

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF ATHEIST AND IRRELIGIOUS YOUTH LIVING WITHIN  
RELIGIOUS HOUSEHOLDS

by

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(Under the Direction of Anneliese A. Singh)

ABSTRACT

In the U.S., the population of people who identify as atheist or irreligious is growing (Brewster et al., 2014; Zuckerman, 2010, 2011; Kosmin & Keysar, 2008; Zuckerman, 2007). Recent studies show that atheism and irreligious people are viewed in a negative light with many persons in the US; as antipathy toward atheists is greater when compared to other religious groups, racial and ethnic groups, or (LGBTQ) people (Cragun et al., 2012). Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) found that conflict within family structures over a family member's lack of belief caused feelings of ostracism and discrimination from other religious family members. Moreover, adolescents report poorer parental relationships when parents are more religious than the youth (Kim-Spoon, Longo, & McCulloch, 2012).

Research on atheism remains poor within social science scholarship, psychology, and within counseling psychology specifically. Yet it is apparent that non-belief is quickly becoming a valid issue of diversity within psychology and counseling psychology as a profession (Brewster et al., 2014; D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007). Counseling psychology has traditionally been at the forefront of social justice issues and cultural competencies within APA, yet the lack of attention to atheism as a diversity issue is problematic (Brewster et al., 2014).

The current study sought to explore and understand the experiences of self-identified atheist/irreligious youth who live with their religious parents or are dependent on parents for financial support. A qualitative methodology known as psychological phenomenology, centered in social constructivist theory (Gergen, 1985; Creswell, 2012) and guided by the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003), served as the theoretical foundation into the exploration of the lived experiences of atheist and irreligious youth living within religious households.

Results of this study included the identification of three major themes (minority stress, outcomes, support) that represent the varied experiences of atheist/irreligious identifying youth in this study. Additionally, each theme contains one or more subthemes, and a total of seven subthemes were identified. The themes identified through this study have implications for clinical practice, for advocacy, and for continued research centered on the under measured population of atheists in the U.S.

INDEX WORDS: Atheism, Nones, Atheist Youth, Familial Religious Differences, Minority Stress, Phenomenology

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## DEDICATION

To my wife, Chandra Danielle Hansen, for being steadfast in your devotion to our family and for being the ultimate supportive backbone in all that we accomplish together. I truly cannot fathom how I could have done any of this without your love, support, and encouragement.

To my children, for giving me life. You help me to see the world in new and exciting ways, and I am the best of me when I get to be with you. I will love you for all of my days, and I am eternally fortunate to be your father.

This document is also dedicated to all secular, humanist, atheist, agnostic, freethinking, pastafarian, and all other religious “nones” out there who live in the world and feel the struggle to live in and/or proclaim their identity proudly and without shame. This is for you. Your views and feelings are important, and you are not alone.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The current study aimed to explore, examine, and understand the experiences of self-identified irreligious and atheist youth who live with their religious parents. It was anticipated that the knowledge created from this investigation would create a typology of experiences of children who do not endorse religious or spiritual beliefs, but are under the financial and housing support of parents who espouse strong religious beliefs. This research study utilized a phenomenological methodology to deliver descriptive accounts of the phenomenon under investigation. Participants in this study included a sample of 12 self-identified atheist and irreligious individuals who rely on religious parents for housing and financial support. This chapter begins with a short summary of the context and background around the concepts of the study. Following this summary is the statement of purpose, statement of the problem, general hypotheses, delimitations and definitions of operational terms. Also, included in this chapter is a discussion detailing the researcher's assumptions.

Throughout this document, the changes in the use of terms such as atheist, irreligious, agnostic, non-spiritual, and secular are purposeful and are not meant to be interchangeable. However, historical problems with survey construct validity, use of vague and otherwise inappropriate terminology, and ambiguity about individual and collective belief systems have caused confusion about how to properly define a population of people who do not believe in a God, deity, or higher power (Brewster,

Robinson, Sandil, Esposito, & Geiger, 2014). Most existing studies focus on atheist individuals, which denotes a lack of belief in a god or higher power, and is slightly different from agnostic, which is often defined as a belief that nothing can be known; that an agnostic does not believe nor disbelieve in the existence of a higher power (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007; Herek & Glunt, 1993; Myers, Smith, & Zimmerman, 2014).

Spirituality is a term that has no conclusive definition; however, the term is in most cases linked with belief in something otherworldly yet not always linked with specific beliefs in a god or single higher power (Linnenberg, 1997; Cragun et. al, 2012). The term irreligious is defined by an indifference to religion and religious practices, while non-spiritual denotes a lack of association or interest in spiritual matters (Zuckerman, 2012; Kosmin, 2007). When describing this current project or when this researcher describes participants, the terms *atheist* and *irreligious* are used as umbrella terms to encompass the lack of belief a god or higher power as well as a lack of interest in religious practices, respectively. Furthermore, the participants in this study were asked to self-identify with the terminology they prefer, rather than the researcher assigning terminology to the participants. To clarify, if a participant identifies as a person who does not believe in a deity, does not partake in a religion, but finds spirituality in some other form, the person was classified as irreligious and atheist in this study. This study assumes the potential for conflict between family and the participant over religious belief, regardless of the level, quality, or stage of atheism held by the participant.

### **Background and Context of Study**

Research on atheism and irreligion has grown in the recent years, which coincides with a growing segment of the US population that identifies as atheist or irreligious

(Brewster et al., 2014; Zuckerman, 2010, 2011; Kosmin & Keysar, 2008; Zuckerman, 2007). According to the 2009 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), the number of young adults in the United States (U.S.) that deny affiliation to religion have risen steadily for many decades, with 22 percent of the population aged 18-29 years of age identifying as atheist or agnostic, compared to 15 percent of the total population that chose “none” under religious preferences and 16 percent of all Americans that described themselves as secular or somewhat secular (Zuckerman, 2009; Kosmin & Keysar, 2008). However, despite numerous surveys that report statistics on the American religious landscape, inconsistencies in the total percentage of identified atheist or irreligious persons remain constant. For instance, according to a 2012 Pew Research Study, 16 percent of respondents identified as unaffiliated with religion, and one third of adults under the age of 30 claimed to be not affiliated with a religion (Pew, 2012). Yet in 2007, a Pew Forum Religious Landscape Survey found 5 percent of Americans that do not believe in God, and a 2005 Baylor Religion Survey found that 14 percent of respondents don’t believe in God but believe in a “higher power or cosmic force” while only 5 percent don’t believe in anything “beyond the physical world” (Zuckerman, 2009; Pew, 2007). Meanwhile, a 2008 Harris Poll found that 19 percent of Americans identify as atheist or agnostic. The difficulty in obtaining an accurate sample of demographics on atheists may be due to the lack of a universally accepted definition of what constitutes as atheism, in addition to the social stigma attached to the term *atheist*, which may prevent some from identifying themselves on surveys (Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Brewster et al., 2014). Thus, the presence of stigma, discrimination, and negative stereotypes about declaring oneself openly may inhibit the true number of atheist, irreligious, or “nones” that are

reported. (Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2012; Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Smith, 2012; Zuckerman, 2009).

**Attitudes toward atheists and irreligious persons.** Most recent studies show that atheism and irreligious people are viewed in a negative light with many persons in the US; they often report more antipathy toward atheists than to other religious groups, racial and ethnic groups, or Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer (LGBTQ) people (Cragun et al., 2012). In a 2006 survey, (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006), almost forty percent of U.S. respondents indicated that atheists are not aligned with their “vision of American society,” (p. 217) and nearly half would disapprove if their child wanted to marry an atheist. Furthermore, Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) found that conflict within family structures over a family member’s lack of belief caused feelings of ostracism and discrimination from other religious family members. In a 2009 study, 25 percent of self-identified atheists reported feelings of rejection, isolation, being avoided or ignored by family because of their atheism, and nearly thirty-eight percent reported a recommendation from family and friends to keep their atheism a secret (Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2012). Moreover, adolescents report poorer parental relationships when parents are more religious than the youth (Kim-Spoon, Longo, & McCullogough, 2012). This situation can be exacerbated by the power differential apparent between adolescents who live in the home and have less control over their family situation than older people, who have the option to form their own families and potentially cease contact with prejudiced parents if needed. It stands to reason that a younger self-identified atheist/irreligious individual may be more at-risk for discrimination or ostracism within the family context (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook,

2001). This study targeted those atheist/irreligious youth, to capture the experience of living in a household with parents that are religious.

**Atheist and irreligious persons as a marginalized population.** Recent literature has shown that atheists are regarded more negatively than other historically oppressed or marginalized populations, including African Americans, people of Islamic and Jewish faiths, and LGBTQ individuals (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Brewster et al., 2014). Some literature attempts to link the experience of identifying as atheist to being a sexual minority due to the atheist identity's lack of outward visibility, and that the irreligious/non-spiritual can stay hidden in a similar fashion to "the closet" metaphor used within the lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) community (Herek & Glunt, 1993; Myers, Smith, & Zimmerman, 2014). Given that both atheists and LGBTs are stigmatized minorities, and given that atheists also experience varying levels of discrimination in different contexts (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, & Nielsen, 2012; Brewster et al., 2014), atheists have the option of staying in "the closet" as a coping strategy used to protect their stigmatized identity against discrimination (Brewster, 2013; Siner, 2011). The term "coming out," first introduced into academic literature by Evelyn Hooker (1956), is used to reference a person publicly acknowledging one's homosexuality. Recently, prominent atheists such as the president of the American Atheists, Dave Silverman, and outspoken atheist Richard Dawkins have appropriated the term "coming out" for use with atheists, in an effort to have atheists proudly acknowledge their lack of faith in public. Research supports closeting as a useful coping strategy, despite the stress it causes the individual (Miller & Major, 2000), as the closeted individual often experiences less discrimination (Jones et al., 1984; Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2011). However, this researcher

finds the appropriation of LGBTQ terms by atheists and nonbelievers as troubling; while the two groups can seemingly share similarities, they differ in very significant ways. The researcher acknowledges that religion, unlike sexual orientation, is ultimately a choice; that no person is born with religious belief. Moreover, the atheist/irreligious/"nones" population is immensely diverse within the population itself, as many different individuals identify their position towards religion or deity differently (e.g. agnostic atheist, gnostic atheist, spiritual, areligious). Furthermore, the historical discrimination faced by atheist/irreligious persons is not equivalent to the history of violence, discrimination, and lack of equal rights faced by persons in the LGBTQ community (Herek, 1989; APA, 2012; Fassinger, 1995; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Gonsiorek, 1993; Meyer, 1995), and therefore, the appropriated historically LGB terms were used with extreme caution in this investigation.

#### **Atheism and irreligion as a multicultural issue in counseling psychology.**

Research on irreligion and atheism remains absent among social science scholarship, psychology, and within counseling psychology specifically (Brewster et al., 2014). In a search for atheism specifically, or how a counselor might approach a client who identifies as nonreligious or non-spiritual, no articles in the *Journal of Counseling and Development* or in the major educational, medical, or psychological databases (e.g., ERIC, Medline, PsychLIT, and PsychINFO) appeared. The few articles that do address atheism tend to focus on the compatibility of beliefs between counselors and clients (Richards & Davison, 1989), the effects of nonbelief on the spiritual and psychological well-being of clients (Herzbrun, 1999), or the importance of respecting clients'

religious/spiritual life during the counseling process (Miovic, 2004; D'Andrea & Springer, 2007).

Conversely, counseling professionals seem to be in agreement that the spiritual and religious beliefs of their clients must be explored and understood in order to be effective in the process of therapy (Ceasar & Miranti, 2001; D'Andrea & Springer, 2007; Hinterkopf, 1994; Ivey, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 1993; McMinn, Hathaway, Woods, & Snow, 2009). Recently, psychologists have expressed support for elements of spirituality and religion as vital dimensions of diversity and identity, so much that in 2008, the American Psychological Association (APA) sanctioned the development of a new journal, *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (Shulte, Skinner, & Claiborn, 2002; McMinn, Hathaway, Woods, & Snow, 2009; Brewster et al, 2014; Worthington, Kurusu, McCullough, & Sandage, 1996). Consequently, ample research points to correlations between religiosity/spirituality and improved mental health and physical well-being, including improved prognoses for people suffering from cancer, HIV, heart conditions, and other physically debilitating conditions (Galen & Kloet, 2010; Greenfield, Valliant, & Marks, 2009; Myers, 2000; Koenig et al., 2001; Koenig, 1998; Weber, Pargament, Kunitz, Lomax II, & Stanley, 2001; Brewster et al., 2014; Seeman, Dubin, & Seeman, 2003). However, the implied message in this research is that if religiosity/spirituality is linked to well-being, then a lack of religious beliefs—such as beliefs held by people who identify as atheist—must be linked to poorer outcomes (Brewster et al., 2014; Whitley, 2010).

Despite the recent surge of literature on religion/spirituality, very few studies include meaningful discussions on or from irreligious and atheist individuals (Galen &

Kloet, 2010; Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2011; Weber, Pargament, Kunik, Lomax II, & Stanley, 2011, Brewster et al., 2014; Whitley, 2010). It is apparent that non-belief is quickly becoming a valid issue of diversity within psychology and counseling psychology as a profession (Brewster et al., 2014; D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007). Moreover, the APA does not offer a set of standards of practice or competencies directed toward clinical work with religious and spiritual clients, nor their atheist, agnostic, and irreligious counterparts. While not directed at psychologists directly, the American Counseling Association (ACA) (2009) offers a brief set of competencies directed at addressing religious and spiritual issues in counseling, yet offers no information directed at atheist, agnostic, or irreligious clients specifically.

### **Purpose**

Historically, counseling research is silent on the experiences of atheist/irreligious persons, and the majority of the research conducted with this population is sociological or social psychological in nature. With the stigma associated with being atheist among religious individuals, it stands to reason that atheist and irreligious children might feel distress over their lack of faith with regard to their parents' system of belief. This inquiry hopes to provide a detailed description of such a phenomenon.

The rationale for this study stemmed from the researcher's desire to advance current research on atheism and irreligion as an issue of diversity within psychology and counseling psychology. By uncovering and naming the experience of being atheist and irreligious within a religious family, clinicians can recognize and better understand the experiences of these youth, and help them to explore their religious identity, and cope with potential discrimination in a safe and nurturing environment.

**Statement of the problem and research questions.** The purpose of this study was to examine and understand the experiences of self-identified atheist and irreligious youth who live at home and are financially dependent on their religious parents. This study aimed to explore the lived-experience of children who do not endorse religious or spiritual beliefs, but are under the financial and housing support of parents who espouse strong religious beliefs. The research question included the following:

1. What are the lived experiences of self-identified atheist/irreligious youth who live with and/or rely on religious parents for housing and financial support?

It was anticipated that the knowledge generated from this study would provide a clearer understanding of the experience of being a dependent child that holds no religious or spiritual belief within a religious household.

**General assumptions.** The role of the researcher is a vital part in the conduction of research, and it is imperative that the assumptions of the researcher are made explicit at the beginning of the study. In psychological phenomenology, the role of the researcher calls for exploration and constant monitoring of assumptions and biases at each point of the research process. Based on a review of literature pertaining to atheism, irreligion, spirituality, and discrimination, as well as from my professional education and personal experiences, three primary assumptions were made regarding this study:

1. This researcher assumed that themes or a typology would be identified that represent the experiences of being an atheist/irreligious youth within a religious household. The hypothesis was guided by the body of atheism literature, which articulates commonalities between the discriminatory experiences of atheist persons.

2. The researcher assumed that the presence of invalidation and potential discrimination within the individual's experience would have a negative impact on the individual as evidenced by a reluctance to admit to their beliefs or a negative experience after revealing their differing beliefs. This hypothesis was formed from existing literature reports of discrimination and negative outcomes after disclosing their atheist identity to family and friends.
3. The final assumed that atheist-identified individuals' experience a wide range of emotions before and/or after disclosure of their atheist identity to their family members. This hypothesis is based on the recognition that familial structures differ in various ways, and that reactions to religious difference vary by individual.

### **The Researcher**

The researcher is a counseling psychology doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia. I personally identify as an irreligious agnostic atheist who is interested in the lived experiences of atheist and irreligious youth and am seeking to better understand the conflict that arises when parents and children do not share the same feelings and ideas surrounding faith. I can personally relate to the experience of growing up in a religious home yet identifying as a non-believer. I grew up in a large, primarily Italian family, raised Roman Catholic, and over time I participated in the holy sacraments of the Catholic faith (communion, confession, confirmation, etc.). My experience with religion as a young boy was very positive, in part because of the social aspect of going through special rites of passage with friends and attending summer CCD (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine) with peers. Yet, I questioned my own faith from the earliest days of

my religious CCD classes. I remember experiencing feelings of guilt and shame, and I often wondered why I didn't believe as wholeheartedly as others appeared to while in church or with family. I had conversations with my priests, and I even reached out to become a Catholic altar boy in an attempt to become closer to the scripture--- an attempt to find God.

My internal questions about faith, God, and religion started to solidify during a traditional time of teenage angst and self-discovery, and I began to outwardly display my contempt for church services toward my mother, often leading to angry discussions centered on church attendance. I knew how devout in faith my mother was, and I felt that coming to terms with my shaky beliefs would be hurtful to her, so I decided against the disclosure, at least until I was older and less subjected to her power as a parent.

It wasn't until I was in my twenties, when I had ample time away from family and my church that finally admitted to myself that I was an agnostic atheist. Now, as an older adult, I have plugged myself into networks of secular thought, atheism, and irreligious groups, only to witness young adults in similar situations as I was in my younger years. Some of the youth report hostility as they confess their lack of faith to parents, with some of the youth ending up expelled from their home. Many older irreligious and non-spiritual members of these groups advise these youths to hold on to their secret beliefs; they implore them to not confess to their parents until they are financially viable and independent, out of fear of the examples of extreme repercussions. It became evident to me that living as an irreligious/non-spiritual youth within a religious household has the potential be confusing and often distressing to a young adult. My desire to explore this

phenomenon stems from my personal experiences and the experiences of others I have witnessed in my time within atheist and irreligious groups.

Moreover, the decision to reveal to my devoutly catholic mother that I was as an agnostic atheist had unseen consequences. Although my disclosure did not seem to initially be detrimental to her as she wanted to fully understand me, I fear she was immediately filled with worry for what might become of me and my religious soul in whatever idea of a spiritual afterworld she held close. Any feeling of freedom I might have gleaned from revealing my personal lack of spiritual and religious belief was quelled when I began to understand the pain I was causing to such a loving and supportive mother. With this research, I hope to give voice to and gain insight into the complex and sometimes confusing feelings among the atheist and irreligious children who grow up in religious homes.

It is because of my experiences as an irreligious/non-spiritual youth that I must both explore and monitor my subjectivity within the context of this study. I can use my understanding and awareness of my subjectivity in building accepting and trusting relationships with the participants. My training as a counseling psychologist will further help me to understand my position and subjective stance in relation to the participants' experiences, and it will allow me to lend my therapeutic presence with greater awareness of myself and my subjectivities within the interview, coding, and interpretation processes. A positive rapport with participants alongside the awareness of my positions and subjectivity may lead to intersubjectivity with the participants, which may enrich the results of the research study.

## Definitions and Operational Terms

A frequently expressed limitation of literature concerning atheism is its lack of commonly agreed upon definitions and terminology (D’Andrea & Sprenger, 2007). Terminology is often confused and intermixed among individuals to whom the terms are claimed as identity, while scholars have attempted to draw concrete lines around certain terms. There is a lack of consensus among scholars regarding definitions and terminology; which results in errors in interpretation of results as well as incomplete research findings and lack of cohesion within the research community. Furthermore, as new understandings are uncovered within the field of irreligious and atheist research, new terms are often coined. Although the meaning of words has been an area of contention in atheist and irreligious literature, for this current study operational definitions for terms and concepts used in this current work are listed below:

*Agnostic* – A term of positionality toward deity often used to describe indifference or uncertainty. As with many terms, the definition of agnostic is often flexible, with many different definitions in literature, ranging from “the impossibility of knowledge with regard to a god” (Smith, 1979, p.10), to “someone who is unsure of or undecided about the existence of God, or who believes that there are certain matters – such as existence of a God – that are beyond the scope of human knowledge and comprehension” (Eller, 2005, p.162). For demographic purposes, the term agnostic is commonly used in conjunction with the term atheist to describe a population to be used as a comparative group against various religious demographics.

