noted that:

> Psychologically, women relate to people more on an individual level and men
> relate to people more on a group level. This is why you will see a lot of younger
> girls having "best friends," whereas boys often feel very close to groups like
> sports teams. Religious people often see their interactions with god as a personal
> relationship (and psychologically it is also studied in this way.) I would think that
> perhaps because it is more of a one-on-one relationship, that it is more the
> "typical" women-style interaction.

On the other hand, Kathleen, a thirty year old Mexican American mother of one, noted

that "Maybe women feel a need to conform more or feel they need more of a support

system as well than do men so maybe those are some factors into why they would be

more religious. Women also have better theory of mind and so therefore can visualize

god better and therefore might believe more in him." Not only does Kathleen's response to this question add to Christy's explanation, but she also suggests like many others in my study that religious organizations seem to provide support systems for women. Psychologists, as Kathleen notes, have found that women are better at "mentalizing" god than men (see Norenzayan et al, 2012). Another participant, Karen, a twenty-seven year old white woman, noted that, "I think this stems from the way women's minds are designed. It is a fact that women are more emotional in their thinking. And religion tends to rely upon both hope and fear. This is especially powerful regarding families (particularly children)." Karen suggests here that women are more emotional in their thinking than men. I contend that one reason why women appear to be more emotional than men is because being emotional is gender normative for women whereas men are expected to be stoic. Furthermore, these gender norms are culturally specific (although not culturally exclusive), socially constructed, and reinforced in the U.S. A cross-cultural and psychological examination of women and their emotions as well as how well they can "mentalize" god may in fact vary from culture to culture. It is also important to note here that two out of the three women who noted psychological reasons have been greatly influenced and disciplined by psychology. These individuals have had psychology play an important role in socially constructing their experiences and their worldview. For example, one reason why I personally can relate to their perspectives is because I am married to a social psychologist and his worldview, experiences, and knowledge have affected my own perspective. I believe it is important not to discount these perspectives, but to recognize them as social constructions.

These essentialist and positivist explanations of gender differences were also met

with skepticism. For example, after responding to this initial question, Karen exclaimed:

"Eeek! I hate this question. My feminism is rebelling at me for my answer." Here Karen

does not want to believe that this gender inequality is true. Instead, it seems like Karen is

on the brink of realizing how they are socially constructed or at least really wants to

believe that they are social constructed rather than "natural" phenomenon. In fact, many

gender researchers, including Kimmel (2013), conclude that that there are in fact more

differences within the sexes than differences between the sexes. Regardless,

psychologists (Kring and Gordon, 1998) who study emotion regularly note that women

are more expressive with their emotions than men. With this in mind, it is important to

remember that just because this correlation exists, does not mean that cultural factors

(including the presence of religion) do not influence individual feelings. For example,

another psychologist Steele (1992) found that environment especially those full of

stereotypes affect personal achievement and success rates in the classroom. Subtle

reminders of stereotypes and gender norms throughout our interactions subconsciously

trigger feelings of inadequacy, especially amongst those who may desire to challenge

these stereotypes and gender norms. In addition, little boys and young men in the U.S. are

socialized to believe expressions of emotions (except for anger) are signs of weakness

and femininity, which is viewed as undesirable. Another important factor to consider is

that psychology, like other positivist and quantitative approaches, seeks to isolate

variables. On the other hand, West and Zimmerman (1987) propose that gender is all

around us. All of our interactions are gendered, our institutions are gendered, and even

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our own personal gender (or behavior) is an on-going process. Since gender is so pervasive, it is difficult to examine thoroughly using positivist approaches.

Some participants, when asked about women being more religious than men, chose not to speculate or said "I don't know" or "I have no idea." Afterwards, a few would ask me my thoughts on this. For those that asked for my opinion on this, I told them about Hunter's (2010) external locus of control theory. In this, she proposes that one reason why this may occur is because a large portion of women's lives has be determined by others. It is important to note that these individuals wanted to defer to scientific authority or theory on this matter rather than speak from their own experiences as (or with) women and with religion, which suggests their respect for scientific investigation and inquiry. One person actually felt a little surprised by the data that I presented to her (when I said that women pray more often as well as attend church more than men). April, a twenty-four year-old white woman, exclaimed:

> I think religion has historically been used to justify constraining women's freedoms in a way that it has not been used on men. Female sexuality, for example, has long been a concern of the Christian church and religion is often used to pressure women especially into waiting for marriage, performing sex as a wifely duty, bearing children for the goodness of god, viewing themselves as "impure" or damaged if they don't conform accordingly, etc. Given those realities you would not think that women wouldn't want to be more religious than men!

Reactions and comments like this make me think back to other comments made by other participants, like Bonnie, who suggested that women who are religious suffer from internalized sexism.

The Role of Children and Being Religious

Not only are women expected to be passive in the U.S., but they are also expected to be the primary childcare providers in their families. The presence (or absence) of

children, even among scientists, appears to affect religious behavior. Even though Ecklund and Scheitle (2007) found no significant gender differences, they noted that scientists who are married and have children are more likely to attend religious services. It is important to remember that even though individuals may attend religious services, this does not mean that they believe in god. Instead this behavior could be a form of passing as religious within the community. As such, by participating in religious activities, individuals may still have their beliefs affected by this participation. In my study, several participants noted that one reason why women are religious is linked to whether they have children or not. For example, Cody, a white sixty-five year old retired social scientist, claimed that:

> This is one of my favorite topics and I have actually developed a theory (that you can test). Women, as bearers of children and relegated to responsibility for health and care of children, realize how vulnerable they are to the vicissitudes of life. This frightens the poop out of them, and they cling to religion because it promises "protection" and a measure of "control." We could test this proposition with a large sample of women, matched on everything. One of the groups would have kids; the other wouldn't. I bet you big money the former group would be more religious.

Cody, of course, was not alone in this opinion. In my study, women were also the majority of those who believed that the presence of children (especially as it relates to any nurturing expectations) plays an important role in why women are more religious than men. In addition, four of these seven women were also mothers. When asked about why women are more religious than men, Amanda, a white seventy-one year old mother of two, exclaimed:

> Because we really rule! I think because we have so much more influence on our children than their fathers do, especially if they're absent and you're a single mom. But you know mothers, women tend you know to keep the household together. [JP: And they see religion as part of that?] Probably, yeah. That's part of you know keeping it all together and everybody doing the same thing. And you

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know following the expectations of whatever their religious dogma whereas men are off working. Not that women aren't, but they tend to be more of the nurturer. So I guess that women would be more influential in non-religion…in the family if that's the way it is.

The connection between being religious and the presence of children appears especially salient for participants. Despite several participants noting this distinction, I did not find it hard to locate Atheists who were parents. In fact, half (26 out of 51) participants had children and 18 of these were mothers (just slightly less than half (45%) of all the women I interviewed). Amongst those who noted that children and child-rearing expectations may affect the likelihood a woman would be religious (or self-identify as religious), only three (all women) out of these ten (seven women and three men) participants did not have children. Mary, a forty-nine married white woman with two children, noted that some times, "It's easier to go along and be part of a crowd, especially when you're looking at your children. You don't want your children ostracized no matter what. Even if it is a group that you necessarily don't belong to, or share the same beliefs." In addition, when I asked about the gender differences related to being religious, another eight participants (including two men and six women) discussed their own children and childrearing. Implicitly in their response, they tied a question directly about gender differences to their experiences with their children and childrearing, which our society associates with normative feminine behavior at least for women. One thing that I find tremendously interesting about these findings is how even those who identified Atheist and had children believed that children play an important role in whether women, as a group, are religious. This also makes me wonder if there is more societal pressure for women to be religious once they have had children. Although I did not investigate this further in my interviews, I was able to witness a discussion of one point of stress (school and

education) related to children and being Atheist during one of my participant observations.

