

Becoming an Atheist

Running Head: BECOMING AN ATHEIST

Becoming an Atheist in America: Constructing Identity and Meaning from the Rejection of Theism

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Becoming an Atheist

This study explores the identity formation process of self-avowed atheists in the context of American culture. Drawing on data collected from participant observation and forty individual in-depth interviews with atheists in Colorado, four stages of atheist identity development are presented: the starting point/the ubiquity of theism, questioning theism, rejecting theism, and “coming out” atheist. I argue that an atheist identity is an achieved identity, and one that is constructed in social interaction. Focusing on the interactional processes and narrative accounts of participants, I discuss the process of rejecting the culturally normative belief in God, and the adoption instead, of an identity for which the “theist culture” at large offers no validation. This research illustrates how identification with atheism in America becomes an important aspect of self for those who adopt this label. Further, it makes a qualitative contribution to our incipient understanding of the subjective experience and identities of actual atheists, as well as the dynamics of irreligion and unbelief in America – an area of inquiry within the sociology of religion that is in need of further development.

Becoming an Atheist

Sociologists of religion have increasingly taken interest in the topic of irreligion, and several scholars have turned their attention to examining those who claim no religion and/or lack theistic beliefs. There is now greater recognition of both the theoretical and sociological importance of such an inquiry. Through studies of religious “nones” we now know more about the demographic characteristics of those Americans who are unaffiliated with traditional religion (Hayes 1995; Hout and Fischer 2002). For instance, studies show that younger males with high levels of education are more likely to be religiously unaffiliated (Baker and Smith 2009). Further, Hout and Fischer (2002) have helped explain the recent increase in the numbers of Americans claiming no religion. They argue that the political differences between the religious right and religious liberals have impelled some of the latter to disaffiliate themselves from traditional religion.

In this study I examine one subset of the irreligious: self-identified atheists. Although the correlates of atheism have been examined, and we know more about the social characteristics of atheists than previously (Sherkat 2008), we continue to know little about how or why people actually *become* atheists. I take a qualitative and interpretive approach to examine the interactional *process* by which some Americans come to reject God and religion. Understanding this process will be useful to sociologists of religion interested not just in irreligion generally, but also in the social dynamics of belief and disbelief, and the processes of conversion and deconversion. Understanding atheists is particularly relevant as the latest surveys show that the number of self-identified atheists is on the rise (Pew Forum 2007). Yet, even if their numbers continue to increase in the years to come, those who express an explicitly atheist viewpoint remain a very small segment of the population – around 2 percent (Pew Forum 2007). Undoubtedly, the United States continues to be a heavily theistic society. This reality becomes

Becoming an Atheist

particularly salient when it is compared to other advanced industrial nations (Norris and Inglehart 2004). One need only briefly examine the data on religion and belief to understand the influence of theism. For example, one major survey reports that about 84 percent of Americans claim a religious identity; nearly 92 percent report they believe in the existence of a God or “universal spirit;” and 60 percent of these believe in a personal God, many of whom also believe God intervenes in their everyday lives (Pew Forum 2007; Schieman 2010). This point is more than just observation. As the current study will show, the formidable influence of theism in America is closely connected to the identities of those who reject it.

Though scholars have employed the sociological lens to investigate atheism with survey data and statistical analyses (Bainbridge 2005; Sherkat 2008), there have been relatively few qualitative studies that examine atheists themselves directly. One such study by Heiner (1992) explores the deviant status of atheists in the Deep South. Based on interviews with ten atheist activists affiliated with the Freedom From Religion Foundation, he discusses some of the strategies atheists use to counter the prejudice and discrimination they face in a highly religious part of the country. He finds that atheists, like theists, are engaged in the “othering” of those who do not share their views. A more recent qualitative study by Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) investigates why it is some Americans come to claim atheism. Their findings in part suggest that despite the normative status of belief in God, as well as the various benefits associated with religious affiliation, atheists are simply those who “could not make themselves believe” (2006:42). Finally, Fitzgerald (2003) through interviews explores the different “identity career paths” of atheists based on an analysis of their backgrounds and social characteristics. My research, through in-depth interviews and extensive participant observation, contributes to this

Becoming an Atheist

incipient literature by explicating the actual formation of an atheist identity through an analysis of the interactional processes and narrative accounts of self-identified atheists.