*Atheist* – A term of positionality toward deity often used to describe a lack of belief in a God, Gods, or anything supernatural (Smith, 1979, D’Andrea & Springer, 2007;

Converse, 2003; Mueller, 2012). The term atheist does not presuppose a belief in the explicit nonexistence of a god or gods, although some that identify as atheist also identify with that view (Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009).

*Agnostic* – A term of positionality toward deity often used to describe indecision or feelings of uncertainty about the existence of a higher power or deity (Zuckerman, 2009). Some contend that an agnostic may believe that the existence of a God or deity are beyond the scope of human comprehension, and thus, take no position of confirming or denying their presence (Eller, 2005; Zuckerman, 2009; Smith, 1979; Goodman & Mueller, 2009).

*Faith* – A contentious term, difficult to define in a scholarly sense, *faith* has been defined and re-defined by scholars over time (Laurencelle, Abell, & Schwartz, 2002). Intrinsic faith has been defined as a belief in and reliance on a higher power, often to transcend self-centered needs (Allport, 1966; Laurencelle, Abell, & Schwartz, 2002). Faith is not necessarily always linked to agreement with a religious doctrine.

*God* – Otherwise referred to as a deity or higher power. The term God is largely devoid of a consensus scholarly operational definition, mainly due to differing religious ideologies about what God is or should be (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). The issue of who and what is God has been divisive since the middle ages (Martin, 1930; Emmons & Crumpler, 2000), most likely due to some religions espousing God as a personal and existing entity, while other religions may believe in a God as a state of enlightenment or Nirvana (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). God may be understood to be a universal and impersonal force that is intertwined with nature, yet others may understand God to be a

personal entity who responds to individual prayers; who sits benevolently over all life (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000).

*Humanist* – Because of social stigma attributed to the word atheist, some secular individuals prefer to use other terms, such as the term humanist (Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009; Pasquale, 2009). A humanist may believe in the promise of humanity's potential and take a personal responsibility in the world, while simultaneously rejecting the notion that goodness and morality comes from divine intervention (Mueller, 2012; Brewster et al., 2014).

*Irreligious* – A term describing a person's position toward religion, commonly referred to as either "a-religious" or "anti-religion" (Campbell, 1971; Schumaker, 1992). For the purposes of this study, we adopt Schumaker's (1992) definition of *irreligious* to describe "extremely low levels of religious belief and involvement, regardless of degree of hostility/passivity" (p.54).

*None* – A term describing a group of persons who do not identify with a religion, and is most often described in the place of a religious affiliation for comparative purposes (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer & Nielsen, 2012; Vernon, 1968; Cliteur, 2009). This term describes to positionality toward a deity, God, or anything supernatural. One can identify as a religious none and also believe in a god or some sort of higher power (Sherkat, 2008; Kosmin et al., 2009; Cragun, et al., 2012)

*Religion* – A term that refers to a formal, institutionalized structure of beliefs and doctrine, including belonging to an organized church, temple, or religious institution (Magaldi-Dopman, Park-Taylor, & Ponterotto, 2011; Worthington & Sandage, 2001; Pargament, 2000). In most religions, a shared holy or sacred book will prescribe and

outline explicit steps needed to achieve sacred betterment (Hill et al., 2000; Magaldi-Dopman, Park-Taylor, & Ponterotto, 2011). Pargament (2000) defines religion as a “search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (p.11).

*Religious* – A difficult term to define, often measured in terms of proxy variables such as church attendance (Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009). Religiosity has been loosely defined as personal beliefs in a higher power, deity, God or gods, as well as organized institutional practices and beliefs (Brewster et al., 2014).

*Secular* – A term describing a person who is irreligious, non-religious, or generally uninterested, indifferent to, or oblivious to religion, religious organizations, or religious activities (Kosmin, 2007; Zuckerman, 2009). This term is not a position toward deity, as both atheists and persons who believe in a God or higher power can be secular if they do not ascribe to being religious or attend religious services or activities. Furthermore, some identify as “culturally religious” and identify with a specific religion but do not believe in the theological content of said religion (Zuckerman, 2009; Demerath, 2000).

*Spirituality* – A difficult term to define due to its varied use in the American milieu (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009). This term is often used to describe a person’s relationship with a higher power (often going beyond religious affiliation), while others may ascribe the term to a search for meaning and purpose (Linneberg, 1997; Clinebell, 1995; D’Andrea & Sprenger, 2007; Dein, 2004; Magaldi-Dopman, Park-Taylor, & Ponterotto, 2011; Pargament, 2000). Spirituality has been reported as being experienced through religion, the universe, meditation, or a feeling of oneness with the world or universe (D’Andrea & Sprenger, 2007). Genia (1994) contends that spirituality refers to a “general sensitivity to moral, ethical, humanitarian,

and existential issues without reference to a particular religious doctrine” (p. XX), while Pargament defines spirituality as a “search for the sacred” (2000, p.12).

*Theism* – A term to describe a belief in one god (Cliteur, 2009). The term is synonymous with monotheism in United States culture, and is usually directed at one of the three main theistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Cliteur, 2009). Slife and Reber (2009) contend that theism assumes that belief in God is necessary for an understanding of the world, and that God is connected to and interacting with the natural world (Taylor, 2007). The prefix a- in atheism presupposes that atheists do not believe in the central tenets of theism (Cliteur, 2009).

### **Significance of the Study**

The field of counseling psychology espouses tenets of social justice and is at the forefront of multicultural efforts within the American Psychological Association. Over the past decade, multicultural scholarship has dominated the literature within the field of counseling psychology (Vera & Speight, 2003). Competencies have been developed (Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992) to enhance training and ensure that issues of diversity and social justice have been integrated into clinical practice and research efforts in the field of counseling psychology. Miller (1999) states that social justice is about "how advantages and disadvantages are distributed to individuals in society" (p.11), yet the literature and scholarship has been largely missing a growing but distinctly marginalized and stigmatized population: the atheist/agnostic, and/or irreligious person.

This study recognizes that religion plays a significant role in identity development and well-being in many individuals in the US, yet little has been done to understand those

same constructs within the atheist/agnostic or irreligious persons. Moreover, there is little research into the effects of differing faith within the dynamic of the family unit, and this study hopes to unfold how these dynamics effect the atheist and/or irreligious individual within that unit.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

Research on religion and spirituality has long overlooked the population of atheists, agnostics, irreligious, and those otherwise known as religious “nones.” As a result, the atheist, agnostic, and irreligious have frequently been misidentified, confused, and “othered;” often lumped together as a population despite the heterogeneous nature of those that fall under the umbrella of atheist, agnostic, irreligious, or “none.” This chapter seeks to provide an overview of the specific definitions and differences between personal identities associated with atheism, agnosticism, irreligion, and religious “nones.” Also included in this chapter is a detailed analysis of the current demographics of the population in the US, an overview of attitudes toward atheists and the irreligious in the US, and the relevance of this population to counseling psychology tenets. This overview will serve as a foundation for understanding the current state of atheists, agnostics, irreligious, and religious “nones” and the challenges they face in multiple settings in the US.

#### **Religion, Spirituality, Atheism, and Identity**

This study acknowledges role of religion and spirituality with context to the history of the world, the United States of America, and the experiences of individuals with whom religion and spirituality have been personally important. Spiritual and religious identity, in general, is now considered to be an important dimension in identity development (Constantine, Lewis, Conner, & Sanchez, 2000), and is now included as an

important dimension of a person's cultural identity (Hage, Hopson, Siegel, Payton, & DeFanti, 2006; Magaldi-Dopman, Park-Taylor, & Ponterotto, 2011). Erikson's (1980) developmental stages acknowledge the importance of religious identification, beginning with the initial stages of social emotional development into the later stages of adulthood, suggesting that a religious/spiritual identity develops and vacillates throughout a person's life as a core component of identity. For many people, religion and spirituality are integral in their conceptualization of a personal ethnic and cultural identity, helping to mold their sense of self (Cross, 1995; Magaldi-Dopman, Park-Taylor, & Ponterotto, 2011; Smart & Smart, 1992). However, for the past few decades, the other side of the spectrum of religious belief: the atheists, irreligious, and those otherwise classified as "nones", have largely been left out of the conversation of religious/spiritual identity in terms of worthwhile research being conducted. Before a researcher can realistically expect to conduct quality research on a largely forgotten demographic, an overall picture of the persons that fall under the umbrella of atheist, agnostic, or "nones" must be accurately defined and understood.

### **Atheism and Irreligion**

The word Atheist has been a contentious term among scholars, one with a seemingly complex and evolving meaning (Brewster et al., 2014). Historically, the term Atheist has been defined as a lack of belief in a God or Gods (Smith, 1979; D'Andrea & Springer, 2007), yet some scholars extend the definition beyond a deity to a lack of belief in anything supernatural (Converse, 2003; Mueller, 2012). Furthermore, the term Atheist has been confused and sometimes interchanged with the term Agnostic (defined as "the impossibility of knowledge with regard to a god" (Smith, 1979, p.10; Mueller, 2012) as

religious affiliations in comparison with other major religions. However, atheism and agnosticism describe positions toward a divinity or deity, and these positions do not prohibit some from identifying theological atheists while still claiming a religious affiliation (Cliteur, 2009; Kosmin et al., 2009; Sherkat, 2008; Cragun et al., 2012). The term Atheist does not presuppose a belief in the explicit nonexistence of a god or gods, although some that identify as atheist also identify with that view (Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009). For example, while that the term Atheist or Agnostic describe positions toward deity or a higher power (which is separate from positionality to religious affiliation), some demographic samples include irreligious participants that identify as atheist yet ascribe to spiritual beliefs of some form of higher power (Cliteur, 2009; Kosmin et al., 2009; Cragun et al., 2012). Cragun et al. (2012) describe this phenomenon under the ‘distinctiveness principle’ (Vignoles, Chryssochoou, & Breakwell, 2000), which postulates that some atheist and/or irreligious people may choose to identify with a religious group in order to find meaning, fulfillment, raise self-esteem, or to simply maintain identity with a majority. Further complicating matters, some self-identified atheists may reject the notion that they are ‘spiritual’ if the language includes terms such as ‘sacred’ or ‘divine’ (Hill et al., 2000; Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009), yet still endorse variables linked to spirituality or conceptualize them in unique ways (Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009).

Historically, research has confused, conflated, and misinterpreted terms that otherwise would be used to describe the atheist and/or irreligious. Most surveys that assess the American religious landscape do not simply ask respondents if they follow a religion or believe in a higher power, but instead ask respondents which religion they

follow (Cragun et al., 2012; Kosmin & Keysar, 2009; Lugo, 2008). When asked which religion an irreligious or atheist person identifies with, some individuals respond with answers such as ‘atheist’, ‘agnostic’, ‘secular’, or ‘humanist’ among others (Cragun et al., 2012; Kosmin & Keysar, 2008), which may be due to stigma associated with the term “atheist” (Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009; Brewster et al., 2014). Despite confusion about meanings behind these self-assigned labels, some researchers have begun to group these individuals into a group known as ‘religious nones’ or ‘nones’ (Cragun et al., 2012; Lugo, 2008; Kosmin & Keysar, 2009). Conversely, using such a vague catch-all term such as ‘none’ invariably results in a disturbingly heterogeneous population in terms of religious attitudes, behaviors, and practices (Hout & Fischer, 2002; Keysar et al., 2003, Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009; Vernon, 1968). Atheists are not homogenous in the reasons for becoming atheistic and/or irreligious, and they aren’t likely to view themselves in a cohesive group identity (Norenzayan & Gervais, 2013; Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999; Ysseldyk, Haslam, Matheson, & Anisman, 2012; Franks & Scherr, 2014).

While finding a consistent definition for the term ‘atheism’ is problematic, defining terms such as ‘religious’ or ‘religiosity’ have proven to be incredibly difficult to define and even more challenging to measure (Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2012; Egbert et al., 2004; Hall & Edwards, 2002). Historically, when scholars seek to measure religiosity they often turn to proxy variables such as ‘church attendance’ in order to quantify religiosity on a measurable scale (Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2012). Measurement problems with using such a problematic variable abound, including problems with self-presentation bias among churchgoers alongside problems with those

that may espouse great religious belief but are otherwise unable to attend church or temple proceedings (e.g., disability/health, proximity to a desired church or temple) (Hadaway et al., 1998; Presser & Stinson, 1998; Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009). Brewster et al. (2014) defines religiosity as “personal beliefs in a God or gods and organized or institutional practices and beliefs” (p. 630).

### **Atheist and Irreligious People in the United States**

Statistically, self-reported individuals who identify as atheist, irreligious, or “religious none” have risen steadily over the past few decades (Pew Research Center, 2015; Kosmin & Keysar, 2009; Cragun et al., 2009). The most recent United States Religious Landscape Study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2015) found that the number of respondents that identified as unaffiliated (identified as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular”) with religion rose more than 6 percent (22.8% overall) since the last study in 2007. The rise in the religiously unaffiliated proved constant throughout the religious landscape, affecting all regions of the United States (US) and across all demographic groups, totaling over 56 million people (Pew Research Center, 2015). Statistics and scholars point to generational differences, as the Millennial generation (born 1981-1989) and younger Millennial population (born 1990-1996) both cite percentages in the 34-36% range for persons identifying as unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, 2015). Surprisingly, the number of Millennial generation respondents (adults now in their late 20’s and early 30’s) that identified as unaffiliated have jumped more than 9 percentage points since 2007, while nearly a quarter of Generation X respondents claim to be unaffiliated with religion or identify as atheist or agnostic (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Another study completed in 2008, the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009), estimated the number of American adults without religion at 15 percent of the population, up from almost 7 percentage points from their prior survey in 1990 (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009; Cragun et al., 2009). The 2008 ARIS found that American atheists are predominantly male (77%) and younger than 50 (59%) (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009; Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009). Compared with the general population, atheists are more likely to live in the West and Northeast US as opposed to the South, while Asian and Caucasian (non-Hispanic) populations are more likely to be atheist and African American populations are less likely to identify as atheist (Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009). Furthermore, a random sample of 1,021 American adults who self-identified as ‘religious nones’ found that those who also identified as atheist were wealthier, better educated, and more likely to be White, male, and older than others with no religious affiliation (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009; Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009). It is unclear whether the rising number of self-identified atheists reflects an increase in the number of citizens who have chosen to publicly identify in a national survey despite the social stigma, or if there is an actual sizeable growth in the numbers of those who do not believe in a deity or God (Smith, 2013b). There is evidence that due to discrimination and social stigma, the actual number of atheists being captured in the various studies is still underrepresented due to individuals who hold no belief in a deity or God but still chose to not self-identify on a nationwide survey (Smith, 2013b).

Despite consistent reports of the growing segment of the population that chooses to not affiliate with religion, those who express an explicitly atheist view remains a very small segment of the population (Smith, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2015). Clouding

the issue of obtaining an accurate sample of atheists in America is the aforementioned lack of consensus about how to define an atheist, as well as the lingering social stigma associated with taking on the label of ‘atheist’ that may prevent large swaths of the population from identifying publicly (Smith, 2010; Brewster et al., 2014; Zuckerman, 2007; Mueller, 2012; Goodman & Mueller, 2009). Regardless, the United States remains an overwhelmingly theistic society, and while estimates of the exact number of U.S. citizens that report a religious affiliation may vary, percentages of religious citizens dominate the population (between 75%- 95% depending on the survey) (Smith, 2010; Gallup & Lindsay, 1999; Kosmin & Keysar, 2008; Brewster et al., 2014).

Across cultural groups, among respondents to the ARIS in 2008, the sample of self-identified “nones” were overwhelmingly white (around 70%), with 11 percent identified themselves as black, 13 percent identified as Hispanic, 2 percent as Asian, and 5 percent as Other. Relative to the US population, whites are slightly more likely to identify as atheist, while black atheists are slightly lower than their proportion of the US population (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009). Hispanic populations were reported to be growing rapidly in both their percentage of the US population, but in their overall percentage of respondents that identified as none in the ARIS (2008). The authors find that the rapid increase of nones in the Hispanic population is contraindicated by their traditionally religious population (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009).

Furthermore, Hammer et al. (2012) note that of the sample of self-identified atheists in their study, a majority identified as white, educated, and middle to upper class (reflective of the profile of surveyed atheists in society), but still fails to capture the reality of atheists from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Reports and intensity of

discriminatory acts may be exacerbated by the intersection of multiple marginalized and historically oppressed identities, and it is imperative that future research studies examine the prevalence of and gain a typography of experiences of discrimination within subsets of self-identified atheists/agnostics and irreligious persons (e.g. atheists of color, atheists under the LGBTQ umbrella, atheists with disabilities, working and lower class atheists) (Hammer et al., 2012).

### **National Attitudes toward Atheists**

In the United States, people who identify as atheist or without religion are in the minority, despite the raising rates of those who are choosing to identify as such. Depending on the interpretation of the most recent surveys (Pew Research Center, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2012; Kosmin & Keysar, 2009), the overall number of identified atheists/agnostics translates roughly to the size of a comparable minority group such as sexual minorities (around 4% to 10%; Miller & House, 2001; Brewster et al., 2014), Black/African American (around 13%), and Asian American populations in the United States (around 5%) (U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011; Brewster et al., 2014).

There is an overwhelming amount of evidence stating that the general attitude of Americans toward atheists tends to be negative (Cragun et al., 2012; D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007; Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Downey, 2004; Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009; Weber et al., 2011; Smith, 2010; Brewster et al., 2014). The antipathy toward atheists has been described as a 'boundary-marking' issue in that atheism runs counter to many Americans' beliefs that religion is inherently a part of 'good society' (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2012; Cragun et al., 2012). In other words, religion is a

cultural norm; it is seen as favorable and acceptable, and those that eschew religion are more likely to face ostracism and discrimination. In fact, seven states (Arkansas, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas) in the US have articles in their state constitution that require a belief in God to hold public office, while Maryland requires belief in God for jurors and state witnesses (Heiner, 1992; Goodstein, 2014).

Recent survey data has consistently found Americans view atheists more negatively and regard them as “more troubling” than other historically oppressed and marginalized populations, including Black/African Americans, people of Islamic and Jewish faiths, and LGBTQ individuals (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Brewster et al., 2014). Furthermore, on a national 2014 Pew Research American Trends Panel, a random sample of 3,217 adults ranked atheists (roughly 41% on a scale of 1-100) and Muslims (40%) on the bottom of a scale ranking feelings of positive and negative feelings towards groups, including Jews (63%), Catholics (62%), Evangelical Christians (61%), Buddhists (53%), Hindus (50%), and Mormons (48%) (Pew Research Center, 2014). According to Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann (2006), Americans, in general, report higher levels of antipathy toward atheists than toward other religious groups (including Muslims, Jews, and conservative Christians); toward oppressed racial and ethnic groups (such as Black/African Americans, Latino/a persons, Asian Americans, and immigrants); or toward persons under the LGBTQ umbrella (Cragun et al., 2012). Historically, national opinion polls from past and current decades show a consistent pattern of fear, disgust, and distrust concerning Americans’ views on atheists and atheism (Gervais, 2011; Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011; Franks & Scherr, 2014), with the primary

motivator for anti-atheist sentiment being a lack of trust (Gervais et al., 2011; Franks & Scherr, 2014).

Moreover, it has been hypothesized that negative attitudes toward atheists may be attributed to feelings about morality, as most Americans see religion and spirituality as a primary means of instilling moral fiber in a person (Galen et al., 2011), thereby increasing perceptions that atheists may be less moral than religious or spiritual persons (Brewster et al., 2014). Franks & Scherr (2014) state that the feeling that “God is watching” is likely to promote adherence to forms of morality and shared social norms that serve to regulate a person’s behavior while leading others to believe that a person’s behavior will conform to social norms even when the person is alone (Haidt, 2007; Henrich et al., 2010). Moreover, when conservative Christians were asked to imagine life without God, the resultant narratives given were full of violent and sexual impulses and selfish behaviors that undermined the social order of the world (McAdams & Albaugh, 2008; Franks & Scherr, 2014). The resulting implicit association is that a person who does not believe in a god or follow a religiously moral doctrine is less trustworthy and more likely to be immoral in their decision-making. Furthermore, research has shown that some Americans view atheists are poorly parented, immoral, unhappy, antisocial hedonists (D’Andrea & Sprenger 2007; Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009; Ehrlich & Van Tubergen 1971; Harper 2007; Hood et al. 1996; Jenks 1986).