The topic of child-rearing also was selected as a topic for discussion for one of the monthly Atheist meetings I attended in Southern City I. This ended up being one of the largest discussion groups that I attended (at least for the Atheist group) with a total of eighteen participants present (10 men, 8 women; 2 non-white individuals, and one lesbian couple present who self-disclosed this information during our discussion). This meeting also had a larger number of women than other Atheist meetings I had attended. Despite this, not only was the organizer of this meeting male, men made up the majority of those in attendance. We met in a local coffee shop, which actually became a slight disadvantage since we packed the small room the organizer reserved. The exact topic for this evening's discussion was: Handling god in school when you have small children. Several individuals disclosed their own issues with their respective schools, especially as these related to their own children. These experiences ranged from one person mentioning how another student threatened to punch her own child because she was a nonbeliever (this child was in the first grade) to children encountering religion from other children, books, and their teachers. As these problems and issues were brought up several participants gave guidance to help these parents deal with them. Some of these solutions included talking with the principal and teacher explicitly, developing skills to help their children prepare for these discussions, and building and finding community for their children within the local secular organizations like the Humanist Forum, the Unitarian Universalist Church, and Camp Quest. There was also a brief discussion regarding on the topic of "what if your children become religious" and several noted that they would be

disappointed, but would still love their children. One individual noted (and I'm paraphrasing here) that if you teach your children critical thinking they will probably become Atheist. As I noted in chapter four, twenty-two percent of those I interviewed (and self-identified as Atheist) noted that they were raised in nonreligious households, so family can play a very influential role in the religious (or nonreligious identification) of children. As I will note later in this chapter, Atheist mothers in particular also appear to serve as role models for their own children. Overall, this discussion due in part to the shear number of participants as well as the discussion itself suggests to me that many Atheists (men and women) find child-rearing an important topic. In addition, this also suggests to me that despite claiming to be pro-social and wanting to be involved in their community, many Atheists are putting their money where their mouths are or practicing what they preach. These participants showed compassion and understanding for their peers and also provided guidance and support to individuals despite being strangers to each other outside of this meeting. Even though it seems like children may affect whether a woman self-identifies as Atheist or not, children and child rearing appear to be quite meaningful for Atheists.

One important topic tied to children and child-rearing is birth control and reproductive rights. In one of the women's-only focus group sessions, several women were quite vocal about their disgust when it came to politicians running their mouths about women and women's bodies (rape, abortion) and how these politicians keep digging a hole for themselves. We also talked about preventing pregnancy, abortion, child support, being "pro-life" or pro-birth since this group (the pro-lifers) tends to not be for child support. We also talked about vasectomies and male birth control (decreasing

sperm count) and why it always seems to be a woman's job. At this point, I asked how many of the participants were mothers (six out of the fifteen were). We talked about how they deal with being Atheist mothers, especially when it comes to socializing their children. Several noted that they did not want to "indoctrinate" their children to be Atheists. One woman noted that "we are all born Atheists." We also talked about the chance their kids will lose friends because of their own nonreligious beliefs. Someone mentioned that women without children and women with children should network. I then handed out a sheet of paper so everyone could list their contact information if they were interested in networking with others. A few women noted how they felt about having kids and how they felt as not having kids and how others perceive them. One woman had actually brought her teenage daughter just to observe. I was the one with the youngest child. Although there were a few (about three women who probably ranged in age from 40-60), most of the women were in their early to mid twenties and thirties---a prime age for reproduction. The most common theme here was that individuals seem to be patronizing towards a woman's choice to either have kids or to choose not to have kids (these interactions ranged from informal interactions with coworkers to interactions with physicians). In addition, a few noted that being a mom makes them "happy," but some also noted feeling guilty about their decisions (i.e. like society was judging them). One woman told another that you should not worry about what society thinks, just be a mom.

One major aspect of child rearing is the passing along one's culture to the next generation. When interviewed, several participants also noted that the assumption that women are those who uphold and pass along cultural traditions may also influence their decision to be religious. For example, Mary, a forty-nine year old white married mother

of two, noted that "In my house, I am the keeper of traditions – I love those more than my husband does. Ours are just not religious traditions. But I guess I can see that as a traditional role for women that may continue somewhat today." Traditions and passing along one's culture do seem to be fairly based in religion especially in countries where religion plays a major part in our everyday interactions. Interactions including saying "God Bless You" when someone sneezes are viewed as a common courtesy in the U.S. In addition, participating in Christmas has become a national cultural tradition (not just a Christian "holy" day). Most study participants took part in Christmas celebrations, just as they enjoyed other traditions, like Thanksgiving and Halloween. Even though Durkheim (1912) suggests that participation in these rituals reaffirms a particular belief system, the study participants did not share that view. Instead, they noted that exchanging gifts, eating together, and enjoying the company of one's family reinforced their social solidarity with their families and community. Rather than reaffirming a belief in god, which may occur for Christians celebrating this holiday, many participants who participated these activities, reinforced their social solidarity with their families and community. It is also important to note that even though many of those in my study sought out a likeminded Atheist community, they also did not want to turn their backs on their families and/or churches. All participants noted the importance of family and how it resonated for them. This becomes especially apparent in their behavior and how they managed their stigma around their family members as I discussed earlier.

Gender and Community

A few years ago when I began to observe Humanist and Atheist meetings, I started to notice how few female participants actually attended Atheist meetings –usually

two or three in a group of twelve to fifteen. This was later contrasted greatly with I organized women only focus groups in which fifteen women attended the first meeting to the point where there was only standing room for those who arrived late. As I held more focus groups, the amount of those who attended began to dwindle. Personally, I think the time of the year (going from Winter to Spring), the role of children and motherly duties, as well as the location and time/day scheduling issues were part of why the numbers began to stagger.

Being cohesive and creating a sense of belonging also appears to be a challenge within the Atheist community. For example, during one of the women only focus group meetings, one woman noted (and I am paraphrasing here) as a group of nonreligious people, we are not very cohesive. She noted that the Unitarian church, for example, covers such a wide range of nonbelief that it becomes scattered or fractured in terms of trying to create a community (no consensus). In addition, several of those who attended this discussion were not regulars at the Humanist Forum meetings or the Atheist meetings in our community. Despite this, I was able to connect with many of these women because they were a part of the Atheist online community in this city. This suggests to me that being active online may be something Atheist women can have time for whereas face-to-face interactions may be burdensome for various reasons including facing sexism.

During my interviews, three women noted some gender differences within the Atheist community. For example, when attending a monthly Secular Student Alliance meeting, Abby, a twenty-five year-old white woman, noted that this group seemed to be more for men than for women. Another participant, Bonnie, a fifty-seven year-old white woman, explained that one reason she stopped attending Atheist and Humanist meetings

was because of the explicit sexist interactions she had with one of the leaders of the group. A few individuals also mentioned a video blog by Rebecca Watson and her experiences with harassment at Atheist conventions. Gwen, a thirty year-old white woman, explained the Elevator Gate article as well as gave her personal take on how this affects women and Atheist circles. She explained:

> There was this whole thing where, it was called "Elevator Gate" and she was a host of one of the shows. She was on an elevator at four in the morning after a whole thing, just hanging out and doing stuff for the convention and some dude gets on the elevator with her and kind of starts aggressively hitting on her. And she feels uncomfortable and she's like "dude, no" and he didn't try anything, but it's still that the first insult is when you're coming and saying this is my experience…the first thing people say after you finish a talk is "you look good or nice" and it's not what you said was good. And a lot of the bloggers and women that go to the conferences feel like they are lesser because there's a lot of women bashing. It's very much against women, but I don't feel like the Atheist movement is much better towards women either.

It is important to note here that the three women who noted gender differences within the Atheist community itself lived in Southern City I. One major factor that may have influenced their perception of gender differences is the representation of women within their local organizations. In Southern City I, only one woman was in a position of authority and she was the president of the Humanist Forum. The other leadership positions were held by men, including: the discussion moderator, the vice president, and the secretary/treasurer as well as the leader of the Atheist meetup. In addition, despite the local Secular Student Alliance being founded by a young woman, it was run by young men. On the other hand, in Southern City II, the board members were almost all women. The president, vice president, secretary, and five board members without titles were women (only two men were on the board out of the ten total seats). This group in comparison to the groups observed in Southern City I, is also very active. The activity of

this group may also be related to the gender composition of the board as well as the age of those involved. Based on my interactions with these board members, these women are attempting to create a welcoming environment by providing diverse and community based activities. Another reason why they are more active and involved in the community (when compared to Southern City I) may be in part because those who are most active are retired, whereas most of those who were active in the other Humanist group were still actively working. This suggests that not only may gender matter, but age may be important especially when it comes to leadership and community building.