In analyzing the process through which individuals come to adopt the label atheist, a clear understanding of the meaning of identity itself is needed. The concept of *identity* has long been of central importance to social psychology. Researchers have defined and used this concept in various ways. In this study, I take identity to have several meanings and uses. Fundamentally, identity is that which we use to locate and understand ourselves in social life (Hewitt 2000). Further, as Stryker (1968) argues, there is a hierarchy of identities that coordinate and comprise the self, shape understanding, and influence behavior. Identity is also that which individuals use to describe and define their membership in groups, their relative positions in social life, and the various ascribed and achieved statuses they hold. Like most scholars today, I take identity to be fluid and shifting, rather than fixed and permanent. This is consistent with how most of the participants in this study moved from religious identities, to atheist identities, as a result of important changes in meaning and social context.

Most discussions of identity focus on the roles and role-expectations attached to the particular identity. An atheist identity however, is best understood not as one that is the product of filling particular socially defined and culturally accepted roles, but as one rooted in personal meaning, history, and biography. Biographical or personal identities make their most obvious appearance when people construct narratives about their lives and tell their own particular life stories, both to themselves and to others (Hewitt 2000). Finally, my analysis is informed by the “deconversion” literature. Ebaugh (1988) for instance, examined the identity processes of Catholic nuns who left their convents, and other studies have investigated those who have left various mainstream religious organizations (Brinkerhoff and Mackie 1993). My investigation

Becoming an Atheist

bears some similarity to such studies as most of the atheists I interviewed abandoned formerly held religious identities. Although these studies facilitate our understanding of the process individuals undergo as they disengage their religion (often to identify with another religion), they do not tell us much about those who divest themselves of a religious identity altogether, nor do they inform us of the active process of developing a *non-religious* identity.

This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the process by which people construct an atheist identity in a theist society. I consider the social psychological aspects of rejecting the culturally dominant and normative belief in God. I begin with a discussion of the methods I used to study atheists. I then present a four part model that discusses and illustrates the process of how these participants came to reject theism and adopt the label “atheist.” I conclude with a discussion of the implications of the model, by connecting my analysis of atheists with other rejection-based identities, and suggesting additional avenues for future research.

SETTING AND METHODS

I discovered that the mountain west university town in which I currently reside is an ideal setting for the study of atheists. Through online searching and asking around campus, I discovered several well-established atheist organizations in the surrounding area. To gain entrée, I attended a picnic at a local park where members of three atheist groups came together for informal socializing. After a friendly conversation with the president of one of the groups, I disclosed that I wanted to conduct a study of atheists. The organizer was very receptive, and she introduced me to group members. Many expressed an interest in the study, and asked if they could participate.

Data Collection

Becoming an Atheist

My primary on-site data gathering methods included conducting individual in-depth interviews and engaging in participant observation. I took an open and active conversational approach to the interviews in which respondents could develop their thoughts in the direction of their choosing within the broadly structured interview questions I used to guide our conversations (Gubrium and Holstein 1995). The interviews lasted from one to two hours and took a life-course approach, which focused on the personal biographies, relationships, social interactions, and life transitions that were important to forming an atheist identity. Because of the nature of the setting, and the fact I disclosed that I was a researcher, my role with relation to those I studied was that of an overt, participant-observer with “peripheral membership” (Adler and Adler 1987:36). At the outset, I gave a presentation on my proposed research at one of the monthly meetings. Consequently, I was able to start recruiting respondents and gathering data immediately.

I sustained significant interaction with participants throughout the research process by attending several monthly group meetings, and participating in outside events with members such as picnics, speaking events, and conferences. Additionally, I participated in volunteer work that one of the groups organized. All of this allowed me to develop relationships conducive to obtaining in-depth information, and learning about the lived-experience of atheists.

In addition to recorded interviews, I kept detailed field notes from my interactions and observations. I first took brief empirical and analytical notes during my interactions and then later expanded on them when time permitted. I took an inductive approach to the analysis of my data. Each interview was transcribed and then coded with an eye to developing theoretically informed themes and patterns (Glaser and Strauss 1967). I utilized both line-by-line and focused coding (Emerson 2001), grouping phrases and substantive ideas, revealing distinct patterns and

Becoming an Atheist

making conceptual connections from the data. I continued to analyze the data throughout the research, which eventuated in the identity model and discussion outlined below.