When considering the overwhelming evidence detailing the negative attitudes toward atheists in the United States, it is unsurprising that atheists report having experienced significant anti-atheist prejudice and discrimination across settings, including schools, places of employment, and within the legal system (Cragun et al.,

2012; Brewster et al., 2014). In the political domain, public opinion polling has shown that qualified candidates who are open about their atheism suffer severe deficits in support from voters, as only 54% of respondents endorsed that they would vote for an atheist presidential candidate (Jones, 2012; Franks & Scherr, 2014). In addition, a 2006 Gallup poll found that 84% of respondents agreed with the statement, “America is not ready for an atheist president” (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006). Atheists were also most likely to be selected by participants as the group that does not share their “vision of America,” while half of all respondents reported disapproval if their child were to marry an atheist, outnumbering the second most disapproved group (Muslims) by a 14% margin (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Franks & Scherr, 2014).

Reports of discrimination against the irreligious and atheist in are varied across settings, but include the workplace, school settings, in the military, within the family, and in their own social network. Downey (2004) has documented acts of discrimination against the irreligious since 1995 through the Anti-Discrimination Support Network in Philadelphia. She highlights hundreds of reports of discrimination against the irreligious, including death threats and physical violence, in addition to reports of job dismissals (Cragun, et al., 2012). The ARIS in 2009 found that almost 22 percent of individuals who don't identify with a religion report experiencing discrimination in one or more contexts (e.g. family, workplace, school, military, socially, or volunteer settings), while 41% of self-identified atheist/agnostics reported personally experiencing discrimination in at least one context in the past 5 years that was directly related to their status as a non-believer (Cragun et al., 2012; Kosmin & Keysar, 2009; Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2011). For the most part, accounts of discrimination mirror those reported by

other marginalized populations, including physical assault by peers, death threats, familial rejection and ostracism, being denied employment, being denied fair service at area businesses, and being rejected from community organizations (Downey, 2004; Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2011; Heiner, 1992; Kaye, 2008; Nussbaum, 1999; Peters, 2009).

Atheists and the irreligious are subjected to unique forms of discrimination in addition to the overwhelming stigma and feelings of distrust from the majority of Americans. Among some of the documented acts of discrimination experienced by the irreligious and atheist reported in various publications include: being subjected to proselytizing in unwanted circumstances and situations (Smith-Stoner, 2007); wishes for a secular funeral being superseded by religious beliefs of family and significant others (Saeed & Grant, 2004); having to swear an oath before God before being allowed to join organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars or the American Legion (Heiner, 1992); being told that a disability will be cured by God if they pray and devote themselves (Hwang, 2008); having their life threatened by fellow soldiers after revealing atheism (Kaye, 2008); and having custody rights denied because of their atheism (Volokh, 2006); having their car vandalized (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006) (Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2011; Cragun et al., 2012). In a 2011 study of discrimination, Hammer et al., found that as a result of self-identifying atheist, almost 97 percent reported being victims of slander, 93 percent reported being coerced, almost 60 percent reported feeling socially ostracized, 16 percent reported being denied goods, opportunities, and services, almost 14 percent reported being the victim of a hate crime, and almost 84 percent reported acts of discrimination not specified in the report. Downey

(2004) remarks that many more instances of ostracism and discrimination likely go unreported due to fears of more severe repercussions (Cragun et al., 2012).

Predictably, discrimination towards the atheist and irreligious will vary according to context. For instance, self-identifying as an atheist or agnostic significantly increases the likelihood that discrimination will occur in a school, college, or workplace setting (Cragun et al., 2012). Perhaps more troubling, atheist and irreligious individuals are substantially more likely to report experiencing discrimination in both family and social settings rather than in the workplace, school, or other settings (Cragun et al., 2012). Research has shown that self-identifying as an atheist, agnostic, or irreligious will increase the likelihood of reporting discrimination in a social setting by a significant margin (Cragun et al., 2012), which could be attributed to the lack of power most young atheist/irreligious children have over choosing their own social network.

Within the family context, research has found that the age of an irreligious and/or atheist individual will affect the odds of ostracism and discrimination (Cragun et al., 2012). Younger individuals inherently have less power and control within the family context; should their hidden identity become known and cause conflict, younger family members don't have the option to cease contact with prejudiced family members (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Cragun et al., 2012). Cragun et al., (2012) found that predictors of familial discrimination include parental religious identification and region. Specifically, parents with two different religions showed a significant increase in the odds for discrimination in the family context relative to having two parents that were irreligious and/or atheist. Another study found that atheists who grow up with strict religious expectations are more likely to report discrimination by family

members (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997). Hunsberger & Altemeyer (2006) found that more than half of the atheists sampled reported experiencing difficulties with relatives and friends due to their lack of religious belief.

Fear of ostracism and discrimination may lead many self-identified atheist and/or irreligious Americans to conceal their identity for their own protection. Much like the characteristics of those under the LGBTQ umbrella, atheist and irreligious identities can be hidden; characteristics that make them minorities and disliked by a majority of the population are not outwardly visible (Cragun et al., 2014; Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Franks & Scherr, 2014). Atheists have the option of attempting to “pass” in everyday life by avoiding topics that might raise awareness of their minority status (Garfinkel, 1985; Cragun et al., 2012), or they may rely on knowledge from previous experiences with religion in an effort to stay concealed when forced into religious conversation. Regardless, when the identity of these individuals is revealed, the potential for ostracism and discrimination is significantly increased (Cragun et al., 2012).

Resultantly, many atheists choose to keep their stigmatized identity hidden not unlike the phrase “being in the closet”, coined and used by the LGBTQ community as a way to describe hiding a stigmatized identity as a coping strategy to defend against serious discrimination (Brewster, 2013; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Siner, 2011). “Closeting” can be stressful to the person choosing to stay hidden, as the person experiences less overt discrimination and in exchange, cuts off an integral part of their identity, while “coming out” atheist involves shedding the safety of invisibility to claim an stigmatized identity (Brewster et al., 2014; Cimino & Smith, 2011)

## **Atheism, Irreligion, and Mental Health**

A majority of the research on atheism and irreligion over the past three decades has focused on examining the association between religiosity and/or spirituality and multiple indicators of physical and psychological well-being (Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009; Waite & Lehrer, 2003; Myers, 2000). Populations sampled include adolescents (Wong et al., 2006), veterans (Chang et al., 2001), persons with medical conditions (Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009), and disabled and otherwise medically compromised older adults (Koenig, 2004; Yohannes et al., 2008), all appearing to find positive effects of religion and spirituality on mental health outcomes (Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2009). The associated implication of these findings is that if religiousness or spirituality is linked to well-being, a lack of religious and spiritual belief (e.g. atheists, agnostics, irreligious, or nones) must be linked to poorer mental health outcomes (Brewster et al., 2014; Koenig, 2008; Whitley, 2010).

However, findings are often contradictory and offer discrepant results based on inconsistent conceptualizations of both religiosity and mental health (Galen & Kloet, 2010). For example, Myers (2000) found that the proportion of “very happy” people among those who feel “extremely close to God” is higher than those whose beliefs are “somewhat close” or “not close or unbelieving.” The category “not close or unbelieving” confuses and conflates those who might be considered weakly religious (yet still believe) and those that do not believe (confidently non-religious), therefore throwing conclusions into question. In most studies that accurately distinguish between the atheist, irreligious, and nones from the weakly religious ultimately end up finding curvilinear patterns (Diener & Clifton, 2002; Maselko & Buka, 2008; Schnittker, 2001), resulting in strength

of conviction (atheistic or religious) as the most likely culprit for fluctuations in mental health (Galen & Kloet, 2010; Wilkinson & Coleman, 2010), not that atheism, irreligiousness, or non-belief as deleterious to psychological functioning (Weber et al., 2011).

Recently, many scholars have openly called for an increase in caution against links between mental health outcomes and religiosity and/or spirituality (Brewster et al., 2014; Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2011; Miller & Thoresen, 2003), citing the flaws in the strength of chosen methodology, including questionable construct validity (Hill & Pargament, 2003), analytic issues (Christenfeld, Sloan, Carroll, & Greenland, 2004), and a lack of atheist control samples (Hwang et al., 2011; Kier & Davenport, 2004; Pasquale, 2007; Weber et al., 2011).

Regarding atheists, the irreligious, and psychological distress, studies are a mixed bag, as negative feelings towards a God or deity (Exline et al., 2011; Exline et al., 1999) emerged, while studies that measured overall happiness (Baker & Cruickshank, 2010), and coping with old age (Wilkinson & Coleman, 2010) produced the same (or better) outcomes as religious persons. Conflicting reports of positive effects and negative effects in studies that measured death anxiety (James & Wells, 2002; Lundh & Radon, 1998), and spiritual quality of life (O'Connell & Skevington, 2010; Herzebrun, 1999). A study by Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) compared atheists to the US population and found that atheists are largely more flexible and critical in their thinking, less prejudiced, and more resistant to social conformity (Mueller, 2012). Hout and Fischer (2002) found that atheism can serve as a practical and symbolic statement against traditional religion, while

Smith (2010) found that after claiming their atheism in public settings, feelings of empowerment, confidence, and a new sense of self emerged.

Nevertheless, when researchers look beyond atheism/agnosticism and irreligiosity as sources of distress, the effects of being a stigmatized minority in the US may become more central to the overall discussion about atheism/agnosticism and irreligion within the mental health literature. Indeed, a study by Hammer et al., (2011) found themes of discriminatory stress reported by self-identified atheists that included assumed religiosity, lack of a secular support structure, lack of church and state separation, negative effects on family, unreciprocated tolerance, and anticipatory stress. In this study, it wasn't the idea of being atheist that was distressing, but living as an atheist in a nation and society that views atheism as a negative that causes distress and negative mental health outcomes.

Hwang, Hammer, and Cragun (2009) as well as Brewster et al., (2014) have called for a model of minority stress (Meyer, 2003) to be used in as a lens in which to view, interpret, and discuss the mental health and well-being of atheists and the irreligious in the US. Initially developed by Meyer (2003), the minority stress model posits that experiences of stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion will invariably lead to increased stress and poorer psychological outcomes; that simply identifying with a stigmatized and socially marginalized group can cause physical and psychological consequences. In other words, a person in a marginalized population will view themselves as "different" from the norm, and will internalize the negative stereotypes, stigma, discrimination, and prejudice directed at their targeted identity, which may lead to an increase in negative self-evaluation and thus, poorer mental health outcomes (Meyer, 2003). Meyer's model concentrates on external stressful events and conditions,

expectations and/or anticipatory stress and the vigilance that arises as a result, and the internalization of negative societal attitudes (Meyer, 2003). Also mentioned is the potential for additive stress in the form of the concealment of the targeted identity, which can exacerbate already present stressors.

### **Atheism, Irreligion, and Counseling Psychology**

Historically, psychological science—more narrowly, applied psychology—has a complicated relationship with religion, spirituality, and atheism; as most touted pioneers of counseling and clinical psychology were not silent about their atheism nor their preference for distinct barriers between clinical work and religious belief (Brewster et al., 2014; Ellis, 1971; Hoffer, 1951; Horney, 1965). Early theoretical work was dominated by anti-religion and atheistic viewpoints—most notably with Albert Ellis and Sigmund Freud—who have expressed viewpoints that religion was a collective neurosis (Freud, 1907), an illusion unsusceptible of proof (Freud, 1927), or emotional disturbance (Ellis, 1980).

Psychological research on spiritual and religious beliefs began to gain popularity within the mental health literature in the late 1980s, and soon a rapid increase in papers examining religion and spirituality's effect on the human experience followed (Brewster et al., 2014). Soon after, religion and spirituality began to be considered as a vital dimension of diversity and personal identity (Brewster et al., 2014; Constantine et al., 2000; McMinnet al., 2009). The emergence of multiculturalism as a “force” (Pedersen, 1991) in psychology and counseling has furthered interest in religion and spirituality as important aspects of culture and cultural identity (Shulte, Skinner, & Claiborn, 2002; Worthington, et al., 1996). Furthermore, the importance of religion and spirituality as

important essentials of culture and identity is illustrated throughout the Handbook of Multicultural Counseling (Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, & Alexander, 1995).

Although there is very little research that exists in terms of religion and spirituality as a specific construct for psychologists' identity, psychological and counseling professionals are becoming increasingly convinced that effectiveness in the counseling domain is dependent on effective exploration and understanding of the client's spiritual and religious beliefs (Hinterkopf, 1994; D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007; Ivey, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 1993; Magaldi-Dopman, Park-Taylor, & Ponterotto, 2011; McCullough, 1999). Resultantly, researchers and scholars have worked to explore ways in which counselors and psychologists can use religious and spiritual beliefs to better serve clients and maximize the effects of treatment (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007; Hinterkopf, 1994; Wolf & Stevens, 2001). Moreover, in 2008, the APA-sanctioned a new peer-reviewed journal, entitled *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, which began print in 2009.

Alarming, despite the surge in psychological literature on religious and spiritual beliefs, very few studies include meaningful discussions of atheists, irreligious, or nones, and the few articles that include atheism do not address atheism or irreligion as a valid diversity issue (Brewster et al., 2014; D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007). In an exhaustive content analysis of academic scholarship about atheism and atheist individuals over a 12-year time period (2001-2012) Brewster et al., found 100 articles that met criteria to be coded (down from 450 initially selected), which is a stark difference from parallel searches for Christian (n = 14,499), Jewish (n = 7,874), Muslim (n = 6,315), Buddhist (n = 2,464), and Hindu (n = 975) religions. From the 100 empirical articles selected, most

of the articles were focused on three dimensions: (a) comparative similarities/dissimilarities of religious/spiritual persons (primarily Christians) to atheists, (b) broad feelings about atheists on a societal level, and (c) how belief systems affect mental health. Noted gaps in the literature on atheist and irreligious individuals include relationships, parenting and family dynamics, workplace issues, and developmental problems. However, only 31 of the 100 articles were relevant to psychology specifically, and their search found general trends attempting to link atheism and mental health outcomes, while the nonempirical articles focused on calls for more research on atheism or calls for more clinical training to promote effective work with atheist clients (Brewster et al., 2014).

Brewster et al., (2014) hypothesize that the lack of research regarding atheism could be linked to the reluctance of scholars to conduct meaningful research on controversial topics. The amount of research that supports the status of atheists and irreligious as a marginalized minority group within the US is overwhelming, yet the invisibility of persons who identify as atheist and/or irreligious in the multicultural and social justice discourse remains puzzling for counseling psychology (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007; Whitley, 2010). Counseling psychology as a field has been at the forefront of social justice issues and cultural competencies within APA, yet the lack of attention to atheism as a diversity issue is problematic as it relates to our ability as counseling psychologists to provide evidence-based treatments to atheist clients (Brewster et al., 2014).

**Competencies, Social Justice, and Counseling Psychology.** Within the APA as a whole, counseling psychologists have historically led the charge for overhauls in policy,

and spearheaded the construction of competencies and standards for practice with clients of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. However, despite a call to the profession for multicultural standards and competencies (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992), no set of competencies directed toward religion or spirituality have been approved by the APA as an institution. The APA has otherwise approved sets of competencies and standards to clinically treat populations such as older adults (APA, 2004), and LGBT populations (Division 44, 2000), as well as overall competencies directed toward multicultural education, training, research, practice and organizational change (APA, 2002). Kaslow, (2004) notes the importance of competencies in training psychologists, stating that a competency-based approach to education and training will invariably bolster the relationship between individual learning, curriculum design, outcomes of treatment, and overall program improvement. Furthermore, sets of competencies enhance breadth of training of future psychologists and help curriculum to keep pace with new research trends, in addition to improving the accountability of training programs (Kaslow, 2004; Sumerall et al., 2000).

Given the hesitance for many psychologists to approach topics of religion and spirituality, it is somewhat concerning that the APA has not issued a standard of practice in clinical work directed at the treatment of religious and spiritual issues for psychologists. Moreover, the APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality, a book in the official APA Handbooks in Psychology and APA reference books series, devotes one chapter to “Atheists, Agnostics, and Apostates” (Streib & Klein, 2013), which includes definitions, statistics, research on demographics and worldviews, research on predispositions and motives to atheism/agnosticism, predictors of nonbelief,

psychological correlates, and an outlook on future research in the population.

Alarming, no other article in the handbook discusses atheist/agnostic or irreligious populations in depth, and no articles discuss applied psychology with clients that may identify as atheist, irreligious, or religious none. Therefore, it is not surprising that educational programs are hesitant to address topics of differing religious beliefs—including atheism and other forms of nonbelief—when the accrediting institution (the APA) exhibits a poor example of addressing the population in terms of research and competencies.

However, while not directed at psychologists specifically, the American Counseling Association (ACA) released a set of competencies for “Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling” in May 2009, giving counselors 14 guidelines for interacting with spiritual and/or religious clients in 6 domains: (1) culture and worldview; (2) counselor self-awareness; (3) human and spiritual development; (4) communication; (5) assessment; (6) diagnosis and treatment. Curiously, there is no definition of what is included in the definition of “spiritual and religious issues” and no mention of atheists, agnostics, or the irreligious specifically. Moreover, in 2013, Vieten et al. proposed a set of spiritual and religious competencies for psychologists, published in the APA-sanctioned journal, *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. In the article, there is one mention of atheism directed at the “atheist/agnostic psychotherapist” (p. 139), and no mention of atheist, agnostic, or irreligious clients in the 16 proposed competencies. Considering the history of negative feelings and discrimination towards atheist/agnostic and irreligious persons in the US, it may be easy to overlook the population as a valid entity within the domain of religious and spiritual issues in counseling.

As a profession that embraces social justice and advocacy, it is alarming that a number of avenues in which psychologists and counseling professionals could raise issues related to discrimination and well-being of atheist, agnostic, and irreligious people are overlooked and ignored. If psychology is to claim genuine interest in religious and spiritual issues, it stands to reason that the largely forgotten population of atheists, agnostics, irreligious, and nones must be fully explored, understood, recognized as a valid identity worth pursuing in accordance with counseling psychology's rich history of social justice and diversity tenets. As Brewster et al., (2014) argue, it is past the time for atheists, the irreligious, and persons otherwise categorized as nones be treated as a "meaningful sociocultural variable that deserves practical exploration" (p.634).

### **Current Study**

D.W. Sue et al. (1998) stated that "multiculturalism is about social justice, cultural democracy, and equity" (p. 5), while a social justice perspective emphasizes societal issues, including concerns about equity, self-determination, interdependence, and social responsibility (Bell, 1997). Social justice is at the center of multiculturalism, where institutionalized problems exacerbate inequitable experiences for multiple cultural identities (most often listed as people of color, women, and those under the LGBTQ umbrella) (Vera & Speight, 2003).

Literature on the atheist and the irreligious have uncovered unique stressors that can occur within the family setting, which can be exacerbated by age of the atheist/irreligious person as well as the religiosity of the parents. The experiences of atheist and/or irreligious youth that live within religious households have yet to be explored in detail. Gaining a greater understanding of the lived experience of the atheist

and/or irreligious youth can help improve mental health professionals' work with such identifying clients and/or family units.

Additionally, tenets of social justice and multiculturalism within the field of counseling psychology call out for the analysis of the problems of discriminated and oppressed groups as discrimination and prejudice are closely connected to quality of life issues with marginalized populations (Vera & Speight, 2003). This study falls in line with those tenets; it serves to add to the existing body of literature and inform scholarship about the unique experiences of the atheist/agnostic and irreligious community.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS AND PROCEDURES

#### **Research Design**

**Psychological phenomenology.** Due to the lack of psychological research exploring the experiences of irreligious/non-spiritual youth, and because qualitative investigations can produce “new forms of knowing” (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011; Morgan, 1997), the use of qualitative inquiry was appropriate for this study. Qualitative research is ideal for research within counseling psychology due to its relation and relevance to multicultural counseling and psychology tenets (Morrow, 2007). The lack of psychological research into the experiences of atheist and irreligious youth within religious households limits our knowledge of, and prohibits a holistic understanding of the phenomenon; therefore, the narratives provided in this inquiry serve to produce new knowledge. Qualitative interviews can uncover lived experiences that are unique and rich, because qualitative research focuses on the language, conversations, behaviors, and actions people use to describe their understanding of knowledge and meaning within their unique interpretation of the world (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011; Seidman, 2006). The way in which young self-identified atheist and irreligious youth describe their accounts of experiences within their family will provide insight into this often unseen or hidden phenomenon.

