ATHEISTS' EXPERIENCE OF COUNSELING IN THE BIBLE BELT OF THE

UNITED STATES

by

TRAVIS K. MCKIE-VOERSTE

(Under the Direction of Anneliese A. Singh)

ABSTRACT

Atheists and other individuals who identify as non-religious non-spiritual (NRNS) who live in geographic areas where religious affiliation is considered the norm often experience stigma in public and private spheres. Counselors who advertise their religious affiliation may be creating barriers for NRNS individuals seeking services and could limit the exploration of doubt in the existence of god for clients who identify as religious and spiritual. This dissertation includes a call to the counseling profession that highlights the systemic barriers experienced by NRNS individuals that includes specific recommendations for individual counselors, counselor educators, and counseling organizations. A phenomenological study highlights the experience of NRNS individuals in the deep south of the United States with the highest rates of religious affiliation also known as the Bible Belt. The experience of counseling for folks who identify as atheist and other NRNS identities in this region showed that frequently counselors include religion in their treatment, and that this is unwelcomed for NRNS individuals. Also included is a review of the experience of conducting the study by the researcher who himself identifies as atheist, containing reflections on how the study impacted his growth,

as well as his thoughts regarding the role that religion should have in the counseling

profession.

INDEX WORDS: Counseling, Atheism, Religion, Spiritual, Secular, Multiculturalism

ATHEISTS' EXPERIENCE OF COUNSELING IN THE BIBLE BELT OF THE

UNITED STATES

by

TRAVIS K. MCKIE-VOERSTE

BS, Bemidji State University, 2007

Ed.S, Arkansas State University, 2009

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2019

ATHEISTS' EXPERIENCE OF COUNSELING IN THE BIBLE BELT OF THE

UNITED STATES

by

TRAVIS K. MCKIE-VOERSTE

Major Professor:	Anneliese A. Singh
Committee:	Deryl F. Bailey
	H. George McMahon

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2019

DEDICATION

To my daughters. I love who you are, and can't wait to see who you will become.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to all the study participants for their willingness to share their experiences on a difficult topic, your contributions are what made this research possible. Thank you, Dr. Anneliese Singh, for providing your wisdom, encouragement, and guidance. Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Deryl Bailey, and Dr. George McMahon for your input and feedback, and for providing me with the benefit of your years of expertise in the field. I also want to thank my team of coders, especially Tregony McNair, Garrett Holder, and Katie Dees who have put in a huge effort into reading and coding interview transcripts and providing input, feedback, and challenge when needed. Thank you to my doctoral cohort for going through this process with me, for sharing some of your stories with me, and for being part of my story.

I could not have completed this dissertation without the support of my partner Annabelle. You gave up time, picked up my slack, and allowed me to work through ideas, thoughts, frustrations, and shared my successes and challenges. I love that we learn and grow emotionally and intellectually together.

Thank you to my parents – when you said I was smart and could do anything I set my mind to, I believed you. So,… this is your fault.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The discussion of religion in the context of a society that has a strong historical connection to religious belief comes with significant challenges, and research into the topic of religion is lacking (Brewster, Robinson, Sandil, Esposito, & Geiger, 2014; Andrew J. Weaver, 1998; A. J. Weaver et al., 1998). Writing about unbelief risks alienating readers who misinterpret a discussion of religious privilege as an attack on their faith, and research on taboo topics such as atheism is often ignored (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007, p. 150; Weinrach & Thomas, 1996). The topic of religion is often avoided in professional settings as a matter of policy or tact, and even in family contexts, conversations about religion are often seen as off-limits. The special status of religious and spiritual beliefs contributes to a lack of practice in discussing religion which has led to a lack of research challenging religious belief as well (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007; Weinrach & Thomas, 1996).

My own experience involves living outside of the studies geographic focus and only moving to the Bible Belt as a counseling graduate student. My own religious de-conversion happened in my early 20's, and so the experience moving to the Bible Belt as a non-believer contributed to the culture shock. Here, an individual's religious beliefs were much more in the public sphere than other places that I had lived previously.

In this introductory chapter to this dissertation, I will provide an overview of the topic of religion within the field of counseling, along with related definitions to provide

the context for the following chapters. This work will not include arguments for or

against religious or spiritual belief but will include experiences of individuals that do not

hold, or challenge, religious belief. The term atheist will be described in more detail but

is a point of misunderstanding that deserves early attention. To be an atheist is not the

assertion that there is no god, but a rejection of the claim that there is a god (*The*

Cambridge dictionary of philosophy, 1999). While it may seem like a subtle distinction, it

is very important to the understanding of the atheist position. The way that an atheist

dismisses claims for any deity is likely a similar process to the way that believers of one

religious doctrine dismiss the claims of the existence of gods from other religions. There

are multiple descriptions of different types of atheists, one over-simplified difference is

described as strong and weak atheism, with strong atheism including an assertion that

there is no god, and weak atheism including a more agnostic stance (Vainio & Visala,

2015). The terms non-religious/non-spiritual (NRNS) and religious/spiritual (RS) are

used in this paper to describe individuals who generally fall within these categories but

do not mean to imply that these are the only two categories that exist. Religious

adherence and spirituality exist on their spectrums, though often significant overlap exists

between the non-religious and non-spiritual and the religious and spiritual dimensions.

Silver, Coleman, Hood, and Holcombe (2014) outline differences within those

who are non-religious/non-spiritual, and identify six types of atheists, ranging from folks

that are very active and may assert that there is no god, or anti-theist, to apathetic atheists

who do not hold theistic beliefs, but remain mostly unimpacted by their lack of theistic

belief. Individuals who are less assertive in their atheism may not indicate that they are

atheists but may state that they do not believe in a god. For this dissertation, the term

atheist will be used to describe all folks who do not believe in the existence of gods, though this may not be a term that is used to describe themselves.

Problem statement

The presumption of religious affiliation often occurs within the social sphere of the Bible Belt of the United States (U.S.)(Brunn, Webster, & Archer, 2011). The Bible Belt is a loosely defined geographical area in the south and southeast of the U.S. where religious affiliation is higher than other parts of the country. Initial social meetings may include individuals inquiring on which church the new acquaintance is attending. Here especially, professional counselors, as well as other professionals, often advertise their religious affiliation. Especially in rural communities, the perception of homogeneity is not reflective of reality, and those who do not fit the "norm" experience pressure to hide the part of their identity that does not conform to the social standard. While the 2014 American Counseling Association (ACA) ethical code may lead to the assumption that the counselors' religious affiliation should not play a role in the counseling relationship, the religious affiliation of the counselor is often known by the client, especially in small communities (American Counseling Association, 2014). Even outside of unintentional disclosure of religious affiliation, counselors may engage in subtle acts of religious disclosure such as wearing small religious symbols, as well as more overt disclosure such as openly advertising their religious beliefs, openly displaying their preferred religious symbols in advertisements or office décor or suggesting client participation in religious practice.

Religionormativity

Religionormativity includes setting religious thought and practices as the norm and provides religious privilege (Parmaksız, 2018). The assumption that others are religious is a characteristic of the existence of religionormativity and is not just limited to folks who are religious themselves, but rather is reflective of the culturally normative assumptions. Since the predominant religion in the Bible Belt of the U.S. is Christianity, the more specific term would be Christionormativity or the assumption that others are Christian, exemplified in the south with asking what church new acquaintances attend, rather than using a more neutral term such as worship or including temple or mosque.

The 2009 ASERVIC Spiritual and Religious Competencies set religion and spiritual worldviews as the norm (Association for Spiritual Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling, 2009). The parenthetical inclusion of "absence of belief" indicates that some exploration of the atheist or NRNS worldview occurred, but only is added as an afterthought to the predominant and what seems to be the preferred religious worldview. The 2016 Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MCSJCC) also address both client and counselor worldviews, though in this case without suggesting any preference to a specific worldview while acknowledging that differing worldviews hold positions of privilege and marginalization in the cultural context (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016).

The Bible Belt

The geographic focus of this study is the Bible Belt of the U.S. Rather than having distinct borders, it includes states in the south and southeast of the U.S. where Christianity plays a higher role in everyday life than other places in the U.S. (Brunn et al.,

2011). There may be communities within the Bible Belt where religion plays less of an important role, and there are communities outside of the Bible Belt where a significant degree of christionormativity exist. The research was open to participants from anywhere in the Bible Belt region, though many participants were located in or near Chattanooga, TN, a city that was found to be the top Bible-centric city in the U.S. (Barna, 2017).

Counselors advertising religious affiliation

Counselors located in the Bible Belt frequently include their religious affiliation on their profiles, display religious symbols on their advertisements, websites, and in their offices. The implicit and explicit disclosure of the counselors' perceived or actual religious preference limits access to not only NRNS individuals but folks from religious traditions that are less predominant in the area as well. While the American Counseling Association (ACA) has attempted to become more explicit in what it considers discriminatory by updating the code of ethics, states continue to work on legislation that provides religious groups protection in engaging in discriminatory practices (American Counseling Association, 2014; Canady, 2016). Especially clients who have experienced discrimination will be sensitive to even subtle clues of the counselors' perceived religious preferences.

<div align="center">

Review of Literature

</div>

The role of religion in counseling is now explored extensively (Adams, Puig, Baggs, & Wolf, 2015; Richards & Bergin, 2005; Stewart-Sicking, Deal, & Fox, 2017), and the ACA has a division, the Association for Spiritual, Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC), dedicated to the integration of spiritual and religious values into counseling. Research that has focused on issues of religious and spiritual diversity has

some acknowledgment of atheists in the field, though issues of diversity in religion often fail to include the unique experience of those who do not believe in god(s). A study by Giordano, Bevly, Tucker, and Prosek (2018) mentions atheists, but in this case as a dimension of the liberal political ideology that exists in the counseling profession as a whole and contributes to the perception by religious and politically conservative counseling students that the expression of their opinions is less welcome. While this study focused on the experience nationally in counseling programs, it failed to capture the geographical differences in political and religious norms that exist in a large and diverse country such as the U.S. In contrast, the context of the broader community, as well as the culture within the institution, is captured well by Reisner (2018) and shows that the broader community influences the campus cultures and impact how open atheists are about their beliefs.

Some research has focused on providing a rationale for integrating religion and spirituality in counseling (Eliason, Hanley, & Leventis, 2001). One introduction to counseling textbook author suggested that spirituality is an important counselor characteristic, though what is meant by spirituality is either not well defined, or lacks discussion of the broad ways in which spirituality is defined (Nystul, 2016). Specific ways of integrating spirituality into counseling were suggested by Stewart-Sicking et al. (2017) who provide an argument that religion and spirituality cannot be separated from counseling. They provide a convincing argument that the practice of counseling deals with concerns that have been of importance to religion and that counselors are likely to encounter clients who frame their experiences in the religious and spiritual context

(Stewart-Sicking et al., 2017). Although a relationship is implied, the article fails to provide evidence that counseling and religion/spirituality are somehow interdependent.

Terminology

A significant contribution to the misunderstanding between and within RS and NRNS individuals is different meanings of common terms in the discussion. Individuals will vary in their definitions of these terms, so to clarify the meaning of the terms in this work, the following list serves as a reference.

Theism - the belief in a personal, omnipotent, omniscient, and/or omnibenevolent god who created the universe, takes an active interest in the world and has provided special revelation (Martin, 2007).

Religion - Practices, and rituals related to the theistic personal or cultural belief.

Spirituality - the belief in the supernatural or things that transcend the material or natural world (Cragun, Hammer, & Nielsen, 2015).

Atheism - the rejection of the claim that god(s) exist.

Agnosticism - skeptical position that metaphysical ideas, in this case, theistic belief, cannot be proven nor disproven.

Secular - As opposed to being religious.

<div align="center">**Theoretical Foundations**</div>

The theoretical foundations of this dissertation include Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) as a way of understanding the way that individuals process information and construct meaning (Kelly, 1955). The research is further informed by Structuration Theory (ST) to inform the relationship between the participant and the

social context (Giddens, 1984). The combination of PCP and ST provided the framework for the design and interpretation of the phenomenological inquiry.

Personal Construct Psychology

PCP posits that the way that an individual anticipates events is essential to their perception and experience of the world (Kelly, 1955). The way that another person is understood is through understanding their system of constructs, which Kelly (1955) did systematically through the use of the Repertory Grid Technique. The laddering technique is another method used to identify individuals superordinate constructs from a dialogue with the person (Caputi, Viney, Walker, & Crittenden, 2012), and was used in the semi-structured interview protocol in this study. PCP was also utilized as a structure in identifying codes with the understanding that constructs are also informed by their opposite pole.

Structuration Theory

The phenomenological inquiry focuses on the experience of the individual or the agents, but it is essential to keep in mind the structure in which these agents are operating. This research focuses on a specific geographic location, the Bible Belt of the U.S. with specific structures that exist in this region. Within this region there are subsets of structures that also exist in other geographic regions, ST will keep the balance between the experience of the individual, and the context in which the individual exists. Specifically, it will inform the identification of themes by looking not only at the experience of the individual, but the structures in which the individual has the experience.

The experience of individual agents are what is the unit of analysis of a typical phenomenological inquiry. Giddens (1984) states that the experience of the agents cannot

be separated from the structures of the experience, so an analysis of the agent would be incomplete if it did not include the structural context. Likewise, a description of a context or structure would be incomplete without a description of the agents who work within and create and reinforce these structures (Giddens, 1984).

Research Questions

1. What is the experience of individuals who are NRNS living in the Bible Belt of the U.S. when seeking counseling?

2. What is the experience of individuals who are NRNS living in the Bible Belt of the U.S. in their daily lives?

Overview of Methodology

Recruiting participants occurred through social media and in-vivo groups focused on secular and atheist topics. The researcher advertised the study with a flyer that outlined the research (Appendix B) and provided a link to a pre-survey which included demographic information (Appendix C), as well as a measure to assess the potential participants level of religiosity and spirituality (Cragun et al., 2015). The researcher contacted participants who met the criteria and contributed to a diverse demographic sample by their preferred method to schedule a semi-structured interview (Appendix A). The researcher recorded and transcribed interviews for a total of ten participants. Initial interviews were coded using an open coding method, and then codes and themes were identified (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The research team, which included individuals from various religious and non-religious backgrounds as well as the primary researcher, then coded each transcript. The research team discussed coding differences to develop consensus before entering codes into NVivo.

Manuscript-Style Dissertation

One of the goals of this dissertation work is to highlight the experiences of NRNS individuals in order to ensure that these individuals are receiving appropriate counseling services. A manuscript style dissertation will help prepare each chapter for publication to have the greatest possible impact on future practice and research. This chapter provides an overview of the dissertation and introduces terminology, theoretical background, and provides the overall structure of the dissertation. Chapter two is a call to the field that includes a review of the research and provides recommendations to the field for practice. Chapter three describes the study and provides the findings, implications, and limitations of the study. Chapter four includes researcher reflexivity, theoretical reflexivity, and recommendations.

References

Adams, C. M., Puig, A., Baggs, A., & Wolf, C. P. (2015). Integrating religion and

   spirituality onto counselor education: Barriers and strategies. *Counselor*

   Education & Supervision, 54(1), 44-56. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6978.2015.00069.x

American Counseling Association. (2014). ACA Code of Ethics.

   https://www.counseling.org/resources/aca-code-of-ethics.pdf

Association for Spiritual Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling. (2009). *Spiritual*

   competencies: Competencies for addressing spiritual and religious issues in

   counseling. Retrieved from http://www.aservic.org

Barna. (2017). *Barna Cities and States Report*. Retrieved from: www.barna.com

Brewster, M. E., Robinson, M. A., Sandil, R., Esposito, J., & Geiger, E. (2014). Arrantly

   absent: Atheism in psychological science from 2001 to 2012. *Counseling*

   Psychologist, 42(5), 628-663. doi:10.1177/0011000014528051

Brunn, S. D., Webster, G. R., & Archer, J. C. (2011). The Bible Belt in a changing south :

   Shrinking, relocating, and multiple buckles. *Southeastern Geographer*(4), 513.

The Cambridge dictionary of philosophy. (1999). (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press:

   Cambridge, England.

Canady, V. A. (2016). Tennessee legislation an 'unnecessary blow' to counseling

   profession. *Mental Health Weekly, 26*(16), 1-3. doi:10.1002/mhw.30578

Caputi, P., Viney, L. L., Walker, B. M., & Crittenden, N. (2012). *Personal construct*

   methodology. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Cragun, R. T., Hammer, J. H., & Nielsen, M. (2015). The Nonreligious-Nonspiritual

    Scale (NRNSS): Measuring everyone from Atheists to Zionists. *Science, Religion*

    and Culture, 2(3), 36-53.

D'Andrea, L. M., & Sprenger, J. (2007). Atheism and nonspirituality as diversity issues in

    counseling. *Counseling & Values, 51*(2), 149-158.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.).

    Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Eliason, G. T., Hanley, C., & Leventis, M. (2001). The role of spirituality in counseling:

    Four theoretical orientations. *Pastoral Psychology, 50*(2), 77-91.

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*.

    Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Giordano, A. L., Bevly, C. M., Tucker, S., & Prosek, E. A. (2018). Psychological safety

    and appreciation of differences in counselor training programs: Examining

    religion, spirituality, and political beliefs. *Journal of Counseling & Development,*

    96(3), 278-288. doi:10.1002/jcad.12202

Kelly, G. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Martin, M. (2007). *The Cambridge companion to atheism*. New York, NY: Cambridge

    University Press.

Nystul, M. S. (2016). *Introduction to Counseling* (5th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Parmaksız, U. (2018). Making sense of the postsecular. *European Journal of Social*

    Theory, 21(1), 98-116. doi:10.1177/1368431016682743

Ratts, M. J., Singh, A. A., Nassar-McMillan, S., Butler, S. K., & McCullough, J. R.

    (2016). Multicultural and social justice counseling competencies: Guidelines for

the Counseling Profession. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 44*(1), 28-48. doi:10.1002/jmcd.12035

Reisner, C. (2018). *The atheist identity in the higher education workplace.* (Doctoral Dissertation), Ball State University,

Richards, P. S., & Bergin, A. E. (2005). *A spiritual strategy for counseling and psychotherapy., 2nd ed*. Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association.

Silver, C. F., Coleman, T. J., Hood, R. W., & Holcombe, J. M. (2014). The six types of nonbelief: A qualitative and quantitative study of type and narrative. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 17*(10), 990-1001. doi:10.1080/13674676.2014.987743

Stewart-Sicking, J. A., Deal, P. J., & Fox, J. (2017). The ways paradigm: A transtheoretical model for integrating spirituality into counseling. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 95*(2), 234-241. doi:10.1002/jcad.12135

Vainio, O.-P., & Visala, A. (2015). Varieties of unbelief: a taxonomy of atheistic positions. *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie, 57*(4), 483-500. doi:10.1515/nzsth-2015-0024

Weaver, A. J. (1998). Is religion taboo in psychology? A systematic analysis of research on religion in seven major American Psychological Association journals: 1991-1994. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 17*(3), 220-232.

Weaver, A. J., Kline, A. E., Samford, J. A., Lucas, L. A., Larson, D. B., & Gorsuch, R. L. (1998). Is religion taboo in Psychology? A systematic analysis of research on

religion in seven major American Psychological Association journals: 1991-1994. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 17*(3), 220.

Weinrach, S. G., & Thomas, K. R. (1996). The counseling profession's commitment to diversity-sensitive counseling: A critical reassessment. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 74*(5), 472-477.

CHAPTER 2

"SO YOU BELIEVE IN…NOTHING?" EXPANDING RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL

DIVERSITY IN COUNSELING: A CALL TO THE FIELD[1]

[1]McKie-Voerste, T. M. To be submitted to *Journal of Counseling and Development*

Abstract

The counseling profession has accepted multiculturalism and social justice as major tenets of the profession, yet there has been little attention to include individuals who do not identify as religious or spiritual in counseling practice, training, research, and advocacy (Brewster, Robinson, Sandil, Esposito, & Geiger, 2014; Essandoh, 1996). This article issues a call to the counseling field to engage in practices that are more inclusive of religious and non-religious clients. Specific suggestions for counseling practice, education, and research are included.

Keywords: Atheism, Religion, Spirituality, Counseling

"So You Believe In…Nothing?" Expanding Religious And Spiritual Diversity In

Counseling: A Call To The Field

The number of individuals who do not participate in religious or spiritual practice

is increasing in the United States (U.S), and those who identify as religiously unaffiliated

made up 22.8% of the national population in 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2014). In spite

of the large and growing number of religiously unaffiliated, there is little research within

the counseling profession about this population despite the long-standing commitment to

diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice advocacy (Brewster et al., 2014; D'Andrea

& Sprenger, 2007; Essandoh, 1996; Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, &

McCullough, 2016). Therefore, counseling research and practice about clients who

identify as non-religious/non-spiritual (NRNS) is needed to guide counselors in ways to

most effectively support these clients. Counselors who present themselves as open to

religious and spiritual beliefs as well as NRNS worldviews, would allow clients with the

broadest range of beliefs to openly express and/or explore these beliefs, whether religious

or non-religious, spiritual or non-spiritual. Counselors who desire to help clients

regardless of their differing beliefs should be concerned with this deficit, and work

towards ensuring that clients do not have to be concerned with their counselors' religious

or non-religious belief.