Sample

The sample began with members I met at the first group meeting. After this, my contacts quickly grew in a snowball sampling fashion as members referred me to other self-identified atheists, many of whom were not affiliated with an atheist group. In the end, about half of my total sample included individuals who were not members of any group¹. My sample was also purposeful (Glaser and Strauss 1967) because in addition to recruiting “typical” atheists, I also sought out specific individuals of interest including presidents of atheist groups and other prominent individuals who may have embodied particularly strong atheist identities.

In total, I conducted 40 semi-structured in-depth interviews with atheists ranging in age from 18 to 92 years old. The sample consisted of 17 males and 23 females. Most respondents were white, and highly educated (see appendix). Although some of the characteristics of the sample align with the previously mentioned demographics of the unaffiliated, neither the sample, nor the study itself was designed to be generalizable to all atheists. This study’s focus is on depth and process, rather than breadth and representativeness. However, given the focused concern with the issue of identity formation, the discussion below may nevertheless be *suggestive* of a generic identity process undergone by many atheists. Ultimately, only further research can confirm this.

CONSTRUCTING AN ATHEIST IDENTITY

¹ I refrain in this paper from making detailed comparisons between atheists who join groups and those who do not. The potential “types” of atheists is not the central concern of this study.

Becoming an Atheist

My research revealed four major elements in the construction of an atheist identity in America: (1) the starting point: the ubiquity of theism, (2) questioning theism, (3) rejecting theism, and (4) “coming out” atheist. For simplicity, these may be viewed as the stages involved in the progression toward atheism, but only in a general sense. The construction of an atheist identity is a fluid and dynamic process rather than one that follows any simple pattern or trajectory.

The Starting Point: The Ubiquity of Theism

In addition to the 92 percent of people expressing *belief* in God, about 60 percent are *certain* that God exists (Chaves 2002). This reality plays a fundamental role in the construction of an atheist identity. For most participants, belief in God² and religious practice had characterized their lives at some point. Thirty-five of them described their upbringing as being somewhere between somewhat religious and extremely religious. They each expressed at least some belief in God; they each identified with a particular religion or spiritual philosophy, and they each participated in some kind of religious activity. This is consistent with the general composition and state of the American religious landscape. As Roof remarks in his study of the “spiritual and religious marketplace” of American society, “Religion (and I would add belief in God) is so deeply ingrained culturally and so broadly based within the population” that any investigation of the American scene which fails to recognize this, will ultimately fall short (1999:179). And as Hout and Fischer (2002) argue, even of those who specifically claim “no religion,” many continue to hold rather conventional religious beliefs. This apparent

² The use of this term throughout will refer technically to some form of the supernatural. It is important to note however, there was particular emphasis by participants on the traditional Judeo-Christian concept of God.

Becoming an Atheist

inconsistency underscores how deeply entrenched theism is in our culture, and though not all of those in this study came from overtly religious backgrounds, I found that they too underwent a similar process in rejecting God, and that the ubiquity of theism and religion itself played an important role in their becoming atheists³.

Much like Peek's (2005) study of the identity processes of Muslims, most atheists viewed their early religious identities as ascribed statuses. Participants used statements such as, "I had no choice about church as a kid. You know, kids just do what their parents tell them to do." "Religion was imposed on me when I was young...you just don't have a choice when you're a child." Many participants made similar surface interpretations of their early experiences with religion. But when asked to elaborate, more thoughtful reflections were offered. For instance, Chris, an ex-Army paratrooper and recent father – who at one time even aspired to be a priest – expressed how deeply he felt about his faith growing up⁴:

I was raised Roman Catholic. I was *very* strongly religious as a kid. Did everything, the plays, did catechism...I'd sit there [in church] and – wow! – actually as a child I was pretty emotional about it. You know, I'd think about Jesus on the cross and I'd cry.

Similarly, Kelly, a 36 year old graduate student and teacher commented: "I was *very* religious, and church was a *very* big part of my life. I went every Sunday, Sunday school and all. I liked church, I liked the ritual...and I enjoyed going." Clearly, despite their own acknowledgement of their lack of choice in the matter, for both Chris and Kelly, religion was of central importance to them growing up.