Female Role Models

The presence of female leaders and role models also appears to have affected how participants implicitly perceived gender differences. For example, nine participants noted no noticeable gender differences (ten if I include one participant who suggested that Atheist circles are affected as much as any other group by society). Of these nine participants, five of these individuals were a part of the local Humanist Forum that has several very active women in leadership positions. Furthermore, four of the nine who noted no noticeable gender differences were women who had Atheist mothers. Two of these four women were raised by Atheist mothers and also served in leadership positions in their local Humanist Forum. The presence of female leaders (especially having leaders participate in my study) as well as the presence of having mothers who role modeled religious nonconformity could have easily influenced these individuals' perceptions of gender differences, especially in terms of the absence of gender inequality.

Conclusion

Overall, my examination of gender and how women manage their stigmatization exposes several factors that affect a woman's decision to disclose this status to others. These factors include thinking about how this will affect others especially family members (primarily for those who were raised in religious households). As Cragun et al (2012) found, nonreligious individuals are more likely to report discrimination that occurs in family settings, which suggests that the family can be a very problematic institution for Atheists when it comes to revealing their identity to others. In addition, many participants utilized various forms of tact to avoid upsetting family members, friends, and even non-specific others. As such, they were engaging in Humanist principles. This behavior was also not gender specific. Atheist women challenge gender norms by identifying with a position that is often associated with men, but they also adhere to gender norms by caring about others. In addition, even though participants noted that they believed the presence of children may factor into why women are more religious than men, the majority of those I interviewed had children. Lastly, the presence of female role models including mothers as well as community organizers appears to affect whether or not individuals within the Atheist community believe gender is a contributing factor when it comes to self-identifying as Atheist.

In my final chapter, I will briefly recap my findings and discuss their significance. In addition, I will also discuss the limitations of this research as well as discuss potential gaps that may advance the study of Atheism and gender.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion and Limitations

Throughout this dissertation, I have utilized Symbolic Interactionist theories to examine what it means to be an Atheist, how individuals become Atheist, the stigmatization of Atheists that occurs, and how individuals, primarily women, manage this stigmatization especially as it pertains to women and living in two pious states in the U.S. South. More specifically, I have examined the micro level interactions amongst Atheists and what these reveal about what it means to be "Atheist."

In chapter three, I documented various definitions of Atheism, noting that my study participants emphasize a disbelief in god as the defining feature. In addition, I examined how Atheists perceive the development of their own morality, which for the majority participants was derived from their interactions with family members. Furthermore, there were several ideologies that informed how participants saw themselves. For example, the majority of the Atheists in my study explicitly defined themselves as progressive, liberal or Democrat. Several participants currently volunteer (or have in the past). They believed that people (women in particular) should have access to reproductive health (including access to abortion). In addition, they also believed that gay and lesbian individuals should have the right to marry, access to adoption, and should receive the same marital benefits that heterosexual couples have. They also noted that the nonreligious and religious communities could cooperate to provide humanitarian aid. In addition, several of the Atheists in my study have had their worldview informed by various ideologies. These perspectives and philosophies include Humanism, feminism, Buddhism, as well as science. Many participants noted that some of the best aspects of

being an Atheist were: freedom, being self-reliant, feeling empowered, and being around likeminded individuals.

In chapter four, I drew upon Symbolic Interactionist theories to examine how participants' interactions and experiences affected their decision to self-identify as Atheist. Specifically, I used Smith's (2011) model to examine the process by which Atheists construct this identity. In this chapter, I examined participants' religious (or nonreligious) upbringing. I found that education, religious instruction, and interactions with religious individuals helped them begin to question religion and god. Furthermore, I found that the act of questioning religion was closely tied with participants' rejection of god. Almost all participants noted that they did not come to this belief system because of some trauma. Furthermore, the one participant who noted a particular trauma recollected being agnostic when this trauma occurred. Some participants noted that their families may have helped them be nonreligious since they were nonreligious themselves. Other participants noted that growing up learning about religion generally (perhaps with no guided religious instruction) formed the foundation for them to ask questions later in life. In addition, living in the South became meaningful for participants, especially as it related to their interactions and experiences with those who were religious. Many participants noted differences in their experiences when they reflected upon places they used to live. I also noted the importance of education, family, and religion and how these provided the context for these individuals to come to self-identify as Atheist.

In chapter five, I discussed the stigmatization of Atheists and the relationship this has to managing their interactions with others. In particular, I examined the assumptions participants believed others had in terms of what it means to be an Atheist in the U.S. In

addition, I examined the significance of being in the South and how this affected how participants managed this perceived stigmatized status. Next, I examined the role of feeling discomfort and how this affected their interactions with others. I also investigated the negative experiences participants encountered. These experiences ranged from explicit religious rituals taking place within the workplace to family members patronizing them for their Atheist stance to losing friends to feelings of loneliness. Several participants revealed that they had no negative experiences in part because they avoided disclosing this identity with individuals who may treat them differently. Participants also discussed any fears that they had when disclosing this identity to others. The majority of participants noted not feeling fearful of disclosing this status despite any negative interactions they may have had. The "hesitant" noted that this was mainly because they would not like for it to affect their work relations or opportunity. I also examined how this status affects their intimate relationships as well as if their coworkers are aware of their status. For the majority of participants, being an Atheist was a nonissue when it came to their intimate relationships. Instead, these individuals noted that their partners' had similar beliefs. In terms of coworkers, most participants explained that their coworkers knew or it was a nonissue. In addition, participants explained instances where they felt more Atheist, which included discussing their beliefs with others, engaging in science and feeling different because of the presence of religion. In relation to this, several participants noted the importance of building a community with likeminded individuals. Likewise, I explored how this minority status and the stigma that comes along with this and how it compares to experiences and interactions faced by another stigmatized group, the LGBT community. Many participants noted that there were

several key similarities and differences. Some of the similarities included the notion that Atheists and gay individuals can be cured, both deal with coming in and out of the closet, and both use phrases like "coming out" to describe disclosing this status to others. In terms of differences, several noted that Atheists have it easier since they can go in the closet and pass on a regular basis. In addition, I was able to ask individuals who identified as lesbian, bi, or queer about their experiences with being both gay and Atheist. Several of these individuals noted that being an Atheist can be harder than being gay, but others indicated the opposite.

In chapter six, I investigated how participants perceived the role of gender and being an Atheist. Specifically, I examined how gender affected how they manage their stigma. Many women (and even a few men) utilized tact to navigate hurt feelings especially when it came to family members such as their mothers, father, and grandparents. As such, women abided by gender norms, which dictate that women should care about others and were "outsiders-within" (Collins, 1990). When it came to self-identifying as Atheist, both male and female participants noted that it was harder for women to be Atheist because they are challenging gender norms. In addition, several participants believed that becoming a mother and rearing children was a life experience that may be a barrier when it comes to self-identifying as Atheist. When I asked participants about why women are more religious than men, several participants noted that women have historically been treated like second-class citizens in the U.S. Other participants explained this phenomenon in terms of women being controlled by their surroundings and those around them rather than by their own will. Others also noted that women and men are psychologically different in terms of visualizing god as well as being

in touch with their emotions. In addition, I discuss the role of gender in community building as well as how female role models may affect the self-identification of women as Atheists.

Overall, in this study I have highlighted several of the complexities behind self-identifying as Atheist. These complexities include: the varied definitions of Atheism amongst Atheists themselves and the varied sources of morality that inform Atheist identities. In addition, I investigated the types of pro-social behavior many Atheists engage in including volunteering and identifying with ideologies that promote humanitarian efforts. I also examined the process in which Atheists come to self-identify and tested the applicability of Smith's (2011) model. In particular, I examined participants' experiences such as asking questions and thinking critically, which later led them to self-identify as Atheist or the construction of this status. I also analyzed the extent to which coming out relates to the perceived stigma of being an Atheist. In particular, women manage this stigmatized identity by engaging in selective concealment. The extent to which women conceal this identity is tied to gender normative prescriptions that are reinforced in the United States in general and in the South in particular. Furthermore, the stigmatization this community feels has led many of them to build community. Finally, the social change this community desires (general acceptance and decreased stigmatization) is very similar to efforts undertaken by the LGBT community.