This article provides an overview of the different communities that hold various

NRNS worldviews, highlight some of the misunderstandings about non-religion and non-

spirituality, and review definitions of atheism as well as differences within atheism. It

will also explore how NRNS individuals experience and are experienced in, social and

professional settings, due to stigma and religious privilege in the U.S., as well as the

ways that this contributes to a lack of access to counseling. Recommendations for the unification of the profession on this matter, as well as methods for increasing equity, expanding research, and improving training will be provided. The purpose of this article is to increase the awareness counselors have of the needs of those who do not hold worldviews that include belief in a god or the supernatural, as well as to provide recommendations to the counseling field to address gaps in counseling practice, training, research, and advocacy.

Religion and Spirituality in Counseling

Counseling literature has placed increased importance on the inclusion of spirituality, and some counseling texts include being spiritual as a personal quality of counselors (Nystul, 2016, p. 15). While evidence suggests that many clients want their counselors to address their spiritual-religious needs, empirical support that counselors need to identify as spiritual to provide this support is lacking. Authors supporting the integration of spirituality are not necessarily making the claim that spirituality should always be a topic addressed in counseling, but offer ways that counselors can address their clients spirituality when appropriate (Stewart-Sicking, Deal, & Fox, 2017).

The Association of Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) competencies for addressing spiritual and religious issues in counseling include addressing the needs of clients who do not ascribe to religious and/or spiritual belief systems. These competencies specifically address culture and worldview and rightfully includes atheism and agnosticism. The second competency addresses "…beliefs (or absence of beliefs)…" (Association for Spiritual Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling, 2009), though the parenthetical inclusion of absence of belief

implies a deficit, misrepresents the atheist position, and/or shows the inclusion was only added as an afterthought. The competencies that follow in the ASERVIC competencies, divided into sections about counselor self-awareness, human and spiritual development, communication, assessment, diagnosis, and treatment, then completely ignore NRNS worldviews. In contrast, the more recent and inclusive Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MCSJCC) can be applied to different religions as well as NRNS worldviews, and also highlight the possible differences in belief and worldview between client and counselor, and its' impact on marginalization and privilege (Ratts et al., 2016).

Training programs and counseling textbooks have included the component of spirituality in their programs as it is included in Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2015). The discontention may be in the differing use of the definition of spirituality of those who are religious and those who are not. The specific definitions will be discussed in more detail later, but spirituality is defined in a religious sense through the use of the supernatural, or above (beyond) nature, a concept rejected by NRNS individuals. Goodness, kindness, love, compassion, and forgiveness are often co-opted as components of spirituality (Corey, 2006), though NRNS individuals would likely reject that spirituality is a requirement to experience or engage in any of these.

Where Are These Non-Religious/Non-Spiritual Individuals?

Counselors, especially those who live in regions with little apparent religious diversity, may be unaware of the diversity within the community of those who identify as

NRNS. Changing demographics will further increase the necessity for counselors to understand a broad range of religious and non-religious individuals. The American Religious Identification Survey indicates that those who do not specify a religion has increased from 8% to 14% between 1990 and 2008 (Kosmin, 1990; Kosmin & Keysar, 2009). The Pew Research Center (2014) reports that those who do not identify with a religion increased from 15% to 20% in five years between 2007 and 2012. A recent study that controls for stigma estimates those who do not believe in god at 26% of the U.S. population (Gervais & Najle, 2017).

The 2014 Religious Landscape Study sampled 35,071 U.S. citizens from all 50 states and found that 22.8% of the sample reports no religious affiliation, also known as religious "nones," providing further evidence for the continued growth of this group (Pew Research Center, 2014). Religious affiliation, however, is not synonymous with belief in god, and individuals from each religious affiliation report differing levels of certainty including non-belief. In 2014, 9% of Americans indicated that they do not believe in God, although only 3.1% identified as atheist (Pew Research Center, 2014). Between 2007 and 2014, the number of individuals in the U.S. who identified that they were absolutely certain about the existence of god decreased from 71% to 63%, a trend that is expected to continue due to significant generational differences in belief (Pew Research Center, 2014). At 17%, younger millennials indicate in the greatest proportion that they do not believe in god. The Baby Boomer generation has a comparatively small 6% who do not believe (Pew Research Center, 2014). In total, this leaves a growing 37% of the population that indicate at a minimum their uncertainty about the existence of god (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Those without religious affiliation have the least amount of certainty of a gods existence; Thirty-three percent (33%) of this group do not believe in a god, and an additional 18% are uncertain about the existence of a god (Pew Research Center, 2014). Respondents identifying as Buddhist, Jewish, and Hindu also indicate low certainty in the existence of a god, with 27%, 17%, and 10% respectively indicating no belief in a god, and 15%, 19%, and 16% respectively indicating that they lack certainty in their belief in a god (Pew Research Center, 2014). Groups with the highest certainty of gods existence, where 90% of the membership profess to be certain or fairly certain in the existence of god, include (ordered from the highest level of certainty), Jehovah's Witness, Historically Black Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Mormon, Muslim, and Mainline Protestant faiths (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Atheists in Social and Professional Settings

Atheists as a marginalized group in theistic US culture, have a different experience than those who hold theistic beliefs (Anspach, Coe, & Thurlow, 2007). Atheists and other NRNS individuals are largely ignored in the literature of helping professions (Brewster et al., 2014), even as the counseling profession has labeled multiculturalism as the 4th force in counseling (Essandoh, 1996). A significant amount of research exists on religion and spirituality, while only minimal exploration of atheist and non-religious identity development has occurred in the social sciences, and is mostly neglected in the field of Counseling and Psychology (Brewster et al., 2014; D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007).

Discourse related to the topic of religion continues to meet barriers in interpersonal as well as professional settings, regarded by many to be a "sacred" topic not

to be challenged (Helminiak, 2010). The value differences between those with and without religious and spiritual belief contribute to differences in use of language and serve as additional barriers. The term atheist in its root prefix refers to being without – *a*-theist, implying that a deficit exists, and some literature refers to atheists as those who "lack" belief in God or being "godless" (Blanes & Oustinova-Stjepanovic, 2015). Possibly in response to the stigma associated with the term atheist, some who do not hold theistic belief have utilized alternative terminology to describe their belief system and utilize terms such as secular, humanist, brights, and free-thinkers (Dennett, 2007). Those with theistic and religious beliefs are also sensitive to the discussion given the sacred nature of the topic and the stigma associated with religious doubt in this community. Expression of belief, anything less than certainty about the existence of a god, violates a social rule and risks loss of social privilege.

Some change in attitude towards NRNS is evidenced by generational differences in attitude towards atheists, with 18-29-year-olds having significantly warmer feelings than Americans older than 64 (Pew Research Center, 2014). Changes in the political sphere are also evident, though impacted by political affiliation. In an interview while still in office, former president Barrack Obama stated:

We should foster a culture in which peoples private religious beliefs, including atheists and agnostics, are respected. And that is the kind of culture that allows all of us to believe what we want, that is freedom of conscience, and that is what our constitution guarantees (Maher, 2016).

Counselors are not exempt from culturally and politically influenced beliefs and convictions, and personally held views can be influenced by the socio-political climate.

Counselors should, however, maintain the skill of respecting their client's beliefs, operating within this belief system where appropriate, and refrain from perpetuating or introducing their particular belief on their clients. It is not within the NRNS counselors' position to capitulate on their clients' doubts to deconvert them, nor is it for theist counselors to capitulate on clients' suffering to indoctrinate clients to religion. It *is* the counselor's position to utilize evidence-based therapeutic techniques to help their clients (Sexton, 1999).

Atheist Representation in the Political Sphere

Religion is pervasive in the socio-political sphere in the U.S. (Grescock, 2001). Election to political office often necessitates theistic, or more specifically, a proclaimed Christian belief (Pew Research Center, 2014). While the barriers to political office are often socially enforced, six states' constitutions have language directly barring atheists from office (Gervais, 2013). Atheists experience distrust not only in the political sphere but because of this distrust atheists have to be cautious in the work and social settings as well (Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011). While Christianity is the dominant religion in the U.S., many other religions also benefit from religious privilege over those who do not have a religious belief. A survey that investigated trust in individuals by religion lists Muslims and "nones" as lowest (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Distrust of Non-Religious Non-Spiritual Folks

In a survey by Gervais et al. (2011), atheists were shown to be among the least trusted groups in the U.S., as well as other geographical areas where religious beliefs are part of the dominant cultural norm. While the distrust towards atheists is not exclusive to Christians, a passage from the Bible illustrates this sentiment well, and provides some

context for the origins of this mistrust, stating "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good" (Psalm 14:1, King James Version). Also contributing to distrust is a lack of understanding of what the NRNS belief is.

What Do Atheists Believe?

Terms surrounding religion and rejection of religion are influenced by their cultural implications. The terms atheism and non-religious are used throughout this paper, and while overlap exists between the two, they are not synonymous terms. The difference between self-identified atheists (3%) and those who state they do not believe in a god (9%) are illustrative of both the stigma and confusion about the definition (Pew Research Center, 2014). Vainio and Visala (2015) accurately describe atheism, not as a worldview of itself but propose a taxonomy of worldviews of positive beliefs to understand the atheism within this context better.

What is Atheism?

Most simply put, atheism is the view that god(s) do not exist (*The Cambridge dictionary of philosophy*, 1999), or the rejection of the claim that god(s) do exist. Subtypes of atheists have been suggested, and not all who hold the view that there is no god may self-identify as an atheist (Silver, Coleman, Hood, & Holcombe, 2014). Atheists may or may not identify with this label, but each will have their own language and constructs related to the term. They also will have different levels of emphasis on their opposition to the existence of a supernatural being or beings, organized religion, or spirituality. Others may not use the term atheist to describe themselves because they

reject the idea of being defined by what they are not, preferring terms such as freethinkers, brights, rationalist, naturalist, or humanist (Dennett, 2007; Smith, 2010).

In contrast, theism is the belief in a personal god, characterized by being omnipotent, omniscient, and/or omnibenevolent, who created the universe, takes an active interest in the world and has given a special revelation to humans (Martin, 2007). Using the term religious should not be confused with belief in a god, as it is used to describe the practice of religion, which may include adherence to tenets of the religion or practice of religious rituals. Non-religious refers to things that are defined by the contrast to things that are religious (Lee, 2012). Non-religious is a broad term that includes many atheists, but there are also those who follow a religious practice but do not have a belief in a god. Deism, a view held by some who may identify as spiritual but not religious for example, is the belief that a god created the world/universe, but does not interfere or has further interaction. In philosophical terms, this also implies that knowledge of god is obtained through reason, rather than revelation by God of his/her existence (Martin, 2007).

Not necessarily tied to theistic belief or religious practice, one definition of spirituality refers to the belief in the supernatural or things that transcend the material or natural world (Cragun, Hammer, & Nielsen, 2015). Not everyone, however, used the term spirituality in the supernatural sense. The colloquial use of *spiritual* may refer to an intense experience of awe or feeling of connection with others, and in the religious context may refer to the sense of connection with God or another supernatural spirit (Cragun et al., 2015). Atheists especially may describe an experience, or use the term in its conversational definition, without referring to the supernatural. Others may be

describing their connection with a god, contributing to a significant misunderstanding about the term if not specifically clarified.

What is Agnosticism?

Another term that sometimes contributes to the confusion is agnosticism; A skeptical position that metaphysical ideas, in this case, theistic belief, cannot be proven nor disproven, though not the assertion that no god exists (*The Cambridge dictionary of philosophy*, 1999). The vernacular use of the term sometimes places agnosticism as an intermediary position between theism and atheism rather than on a separate spectrum. However, there is no contradiction if an individual is agnostic, religious, and a theist.

Differences within Atheism

Researchers investigating non-belief acknowledge that most people in the U.S. believe in the existence of god(s), but that even with the relatively small percentage of atheists, this is a vast number of individuals (Gervais, 2013; Helminiak, 2010). While not all who reject the existence of god(s) identify as atheists, this population is excluded from openly participating in politics, and find little support in the legal system (Grescock, 2001). A portion of those without religious affiliation consider themselves spiritual, but not religious, though social and juridical spheres are also skeptical of their views (Miller, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2014). The religious landscape study identifies twelve religious traditions in their survey and also include the religiously unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, 2014). Since many of those who do not believe in the existence of god are religiously affiliated, this grouping is less useful if unbelief is the topic of research. The percentage of individuals who stated that they do not believe in god in the 2014

survey was 9%, and an additional 5% that stated they were "not too/not at all certain" in their belief in god (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Silver et al. (2014) proposed a grouping that includes six types of nonbelievers which include those who may continue religious affiliation and include academic, activist, agnostic, anti-theist, non-theist, and ritual atheist types. The Intellectual Atheist/Agnostic made up 37.6% of a sample of nonbelievers in a quantitative component of this study (N=1153), and are characterized by their interest in their use of rationality in regards to belief (Silver et al., 2014). The Activist Atheist/Agnostic group made up 23.0% of the sample and were actively engaged in socio-political settings to include a broad range of social justice concerns, and Seeker-Agnostic types displayed an openness to metaphysical possibilities, taking a more constructivist ontological position, making up only 7.6% of the sample (Silver et al., 2014). Anti-theists, also labeled as the "new atheists," are vehemently and actively opposed to theist positions and made up 14.8% of the sample, whereas Non-theists showed no interest in religious or spiritual beliefs and were called "apathetic nonbelievers" making up 4.4% of the sample, though their low representation was likely influenced by sampling limitations (Silver et al., 2014). The final group was Ritual Atheist/Agnostic making up 12.5% of the sample and were characterized by having an appreciation for the teachings of religion without holding theist beliefs (Silver et al., 2014).

Religious Privilege as a Social Justice Issue in Counseling:

D'Andrea and Sprenger (2007) recognized that the conversation about the inclusion of religion and spirituality lacked a discussion about those who do not have a religious or spiritual belief. Rawls'(1971) description of justice includes a focus on the

rights and opportunities of individuals have to access resources or occupy positions. This theory of justice also includes the individual justice principle which states that each person has similar fundamental liberties (Rawls, 1971, 2001), yet the counseling profession may be contributing to limiting access for NRNS individuals. NRNS individuals are systematically excluded from opportunities even within the counseling profession. This includes some faculty positions at Council of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accredited programs at private religious institutions since they often include the requirement for applicants to submit statements of faith. While this practice may be legally permissible under federal law, this is not a practice that should be endorsed by the major accrediting body for educational programs in our profession.

Building on Rawls' (1971) work, Crethar, Rivera, and Nash (2008) have outlined the definition of social justice for counseling to include equity, access, participation, and harmony. The inclusion of harmony is reflective of the importance of considering the broad social impacts when determining justice, and the exclusion of NRNS faculty, as well as faculty from other religious traditions, have broader impacts on the students at that institution and the clients they will ultimately serve.

Lack of Access to Affirming-Counseling for NRNS Clients

The American Counseling Association (ACA) code of ethics lists social justice in its preamble as a core professional value. Counselors who advertise their counseling service as Christian, or religious based, are limiting access to the growing number of NRNS individuals who are forced to seek alternative ways to find counselors who do not use religion in their practice. Clients who do not identify with the local dominant religion

but are also religious, are similarly disadvantaged when seeking counseling services. While it may not be the intention of the counselor to advertise that only those of their religious beliefs are welcome, this is likely to be the impact that it is having and could be seen as intentional, though this is a topic that necessitates further research.

Research in non-religious and non-spiritual (NRNS) beliefs has been lacking, with impacts on practice and client experience. Religious clients seeking a counselor who identifies with their religious belief can utilize the "find a counselor" feature linked from the ACA website to sort counselors who work specifically with their religious affiliation. NRNS clients seeking counselors who work with NRNS belief do not have this capability. To deal with this shortfall the Secular Therapy Project has created a matching service for clients who seek therapists who do not allow their religion to inform their therapeutic intervention (Recovering from Religion, 2017). As of March 2017, the site reports that 10,495 clients have registered for this service, but that only 316 therapists are registered, demonstrating both the need and the lack of access for this population (Recovering from Religion, 2017). A limitation of the site is that it only allows the therapist to register for the matching service if they identify as non-religious as well as utilize cognitive behavioral or related therapies. It also adds to the fragmentation of the profession into factions based on religious belief or its rejection, and, while attempting to provide access for NRNS clients, may inadvertently be adding to this division.

Stewart-Sicking et al. (2017) point out that while new practitioners report increased competence in spiritual integration, this often does not translate into practice (Cashwell et al., 2013). The integration of spirituality and religion into counseling should only occur when counselors give sufficient attention to the diversity of religious and

spiritual belief, and also include non-belief. Counselors may incorrectly assume that those who are non-religious and non-spiritual are not impacted by religion and that this is thereby is a non-issue. This would be equivalent to stating that those who are marginalized need not be concerned about privilege since they do not have any. NRNS individuals are confronted with living in a theistic society and finding a counselor that shares their values is met with barriers that many religious clients do not experience. The MCSJCC address the power differentials that exist between client and counselor (Ratts et al., 2016); Religion, spirituality, as well as NRNS, is one of the many domains that the counselor needs to be aware of their own and their client's position of privilege or marginalization.

The counseling profession has now acknowledged the role of race and its impacts on society and individuals within (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Comparisons can be made with the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT), whereas in this case religion, rather than race, is the societal construct that will benefit from a critical analysis of the power structure that makes this a central issue (Russell, 1992). Like with CRT, a historical hierarchy or religious belief exists in the U.S., placing the greatest privilege with Christian religions, evidenced by the difference in trust, placing atheists and Muslims at the bottom in the United States (Adelman & Tsao, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2014). While religion has attempted to claim ownership of morality, and a majority (53%) of Americans believe that a belief in God is necessary for morality (Pew Research Center, 2014), the counseling profession should be careful not to endorse this assertion. Counselors are likely to err when assuming that their clients operate from the same or similar needs, desires, values, and perspectives as themselves, as their worldview differs

in culture and context (Crethar & Winterowd, 2012), oftentimes in ways that are significant, but not readily apparent.

Identity of Counselor and Client

Atheism is a cultural term that is by definition in opposition to the dominant theist worldview, setting the existence of a god as the standard. In science, the null hypothesis represents the default position that the researcher attempts to reject in support of their proposed hypothesis. The burden of proof lies with the theories proponents to produce evidence which allows them to reject the null hypothesis. This stance contributes to some who dismiss the idea of a god, to also reject the atheist label since the term implies theism as the foundational position (Fitzgerald, 2000). Atheists would correctly argue that the null hypothesis is that no god exists and that the burden of proof lies with those who claim that God does exist.

What it feels like for an atheist living with the assumption that they are a theist may be clarified with an example. A person seen on a golf course is likely to be identified as a golfer, or if they are not a golfer, are expected to openly and willingly communicate their non-golfer status to others who mistakenly assume their golfer status because of their location. Outside of the context of being on the golf course, their non-golfer (a-golfer?) status is unlikely to be a part of their identity and is unlikely to be presumed by others without evidence to the contrary. In many parts of the United States, religious affiliation continues to be assumed, even outside of the contexts of places of worship, and may even extend to the counseling relationship.

If we imagine a counselor who identifies as White, straight, Democrat, female, Christian, Cisgender, and young; Each identified aspect of this identity would seem odd

to advertise. While it is not unusual to encounter counselors who identify as republican, they would unlikely identify as a "Democrat Counselor," or "Counselor who is a Democrat," when advertising their services. While each of these identities is important to be aware of, as highlighted in the MCSJCC, these identities should not be so central to the counselor that they are the way they do counseling. Religion should not hold any special privilege as an identity that can be used as a modifier for the counselor identity or title in professional settings. The following recommendations will continue the process of ensuring equitable access to clients who are atheist as well as theist.

Recommendations for Counselors

While individual counselors differ in their worldviews, and which may or may not include religion and spirituality, the profession does not have to be divided based on these factors. The profession is united in its commitment to providing a helpful relationship to the benefit of the client. This does mean that counselors should bracket their beliefs, and recognize in what ways their privileged or marginalized position impacts the relationship (Ratts et al., 2016). Counselors can strive to have an open dialogue about the roles that spiritual, religious, as well as NRNS worldviews should hold so we can ensure a unified professional identity. There are three specific recommendations provided below to address these current inequities. The counseling profession would benefit from (1) reaching a unified position about the role of religion in counseling, (2) ensure that access to counseling is equitable for folks with and without religious belief, and (3) counselor education programs ensure equity for religious and non-religious students and faculty. I also propose a checklist that can be used to ensure

equitable access for religious and non-religious folks to be used by practitioners, educators, and programs.

Unified Position on the Role of Religion in Counseling

Counselors will differ in their perspectives about religion and spirituality, and their recognition of theistic and religious privilege. Conservative or fundamental adherents to religion, in society and in the counseling field, argue that their worldview is under attack and that the secular position infringes on their rights. In spite of these differences, the profession does have an overwhelming consensus that the needs of the client are the primary responsibility of the clinician. Counselors can build on this common ground and utilize research to support a practice that balances the needs of religious, spiritual, as well as NRNS clients.

The imposition of values is clearly addressed in the ACA (2014) Code of Ethics (A.4.b), yet the ACA has a recognized division, ASERVIC, focused on the integration of religious values in counseling. ASERVIC did include non-belief in the competencies for addressing spiritual and religious issues in counseling, but the parenthetical enclosure seems to represent the lower status of this worldview. The competencies could be revised to be more inclusive of NRNS individuals, but since the current MCSJCC already include belief and worldview, the ASERVIC competencies may be seen as obsolete. However, the ASERVIC membership can serve as an important group to work towards building a unified vision of the role religion and spirituality should hold in practice, training, research, and advocacy. The World Psychiatric Association (WPA) could serve as a model for developing consensus about the role of religion and spirituality in the mental health field as they adopted a position statement its role in 2015 (Verhagen, 2017).