³ Although it is also important to note that the normative status of theism can be relatively weak or strong depending on context (e.g. regional context, or whether the setting is public or private).

⁴ Pseudonyms are used throughout to ensure anonymity.

Becoming an Atheist

Participants' level of belief and religiosity varied by degree, and for most, their involvement was more tempered than this. Still, all but a few discussed some level of religiosity before becoming atheists. This is evinced by the fact that participants began sharing their stories by first naming and identifying with the particular religious organization or belief system with which they grew up. And even when there was low religious *participation*, the normative *belief* in God was still present. Jenny, for example, was a young and bright student at a local university. Her comments are indicative of the ubiquity of belief (especially in childhood), and were typical of many, "I grew up religious, I was Lutheran; but we didn't go to church all that much. By late high school, I don't think I was really going anymore at all...but it wasn't that – I mean, I *still believed* in God."

From her comments, Jenny's belief in God seemed almost a "default" position. And as has been observed, many individuals – especially in their formative years – simply accept the normative theistic viewpoint with which they are accustomed; sometimes passively internalizing belief in God based on their experience within their social environment, where belief is not just accepted, but often expected (Zuckerman 2003). Indeed, because belief is so pervasive, most people born and raised in the United States experience socialization toward theism, and the atheists I studied were no exception to this socialization process.

As social psychologists have argued, the transmission of cultural values and beliefs through primary socialization within the family context greatly influences the values and beliefs that children will adopt and carry with them into adulthood. However, I found that even those few who were raised in families without much religion, (or no religion at all) nevertheless encountered, and were influenced by, the high levels of religiosity and belief present in the general milieu of American culture. Even the least religious were not invulnerable to the

Becoming an Atheist

influences of their communities, their neighbors and their peers, their schooling, and other aspects of socialization when it came to belief in God and religious behavior.

This certainly was Helen's experience. Helen was in her early thirties and had recently moved to start a new job. She discussed how her immediate family was entirely non-religious, yet she ended up participating in religion anyway by attending Christian church services with her friends or other neighborhood children. She puts it this way, "I was definitely raised in a secular household...but I'd still go to church with some of my cousins and stuff; all the rest of the people I knew were religious, so I had lots of exposure to it. Plus one of my best friends for a long time was Mormon. So I went with her to the Mormon Church several times."

Frank's experience was not unlike Helen's. Frank was a friendly and eccentric man. A retired physicist, he spent much of his time in his home-lab conducting experiments. He was raised by a non-religious family, and yet he remarked:

I had my first real association with religion at age seven. It was the Catholic Church across the street...all the neighbor kids went there, especially in the summer because that's what you did; they had things for kids to do. So I started attending church because I was friends with the other kids.

All participants, whether raised with religion or not, were surrounded by theist friends, neighbors, and others who influenced them significantly⁵.

Questioning Theism

⁵ Further, five participants came from "secular" families, but only two could accurately be described as "second-generation atheists" (that is, their parents were explicitly atheists).

Becoming an Atheist

If most participants were raised with religion, and had once believed in God, what caused them to reject this, and claim an atheist identity? The ways participants began to understand God and religion as they carefully contemplated their beliefs and interacted with others became a determining factor. As Blumer (1969) observed, people act toward objects (whether physical or abstract) based on the *meanings* these objects have for them. Further, these meanings are not fixed or inherent, but change or take on new meanings through interactions with others. Respondents, over time, and in new social contexts, began questioning what they had learned growing up, which included the religious meanings they had often taken for granted. They developed new outlooks and commitments as their interactions took on new meanings.

Most started experiencing significant doubts about the existence of God when they left their homes for the first time to begin college. This was a critical time in life, as they encountered other points of view, met people from other backgrounds, and started new relationships. Jason, a 61 year old former Catholic, who had worked various odd jobs throughout his life before recently retiring, described it this way:

I didn't really question it at all until I got to college and started studying. I remember reading a book by Bertrand Russell, *Why I'm Not a Christian* and that just opened my eyes. It's like, wow!...And when I got to college I met other people...it was my first exposure to people outside my social milieu. They [fellow students] didn't go to church on Sunday, and nothing bad was happening to them (laughs), and God wasn't striking them down for not going to church...I mean I wasn't an atheist at this point, I still thought you know, maybe there is a God out there.