As this investigation intended to describe the phenomenon of being atheist and/or irreligious within a religious household, and was not intended to deliver an explanation or

theory of religious belief and/or atheism as a construct, phenomenology was suitable for this study. The work of Edmund Husserl focuses on the exploration of meaning and essence as a core tenet of phenomenology (Creswell, 2012), and for the purposes of this study, phenomenological approach is best suited for a research design that seeks to understand the lived experiences of a person's relationship with a particular phenomenon. The particular variation of phenomenology used in this current study is psychological phenomenology (also termed as transcendental phenomenology) (Creswell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). The use of psychological phenomenology served to present descriptive accounts of the experiences that irreligious/non-spiritual youth experience living in a religious household.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe qualitative research as “a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” and that it involves an “interpretive, naturalistic view of the world” (p, 3). Creswell (2012) states that qualitative work begins with assumptions, a worldview, theory, and the study of meaning-making from social or human problems. Phenomenology is based on the ontological assumption that multiple realities exist, and the focus of the research is to examine and report the multiple realities of individuals (Creswell, 2012). To reveal the essence of a phenomenon, the description of an experience is considered holistically, from different perspectives with regard to the entire experience being studied, in order to create a unified description of “truth” detailing the phenomena (McLeod, 2011). Each experience of the phenomena of atheist and irreligious individuals that is to be captured by the phenomenological inquiry is reduced to its essence, in a technique known as phenomenological reductionism (McLeod, 2011). Phenomenology assumes both the experience and the description of a

phenomenon will be reasonably similar to others who have had contact with the same phenomenon. Therefore, the analysis of the similarities across the descriptions of the lived experience of being an atheist and irreligious child of religious parents will express the essence of the experiences of other atheist and irreligious children in the same situation.

This study used a specific variation of phenomenology called Psychological phenomenology (also known as transcendental phenomenology) (Creswell et al., 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Psychological phenomenology was selected in part due to its central tenet; to find the meaning of the experience for each person that has experienced the phenomenon, and to gain a descriptive and comprehensive narrative of their individual experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This study used psychological phenomenology with the hope that it would provide descriptive accounts of the experiences that atheist and irreligious youth face while living in deeply religious homes.

Prior to data collection and analysis, the investigator must first approach research without bias; to attempt to keep an open mind and suspend all potential judgment. In phenomenology, this process is known as Epoche. Moustakas claims that through Epoche, everything is experienced and perceived “as if for the first time” (1994, p. 34). This process demands the researcher to maintain neutrality throughout the entire process of research (Wertz, 2005). Neutrality can be achieved through the act of doubting one’s natural attitude, that is, the way a person processes everyday occurrences (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011). Not dissimilar to the approach of a therapist that enters therapy with a nonjudgmental and neutral stance; by using my natural attitude I may not fully capture the essence of the experiences of participants. The process of Epoche allowed

me to more accurately describe the lived experiences of the participants, by allowing me to set aside my natural attitudes, predilections, prejudices, predispositions and take in new information “as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p.85). Moustakas (1994) states that Epoche does not eliminate “deny the reality of everything, does not doubt everything” (p. 85), but intends to eliminate the biases of everyday knowledge and to set aside for a moment the known scientific facts of the world. In order to achieve transparency about the investigator’s possible assumptions, a section outlining the investigator’s positionality is stated below.

**Social constructivist theory and the minority stress model.** Social constructivist theory and a model of atheist identity were used to guide the study as theoretical frameworks. Social constructivism is a worldview in which persons seek an understanding of the world they inhabit; that they seek to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world in which they live, and that each person’s unique worldview derives subjective meanings towards certain objects or things (Gergen, 1985; Creswell, 2012). For this study specifically, the child’s views are subjective meanings that are negotiated through interaction with others and through cultural and historical norms. Using social constructivist theory, the questions generated on the interview protocol are developed to be general and broad, in an effort to allow each participant to construct their own meaning of the experience. The field of counseling psychology values the process of interaction between individuals, but also asks the psychologist to recognize themselves as a tool in the interaction between persons. Social constructivist theory aligns with those ideals, stating that the researcher’s own background and experiences will shape the

interpretation of data, and the researcher's own positionality must be taken into consideration in the interpretation of the results (Creswell, 2012).

By acknowledging the core tenets of the social constructivist worldview, the experiences of atheist and irreligious children living in religious households can be effectively conceptualized. This theoretical framework offers insight into the complexity of the experiences faced by children living in religious households, and accounts for subjectivity on the part of researchers in the interview, analysis, and discussion processes. Finally, the theoretical framework presented for this study is a novel way to conceptualize atheist and irreligious children as they make meaning of their belief in religious households.

The minority stress model, first conceptualized by Meyer (2003), was developed in response to the unique stressors experienced by members of marginalized and stigmatized populations. The concept of minority stress builds upon the work of stress researchers on social and individual stress. In psychological literature, stress has been defined as the response to a change or adaptation to a new situation or life circumstance, including traumatic events (Meyer, 2003). Minority stress has been distinguished to be stress experienced as a direct result of a person's social position, often from a stigmatized or marginalized identity (Meyer, 2003). This type of stress is anticipated to have a strong impact in the lives of people belonging to stigmatized social categories, such as race/ethnicity, gender expression, sexuality, or gender identity.

The minority stress model postulates that society itself is a stressor that enacts upon the marginalized and stigmatized by upholding values that conflict with the minority person's culture, norms, or social structures (Meyer, 2003). Moss (1973)

explained that an individual is given information about how the world works in everyday life, yet health is impaired when that information received is incongruent with the person's (often a minority) experience of the world. Theories of symbolic interaction posit that negative regard from others can lead to negative self-regard, and Pettigrew (1967) details how human beings tend to compare themselves to others in order to learn about themselves (Meyer, 2003). In response to negative stereotypes, stigma, and prejudice directed at minorities and other marginalized populations, a person can develop a negative view of self-worth, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and eventually develop adverse psychological effects.

Meyer's (2003) model of minority stress conceptualizes stress within the assumptions that minority stress is (a) unique and additive to other general stressors, (b) chronic, and (c) based within the societal and institutional structures beyond the individual. The stressors are defined in terms of distal stressors, or objective and independent of an individual's perceptions and appraisals, and proximal personal processes, which are subjective due to their reliance on individual perceptions and appraisals (Meyer, 2003). From distal to proximal, the minority stressors are:

- (a) External, stressful events and conditions (chronic and acute)
- (b) Expectations of such events and the vigilance this expectation requires
- (c) The internalization of negative societal attitudes (Meyer, 2003)

Meyer has suggested that another stress process is important in the model and is relevant to this study: concealment of one's identity as a proximal stressor (2003).

## Sample and Sample Selection

In psychological phenomenology, it is important that the research participants have experienced the phenomena being investigated (Creswell, 2012). Approximately 12 participants were drawn purposefully, from multiple sources including internet listings on message boards and listservs specific to irreligion and atheism (Reddit, Facebook, message boards), to active recruitment from secular student associations at the predominantly White institution (PWI) of which the study was conducted and a separate PWI from which the primary researcher contacted through outreach. The researcher used a combination of criterion and snowball sampling to identify participants for this study (Patton, 2002). The criteria for participating in the study included the following:

- (a) Between the ages of 16 and 21 years old;
- (b) Identify as atheist, agnostic, irreligious, or a person who does not believe in a higher power;
- (c) On a subjective scale of 1-10 (1-Not Religious, 10-Highly Religious), participants deem their parents as religious at a level of 7 or higher;
- (d) Rely on their parents for housing and financial support.

In terms of snowball sampling, participants were granted permission to enlist the participation of additional persons who might also qualify for the study, and leaders of secular student associations were encouraged to enlist other potential participants for the study.

Each potential participant interested in the study contacted the researcher via email or phone and if they met criteria for participation in the study, were scheduled for one semi-structured qualitative interview. The interviews were conducted over the

telephone in a confidential location of the participant's choosing. It was imperative to ensure the participant feels comfortable and safe in the environment, as to ensure the most candid and expressive answers without additional distractions. Additional data was conducted via a short demographic form (Appendix B). Each participant was contacted after transcription of their interview, and given the opportunity to correct, clarify, or add to the conversation.

### **Data Generation and Analysis**

**Semi-structured interviews.** Semi-structured interviews are the most common interview style used in phenomenological inquiries (Langdrige, 2007). For most studies, the semi-structured interview is the only source of data, and uses an interview protocol to serve as a guide for the research interview. The guide is typically developed before the process of interviewing participants begins, and is informed by literature and assumptions about the study. During each interview, the researcher is afforded the freedom to ask questions that are not on the protocol, which typically emerge from the dialogue between the co-researchers (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Each interview question does not need to be asked during every interview, and the sequence of questions can be changed to fit the dialogue that arises within the interview (Hays & Singh, 2012). For this study, semi-structured interviews and reflexive journals are the only source of data, while the interview protocol was developed before the initial interview and evolved over the course of the study.

Using phenomenological coding (Moustakas, 1994), researcher assumptions and biases about the study were bracketed before, during, and after data collection and analysis. Participants engaged in one 45-90 minute semi-structured interview protocol

about the experience of living as an irreligious/non-spiritual youth within a religious household. Interview questions also sought to explore the participants' individual meaning of religion and spirituality, their journey of becoming irreligious/non-spiritual within a religious household, and resources for support as an irreligious/non-spiritual youth. The researcher utilized an interview protocol to guide conversations with participants. In addition, participants were given the option of conducting an interview in-person or over the telephone. Interviews were audio recorded with each participant's permission.

Semi-structured interview recordings were transcribed verbatim in a uniform manner using transcription software and paid transcription services. Data collection was recursive in nature (Kline, 2008) in that earlier data collection and interpretation served to inform later data collection.

The data collection and analysis of this study were derived from the guidelines of Moustakas (1994), which features a version of the 'Duquesne method' developed by Giorgi (2006) and adopted by many phenomenological researchers (Creswell, 2012; McLeod, 2002). This method involves the following procedure:

1. Collecting verbal accounts of each experience, through transcription of audio recordings
2. Reading through each account carefully and purposefully to get a sense of the whole
3. Highlighting and extracting significant statements
4. Eliminating repetition and irrelevant passages
5. Identifying central themes

6. Integrating collective meaning into a single description of the phenomena  
(Creswell, 2012)

Specifically to this study, four steps to data analysis were utilized. The first step involved transcription of participant 1's qualitative interview. The collection of verbal data served to produce significant themes through a technique called horizontalization, where "significant statements" were highlighted as a way of centralizing the understanding of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The identified themes were used to create a textual description (what the participants experience) and a structural description (the context in which the phenomenon takes place) from the synthesized data (Creswell, 2012). This step formed step two of the data analysis. The third step involved a codebook, generated from the extracted data of the first participants' qualitative interview, which was used to revisit earlier data to help identify and clarify meaning throughout the research process. Step four involved contacting participant 2 for a qualitative interview. This process was continued through the end of the sample of participants, and each of the four steps were repeated for each participant.

### **Procedure**

For the purposes of this investigation, the researcher produced a formal set of interview questions. To establish rapport with potential interview participants, the researcher engaged with the secular student alliance at the Primarily White Institution (PWI) of which the study was conducted and at a separate PWI of which the researcher has contacted through unaffiliated outreach. Moreover, the researcher has established links with leadership and moderators for listservs, message boards, and internet groups associated with irreligion, secular thought, atheism, and non-spirituality in order to reach

participants with full authorization from leadership. A recruitment flyer (Appendix D) was distributed via internet message post and email, with specific instructions to contact the researcher by phone or email if interested in the study. Once contact with the participant was made, the researcher screened interested parties for eligibility in this study via the criteria listed above, and if eligible, a time and place of the participant's choosing was established for the semi-structured interview. The researcher will supply a digital recorder and consent form to each participant interview. Data was generated through a 45-90-minute semi-structured interview to allow for in-depth exploration of the phenomena being examined. The participant selected a pseudonym, and the researcher took measures to keep the codebook containing personal information under lock and key to maintain confidentiality. Following the interview, the researcher again bracketed biases and wrote thoughts and experiences taken from the interview, followed by a full written transcription of the audiotape.

### **Study Instruments**

Materials used for the purpose of this study include researcher positionality, a recruitment flyer (Appendix A), an informed consent document (Appendix B), a demographic form (Appendix C), and a list of interview questions to be used during the semi structured interview (Appendix D). The researcher also utilized a reflexive journal at each step of data collection and analysis in addition to the use of constructive comments regarding the research process and analysis that was provided from an external auditor.

**The researcher as a research instrument.** Psychological phenomenological inquiry strongly encourages researchers to thoroughly explore, examine, and disclose the

multiple cultural identities held by the researcher. The researcher should continuously scrutinize their own cultural perspective's effect on both the construction and deconstruction of data and theory (Creswell, 2012). Langdrige (2007) outlined a reflexive approach for researchers to explore bias and potential subjectivity in the research process. This investigator acknowledges that by the selection of research questions, the investigator is a co-constructor of the knowledge acquired through the process of inquiry. The reflexive questions used by the investigator are (a) Why have I selected this topic for research? (b) What do I hope to achieve with this research? (c) How might I influence or bias the research I am conducting? (d) How might the findings impact the participant? (e) How might the findings impact people close to the participants?

The process of reflexivity is important to minimize the chance that the investigator may misinterpret or misrepresent the participants' experiences. Reflexivity is especially important when working with vulnerable populations (Langdrige, 2007). To utilize reflexivity effectively, the investigator should question their own subjectivity and attitudes from personal, functional, and epistemic stances (Langdrige, 2007). In this investigation, reflexive questions were asked and answered before research begins, during the research process, and after the data was analyzed.

The researcher's positionality is discussed in terms of an instrument for the study, as the researcher's self was used as an instrument in this study. This researcher acknowledges that my prior experiences and beliefs may influence the research process (Creswell & Miller, 2000). As the primary investigator for this study, I identify as an agnostic atheist, heterosexual, cisgender White male counseling psychology doctoral

candidate. I was raised Roman Catholic, served as an altar server in my youth, traversed through traditional Catholic rites of passage (communion, confession, confirmation) and left formal and informal faith as a young adult in my early twenties. I currently view organized religion as positive to some people, but acknowledges that some people also carry religious stress that may manifest differently depending on the religion and situation. I do not discount the possibility of some higher power; however, I do not acknowledge any form of spirit, deity, god, or paranormal authority figure present in my life. I believe in the goodness of humanity, I feel that that human beings are essentially good, and that religion is not necessary to instill values or virtue in others. However, I do consider some aspects of life to be “spiritual,” such as a scenic, visually appealing nature setting, or perhaps in feelings of deep love for other beings.

Topics of religion were not discussed often in my household as I grew up, and I look back fondly at my experiences in the Catholic Church. Nearly every person I knew socially believed in a God, and many of my friends and virtually all of my family went to the same church. I remember learning specific prayers with my friends, such as the “Our Father” and the “Hail Mary,” and I recited them at night when I wished for good things to happen. My journey to atheism began without a specific negative incident with my own faith; I honestly don’t think I ever fully believed in the stories told to me from the Bible. What prevented me from acknowledging to myself that I was an atheist was the simple thought of what would happen if I were wrong? Even to this day, when I share with people that I am atheist; they almost always posit that I would lose more by being wrong about being an Atheist than I would gain by actually living without faith. While that

logic may have merit, it doesn't shake that I simply do not believe in any of the religious texts I have encountered as true.

Perhaps the greatest detriment to my being out as Atheist is the effect that my acknowledgement has had on my mother, still a devout Catholic. I fear that she carries extreme anxiety over my soul; that I may not meet her in the afterlife she believes in. My feelings about my mother and her anxiety have caused me to question whether I should closet myself as an atheist to those that may worry about me, and put on a mask of belief in an effort to assuage their worry. I still remember a great deal from my former Catholic religion, and could "pass" as a Catholic easily. It seems the consequences of my belief are a zero-sum game with regard to my mother and perhaps other religious family.

I find support from others that I know to be Atheist, and from networks of other irreligious and atheist people (e.g., secular student alliances, online networks). I have empathy for other people that may share my same situation; that "coming out" as atheist might cause familial or social distress. Although I have found support and validation as an agnostic atheist, I wonder what consequences might have arisen had I come out to friends and family sooner.

My experiences as an irreligious/atheist youth warrant constant exploration and monitoring of my subjectivity during this study. Because of my experiences as an agnostic atheist, at times I may identify closely with the participants of this study. My proximity to the topic could also affect my interpretation of data. I hope to use my understanding and empathy to align with participants and gain their trust, so they may feel free to share their unique experiences. My training as a counseling psychologist will help me to monitor and be sensitive to my subjective stance during the process of

interview, analysis, and interpretation of the participants and their experiences so that the data will truthfully mirror the reality of the participants rather than my own personal viewpoint (Yeh & Inman, 2007).

**Recruitment flyer (appendix A).** Participants were recruited via a uniform recruitment flyer containing a brief synopsis of the study, including the purpose and procedures, and assumed risks and benefits of participation. The flyer contained information about demographic criteria for potential participants and contact information of the researcher.

**Informed consent document (appendix B).** After meeting selection criteria for the study, participants were asked for both written and verbal informed consent before moving on to the semi-structured interview. Hays and Singh (2012) describe three aspects of obtaining informed consent from participants when participating in a qualitative inquiry: capacity, comprehension, and collaboration. Capacity and comprehension refer to the participant's ability to understand information within the informed consent document, in addition to having the cognitive capacity to fully understand the risk, benefits, rights, and responsibilities contained within the document itself. Collaboration refers to the ongoing process of informed consent throughout the qualitative study, with constant negotiation of the research process within the investigator-participant dyad (Hays & Singh, 2012). The informed consent document contains information to ensure that each participant was aware of their roles and rights as study participants. The document also described the study in detail, outlined potential risks and benefits of participation, and required written consent of all participants of the age of 18 and over. While this study contained no participants under the age of 18, the

informed consent process requires any potential participant under the age of 18 to get parental permission to participate in the study.

**Demographic form (appendix C).** The demographic form located in Appendix B consists of a set of identifying characteristics uses for demographic purposes, such as age, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, education level, socioeconomic status, setting (e.g., rural, suburban, urban), and the selection of a pseudonym. In addition, a short questionnaire used for demographic purposes was listed at the bottom of the form, including the following questions: (1) at what age did you first identify as irreligious/atheist? (2) have you disclosed your irreligious/atheist status to your parents? (3) have you disclosed your irreligious/atheist status to your other family? (4) have you disclosed your irreligious/atheist status to your friends?

**Interview questionnaire (appendix D).** The interview questionnaire located in Appendix A consists of a short scripted introduction to the study, a reminder of the participant's option to withdraw from the study at any time, and a request for permission to being the audio-recording device. The protocol lists 14 scripted interview questions with the option for appropriate follow-up questions.

### **Trustworthiness and Authenticity**

In order to evaluate the quality of this qualitative investigation, the researcher examined aspects of trustworthiness and authenticity first proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1989), which includes tenets of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility provides assurance that the researcher will present the participants' perspectives authentically. Transferability asks that the researcher provide sufficient information to the participant about how the findings of the study will be used.

Dependability requires the researcher to form a logical, traceable, and fully documented process during the research process, while confirmability provides reassurance that the results of the research are “true;” that the researcher has not altered nor “made up” the results of the study.

The researcher took several steps to ensure trustworthiness of the data collected. The study employed the use of thick, rich descriptions as a way to enhance trustworthiness and to frame sequential data interpretation (Hays & Singh, 2012; Maxwell, 2005). In addition, this study utilized several verification processes to increase trustworthiness, such as the use of an external auditor, engaging in member checking, and the researcher’s clarification of personal biases (Creswell, 2012).