Counselors, and ultimately their clients, will benefit from deliberately working towards such a consensus, with the following recommendations serving as a starting point for the work to be done.

Equitable Access to Counseling for Non-Religious/Non-Spiritual Clients

Clients with religious beliefs that differ from those dominant in their geographic region will find it more difficult to locate a counselor that matches their belief. While outcome research has not shown significant differences due to a mismatch between gender, race, and ethnicity, there are differences in client preference that lead to implications for access (Blow, Timm, & Cox, 2008; Cabral & Smith, 2011).

The ACA website links to a counselor referral site (Psychology Today) which gives the option of finding a counselor by religious affiliation, but this does not include NRNS categories. The lack of this category has created referral sites that are specifically non-religious, which are more difficult to locate than the mainstream referral means. Sites focused on non-religious counseling may also be more anti-religious, which may not fit the client's needs or reflect their belief. They also require NRNS clients to use more cumbersome and less complete listings to find counselors committed to serving the need of this clientele.

Counselors must take care both as individual practitioners, as well as representatives of the profession, to be seen as inclusive in their service delivery. Clients should have the expectation that their counselors are able to refrain from value imposition, and counselors need to receive the training to be able to meet this expectation. Counselors who are fundamentalist religious practitioners may argue that they are being excluded from the profession, or that the standards of the profession are

limiting their ability to practice within their religious belief system. The professional standard, however, is set to prevent discriminatory practices toward clients. It is the counselor's ability to provide affirming services to all clients that are of concern, not their personally held beliefs as long as these do not interfere with their ability to practice ethically.

As identified earlier in this article, the advertisement of religious or non-religious affiliation can impact the counseling relationship as well as access to services. Until a consensus is reached about whether religious affiliation should be advertised, both religious and non-religious counselors should have the option to advertise this aspect of their worldview. Websites that are endorsed by professional organizations must be consistent in their practice of allowing the indication of the counselors religious or non-religious affiliation.

Equity in Counselor Education

The culture of counselor training programs will be influenced by the politics, values, and history of the institution in which they reside (Reisner, 2018). Counselor training programs are also in a position to impact the institution. With private institutions not under the same regulatory pressures as public colleges and universities, some counselor training programs in religious institutions require applicants or employees to sign faith statements, effectively screening out educators from differing religious traditions or non-religious worldviews. CACREP accredited programs should not be permitted to have hiring practices that specifically exclude counselor educators from backgrounds other than the religious tradition of the institution. ACA Code of Ethics F.11.a addresses faculty diversity, which should include a diversity of NRNS faculty

(American Counseling Association, 2014). While counseling programs within religious institutions may feel tied by their employers' policies, this is also clearly addressed in the ACA ethical code. D.1.g, indicating that counselors are in agreement of their employer's policies, and should rectify any conflicts. Discrimination by religious affiliation can certainly be seen as such violation of ethical codes that can be cited for action by counselors and counselor educators employed at these institutions. This is not an attack on the institution, but a critique on the policy of exclusion. Numerous religious institutions have adopted inclusionary practices which do not exlude individuals based on their religious beliefs, or other factors that historically excluded people from their institutions.

Education programs that have focused their attention on ensuring that future counselors do not impose values should also provide their students with training on providing counseling to clients with different religious and spiritual, as well as NRNS worldviews. Counselors should examine the impact of advertising their worldview, though it is important to recognize that Counselors who disclose their religious or non-religious worldview proactively do not have the benefit of understanding how this may impact the therapeutic alliance.

Guide for Non-Religious/Non-Spiritual Friendly Practice/Programs

- Website/advertisements do not include religious symbols; or advertisements are inclusive of a multitude of religious and non-religious symbols such as atheist or humanist symbols.

- Profiles do not identify religious affiliation; or profile is intentional of stating that counselors/program is welcoming to NRNS and religious/spiritual individuals.

- Counselors/educator/supervisor avoids wearing religious items or display religious symbols; or if religious items are worn, this is discussed to ascertain the impacts the relationship.

- Forms that inquire about religion spirituality include options to identify as non-religious, non-spiritual, atheist, humanist, freethinker; or objective assessment such as the NRNSS are used (Cragun et al., 2015).

- Individuals are not assumed to have a belief in god, even if they indicate/state that they attend religious rituals, or wear religious symbols.

- Stigma related to the rejection of belief in a god is accepted and acknowledged appropriately.

Research and Training on Religious Nones

More research is needed to ensure counselors have the necessary resources to Counselor educators have the difficult and rewarding task to facilitate the development of individuals who are highly skilled, follow evidence-based practice, and are authentic and ethical practitioners. Research has shown that for religious/spiritual clients the inclusion of religion and spirituality is appropriate (Sanders et al., 2015), though counseling research currently lacks inclusion of NRNS individuals. Researchers investigating the role of religion and spirituality should purposefully address NRNS, as well as focus research specifically on the needs of NRNS clients.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

</div>

The debate about the existence of a god will continue in the social sphere, but the insertion of god and religion into counseling risks splitting the profession. Clients and counselors will always have different worldviews and perspectives, even if only in the

differences inherent in the counselor/client relationship dynamic. To advertise a worldview as part of the counseling practice will place constraints on clients seeking services. To be a *professional* counselor is to be able to apply appropriate, theory-driven, evidenced-based interventions, even when our worldview does not match the clients, and to seek additional training and supervision in cases when that ability is challenged.

The risk faced by the profession by advertising religious' affiliation is to split counselors into religious and non-religious factions. Clients would be forced to select counselors based on matching religious belief, and hope they have a counselor in their geographic area that matches their worldview. The alternative, and what is advocated for in this article, is to continue in the commitment to provide counseling that is not religiously based but to work with the religious and spiritual, as well as NRNS resources, that match the clients' needs when appropriate.

References

Adelman, R. M., & Tsao, H.-s. (2016). Deep South demography: New immigrants and

　　racial hierarchies. *Sociological Spectrum, 36*(6), 337-358.

　　doi:10.1080/02732173.2016.1227283

American Counseling Association. (2014). ACA Code of Ethics.

　　https://www.counseling.org/resources/aca-code-of-ethics.pdf

Anspach, W., Coe, K., & Thurlow, C. (2007). The other closet?: Atheists, homosexuals

　　and the lateral appropriation of discursive capital. *Critical Discourse Studies,*

　　4(1), 95-119. doi:10.1080/17405900601149509

Association for Spiritual Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling. (2009). *Spiritual*

　　competencies: Competencies for addressing spiritual and religious issues in

　　counseling. Retrieved from http://www.aservic.org

Blanes, R. L., & Oustinova-Stjepanovic, G. (2015). Introduction: Godless people, doubt,

　　and atheism. *Social Analysis, 59*(2), 1-19. doi:10.3167/sa.2015.590201

Blow, A. J., Timm, T. M., & Cox, R. (2008). The role of the therapist in therapeutic

　　change: Does therapist gender matter? *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy,*

　　20(1), 66-86. doi: 10.1080/08952800801907150

Brewster, M. E., Robinson, M. A., Sandil, R., Esposito, J., & Geiger, E. (2014). Arrantly

　　absent: Atheism in psychological science from 2001 to 2012. *Counseling*

　　Psychologist, 42(5), 628-663. doi:10.1177/0011000014528051

Cabral, R. R., & Smith, T. B. (2011). Racial/Ethnic matching of clients and therapists in

　　mental health services: A meta-analytic review of preferences, perceptions, and

outcomes. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 58*(4), 537-554.

doi:10.1037/a0025266

The Cambridge dictionary of philosophy. (1999). (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, England.

Cashwell, C. S., Young, J. S., Fulton, C. L., Willis, B. T., Giordano, A., Daniel, L. W., . . . Welch, M. L. (2013). Clinical behaviors for addressing Religious/Spiritual issues: Do we practice what we preach? *Counseling & Values, 58*(1), 45-58. doi:10.1002/j.2161-007X.2013.00024.x

Corey, G. (2006). Integrating spirituality in counseling practice. *VISTAS ONLINE*, 117 - 119.

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2015). 2016 CACREP standards. Retrieved from http://www.cacrep.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/2016-Standards-with-citations.pdf

Cragun, R. T., Hammer, J. H., & Nielsen, M. (2015). The Nonreligious-Nonspiritual Scale (NRNSS): Measuring everyone from Atheists to Zionists. *Science, Religion and Culture, 2*(3), 36-53.

Crethar, H. C., Rivera, E. T., & Nash, S. (2008). In search of common threads: Linking multicultural, feminist, and social justice counseling Paradigms. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 86*(3), 269-278. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6678.2008.tb00509.x

Crethar, H. C., & Winterowd, C. L. (2012). Values and social justice in counseling. *Counseling & Values, 57*(1), 3-9. doi:10.1002/j.2161-007X.2012.00001.x

D'Andrea, L. M., & Sprenger, J. (2007). Atheism and nonspirituality as diversity issues in counseling. *Counseling & Values, 51*(2), 149-158.

Dennett, D. C. (2007). *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a natural phenomenon*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Essandoh, P. K. (1996). Multicultural counseling as the 'fourth force': A call to arms. *The Counseling Psychologist, 24*(1), 126-137. doi:10.1177/0011000096241008

Fitzgerald, T. (2000). *The ideology of religious studies*: New York ; Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2000.

Gervais, W. M. (2013). In Godlessness We Distrust: Using Social Psychology to Solve the Puzzle of Anti-atheist Prejudice. *Social & Personality Psychology Compass, 7*(6), 366-377. doi:10.1111/spc3.12035

Gervais, W. M., & Najle, M. B. (2017). How many atheists are there? doi:10.31234/osf.io/edzda

Gervais, W. M., Shariff, A. F., & Norenzayan, A. (2011). Do you believe in atheists? Distrust is central to anti-atheist prejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 101*(6), 1189-1206. doi:10.1037/a0025882

Grescock, J. (2001). No freedom from religion: The marginalization of atheists in American society, politics, and law. *Journal of Race, Religion, Gender and Class, 1*(2).

Helminiak, D. A. (2010). "Theistic psychology and psychotherapy": A theological and scientific critique. *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science, 45*(1), 47-74. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9744.2010.01058.x

Kosmin, B. A. (1990). *The National Survey of Religious Identification*. Retrieved from

http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2013/11/ARIS-1990-report1.pdf:

Kosmin, B. A., & Keysar, A. (2009). *American Religious Identification Survey 2008*.

Retrieved from Hartford, CT:

http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/ARIS_Report_2008.pdf

Lee, L. (2012). Research Note: Talking about a Revolution: Terminology for the New

Field of Non-religion Studies. *Journal of Contemporary Religion, 27*(1), 129-139.

doi:10.1080/13537903.2012.642742

Maher, B. (Producer). (2016, Nov 4, 2016). President Obama on Atheism *Real Time with*

Bill Maher. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCb3CaLpfmk

Martin, M. (2007). *The Cambridge companion to atheism*. New York, NY: Cambridge

University Press.

Miller, C. (2016). 'Spiritual but not Religious': Rethinking the legal definition of religion.

Virginia Law Review, 102, 833.

Nystul, M. S. (2016). *Introduction to Counseling* (5th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Pew Research Center. (2014). Religion & Public life project. from Pew Research Center

Ratts, M. J., Singh, A. A., Nassar-McMillan, S., Butler, S. K., & McCullough, J. R.

(2016). Multicultural and social justice counseling competencies: Guidelines for

the Counseling Profession. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and*

Development, 44(1), 28-48. doi:10.1002/jmcd.12035

Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard

University Press.

Rawls, J. (2001). *Justice as fairness: A restatement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Recovering from Religion. (2017). Secular Therapy Project. Retrieved from https://www.seculartherapy.org

Reisner, C. (2018). *The atheist identity in the higher education workplace.* (Doctoral Dissertation), Ball State University,

Russell, M. M. (1992). Entering great America: Reflections on race and the convergence of progressive legal theory and practice. *Hastings Law Journal, 43*, 749.

Sanders, P. W., Richards, P. S., McBride, J. A., Lea, T., Hardman, R. K., & Barnes, D. V. (2015). Processes and outcomes of theistic spiritually oriented psychotherapy: A practice-based evidence investigation. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice, 2*(3), 180-190. doi:10.1037/scp0000083

Sexton, T. L. (1999). *Evidence-Based Counseling: Implications for Counseling Practice, Preparation, and Professionalism. ERIC Digest*: Eric Clearinghouse on Counseling Student Services.

Silver, C. F., Coleman, T. J., Hood, R. W., & Holcombe, J. M. (2014). The six types of nonbelief: A qualitative and quantitative study of type and narrative. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 17*(10), 990-1001. doi:10.1080/13674676.2014.987743

Smith, J. M. (2010). Becoming an atheist in America: Constructing identity and meaning from the rejection of theism. *Sociology of Religion*. doi:10.1093/socrel/srq082

Solorzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2001). Critical race and LatCrit theory and method: Counter-storytelling—Chicana and Chicano graduate school experiences.

International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 14(4), 471-495. doi:10.1080/09518390110063365

Stewart-Sicking, J. A., Deal, P. J., & Fox, J. (2017). The ways paradigm: A transtheoretical model for integrating spirituality into counseling. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 95*(2), 234-241. doi:10.1002/jcad.12135

Vainio, O.-P., & Visala, A. (2015). Varieties of unbelief: a taxonomy of atheistic positions. *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie, 57*(4), 483-500. doi:10.1515/nzsth-2015-0024

Verhagen, P. J. (2017). Psychiatry and religion: Consensus reached! *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 20*(6), 516-527. doi:10.1080/13674676.2017.1334195

CHAPTER 3

THE EXPERIENCES ATHEISTS HAVE IN COUNSELING IN THE BIBLE BELT OF

THE UNITED STATES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

Abstract

This phenomenological inquiry describes the experience of non-religious, non-spiritual (NRNS) individuals seeking counseling, and living in the Bible Belt of the United States. Communities differ significantly across the United States in their religious and non-religious demographic, and in the south religious affiliation is often expected. NRNS clients may receive direct messages, or assume, that their counselors also hold the dominant religious worldview. Counselors may openly advertise their religious affiliation, or more subtly make clients aware of their religion through the inclusion of religious symbols or personal statements or inclusion of religious-based interventions.

The Experiences Atheists Have in Counseling in the Bible Belt of the United States: A

Phenomenological Inquiry

The experience of non-religious/non-spiritual (NRNS) individuals in the southern

United States (U.S.) is influenced by their departure from the dominant theistic and

Christian beliefs, especially in the deep south, known as the Bible Belt (D'Andrea &

Sprenger, 2007; Gervais, 2013). In the U.S., 70.6% of the population identified as

Christian in 2014, while 22.8% identify as religiously unaffiliated (Pew Research Center,

2014). Individual U.S. states differ significantly in the makeup of the religious

demographics, ranging from 54% of the population identifying as Christian in Vermont,

to 86% in Alabama (Pew Research Center, 2014). Religious affiliation is however not

synonymous with belief in god(s). Thirty-three percent of those who state that they are

unaffiliated, also state that they do not believe in god(s), and 82% of people in the U.S.

who state they do not believe in god are religiously unaffiliated, but 7% of those who do

not believe in God identify as Christian, and 10% identify with other religious groups

(Pew Research Center, 2014). While there has been some research to explore the impacts

of religion and spirituality on mental health, results that indicate a positive correlation

often neglect to consider the impact of stigma against minority groups, in this case,

NRNS individuals (Brewster, Sawyer, Eklund, Hammer, & Palamar, 2016).

Even as counselors take a position to avoid imposing personal values, they are not

exempt from the rules and attitudes of society that include norms and language which

influence thinking and experience (Jadaszewski, 2017). Counselors should, however, be

in the position to gain an understanding of the experience of the individuals with whom

they work, even if that experience is informed by a different worldview than their own

(Elliott, 2011). The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experience of non-religious and non-spiritual (NRNS) individuals seeking or receiving counseling in the southern U.S., specifically in the region known as the Bible Belt. Transferability of results is likely applicable to areas outside of the Bible Belt of the US, with similar experiences likely occurring by NRNS individuals living in communities where religious affiliation is the norm.

For the purposes of this study, religion is defined as a group of people who share beliefs regarding the supernatural and are members of an organization (Martin, 2007); and the word spiritual is defined in the supernatural sense of having belief in things which are "beyond or transcend the material universe and nature" (Cragun, Hammer, & Nielsen, 2015). In this article, the literature on atheists and NRNS individuals in the helping professions are reviewed, followed by a phenomenological study to describe NRNS individuals' experience in the Bible Belt of the U.S.

Literature Review

While the literature within the counseling field specifically related to atheists is lacking, the literature review will focus on reviewing how the terms are defined in the literature and how terms will be used in this research, demographic data, and the role of religion within the current cultural context.

Defining Atheism, Religion, and Agnosticism

Atheists, as one group that falls under the definition of NRNS, are a marginalized group in theistic US culture and have a different experience than those who hold theistic beliefs (Anspach, Coe, & Thurlow, 2007). Atheists and other NRNS individuals are mostly ignored in the literature (Brewster, 2016), even as the counseling profession has

labeled multiculturalism as the fourth force in counseling (Essandoh, 1996). To be atheist

means to reject a belief of the dominant theist worldview, but this is not an ideology in

itself (Gervais, 2013). Many who may fit the definition of atheist, as someone who rejects

the idea of the existence of god(s), dismiss the atheist label due to attached stigma

(Brewster, Robinson, Sandil, Esposito, & Geiger, 2014; Siner, 2011). The terms atheist,

as well as non-religious and non-spiritual, are used throughout this paper, and while these

are not synonymous terms, some overlap does exist. Non-religious is a broader term that

includes many atheists, but there are also those who follow a religious practice but do not

believe in god. There are also a significant number of individuals who reject the claim of

god(s) existence, or are unconvinced of the existence of a god, but would also reject the

atheist label.

Significant attention in research and practice is given to diversity in regard to

race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and difference between religious beliefs. Brewster

(2016) however, points out that atheism is a neglected topic, finding that at a 2014 large

convention of helping professionals, there were eighty presentations on religion, sixty

presentations on spirituality, and two on atheism, even though 10-20% of Americans

consider themselves non-religious. The growing number of atheists, as well as their

difficulty accessing counseling, is not lost in the popular media (Almeida, 2017). A

National Geographic article estimates that 25% of the American population consider

themselves "nones," exploring gender and ethnic differences between those who do not

identify with a religion (Bullard, 2016). The limited research that does exist highlights

similarities between the stigma experienced by the non-religious communities and other

marginalized groups (Anspach et al., 2007). Atheists are considered the least trustworthy

group in American culture (Gervais, 2014), with implications in the daily lived experience, and on the counseling relationship when only the client or therapist identifies as an atheist. Highlighting the experience by atheists, however, is in no way meant to elevate their experience of discrimination above other religious identities. It is important to remember that besides theist privilege, Christian privilege has resulted fore example in tolerance of the anti-Muslim sentiment and violence against the Sikh community post 9/11 (Singh, 2013), as well as the acceptance of discrimination of a variety of marginalized groups in numerous religious communities.

While the term atheist is often used to describe those who are not religious, significant variability exists within the group of people that do not have a belief in the existence of a god or gods. The term non-religious is not synonymous with atheist. Individuals, who identify as non-religious may have faith in the existence of a god but reject religious institutions. Others may not believe in god, yet attend religious services and be members of a church in order to conform to social norms and expectations, or because they value the community and, at least privately, identify as both religious and atheist (Smith, 2010). An example that highlights the challenge of rejecting theism is The Clergy Project (clergyproject.org), a community created for de-converted members of the clergy profession, many of which still actively engage in the vocational practice while privately having rejected a belief in the supernatural.

The label of atheist comes with a significant negative connotation in U.S. culture, resulting in many who do not believe in the existence of a god, to still reject the label of atheist (Anspach et al., 2007). Numerous labels exist to describe various non-religious and non-spiritual identities, many of which are unfamiliar outside of the non-believer

community. The most common terms may be atheist and agnostic, with atheism considered to be on the opposite end of theistic belief, and agnostic being mistakenly seen as a middle position with some social acceptance of a period of doubt. However, the term atheist by definition refers to the absence of the belief in god or deities, and the term agnostic is referring to whether something, in this case, the existence of a deity, is knowable. Atheists and theists may, therefore, identify as gnostic or agnostic. One qualitative study addressing atheist types suggested six categories of atheists ranging from passive non-theists to assertive anti-theists (Silver, 2014).

Demographic Information of Non-Religious/Non-Spiritual Folks

In 2014, 3.1% of the US population identified as atheists, 4.0% identified as agnostic, and 22.8% identified as religiously unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, 2014). Unaffiliated does not mean not believing in god, though 33% of the unaffiliated state that they do not believe in god. Religious affiliation is also not synonymous with belief in god, with numerous individuals with various religious affiliations stating that they do not believe in god, though they do not identify as atheist. While many individuals who do not believe in god(s) do not identify as atheist, in this article the term will refer to all who do not believe in god, even if individuals do not claim certainty that no god(s) exist. Some consideration was given to whether atheist should be capitalized in this article to give this position equal standing to the religious groups. Since atheism is a rejection of others ideology, not an ideology in itself and will include individuals who may not choose to use this label, atheism will not be capitalized.