New relationships with friends, professors, and others prompted and drove this questioning. Some developed friendships with others who were themselves questioning God, or

Becoming an Atheist

were critical of religion. One respondent remarked how a new friend she considered “very smart,” and who made a considerable impression on her, would send her secularist podcasts that critically engaged religion and debated the “God question.” Another felt “inspired” by a brilliant professor who “seemed to be an atheist.” Further, several encountered the recent popular writings of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, or Christopher Hitchens. This piqued interest in other media critical of religion and belief (e.g. documentary films, podcasts, blogs etc). Ironically however, for many participants, it was their interactions with believers that compelled such questioning. For instance, 34 year old Amber related how one of her good friends – a strong Catholic – “basically believed I was going to hell for questioning whether there is a God...[yet] she was still willing to hang out with me.” Although Amber thought this aspect of the relationship was strange, it led her to recognize the “illogical” aspects of religious belief, and drove her to question more.

Research has found that going off to college tends to be an important stage in individuals’ lives in terms of experimenting with, and developing new identities and establishing a more autonomous sense of self. This process can also sometimes happen relatively abruptly. But for these participants, the process of questioning their beliefs and the existence of God tended to take time, because as has been observed, the effects of religious socialization – and especially *early* religious instruction – can be quite strong (Zuckerman 2003). And because religious beliefs and practices are socially learned, there must take place an *unlearning* process for those who eventually come to reject it. Thirty year old Joel was raised Episcopalian. He related his experience with this gradual process:

In college I still believed in God, but I no longer had a desire to go to church or anything.

And then I guess it was just a slow progression, as every year went by my belief was

Becoming an Atheist

getting less and less, and as I started getting into astronomy, and reading, and studying evolution...it [God and religion] just started sounding more and more implausible.

This “slow progression,” which was described by many participants, is consistent with Ebaugh’s description of the “doubting stage” in her study of the process of role-exit: “The doubting process is usually gradual in that the individual first experiences an overall dissatisfaction in a generalized way...” (1988:41) Indeed, these participants experienced a generalized and non-descript discontent with their religious beliefs. But through ongoing and particular interactions they began to specify and articulate their doubts in ways that opened a space for an atheist viewpoint.

As participants sought more education, they became increasingly skeptical of the religious teachings they grew up with. Once they viewed their religious beliefs as being challenged by scientific and secular explanations of the world, the religious ideas and objects (e.g. the afterlife, the Bible) began to take on different meanings. As Ebaugh argued: “The doubting stage is essentially one of reinterpreting and redefining a situation that was previously taken for granted. Events and expectations that had been defined as acceptable begin to take on new meanings. [These] doubts involve a reinterpretation of reality, a realization that things are not what they had seemed.”(1988:41). However, as significant as this was, doubts about God alone were not sufficient for participants to adopt an atheist identity. More active engagement with substantive moral issues and specific interactions with others were necessary.

The centrality of morality.

Morality was of central importance to these atheists, and specific moral issues progressively drove their questioning of God and religion more intensely. Forty-nine year old Matt, a former Lutheran, described it this way:

Becoming an Atheist

I was reading the old testament, and what really got me started on a different path was that God was telling Joshua to go in and destroy the city, destroy every man, woman and child, every goat, every chicken, I mean leave nothing! And I remember thinking “what’s going on here; why does God want to kill cows?” And as I continued reading and finding more troubling things I just started questioning more and more. And then it dawned on me that the God I was worshipping and reading about all this time was really just a sinner himself. Here he is being jealous and vengeful and human.

Matt had read the Bible before in its entirety as a young adult. But it wasn’t until he had left the country to serve in the Air Force, and later attend college, where he made new friends and experienced other views, that he underwent this “re-reading” of the Bible and engaged his beliefs in a critical way. Many participants raised similar issues addressing scriptural teachings. This is consistent with Hunsberger and Altemeyer’s (2006) study that reported that serious doubts about religion were often caused by reading the Bible itself. But more than just having problems with scripture, these respondents also pointed out what they saw as the hypocrisy of religious people they knew. Kelly, for instance, reflected that, “In college, I started to think about some issues from when I was growing up, that people [church members] were not nice. They preached about it [the Bible and morality], but then they were not good to each other. That really frustrated me.” As participants confronted these issues, they increasingly desired to distance themselves from religion, and to extricate morality from its traditional association with religion. What emerged for them was a new outlook on morality: its origins, meaning, and implications for behavior.