Specifically, the researcher took steps to practice reflexivity to give credence to the primary researcher’s role as co-creator of knowledge. The use of a reflexive journal was practiced throughout all steps of the study, including each point of contact with a participant as well as throughout data collection and analysis. Member checking was utilized to provide validation and clarification of the collected data, and to ensure the researcher’s own life experiences were not introduced into the participant’s own experiences reported in the semi-structured interview. Moreover, recorded interviews, researcher interview notes, transcriptions, codebooks, reflexive journal, and the external auditor’s report provide multiple sources of evidence of trustworthiness through a process known as triangulation (Hays & Singh, 2012). Furthermore, the researcher practiced honest, open communication with each participant with respect to the research project’s goals as an additional way to help participants feel welcomed as co-creators of new

knowledge. The researcher also informed participants of their potential contribution to the literature of atheist youth experiences within religious households.

### **Risks and Benefits**

Risks to participants were assumed to be minimal; however, two primary risks were present during the research procedure. One potential risk included potential painful discomfort of reflecting on negative experiences. To mitigate risk, the researcher provided resources for participants who may potentially experience distress, as he holds a degree in professional counseling and is a psychological intern well versed in providing support and resources for persons in distress. The second primary risk was the potential for participants to have their identity as atheist/irreligious/non-spiritual to be disclosed to parents through the act of participating in the study. In order to ensure confidentiality, participants were instructed to select a pseudonym and a code at the beginning of the study and were referred to as the pseudonym throughout the remainder of the study. The only individuals who had access to the data besides the researcher are research advisors held to the same ethical principles as the primary investigator. The list of research participant names and pseudonyms assigned to each name were kept in separate locations under lock and key and available only to the investigator and the research advisors. The participants' responses were held confidential. Before completing the demographic form and the semi-structured interview, participants were informed about confidentiality agreements and the limits to confidentiality. The researcher educated participants that they may request that their interviews be stopped at any time, with no penalty to the participant. Participants were given the option of taking materials describing national

resources for mental health services, if needed during or after the semi-structured interview.

For many irreligious/non-spiritual youth, their voice may be silenced or relegated to internet boards or other online communities, and the act of being in front of a curious, empathetic listener may prove beneficial to the participants. The results of conducting this study may help counselors, psychologists, social workers, and family therapists to fully understand this phenomena and its impact on the individual youth as well as the family structure, should they present in therapeutic settings. Moreover, the results of this research investigation can add to the lack of scholarly papers that deal with meaningful discussions with irreligious/non-spiritual individuals, and further the research on irreligion/atheism/non-belief as a valid diversity issue.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Identity	Age of identity onset	Revealed identity to parents?	Family religiosity
Jack	19	Male	White	In College	atheist	15	Yes	9
Strider	21	Male	White	Technical School	Gnostic atheist	20	Yes	9
Nattilus Nye	20	Male	White	Bachelor's Degree	atheist	17	Yes	9
Mark	18	Male	White	High School	atheist	16	Yes	8
Clyde	20	Male	White	Associate Degree	atheist	18	No	9
Emily	20	Female	White	In College	agnostic	18	No	8
Glen Bateman	19	Male	Mostly Caucasian	In College	Agnostic Atheist	18	No	8
Patheos	18	Male	White	High School	Gnostic atheist	14	Yes	8
Ashley Brown	19	Female	White	High School	atheist	16	No	9
Andrew Lane	21	Male	White	Bachelor's Degree	atheist	16	Yes	8
Everett Smith	19	Male	White	In College	agnostic	17	No	8
Sigrid	18	Male	White	In College	atheist	17	No	10

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### **Themes**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore with a sample of self-identified atheist/irreligious children their experiences of living in a highly religious home. The researcher believed that understanding this phenomenon more clearly would generate new knowledge and lead to more insight into the experiences of these youth. This study assumed that themes would be identified that represent the experience of being an atheist/irreligious child living within a religious household. Based on a review of literature pertaining to atheism, irreligion, spirituality, discrimination, and minority stress, as well as from personal experiences and education, three primary assumptions were made in anticipation of the study. This researcher assumed the following: that a typology will be identified that represents the experiences of being an atheist/irreligious youth within a religious household, that the presence of invalidation and anticipatory discrimination will negatively affect the individual holding the marginalized identity, and the assumption that the atheist/irreligious youth will experience a wide range of emotions before/during/after the disclosure of their identity to family members.

This chapter presents the key findings obtained primarily from the semi-structured interviews with a sample of 12 atheist/irreligious/none identifying individuals who currently live with or are under the financial support of religious parents. Additionally, feedback from participants and auditors assisted in the production of these findings.

Using Meyer (2003)'s minority stress model as a guide in the exploration and analysis of the data, a total of 3 overarching themes (Minority Stress, Outcomes, Support) were identified from participant interviews that represent the varied experiences of atheist/irreligious/none identifying youth. Additionally, each theme contains one or more subthemes, as a total of 7 subthemes were identified. Themes were derived from statements that: (a) were shared by multiple participants (b) contained an adequate depth of experience that enabled full understanding; and (c) could be abstracted and sufficiently labeled. Some participant statements expressed experiences that could fit into one or more established themes; therefore, some themes are interrelated to one another to an extent. Each theme is explained in depth and clarified with multiple examples using exact quotes from the transcripts. Each theme is described using multiple examples using direct quotes from the verbatim transcripts. This study sought to illustrate the true experience of atheist/irreligious/nones youth by using the technique of "thick description" (Denzin, 2001), and therefore, this chapter uses the provided language from the participants to understand and explore the themes. The following also describes the impact that their unique experiences have on their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral state whenever possible. A figure describing atheist minority stress was developed through analysis of the data, and is presented in Figure 1. The themes are presented below:

1. Minority Stress

- a. Distal (Prejudice Themes)

- i. Discrimination/invalidation of atheist identity

- b. Proximal

- i. Anticipated negative consequences/outcomes
  - ii. Concealment
  - iii. Internalized negative feelings towards atheist/irreligious identity
2. Outcomes
  - a. Isolation
  - b. Hopelessness
  - c. Loss of closeness within the family
3. Support
  - a. The internet
  - b. Social and peer support

### **Minority Stress**

Participants reported experiences of stress that aligned with the well-known model for minority stress first conceptualized by Meyer (2003). The experiences described were categorized into distal and proximal stressors per Meyer's model, with subthemes emerging within each stressor.

**Distal subtheme 1: Discrimination/invalidation of atheist identity.** A paper by Hammer et al. (2012) detailed the forms of discrimination commonly experienced by atheists in the U.S., stating that atheists experience social ostracism, coercion, slander, denial of opportunities, goods, and services, and hate crimes among other forms of discrimination. Participants in this study described experiences that were in line with the findings from Hammer et al. (2003), such as experiencing social ostracism from peers and family, coercion in the form of being asked to pray, attend services, or to pretend they were not atheist. Other forms of discrimination reported were slander in the form of

witnessing anti-atheist comments, being told that atheism is wrong, sinful, or immoral, and being verbally disrespected. For some participants, discrimination was reported in the form of anti-atheist sentiments directed at other atheists from family members. One participant described,

I mean [reaction to brother's revealed atheist identity] was open hostility. It kinda sabotaged the relationship. It is much much worse than I am, and it definitely shows that there's a major conflict going on between my parents and him after he revealed himself. I mean open statements of "maybe you deserve to go to hell" things like that. I mean very, very hostile. After hearing that you know, I don't want any part of that... hearing the anger [that] comes from my parents about that causes me not to talk about it as much. (Clyde)

Another participant stated,

When my mom says things...like she believes my brother is wrong because he has told her he is an atheist and she'll say things to me like, "We're going to get him back on track..." (Emily)

Other participants stated fears about their atheist identity being revealed to family members after reading or hearing about other young atheist/irreligious children's experiences with anti-atheist discrimination:

I had been reading about other people's coming out stories how they've gotten kicked out of the house or yelled at or cut-off completely and pretty much every time somebody said, "should I come out to my parents?" the answer was "No. The best time to do that is um is over a meal that you paid for in a house that you paid for." That's the best time to come out to your parents. (Mark)

Witnessing family members express anti-atheist sentiments can cause a young person to question whether the family is a safe place to establish their burgeoning atheist/irreligious identity. Emily, a 20-year-old self-identified White agnostic female, described her feelings about potentially revealing her beliefs after witnessing her family's reaction to her brother coming out as an atheist:

I don't know what my mother's exact reaction was when my brother told her that he didn't believe in a god, but she's still very stressed about it. He's still viewed as the black sheep in the family, not only because of that, because he's also facing charge of possession of marijuana, which they attribute to not believing in a god...they equate all those things. So, suddenly it would be like they would see me as evil.

Emily's experience models atheist discrimination in a couple different ways, as she experienced slander in the form of witnessing anti-atheist comments, but she also feels her parents' projection of unfair stereotypes about atheists. She continued, stating:

My entire life I've lived the role of, "Oh this sibling, and responsible and trophy winning does everything well, advances in everything" and that would invalidate all of that, and they would not be able to believe that I could be all those things and not be religious.

In her experience, she is fighting the stereotype that all atheists lack morals, or are inherently evil due to the lack of religious belief. This experience was shared by other participants, as Strider also shared a similar exchange with his grandmother,

There has been some discussions where I would be jokingly saying, "well we can't really talk about it because you just think that I'm possessed by Satan," and

she says “yeah, yeah, I do. You need to get that demon out of you”. And you can’t really argue or discuss something with someone when they just straight up think you’re possessed by an evil entity. Anything I bring up goes immediately to the filter of what her religion teaches her.

Another form of discrimination commonly felt by atheist/irreligious youth is outright verbal harassment on behalf of parents and other family members. Everett Smith, a 19-year-old self-identified White male agnostic, described a thinly veiled threat about his future,

Like, he pretty much told me that I need to be careful or I'm going to hell. That's just kind of what I'm trying to avoid.

Other participants shared experiences of verbal harassment from parents:

When my dad found out [about my identity] he told me that I was quote unquote, “sick” and that I “needed help.” (Jack)

I don't remember what exactly why he brought it up but he started discussing it on Facebook. And it just completely turned into a shit show immediately. He was bringing up how disrespectful... That I couldn't live a happy life if I was atheist. (Strider)

For some participants, the feelings of parental harassment are not always overt.

Participants reported a wide range of family reactions to their identity being revealed.

Mark, an 18-year-old self-identified White male atheist, described his father’s harassment to be in an “off-handed” and joking manner, which he didn’t find as amusing:

There are a lot of little stabs, like just little off-handed comments [about my atheism]. These are almost exclusively from my dad. Off-handed comments that

are supposed to be funny. He probably thinks they're funny but I've expressed that you're not funny and this is not enjoyable to me. (Mark)

Another form of anti-atheist discrimination discussed by participants was coercion. Participants experienced coercion when parents and other family members asked them to be a part of prayers or other religious services, or when family asked the individual to pretend they were not atheist around others. Nattilus Nye, a 20-year-old self-identified White male atheist, described his family's push to have him conceal his atheist identity to others:

[My parents and my family] kind of want to hide my atheism from my extended family. So when I'm around them they want me to kind of pretend that I'm religious.

He continued later on in the conversation,

Yes, [I feel like I've caused them pain] as part of the conversations, trying to get me back [to religion]. Especially with my mom, she tries to do a lot of guilt trips. Especially when I came out about it to her...Part of the guilt trip as well is when she tries to say "go to church with us, we don't want your grandma to know." She is saying that it'll hurt my grandma to know that I'm not religious.

For another participant, frustration and feelings of invalidation mounted after parents made remarks about prayer even after this individual revealed his identity,

Absolutely, it has already [caused them pain]. You know, between things that is uttered under their breath or just said in passing... you know the, "you should pray about that" or "I'll pray for you," "maybe you should join or go with a friend to church" or anything like that. (Clyde)

**Proximal Subtheme 1: Anticipated negative consequences/outcomes.**

Participants noted anticipatory stress related to their atheist/irreligious identity, and the degree to which they felt stress within their household impacted comfort levels within the family unit in addition to overall levels of tension and stress. Most participants described fears and assumptions that their identity, once revealed, will be met with negative outcomes. They detailed feelings of anxiety related to what might happen if their identity were revealed, leading some individuals to weigh the risks versus benefits of revealing. Glen Bateman, a 19 year-old self-identified mostly White male agnostic atheist, described his experience:

Right now, I'm still very heavily financially dependent on them. I no longer live with them for the majority of the year because I'm in a college dorm room now. It's been good to get away but they definitely... they pay for the room; they pay for my tuition and I honestly couldn't say how they would react. I want to believe that they would ... What I'd like to think is that they would be disappointed but that they would accept it without doing anything too drastic, but I know, and I've heard stories of children that were turned out and exiled from their families for going through the same sort of thing that I'm going through. I feel that it's a bit selfish to kind of deceive them for essentially, for money, which now that I've verbalized that it's just kind of a weird thought. At the same time, I'm not willing to take that risk, you know?

He described his conflicting feelings about wanting to rid himself of his secret identity, yet fearing what he might lose by coming clean:

In an ideological sense, I hate this. It's immoral and deceptive and feels totally wrong, but practically speaking it would be far too risky to act otherwise. I could lose a home, an education, and a family. Probably, though, I would just lose some respect or I'd have to pick up some more work while at college. Still, it's hard to know for sure, as mentioned elsewhere.

Another participant shared anticipated negative outcomes and assumptions if her hidden identity were to be revealed:

I feel nervous. I do plan on telling them, but I feel like it's just going to keep getting harder and harder to hide it because ... This is a hard question. I just have anxiety over the future. I'm terrified of telling them, and I can't even imagine what that talk is even going to go like. What am I going to say? I have no idea. (Ashley Brown)

Mark, an 18-year-old self-identified White male atheist described the anxiety he felt as he prepared to reveal his identity to his religious parents,

I was very scared about coming out ...so my voice probably shook a little bit when I said "Would you still love me if I said no?" Because I was thinking that...I was fearing the worst.

Moreover, some participants that have not revealed their identity to parents or family shared fears of what their disclosure might mean, as described by Emily, "there may come a time when I have to outright tell my family this is not what I believe in, and it could be very, very bad, it could absolutely be very, very bad." One participant measured the possibility of harm coming from a possible atheist identity disclosure against the outcome of their sibling's "coming out" to their parents as gay:

I know they're probably going to know that I'm not religious one of these days. It's just, I really do just want to, just to postpone that because, I mean, I care about them. I know that's going to put them through a lot of distress because when my oldest brother came out, it was certainly, it was certainly distressful for them. My own dad said that once he found out that [my brother] was gay, he cried. He cried tears of sadness because his son was gay. I was like, yeah, maybe I shouldn't tell them [about my identity] tonight. (Everett Smith)

Some participants talked about how the impact of their newly formed atheist/irreligious identity, if revealed, might change the relationship dynamic profoundly:

Yeah, that's exactly it. It's this notion that someone that they love and care about is living what they believe to be an immoral lifestyle, or as making an immoral or evil choice. It would essentially be me coming out as a murderer to them. At least, that's what I think, I don't know their perception of the world, obviously, but that's kind of my fear is this notion that it would be seen as this hugely immoral or evil thing for me to have done. Yeah, and that would obviously affect those relationships negatively, with people that I am close with, you know? (Sigrid)

I think they would view me differently...I think they know there are a lot of things that they view as evil, I guess, or bad that I would either have no opinion on or support. These are issues that, like I mentioned, they sort of come up and I try not to say anything about them, but if it came out, I think those are issues that would definitely come up in conversation. I think they would definitely have a changed opinion on me as less good, in the sense, God is good and Satan is evil. (Glen Bateman)

**Proximal subtheme 2: Concealment.** For many participants, the idea of revealing their identity to others introduced a game of constant assessment of potential losses versus potential gains. The words “living a lie” or “double life” appeared in the conversations between multiple participants, as many struggled to know if their atheist/irreligious identity was safe at home. The stigma of atheism and potential for discrimination at the hands of religious people typically results in the choice to simply hold their beliefs inside. This was clearly identified across participants in this study. “Passing” is a term commonly used to describe a way of interacting with the world when a stigmatized identity is invisible; an act of performing a less-stigmatized identity for others instead of claiming the stigmatized identity outwardly. For one participant, not knowing the what the consequences of revealing their identity meant that they would take steps to keep hidden; to conceal their identity from others:

Probably whenever I don't really rely on them as much. Even right now I don't. I have a full ride scholarship, so they're not giving me money or anything. It's just that, I mean, I go home with them, with the weekends. I know if they knew that, ever time I'd come home, they'd want to talk about that, and try to change me back. I just don't want that. I don't want to put them through that stress. I don't want to put myself through that stress. I just want things to be peaceful when I come home. (Everett Smith)

Another participant shared similar feelings,

The obvious elephant in the room that is not necessarily comfortable to ask is, it's the fact that I am essentially lying about who I am and whether or not that's the right thing to do. It's definitely something that, to this day, is causing me, not

stress, but it's not something that I'm 100% comfortable with, this notion that I'm lying to everyone around me, essentially, or these people that I love and I'm super close to. Which is not a fun thing to have to do, it's not something that I would want to have to do in the ideal scenario, but because I think that the consequences are big enough, I do think that it's the right thing to do, in my mind. (Sigrid)

Patheos, a 19-year-old self-identified White male gnostic atheist, shared his reasoning for keeping his atheist identity a secret from other family members,

For my extended family, I intend on staying passive...Sadly, but mostly for fear of a form of ex-communication, shunned almost, that I imagine from my grandparents in particular. (Patheos)

For some participants, the need to conceal was not limited to their atheist identity, but also came across as a need to keep away from strongly religious family members and religious rituals. After revealing his atheist identity to his family, Jack, a 19-year-old self-identified White male atheist, expressed his feelings of needing to “hide” from family partly out of a fear of them asking him to act within the family’s traditional Orthodox Jewish religion:

Like, they would ask me to wear a kippah around the house, like a yarmulke... and I just... like I wouldn't. And they kept asking me and eventually, like, they stopped. ... [It feels] kind of like, I'm being a fraud, you know? Like I'm doing this shit just to make someone else happy and I don't... I don't want to do that crap... I feel constrained right now; you know I can't really be myself or do things that I want to around the house. I wouldn't have to hide anything; I would just do whatever I wanted. (Jack)

For some participants, the act of “passing” seemed to be a pragmatic way of “keeping the peace” in a household, as described by Patheos,

I will go to church and hold hands and sing songs for them if it makes them happy. I'm not going to be like, "No, I'm not going to sing this song with you or hold your hand," those are my grandparents. If it makes them happy, even though I know that it's not true. ...I'm a fantastic Christian when I need to be...That's how [I] navigated [holidays and religious situations]. I'm the best Christian I know. ...For about 2 years, it was just pretending at family events, and it still is, actually, at family events...realistically, I only have favor to lose with my extended family if I didn't sing at church or hold hands saying grace. There's really no reason for that.

Another participant echoed Patheos' experience,

To some extent, I still do [pass as Christian] sometimes. That is absolutely something I did. Even after I had made it clear to my immediate family, I definitely did that around my extended family. There was a lot more conflict with my extended family than there was with my immediate family. For a long time, I still do pray at meals and things like that. (Andrew Lane)

Perhaps most poignantly, Emily shared the experience of talking with her therapist about her situation at home, and coming to the realization that concealment might be the best option to keep stress at home to a minimal:

I've really talked about this with my therapist on Tuesday; it's easier I think, or the best situation at least now is to go along with things. That's more in my nature to just go along with it. It's not really hurting me that much to just go to church, it's

fine, I see nice people there...I have just truly accepted that this is the way things are in my life and am more at peace dealing with it than attempting to change it. I feel that attempting to change it would not be worth it. (Emily)

**Proximal subtheme 3: Internalized negative feelings towards**

**atheist/irreligious identity.** Considering the literature on stigma and discrimination on atheists in the U.S., it might not be surprising that participants shared feelings of internalized negative feelings towards their emerging atheist/irreligious identity. Some participants shared feelings of shock or confusion as they realized their own struggles to identify with the belief system they were brought up in within their family system. Sigrid, an 18-year-old self-identified White female, described her experiences as she struggled with her faith:

There had never been any question, really. It was like, the sky is blue, grass is green, there is God. It was just obvious in my brain, and so this was the first time that I'd ever really stopped and said, hang on, we can talk about why the sky's blue because there's reasons for that, right? Wavelengths of light and stuff, but there's nothing like that for God. Initially, that notion to me was ... Because of the way that I had been brought up and raised, that notion itself with evil. It was wrong, I thought that it was morally wrong, these thoughts that I were having and these doubts...It was obviously difficult at first, to the point where I essentially denied it for a year. Even though I didn't think there was a God, I still pretended like there was because that was the morally right thing to do in my brain. Then, eventually I was able to come terms with it. It was uncomfortable, it was difficult for me to try and teach myself.