Atheists are considered an oppressed or marginalized group in the U.S. (Grescock, 2001). Christian privilege includes the presumption that others are also

Christian. The assumption is exacerbated when assumed that the other person is also from the U.S., or "looks" Christian, that is that they appear to be of a group that traditionally would be seen as Christian in the specific cultural environment. Atheists, like other oppressed groups, are expected to be silent about their oppression (Freire, 1970, 2000), and previous research suggests that a significant portion of atheists keep this part of their identity hidden (Smith, 2010). Research on atheism and counseling has been scarce (Brewster et al., 2014; D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007), and virtually no research exists on counselors who identify as atheist. The atheist research that does exist has used language such as "coming out," and "closeted," to describe atheists and other NRNS individuals, emphasizing the similarities to the oppression and marginalization experienced by LGBTQ communities (Harrington, Harbert, Jacob, & Saiid, 2014). A study by Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan (2011) showed that atheists are the least trusted group in the U.S., and are seen as immoral. Scholars and philosophers have debated whether religion is a requirement for morality (Lukes, 2012), with arguments on both sides, Nietzsche (1950) famously proclaiming that God is dead, or that the need for the existence of god(s) for morality is no longer required, and a hindrance to morality. However, whether religion or a god is a requirement for morality is a debate that is separate from challenging inequity and oppression a group of people based on their non-belief in the supernatural.

Religionormativity and Its Impact in Counseling Atheists

The idea of Christian privilege includes the assumption that others are also Christian, and that there is a preference for others being Christian (Blumenfeld & Jaekel, 2012), the term *Christionormativity* may best describe this social state. Religious

privilege expands this idea and assumes that others are religious, and theist privilege presumes that others believe in the existence of gods. This assumption that others are religious is described by Parmaksız (2018) as Religionormativity and again could be modified to describe the assumption that others believe in a god as theonormativity (Stedman, 2012). While individuals' identities vary in relationship to the dominant religious and theistic narrative, a qualitative phenomenological study to describe the experience of those not conforming to Christian, religious, and theistic norms will validate the experience of those who are in this spectrum, and help clinicians work with individuals that are religious "nones."

The privileged or marginalized position of the therapist may be something that is explicitly communicated through advertisement or discussion of the counselors' religious affiliation, or implicitly communicated to the client through the display of religious symbols or subtle disclosure of participation in religious practice. Magaldi and Trub (2016) have investigated self-disclosure of Spiritual/Religious/Non-Religious self-disclosure and found that the therapists' expectation of the impact on therapeutic alliance guided the decision about disclosure. In their study, the self-disclosure was an informed decision made by the therapist, rather than a preemptive disclosure through advertisement of religious affiliation.

Sociopolitical Context of the Current Study

Because of the pervasiveness of religion in the U.S., participants in a study on atheism may be skeptical of the researchers' motivations and curious about the interviewers' positionality. The Bible-Belt is only a loosely defined region in the southeast of the US, but this region has the most religious and Christian communities

including the most Bible-minded cities (Barna, 2017). Participants may experience

anxiety about the researchers' motivations and be hesitant about participating to avoid

further stigmatization. Participants in research on NRNS that identify as atheist are likely

to feel marginalized in regard to their non-belief. NRNS individuals may have

experienced stigmatization in educational, occupational and social environments, as well

as emotional pain from rejection from their families of origin if not raised in a secular

family. When selecting participants, individuals were sought who also identify with other

marginalized groups that are subject to stigma and discrimination, further compounding

the impact of stigma.

The research questions this study aimed to address are:

1. What is the experience of individuals who are NRNS living in the Bible Belt
   of the U.S. when seeking counseling?

2. What is the experience of individuals who are NRNS living in the Bible Belt
   of the U.S. in their daily lives?

Method

As a counselor whose identity includes being an atheist, and has grown up in

different cultures, I am interested in exploring atheist identity in the context of culture.

Only minimal exploration of atheist and non-religious identity development has occurred

in the social sciences, and mostly neglected in the field of counseling (D'Andrea &

Sprenger, 2007).

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

To help describe the experience of those who do not identify with religion, this

research used an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) informed by Personal

Construct Theory (PCT) (Kelly, 1955). The aim of the study was to describe the experience of NRNS individuals who live in the Bible Belt of the U.S. The research questions aim to describe the experience by individuals in a group and therefore are best answered using qualitative methods. Phenomenology is the most appropriate research method when attempting to capture the experience, as it appears to the consciousness of the individual (Hays & Singh, 2012). Analysis within the IPA method was informed by Giddens's (1984) Structurationist theory within the critical tradition to guide the research and helped to describe the experience of the research participants in the context of societal structures (Prasad, 2005).

Terminology. The definition of atheism is at its root one of opposition to theism, literally meaning not, or without, god. Individuals ascribing to this label will have their own language and constructs related to the term and may have different levels of emphasis on their opposition to, the existence of a supernatural being or beings, organized religion, or spirituality. Others may not use the term atheist to describe themselves because they reject the idea of being defined by what they are not, preferring terms such as freethinkers, brights, rationalist, naturalist, or humanist (Smith, 2010). Agnosticism refers to the belief that the existence of a god cannot be known. Although the subtleties of the individual definitions of the terms used by persons not ascribing to religion are outside of the scope of this article, it is important to note that the researcher continues to struggle with identifying with a specific label. Atheist defines me by what I am not, a believer in the existence of a god, but terms such as freethinker imply what others are not. The post-modern traditions go beyond having respect for diversity but claim that freedom cannot exist unless different ways of knowing are embraced (Cohoon,

2010). Out of lack of better terminology, NRNS is used to refer to individuals that ascribe to any of the previous labels, or who chose not to use one of the labels for themselves but identify that they do not believe in any gods.

Theory. Structurationist Theory supports the understanding of non-religious identity in contrast to societal norms and power structures (Giddens, 1984; Prasad, 2005). Utilizing this theory acknowledges the reality of the power structures that impact the experience of the individual and will help inform the researcher with their identification. Personal Construct Theory (PCT) informs the awareness about the internal processes of the model, relying on the theories corollaries to understand the participant's processes (Kelly, 1955).

Research Team

The researcher is a white, straight, cisgender male who identifies as atheist, and is pursuing a doctoral degree in counselor education. As an individual who benefits from privilege in most areas of my life, my atheism is unique in that it is one part of my identity that the researcher has to be more aware of in certain social and professional situations. Yet, the privilege as a white male also offers a significant protective barrier. The aim of this study is to describe the experience of atheists, but also ensure that other significant areas of oppression in our society are not overshadowed or minimized. To address the trustworthiness of the study, analysis of the data included individuals from differing gender, ethnic, and religious background to review the interview protocol, coding, and triangulation. Four individuals were part of the research team; two were religious, one identifies as Christian, one as Hindu. Two individuals were non-religious, one identified as an atheist, one as agnostic.

Procedure and Participants

This study sampled from adults who self-identify as NRNS and live in the southeast of the U.S. Stratified purposeful sampling techniques were utilized to ensure a sample that includes ethnic, gender, and cultural diversity since atheists are more likely to be white, male, and have a college education (Lugo, 2012). Potential participants were reached through recruitment on social media groups, area atheist organizations and through snowball sampling to identify additional participants. Participants meeting the previous criteria were asked to complete the Nonreligious-Nonspiritual Scale (NRNSS) (Cragun et al., 2015). There were twenty-three individuals who completed the pre-screening survey, fifteen individuals were contacted to schedule interviews, and ten individuals responded and participated in interviews.

Potential participants could contact the researcher by phone, email, or in-person, instructions for contacting the researcher were outlined in a description posted in online settings. Potential participants who identified that they meet the research criteria were directed to complete the NSNRSS via Qualtrix which also was used to collect demographic information. Participants were contacted by their preferred method, either phone or email, and were informed by this means if they were selected to participate in the study. An interview was scheduled in a location agreed upon between the researcher and participant that allowed for sufficient privacy for the interview.

Participants in this study were asked to share experiences about a time in their life that they may have found difficult since they are asked to share a time when they sought counseling. Past research has highlighted ways that atheists have felt discriminated and rejected by others including their families. Participants also described feeling empowered

by sharing their personal experience. Before engaging in the interviews, participants were informed of these potential risks and benefits, and were made aware that they may discontinue the interview at any time. Participants who may be experiencing distress would receive follow-up resources if needed, though none reported experiencing distress, but described the experience as enjoyable or cathartic. This study received approval from the institutional review board of the University of Georgia.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection occurred through individual interviews, using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A) to allow for more of the participants' voice than a structured interview would allow (Hays & Singh, 2012). The use of field notes helped document additional pertinent information observed by the researcher. Interviews were initially recorded, then transcribed. The researcher engaged in reflexivity through journaling exercises throughout the data collection and coding process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

After the completion of interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed and read by the researcher. The analysis utilized the IPA methodology, and initially, transcripts were read, and notes were made on individual transcripts. After this process emerging themes were identified using an open coding process. After the initial identification of themes, the researcher clustered identified themes into clusters and developed a list of themes and subthemes, with short descriptions of each item. The research team was assigned specific themes with accompanying subthemes to review transcripts to identify participant statements that fit the specific theme. These were then coded by the primary researcher into the qualitative research analysis software NVivo,

and any differences in the interpretation of code appropriateness were discussed with the research team until consensus was reached.

A journal of the experience and reactions throughout the data collection and analysis process was kept. The transcripts for each participant was read with each expression relevant to the experience of being non-religious or atheist listed and placed into preliminary groups. Expressions were reduced to limit these to statements that include moments of the experience, which are necessary and sufficient to understand the experience of the individual and phenomenon and were able to be abstracted and labeled.

The remaining invariant constituents were clustered into themes and validated through comparison to the participants' full transcript. Non-compatible or inexplicit invariant constituents were eliminated. The remaining validated invariant constituents and themes are used to create an individual textual description of their experience of non-religious identity in relation to the dominant theistic society, as well as their experience of seeking counseling in the Bible Belt. The individual textual description were then utilized to create a structural description utilizing imaginative variation and informed by Giddens (1984) structuration theory described earlier.

Implications for Research

Atheist or NRNS individuals experience has not been examined thoroughly by the social sciences, let alone the counseling profession. Future research may be informed by this phenomenological study that provides educators, researchers, and practitioners insight into the experience of clients who identify as NRNS. The focus of this research was to describe NRNS experience in relationship to the dominant Christian beliefs in U.S. culture, thereby having some implications for various religious individuals who do

not identify as Christians. Clients who identify as religious who want to explore their religion or doubts with a counselor will also be impacted by the assumption of theism and gnostic certainty. The implication for research is that the relationship of the perceived and actual religiosity of both client and counselor will likely have an impact on the counseling relationship, which must be considered when engaging in counseling research and practice.

Critical Theory Research

Since PCT and CT was integrated into this phenomenology, the following provides an outline of the research process in the five recommended steps of critical theory research (Prasad, 2005).

Interpretive. In the interpretive step, the experiences of participants were gathered through interviews. The interview protocol as seen in Appendix A includes the constructivist method of laddering to gain an understanding of the individual's constructs related to non-religion. This process was informed by the ontology and epistemology of PCT and CT. To reduce distortions, the researcher engaged in triangulation, including and comparing the phenomenological perspectives of other sources (Caputi, Viney, Walker, & Crittenden, 2012).

Understanding Sociocultural Structures. The second step included an evaluation of socio-cultural structures that impact the studied phenomenon. In PCT terms, I looked at the commonality corollary and identified the possible ways that sociocultural structures have impacted different individuals' similar constructions about NRNS. CTs' emphasis is on identifying the historical, social, and cultural contexts that have led to the similarities and differences in these constructions. The semi-structured

interview protocol included a laddering section (Caputi et al., 2012), and constructs related to the experience of religion could be compared between participants.

Ideology-Critique. This step involved a critique of the sociocultural structures and identifying internal inconsistencies. The PCT influence on this step includes looking at the fragmentation corollary and identifies how sociocultural structural inconsistencies impact the development of incompatible personal constructs.

Awareness. The results of research are shared to empower individuals to enact personal or social change. The social corollary, which also impacts the understanding by the researcher, is now relevant to empower agents to play a role in the constructs of others. Participants and other interested parties remained informed of the process and progress of the research, providing empowerment to provide input and critique of the process and outcomes.

Praxis/Rhetoric. The phenomenology will help to share the experiences of those who identify as NRNS. Knowledge gained through the process of identifying similarities in constructs, and engaging in a critical analysis of sociocultural structures, will be shared in formats that are accessible to both researchers, counselors, and social justice advocates.

The combination of PCT and CT combines to serve as a basis for understanding the experience of individuals like myself who identify as NRNS. While the focus of CT is the analysis of power structures in social and cultural contexts, the addition of PCT will help keep the researcher informed about the influence of his construct system, its impact on the participants, as well as the research. The researcher's position as an atheist aided in

identifying the common and differential experiences, adding depth and richness to the phenomenological study.

Personal Construct Theory/Structurationist Theory

Kelly (1955) developed personal Construct Theory (PCT) with distinctive features setting it apart from psychoanalysis and behaviorism, which dominated the field at the time of its creation. It is also known as Personal Construct Psychology as it was developed as a complete psychology since it goes beyond a technical theory, but a complete understanding of how individuals function (Fransella, 1995). Even though considered a post-modern approach, Kelly (1955) placed heavy emphasis on testable hypotheses and validity, concepts tied more closely to rationalism. While this departure from the research tradition may seem contradictory to post-modernism, it is important to understand how mathematical systems influenced Kelly in his development of the theory. Contemporary applications of PCT allow for a systemic analysis of individuals constructs while maintaining a deep appreciation for the individuals' experience.

A key practice of the critical tradition is uncovering the hegemony of societies institutional practices (Prasad, 2005). Religious and Christian privilege in the culture of the U.S. has been the focus of previous research and is well documented (Riswold, 2015). Those who identify as an atheist may seek emancipation from societies expectation of religion, making critical theory well suited for research on non-religion. Being concerned with independence and freedom from oppression will help identify the force that motivates to reassess specific constructs. Kelly (1955, p. 51) did not limit constructs to the linguistic phenomena and was clear that ways of knowing cannot always be expressed through verbal language.

Epistemology

Foundationally PCT operates from constructive alternativism, Kelly (1955) stated that individuals are better understood in their historical context, rather than attempting to understand them from a fleeting moment in time. In addition to his fundamental postulate which states that "a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events," Kelly (1955) describes eleven fundamental corollaries that serve as the basis for his proposed psychology that describe the process of knowing. The system includes dichotomous constructs, where similarities in experience will yield similar constructions, and differences in experience yield unique constructs. Individuals use constructs organized in a hierarchical system to predict events based on the success of their previous application. Constructs are limited in applicability, although they include a large but finite number of constructions to choose from which to predict events. A person is left with selecting the construct they predict will have the best chance of expanding and defining their construct system. As constructs are applied, they are evaluated and modified, but the extent to which modification is allowed differs between individuals. Construct subsystems may be incompatible with each other. The interaction between individuals occurs when individuals construct the construction process of the other person.

The postulates, along with the corollaries, define the process of knowing dependent on the constructs used in perception, impacting the research process. The observer in the process of receiving information from the participant is applying their constructs to the experience and thereby modifies the constructed reality of the

participants. Critical Theory (CT) also opposes objective knowledge and ascertains that culture and power structures influence the process of knowing (Prasad, 2005).

Ontology

While PCT scholars differ slightly in their particular ontology, such as whether an independent reality exists outside of the observer, this study will be conducted out of epistemological constructivism. Within this approach, it is understood that while an independent reality exists outside of the observer, any observer cannot know this independent reality. Individual observers can only know if their conceptualizations of reality, or constructs, are capable of predicting useful outcomes. In relation to this research, it becomes necessary that individuals are free to reconstruct reality when it is found that their current constructs are no longer providing reliable outcomes. For counseling practice and research, this also proves to be a major factor as it allows the counselor to remain in a position where their constructed reality is not any closer to an independent reality than the reality of their client or research participant.

In CT, like in PCT, reality is constructed and is understood through the lens of history, and by understanding current and past power structures (Hays & Singh, 2012). While this ontology aligns with the nature of reality within PCT, it places increased emphasis on the influence of social structures in understanding individuals and cultures. PCT focuses on the interpretation by the individual, which is affected by power structures but does not specifically name these or encourage the researcher to identify them. One question that this research aims to address is how the structures, or rules and customs, within our society impact those individuals who do not ascribe to the basis from which this structure originates.

Rhetoric

In research based on the previously described positions in the epistemology and ontology of PCT and CT, the researcher must understand that sharing results can only occur within the context of the individuals' experience. This phenomenological inquiry of NRNS experience is especially focused on the commonality corollary. It aims to understand in which ways constructs are similar among the participants of the study as influenced by the social and cultural context of the time as experienced by these individuals. A detailed outline of the rhetoric in the five steps of research-based in critical theory was discussed in an earlier section describing critical theory research.

Axiology

As a researcher, I will bring my experiences and constructs to the process of the study, which will change by engaging in the research process (Patton, 2015). Being cognizant of the sociality corollary, I will share my positionality as part of sharing the results of the study. Contained in PCT's organizational corollary, developmental models indicate a change in the construction of reality as people move between phases. The experience corollary shows that when constructs are no longer useful, and the individual becomes aware of this, new sets of constructs are tested, and adapted if proven useful. This research will attempt to describe the ways that social constructs related to belief in the existence of the supernatural, in particular, religion, is experienced by people who identify as NRNS.

Researcher Subjectivity

As a white, cisgender, straight, young, able-bodied, male, I am a person that is a position of privilege in most areas of my life, but when it comes to being an "out" atheist,

I experience anxiety, even though rationally I am very comfortable with being an atheist. When seeking counseling resources for referral and personal use in rural Georgia, I predominantly found practitioners who advertised their Christian religious affiliation and often felt uncomfortable seeking services or referring individuals. It is important to note the distinction between counselors who are religious, and those who advertise their religious affiliation. I have no discomfort with counselors who are religious, but I am skeptical of counselors who find it important to advertise their religious affiliation.

Intersections of oppression create barriers that are even more powerful to obstruct freedom of thought and expression. As a practitioner informed by constructivist ontology, I value others experiences and aim to understand people within their worldview. I was born into a family with a religious tradition, and as a previous believer understand having a spiritual belief. I also am very frustrated when there is intentional damage to others based on different belief systems and so do not condone actions that are physically or emotionally hurtful to others. Theists and atheist should be able to interact and coexist peacefully with individuals able to openly express their beliefs, and without fear of marginalization. Unfortunately, religion has a long history of justifying intolerance, violence, and war that cannot be ignored. To conduct research about atheists will likely lead others to assume, even if not explicitly stated, that I am an atheist, a word that carries a significant amount of stigma and misinterpretation.

The exploration of atheism is specifically challenging in the southern U.S. where the label of atheist places me in a position of marginalization. As a white cisgender male, I am usually in a position of power which allows me to explore this area of my identity while holding on to much privilege. I also feel like I am in a position where I have

privilege to lose, and this is scary. As a Ph.D. Student seeking an academic position after graduation, the exploration of religion and atheism, especially with a critical lens about the role that religion plays, may impact how I am viewed by search committees for the positions that I seek. I thereby experience the dilemma of keeping a privileged position or risk losing privilege to stand up in an area where oppression and marginalization exists. My morality, however, prevents my silence.

Trustworthiness

An important aspect of engaging in qualitative research is to establish credibility, or what Lincoln and Guba (1985) described as "believability" (Hays & Singh, 2012). To ensure trustworthiness of this study, several strategies will be utilized. To address transferability, descriptions of the individuals who are participating in the study, to give the reader sufficient information about the person who is sharing their experience without sacrificing confidentiality will be included (Hays & Singh, 2012). During the data gathering process, the researcher will utilize reflexive journaling and field notes that also may be included in the data analysis. Participants will be asked to clarify responses and understanding of the researcher during the interview, review transcripts of the interview, as well as verify that the themes identified by the researcher during the data analysis represent the experiences of the participant.

Prior to engaging in data collection the researcher has engaged activities with NRNS groups, including the Secular Student Alliance, several social media groups related to secular, atheist, and humanist worldviews, as well as attending events such as the Secular Saturday Conference to start a prolonged engagement. The researcher has started a process of persistent observation through the prolonged engagement but will

also have two separate interview times to allow for specific follow up with the participant. Utilizing sampling techniques, or triangulation of data sources will ensure diverse participant participation within the studied phenomenon. While data was only collected by the primary investigator in the study, data analysis included a separate team from diverse backgrounds and intentionally include diversity in religious belief. Ultimately the phenomenology will provide a thick description of the participants' experience to help readers gain a deeper understanding of the experience of living in the Bible Belt as an NRNS individual.

Findings

The experience, and expectation, of counseling, is influenced by the lived experiences prior to engaging in the counseling experiences in the various spheres of experiences of the individual. The research questions are not intended to imply that a person's experience of counseling and their daily lived experiences can be separated. In the Bible Belt, participants' daily lived experiences inform their expectation of their counseling experience. Each of the participants discussed the consequences of disclosing their beliefs and times when they openly shared their non-religious identity, and times when they elected to hide this part of their identity. Each of these decisions guided by their expectation of the consequence of their actions.