Limitations and Future Research

My study, like all studies has limitations. The first, and perhaps the most obvious, limitation that my study has is its generalizability. As I noted in chapter two, I did not set out to make generalizable claims about the entire Atheist community. On the other hand,

I did set out to find out more about this community and to perhaps fill in some gaps in the literature, especially as these pertain to women. In addition, by examining Atheism and gender, I have also attempted to add to our theoretical understanding of this phenomenon by contending that the process by which one becomes Atheist is gendered. Atheists (and women in particular) are challenging and defying norms and they view this as a form of empowerment and are attempting to resist cultural cues (perhaps due to those emphasized heavily in the South) that try to encourage their passivity. In addition, women abide by gender expectations that suggest that women should care about others. Atheists in my study also build community and this appears to happen in relation to being stigmatized and attempting to find social solidarity amongst others.

Another limitation that became apparent in my study is related to the age range of participants as well as the location differences related to this. The major difference noted between my two samples was the age discrepancy within the population, which ultimately affected my sampling. Since I had lived in the first southern college city for five years, I met and interacted with many individuals who were about my age (late twenties) as well as those who were older than me. The age difference between the two samples became very apparent to me as I started attending local Humanist and Freethinker meetings in the second city. My very first meeting was with an all women's group who were predominantly retired (so there was about a thirty year age difference between myself and these women). When I went to the larger co-ed monthly meeting, I was still one of the youngest in attendance. I was not completely surprised by this, though. When I began attending Humanist meetings in the first city, the majority of those in attendance were over the age of fifty. Over time, however, more and more twenty and

thirty-somethings began attending. I attribute some of the influx of twenty and thirty somethings with the resurgence of a local Secular Student Alliance within the local university. In addition, Southern City II does not provide childcare, which may make young families feel not included. In addition, a few friends of mine noted that they would love to participate in the Humanist group, but they feel awkward being surrounded by so many people who are their parents' age. A few of the board members, when I introduced myself and my research expressed to me how much they want to get individuals around my age active in the group. Regardless, I was able to interview and observed individuals who ranged in age from 20 to 88 years old.

Along with this limitation, I began noticing how individuals over the age of forty seemed to be more comfortable with their identification as "Atheist" than those who were younger. In addition, those who were older may have had experiences that do not happen to those who are younger. A longitudinal study may provide further explanation as to why Atheists may become more likely to be outspoken about this identity as they age. Research indicates that the longer individuals are associated with a particular stigma, their perception and management of this stigma changes (Snow and Anderson, 1987). In addition to this, a study that controls for the length of time that someone identifies as Atheist would help shed light to whether it is the length of time associated with this identity or someone's age that appears to contribute to their comfort with this label. For example, a few individuals that I interviewed did not come to identify as Atheist until they were over the age of fifty. With this in mind, an individual who was raised Atheist, but is only twenty years old may have had more experience with this status than the fifty year old who just recently came to this identification.

My study also took place in relatively liberal cities within two fairly conservative states. For example, one city had recently elected their first openly gay mayor. As a result of living in fairly liberal cities, the Atheists in my study may feel fairly more comfortable and perhaps less fearful of revealing their Atheist status because of their surroundings. On the other hand, Atheists who do not live in liberal cities and instead live in conservative areas (rural communities as well as conservative cities) may experience more fear and may manage their stigma differently than those who live in more progressive or liberal places.

The majority of my sample was White, so examining individuals who are nonwhite may aid in understanding the differences race and ethnicity may make when it comes to identifying as Atheist. For example, Black women may perceive to undergo more stigma management because of how entrenched religion is within the Black community. Additionally, even though I intentionally oversampled women in my study in order to get a wide range of experiences, examining equal numbers of men and women may allow for greater comparison between the sexes. Furthermore, an explicit comparison between regions may also prove fruitful. The research done by Garneau (2013) in which he examined the stigma management of seculars in the Midwest has aided my examination, but it cannot be used to make direct comparisons between the regions. In addition, a more definitive study that explicitly examines individuals who do not believe in god and the variations within the Atheist community and the terminology used by its members is needed. In my study, I discussed some of the nuances between terms like agnostic, Atheist, and agnostic Atheist, but a more focused and exact study of some of these nuances is still needed. A colleague of mine, who also studies Atheism,

explained when I began this project that getting a straight and definitive answer when it comes to how Atheists self-identify can be quite difficult. I contend that there may be a few reasons why this occurs. First, it is possible that these individuals do not want to come out to researchers who may misconstrue their experiences in part because these individuals are stigmatized. Secondly, they may want to avoid labeling themselves in the negative (who they are NOT) rather than who they are. Thirdly, many of the people with whom I spoke suggest that thinking critically (including when it comes to terms) is a major aspect of being an Atheist.

A Few Final Thoughts

Before I conclude, there are a few final things that I would like to discuss briefly here. Throughout the years that I spent examining and interacting with Atheists and their communities, I noticed a very interesting theme. I noticed what might be perceived as an elitist perspective. Like several participants noted when it came to religion, they did not like how they were perceived as in need of saving or correcting. In line with this, many Atheists also discussed the religious communities in need of "saving" although they would not use this particular word. On the other hand, participants would perhaps say that the religious community needs "educating." Again, this sounds patronizing and a little elitist. Despite this initial kneejerk reaction, I believe that participants mean this in the nicest way possible. More than anything, I also believe that they would not want to come off as confrontational. Instead what I believe they would like is for society, as a whole, to have stronger critical thinking skills. This includes being able to examine one's faith and one's religion critically. In addition, I believe they would also like for religion to be a

personal matter that does not bleed into politics, education, or our everyday interactions. In many ways, Atheists want a more secular society.

Although I do not go into Durkheim's secularization theory in this research, his discussion may be pertinent at this juncture. Durkheim argued that as society evolves and becomes more modern, it would become more secular. Even though Durkheim thought that this would occur in his lifetime, it did not. Years later, the world (including the U.S.) is not completely without religion. Now, there are several countries that are secular and even a few have open Atheists in positions of power. In the U.S. and in the South in particular, religion is still very present. If religion was not as apparent as it is, there would be very little need for Atheists to go in and out of the closet. There would also be very little need for Atheists to build communities and to strive for social change.

Community building was one thing that I found fascinating when I began interacting with these communities. As a young woman and mother who is trying to find and build community, especially when it comes to my own child, I have wanted to know more about establishing community without tying this to religion. My husband and I have joined local groups and have bought books like *Parenting Beyond Belief*, and *Raising Freethinkers* to help guide our attempts. With this in mind, I am also left wondering if there are any reasons why individuals who are older seem more drawn to community building efforts. Could it be generational, or perhaps something that twenty and thirty somethings do not have time for? For example, our current recession, the continued wage gap that individuals and families are enduring, and the effects of living in a capitalistic society may leave little time to organize and participate in organizations that are attempting to create social change. It may also be possible that these twenty and thirty

somethings are finding likeminded others and building community around other aspects of their lives (like work). In order to examine this further a more extensive project (one that would have an equal distribution of the age of participants as well as socioeconomic status) that examines their desire for and active involvement in community would help address this question.

Overall, I found this project personal, political, and important. As more individuals identify as Atheist and help society to become more secular, as globalization continues, and as we begin to include more and more perspectives into our interactions, I find it important to learn more about communities that might be misunderstood, distrusted, and/or stigmatized. Being willing to learn more about humanity, learning to empathize with others, and adding to the greater understanding of humanity in general is going to become a necessity as our population continues to grow, as our societies evolve, and as they diversify. As Durkheim suggests, the more we diversify or specialize, the more we will become more dependent on one another. The more we depend upon one another, the more we will have to trust one another and in order for there be to greater trust, we need greater awareness and less prejudice of those who seem different from ourselves.