She continued, stating...

I'm a bad person for having these thoughts, I'm doing something morally wrong, like stealing. I essentially equated it to do other immoral things like doubting or questioning, to me, was an immoral action. So yeah, definitely, that's why I tried to suppress it for so long because it was, in my brain, immoral. Yeah, it was definitely really, really, really difficult to eventually come to terms with that fact.

The stigma associated with atheism was present in many participants' minds as they began to explore their feelings and beliefs about religion and God. One participant described the first time they stated the word "atheist" to another person:

The first time ever I uttered the word atheist was like a four-a.m. conversation with one of my roommates from college buddies. We were having a conversation and discussing theology and things like that and it just kinda clicked right then and there I said "Oh good god I think I'm an atheist." I [was] kinda tearing up and crying, because I didn't want to, but I had to say it and that was the first time I uttered that. Then it was a slow process in order to not feel ashamed of the term and starting to be comfortable saying that I am or at least not hiding it as much and that's the point where I'm at now. (Clyde)

Other participants discussed the uneasy feeling of stress regarding a fear of eternal consequences of losing their faith, a feeling rooted in the fear that atheism in and of itself is immoral or wrong:

When I was first kind of reconsidering my beliefs, it was very much like, what if this is all real? What if there really is a God and I'm going to go to hell if I keep

going down this path? That definitely held me back for a while. There's definitely a lot of ... At least a decent bit of nervousness and anxiety. (Glen Bateman)

I would say that it did cause me a fair amount of stress. Especially when I went to the primitive Baptist church, they were pretty heavy on the whole hell thing. I was pretty stressed out and pretty worried about that kind of stuff a lot of the time during my childhood, "If you do X, Y and Z, you're going to go to hell." (Andrew Lane)

Ashley Brown, a 19-year-old self-identified White female atheist, described how her initial questioning of her faith exacerbated her feelings of depression out of a fear of eternal punishment or judgment; the fear that atheism is wrong:

When I was younger I was very, very religious. I was raised to think that atheists, non-believers were just bad people who needed to be saved. ...When I was very religious ... They taught us that it was us versus them. They had that mentality and it felt comforting to know that I was with us, and then it started to feel like I was them when I started questioning. ...It was really confusing and it also made me feel very guilty about it. Having these thoughts that wouldn't go away, I felt very guilty and felt like I had to pray more for forgiveness because I'd have these thoughts like I hate Jesus, and I'd just be like, "This is wrong." It was a very confusing time I felt more and more like the black sheep of the family, like an outcast pretty much. It was very isolating because I felt like I was the only one who felt this way in my family and friend circle. It was pretty awful and it made my depression a lot worse. I felt like if this all didn't happen I feel like my

depression wouldn't have gotten as bad as it did. I really, really escalated it, intensified it.

## **Outcomes**

Participants discussed the outcomes related to stressors experienced while living within a religious household as an atheist/irreligious child. The following three subthemes were identified as isolation, hopelessness, and loss of closeness within the family.

**Outcomes Subtheme 1: Isolation.** Concurrent with the experience of minority stress, participants endorsed feeling isolated; alone within their family. They described feeling alone in their belief system, both within the family structure and in the surrounding social strata. For many participants, religious belief was not just a personal connection with a deity, but a way to connect with family, friends, and others; it was a way of life. Jack, a 19-year-old self-identified White male atheist, described feelings of intense isolation as he began to explore his new atheist identity. He described his feelings in the following quotes:

At the time, I didn't really have anything, I didn't know anybody that was not religious... I didn't have access to internet so I was pretty isolated. And I was kind of just going at it alone. I wasn't really sure of what I was doing either. ...I pretty much spend the whole time in my room because I just don't like seeing all of [my family]. It's worse when they're all together. I don't go to meals. I eat in my room.

Another participant shared similar feelings of isolation, in part because of the lack of connection to like-minded peers or family members. She stated, "All my friends, they

were religious, so how could I talk to them about this?" She further described her feelings of isolation in the following quote:

I stopped reading the bible. I wasn't allowed internet actually. My family never had the internet just until recently actually, like a few months ago. I had very limited phone time, so I couldn't really research these feelings. It was very hard to find support. I couldn't look up does anyone else feel this way. I couldn't do that. I was isolated. (Ashley Brown)

Strider, a 21-year-old self-identified White male atheist, described his experience of failing to find validation in others, resulting in his isolated experience at home:

[I felt] invalidated. It was very distressing... and pretty lonely. So, when I'm driving around, and all my friends are busy... I just have nothing to do, so I get to go back home and go back to my room. I watch movies, play games. Find something else to do.

He summed his experience up in a few words: "isolationist, frustrating, and very stressful."

As a result of differences in religious belief, a few participants described a strategy of self-isolation and avoidance as a way to avoid difficult situations regarding religion to avoid the potential for conflict:

I try to ignore them as much as I can but when Christmas comes around, let's say last Christmas for example, I was planning on keeping my headset on and sitting on the couch during Christmas Eve while my parents went out to the Christmas service. I was just planning on tuning them out. (Mark)

Another participant echoed this sentiment,

Avoiding is best. Like for Christmas Eve or Easter services and things like that, I am normally trying to get out the house go somewhere else go meet a friend or whatever. So, we don't have to discuss where I am or am not going. But we are on at least unspoken terms that I do not attend services and things like that.

(Clyde)

**Outcomes Subtheme 2: Hopelessness.** Perhaps a direct result of stressors related to their minority status, many participants described feelings of hopelessness regarding their family and the future because of the new differences in faith. Among the reported feelings of hopelessness was the loss of hope about ever being understood or validated in their identity, to a loss of hope for a closer relationship with family members due to the vast difference in religious belief. Some of the most salient feelings of hopelessness felt by participants are detailed in the following quotes:

I feel like part of it just like, you know how old people just get stuck in their ways so... like, my parents are never going to change what they believe in. They're never going to change their political views or anything like that, like, no matter what you tell them. So, it's just not even worth trying. (Jack)

Another participant shared similar feelings of hopelessness:

I don't really see any hope with them. They're not the type to understand how other people feel. They don't care what you think. They think that they're right, you're wrong. That's it. There's no mutual understanding. There's no respect. I've seen that because of how ... They've talked to be about my political views. It's just very ... They talk down to me about it and I can't even imagine what they would think about my religious views. (Ashley Brown)

Clyde, a 20-year-old self-identified White male atheist, described his feelings of distress surrounding his loss of hope that his family will ever be close again:

Well it's extremely distressing, absolutely. I mean, you expect to have good relations with your parents, you expect to be able to maintain that connection...blood is thicker than water that type of thing. And now I come to the conclusion that it will never be because I can't be completely honest with who I am and what I believe. So due to that fact it has certainly changed the relationship drastically. Whenever I was a kid you kind of just take it for granted that you will be able to have a relationship as an adult, but I have come to the conclusion that whatever relationship we have won't be as deep as I would like or as I would expect a parent-child relationship should be. Since I can't have that it is distressing.

He continued, and described his personal conflict between wanting to hope for a pleasant outcome in the future, and accepting the likelihood that little will change.

You just have to accept it for what it is now and move on from there. You can't let it be disconcerting for forever, so we just have to accept it and try move on. And that's what I try to do; understand and not try to be idealistic of what the relationship is or could be or what I would want it to be and you just have to accept it for what it is. And currently it's not much of a relationship... Of course, I have to hope for the best and but... its hope. You can hope for the best but expect what's actually going to happen, and my expectations are low and my hope is high. But I hope it does get better... but in the two years or whatever it has been since our strained relationship it hasn't gotten better maybe it's gotten

slightly worse so I hope that it gets better but I don't expect it to. ...Our future is probably going to be the same as what it is now: a very strained relationship, unless they do come to some sort of understanding but I doubt that as well. So, our future relations are probably going to be minimal or surface level at best not any intimate relationship with them.

Another participant mirrored the sentiment of that nothing will likely change,

I still feel like this current environment is much more peaceful than it would be if I attempted to reveal my beliefs to my family, especially because I will be living with my mom for seven months after I graduate in May, and my brother will be leaving for his first year of college in August. I do not want to live with her judgment, especially when I am the only child in the house. If I were ever to intentionally reveal my beliefs, I would only want to think about doing it after I already had my own house and my own family to go back to... I have just truly accepted that this is the way things are in my life and am more at peace dealing with it than attempting to change it. I feel that attempting to change it would not be worth it. (Emily)

**Outcomes Subtheme 3: Loss of closeness within the family.** Perhaps a result of invalidation and increased stress, many participants described feeling less close with their families as a result of the difference in religious belief. Moreover, both the participants that have revealed their identity as well as those that are still hiding their beliefs revealed feelings of being less close to family, suggesting that merely holding an atheist/agnostic/irreligious/none belief can impact the perceived level of closeness in a

family. In some participant's stories, themes relating to how religion initially fostered closeness and connection was identified:

We went to church every Sunday. During the Christmas season, there'd be advent services on Wednesday's. Almost every major holiday, you know, Easter and Christmas and all the rest we'd go to church. Honestly, the Christmas-Eve services became a big part of our Christmas Eve traditions, and it still is to this day, actually. (Glen Bateman)

Another participant described how religion was used to foster closeness within his family:

Then when I turned five, my mother had talked to me about religion and "saved me" as she puts it... then through the course of growing up I was "saved" several more times, but really it just ended up being a conversation I would have with my parents that was very personal. And, they became special to me because they were the only special moments I had with my parents. So, growing up, the only times I had with my parents was reading the bible or praying or at church because they were either constantly working or not interested in spending time with me. (Strider)

Strider also expressed a fear about formally dropping a religious identity due to the religion being an anchor for closeness and connection, stating, "I didn't want to throw away my family's beliefs because it was still the only connection I had with them."

Another participant, Clyde, described the loss of closeness with his parents as a result of the difference in religious belief throughout his interview:

We're not particularly close any more, especially after my deconversion. Minimal relations with my parents even though I'm living with them. Terribly tense at times but nothing too major or extreme. ...It used to be an acceptable relationship between parents and their child and now there's not much of a relationship there, it's down to barely common questions. "Can you get me something down from the store?", "Hi, how are you?" that type of thing. No real deep connection or real deep conversation or anything like that. It's mainly surface level conversation and a surface level relationship I guess. ...It has sabotaged the relationship. It's definitely gone down the drain since I have become irreligious or not participatory in their relationship with their religious beliefs.

A few participants described their difference in religious belief as altering the way in which they can connect with parents and family. They described their parents' religion as a fundamental part of their identity, and their differing beliefs make it hard to relate feel connected:

As far as my family goes, and our widening gap of religious beliefs, I think there's a definite chance, honestly it's probably happening now, that we're just growing apart. I talk to them less. It's not necessarily intentional. Not meant to be harmful or hateful in any way but we just have fewer points of contact in our lives. Fewer connections. I wouldn't be surprised if at some point I end up moving away and getting to a point where I don't even see them once a year. Just, once every few years whenever it's possible. (Glen Bateman)

Another participant shared similar sentiments:

My relationship with my family members has definitely changed because as time progressed I see them as more and more radical and more and more different from me. It's hard to connect and relate to them. I feel like there's just this wall in between us that I can't get passed to really connect with my family members.

(Ashley Brown)

Another participant described the loss of connection with a sibling, who chose religion as a career and way of life”

I've had barely any religious talks with since I came out as an atheist is my brother who's a priest. And I kind of get a sense... we've been very close growing up even though there's about a 10-year age difference but we've been very close all my life and I feel like these last few years we've kind of been a bit more apart. We don't talk as much and its... I mean we bond over like video games and things like that but there's not a whole lot of other substance. Because really the thing he's passionate about is religion. That's what he lives, that's what he does so it's just the fact that that's not something I can talk to him about. I feel kind of I don't know; put to the side or excluded because of that. I'd just rather not talk about it with them lest it become them bombarding me with attempts to convert me back. (Nattilus Nye)

Strider revealed feelings of wishing his atheist identity weren't real, stating that it would be easier for him and his family if he were Christian:

There's a lot of times that I wish that I was Christian and straight and didn't have to argue about it, that I didn't think or discuss anything else and I just fit in with my family. There wouldn't be any arguments. (Strider)

Another common sentiment among participants was a need to get away or escape from family as a result of the impact of differing religious identities:

I have my own room, so if I just need to get away from it all, I can go in here and its alone. No one bothers me. ... [Moving out would be] like... heaven I guess.

Like if heaven existed I guess that's what it would be. (Jack)

Other participants shared similar feelings:

It kind of makes me not want to be at home, I live in California and I ended up at school in New York. It was probably at least in some part that I wanted to get away because at home I have to not talk for a good portion of the conversations that happen. It's frustrating. (Nattilus Nye)

I'm on track to get a decent job so that I can live away, far away from my parents, or far enough away from them so that it's um so that they can't be mad that I'm not going to church but not so far away so that we can't still be close. (Mark)

Completely honestly, I would rather move as far away as possible and never have anything to do with them. Because I've had so many bad experiences with all of them that I'd rather just move away. (Strider)

## **Support**

Participants highlighted ways that they found validation, support, and information about their newly formed atheist/irreligious identity. Further, they identified two subthemes which include the internet and peer/social support.

**Support theme 1: The internet.** Another potential buffer to potential negative outcomes, most participants highlighted the internet as a means of finding support, validation, and information about their new identity. This theme was the first listed

source of support and validation by many participants, and the following quotes are a highlight of how these individuals receive support from the internet:

The internet certainly helped a hell of a lot. There's a lot of people who are religious, and a lot of the ... not teenagers but millennials who grew up in this age of the internet, finding information wherever we can, don't believe in it so we cling to each other. And that's where we go to get the validation from. (Emily)

The internet basically. For me, the internet is the greatest tool against religion ever devised. I found complete acceptance and support on the internet. I did my historical research on the bible using the internet. We're talking about literally billions of sources to reference from for free. My greatest sense of support was probably the sub-reddit atheism. I discovered a lot of people like myself. This was after I already came to the conclusion of my own beliefs. (Patheos)

A lot of it is online, you know the internet can be a wonderful resource. It's just being part of atheist communities and talking, discussing issues with other people who have similar stories and similar experiences as me. ...It's where people can just post their de-conversion story, essentially, and it's a really great place to just be able to talk to other people about it and to realize that you're not alone. I'm just going through and reading other people's stories, but there does tend to be a pattern that you can pull out and it really helps you. I should really say it helps me come to terms with the fact that I'm not alone or I'm not different in this.

There are other people who are like me and who have had similar experiences to me. So, the Internet's one of those places. (Sigrid)

One participant, a 21-year-old self-identified White male gnostic atheist, described the internet as more than a resource for support and validation. He described using the internet as an escape from isolation and potential negativity, using the internet as an escape:

So, if I didn't have to talk to my family, I didn't. And then when I went online, then I would become myself. Whoever that self was at the time. So, I would do a lot of writing. Lot of online role playing. Kind of enjoying talking to people from around the world. That's what's so beautiful about the internet. That you don't have to be someone that you're not. You can be whatever you want to be.

(Strider)

**Support theme 2: Social and peer support.** Acting as a buffer to potential negative outcomes of coming to terms with their atheist/agnostic/irreligious/nones identity, many participants highlighted the positive effects of social and peer support. Support and validation from others served a vital purpose in participants' experiences as they began to express their lack of religious feelings and beliefs with safe people. Nattilus Nye explained the benefits of having friends who share "similar nonbelief," expressing relief that others can hold similar feelings and be "alright" and "living just fine:"

Being in an engineering school most of my friends don't believe either so I can feel free to at some point make fun of religion or just point out some of what is to me at least the obvious flaws and talk about it and have a laugh with my friends. So really my friends I guess would be that source of support religion wise. But there aren't really atheist churches or anything for that kind of support. ...I talk

about it freely with my friends because I'm an engineer so most of my friends and people I'm around are not religious. So, it's nice to be able to talk to people who have a similar mindset there. (Nattilus Nye)

Sigrid described the "comfort" he felt after finding others that have experienced similar situations:

Just talking with other friends because most of my friends are still from my Catholic high school, and we've all sort of gone through this similar sort of experience of de-conversion and coming to terms with that. Just being able to talk to them about it and discuss issues, and having similar struggles as them, whether or not to tell your parents, whether or not to go to mass, whether or not ... Just have to your own little close support group is really nice. (Sigrid)

... Just to be able to talk with them about it and to hear that one, that I'm not alone ... Even though it seems silly, this isn't an uncommon thing, but it's nice to know that when you do feel alone in situation, it's nice to know that there are other people who have the same belief as you. So, that was very comforting. Then just to hear their story and that they've gone through a similar experience to me, growing up in religious families and coming to terms with this, and sort of going through that journey. It was comforting. (Sigrid)

For one participant, going to college out-of-state proved invaluable as a tool to gain distance from the dominant religion. This 19-year-old student sought out the company of like-minded students by finding a local Secular Student Alliance:

I was looking online at [my college's] clubs and seeing what they had, and I saw that they had a Secular Student Alliance, which was exactly what I was looking

for. I was like, "Yes, similar minded people." I sought it out and it was all I expected. It was nice. ... I really enjoyed it and I met some really nice people who helped me think through things and feel more optimistic, feel better about what I was going through because I met people who have gone through similar experiences. It really helped a lot with that. (Ashley Brown)

In addition to peers and friends, one participant discussed the helpful support of family members who have also come to the same set of beliefs, noting that they often keep each other "in check:"

Since I can relate well to my brother we have had many conversations and I definitely have become a lot closer since we shared common atheism, I guess does that make sense? Certainly, my brother helps he keeps me in check and I keep him in check, things like that. We're, you know I can ask him any question I want, he will give me his honest opinion, and I'll do the same for him. I don't know what I would do without him. (Clyde)

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

#### **Summary**

The purpose of this psychological phenomenological study was to explore with a sample of atheist/agnostic/irreligious/none identified children their experiences of living within a religious household. It was anticipated that a better understanding of the lived experiences of this population would uncover a potential typology of experiences, and uncover the potential for invalidation, discrimination, and minority stressors within the family structure. Understanding these experiences from the perspective of the child, both on the child themselves and the experience within the family dynamic can advance mental health practitioners' awareness of potentially problematic situations within family structures, thus improving the quality of services provided to the atheist/irreligious community.

This researcher collected qualitative data using 12 semi-structured interviews. Supplemental data for this study was obtained from the use of participant feedback, an independent auditor, and the researcher's reflexive journaling. Participants in this study included 12 atheist/agnostic/nihilist/humanist identified individuals who self-reported either living at home with parents or being under financial dependence of their parents and rated their families' religiosity at least a 7 on a scale of 1 to 10. After the data was collected and transcribed it was read thoroughly to get a sense of the whole, followed by careful extraction of significant statements, identification of central themes and

subthemes, and finished with the integration of contextual and descriptive meanings. The chosen methodology for analysis was guided by the ‘Duquesne method’ as described in chapter 3. The study was based on the following research question:

1. What are the lived experiences of self-identified atheist/irreligious youth who live with and/or rely on religious parents for housing and financial support?

The following is a discussion of the major findings and conclusions drawn from this research study. The conclusions are followed by implications and recommendations for future research.

## **Conclusions**

This study revealed a typology of three overarching themes that were identified from the data and aim to describe the lived experience of this population. Meyer’s (2003) model of minority stress was used as a lens in which to explore and identify the potential stress themes. The three overarching themes (minority stress, outcomes, support) each contains one or more subthemes, with a total of seven subthemes. The themes are listed below:

1. Minority Stress
  - a. Distal (Prejudice Themes)
    - i. Discrimination/invalidation of atheist identity
  - b. Proximal
    - i. Anticipated negative consequences/outcomes
    - ii. Concealment
    - iii. Internalized negative feelings towards atheist/irreligious identity
2. Outcomes

- a. Isolation
  - b. Hopelessness
  - c. Loss of closeness within the family
3. Support
- a. The internet
  - b. Social and peer support

When examining themes and subthemes identified by the atheist/irreligious youth population in this study, a figure describing the findings related to participants' minority stress in this study was created (see figure 1). This figure can be viewed as a helpful framework for understanding the lived experiences of atheist/irreligious youth living within religious households in this study. To validate the utility of the figure, this author will illustrate how the experience of one of the participants' experience of living as an atheist youth living in a religious household is depicted by the figure.