Main Themes

I identified six overarching themes in the participant data related to my research questions: (1) experience of RS and NRNS individuals, (2) experienced feelings, (3) context of the experience, (4) consequences of disclosing NRNS worldview, (5) managing identity, and (6) experience of counseling. The themes have been organized to

show a progression from how experiences in spheres outside of counseling influence the

expectation and identity management that may be applied in the counseling setting. A

graphic overview that represents the findings for the participants in this study are shown

in *Figure 1*. While the counseling related themes are addressed at the end specifically,

earlier themes will also include counseling experiences as they apply to those themes.

The first theme discussed below focuses on the experience of RS and NRNS individuals.

While the research question separated these contexts, the theme applies to experiences in

the daily life of NRNS folks, but also to the counseling context.

Experience with Religious/Spiritual and Non-Religious/Non-Spiritual Folks

NRNS folks are informed by their experiences with folks who may be perceived

as RS and NRNS. There are certain actions or behaviors that are associated with

individuals belonging to each of these identities and are based on experience. Because

this study focuses on the experience of NRNS individuals within the context of a

geographic region predominated by folks with RS values, this was a major theme

described by participants. The main theme identified in the participant data was *The*

experiences of RS and NRNS individuals, within this theme the following subthemes were

identified: (a) Experiences with NRNS folks, (b) Experience with RS folks, and (c) Not

knowing the RS or NRNS identity.

Experience with Religious/Spiritual folks. Interactions with RS individuals

included both positive and negative experiences, although interactions with RS

individuals were often associated with feeling judged. In Rhonda's interaction with her

parents, she states that their disagreements are blamed on her lack of theistic belief:

There's always the, like the undertone of like, "Hey, if you went to church and you start believing in God and you start following God, then we wouldn't be arguing about this" or, "I guess you would be on the right path and we wouldn't be having this conversation" because I guess they see how I live my life maybe or with decisions I'm making as like if God was in my life I wouldn't be making these decisions. So I guess they don't agree, so it's just like a constant fighting and they think if I go to church, you know, I'll be, I guess "corrected in my ways" if you want to put it that way.

Natalie describes her experience with RS folks in general:

If all I were to say is "I'm and atheist" like just the, the conflict there. Um, so yeah, this sort of unspoken like unspoken rule, that'd be that atheists are somehow less than moral than people who are religious. That we somehow feel like we don't have to be kind to each other or you know, because that's something that's sort of inherent to religion. That's why people are good to each other is because God says you should be good to each other. That's, that's the only thing I can think of and this sort of, there is this whole idea that, you know, people wouldn't want me if they know I'm an atheist in certain positions, like they wouldn't, they might not want me to be their child's teacher. They might not want me, they might not want to send their kid over to play with my niece, you know, just things like that where people may, you know, think I'm somehow bad because of that.

Charlie also talks about how he expected his interaction with RS folks to go:

When I first understood that I was atheist, when I first started to learn about it and things like that, and uh, I decided that that was, that was who I was, and um, I was

pretty hesitant about telling people and, and filling paperwork out that way, just

because I am, yeah, I mean, it's the Bible belt and I understand how people view,

um, nonbelievers.

Rhonda discusses how religion and her friendships are maintained:

I mean most of my friends either like don't know that I don't go to church just

because I guess something that's never been brought up because that's not

something we talk about. Just hanging out, talking about church, like that's just

not something that happens, but I definitely will actually. A few of my friends do

know that I'm not going to church, because I don't feel comfortable, but never

once has somebody been like, "Hey, that's not right. You should definitely go to

church." So I think I definitely have people around me that are more accepting…

The experiences with RS folks were often associated with feeling rejected,

judged, and threatened. Participants also described feeling annoyed, angry, and frustrated

about their interactions with RS folks. Whether individuals were open about being NRNS

would impact the interaction or expected interaction with RS folks, and will be described

later when looking at the identity management strategies by NRNS folks.

Experience with Non-Religious/Non-Spiritual folks. Participants described

their experiences when interacting or finding others that were also NRNS. As Alicia

described finding a group of NRNS folks after many years of feeling more isolated,

others discussed how they felt in contexts how they felt when encountering other NRNS

individuals. Jorge discusses subtle ways in how he identifies possible NRNS individuals:

Got to know one other guy that was an atheist also because you just find out over

time, like when everybody has the company dinner and everybody puts their head

down, you kind of just look around and see who else is not putting their head
down.

Natalie talks about a counselor who shared that he was also atheist:

Chuck, his wife was the founder of the counseling center. She was also a therapist
there and it was called alternative counseling center and they sort of had the
reputation in Nashville that they saw sort of people that were having the issues
that you might be looking into, like they weren't accepted because whatever
reason they like homosexual transgender atheists perhaps like they did a, they did,
um, counseling groups for like juvenile sex offenders. Like you can imagine how
well received those kids are. So they did a lot of sort of that outcast kind of people
who they, you know, they openly talked about that as their mission, everything.
So I saw him there and I told him I was an atheist and he, we commiserated about
that. Like he was open about his atheism.

Natalie describes how her relationship with other atheists is different:

Like he and I are both atheists. So there's like a, there's a common bond that we
have and he can understand me in ways that someone who's not an atheist can
because he's not an atheist camp because he sort of, that we share that worldview,
that, you know, things that atheists have in common, like they don't have in
common with religious people.

NRNS folks with others that also are NRNS are often accompanied by different
feelings when compared to the interactions with folks they perceive as RS. The feeling
most commonly identified with NRNS interactions was accepted.

Context of the Experience

The context of the experience matters and individuals may modify their

expectation, or utilize different constructs, as the context of the experience is modulated.

Individuals described ways of code-switching, especially when it came to work settings,

but also when interacting in other contexts. On the other hand, the constructs in one

setting may be applied to others, and especially when in novel situations, such as first-

time counseling experiences, constructs that were used in other contexts may be utilized

until disconfirmed. The various contexts that were coded in the transcripts can be seen at

the top of *Figure 1*. Under the main theme *Context of the experience*, a number of

subthemes were identified: (a) Family, (b) Society, (c) Religious Context, (d) Higher

education, (e) Work, (f) Friends, (g) Partner, (h) View of Self, (i) Counseling.
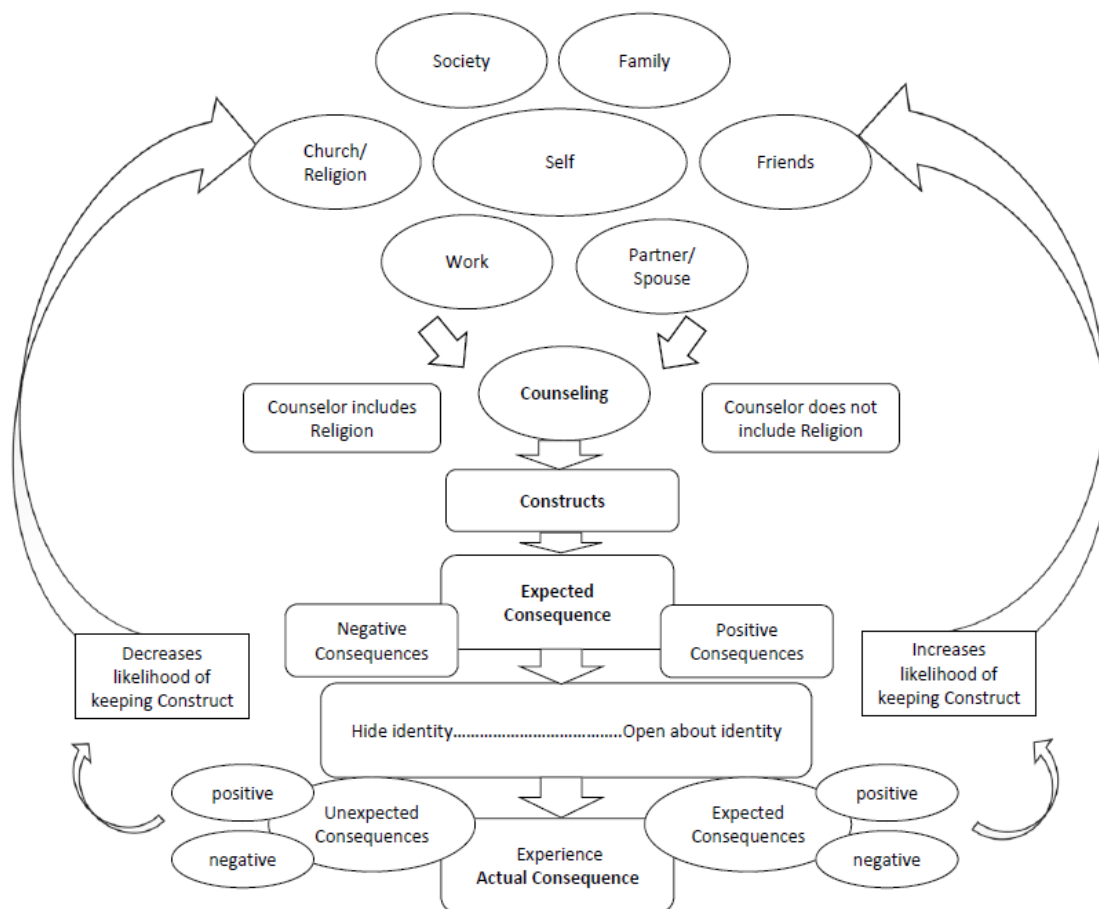
Figure 1. Relationships of context, counseling, construct, and experience for atheists in the Bible Belt

Experiences in the Family context. Participants discussed their experiences in the family context, and this included parents, siblings, partners, and cousins. The religious beliefs of the family most often inform the individual's religious belief, but for NRNS folks, this can differ from their family of origin. Alicia discussed the importance of family, "Family, Society. Those are the things that really mattered to me. My family first, community second and then out to the broader world." She also discussed how her values were different than those of her father:

There have been positive and negative aspects to that because my father died

recently. We were estranged for many years because he, he put religion over his

family. Anything the church ask him. He's right there. Family, you take a backseat

to it. Needless to say, it did not sit well with me. Once I got older and started

realizing what was going on and this was not the way things had to be until the

date. Literally to the day he died, he was on my case about you got to come to

Jesus. You got to come to Jesus. You know you're going to hell if you don't come

to Jesus, blah, blah blah. So that put a big strain on us. Even though I tried to

reconcile with him in adulthood and say, Dad, I'm an atheist. Um, you know, and

realize you're not, but if we're going to have any kind of relationship, you've got

to realize this is who I am. You know, any of you can, if you can deal with that, if

you can deal with my being atheist, I can deal with your being religious and for a

while that seemed to work, but as he got older, I think it started bugging him that

he had a daughter who wouldn't come in in line. My other two sisters aren't

particularly religious, but they play act better.

Charlie also describes how his relationship with his brother is impacted by his

NRNS worldview:

I can feel isolated at times. Um, even, even, even my brother. I mean, I, I've

always kind of, it's pretty surprising because this past year, sometime this past

year I were texting back and forth and I mentioned something about going to a, an

SSA meeting. He's like, what is that? I told them secular student alliance. It's a

non-religious, um, club on campus and uh, he was, I could tell that he didn't know

what to do with that. He, he was. And he asked me, he was like, you don't believe

in God? I was like, no. I was really surprised that he didn't have, he hadn't already

known that, but you know,

Charlie goes on to describe that it is not only his atheism that was difficult to

discuss with his brother, but that this expanded to being less authentic in other areas. "I

realized even then that, it could be hard to even talk to my brother about things like that

or things that I'm going through."

James described feeling rejected from his family:

Uh, the biggest one is a, [pause] my family is kind of rejected, has kind of

rejected me, and I have anger towards religion because of that. And it's more like

anger of simple thinking, and hypocrisy as far as you know, um, lifestyles.

Hypocrisy of lifestyles.

James describes being unsure of how much of the rejection results from religion:

I mean, but their whole culture is it, it's like this conservative Bible belt culture,

let's cheer for the Dawgs on Saturday, you know, and it's like. I'm, I don't fit in

with all with all that. So that's part of the time when, you know, it's, I don't say it's

100 percent religious thing, but um, but yeah, that's just, I'm just very separated,

you know, I'm not asking, I'm not included very often except for, you know, like

Thanksgiving and Christmas. I'll come to that kind of thing and stuff. So it's just.

Yeah. But, uh, I think more may be more than just straight up religion. It's just a

different way of thinking in general.

Rhonda also describes how she thinks that religion is a factor in her relationship

with her parents:

But before I stopped going to church, my relationship with my parents was definitely, definitely better than it is now. Like we don't talk as much,… we fight more, and even if it's not about church, I can always kind of tell that like it's because I'm not doing what they want. I'm not going to church on Sunday, not going to church on Wednesday night.

Rhonda explains this conflict this way:

There's always the, like the undertone of like, "Hey, if you went to church and you start believing in God and you start following God, then we wouldn't be arguing about this" or, I guess you would be on the right path and we wouldn't be having this conversation because I guess they see how I live my life maybe or with decisions I'm making as like if God was in my life I wouldn't be making these decisions. So I guess they don't agree, so it's just like a constant fighting and they think if I go to church, you know, I'll be, I guess "corrected in my ways" if you want to put it that way.

Tyler discusses the relationship between religion and being rejected by his brother for being gay. "It'll always be a thing. I'll always be the gay, older brother and that that's a big problem for him and his worldview."

Families will vary in their acceptance or appreciation of the NRNS worldview and could serve as protective factors if support exists. Often families were a source of major rejection, and other conflicts were at times attributed to the difference of RS belief between the individual and their family.

Experiences in Society. Society included a variety of areas, and included were P-12 education, daycare, social groups, daily activities in restaurants, stores, or public

events. This is one of the areas most influenced by the geographic focus of being in the Bible Belt since religious affiliation is assumed.

Tyler discusses the societal impact on his ability to be open in his identity in school, and the relationship between religion and being gay:

So even like the people who I was closest to in elementary and middle school, they didn't know me as well as I knew them. No one ever knew me as well as I knew them. Uh, and then you know, that you'll never get married is that you're not going to be able to have children. That even with adoption being an option, it isn't really an option for you here. Um, that's not something you can do in this state, conveniently.

Tyler also describes the relationship between his experience in society and his expectation for counseling:

In this area, I didn't want to look for another counselor after my first experience because I assumed that that would be the experience with most of them. Um, but that's just because we live in an area where religion is such a big part of people's lives.

Rhonda describes the expectation of religious belief by societal standards this way:

Like you have to say that. You know, "I believe in this God" or "I believe in this God" or "I believe this" maybe not be in control almost. I feel like it's sometimes having something to blame something on, whether it be fate or God or something,... having something bigger than you that you can say "Well this is why this happened."

Jorge talks about the normalcy of religious practice in public schools:

My oldest kid was in kindergarten in public school. There was an old lady who

was kindergarten teacher, been there forever and I went to go to lunch with them

one day and I was a little bit shocked to see that she has them all sit down in the

circle and recite the Lord's prayer before they go to before they allowed to go to

lunch. And I was, I wasn't gonna make a big deal of it, you know, I knew in the

future if we needed, we'd have that discussion, you know, but he's just a

kindergartener and uh, but yeah, right there in a public school having the kids

pray led by the teacher completely against the law. But, and she's, she was all,

she'd been there forever. So, you know, she's been doing that every lunch for

years and years and years.

In the Bible Belt of the US in the social sphere especially, religious affiliation is

often assumed. Even though public schools are subject to rules that prevent religious

preference, the broad social acceptance of religious practice in practice means that the

public education arena resembles the broader social context.

Experiences in Religious Contexts. Participants described interactions within the

religious context, though these were often seen as less problematic because of the

expectation of religion and the appropriateness of religious content in these settings. The

issues within the religious context were more problematic when individuals did not have

the option of attending religious rituals. Most often this was the case with children, but is

also possible when the individuals NRNS identity is not known by family members.

Rhonda describes how she felt ambivalent when she went to church:

Like when I used to go to church, I would never share anything with them. I didn't feel like I belong, but I was still there, so I was definitely part of the group. Like they thought I was, but I definitely wasn't part of the group, so I don't know how to put that in better words.

Rhonda also goes on to describe why she thought others in the Bible Belt attend church:

I feel like church nowadays, if for some reason I was like "I want to go to church and I want to be in a religion." I feel like church nowadays, especially in the south, is now more of a, not necessarily a social event, but it's like "I'm here!" "See me!" "See that I'm here and I believe in God!" It's like a very, I guess outward thing like I felt like people at my church specifically weren't going to church to be closer to God, but to show people that they were there.

Tyler recalls a play at the church that he attended, and describes his reaction this way:

Well, that, that was kind of the part of the, the idea of the play that bothered me. That was just... You're either a part of our club where you're not. Um, if you are, you get to go off to the side with the singing choir and all that. If not, you get to burn in this little box. [laughs] uh, very egocentric.

Rhonda and Tyler both address feeling like they don't belong in the church context, and share how they perceive the authenticity of the experience for themselves, and for others who go to church. The context of church will also have much overlap with the experience of those whom they perceive to be religious. This association is likely to

have impacts for counselors, especially when counselors are perceived to be associated with a religious institution.

Experiences in Higher Education. Higher education was separated from the societal context because participants' description was often much different in the higher education setting. Alicia responded to how religion impacted her educational experience this way:

> I think it was the other way around. Education opened my eyes to the limitations of Religion. Like a lot of young people I want, I went out and explored, you know, all the alternatives out there, uh, uh, our era, you know, palmistry and an astrology and a Buddhism and just on and on and on, the turning point for me and being able to know I was an atheist, I guess I was in a class on comparative religions in College, so I studied all the usual stuff. They, they mentioned that they said humanism and explained to me what humanism was. And when I heard that I thought, by golly that's me. And from that point onward, yeah, I really had a name for what it was because it wasn't just being an atheist, not believing in God, it was also an idea of believing in other people and in science and in art and in, and all the other lovely things around us that aren't, weren't given to us by, by some skydaddy.

The higher education context seems to be a place where most participants felt safe to explore their atheist identities. For Alicia, the higher education experience exposed her to humanism, and she more openly shared her atheist views in this context. It was transitioning out of higher education into the work context that provided more difficulty.

Experiences at Work. The work context provides specific challenges due the potential for economic impacts. Alicia avoided working at one company:

> I went on one interview with the [power company], I'm gonna mention them by name, who asked me in the job interview which church I went to. I knew at that point that wasn't any place I wanted to go to work because they had the balls to ask me that in a job interview.

Jorge states that he hides his identity at work:

In my work, I'm pretty much closet atheist. No, because I've known that the people that pull the purse strings, make decisions about who gets what, are devout Christians. So you know, uh, you're, you're not gonna have many religious discussions at work.

Tyler balances how open he is even within the work context:

I play, I play religious at work, usually not for the people that I work with. I'm usually very open with the people in the kitchen, wherever I'm serving this. I'm, I'm very open with the people in the back of the house or the, the, the people that I work with, that I'm not religious. But with my customers, I'm as religious as they are. [laughs] Because I, that's, that's my income. Like, the friendlier I am, the more I relate to them, the better I'm going to make income or tip wise, whenever I'm working out here. Um, if I were to be open with my customers about it, I, I severely doubt I would have a job there very long.

While there were significant differences between the types of workplaces that participants described, ranging from large corporate organizations, to very small locally owned businesses, religionormativity is described as pervasive in these settings. The

reason for participants' choice of identity management style is influenced sometimes by customer expectations, co-workers, or supervisors, but the common experience is that in this case, they consider the financial impacts that being open about their NRNS worldview may bring.

Experiences with Friends. Participants vary in their friendships and include both NRNS and RS folks, and varies significantly between individuals. Those who have more recently de-converted were more likely to have a higher number of religious friends, and they also varied how much they disclosed their NRNS status. Alicia describes how she felt when she first found a group of NRNS individuals after many years of feeling isolated:

> Oh, I was thrilled. I just wanted to go and hug every single one of them. And they were all very different, very different people. But, but all atheists, and it was like, oh, some of them wanted to get. And I still have occasional contact with some of them. We didn't have big enough group to sustain it, you know, there's a lot more of us now. A lot more people willing to be there and of course not a lot more access with the worldwide web. We have, uh, you know, Twitter and Facebook and all the other stuff. I think they were as delighted as I was.

Friendships with RS folks are also maintained and made. Alicia describes how she deals with friends who are religious on social media:

> My friends, you know I have some religious friends and a couple of them I've had to just unfollow on Facebook, [laughs] you know, I don't want, I don't want to comment on some of the crap that like, oh, so I just don't want even want to see it because it's like, how stupid can you be? Are you really believe that Shit, you

know, I'm not going to do that to a friend over Facebook because you know, they

can get all messy. So, but, uh, and when I'm around 'em, Oh me, it's like, okay,

you know, they'll say something about God, and I'll roll my eyes. And it's like,

that's what, That's what we do. But you know, these are people I have known

from, from the time I was a teenager. So it's, you know, you don't give up those

friends no matter what, but we tolerate each other.

In contrast, another friendship that includes social media is described by Alicia

this way:

I have a good friend. She goes to church; she's a believer. She knows. She knows

my take on it. Again, she's not in my face about it. She will post the occasional

God-centered something on her, but not to the point where I'll unfollow her, I

mean it's not that hardcore stuff that you get from, from some people — the

outrageous stuff.

James points out some of the challenges he has when it comes to dating, as well

as maintaining friendships from when he was religious:

Um, yeah, I feel like it's harder because a lot of the girls that I have met are kinda

religious and churchy, and so it's kinda like, um, it's hard to, um, yeah, I mean, but

it's, I mean, I don't know, I guess that's, I'm trying to think. Um, most of my

relationships now are with like my old Christian friends, um, because I did

college ministry for a little bit and that's where most of my relationships are now.