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Appendix A
My Journey

In order to situate my position as an Atheist, feminist, and social scientist, I must be honest and disclose my own socially-constructed experiences including the formation of my Atheist identity. I grew up in a town just slightly south of Richmond, Virginia, and have always lived in the South. I am the youngest child in my family and my parents' only female offspring. When I was a child, my family and I went to church on occasion, primarily at Baptist churches. My father rarely ever went to church with us. The majority of what I recall in terms of my own religious upbringing was done on my own. My mother basically left it up to us to go to church once we reached middle school age. My mother noted that one reason why she left it up to us had to do with an incident when I was a child. She explained that somehow got my finger shut in a door at church when I was young (so young that I do not recall this experience at all). When I asked her for more information about this experience, she noted that I was only two (maybe two and a half) and it really upset her that I got hurt. She also had to explain this to my father, who never liked to hear about one of us getting hurt (in part because of any medical expenses related to these incidents). Although I am still a bit puzzled as to why this particular incident led her to stop taking us to church, she explained to me that she believed it was traumatic enough to stop attending. As a mother myself, I wonder if she became slightly distrustful of those watching the kids and did not want her kids to be a part of church where they could be injured. I also find it important to note that even though I am my parents' only daughter, two years prior to my birth my parents lost a baby girl to spinabifida and this incident may have made my mother feel like she had to protect me.

When I was in middle school, one of my brothers went to one church and I went to another. I started attending church regularly when one of my close friends asked me to go. This was mostly in middle and high school. I really saw church activities as a way to build friendships as well as good way to meet boys. I was baptized on my own accord and I remember feeling really emotional about this experience. I wanted god to be a part of my life and I wanted him to help guide me be a good person. I stopped attending church regularly when I started my first job at age sixteen. During this time, I do recall one Sunday school lesson said we should not work on Sunday; I felt like I did not have this luxury. Over the next few years, I believed in god, but I had responsibilities and one of these was saving to go to college, which meant I had to work. During this time, I worked very hard and put myself through college with little debt.

When I started questioning my faith

Nothing really traumatic ever happened in my life that led me to question the existence of god. The most vivid experience that I can recall was when I was in college. I remember feeling very alone. During this time, I worked multiple jobs to pay for my rent and tuition and more than anything I wanted to feel loved. I dated, but nothing really substantial resulted from these experiences. Needless to say, I wanted god to help me not feel so alone in the world. Not long before this experience, I took a class on Buddhism and during this emotional struggle I was finding more solace in Buddhist philosophy than Christianity. Particularly salient to me was the proposition that there cannot be love without suffering, and suffering is only temporary. By meditating and finding my own inner strength, I slowly felt better and less alone.

The next year, I met my husband. He has played a profound impact on my worldview. While we were courting, he was accepting of my Buddhist rituals (meditating and trying to avoid meat consumption, for example). Not long after our dating became more serious, I found out that he was an Atheist. This became something that we discussed often. We watched documentaries on religion and listened to countless books on tape by Atheists like Christopher Hitchens and Dan Dennett. Around this time, I started identifying as Atheist rather than Buddhist. After we met more Atheists, we started looking for an Atheist community (or more specifically a group a people who also identified as Atheist) to extend our discussion. Through these experiences, I became more and more curious. Like several of my study participants, my journey to Atheism was something that occurred over time through various experiences, including the option to go to church, taking courses on religion and philosophy, and interacting with nonbelievers. These experiences in part explain why I chose this as a dissertation topic.

Today, my parents know that I am not a Christian (we have had several discussions about it). I am not totally sure whether they know that I flat out do not believe in god. My grandmother ("Granny") before she died a few years ago knew I was not religious anymore and told me to be true to myself despite what others may say. She also thought it was kind of cool that I was a Buddhist when I was. My parents, on the other hand, seem to be functioning on a "Don't Ask/Don't Tell" policy, especially after I stopped identifying as Buddhist. This policy has become more difficult to implement since I had my daughter. I will occasionally hear my mother discuss my niece's pre-school (it is religious) and I will attempt to sidestep the conversation. My parents also were dismissive about this aspect of my identity when I stayed the night at their house

before I defended this dissertation. When they asked me about my dissertation, I gave them a chapter to read and within the first minute or two, they scoffed. Afterwards, my mother asked me questions and proclaimed that she was a failure as a parent. Then, she asked my husband about if he too was an Atheist to which he responded "yes." During this exchange, she seemed to be more irritated at my position (saying things such as "you won't pray for me if I get sick and in the hospital") and when my husband noted his own identification, she started to let the topic go. Of course, I internally noted that this interaction was gendered. Not long afterwards I mentioned that she should not feel like a failure because I do not believe in god because I am not a bad person. I told her that I am a good mother and a good person, so what she sees as a "failure" should not be based on whether I believe in god, but who I am and my character.

Two of my three brothers are fairly religious as well, which can make life a little difficult. I have one brother who is now a minister, one brother who is very religious, and another brother who is religious, but also very scientifically oriented. My two brothers who are very religious also did not complete higher education (well, except my brother who attended a small seminary college). One of my brother's and his family are very religious. For example, I have a niece who will be attending Liberty University this fall. As an Atheist, this is fairly upsetting to me. This young woman is very bright and I know that her college education may suffer because of this choice. As a young woman who wants to become a nurse, I wonder if her scientific education will be hampered and if she will learn about evolutionary medicine. When I received a card announcing her graduation, I had to determine what to do. Should I send her a check as I would the typical high school graduate or would I have to do something else? I finally decided to

send her a gift card to Staples. I told my husband that I did not want to contribute to Liberty, but I wanted to be supportive, so a gift card to Staples was the answer. In addition, when I am home and the topic of religion happens to come up, I get the not-so subtle eye-roll from my mother who thinks that I am just being defiant. Like my participants, I find this patronizing. Although I do not shout my disbelief from the mountaintops, my lack of belief makes me seem childlike in the eyes of my family.

Despite operating on a "Don't Ask/Don't Tell" policy with my immediate family, I am fairly active in managing my Atheist identity as well. I disclose my religion as "Atheist" on Facebook. I disclose this openly with most of those that I interact with in part because of what I research. I also feel the occasional need to filter religious posts on social media. I am also fascinated by how religion affects people, especially since it is so present in the South. Phrases like "having a 'come to Jesus' meeting," "God Bless You," and the ever so popular "God Damn It," are quite common in my interactions with others, although I try to avoid these phrases myself. I am also not anti-Christianity. I have several friends who are Christians and we get along great. I believe, like many others, that religion can be harmful, especially to children and to the LGBT community. Being religious and believing in god can be very comforting and provide social support that many people can benefit from. In addition, I respect my close friends who are admirable individuals who believe as well as behave in accordance to these beliefs. For example, my husband and I have two religious friends who would easily be "god-parents" to our daughter if something ever happened to us and we know that they would raise our daughter to be a good person. I agree with several of the key principles with religious teachings including giving to charity, treating people with respect, and trying to be good

to others. For me, I do not need religion to reinforce or maintain these principles. Like several participants, I believe to be moral does not necessarily mean that you have to be religious. Furthermore, my nonreligious intensity has ebbed and flowed as I have come into this identity. When I was in my mid twenties, I was more vocal about my disbelief. As I have aged, this aspect of my identity is no longer at the forefront. Despite this, I am keenly aware of religion and I try to remain respectful when the topic comes up whether it is in my own classroom or in my everyday interactions. One aspect of my identity that is much more prominent in my life is my feminist identity. These, of course, are not mutually exclusive aspects of my identity. On the other hand, I believe that they intersect and interact with one another.

Being a Feminist

More than my Atheist identity, my position as a feminist seems to be what people read from my personal appearance as well as my interactions with others. One reason I believe people can pinpoint this aspect of who I am is because for the past several years, I have sported a very short hair cut. Furthermore, I make a point to be heard when I have something to say, especially when it relates to women's issues. I became a feminist while I was in college, but in reality I have always been a feminist. Ever since I was a toddler (according to my mother), I have wanted to do things for myself and make my own way in the world. In addition to this, I have also learned when to rely upon others for support.

I do not know if my feminist identity is a result of being the only female child in my immediate family, being the youngest, being literally the smallest, or what, but I have always been quite aware of injustice and being treated differently than those around me. One very vivid memory I have about being feminist comes from my childhood. When my

brother (the same who is now a minister) came home from boot camp, he told my other brother and me that women were not supposed to be strong. I then proceeded to do more push-ups than my other brother. Later, this same older brother told me that I should not wear shorts despite it being extremely hot outside. He told me that boys have bad thoughts about girls. I remember sitting there thinking "Well, girls have bad thoughts too, but we never really hear about these." I also remember a time when my mother was in the hospital and my father told me that it was my job to cook for everyone in the house (mainly him). Even though I was in middle school at the time, he believed that it was my job to cook and clean despite me being the youngest person in the house. Rather than accept these duties, I told him that "everyone has the ability to make dinner for him/herself." My interactions with my family have affected the person I am, especially when it comes to being a feminist. I remember hating not being able to play backyard football with the neighborhood boys because I was (gasp) "a girl." Out of all my brothers, my oldest brother has probably had affected me the most. When I was young, I remember him taking me to the movies on occasion. I also remember calling him and asking for help in Calculus. He is also the brother who encouraged me to go to college. Since we were working class, my oldest brother helped guide me to select the best college for me. He was also the only one who took me to a nearby campus, his (and now my) alma mater. Despite all of this, he still treats me like I am fourteen. I know this has more to do with the fact that I am his little sister than it does with anything else. Regardless, this sibling has treated me more like an equal than the rest of my immediate family despite our large age gap (ten years) and for this I am profoundly grateful.