An important outcome of this is that a tension arose in which participants saw themselves as good and moral individuals, but were beginning to doubt that this came from observing

Becoming an Atheist

religious practices or adhering to religious “truths.” They began to construct a cognitive and symbolic boundary between morality and religion, and asserted themselves as moral individuals against what they increasingly viewed as a false connection between being religious and being moral. They each in some way observed – and criticized the idea – that people *need* religion to be moral and good. As one participant remarked, “I don’t think having morals has anything to do with religion. I know right from wrong. I think it benefits me in the long-term to do good things and be a good person; you know, not to lie, cheat, steal or kill; and it just makes my life a lot easier. It frustrates me that people think that one has to do with the other.”

Although research shows that atheists and the nonaffiliated often differ sharply from theists and the affiliated with regards to political orientation, and on specific political issues (Hayes 1995; Hout and Fischer 2002) in terms of the content of basic moral questions, these atheists’ views do not differ much from the conventional and commonly held views of the meaning of morality. That is, they all considered actions such as lying, cheating, stealing, murder, and basically anything else that harms other human beings to be immoral. In line with what Hunsberger and Altemeyer found – in addressing why atheists doubt God – their skepticism seemed primarily cerebral in nature. For instance, they did not deny God because it would give them license to be immoral; or as the authors put it, allow them to “wallow in wantonness” (2006:39). Rather, atheists tended to doubt because they found no evidence of God’s existence, or they could not square religious doctrines with empirical facts, or simply, the notion of God was inconsistent with their intellectual sensibilities and developing view of the world. I would add to their argument, that the “cerebral” skepticism of atheists itself is in part a product of the changing meanings and viewpoints associated with the social interactions experienced by participants.

Becoming an Atheist

What did differ significantly were their views of *where* morality comes from, how it is maintained, and why it is important. As Edgell et al. (2006) observed, the majority in the United States view atheists as having rejected the very moral foundation of American society. As a corollary, there exists a symbolic moral and cultural boundary between believers and non-believers. Aware of – and in response to – this reality, the atheists I interviewed continually returned to the topic of morality, drawing their *own* boundaries vis-à-vis theists, and asserting themselves as both atheists *and* moral persons. Chris, for instance, made the following illustrative remarks:

Morality comes from society. It's societal norms. It's what you need to do, and what's good. Morality does not come from religion. It's like, really – so killing would be OK unless God said no? And it seems like many things, especially in the Bible are totally arbitrary. And then the things that don't seem arbitrary are—are everywhere. No killing. No stealing. Those are all just good ideas...But it's like, you don't want to help me? You don't want to be nice? You're just doing it because you're afraid...God's gonna throw you in a lake of fire if you don't?

Chris's comments represent how many of the participants came not only to reject the idea that God and religion are necessary for moral behavior, but also implicitly suggest that a *non-religious* morality is superlative. Morality to them means behaving in ways that are beneficial for society and productive in and of themselves; that they are based on “real” integrity and autonomy, rather than punishment and reward. Clearly, participants were challenging the commonly held belief that atheists lack morals. They resisted this view, thereby salvaging a *moral* identity. As Brittany, an articulate thirty-four year old researcher for a large company remarked:

Becoming an Atheist

So if you're not religious, then where does your moral and ethical compass come from?

This is the question asked by many religious people because they don't realize that you can simply choose to act moral, and define an ethical framework on a rational basis. They think it has to be something that God told you to do, and that you'll be punished for not doing it. You know, a very simple reward/response kind of scenario...if you're doing something because of fear of being punished, that completely removes what I consider a moral dimension.

Similarly, thirty-one year old Lisa, who was raised in a fundamentalist Christian family stated:

“Many people think that if you don't believe in God you are amoral. If that's the case, why don't we see atheists in the streets burning down buildings and churches and doing all sorts of immoral things? Prisons aren't full of atheists...and you just don't hear about atheists behaving that way.”

And another participant simply remarked, “I'm moral *and* I don't believe in God.” Thus these atheists create identity by drawing symbolic – and ultimately social – boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002) between them and theist others as they justify and actively construct and defend an atheist viewpoint; a viewpoint which typically involves elaborating a pragmatic and “rational” view of morality⁶.