But it's like I've come out, I've kind of slowly come out more and more to more

than. Not. There are some people are just like, still, like have no clue. But um, but

uh, yeah, so that's. So yeah, there's a barrier with that because they're always

trying to push like, oh, you're, you're upset or something because you don't have a

relationship with Jesus, you or whatever. And so there's just. So there's an

awkwardness there and I just kinda roll my eyes and get to the next point or

whatever.

Experience of their Partner. Alex describes having similar views with her

partner. "We're both very outspoken I guess on the whole atheist thing. I mean we both

are like part of groups and he, you know, we do like watch a lot of YouTube and stuff

like that." Alicia states:

He calls himself a Daoist. Uh, I doubt we would ever have gotten together

because I cannot, I can't see me ever... well. I say ever my first husband was a

different story. He was just an asshole because you know, how I w I don't think

we ever discussed religion per se, and I was what? I was 17. So yeah, my husband

now and we've been married, we've been together on a, over almost 37 years. I've

been married for 27 years. Um, religion was never a big deal to him. When we did

finally have the discussion, he was still sort of searching and he knew he wasn't a

Christian. He puts up with it a lot better than I do because his is family and all.

But he, no, he's not religious. You see his car, he's got a little. he's a Pastafarian

now, he sees a Daoist, then he sees the, the pasta, and he found the Pastafarians.

Now he's got the flying spaghetti monster on his car and that's pretty much… It

was the beer fountain that turned him, I think. It's. He's, like I said, he's a little

more tolerant of it than I am. He can tolerate a lot more of it than I can.

Charlie shares how he thought about the impact of two parts of his identity in a

new relationship:

I'm actually just started dating someone and um, I met her at the music venue and

uh, uh, she's, she's really cool. She, she seems pretty liberal and um, but it's one of

those things that I always have to check off. There's two things, especially, I mean

for me. Um, are your parents going to be okay that you're dating a black guy and

is it okay that I don't believe in God and uh, um, she, I mean, she, she was, she is,

she's awesome. So, I mean, it didn't bother her at all, but it's one of those things

that I can't avoid for that long, you know.

Interviewer: Being black and being non-religious.

Charlie: Yeah.

Tyler also discusses the intersection of how religion impacts his relationship:

I am gay, recently got married, couldn't get married up until a few years ago. And

a big part of the reasoning behind that was religion. I don't see anything right

now, I'm sure. That was a, that was an interesting one because I grew up knowing

that I wouldn't be able to get married. So that was kind of a good feeling.

Not all participants were in relationships with other NRNS folks, but

relationships tended to be influenced by their partner's attitude towards the NRNS

worldview.

View of Self. This theme was included as a contrast to the other context. The

individuals' experience in the previous themes was describing how the individual is when

in a given context, whereas the view of self was looking at how am I despite of the

context. Alicia describes the influence of the context, and relates this to her own

thoughts:

I don't have time for their crap, you know, as soon as they, soon as they go into that God spiel. It's like, "Get outta my face. I don't want to hear it. I've heard everything you've got to tell me" you know, "don't waste my time and money."

Alicia describes why she values her NRNS identity:

Because I'm not, I'm not restricted by, by ancient restrictions, uh, you know, if I were Jewish and they would expect me not to eat pork, or you know, or mixed my meat milk, you know, if I were a Muslim woman, they expect me to wear a headscarf. I mean they, you know, they've got an awful lot of ridiculous rules and stuff that don't affect me. I'm free to look at things openly and say, okay, in the big scheme of things, is this important or not? Is it important that women wear headscarves? Well no, [laughs] but I don't have to stop and think, oh, but you know, all [inaudible].... my momma said I had to do that, so I got to do it. I'm not restricted by that. I find I'm very free.

Alicia also describes the overlap with the marginalization she experiences as a woman:

I want to see a whole generation of new free-thinking women who aren't limited by what these male-centric religions say that, that they can and cannot be. So for me as a woman, it's even more important than that, that we, we release ourselves to be able to look at the world freely without those religious restrictions.

Charlie describes not feeling the pressure of the other spheres this way:

I just feel like without someone there to base that judgment on you, you have a, you don't have the pressure of, of ah [pause] fitting, fitting in line, or the other pressure of, of ah, [pause] the pressures of being normal or not there anymore.

Tyler also describes how he values not having the other spheres pressure him into a way of being. He states, "It's better not to live in a bubble because. I don't know, like I'm open to new experiences or new ideas." Tyler contrasts this with how he saw himself before his deconversion:

A few years ago, I didn't believe in evolution. I was really religious. Didn't believe in climate change. I didn't have any reason not to believe in these things. Like, it didn't affect my day to day life for me to care whether or not evolution was a thing, whether or not climate change was a thing. Either way, I was going to do the same job and make the same amount of money. Um, it was just what I believed because that's what everyone that I knew believed growing up in the area that I was from. I didn't really have experiences with people who didn't think in that same way.

Jorge describes the contrast between how he feels judged, compared to how he sees himself. He states, " I try and help people as much as I can within my ability to help people." He thinks of himself as charitable:

Uh, so yeah, I mean for, for the amount of money I get, I'm pretty charitable, you know. I haven't volunteered in a while, but I volunteered quite a bit in the past on different things, always volunteered when my kids were in school, and my wife, we we're always big volunteers helping people, you know, I coached little league for years. Yeah. So, I've mean I been down to the soup kitchen though. I'm a real sucker for those things on Facebook now that. Oh man, look at that, that person could use five bucks. I mean they could use 5,000, but I'll give him five bucks, you know, because I can't give everybody, you know, I'd be broke myself.

Counseling. The experiences in counseling were separated but will be discussed in the counseling experience section.

Consequences of Disclosing Non-Religious/Non-Spiritual Identity

The main theme *Consequences of disclosing NRNS worldview* the following subthemes were identified: (a) Negative consequences, (b) Positive consequences, which were also coded as (c) Expected consequences, and (d) Actual consequences. Negative Consequences included: (a) Being preached to, (b) Feeling restricted, (c) Limited NRNS relationships, and (d) Not being understood. Positive consequences included: (a) Not belonging, (b) Work or Financial Consequences, (c) Feeling accepted, (d) Being understood, (e) Being authentic. When individuals disclose their NRNS identity, whether intentional or not, they will experience consequences that they see as positive, negative, or neutral. Neutral consequences could be that there were no perceived consequences and could be seen as either positive or negative. The expectation of the consequence may be informed by previous experience, and so participants shared situations that included anticipated and actual consequences of disclosing their NRNS identity.

Charlie puts it like this:

I don't feel like I can be completely open to a lot of people and I don't want to be because I don't, I don't just want to be referred to a book in the Bible, you know, like I, I don't, I don't, that's not going to help me, and it's hard getting close and sharing to a people in class or professors on campus and things like that. Um, and that's how I feel. I can feel isolated at times.

Negative Experience when disclosing NRNS identity. Negative experiences would be where folks felt rejected, hurt, and ignored, but it is separate from expected or

unexpected experiences discussed later. Negative experiences can be viewed in the behaviorist sense of punishment, and could be positive punishment, such as the addition of an undesired stimulus, such as being preached to, yelled at, or negative punishment, such as withdrawal of a desired stimulus, i.e. affection, attention, opportunity. Individuals may participate in experiences where a negative experience is anticipated. Kelly (1955) describes the individual as a scientist that tests hypotheses, though the experimental design often includes a confirmation bias. Participant experiences were coded into three categories, positive, negative, and neutral. Alex describes a negative experience where she felt ignored, rejected, and devalued?

> It, there's, there's nothing worse to me when you go in and you speak to a professional, like a medical professional or a mental health counselor or something, and you tell them like wholeheartedly, you give them your story and you tell them what you need. You can tell them, you know, "I need help with a crisis" and whether the, whether the crisis is only in your head or the crisis is legitimately within your body or it's something you really ultimately feel and they take your words and they do the opposite. It's painful and it makes you feel dehumanized. It's just like when I, because when I told the counselor, I'm like, "I've been hurt by the church, by my God. I'm questioning my faith. I don't want to talk about the Bible or scripture. I'm questioning these things. I want to talk outside of that realm of things." And she says, "Read this scripture." that's just like, "Hey, I'm ignoring you. Just do this anyway."

The negative experience can be something that is expected, possibly based on others experience, or vicarious learning, as Alicia describes:

I have considered it [counseling] on numerous occasions and particularly in the last five years or so, but quite honestly I don't trust, you know, really I, I, if I can't find someone I think I might want to try. I hear from the Grapevine, oh well yeah, they're religious or blah blah or yeah, I was there and there's religious literature all over the waiting room in a sense like, oh gosh, I don't want to have to deal with that. So I've just put it off and put it off, you know.

Alicia and Alex describe the experiences of having a negative consequence of disclosing their NRNS identity and justify their future expectation because of these experiences. The negative experiences for some individuals are balanced somewhat with positive experiences. Past experiences that were perceived as being negative may contribute to the expectation of future negative experiences, and positive experiences are likely to yield an expectation of future positive experiences given a set of contexts.

Positive Experiences when disclosing NRNS identity. When an experience was considered positive it can be associated with actions that should be repeated, or associated with a specific context, or group of individuals. When expected, this confirms the individuals construct, when unexpected it, may contribute to the individual reevaluating their construct – and aligns well with the goal of counseling. Alex describes such a positive experience in the counseling context with a counselor who was religious:

She said her brother's atheist, but she's, she is a believer. And I was like, "Okay, here's the deal. I am an atheist. I've come to that decision through a lot of reason and logic in pain and crying and sleepless nights and it's not been an easy decision. I didn't wake up one day and say, "I'm going to be an atheist." I was not

raised that way. Believe me. Um, I was well indoctrinated as a child. It was beat

into me, literally. I did not come to this decision without pain and suffering. So, I

do not want to hear any kind of theology or indoctrination of any kind. If I'm

seeing someone for therapy. It, it, it damn well,... it needs to be because you've

gone to school and they haven't given you bible verses to treat someone with. And

if that's the case, we both need to be doing something else." So, I was very out

there with it, and she kind of laughed and she said, she's like, "Okay, here's the

deal, because I'm a believer, and thank you for telling me that you're not if you're

not, and I am, that's okay. We don't ever have to discuss that." She said, "And if

you, and if you are comfortable discussing any of that," she said, "I am your

counselor. If you are comfortable discussing any of that with me, you go right

ahead."

Alex' previous experiences informed her constructs which led to her direct

response to the therapist who stated that she was religious. In sharing this experience, she

is giving an example of a disconfirming positive experience that led her to change her

expectation for future interactions with RS individuals, and RS counselors.

Expected Experience (What will happen?) Previous experiences lead to an

anticipation of events, and expected outcomes are often associated with individuals or

contexts. As specific constructs are applied, the expected outcome is compared to the

actual outcome. Participants gave examples of their expectation if they were to engage in

activities, or expectations of what would happen when they were open about their

identity. These are informed by previous experiences, though this can be through

vicarious learning. Alicia shares how she expects religion to be included in weddings and funerals and how this impacts her decision making:

And you know, you just get to where, you know, after 60 some odd years of putting up with this crap and having, having that constantly, uh, abraded, you know, you get, you just get so sensitive to it, you just don't want to hear it anymore. And that's, and you know, and I hate going to most funerals and most weddings because they always have preachers there that want to turn it into a come to Jesus moment. And I feel bad because I have, you know, missed going to a lot of these things simply because I knew the family and I knew what it was going to be and, no, never again, just . If my husband insists, I will hold his hand and go to a funeral, but you know, the rest of it, we'll, we'll skip the service and go to the reception if it's a wedding. But I'm just not going to put myself through that.

Jorge describes how he would expect that sharing their atheism at a public school would impact his child's experience in sports:

So, you know, you don't want that to be known because, uh, like when, when when they, of course they know they can't go join into group prayer, but they tell all the kids go down the sideline, kneel and pray. The, they can go tell them to do that, and of course you don't have to do if you don't want to, but you think you're not go when you know you want to play, you think you're going to play if "Fuck your God" you know, that's not gonna go over well. So you're pretty much forced to do that.

Tyler discusses how his expectation influences his decision to go to counseling:

In this area, I didn't want to look for another counselor after my first experience

because I assumed that that would be the experience with most of them. Um, but

that's just because we live in an area where religion is such a big part of people's

lives.

It is the expected experience that informed the actions of each of these

participants. Alicia avoids funerals and weddings because of how she feels when

religious aspects are included in these ceremonies. Jorge does not advocate for his child

to avoid the group prayer because of the expectation of his sons' rejection, and Tyler does

not seek counseling because of the expectation that his counselor will use unwelcome

religious interventions. In PCT terms, it is the expected outcome based on the individuals

applied set of constructs that determine their behavior. The interpretation of the actual

experience will contribute to how the individual will use the construct in future settings.

Actual Experience (What happened?) What actually occurs is at least

somewhat different than the expected outcome, but with a larger magnitude of difference

between expected and actual outcomes the likelihood of a construct change increases

(PCT reference). Some participants indicated that they experienced surprise when RS

folks did not behave as expected. The expected outcomes that were described previously

could be dismissed as faulty assumptions, but these expectations are informed by actual

experiences. Alex describes an experience where she was explicit with her counselor

about her needs:

I was very specific about that when I went to a counselor, I would say, "Look, I

realize I have some problems with depression and anxiety and I know that, um,

and I have some other problems and they're deeply rooted in the fact that I was

basically raised in a cult and here's why, and I need someone who can really talk to me about that and not be biased." And I went to see a particular person in Hickson and we sat and I had three or four sessions with her and she quoted scripture at me and gave me lists of Bible verses and I just looked at her like, "you've got to be kidding me." This is after I told her specifically that I had had major issues within the church.

Alicia describes how her expectation was confirmed at work by a colleague:

I had a good friend or a friend I had made there who was a manager, not my manager, but one of the managers. He came to me and we frequently had lunch because he's best buddies with my now husband. Um, and tell me, he said, you know, you need to, he say you need to calm down about your religious beliefs because you know it, it's going to hurt you here.

James also describes an actual counseling experience that informed his future expectations:

I went to him and he said, "I'm going to give you one week. I don't think you've made an authentic commitment to Christ and I'll give you one week to decide if you have or not." You know, at that point I didn't think my suicidal thoughts had anything to do with an authentic commitment to Christ. And so, uh, he came back, he was like, "Well, I hope you…" and I'm like, "Same as the last. I'm the same as last week." And he's like, "Well, I can't help you." And uh, let me go. And then he came out to my car and gave me a, uh, a biblical pamphlet on depression, like a small little pamphlet on the depression. So, uh, yeah. So that was the end of that.

Some actual experiences with openly sharing their non-belief were more positive. Jorge describes being somewhat open with not being religious and having a positive experience:

I said, well "We're not real religious people", you know. Don't go out and say your atheist, because they'll be like "Let's get the guns out and shoot you." Uh, but, uh, so we really didn't want to. We told them that up front and they were pretty cool with it.

When small differences exist between the expected and actual experience, it served as a justification for future similar responses, or it strengthened the construct utilized by the individual. Alex expected that her counselor would be religious and utilize religion in her practice, so she attempted to preemptively address this with her counselor, just to be disappointed again when the counselor utilized religion in counseling. Alicia thought she could be open with her NRNS identity at work, but the actual experience of having a manager tell her to be more silent about this shaped her behavior and future expectation. Alicia stated that she was more hidden with her identity going forward. Jorge's approach was more subtle when he stated that he was "not real religious," but had a positive experience with this safer way of sharing his NRNS belief.

Identity Management

NRNS folks are required to make decisions about whether they should disclose this part of their identity in the particular environment that they find themselves in. The constructs that individuals have may differ depending on the environment, with open identities in some situations, but not others. The way that identity is managed is not limited to being open or hiding their NRNS identity, but rather are expressed on a range

from open to hiding this identity. Specific example of techniques used by participants is described further. Under the main theme *Identity Management* the following subthemes were identified: (a) Hiding NRNS identity, (b) Open identity, and (c) In between hiding and open identity.

Hiding Non-Religious/Non-Spiritual Identity. Specifically in work or social contexts, but especially in religious contexts and in settings where RS belief is assumed to be part of the norm, individuals likely to hide their NRNS identity. How the hiding of the NRNS identity occurs is accomplished in different ways and includes pretending to be religious, or letting others assume they are religious or avoiding the topic or situations where their NRNS status may come up. Within this subtheme, two additional subthemes were identified: (a) Pretending to be religious, and (b) Avoiding Judgment or Conflict.

Pretending to be religious. Individuals may appear to others as being religious, implicitly communicated by participation in religious ceremonies, prayer, and wearing religious jewelry or symbols. Other times this may be explicitly communicated when asked if they are religious or if they believe in God. Tyler describes how he pretends to be religious at work when engaging with customers:

> With my customers, I'm as religious as they are. [laughs] Because, I, that's, that's my income. Like, the friendlier I am, the more I relate to them, the better I'm going to make income or tips, whenever I'm working out here.

Rhonda recalls the strain she felt while pretending to be religious:

> [I] put on a show that I want to be there and then I want to belong because I don't. Those are not people that I feel like I belong with. But going to church it was

definitely, you know, waking up every Sunday. Okay. Like, got to prepare myself,

like I have to be ready for this.

Charlie simply states "[I'll] just mark, you know, the typical Christian label on the

paperwork just to avoid the whole thing." This also illustrates the other technique used of

avoiding discussing their NRNS identity.

Avoiding Judgement or Conflict. Avoiding the topic of religion or avoiding religious

contexts is also used. Alicia describes her avoiding through comparison with an allergy:

> Avoidance. It's like an allergy. Got It. Avoidance is the, is really the biggest thing.
>
> Um, I tend to avoid, just like you avoid toxic people. I tend to avoid the most
>
> toxic religions, I found that evangelicals are, are just, I can hardly be in the room
>
> with them when they start talking

James recalls feeling uncomfortable when his friend brought up God:

> I met with a friend recently at Panera, not like super recently, but at one point he
>
> said, "tell me about your relationship with God." And I just kept saying I didn't
>
> want to talk about it. And uh, and uh, uh, let's see. Um, I don't want to talk about
>
> it and I wasn't sure, I don't know where I am right now. I don't, I don't think about
>
> it a lot. And he was like, "oh, that's awful."

James also describes the impact of this, and implies that he would like to have

more authentic relationships:

> Um, kinda sucks. Like, and yeah, I can't lie, it kinda sucks. Um, I mean, and, and
>
> it's, it kind of leads you to hold back on other things too a little bit I guess
>
> sometimes. So, um, yeah, I mean it just, um, maybe some of it told me where I
>
> should just, I'm not secure enough to do it, you know? And so I don't, I don't want

to say it's like culturally totally or anything like that, but I have my issues to where I'm am um, you know. Yeah. Where I kind of hold back a little bit. Charlie also describes how he would like to be able be more open about his identity "I would probably be more open about my atheism. I... for sure. I wouldn't dodge questions or frame my answers in particular ways. Uh, I wouldn't be bothered about talking about it in class."

Open Atheist Identity. Participants varied in how open they were in their identity, but because of sampling techniques were likely to be more open in some of their interactions. In order to have a positive experience with being open in their identity this has to occur first or be witnessed by the individual. Examples of the times that participants are open in their identity occur in varied settings. James discusses a time that he was open with his counselor:

> I said, I mean one day I think maybe our first or second session I was like, "Sometimes I'll let, I'll let, uh, I get frustrated with religion in my experience because as you know, I had rough experience with it and I'll have some frustrations of those over and I'll say, you know, hear things here or there." And um, I was, I think I made a comment about, um, religious people not being the smartest bunch or something like that. And I was like, I was like, I was like, but I, "I bet you are, I bet you are religious, aren't you? Everybody is here in the south, right?"

James includes indirectly calling the counselor as part of the "not the smartest bunch" while also showing some insight that he has a negative bias towards RS folks.

Alex shares that she feels more free to be open about her atheist identity in the LGBT community:

> I'd always had a lot of friends in the, in the gay and lesbian community had this transgender friend. I'm trying to remember. Yeah, I was trying to remember how, I'm not sure. Oh, I know how I met her. I met her at a p-flag. Yeah. I met her at p-flag and we hit it off right away. She's just fantastic. We just hit it off just great. And one day I was just talking to her and I was like, I need a good counselor who's not like, you know, all about God. Who can understand when I talk to about how much church sucks and how and like not clutch their pearls when I say that.

> Charlie describes feeling uncomfortable or discouraged about sharing his identity on counseling intake paperwork:

> I mean, no, they, they had me fill out some, some paperwork and things like that and they asked my, my religious affiliation and things like that. And um, yeah, I mean I put down an atheist and, and I mean that was kind of an. I mean, I did see, I mean, I did see a lot of, a lot of, um, uh, my counselor had had a pretty extensive, a Christian. Uh, she had a bunch of Christian books laid out everywhere, her, her, um, bookshelves or were basically that, um, but my religion or my lack of religion didn't ever come up and she never really of pushed hers on me at all.

In between hiding and open identity. At times neither open or hiding identity was applicable to the strategies used by the participants. The following methods were utilized as an in-between: (a) Euphemism for non-belief, (b) Indirectly disclosing NRNS, and (c) Minimizing non-belief.