I have also had several very strong female role models in my life. I had a very vocal and proud feminist theater teacher throughout high school. During my middle school and high school years, I tended to get along best with my physical education teachers (in part because I was active in sports). I had a grandmother who despite her small stature was a strong woman who worked and raised five young children after her husband died. I have a wonderful aunt who has listened to me complain as well as encouraged my independence. My mother has also helped me accept my desire to nurture and care for my daughter. All of these women have helped mold me into the woman and the feminist that I am now.

In addition to my family's impact on my life, I have also been disciplined by feminist theory. When I was an undergraduate, I took several courses on related to women's issues. I took so many courses, that I was just one course short of graduating with a minor in women's studies. These courses included women's literature, lesbian literature, feminist theory, and the psychology of women. During this time, I also attended my first showing of the *Vagina Monologues*. After I graduated and became a graduate student, I continued studying women's issues as well as issues tied to injustice including race. I was also becoming more fascinated with science (this was around the time I started identifying as Atheist). Both science and women's issues culminated in my decision to examine a fairly unknown female Victorian Scientist and Poet, Constance Naden, when I did my master's thesis. As I progressed in my graduate career, I took more courses on women's issues and finally completed a graduate certificate in Women's and Gender Studies. During this time, I also began teaching introductory women's studies courses. These experiences have shaped my worldview, especially as it pertains to

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women and issues of injustice whether they are related to sexuality and/or race. As a result of all these experiences, I can respect the desire to be a financially independent woman as well as the woman who chooses to stay at home with her children.

Jamie, the Social Scientist

Over the past five years, I have become disciplined by the social sciences. Before this time, I studied English and literature. Several years ago, my husband encouraged me to take some sociology courses as well as talk to some former sociology professors. During that time, I realized that sociology excited me and made me feel like I could really impact the world around me. After this time, I focused my attention on sociology and I was particularly drawn to gender issues. As I mentioned above, I completed a graduate certificate in Gender and Women's Studies during this time. I also began thinking about Atheism and women early on in my studies. After finishing my coursework and exams, I started delving deeper into this project. When I began proposing my dissertation, I began attending Humanist and Atheist meetings. During this time, I also taught courses on Stratification (Social Inequality) as well as Women's and Gender Studies. Despite being drawn to conflict theory (in particular Marx's theories on religion as well as Weber's multivariate approach), it appeared to make more sense to examine Atheism by examining the micro-level interactions and the use of labels. As such, Symbolic Interactionism seemed a natural compliment to this study. During this time, I was always conscious of my role as the researcher.

My role as the Researcher in this process

Whenever I attended meetings or interviewed participants, as an insider I was always willing to share my experiences. I also openly took notes (some of which was

even used by participants, like Rebecca, to give me book, article, or blog recommendations). As I noted earlier, I started this dissertation because of my personal curiosity with the subject. When I started this project and as I sit here writing about it, I do not feel like an "expert" on Atheism. Despite my personal sufferings from "imposter syndrome," which of course is not uncommon during graduate school, I would be suspicious of anyone who actually said that he/she was an "expert" on this particular field. Even as a teacher, I still feel like I learn as much from those around me as they learn from me and this experience was reflected in my experiences as a researcher. The more I talked to individuals about their beliefs and their experiences, the more I felt more attuned to my own beliefs and how I wish to live my life.

During my experiences, I met some amazing individuals, who opened up about their experiences (both positive and negative). Overall, I believe I was quite successful in building rapport with this community. I was even asked to serve on the board for my local Humanist and Freethinker group. I only had a few slightly negative experiences, which I believe were related more to my age and gender than my status as "the researcher." For example, during one interview I disclosed my husband's profession (social psychology) and the male participant said a handful of times things like "Oh, your husband will understand this," which was slightly patronizing. I enjoyed e-mailing participants (a year or two later) when I had them review our conversation. Several of them updated me about their current interactions including the upcoming wedding of one woman. A few individuals were a bit hard to track down and a few explicitly told me that they would not have time to review things or to add to our conversation; these individuals noted that they would be happy to talk in person, but taking the time to review and maybe

answer a few follow-up questions on their own might be a little much. I told them that this was okay and their continued participation was optional even if it would mean that I may have a fuller picture of their worldviews.

Since I self-identify as an Atheist, this may have shaped my data collection. As I noted above, this allowed me to build rapport with the community, but it may have also inadvertently shaped what I saw as important and relevant as I collected data. For example, I was really drawn to the women's stories in our conversations as well as the women's only focus groups and found these very fascinating. In addition, it is very possible that I may have unconsciously influenced these participants to respond in particular ways since I could easily identify with their points and opinions. I could easily see myself becoming close friends with several of the women I interacted with. Furthermore, because I can empathize tremendously with their experiences (especially those who come from a Christian background), I can definitely see how I have been influenced by this research. For example, I feel like I am more open about my own identification to others in order to help diminish the stigma this identification has. I believe that if people (including my own parents) can see me as a good person first, then it may help them question why their own assumptions about Atheists.

Overall, these participants appeared to be genuinely good people who wanted to do all that they could for humanity; being around individuals who think and live like this was awe-inspiring. It is heartbreaking to me to know that these individuals may feel compelled to hide a part of their identity (even if it's on a "don't ask/don't tell" basis), because they might be treated differently if the truth is known about them. To be honest, one of my goals when doing this research was for people to gain a greater understanding

of what it means to be Atheist. Atheists are not only around you as you read this, but they may be your family members, your friends, and your neighbors.

As a result of this research, I think it is should be of the upmost importance for individuals to cultivate empathy and learn to understand that their assumptions regarding what it means to be an Atheist may be distorted. The research here does not propose to give a generalizable picture of Atheists as a whole, but it should provide a slightly fuller picture, especially as it pertains to women's experiences within the Atheist community. In addition, the stories, experiences, and learning about their (or our) outlook on life, gives me hope. Although I am hopeful that more and more people will begin to question their religious upbringing and the world around them, I am more hopeful in terms of larger, more humanitarian efforts. As I discussed in chapter three, many Atheists want to change their society, but not because they want the dissolution of religion. On the other hand, they would like to see the separation of church and state honored, less infiltration of religion into the political sphere (including the laws that regulate women's bodies), a more inclusive and welcoming society, and more focus on the greater good of humanity.

As I finish this, despite discussing my own experiences, I want to make sure that participants' stories and experiences are foregrounded. I did not intend for there experiences to stand out or for my voice to be the final authority on this topic.

Appendix B

Questionnaire for Female Participants

Background:

What's your age?

What's your educational background (highest level achieved)?

Are you single, married, divorced?

If married, is your spouse/partner atheist?

Do you have any kids?

How would you describe your sexuality? (heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other)

What is your race?

More in-depth questions
Tell me about how you learned about religion as a child? What did your parents teach you about it? Friends? How important was religion to your family?

How long have you been an atheist? Tell me about why and how you became an atheist. What does being an atheist mean to you?

Where have you lived before and how has being an atheist affected some of your interactions in this or these other locales?

Have you attended any secular meetings (Atheist meetups, Humanist Forum, and/or Secular Student Alliance)? If so, how often do (or did) you attend? Why did you choose to go? What do you think you got out of these meetings? What about social, or less formal, events or gatherings?

Do you read any literature on Atheism and if so how often do you read and what might you read?

How might one consider Atheism as a social movement? What social change do you (or others) believe is necessary?

Do you think there are any similarities between being an Atheist and being another type of minority (homosexual, African American etc.)?