The talk that these atheists engaged in is more than objective descriptions of experiences. In sharing their thoughts, views, and personal biographies, participants were providing accounts. According to Scott and Lyman (1968) accounts are the generally socially accepted statements

⁶ Clearly, much of participants' responses refer to a particular – and perhaps simplistic – version of Christian religion (e.g. very conservative, or even fundamentalist groups). Many in fact acknowledged this during the interviews. Nevertheless, this was how most continued to characterize religion generally; in part because this was what they were most familiar with.

Becoming an Atheist

that are made in order to explain or justify particular behaviors (or views). In this case, the accounts employed by participants justified their non-normative views by asserting a positive social and moral basis for their atheism. Their accounts neutralize the negative connotations of the atheist label and replace it with morally and socially positive implications. Although Heiner found something similar, the atheists he interviewed had an even stronger penchant for attacking religion outright as they argued explicitly for the moral superiority of atheism. Discussing the Christian concept of forgiveness through prayer, one of his respondents blatantly remarks: “They [atheists] are the only ones with good morals. Christians are all sinners” (1992:13). None of those I spoke with made such sweeping claims (Heiner specifically selected hard-line and activist atheists for his study), yet from their accounts the implication is clear: atheism not only allows for morality, but is potentially superior to the *religious* understanding of morality. In any case, participants’ accounts imbued their experience with meaning, and provided coherent frameworks for understanding both themselves and their social worlds. Through these accounts, they created, justified, and “owned” their own morality by separating it from what they viewed as the culturally dominant theist view of moral behavior.

Rejecting Theism: “Not Theist, or Atheism as a Rejection Identity”

The earlier ideas of God and religion began to be replaced with new meaning as participants moved from the questioning stage, to a more deliberate and active stage of rejection. Sometimes intimate relationships with other non-believers facilitated this process. For instance, 30 year old John commented, “I was on the fence, borderline, you know, for a long time, like an agnostic type thing until I met Angie (now his spouse) and she brought me ‘over’...and I said, okay, I really don’t believe anymore.” But for participants, it was not simply a matter of reaching a place where they happened not to “believe anymore.” Rather, a veritable *atheist identity* was

Becoming an Atheist

only possible in the context of having *explicitly* rejected religion and the notion of God itself, and then elaborating in this space that which they saw as the more accurate way to view and interpret the world: through the lens of science and secular thinking. Respondents experienced an increasing commitment to this new viewpoint, which is apparent in their discussions of their developing world-views⁷. Brittany put it this way:

If people could become more educated and more capable of making reasonable, peaceful decisions that would support the smooth functioning of a society without anybody over them holding a whip...that would be better... That's how it is with religion. As we acquire the education and the sophistication to begin to choose an ethical system for [its] advantages, in a scientific, rational, social context, we can move away from the crutch of a carrot-and-stick approach, which is what I consider most religions [as] basically being.

The generalization that religion is an uncritical and unsophisticated attempt at interpreting the world, that a rational scientific approach is more accurate and desirable was one echoed by many participants. Helen, for instance, elaborates this at greater length:

My interest is in the *natural world*...it's a scientific worldview. And it's not that you have to be a practicing scientist or anything. But if you think about the world in a scientific method kind of way, I think it becomes increasingly difficult to reconcile that with any kind of supernatural belief. A scientific worldview is the idea that you approach the world and ideas in your life in a way that mirrors the scientific method. You go out

⁷ It has been noted that certain occupational groups, including scientists, are more likely to claim atheism than others (see Ecklund 2010). Although there are two professional scientists included in the sample, for most, their developing interest and commitment to science was as much a corollary of their unbelief as a cause of it.

Becoming an Atheist

and you gather data and see whether that refutes your ideas and your hypothesis or whether it supports it. And that might sound kind of funny for everyday life, but it's not. The idea that a supernatural God created the Earth either happened or it didn't. It's real or it's not real...I mean, there are good theories and bad ones, and they [religion and science] are not equally valid.