Counseling Experience

The lived experience of individuals lead to anticipation within the sphere of which it was experienced but may be generalized to the expectation of counseling as well. Table 3.6 shows the subthemes related to the main experience context of counseling. Individuals vary in their expectation of what counseling will be like, and this is informed by the various spheres of experience (Figure 1.) After an individual has their first counseling experience their expectation may be shaped more by that experience.

Under the main theme *Counseling Experience,* the following subthemes were identified in the participants: (a) Counseling Process, (b) Physical environment, (c) Finding a counselor, and (d) Relationship with the Counselor. *Finding a counselor* also had additional subthemes that were identified and included: (a) Counselor qualifications, (b) Difficulty finding a secular counselor, (c) Expectations for counselors religious belief, and (d) reasons for seeking counseling. Relationship with the Counselor included additional subthemes (a) Can open up, (b) Counselor discloses NRNS identity, (c) Counselor discloses RS belief, (d) Counselor focuses on RS, (e) Difficulty opening up, and (f) Perceived quality of counseling.

Relationship with counselor. Identity is managed in the counseling relationship just as it is in other spheres, and an individual's capacity to be authentic is influenced by previous experiences. Counselors have the opportunity to set up an expectation about the counseling relationship through a new experience, though this may be more difficult if the client has previous negative experiences in counseling. One of these challenges that counselors may face is to establish a relationship where the client feels safe to discuss aspects of their experience. The related codes that were identified in this were Can open

up vs. difficulty opening up, this can be contrasted with another code dichotomy of Counselor focuses on religion vs. Counselor doesn't focus on religion, and Counselor discloses RS belief to counselor discloses NRNS belief. Individuals differed in their assumptions about the counselors RS/NRNS status when this was not disclosed. (One NRNS client that I worked with once asked if I was religious, and after a discussion on why this would be important to know, he stated that I must be religious because they perceived me as caring, showing some internalized negative beliefs about being NRNS).

Counselor focuses on religion. Individuals differed in their expectation with some being surprised when their counselor suggested participation in religion or relationship with God. Rhonda shares what it was like when her counselor kept focusing on her church attendance. "It was just very awkward, and a lot of "Why don't you go to church? What happened?" And I'm like, "That's not the reason why we're here. So you can stop asking me that." Responding to the researchers follow up on how that felt she clarified that it was not the question itself, but the insistence of the question that bothered her:

> I mean I would, I mean, I don't mind answering that question. I don't like, I just, I didn't like church. I didn't feel safe there. It just wasn't a place where I felt like I belonged. So I don't mind to like people that I don't mind disclosing that information. I'm a very open person, but the tone that it was approached was very, "Why don't, why don't you? Why haven't you done this? Like you're a terrible person." So that was really awkward for me.

Counselor discloses religious belief. Counselors differ in how they disclose their religious belief, ranging from the open advertisement of religious affiliation on websites

and other marketing materials to more subtle disclosing of religious belief with wearing religious symbols. These pre-emptive type of disclosures leaves no room for a decision making process for the counselor to choose whether or not to disclose their belief based on the client's benefit. Alex was very open with her counselor about identifying as an atheist and recalls receiving a response that likely contributed to increased trust in her counselor. Alex remembers her counselor responding like this.

> "Okay, here's the deal, because I'm a believer, and thank you for telling me that you're not. If you're not, and I am, that's okay. We don't ever have to discuss that." She said, "And if you, and if you are comfortable discussing any of that," she said, "I am your counselor. If you are comfortable discussing any of that with me, you go right ahead."

The counselor, in this case, chose to disclose to Alex that she had a god belief and responded in a way that Alex felt accepted despite this difference. Charlie described the indirect disclosure of religious belief by his counselor, "I mean, I did see, I mean, I did see a lot of, a lot of, um, uh, my counselor had had a pretty extensive, a Christian. Uh, she had a bunch of Christian books laid out everywhere…" This counselor may not have been religious, but she did communicate something with the books that were displayed. Charlie describes how this was for him:

> Yeah, no, it gave me pause for sure. I, I was worried that um, it might come up or that she might push back on me for that, you know? Um, but, um, she was, she was pretty, she did pretty well. I feel like, I mean, of course, there was um, the paper trail of Christianity.

His counselor intentions are not known, but Charlie's description of giving him pause about possibly getting pushback about being non-religious is likely an unintended, although avoidable consequence, of the choice to display Christian books in her office.

The experience of how counselors disclose their religious belief varied from subtle disclosure, such as mentioning church attendance, to overt disclosure such as stating on advertisements that they provide counseling from a religious perspective. NRNS clients were skeptical of receiving services from counselors who identified as religious but often were open to this, especially if counselors directly or indirectly communicated their willingness to work with NRNS clients.

Counselor doesn't focus on religion. When working with NRNS clients, discussing religion may be very relevant to the client's experience, especially in the bible belt where religion may be a pervasive part of the client's experience. The matter in which a counselor addresses religion will impact how it is perceived by the client. Alicia was very happy that a counselor that she saw didn't bring up religion and stated "I got in with a therapist, a young therapist. I don't think we ever even discussed religion, which I was, I was really pleased." Charlie has a similar experience and states "But my religion, or my lack of religion, didn't ever come up and she never really of pushed hers on me at all." James also had this experience at a university counseling center:

> That's, that's where, that's probably the most were they kept it separated? I don't know if I have no idea. I mean I didn't see those people a ton compared to compared to the others. But um, nobody ever mentioned. Nobody ever mentioned their Religion there.

Natalie also talks about her University counseling center experience where she felt religion was not a topic that was pressed:

But it never played a role where I went to seek counseling. Anybody never even asked me, like I was never, it never came up like with any of the therapists that I saw. Um, and I don't know if that's because. So the therapist that I saw when I was at the University, I found out... I saw him for years probably. I mean, it was, I guess three or four years.

Tyler also shared that his experience at the university counseling center did not include religion, "And then the other time was earlier this year I spoke to one of the counselors at the college. Um, that was a really good experience. Uh, religion never came up. Uh, I really enjoyed that one."

Discussion

Two questions were explored in this phenomenological study: one research question examined the experience NRNS participants had of everyday life in the Bible Belt, and the second research question explored the experience of counseling NRNS participants in the Bible Belt. D'Andrea and Sprenger (2007) highlighted the lack of services for atheists in the counseling profession, calling to the field to expand research in this population. In the decade following their call, only a few researchers have answered, and research that focuses on the needs and experience of NRNS folks is still arrantly absent (Brewster et al., 2014). The lack of research should also be understood within the context of the growing number of people in the U.S. who state that they do not believe in God, which has grown from 5% to 9% between 2007 and 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2014). Estimates for the number of atheists in the US that control for stigma indicate

significantly higher proportions at 26% (Gervais & Najle, 2017). Previous research indicated that perceived discrimination against the non-religious was higher for folks who identify as atheist or agnostic, compared to folks who identify as non-religious (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, & Nielsen, 2012). The discrimination experienced in the various contexts was also described by the participants in this study, supporting the claims that this is, and continues to be an experience seen in both broader society as well as the counseling context. The general experience of NRNS folks within the counseling context continue to remain unexplored, though this study is a starting point to investigating this phenomenon further. The MCSJCC also provides a useful framework to investigate this utilizing qualitative and quantitative methods (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016). This study showed that NRNS individuals seeking and participating in counseling in the Bible Belt have experiences in which they perceive their worldview to be unappreciated or unwelcome, leading to a lack of trust that was a perceived a hindrance to the relationship. The participants did describe good experiences with counselors when their worldview was appreciated, or at least their counselor's religious worldview did not become obvious during the counseling experience.

A counselor who is interested in how the experience of NRNS clients could use *Figure 1* as a starting point for their assessment. Working from the top to bottom of *Figure 1*, the first area of understanding the clients experience can focus on the various spheres of experiences, understanding the ways that these spheres overlap, and differ from each other, in how the client perceives their level of acceptance or rejection in each context. This can inform how expectations for each given context is shaped by prior

experience, with extra attention given to any previous counseling experience, as perceived by the NRNS client. An understanding of the clients' past experiences may also inform the counselor whether they should disclose their religious belief or lack of belief to the client. A client who has had past experiences of rejection from their religious community may have an unexpected experience when a counselor from whom they feel accepted reveals their religious belief when therapeutically warranted. Similarly, a client may benefit from a counselor revealing their NRNS worldview.

Study Limitations

As a phenomenology, this study has the associated limitations of a qualitative methodology. It described in rich detail the experiences of the participants but is not meant to be generalizable to all communities, even within the Bible Belt. The study is transferrable to the experiences of individuals across a variety of settings and religious beliefs when there is a difference between their own worldview and the predominant worldview in the context of interest. This study also investigated a phenomenon for which significant stigma exists, and participants may also minimize their experience of rejection. To address this limitation, I did disclose to participants that I am non-religious, although this could impact a social desirability bias. This was addressed by utilizing interviewing techniques that minimized a judgment and used a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A). Future studies that employ both qualitative and quantitative measures will ensure that both an understanding of the experience of NRNS individuals in counseling as well as best treatment practices can be determined.

Implications for Practice

For NRNS individuals, their experience in the Bible Belt is often relevant to their counseling experience, and exploration of this experience could provide benefit. Counseling should be an environment where religious belief can be safely discussed, but for many NRNS folks, this has not been their experience. In this study, the presumption of religious adherence and theistic belief was often replicated in the counseling environment. When this occurred, NRNS individuals had the expectation that the use of religious interventions would be an inherent component of counseling when seeking counseling in the Bible Belt. Participants in this study included folks in urban, suburban, and rural settings, but individual communities even within the Bible Belt may be exceptional in their lack of religionormativity. The percentage of the population that holds religious belief could be one indicator of potential religionormativity, though the diversity of religious belief may accompany less presumption of religious belief or at least a more tentative inquisition about religious belief.

A counselor who has a God belief or is religious is itself not a problem, evidenced by positive experiences by participants with counselors whom they perceived to be religious. A counselor who is atheist, agnostic, or another NRNS identity is also not a problem, though often appreciated by NRNS individuals. The religionormativity and christionormativity as is often evident in the Bible Belt, and the unwelcome use of religious-based interventions, however subtle, is problematic. Especially for NRNS clients these approaches are misguided at best and may be considered malpractice or an ethical violation. Study participants described beneficial experiences with counselors who disclosed their religious belief, but this was interpreted positively only when their

counselor respected their NRNS worldview and did not attempt to use religion in their interventions. This study supports the findings of Magaldi and Trub (2016) in regards to the self-disclosure by counselors of their religious belief. It can be beneficial to share this with the client, but it should be an informed decision by the counselor who has had the opportunity to evaluate the clinical significance and possible impacts on the relationship. Counselors who disclose their religious belief on websites or through the display of one type of religious symbol do this without the opportunity to evaluate those impacts. In practice, this ends up screening out a segment of the population, essentially communicating that only those with a Christian worldview is welcome here.

Counselors should be sensitive to the perceptions by the client when using common language phrases that may not be received well by clients who are NRNS. Phrases in commonly used in the Bible Belt, but also in many other parts of the country include "Bless you," "I'll be praying for you," "Bless your heart," are examples of language that may not be welcomed, and potentially create distrust with some NRNS clients.

Religious belief should also not be ignored in the counseling relationship since regardless of whether gods exist, it is something that is an important factor for many individuals who receive counseling. If a client indicates that they do not have a religious belief, it is also not something that should be ignored, but rather the counselor should be aware that their atheist client may have experienced rejection by family, friends, community, their jobs, partners, and counselors. It is also a mistake to deal with this rejection by encouraging the client to assimilate to the beliefs of their community to avoid rejection. The problem is the rejection by their community, and as social justice

advocates, we need to address this. My hope is that this article contributes to the knowledge and awareness about the experience of daily lives and counseling by NRNS folks living in religious regions, what this should lead to is application and development of skills, and action in the form of social justice advocacy.

The strategies used by NRNS folks in this study may also be transferable to other types of identities that are marginalized or with attached stigma. While some types of identities are usually not in the public sphere, counselors can make deliberate choices on what they do share with clients about some of these identities. The counselors gender expression, racial background may be difficult to conceal, though even these have impact on how the counselor is perceived. The counselor holds a plethora of identities that they can make choices about to inform or not inform their clients. The awareness of each of these identities is what will allow the counselor to make a more informed choice about whether disclosure would benefit the client (Ratts et al., 2016).

Implications for Research

The sampling strategies in this study focused on folks who identified as atheist, though it was open to all individuals who identified on the NRNS spectrum. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these individuals reported feeling discrimination in various contexts, in line with the findings of Cragun et al. (2012). This study focused on describing the experience of NRNS folks in the Bible Belt, but more research on the subjective experiences of NRNS folks in other parts of the country as well as investigating the intersectional experiences is needed. Further research on the experience of counselors who identify as NRNS working with NRNS and RS clients is needed. Since the population of religiously unaffiliated is growing,

Implications for Advocacy

While research on the impacts of religion in the counseling relationship is often investigated, research that is unbiased continues to be lacking and neglect NRNS worldviews (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007). Counselors, as well as related helping professions, include practitioners who are religious and integrate their beliefs in their practice. But especially with the increased focus by the counseling profession on social justice, the broader impacts of the work that counselors do with clients must be considered. While one individuals' coping mechanisms may utilize the god concept as a method of improving their experience in the short term, the broader implication of religious belief at the individual as well as the societal level needs to be considered.

This research highlights the ways that NRNS individuals are impacted by living in contexts where religious belief is assumed, and thereby live, along with other religious minorities, in an environment where they are considered the outgroup. This phenomenon can be understood within the context of privilege, and addressed through the MCSJCC (Ratts et al., 2016). Counselors in predominantly religious communities are frequently perpetuating the Christionormativity and using strategies that assume or advocate for religious belief, sometimes citing improved wellness of religious adherents. The failure on the counselors' part to recognize that this wellness can be attributed more to belonging to the dominant and privileged group is especially damaging to NRNS clients, but also has implications for RS individuals.

Implications for Training

Training programs must take care that future counselors are aware of the limitations of past studies on the role of religion in counseling. Counselor educators must

highlight how counselors need to bracket their worldview in regard to religion, especially in communities that are overwhelmingly religious. While training programs have included religious diversity, this often lacks the inclusion of NRNS worldviews. Claims that the loosely defined term of spirituality is an important characteristic of counselors to have as claimed by textbook authors such as Nystul (2016) could be seen as exclusionary towards trainees who hold an NRNS position. Ideally, program faculty includes folks from diverse backgrounds, as stated in the ACA (2014) Code of Ethics (F.11.a). Programs that are in religious institutions should be especially intentional in recruiting NRNS faculty, though this is complicated when institutional policies require their faculty to have a religious worldview. Students in programs where religious adherence is expected will also limit the authenticity of a student with an NRNS worldview and this exclusionary practice should not be accepted by the profession. This study can serve as a training tool and provide students with examples of how the interaction of the client and counselors religious beliefs impacted the counseling relationship.

References

Almeida, A. (2017). The atheists struggling to find therapists in the bible belt. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from secular therapy in the south website: https://www.theatlantic.com

American Counseling Association. (2014). ACA Code of Ethics. https://www.counseling.org/resources/aca-code-of-ethics.pdf

Anspach, W., Coe, K., & Thurlow, C. (2007). The other closet?: Atheists, homosexuals and the lateral appropriation of discursive capital. *Critical Discourse Studies, 4*(1), 95-119. doi:10.1080/17405900601149509

Barna. (2017). *Barna Cities and States Report*. Retrieved from: www.barna.com

Blumenfeld, W. J., & Jaekel, K. (2012). Exploring levels of Christian privilege awareness among preservice teachers. *Journal of Social Issues, 68*(1), 128-144. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.2011.01740.x

Brewster, M. E. (2016). *Atheism in counseling psychology: Conspicuous by its absence.* Paper presented at the The Stress Center at Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA.

Brewster, M. E., Robinson, M. A., Sandil, R., Esposito, J., & Geiger, E. (2014). Arrantly absent: Atheism in psychological science from 2001 to 2012. *Counseling Psychologist, 42*(5), 628-663. doi:10.1177/0011000014528051

Brewster, M. E., Sawyer, J., Eklund, A., Hammer, J., & Palamar, J. (2016). Perceived experiences of atheist discrimination: Instrument development and evaluation. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 63*(5), 557-570. doi:10.1037/cou0000156

Bullard, G. (2016). The world's newest major religion: No religion. *National Geographic*.

Caputi, P., Viney, L. L., Walker, B. M., & Crittenden, N. (2012). *Personal construct methodology*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Cohoon, L. (2010). Modern intellectual tradition: From Descartes to Derrida. *The Great Courses*: The Teaching Company, LLC.

Cragun, R. T., Hammer, J. H., & Nielsen, M. (2015). The Nonreligious-Nonspiritual Scale (NRNSS): Measuring everyone from Atheists to Zionists. *Science, Religion and Culture, 2*(3), 36-53.

Cragun, R. T., Kosmin, B. A., Keysar, A., Hammer, J. H., & Nielsen, M. E. (2012). On the receiving end: discrimination toward the non-religious in the United States. *Journal of Contemporary Religion, 27*(1), 105-127. doi:10.1080/13537903.2012.642741

D'Andrea, L. M., & Sprenger, J. (2007). Atheism and nonspirituality as diversity issues in counseling. *Counseling & Values, 51*(2), 149-158.

Elliott, G. R. (2011). When Values and Ethics Conflict: The Counselor's Role and Responsibility. *Alabama Counseling Association Journal, 37*(1), 39-45.

Essandoh, P. K. (1996). Multicultural counseling as the 'fourth force': A call to arms. *The Counseling Psychologist, 24*(1), 126-137. doi:10.1177/0011000096241008

Fransella, F. (1995). *George Kelly*. London: Sage Publications.

Freire, P. (1970, 2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum International

Gervais, W. M. (2013). In Godlessness We Distrust: Using Social Psychology to Solve the Puzzle of Anti-atheist Prejudice. *Social & Personality Psychology Compass, 7*(6), 366-377. doi:10.1111/spc3.12035

Gervais, W. M. (2014). Everything is permitted? People intuitively judge immorality as representative of atheists. *PLoS ONE, 9*(4), 1-9. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0092302

Gervais, W. M., & Najle, M. B. (2017). How many atheists are there? doi:10.31234/osf.io/edzda

Gervais, W. M., Shariff, A. F., & Norenzayan, A. (2011). Do you believe in atheists? Distrust is central to anti-atheist prejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 101*(6), 1189-1206. doi:10.1037/a0025882

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Grescock, J. (2001). No freedom from religion: The marginalization of atheists in American society, politics, and law. *Journal of Race, Religion, Gender and Class, 1*(2).

Harrington, M. A., Harbert, A. B., Jacob, S. A., & Saiid, L. (2014). The coming out process among non-religious undergraduate students: Implications for residence life professionals. *Journal of College & University Student Housing, 41*(1), 164-177.

Hays, D. G., & Singh, A. A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings*. New York Guilford Press.

Jadaszewski, S. (2017). Ethically problematic value change as an outcome of psychotherapeutic interventions. *Ethics & Behavior, 27*(4), 297-312. doi:10.1080/10508422.2016.1195739

Kelly, G. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage

Publications.

Lugo, L. (2012). *"Nones" on the Rise: One-in-five adults have no religious affiliation*.

Retrieved from: http://www.pewforum.org/files/2012/10/NonesOnTheRise-

full.pdf

Lukes, S. (2012). Ist Durkheims Religionsverständnis mit dem Glauben vereinbar?

Berliner Journal für Soziologie, 22(4), 457-472. doi:10.1007/s11609-013-0204-9

Magaldi, D., & Trub, L. (2016). (What) do you believe?: Therapist

spiritual/religious/non-religious self-disclosure. *Psychotherapy Research: Journal

Of The Society For Psychotherapy Research*, 1-15.

doi:10.1080/10503307.2016.1233365

Martin, M. (2007). *The Cambridge companion to atheism*. New York, NY: Cambridge

University Press.

Nietzsche, F. W. (1950). *Also sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*.

Stuttgart, Germany: Reclam-Verlag.

Nystul, M. S. (2016). *Introduction to Counseling* (5th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Parmaksız, U. (2018). Making sense of the postsecular. *European Journal of Social

Theory, 21*(1), 98-116. doi:10.1177/1368431016682743

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and

practice: The definitive text of qualitative inquiry frameworks and options*.

Thousand Oaks, California SAGE Publications, Inc.

Pew Research Center. (2014). Religion & Public life project. from Pew Research Center

Prasad, P. (2005). *Crafting qualitative research: Working in the postpositivist traditions*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.

Ratts, M. J., Singh, A. A., Nassar-McMillan, S., Butler, S. K., & McCullough, J. R. (2016). Multicultural and social justice counseling competencies: Guidelines for the Counseling Profession. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 44*(1), 28-48. doi:10.1002/jmcd.12035

Riswold, C. D. (2015). Teaching the college 'Nones': Christian privilege and the religion professor. *Teaching Theology & Religion, 18*(2), 133-148. doi:10.1111/teth.12275

Silver, C. F. (2014). Atheism, agnosticism, and nonbelief: A qualitative and quantitative study of type and narrative. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 74*(12-B(E)).

Siner, S. E. (2011). A theory of atheist students identity development. *Journal of the Indiana University Student Personnel Association*, 14-21.

Singh, J. (2013). A new american apartheid: Racialized, religious minorities in the post-9/11 era. *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory, 9*(2), 115-144. doi:10.1080/17448727.2013.822138

Smith, J. M. (2010). Becoming an atheist in America: Constructing identity and meaning from the rejection of theism. *Sociology of Religion*. doi:10.1093/socrel/srq082

Stedman, C. (2012). *Faitheist: How an atheist found common ground with the religious*: Beacon.