Have you had any negative experiences (internal and external) because of you don't believe in a god? What are some of the biggest challenges of being an atheist? What are some of the best things about being an atheist?

Describe how you think you developed a sense of morals.

Do you celebrate any religious holidays, and if so, how do you celebrate?

Parenthood/Childcare/Roles of Men and Women/Marriage
In what way do you think gender (being a woman) matters when it comes to being an Atheist? (what about being a mother—if the participant has kids) How might it be difficult? If so, what challenges do you encounter? How might it be rewarding?

Research indicates that women tend to be more religious than men (Freese, 2004; Miller and Hoffman, 1995). Why do you think this is the case?

If you have kids, how do you deal with the topic of religion in your family? Are there various approaches that you and your spouse/partner take? Religious holidays?

If you have kids, how do you explain the topic of death?
If you don't have kids, imagine that your nephew comes up to you after his pet hamster dies. What do you imagine saying to him to explain death?

How does your family allocate childcare and household duties?

In what ways, if any, does being an Atheist influence how you think about your own body? Other Women's bodies? Men's bodies? What guides your decisions on issues of modesty and dress? Rights to control the body? Abortion?

How would you define marriage? (Probe questions) Okay with same-sex marriage, is marriage outdated?

What are your thoughts about issues around sexuality? (same-sex adoption, health care benefits etc)

Have you ever taken a gender and women's studies class? If so, why and did you find it a productive use of your time? Why/why not?

Please tell me about how you deal with dating and your religious (or nonreligious) beliefs?

Family/Friends/Relationships
Which of your close friends or family know you're an atheist? How did you tell them?

What family do you talk to on a regular basis, if so how often?

Which of your friends are also atheists?

Describe the types of contact you have with friends or family besides what you have already mentioned above (e.g. how often you talk with your family). What types of activities, topics of conversations about being Atheist?

What co-workers know your religious beliefs?

Are there any people who you refuse to tell that you are an atheist? If so, why?

Do you participate in any volunteer work and if so what kind and how often?

Do you have any moral beliefs when it comes to your eating habits? (many people claim moral reasons for not eating meat for example)

Do you have any political leanings and if so what are some of the important issues present in our current society and what are your thoughts on these issues (for example, death penalty, overturning Roe v. Wade)

Describe occasions you know of when Atheists and those who are religious have come (or that you could foresee coming) together to discuss issues or work together. What topics or activities might be difficult for Atheists and those who are religious to address with one another?

Fears
As an atheist, do you have any fears about telling others about your beliefs and if so please explain.

Are there times when you feel more atheist or less atheist? Perhaps times you minimize or accentuate your atheism? Do you ever think of this in terms of "outing" yourself?

What do you believe are some common assumptions about what it means to be an "atheist"? or in other words, how do you think society perceives "atheism"? Where do you believe you are getting these impressions from?

Do you have any final thoughts?

Appendix C

Questionnaire for Male Participants

Background:

What's your age?

What's your educational background (highest level achieved)?

Are you single, married, divorced?

If married, is your spouse/partner atheist?

Do you have any kids?

How would you describe your sexuality? (heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other)

What is your race?

More in-depth questions
Tell me about how you learned about religion as a child? What did your parents teach you about it? Friends? How important was religion to your family?

How long have you been an atheist? Tell me about why and how you became an atheist. What does being an atheist mean to you?

Where have you lived before and how has being an atheist affected some of your interactions in this or these other locales?

Have you attended any secular meetings (Atheist meetups, Humanist Forum, and/or Secular Student Alliance)? If so, how often do (or did) you attend? Why did you choose to go? What do you think you got out of these meetings? What about social, or less formal, events or gatherings?

Do you read any literature on Atheism and if so how often do you read and what might you read?

How might one consider Atheism as a social movement? What social change do you (or others) believe is necessary?

Do you think there are any similarities between being an Atheist and being another type of minority (homosexual, African American etc.)?

Have you had any negative experiences (internal and external) because of you don't believe in a god? What are some of the biggest challenges of being an atheist? What are some of the best things about being an atheist?

Describe how you think you developed a sense of morals.

Do you celebrate any religious holidays, and if so, how do you celebrate?

Parenthood/Childcare/Roles of Men and Women/Marriage
In what way do you think gender (being a man) matters when it comes to being an Atheist? (what about being a father—if the participant has kids) How might it be difficult? If so, what challenges do you encounter? How might it be rewarding?

Research indicates that women tend to be more religious than men (Freese, 2004; Miller and Hoffman, 1995). Why do you think this is the case?

If you have kids, how do you deal with the topic of religion in your family? Are there various approaches that you and your spouse/partner take? Religious holidays?

If you have kids, how do you explain the topic of death?
If you don't have kids, imagine that your nephew comes up to you after his pet hamster dies. What do you imagine saying to him to explain death?

How does your family allocate childcare and household duties?

In what ways, if any, does being an Atheist influence how you think about your own body? Other Men's bodies? Women's bodies? What guides your decisions on issues of modesty and dress? Rights to control the body? Abortion?

How would you define marriage? (Probe questions) Okay with same-sex marriage, is marriage outdated?

What are your thoughts about issues around sexuality? (same-sex adoption, health care benefits etc)

Have you ever taken a gender and women's studies class? If so, why and did you find it a productive use of your time? Why/why not?

Please tell me about how you deal with dating and your religious (or nonreligious) beliefs?

Family/Friends/Relationships
Which of your close friends or family know you're an atheist? How did you tell them?

What family do you talk to on a regular basis, if so how often?

Which of your friends are also atheists?

Describe the types of contact you have with friends or family besides what you have already mentioned above (e.g. how often you talk with your family). What types of activities, topics of conversations about being Atheist?

What co-workers know your religious beliefs?

Are there any people who you refuse to tell that you are an atheist? If so, why?

Do you participate in any volunteer work and if so what kind and how often?

Do you have any moral beliefs when it comes to your eating habits? (many people claim moral reasons for not eating meat for example)

Do you have any political leanings and if so what are some of the important issues present in our current society and what are your thoughts on these issues (for example, death penalty, overturning Roe v. Wade)

Describe occasions you know of when Atheists and those who are religious have come (or that you could foresee coming) together to discuss issues or work together. What topics or activities might be difficult for Atheists and those who are religious to address with one another?

Fears

As an atheist, do you have any fears about telling others about your beliefs and if so please explain.

Are there times when you feel more atheist or less atheist? Perhaps times you minimize or accentuate your atheism? Do you ever think of this in terms of "outing" yourself?

What do you believe are some common assumptions about what it means to be an "atheist"? or in other words, how do you think society perceives "atheism"? Where do you believe you are getting these impressions from?

VITAE

JAMIE POND

Educational

2008-2015
University of Kentucky, Lexington KY
Department of Sociology
Primary Area: Gender
Secondary Area: Education
Dissertation: Living Without God: Female Atheists and Stigma Management in the South in the United States
Advisor: Shaunna Scott Ph. D.

M.A.
May 2008
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond VA
Track: Literature
Thesis: A Place Where Poetry and Science Meet: Constance Naden's Critique of Victorian Gender Roles
Advisor: Nicholas Frankel Ph.D.