**Minority Stress.** The DSM-5 categorizes stress as the pattern of specific and nonspecific responses a person makes to stimulus events that disturb equilibrium and tax or exceed the ability to cope (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 829). In prior psychological research, a stressor has been defined as an event or condition that initiates change and requires the person to adapt to a new situation or life circumstance (Meyer, 2003). The concept of social stress purports that conditions in a person's milieu, not just person events, can be sources of stress that might lead to negative effects in mental and physical health. Social stress is therefore considered to impact marginalized and stigmatized social groups, such as SES, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion (Meyer, 2003).

Meyer (2003) described minority stress processes along a continuum, from distal stressors to proximal personal processes. A distal stressor is considered to be objective, in that they are not dependent on a person's perception or appraisal. A proximal stressor is considered to be more subjective and related to self-identity, in this case, atheist, agnostic, irreligious, or religious "none." Meyer conceptualized three processes of minority stress, from the distal to the proximal are (a) external, objective events and conditions (chronic and acute), (b) expectation of such events and the vigilance required, and (c) the internalization of negative societal attitudes (Meyer, 2003; Meyer, 1995; Meyer & Dean, 1998). The following minority stress themes related to the experience of atheist youth living in religious households were categorized in a similar manner.

*Distal subtheme 1: Discrimination/invalidation of atheist identity.* With distal minority stress processes defined as objective and external, the atheist youth figure detailing distal minority stress focuses on overt discrimination and invalidation. Hammer et al. (2013) developed a typology of most frequently perceived acts of discrimination on atheists in the U.S. These types of discrimination were categorized into six major themes, social ostracism, coercion, slander, denial of opportunities, goods, and services, hate crimes, and other forms of discrimination. The stories of discrimination and invalidation emanating from participants in this study were categorized into similar categories.

For participants that revealed their atheist/irreligious identity to parents and family, feelings of overt discrimination and invalidation were identified as a reliable theme. This theme is consistent with the literature indicating the existence of familial discrimination, especially within households of higher religiosity members (Altemeyer &

Hunsberger, 1997). Participants in this study reported feeling “attacked” and “dismissed” while some became the target of ridicule at the hands of parents and other family members. As research has indicated, familial conflict with younger family members becomes troublesome due to inherent power differentials, particularly the child’s lack of control over how to cease contact with the conflictual situation (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Cragun et al., 2012). Furthermore, atheist/irreligious children may feel confused in situations of parental invalidation and discrimination, particularly in closer, more caring parental relationships. For example, one participant reported feeling “attacked” in a situation he described as “harsh,” but also made statements about not being “too upset” at the situation, knowing that his parents’ attack is “not intentional.”

Moreover, one participant reported parental invalidation of their atheist identity by placing blame its potential to be a “bad influence” on siblings. This experience may be supported by misconceptions and stigma surrounding the atheist identity, therefore causing religious individuals to cast blame on the “atheist child” for potential negative outcomes of siblings.

*Adulthood.* Some participants discussed comments made by parents that hint at the notion of emerging atheist identity being viewed as a “phase” or something that is not valid. This experience, when viewed through the lens of adulthood, is potentially harmful in that the feelings of atheist youth can feel disrespected, not taken seriously, and often dismissed by parents in reminder of the existing familial dynamics of power and control. As a result, atheist/irreligious children may resort to keeping their stigmatized identity hidden or retreat from the family completely. Furthermore, it may be assumed by some

youth that parents will, in turn, try to convince or “re-convert” the child back to religion, furthering the feelings of invalidation and adultism.

*Microaggressions.* In many cases, the forms of overt discrimination and invalidation appear in the form of a microaggression. Microaggressions are subtle, usually hard to distinguish, and often-innocuous actions and messages that communicate a demeaning message to an intended person (Constantine, 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). Most well known literature on microaggressions is focused on ethnic minorities and race (Nadal, 2011, Sue et al., 2007, Sue, 2010), microaggressions toward women (Capodilupo et al., 2010, Nadal, 2010), LGBT people (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011), persons with disabilities (Keller & Galgay, 2010), and religious minorities (Nadal, Hamit, Leon, & Tobio, 2012; Nadal, Issa, Griffin, Hamit, & Lyons, 2010). Nadal et al., (2012) points out that microaggressions based on religion are studied the least when compared to other identities; however studies focusing specifically on microaggressions impacting atheists are practically nonexistent. In this study, participants experienced discrimination in the form of microaggressions on several different occasions, as some participants described discomfort after overt discriminatory remarks about atheists, witnessing snide comments, or references to on objective lack of morality. Microaggressions may also appear in the context of adultism by parents as a way of exerting power and authority.

*Proximal subtheme 1: Anticipated negative consequences/outcomes.* Multiple study participants endorsed feeling direct negative consequences as a result of their identity being revealed, or feared potential negative outcomes if their identity were to be compromised or revealed. This theme contained two subthemes that further described

potential consequences of holding their atheist/irreligious identity. Some participants described fears that were directly related to the stigma associated with being “atheist,” either through seeing parents and family members react negatively to other atheists, or by reading the accounts of other atheists who were mistreated or thrown out of their houses due to their identity being revealed.

The assumption of negative consequences and subsequent anxiety increased some participants’ feelings of dread before engaging with religious family members. Some participants endorsed feeling as if they would be “judged” negatively if their lack of beliefs were revealed. Not all of the assumed negative consequences were centered on the participants themselves, and a subtheme was identified that associated the participant’s identity as a cause of pain on others. Some participants described feelings of fear derived from not wanting to cause pain to their religious family, again likely due to the family members’ misconceptions and beliefs about the identity itself. These shared accounts reveal the complicated and somewhat delicate family dynamics that emerge as a result of an atheist/irreligious identity emerging in a religious household.

***Proximal subtheme 2: Concealment.*** Perhaps the most stress-inducing theme that was identified from the participants’ stories was the feeling of holding the identity inside and having to live a lie within their own home. This feeling has been referred to commonly as “closeting.” The effects of “closeting” are complex and multifaceted, with many perceived advantages and disadvantages of revealing a stigmatized identity. In the case of an atheist or irreligious identity, the body of research on discrimination (Cragun et al., 2012; Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2011) and attitudes (Pew Research Center, 2015; Cragun et al., 2012; Kosmin & Keysar, 2009) towards atheists informs how

participants might expect parents and family members to feel if their identity were exposed. As a result, some participants highlighted a need to “get away” from their home, which seems to be well founded, as reported feelings of anxiety were sometimes mitigated when the individuals were separated from their family by distance either through enrollment in college or through some other form of physical distance.

Study participants revealed feeling higher levels of stress in their home from holding their identity inside and instead choosing to participate in either religious discussion or religious rituals as a way of avoiding conflict. These reports are consistent with research that identifies fear of ostracism and the potential for discrimination as driving factors to the concealment of a person’s atheist/irreligious identity when around others (Cragun et al., 2012). Participants in this study revealed that they chose to utilize prior knowledge of prayers, rituals, and religious ceremonies to hide their stigmatized identity and defend against negative outcomes and the potential for discrimination. However, as research also shows, religion and spirituality are regarded as important in identity development, and hiding a stigmatized identity can increase stress and the potential for unhappiness, as the act of hiding will cut-off an integral part of identity.

***Proximal subtheme 3: Internalized negative feelings towards atheist/irreligious identity.*** In some stories, it was evident that the participant did not actively choose or seek out atheist thoughts and beliefs, but struggled internally as they came to terms with their disagreement with religious teachings. Because all the participants were raised to believe in a God of a particular religion, it may not be surprising that the idea of losing belief in tenets that many around you hold close may cause stress and uncertainty. For most participants, religion served to partly reinforce unfair stereotypes that atheists are

immoral, rebellious, or hedonistic, among other negative descriptors (Harper, 2007). Participants described trying to suppress their atheist feelings, or even trying to force themselves to believe in God by essentially doubling down on religious scripture, prayers, or attendance in religious services. Furthermore, more than one participant stated the feeling that things would just be easier if they were not an atheist, suggesting that being an atheist is the root cause for distress.

**Outcomes.** Guided by the figure of atheist minority stress, themes were identified that result from the combined influence of stressors (minority stress, general stress, environment) and supports (internet, social and peer support). The participants identified three subthemes of support as isolation, hopelessness, and loss of closeness within the family.

***Outcomes subtheme 1: Isolation.*** Another form of stress that was discovered from participant interviews centered on feelings of isolation. Participants described feeling less close with family members through the emergence of their newly forming atheist/irreligious identity. Some felt that it became more difficult to connect to religious family and friends, while some felt overt discrimination and/or invalidation. As a result, many felt unsafe in their own homes, and began to seek validation elsewhere. However, atheist/irreligious youth often experience isolation due to the religious identity's lack of outward visibility, which invariably makes it difficult to find like-minded others for support and validation. This experience was captured in the participant interviews, as some participants reported feeling isolated in their own home, or reported the act of self-isolating to protect themselves from the potential for negative interactions with family members.

***Outcomes subtheme 2: Hopelessness.*** A large percentage of participants discussed feelings of hopelessness about their familial situation in the future, assuming rigidity in their family's religious beliefs. Joiner and Wagner (1995) defined hopelessness as "an expectation that highly desired outcomes will not occur or that negative ones will occur..., and that nothing is going to change things for the better..." (p.778). In other words, participants may view their parents' religion and religious beliefs as concrete and unwavering, with nothing short of parental loss of faith viewed as a hopeless situation void of potential understanding and validation. As discussed in the literature review, spirituality and religion is considered to be an important dimension in identity development (Constantine, Lewis, Conner, & Sanchez, 2000), and is considered by scholars to be an integral part of a person's self-concept (Cross, 1995; Magaldi-Dopman, Park-Taylor, & Ponterotto, 2011; Smart & Smart, 1992). If religion and spirituality is viewed as a valid part of identity and identity development, then it could be argued that expecting a person to validate and appreciate an oppositional stance on the belief in a deity or God as unlikely.

Resultantly, many participants described plans of moving far away from religious family in the future. Influenced by feelings of hopelessness that their family will magically become accepting and validate their atheist/irreligious identity, participants endorsed a need to create space between themselves and their religious family, with physical distance the preferred method of staying away. Moreover, some participants identified feelings of frustration and anger at parents and family, primarily centered on the feeling that they as individuals have not changed, yet their personal choice of what

they believe stands to impact how family, friends, and other religious people think and feel about them.

*Outcomes subtheme 3: Loss of closeness within the family.* For many participants, initial experiences with religion served to foster close relationships between family members in formative years, as religion played a key role as the primary driver of connection. Consequently, as atheist/irreligious youth begin to question their beliefs and become more secure in their secular identity, they may feel less connected to those avenues of connection with their religious family members. Indeed, this study found that many participants discussed a loss of connection and closeness between family members who became aware of the differing religious identities. One participant remarked that the revealing of their atheist/irreligious identity “sabotaged” their relationship with parents and affected the level of connection felt between himself and family members. Another participant admitted feeling that he wished he still believed in his family’s Christian faith out of the desire to “fit in” with his family and avoid the potential for arguments.

As stated in the prior hopelessness theme, many participants reported a loss of hope that the previously close relationships with their religious family members would ever be restored. There were reports of some participants giving up hope of the possibility of parents and family ever understanding their feelings, while some discussed plans to move away from family permanently.

**Support.** Participants identified sources of support that they used to cope with the stress associated with holding a stigmatized minority status. The identified sources of support were the internet and peer/social support.

***Support theme 1: The internet.*** Perhaps the most consistent theme between participants in this study is the report of internet-based sources of coping. Many participants directly attributed the internet as a primary means of support and coping, either through online communities, the use informational websites, podcasts, and videos, or as a means of getting away from invalidation and hostility. For isolation in particular, the internet provides a means for adolescents and other youth to reach out and find out that they are not alone; that their feelings are valid and supported.

Recent research has estimated that as much as 92 percent of teenagers and other youth go online on a daily basis, with up to 24 percent online “almost constantly” (Lenhart, 2015). Furthermore, the internet can provide an adolescent or teenager with a sense of independence and privacy in a household, which is increasingly useful in a time of exploration within a potentially stigmatized identity (Schmitt, Dyanim, & Matthias, 2008; Pascoe, 2007). As Sofka (2009) and Hellenga (2002) note, the internet is a vital resource for adolescents that find it difficult to discussing issues or concerns with parents and peers, as it provides anonymity and relative safety in searching for validation and information. Moreover, for marginalized populations, the internet can be instrumental in a person’s search for acceptance, community, and a place to connect with others in an empowering manner (Pascoe, 2007).

***Support theme 2: Social and peer support.*** In addition to utilizing the internet for support, information, and validation, participants also described friends and peers as helpful sources of support and validation. These findings are important, as existing literature has viewed social support as an important ingredient to individual resilience. In fact, Plancherel et al., (1994) proposed a model known as the stress-buffering effect,

which centers on social support as a way to offset or moderate the impact of stress on health (Dumont & Provost, 1999). For adolescents and young adults, it has been shown that low social support can be associated with depressive symptoms, anxiety, and interpersonal sensitivity (Burke & Weir, 1978; Compas et al., 1986; Dumont & Provost, 1999).

With the youth atheist/irreligious population however, the stigma associated with the identity in combination with the lack of outwardly visible characteristics might make it difficult for young individuals to find adequate social support. Some participants shared experiences of finding local Secular Student Alliances in their schools, but for many participants there were no easily available communities focused on secular/atheist/irreligious identity. Consequently, more participants relied on the internet for support, understanding, and validation.

Participant reports of the value of local social and peer support is also somewhat unsurprising given the latest research by Pew Research Center, which states that atheists tend to be younger and more educated, and are viewed much more favorably by persons (regardless of religious belief) that are under the age of 30 (Pew Research Center, 2017; 2015). Given the age of the population of our study, it is likely that they are more apt to find acceptance within their peer demographic.

### **A Case Example**

Ashley Brown described her lived experience of becoming a nihilist atheist in the home of fundamentalist evangelical Christianity. She described her family to be “really young,” stating that both her grandmother and her mother were pregnant by 18. Her family of origin consists of her mother, her stepdad, and her younger sister. She

explained that they grew up close and even though Ashley's family has moved across the country, they still communicate every month with extended family. She considers her grandparents to be very close, but described them to be "extremely religious, very, very, very religious" and explained that they are "doomsday preppers." She revealed that her biological father was not in her life due to his problems with "serious mental illness."

Ashley detailed her early messages and experiences with religion, and she described being very religious as a child, thinking that atheists were "bad people" who "needed to be saved." She read the bible every night, went to "Jesus camp" multiple times, and by her own admission, was a "very religious" child who prayed "obsessively." She explained that her family prayed for every meal, they attended church services every Sunday, and they memorized bible verses to read aloud to each other when they were not able to attend church. Her peer network was entirely made within the religion, as her friends were "church friends" and she participated in a church group and bible studies. For Ashley, church and religion was an everyday life occurrence.

Ashley's first experience of doubt regarding her religious belief came after an experience of trauma. She reported being "taken advantage of" by another person, which made her angry "towards God." Her immediate reaction to the traumatic experience was to ask questions pointed at God, such as, "Why would he do this? Why would he let this happen? I read the bible every night. I pray all the time. I don't understand why he would let this happen to me." She described a spiral of depression and self-harm, which only exacerbated her anger and questioning towards God and her religious belief. Ashley then explained that her initial nihilist thoughts began to manifest, despite her continuous efforts to "push them away." She explained that it was "really hard to accept that God

didn't exist" and found it difficult to break free of the fear that not believing in God or her religion would subject her for an eternity in "hell." Meanwhile, as time continued to pass, her nihilist feelings steadily progressed into agnosticism and eventually into atheism, although she still considers herself a nihilist.

Ashley identified both distal and proximal minority stress events as she navigated her newly forming atheist and nihilist belief structure. She endorsed distal experiences of discrimination in addition to proximal experiences of anticipatory negative events or reactions, concealment, and internalized negative feelings towards atheism. She described experiences of discrimination and internalized negative feelings towards atheism as she began to struggle with the realization that she no longer believed in a God. As a child, she had learned that everyone that did not follow in her faith was evil or bad; she described thoughts of "hating Jesus" and then immediately feeling guilt and shame. She explained that her parents noticed that she had been pulling away from church, and told them that she no longer wanted to participate in church. Her parents responded by doubling down on the bible readings, and Ashley reported that her mother became even more vigilant after noticing that she no longer sang or smiled in church.

Because Ashley has not informed her parents or family about her atheist identity, she is not as likely to be subjected to overt personal discrimination by family and friends because of her ability to conceal her identity from others. She described plans to tell parents and family in the future, but revealed feelings of fear, stating that the thought of revealing her identity "terrifies" her because she anticipates that it will "ruin the relationships" and possibly cause family members to "cut (her) off." She shared feelings

of hopelessness; that her family will never reconcile her atheist identity within their own fundamentalist Christian values.

Moreover, Ashley described religion to be a point of connection within the family as she grew up. She stated that her family's focus on their beliefs meant that they did "everything" together around the religion itself, and when she lost her faith, it became harder to connect and relate to everyone. As a result, she reported feelings intense isolation, anxiety, and dread surrounding the times when she has to go back home from college, which stems from the stress of concealment in addition to the lack of closeness with her family members. She considers herself the "black sheep" of her family.

However, Ashley also indicated the helpful support of the internet and peer/social support as potential buffers of resilience. She reported that her family was not connected to the internet for much of her childhood, and most of her childhood friends were connected through religion. She reported the experience of going away to college as liberating, because she was then free to search for like-minded peers and find validation and information. She expressed feelings of optimism after joining a local Secular Student Alliance at her college and finding others who shared similar experiences. In college, she was also able to access the internet, research her feelings about religion, and find that she was not alone in this process of coming to terms with a loss of faith.

### **Implications**

This study expands on the existing literature pertaining to atheism/irreligion and discrimination and stigma with regard to family dynamics. By trusting and valuing the lived experiences of atheist/irreligious youth within religious households, this study led to increased knowledge regarding the impact of the emerging atheist/irreligious identity on

the individual within the home. Through the safety of anonymity and a nonjudgmental, open dialogue, study participants felt safe to disclose their personal life experiences as they navigated through a new emerging secular identity. Additionally, participants highlighted fears, increased stress, loss of closeness within the family, misconceptions about their identities, in addition to discussing helpful sources of support. This study encouraged dynamic and transparent discussion throughout participant interviews regarding their feelings, assumptions, and experiences of living with a stigmatized identity.

The voices of atheist/irreligious youth who participated in this study can serve to inform the existing literature of this population's experience, help formulate standards of care and guidelines for practice with this population. The aforementioned research findings hold several implications for practice, research, and advocacy.

### **Implications for clinical practice.**

*Understanding atheist/irreligious youth.* The findings in this study have important implications for clinical practice with atheist/irreligious youth. An important finding from this study detailed the experience of internalizing stigma and discrimination toward their emerging identity. Participants described feeling that their atheist/irreligious identity will cause others pain, and felt as if a potential reveal of their identity will increase stress both internally and within the family structure. As a result, atheist/irreligious young adults may avoid disclosure due to a variety of reasons, from a fear of rejection and potential abuse, to a fear of causing pain to loved ones, to a fear of economic consequences. To avoid negative outcomes or related stressors, a common tactic expressed by participants in this study is closeting, or "passing" as religious.

Research supports closeting as an often stressful but common coping strategy to defend against reactions to a stigmatized identity and potential for discrimination (Hammer et al., 2012; Miller & Major, 2000). The literature on atheism and discrimination confirms that atheists are viewed more negatively and often experience derision, exclusion, and sometimes violence (Cragun et al., 2012b).