Chapter 4

REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND GOD IN

COUNSELING

Abstract

This chapter includes the reflection of the researcher about the role of religion, spirituality, and god in counseling, focusing on the researcher's thoughts while engaged in the research process. It also includes reflections on the theories used in the study, the methods used, and the impacts on the researcher of investigating the experience of Non-Religious/Non-Spiritual folks receiving counseling in the Bible Belt of the United States.

Reflections on the Role of Religion, Spirituality, and God in Counseling

The time I spent on investigating the counseling experience of folks who do not believe in God led me to think about what the role of God should be in the counseling profession. As a counseling trainee, I heard about the importance of spirituality in counseling, as well as the purported mental health benefits by those who have a religious belief. As someone who does not believe in the existence of gods or the supernatural it sometimes seemed that what was being said is that I could not be a successful counselor because of this. Whether a god exists is a separate question from whether faith in a god is a protective factor in mental health. The issue of Gods' existence using an empirical methodology quickly runs into problems due to lack of falsifiability, and empirical evidence for Gods' existence is non-existent. The question of Gods' existence remains unanswered and is likely to be unanswerable. It can be explored whether having a god belief or belonging to a religion enhances mental well-being and continues to be investigated. The evidence points towards non-supernatural factors as the cause for the increased well-being, though religious proponents like to cite these as reasons to believe, or evidence for the existence of God.

This chapter will focus on my own experience while investigating the experience of Non-Religious/Non-Spiritual (NRNS) folks receiving counseling in the Bible Belt of the United States (U.S.). I will also reflect on the theoretical theories and methodologies utilized in this study. I will conclude with some reflection on possible directions for the counseling profession.

Studying the Experience of Atheists in the Bible Belt

Researching the topic of atheism came only after much thought and deliberation, some internal, others with my advisor, my doctoral cohort, and my partner. I considered how studying this topic and outing myself as an atheist could impact my career and my personal life. While I am comfortable in my position as someone who does not believe in God, making this known to others comes with some risks. I knew from looking at postings on websites and listservs that I would be eliminating myself from a faculty position at many private religiously affiliated institutions, though working at one of these was not in my career goals anyways. I was unsure about how it would impact my marketability at public institutions, but my experience and intuition told me that lack of religious adherence and lack of a god belief was something that was acceptable, as long as it wasn't discussed. Mention of atheism as a worldview would likely be met with discomfort at a minimum, and would likely lead to exclusion from opportunity and relationships. After some guidance from my doctoral advisor, who had experienced doing research on populations to which stigma was attached, I did decide to move forward to this research topic.

My first presentation on the topic I gave at a southern regional conference and atheism was distinctly in the title of my poster presentation. While I wasn't sure whether the location and time of the presentation were deliberately on the last day of the conference at the end of the row of boards that would be less visible, I had my suspicions that were also informed by similar experience reported by other atheist researchers. Because of the cancellation of another poster presentation, I did move my poster to a more suspicious location. Nonetheless, the presentation seemed to have a protective field

that was penetrated only by the bravest souls, all of which themselves identified as non-religious. A related presentation at a national conference drew much more interest, with reactions from practitioners and educators from outside of the Bible Belt expressing disbelief in the types of experiences that NRNS folks have in counseling in this region of the country.

To gain perspective on the need for religious and spiritual integration in the counseling profession, I attended an ASERVIC conference. Here I watched a similar force field effect around a poster focused on atheism which was not my own, and several presentations seemed to regard atheism as a DSM diagnosis. One presenter received audience affirmations and sighs of relief when she described how she was able to report to her clients' parents that after a few sessions the teen was agnostic, rather than atheist, a much less severe diagnosis with a better prognosis for a full recovery. As a counselor who identifies as NRNS, I felt anger towards the counselor who described how she invalidated the position of her client, sadness for the client who experienced this, and further frustration at the counselors in the audience who expressed relief at this invalidation.

The contrast between the reactions at the southern regional conference and the national conference strengthened my contention that this was an issue that needed to be explored. It also provided me with further evidence that the reactions to this research topic would be mixed, but that research and advocacy in this area was a worthwhile and necessary endeavor.

Reflections on Theories Used

I chose Personal Construct Theory (PCT) and Structuration Theory (ST) as my theoretical models informing the study. PCT states that a person's idea, or construct, about something, is informed by what it is, but also what it is not. I think that this is a fitting model for studying the dichotomous nature of theism vs. atheism, and religion vs. irreligion. Atheists are defined by their lack of belief, and the term atheist would be meaningless without theism. When individuals introduce themselves as Christian, this only has meaning in the context of not-a-Christian. The difficulty with using Personal Construct Theory is its' lack of familiarity in the counseling profession. Kelly (1955) is unfortunately less known, attributed partially to his academic writing style making the theory more difficult to understand (Schultz, 2009). I find that this theory lends itself well to understanding individuals, and how they function in the context of others.

For researchers who want to utilize this theoretical orientation, I recommend describing this approach to an audience unfamiliar with the theory. Feedback from conference attendees was that the term construct was understood as a schema, an understandable comparison, though one that fails to capture the depth or bipolar nature of the Kellyan' construct.

ST was an important addition in that it helped to ground the work in understanding the experience of the individuals within the structures and the context of time and location (Giddens, 1984). Both the time and the contexts are important considerations. The location of being in the Bible Belt provides a different experience of other places, and historically atheism is changing in its prevalence and social acceptability.

Reflections on My Use of Methods

Phenomenology was a good place to start this research since there is only little research in the social sciences on atheism, and essentially none specific to counseling. At the beginning of the research process, I did not appreciate the usefulness of this method as I was more familiar with experimental methods. I also have a great appreciation for how things are and see this as the common ground from which the accuracy of experiences should be judged. On the other side I am realistic, and through my counseling approach and understanding of people understand that individuals act based on how they perceive reality, and often times objective reality is less important at the moment.

My experience with this group is that NRNS folks have an appreciation for an objective reality, so there is a mismatch between the methodology and the worldview of the participants. Atheists have often spent some time rejecting the "experience of God" as a way of determining what is real, and are skeptical as personal experience as a reliable method.

The counseling field is only beginning to study and understand the experience of their NRNS clients, and the phenomenology is needed to get more counselors on board about the impacts of this gap. Much more research is needed using both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the experience and find the best ways to help people. The common goal of helping still leaves the question, given that RS, as well as NRNS clients, exist, how should religion be utilized, if at all, in counseling?

What Should the Role of Religion Be in Counseling?

In geographic areas where religious affiliation is considered to be the norm religion currently holds a sacred position in that it is often included in daily life without challenge. This is especially true in the Bible Belt of the United States, although it is not limited to this area. There is little controversy about using practices that are supported by evidence. When utilizing counseling interventions that include the existence of God as an assumption, several questions are of interest. One problem is whether the intervention results in a positive outcome for the client. However, what is considered a positive outcome? Counselors are trained to avoid value imposition and choosing for the client what a positive result is would likely fall into this category. There can be value in taking a directive approach and may be culturally appropriate.

Another option to who decides the positive outcome is its definition by the client, and something that I have accepted at times in my own practice. This, however, is at best an oversimplified method, and in practice is an unlikely position for a counselor to assume. A counselor who accepts the definition of a positive outcome offered by the client without further exploration may also be engaging in malpractice. Imagine a suicidal client who defines a positive outcome as their death or a client who sets a positive result that their partner is obedient without question. It is unlikely for a counselor to accept these outcomes as positive, especially without further consideration. Even counselors who are very directive in their approach are unlikely to decide the desired outcomes a priori and will consider the clients' situation.

A completely directive approach is therefore probably not the best option, and goals completely decided by the client, is also unrealistic. Positive outcomes are in

practice most effectively a negotiation between the client and their counselor. Whether religion or supernatural belief is something that is included in counseling could be part of this negotiation and goal setting during the initial phases of the counseling relationship. This does not absolve the counselor of making a professional determination about the role of religion.

The next question for consideration then is whether we should evaluate the role of religion and spirituality purely by its outcomes, essentially taking a utilitarian, or Machiavellian stance and justifying the means by their end. Again, we quickly run into problems. For example, conversion therapy, the practice of attempting to change someone's sexual orientation, could be argued to provide a client with a favorable outcome. Living in a society that welcomes your sexual orientation is easier than living in one that rejects you for it. However, taking this stance avoids asking the question, "At what cost?" The counseling profession, fortunately, has rejected this practice with ample justification, not limited to a shortsighted view on the impact of the individual subjected to this practice, but putting the blame where it is due, on the rejection, rather than the rejected. Utilizing only utilitarian ethics precludes the investigation of the premises underlying the methods to reach the outcomes, and should be considered insufficient as a rationale for evidence-based practice. The means, as well as the results, matter when it comes to the evaluation of ethical and effective outcomes.

As an example, some parents have used "monster spray," a spritzer bottle filled with water, to spray their children's rooms if they expressed fear of monsters. The monster spray, in some cases, proves to be an effective intervention for some children comforted by this practice. Parents are unlikely to believe that the monster spray has any

special properties that keep away monsters, or have any belief that monsters are likely to attack their children, or that monsters exist. Is this an acceptable practice for parents? An argument could be made that in this case there is no harm, though as a parent I would be skeptical of utilizing this technique because I am setting up my child to believe in something not based in reality. Would this be an acceptable method of treatment for an adult with a phobia? The placebo effect is a well-documented, empirically supported, and therefore evidence-based phenomenon. Because of the documented placebo effect, in pharmaceutical trials, placebo is the standard to beat, as opposed to receiving no treatment. Counseling, however, is not the medical profession, and the subjective experience of wellness is certainly appreciated. Does this mean that the counseling profession should be satisfied at placebo level impacts? We must be careful not to be placed in the same category as the snake-oil merchants.

While self-delusion may be a normative human experience, I am not a proponent of this strategy towards achieving well-being. This invokes the question of Plato's Cave, will counselors advocate to free the prisoners from their shackles and see reality for what it is, using the best methods to achieve this? Alternatively, will counselors support to remain shackled and to have contentment in the experience of the shadows of reality. Dennett (2007) explores this question as it relates to religion in detail, and provides a thoughtful critique of whether religion should be subjected to the same level of scrutiny as scientific claims. Dennett (2007) considers that it may be better for humanity to forgo this exploration if religion brings about so much good that it does not matter whether it is based in reality or not. Dennett ultimately concludes that religion should be scrutinized just like any other phenomenon, and does not deserve its' sacred position. What I am

considering is that clinicians engage in exploring the use of their interventions and include both deontological as well as utilitarian ethics to determine whether an intervention is used. The questions could include the following:

- Has the intervention been shown to be effective? Does the intervention reach the goal that the client and counselor have explored and is beneficial to the client and not harmful to society? (Utilitarian ethics)

- Is the intervention based on sound premises, validated through evidence and supported by the profession? (Deontological ethics)

While this process may not be explicitly applied, I think that counselors do engage in an evaluation of their approach, and their hope is indeed aligned with the utilitarian outcome-based goal. What may be lacking is the consideration of deontological concerns. Are the premises on which the intervention is based valid?

The field has some options when it comes to the approach to religion. If the profession decides that religion and theistic belief is something that is beneficial to individuals and that counseling is a profession that should address this, the question becomes which god/religion and some may be more beneficial than others. Much research and resources have been placed on this assumption and attempts made to push the profession in this direction and it seems to be the main goal of ASERVIC.

The second option is that religion is not a focus in counseling, and religious issues are referred to clergy. The concern here would be that this leaves little room to doubt religion or god(s), and the client would have to have certainty in this domain. A neutral position may leave individual practitioners to interpret whether religion should be included, and lack of skill in this has been documented.

A third option is that we see how the client uses religion, and work with the client to assess whether this is a beneficial or harmful way of coping or understanding. I think that once the sacred position of religion is removed, this becomes a bit easier to do. A person who keeps a talisman in their pocket to provide them with the confidence to do well in an interview may have little to lose from this practice. However, if the person does not prepare through standard practices, or relies only on the presence of the trinket to provide them with success, they would likely benefit from analysis on the reliance on this method. I realize that with this comparison that I am comparing God to a good luck charm, but both can provide the same level of comfort or confidence in this case. The counseling profession has hopefully grown past accepting methods because they are better than doing nothing, and reliance on supernatural beliefs as a tool of the profession should be dismissed as quackery.

Impacts on the Researcher

I have spent a lot of time thinking about the role of religion in counseling, as well as the impact on everyday lives. While I am certain that there are no gods, even if I had 100% certainty, which I think is impossible, the question still remains on whether belief in God is something the profession should encourage, leave alone, or discourage. I have struggled throughout this research in relationships with friends, family, students, etc. being more vigilant towards religionormativity. I have found that my relationships with others who are NRNS are easier than RS folks. I appreciate those who have been able to come to the conclusion that there are no gods in spite of the social and often family pressures to avoid this question. This has also translated to an appreciation of others who

are open in their identities that are less popular with societal standards, though significant overlap exists between who is rejected in our society and religious standards.

Ultimately the question of whether the supernatural exists, has an answer, either it does, or it doesn't. The counseling profession has mostly avoided taking a position on this topic, which is a safe place to be. If God exists, and has an interest in humans, appealing to this god would make sense, and counseling may be advised to use this. Any attempts to measure the effects of appealing to god have failed to capture such an effect, and so it would be better to encourage folks to use the methods to achieve wellness through strategies that do work.

I am different after doing this study in hearing the stories of people who have made the difficult decision to reject the idea of the existence of god(s) in a society where this belief is encouraged and assumed. Many of these folks have acknowledged that it would be much easier if they did believe, yet they cannot force themselves to do this, though they may have made serious attempts. I have been thinking more about my own atheistic beliefs, and how I arrived here, and have more appreciation for others who have shared a similar journey. I have heard the stories of counselors who have relied on appeal to God as a counseling intervention, and appreciate the counselors, religious or not, who avoid this temptation, especially in a social environment where this is accepted and encouraged.

References

Dennett, D. C. (2007). *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a natural phenomenon*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Kelly, G. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Schultz, P. D., Schultz, SE. (2009). *Theories of personality* (9th ed.). United States: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Thank you for your participation in this study. Please remember that you may withdraw

from participation in this study at all times per your consent form. May I begin

recording our interview now?

The first part of the interview will involve a series of questions that will help identify

how you think about different ideas. I will introduce a choice between two

concepts, ask which you prefer, and then proceed with follow up questions. At

times I will ask about opposite meanings to words or ideas. Do your best to

answer them based on your thoughts, ideas, and experiences, which may be

unrelated to dictionary definitions of the opposite meaning. Any questions?

Let's get started.

Q1People differ in their ideas about religion, what are some of the biggest differences

that you have seen, or have experienced? (Identify basic construct about religion

or spirituality as identified by participant.)

A1

Q2 Do you prefer _____ or _____?

A2

Q3 What is it about _____(A2) that you prefer?

A3

Q4 What would you consider the opposite of that (A3 or A6)? or As opposed to…

A4

Q5 Why do you prefer (A3 [A6]) over (A4)? **Or A4 over A6 if indicated**

A5

Q6 Why is it important to _____A5?

A6

Does A6 indicate new construct? Yes – go to Q4, No – discontinue laddering.

Q7 Please tell me about a time that you went to or sought counseling.

Possible follow up: How was this experience for you?

How this was impacted by religion?

How did you select a counselor?

What was your perception of the counselors' religious or spiritual views (if any)?

Q9 How is your life (relationships, work, education, family, daily tasks) impacted by

religion?

Has there been a time when it was different?

Q10 Were there any significant moments or events that stand out?

Q11 How have societal rules and laws impacted your life in regards to your beliefs?

What are these rules and laws?

Q12 Are there any other points that we did not discuss that are significant in relationship

to your experience of religion?

Appendix B

Research study on atheists who live in the bible belt of the United States

Hello folks! I am conducting research on atheists, and others who do not identify as religious or spiritual, and their experience seeking and/or receiving counseling. If you are an adult who has lived in the bible belt of the U.S. and are interested in sharing your experiences for the purposes of the study, please follow the link at the end of this flyer. Participants selected for interviews will receive a $15 gift card for their participation.

Participants should be:

1. 18 or older

2. non-religious and non-spiritual

3. have sought and/or attended

    counseling while living in the region of the U.S. known as the "Bible
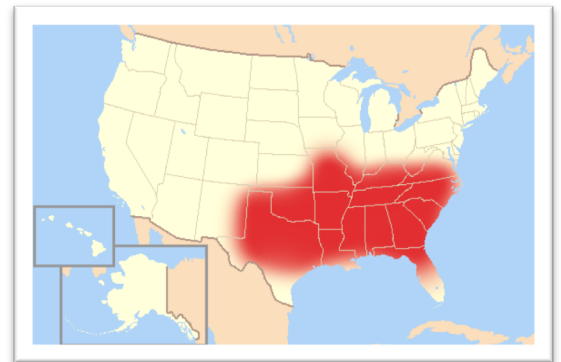
    Belt"

Bible Belt of the US

If you would like to volunteer for participation in this study, your participation would include:

1. A short questionnaire that includes demographic information and eligibility.
2. Formally consenting to the study.

3. Two audio-recorded interviews that will take approximately one-hour each.

4. Reviewing themes identified by researchers.

Participants who are selected for interviews will receive a $15 gift card for each interview in which they participated.

If you are interested, please take this questionnaire. You may also contact me directly should you have any questions.

Travis McKie-Voerste

Doctoral candidate

University of Georgia

870-219-4086 (cell)

tmckie@uga.edu

This study is being conducted under the direction of Dr. Anneliese Singh who can be reached at asingh@uga.edu or (706)542-5341

Appendix C

Some people use the terms "spirituality" and "spiritual" in a broad, NON-supernatural sense. They see those terms as just having to do with: a special or intense experience, an appreciation for existence, meaning in life, peacefulness, harmony, the quest for well-being, or emotional connection with people, humanity, nature, or the universe. In this way, an atheist could technically describe her or himself as being "spiritual" or as having had a "spiritual experience." In contrast to that *broad* approach, when you answer the items in THIS questionnaire we'd like you to think about "spirituality" and "spiritual" in the *specific*, SUPERNATURAL sense. And by "SUPERNATURAL" we mean: having to do with things which are beyond or transcend the material universe and nature. God, gods, ghosts, angels, demons, sacred realms, miracles, and telepathy are all supernatural by this *specific* definition.

Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Neutral	4 Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree
9. Spirituality is important to me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. The rightness or wrongness of my actions will affect what happens to me when my body is physically dead.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11. I have a spirit/essence beyond my physical body.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12. All other things being equal, a spiritual person is better off.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
13. The supernatural exists.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
14. I engage in spiritual activities.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
15. I feel a sense of connection to something beyond what we can observe, measure, or test scientifically.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
16. I cannot find worthwhile meaning in life without spirituality.					

NonReligious-NonSpiritual Scale

Many people have heard the word "religion" before and probably have some understanding of what that means. For this survey, we want you to think about religion in a specific way. When you think about religion for the following questions, we want you to think of institutionalized religion, or groups of people that share beliefs regarding the supernatural (i.e., gods, angels, demons, spirits) that are members of an organization. In this sense, the Roman Catholic Church would be a religion as it is a group of people with shared beliefs toward the supernatural and who are members of an organization. Members of a soccer club would not be considered a religion because they do not have shared beliefs toward the supernatural, while Hindus or Mormon would as they belong to an organization that emphasizes the membership's shared beliefs toward the supernatural.

Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Neutral	4 Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree
1. I'm guided by religion when making important decisions in my life.	□	□	□	□	□
2. Religion is the most powerful guide of what is right and wrong.	□	□	□	□	□
3. When faced with challenges in my life, I look to religion for support.	□	□	□	□	□
4. I never engage in religious practices.	□	□	□	□	□
5. Religion helps me answer many of the questions I have about the meaning of life.	□	□	□	□	□
6. I would describe myself as a religious person.	□	□	□	□	□
7. Religion is NOT necessary for my personal happiness.	□	□	□	□	□
8. I would be bothered if my child wanted to marry someone who is NOT religious.	□	□	□	□	□

Coding Directions:

To use the NRNSS, you must first reverse-code items #4 and #7. For example, a participant who selected "1 Strongly Agree" for Item #4, should get a score of "5" for Item #4 after reverse-coding has been implemented. The final step is to average all of the items, though this can be done with all of the scale items or separately for the two dimensions. If you average all of the items, you will have one comprehensive nonreligiosity/nonspirituality score. If you separate the two dimensions, you will have two scores, one for the nonreligiosity dimension and one for the nonspirituality dimension. NRNSS scale scores ranges from 1 to 5. Higher scores indicate higher nonreligiosity and nonspirituality or, inversely, *lower* religiosity and spirituality.

Citation:

Cragun, Ryan T., Joseph H. Hammer, and Michael Nielsen. 2015. "The Nonreligious-Nonspiritual Scale (NRNSS): Measuring Everyone from Atheists to Zionists." *Science, Religion, and Culture* 2(3):36–53.

License:

This scale is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/. Basically what this license means is that anyone can use this scale for any purpose, commercial or not. There is no cost. **It is free to use**. The only restrictions to the use of the scale are: (1) You need to cite the authors and, (2) if you decide to modify the scale, you cannot change the terms of the license, meaning all future versions of this scale have to be **free to use**.