B.A.
December 2004
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond VA
Major: English
University Honors and Magna Cum Laude

Graduate Certificates:

Graduate Certificate in College Teaching and Learning (Spring 2013)
University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY

Graduate Certificate in Gender and Women's Studies (Spring 2010)
University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY

Teaching Experience:
Aug. 2015- Dec. 2015
Sociology/Criminology 300: Research Methods in Sociology
(1 section; 3 credits)
University of North Carolina Wilmington

(Online) Principles of Sociology
(1 section; 3 credits)
Brescia University

Women's and Gender Studies 210: Introduction to
Women's and Gender Studies (1 section; 3 credits)
University of North Carolina Wilmington

Women's and Gender Studies 212: Sexuality and Gender
(1 section; 3 credits)
University of North Carolina Wilmington

Sociology 210: Introduction to Sociology
(1 section; 3 credits)
Brunswick Community College

June 2015- Aug. 2015   (Online) Women's and Gender Studies 210: Introduction to
Women's and Gender Studies (1 section; 3 credits)
University of North Carolina Wilmington

Aug. 2014-May 2015   Women's and Gender Studies 210: Introduction to
Women's and Gender Studies (4 sections—2 sections per
semester; 12 credits)
University of North Carolina Wilmington

Women's and Gender Studies 212: Sexuality and Gender
(1 section in the fall; 3 credits)
University of North Carolina Wilmington

Honor's College 210: Masculinity in Film
(1 section in the spring; 3 credits)
University of North Carolina Wilmington

May 2014-June 2014   (Online) Sociology 101: Introduction to Sociology
(3 credits)
University of Kentucky

Women's and Gender Studies 210: Introduction to
Women's and Gender Studies (1 section; 3 credits)
University of North Carolina Wilmington

Jan. 2014-May 2014   Women's and Gender Studies 210: Introduction to
Women's and Gender Studies (2 sections; 6 credits)
University of North Carolina Wilmington

Women's and Gender Studies 212: Sexuality and Gender
(1 section; 3 credits)
University of North Carolina Wilmington

Aug. 2013-Dec. 2013   Women's and Gender Studies 210: Introduction to

Women's and Gender Studies (3 sections, 9 credits)
University of North Carolina Wilmington

June 2013-Aug. 2013   Sociology 101: Introduction to Sociology (3 credits)
University of Kentucky

Jan. 2013-May 2013   Sociology 235: Inequalities in Society (3 credits)
University of Kentucky

Aug. 2012-Dec. 2012   Sociology 235: Inequalities in Society (3 credits)
University of Kentucky

Jan. 2012-May 2012   Gender and Women's Studies 200: Introduction to Gender
and Women's Studies in the Social Sciences
(2 sections, 6 credits)
University of Kentucky

Aug. 2011-Dec. 2011   Gender and Women's Studies 200: Introduction to Gender
and Women's Studies in the Social Sciences
(2 sections, 6 credits)
University of Kentucky

Jan. 2011-May 2011   Gender and Women's Studies 201: Introduction to Gender
and Women's Studies in the Arts and Humanities
(2 sections, 6 credits)
University of Kentucky

March 7-8, 2011   Guest Lecturer for Sociology 101
Topic: Gender Inequality
University of Kentucky

March 9-10, 2011   Guest Lecturer for Sociology 101
Topic: Religion
University of Kentucky

Aug. 2010-Dec. 2010   Gender and Women's Studies 201: Introduction to Gender
and Women's Studies in the Arts and Humanities
(2 sections, 6 credits)
University of Kentucky

Oct. 5, 2010   Guest Lecturer for a Communications Class
Topic: Gender and Media
University of Kentucky

June 2010-Aug. 2010   English 203-021: Business Writing (3 credits)
University of Kentucky

Jan. 2010-May 2010	English 104-020 and 104-026: Freshman Composition (8 credits) University of Kentucky
Aug. 2009- Dec. 2009	English 104-012: Freshman Composition (4 credits) University of Kentucky
Jan. 2009-May 2009	English 104-025 and 104-050: Freshman Composition (8 credits) University of Kentucky
Aug. 2008-Dec. 2008	English 104-053: Freshman Composition (4 credits) University of Kentucky
Jan. 2008- May 2008	English 200: Writing and Rhetoric Workshop (1 section; 3 credits) Virginia Commonwealth University
Aug. 2007-May 2008	Writing Center Consultant Virginia Commonwealth University
Aug. 2007-Dec. 2007	Teaching Assistant for Early American Literature Taught one class on Edgar Allan Poe and another on Emily Dickinson Professor: James Kinney Ph.D. Virginia Commonwealth University
Jan. 2004-Dec. 2004	Tutored Spanish Campus Learning Center Virginia Commonwealth University

Additional Teaching Experience/Skills:
Have worked with the following programs: Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, Microsoft Outlook, Blackboard, Powerpoint, Turning Point, Facebook, Prezi, and Twitter

Teaching Awards:
May 2012   Department of Sociology Graduate Student Teaching Award

Manuscripts:
Manuscripts Edited:
Bierbower, S. M. and R. L. Cooper. The Effects of Acute Carbon Dioxide on Behavior and Physiology in *Procambarus clarkii. Journal of Experimental Zoology.* 313A: 1-14 (2010).

Under Review:
Pond, J. Doing Gender: Hegemonic Masculinity, Sexuality, and Violence in *Breaking Bad.*

In Preparation:
Pond, J. and R. Pond Jr. Discussion-Based Learning Course on Social Inequalities Predicts Greater Awareness of Social Inequalities.

Pond. J. and R. Pond Jr. Religiosity, Fundamentalism, and Feminism: Why Religiosity is Associated with Conservative Attitudes Towards Women.

Pond. J, Blincoe, S. and Stigall, L. The Effects of Gender on Teacher and Student Interactions.

Conferences:

April 2-5, 2014	Southern Sociological Society Poster: Discussion-Based Learning Course on Social Inequalities Predicts Greater Awareness of Social Inequalities
March 27-29, 2014	Southeastern Women's Studies Association Presentation Title: Doing Gender: Multiple Masculinities, Sexuality, and Violence in *Breaking Bad*
May 16-17, 2013	Kentucky Innovation Conference Presentation Title: Dialogue and Democracy: Empowering Students to be Active Learners
Jan 27-30, 2012	Society of Personality and Social Psychology Poster: Religiosity, Fundamentalism, and Feminism: Why Religiosity is Associated with Conservative Attitudes Towards Women.
April 8, 2011	Pop Praxis: Social Justice and the Media Paper: Consuming *Buffy*: Embracing the Darkness and Female Empowerment in the Buffyverse
March 27-30, 2010	College English Association Paper presented "Screen Memories and Early 20th Century Lesbian Stereotypes in David Lynch's *Mulholland Dr.*"

March 26-30, 2009	Nineteenth Century Studies Association's 30th Annual Conference
	Paper presented "Deconstructing the Flower: Constance Naden's Critique of Scientific Essentialization of Femininity in the 'Poet and Botanist'"
November 7-8, 2008	"Shifting Tides, Anxious Borders: A Graduate Conference on 19th Century Transatlanticism." at Binghamton NY.
	Presented paper "Constance Naden's Critique on Scientific Theories that Suggest that Women are Innately Mentally Inferior to Men"

Public Lectures:

April 15, 2014	Female Atheists in the South: Becoming Atheist Presented to the Humanists and Freethinkers of Cape Fear
October 7, 2014	Female Atheists in the South: Managing a Stigmatized Identity
	Presented in conjunction with the Women's Studies Resource Center as a part of their "Works in Progress" series

Panels

November 8, 2014	The Role of Men in Women's and Gender Studies Courses Men's Leadership Summit University of North Carolina Wilmington

Funding:

Aug. 12-May 13	Sociology Teaching Assistantship, which includes a full tuition waiver and a $11,500 stipend at the University of Kentucky, Lexington Kentucky.
Aug. 10-May 12	Gender and Women's Studies Teaching Assistantship which includes a full tuition waiver and a $11,500 stipend at the University of Kentucky, Lexington Kentucky.
December 2009	Bonnie Cox Award in the amount of $800
Aug. 08- May 10	Teaching Assistantship which included a full

	tuition waiver and a $12,000 stipend at the University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.
Aug. 07-May 08	Teaching Assistantship which included a full tuition waiver and a $10,000 stipend at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA.

Research Interests:

Social Inequalities (Gender, Race, and Class)
Education
Religious Beliefs and Religiosity
Female Deviance
Popular Culture

Affiliations:

American Sociological Association (2009)
Southern Sociological Association (2013)
National Women's Studies Association (2010)
Society of Personality and Social Psychology (2010)
Southern Atlantic Modern Language Association (2007-2009)
Modern Language Association (2007-2010)
Nineteenth Century Studies Association (2008-2009)
College English Association (2009-2010)

Service:

Article and Book Reviewer for *Gender & Society* (2011-present)
President of the University of Kentucky's Sociology Graduate Student Organization (2011-2012)
Secretary of Gender and Women's Studies Graduate Student Union (2011-2012)
University of Kentucky Graduate School Microteaching Assistant (2011 & 2012)
Graduate Student Representative For Sociology Department's Hiring Committee (2011)
Presenter for the Sociology Department's New Student Sociology 101 Teaching Assistant Orientation (2011)
Participant/instructor in a university recruitment video for transfer and nontraditional students (Fall 2011).