From a social justice perspective, it is crucial that counseling psychologists work to understand the atheist/irreligious identity of the specific individual that presents for therapy. As this study revealed, atheist/irreligious youth are aware of the stigma that their identity holds, and seek to clarify misconceptions about what their identity means personally for them. The findings from this study point to the need for therapists to both recognize the stressors that atheist/irreligious youth encounter in the home and support the protective factors that enable resilience. Moreover, as psychology holds religion to be a core component of diversity and personal identity (Brewster et al., 2014; Constantine et al., 2000; McMinnet al., 2009), it is imperative for graduate training programs to address atheism as a valid aspect of multiculturalism and diversity, and take precautions to address potential biases about this group. As Brewster et al., (2014) and D'Andrea and Sprenger (2007) recommend, competent psychological work should strive to honor differences between religious belief and atheism, validate experiences of discrimination, stigma, and oppression, and focus on personal responsibility in the therapeutic context.

***Working with atheist children within the family setting.*** For many participants, the stressors described in their experiences directly relate to difficult family dynamics. The relationship of religion to family life has been studied for decades (Edgell, 2003; Houseknecht & Pankhurst, 2000; Zuckerman, 2009), however very little research exists

to help understand what happens to families when religious belief is not homogenous. In fact, social scientists have found evidence to support that religious agreement is an important factor in intergenerational relations between parents and children (Stokes & Regnerus, 2009; Myers, 2004; Pearce & Axinn, 1998). Stokes and Regnerus (2009) found a relationship between religious discord and parental affection in young adults, leading them to make the assertion that highly religious parents are more likely to be “frustrated” with a child who does not believe in the same manner, creating an environment for higher conflict (p.164). They also asserted that higher magnitudes of religious discord are associated with more intensive negative feelings from child to parent (Stokes & Regnerus, 2009). Moreover, some religions do not expressly forbid prejudice against atheists and may indeed express support for discrimination and prejudice, while another study made the claim that early emphasis on religion within the family may serve to promote a script of “us versus them” with regard to religious differences (Cragun et al., 2012; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997; Harris, 2006; Hitchens, 2007). When viewed alongside the results from this study, it is imperative for therapists to understand the role of religion in a household, and to take into consideration the role of religious belief with identity development and maintenance.

Additionally, participants in this study described the process of revealing their atheist/irreligious identity to have the potential to cause pain to parents and family members. Participants who chose to not disclose their identity similarly shared fears of causing parents pain, with some elucidating fears that religious parents might blame themselves. For therapists working within the family setting, it is essential to address potential parental concerns involving possible feelings of denial, anger, guilt, self-blame,

resentment, shame, and disappointment with their child's religious identity. It may be wise to be vigilant for signs of possible depression in the parent, partly resulting from blame and guilt over not "doing more" to change their child's religious feelings and beliefs, or resulting from concerns over the "eternal soul" of their child. Parents may also feel shame and become targets of discrimination around others, specifically religious friends and family if the child's identity is revealed publicly.

*Working with marginalized youth.* The findings in this study have important implications for clinical practice with marginalized youth. Specifically with atheist/irreligious children, study participants identified the internet and social support as protective factors that help with finding validation and support. Literature has shown that people need to feel connected to others and to feel valued as a part of a group or community. For individuals with marginalized identities, these feelings of belonging are challenged by the aspects of themselves that need to be hidden from others, specifically of those that do not conform to mainstream societal values (McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Brewer, 1991). Frable (1993) described how a concealable identity (such as atheist identity) could prevent others from finding similarly minded members of the marginalized group due to the lack of outwardly visible identifying characteristics. Furthermore, he argued that a concealed identity might make it easier for a marginalized person to witness harsh negative comments and opinions from others regarding their stigmatized identity, with the perpetrator assuming membership in the dominant identity (Frable, 1993). When a person holding a stigmatized and marginalized identity hears negative opinions from others in the mainstream community, it is likely to reinforce

negative beliefs about the stigmatized identity and effect the individual's self-esteem (McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Brewer, 1991).

Given the atheist/irreligious youth's dependent position within the family structure, and the lack of visible support available to most youths in this position, it is no surprise that the individual becomes highly motivated to identify with a group of similar others online. McKenna and Bargh (1998) found that individuals with concealable stigmatized identities were more likely to utilize the internet for support than others with less-concealable or mainstream identities, and find those internet supports to be important to their identity. Participants in this study mirror these findings, in that virtually all participants discussed the importance of the internet in finding information, support, and validation.

For clinicians, it is important to recognize the importance of the internet and digital literacy in the new age of internet support. For adolescents and young adults, the digital language evolves quickly, and many parents are left behind. Prensky (2001) described youth as members of a D-gen (digital generation), and as natives of the "language of computers, video games, and the Internet" (p. 1), may feel less connected to older generations who were not raised in a digital generation. It is important that practitioners continue to learn about technology with a goal of developing rapport through a common language with youth. This is especially important with marginalized youth that hold concealed identities, as the internet is not an inherently safe place to discuss a stigmatized identity. Pascoe (2007) discussed the importance of knowing how to keep safe online, and it is essential that practitioners encourage marginalized youth to

think about what they choose to share online, and to be prepared to have discussions with parents and others about what is posted in the event of a loss of privacy (Sofka, 2009).

*Resilience.* The construct of resilience within marginalized populations has been researched thoroughly, and is commonly linked to a set of resources available to the individual that help deal with stressful situations (Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2009; Harvey, 2007). Literature on resilience in other marginalized identities highlights protective factors and learned behaviors that influence a person's ability to cope with struggle and adversity. Some examples of resilience within this population may include the ability to define their identity with regard to religiosity and spirituality as they see fit, the act of keeping aware of stigma and oppression, staying connected to supportive communities, and feeling hope for the future. Clinicians can play a role in fostering resilience within atheist and irreligious youth by helping to name the stigma and discrimination in addition to attending to needs for understanding, acceptance, and advocacy. With atheist and irreligious youth, differences in power dynamics are often apparent, and a focus on empowerment in therapy is important, as it allows clinicians to identify and foster the youth's personal strengths and coping skills.

**Implications for research.** Following Brewster's (2013) call to the profession for more research focused on the population of atheists in the United States, this study succeeds in adding to the literature by gathering experiences of atheist/irreligious youth living within religious households. Through the review of participant experiences gathered by the researcher, a typology of themes describing the lived experience of being an atheist/irreligious youth was identified. The experiences of the 12 participants provide groundwork for future work within this population. Although participants came from

diverse backgrounds and religious upbringings, it was not possible to account for all diverse characteristics with the 12 participants.

There are a number of different prospective avenues to further explore with the population in this study. First, it is evident that the sample gathered in this study were majority White and male, with most being raised in a denomination of the Christian religion. This sample is somewhat unsurprising, as the latest statistics of the religiously unaffiliated, or “nones” measure out to be mostly male (57 percent) and White (68 percent), and when separated by purely self-identified atheists (most of the respondents in this study self-identified as atheist), the numbers raise to 68 percent male and 78 percent White (Pew Research Center, 2017). Moreover, the findings of this study should be explored with targeted populations, such as specific religious identities, populations of color, or even stratified with a focus on the impact of atheism/irreligion within persons that hold multiple intersecting oppressed identities. It should also be noted that for some religions, in some parts of the world, the penalty for apostasy, or renunciation of a religious belief, is incredibly severe and may impact the perceived safety of revealing or admitting a non-religious identity. Gaining access to, and working with, individuals from such religions should be carefully considered.

Additionally, this population surveyed in the sample of this study do not represent the entirety of family dynamics. Future directions might explore the other experiences within the family structure, such as the experiences of religious parents that have children that identify as atheist/irreligious. The emergent theme in this study that their atheist/irreligious identity might cause others pain may, in fact, be corroborated or explored with studies on the impact on parents and other family members.

Another possible future direction for research with this population could focus on longitudinal effects of atheism on both mental health and family dynamics. With the seemingly high negative attitudes toward atheists in the U.S. and the possibility for long-term exposure to minority and environmental stressors, studies that examine the experiences of this population over time could be beneficial. Longitudinal work may also be helpful to understand possible changes in individual personal belief or changes to familial dynamics over time.

Moreover, little is known about the atheist/irreligious/"none" population and well-being aside from the problematic comparisons to Furthermore, from the analysis of the transcripts, several patterns were discovered that did not fully meet the criteria to be a freestanding theme. These potential themes were not endorsed by multiple participants, did not describe a moment of the event that could be sufficiently understood, or could not be markedly abstracted and labeled. For some of the themes, further exploration was not successful, as some participants did not reply for elaboration in a sufficient amount of time.

A few participants made remarks regarding feelings of hope for the future with regard to their parents' awareness of their lack of religious belief. They discussed feeling that their parents will "realize that it's not just a phase" and noted their parent's "easing off" on pressure to be religious. It is important for future research to explore familial dynamics within this population that are hopeful, positive, or hint at experiences that counter to those that were discovered within this study. One participant described an experience of sharing materials and knowledge from his atheist identity with parents and

finding understanding and validation after a period of time. One participant described this experience:

I was matter of fact about what I was telling them, they really did their best to understand my point of view. Eventually, they did come to the realization that they share my beliefs, which was obviously gratifying to me, but it really was not that big of an issue. (Patheos)

Yet another unexplored potential avenue for future research is the potential feeling of liberation that comes from claiming an atheist/irreligious identity. A couple participants in this study described feeling “free” or “liberated” after acknowledging their lack of beliefs, and these liberatory experiences are important to capture in future research centered on resilience with this population.

**Implications for advocacy.** Vera and Speight (2003) cite a commitment to social justice as a core principle of counseling psychology. This study highlights a marginalized and stigmatized population that is at risk for mental health issues related to carrying a stigmatized identity. Stigma can increase the frequency and/or intensity of threats to the self in addition to becoming a target of prejudice and discrimination (Miller & Major, 2000). In addition, the awareness that others hold specific negative stereotypes of atheists may introduce the threat of perpetuating the stereotypes, regardless if the individual gives credence to them (Miller & Major, 2000; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997). As counseling psychologists, we not only strive to recognize inequity but to move as agents of social change (Vera & Speight, 2003).

Moreover, participants in this study identified frustration about misconceptions about atheism, and revealed feelings of wanting to correct and clarify misconceptions

about what their identity means. Many referred to the stigma surrounding the term “atheist” and the associated potential for discrimination from religious minded family and friends. A common misconception highlighted by participants was the assumption that atheists and irreligious people lack morality, and many felt pressure to live up to a model of perfection in order to combat the premise that anything negative that happens can be misattributed to their lack of belief in a God or deity. Another potential misconception about the atheist/irreligious identity that was identified was the assumption that atheists are “Satan worshippers” or desire a life of Christian Sin. Finally, participants highlighted a desire to correct people that assume that not having religious belief means that person also holds anti-religious views and feelings, which may come as a direct result of the “New Atheism” movement.

Many “leaders” in the “New Atheism” movement, such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens, have called for atheists to become visible or to “come out” in public as atheist as a way to increase visibility of the population and reduce stigma (Brewster, 2014). However, this “New Atheism” movement has been viewed as “militant” and aggressively anti-religion, and may ultimately serve to reinforce misconceptions discussed by participants in this study (Brewster et al., 2014; Stenger, 2009, p. 29). However, positive effects of social support and aligning with like-minded members of the same stigmatized identity are well-known in research on coping with stigma (Miller & Major, 2000). Other than emotional and instrumental social support, the benefits of finding others in the same stigmatized group include validation of beliefs and attitudes, mutual understanding, and interaction compatibility (Byrne, 1971; Levenson & Breedlove 1966; Ickes, 1985; Ickes & Barnes, 1978; Miller & Major, 2000).

The inherent problem with atheist identity is its hidden nature, and with assumed negative consequences of revealing the identity to others, individuals may need to assess the benefits and potential detriments of being “out” and visible with their religious identity. As a result, the onus of social change and advocacy should not rest on the members of the marginalized population alone, but with the help of the privileged non-stigmatized group member allies in the name of advocacy.

While the efforts of atheists in popular culture to increase visibility and reduce stigma by revealing themselves is powerful, the more sources of influence that speak on behalf of the marginalized identity can increase social pressure for change (Latane & Wolf, 1981; Miller & Major, 2000; Nemeth, 1986). Consequently, marginalized individuals who engage in advocacy and activism are more likely to incur significant personal costs, and are likely to meet resistance from privileged groups. The research on attitudes toward atheist populations implies that other stigmatized identities, not just the privileged Christian identity, may resist efforts of atheists to gain access to power.

Counseling psychology strives to understand the interaction between the person and environment, including the social and structural systems in which individuals live and thrive (Delgado-Romero, Lau, & Schullman, 2012). It is important to highlight the systemic conditions that contribute to the negative well-being of this population, specifically within the context of youth identity development. There is a need to discover, understand, and call attention to the systemic factors that negatively impact the lives of atheist/irreligious youth so that counseling psychologists can advocate for greater visibility, equity, and lessen the stigma of atheists within the U.S.

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## APPENDIX A

### Study Seeking Self-Identified Atheist/Agnostic/Religious “None”/Nonbeliever/Irreligious Participants for a study on their experience living within a religious household

Anneliese Singh, PhD, a professor at the University of Georgia (principal investigator), and Anthony W. Hansen, a doctoral candidate in Counseling Psychology at The University of Georgia (primary contact) are conducting a research study entitled, *The Lived Experience of Atheist and Irreligious Youth Living Within Religious Households*. The purpose of the study is capture the experience of living as an atheist, agnostic, irreligious, nonbeliever, or religious none while living within a religious family.

Study procedures will involve:

- (1) The completion of a consent form and brief online demographic questionnaire (10 minutes)
- (2) The completion of a 45-90 minute semi-structured, audio-recorded interview at a location of your choice

The findings from this project may help counselors, psychologists, social workers, and family therapists to fully understand this phenomena and its impact on the individual youth as well as the family structure, should they present in therapeutic settings. Moreover, the results of this research investigation can add to the lack of scholarly papers that deal with meaningful discussions with irreligious/non-spiritual individuals, and further the research on irreligion/atheism/non-belief as a valid diversity issue.

The only risks associated with this study are possible feelings of discomfort when reflecting on your past experiences or risk associated with breach of confidentiality if you have not disclosed your personal beliefs. We will take all precautions possible to preserve your confidentiality and privacy.

Please contact the researcher below should you meet the following study requirements:

1. Identify as a as atheist, agnostic, irreligious, a religious “none”, or a person who does not believe in a higher power
2. rely on your religious parents for housing and/or financial support
3. Are 16-21 years of age

For further information, please contact Anthony W. Hansen, M.Ed., at [ahansen@uga.edu](mailto:ahansen@uga.edu) or call [404.358.3200](tel:404.358.3200)

## APPENDIX B



October 18, 2015

Dear Participant:

I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at The University of Georgia. Along with my major professor, Anneliese Singh, PhD, NPC, NCC, we invite you to participate in a research study entitled “*The Lived Experience of Atheist and Irreligious Youth Living Within Religious Households*”. The purpose of this study is to qualitatively examine and understand the experiences of self-identified atheist agnostic, irreligious, or youth who fall in the category of a religious “none” who live at home and rely on their religious parents for shelter and/or financial support. This study seeks to explore the lived experience of children who do not endorse religious or spiritual beliefs, but are under the financial and housing support of parents who espouse strong religious beliefs. My research question will include the following:

1. What are the lived experiences of self-identified atheist/irreligious youth who live with and/or rely on religious parents for housing and financial support?

It is anticipated that the knowledge generated from this study will provide a clearer understanding of the experience of being a child that holds no religious, spiritual, or belief in a deity or higher power while living within a religious household.

To participate in this study, you must be 16-21 years of age; self-identify as atheist, agnostic, irreligious, or a person who does not believe in a higher power; and rely on your religious parents for housing and financial support.

Your participation will involve the completion of a consent form, a brief online demographic form and a 45-90 minute semi-structured, audio-recorded interview. This process should only take about 60-75 minutes. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Any results obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will be kept confidential. Individually identifying information will be securely kept and will only be disclosed with your permission or as required by law. There are limits to this confidentiality. If you report that you want to hurt yourself or another person or that you are abusing a child or elderly person, I am a state-mandated reporter and will have to report this information to the Department of Family and Children Services. Only the investigators will have access to the information, and any individually-identifiable information will be stripped after data collection. The results of the research study may be published, but your name or any identifying information will not be used. In fact, the published results will be presented in summary form only. Internet communications are insecure and there is a limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself. However, once the materials are received by the researcher, standard confidentiality procedures will be employed.

The findings from this project may help counselors, psychologists, social workers, and family therapists to fully understand this phenomena and its impact on the individual youth as well as the family structure, should they present in therapeutic settings. Moreover, the results of this research investigation can add to the lack of scholarly papers that deal with meaningful discussions with irreligious/non-spiritual individuals, and further the research on irreligion/atheism/non-belief as a valid diversity issue. There are some minimal risks or discomforts associated with this research. They include physical or psychological discomfort by the sharing negative familial experiences, however, the principal investigator is a licensed psychologist, and the co-investigator is a trained psychotherapist and has extensive counseling experience in working with youth populations. Another risk that may be involved includes the potential for participants to have their identity as atheist/agnostic/none/irreligious to be disclosed to parents through the act of participating in the study. Confidentiality procedures outlined above may serve to mitigate that risk. Furthermore, a list of counselor expert referrals (with reduced fee scales if needed) will be provided to any participant who may have an adverse reaction during the study.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me, Anthony W. Hansen, MEd at (404) 358-3200 or send an e-mail to [ahansen@uga.edu](mailto:ahansen@uga.edu).

Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to  
The Chairperson  
University of Georgia Institutional Review Board  
telephone (706) 542-3199  
email address: [irb@uga.edu](mailto:irb@uga.edu)

By completing and returning this questionnaire, you are agreeing to participate in the above described research project.

Thank you for your consideration! Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Anthony W. Hansen, MEd

## APPENDIX C

## Demographic Survey

Pseudonym (Pick a fake name) \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_

Gender Identity \_\_\_\_\_

Gender Expression \_\_\_\_\_

Race/Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_

Education Level \_\_\_\_\_

(e.g., high school, GED, Technical School, Associate degree, Bachelors degree, Masters degree, Doctoral degree)

What type of setting do you currently live in (circle one): rural suburban urban

State of Residence \_\_\_\_\_ Region of US \_\_\_\_\_

What term do you prefer in identification of your personal religious (or lack of) beliefs?

\_\_\_\_\_

At what age did you first experience identify with the above listed identity? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you disclosed this identity to your family? Yes No

Have you disclosed this identity to your friends? Yes No Not Sure Some, not all

(explain) \_\_\_\_\_

Have you disclosed this identity to your partner/romantic interest? Yes No NA

Have you disclosed this identity to your work or school?

Yes No Not Sure NA Some, not all (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

Please rank your family's closeness with religion. 10 being extremely, overwhelmingly religious, and 0 being not religious at all.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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## APPENDIX D

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 or assent form. Can I begin recording our interview now?

### *General Questions*

1. How do you classify yourself in terms of belief?
2. Tell me about your family.
3. Please describe your experiences with religion through your life to this point. What religion were you raised with? How close to religion is your family?
4. What does religious or religion mean to you?

### *Interview Questions*

1. How did you come to experience and understand your personal beliefs with regard to religion/spirituality?
2. How do you experience religion now, as an (use their identified term)?
3. Tell me about your experiences with family/parents as you realized you were (use their identified term).
  - a. Positive and negative experiences
4. How do you navigate religious topics, holidays, and other situations as a (use their identified term)?
5. Have you revealed your beliefs (or lack thereof) to your parents? If not, do you have a plan? Tell me about that experience or your thoughts about that kind of experience.

6. Has your relationship with family, parents, or friends changed as a result of your lack of belief? If so, can you describe that?
7. Can you tell me about your feelings about the future with regard to your family differences in religious belief?
8. How do you find information? Support? Where do you gain understanding and validation as an irreligious/atheist/nonspiritual person?
9. What would you like others to know about being atheist/irreligious/non-religious?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about being an atheist/irreligious/non-religious youth?

Thank you again for your participation. I want to remind you that you may withdraw from participation in this study at all times per your consent or assent form. If you have any questions about the study or feel like you need assistance after this study, please do not hesitate to contact me by email or phone.

Figure 1: Minority Stress in Atheist Youth