This new commitment to scientific and secular thinking was accompanied by an explicit rejection of the supernatural. Although most made a point to observe that they cannot *prove* God does not exist, and that they cannot be absolutely certain there is no God, when probed further, most comments were of this variety: "I find no compelling reason to believe in a god," "There is *nothing* magical or supernatural about the universe or anything in it." Some remarks were even a bit sarcastic: "No spooks here." Or, "I just don't believe in the 'great sky fairy.'" This language is telling because it indicates a strong rejection and distancing from what participants view as the ideas of theists.

I found much of an atheist identity is constructed in terms of what it is not. This was apparent throughout participants' accounts. Thus, the notion of the "not-self" is instructive. The not-self "refers to meaningful gestures (vocal and otherwise) whereby ego...designates certain thoughts, feelings, acts, relationships, roles and/or other social objects as fundamentally *inconsistent* with ego's real self..."(Colomy 2007). An essential part of the self-definition process includes not just defining those things we are, but also those things we are *not*. An atheist identity however, may be thought of as having its very foundation in the process of the "not-self" or "not-me." It is a salient example of the possibility of constructing an identity out of the rejection or negation of something, in this case theism. That is, to a significant degree, it is an identity that provides meaning for the self – and indeed is constituted – by making statements of

Becoming an Atheist

what is *not*-me. Like those in Heiner's study who in the context of the Deep South made clear they were *not* Christians, these atheists' accounts were replete with discussions of the beliefs they do *not* possess; continually highlighting that they are *not* theists. In this way, these atheists are similar to the vegans, nondrinkers, virgins, and others Mullaney (2005) studied, whose personal identities are built around behaviors they do not engage in, or beliefs they do not possess.

This process of dissociating from theism and drawing symbolic boundaries is not just an abstract or intellectual affair. Developing a self that includes *not* being a theist had real consequences for participants' social relationships. For instance, though they generally viewed themselves as highly tolerant of others, many discussed how they could not date or have a serious relationship with a strong believer. For example, James, a college student in his late twenties, said "I couldn't date a true believer; somebody that was just like 'this is how it is,' because I couldn't respect how they approached the universe...I mean, I respect them as people, but that line of thinking is not something that I would want in my intimate life. Someone who makes religious claims like that. Anybody who, for instance, can buy the Bible as truth, I'm going to have a problem with that, and it's just not going to work out."

As is the case with other kinds of identities then, (e.g. racial, political, or religious identities) there exists a level of in-group/out-group thinking for atheists. Thus, although research has shown that in American culture, the public views atheists as other, in constructing their own self-concepts, atheists drew their own social boundaries, on some level conceiving of *theists* as other. Creating this sense of difference involves the cognitive process of classification that Zerubavel (1996) outlines in his discussion of boundaries. Importantly, this mental and social boundary making, or "splitting" becomes habitual, and begins to shape future thinking, interactions, and behavioral choices.

Becoming an Atheist

“Coming Out” Atheist

The significance and influence that any particular identity has for one’s self-concept cannot be fully articulated until that identity has been both explicitly claimed and validated in meaningful social interaction. That is, although an individual may think of him/herself as an atheist, acknowledging the consistency of their views with that label, it is only when this label is voluntarily applied in concrete social interaction that it takes on its full social significance. Because of the stigmatized and deviant status of atheism, it can initially be difficult to claim the identity in a social setting. This results in part from the tension experienced from their knowledge of having rejected the normative views of the larger society, and feeling disconnected from the rest of American culture becomes a real possibility at this point. But these cognitive tensions are related to Lofland and Stark’s (1965) study of the process of those who convert to a deviant perspective. And like the converts to a deviant cult in their study, the felt tensions, and the awareness of the deviant status of their views, actually served to encourage or promote their desire to claim the deviant identity.

Claiming an atheist identity vocally and using the label had important implications for respondents. Different factors impelled participants to “come out of the closet.” Having “known” and thought of themselves as atheists for a period of time, the desire to *claim* the identity grew stronger as they interacted with theists and sought to dissociate themselves from religion. This is in line with Hout and Fischer’s (2002) findings, in that claiming atheism can serve as a practical, and symbolic statement against traditional religion (and its often politically conservative ideas). Finally, despite any initial reticence, as interviewees began to claim atheism overtly in social interactions, a concomitant sense of empowerment, confidence, and new sense of self emerged.

Applying the label.

Becoming an Atheist

These atheists thought of themselves as such before they applied the label in the presence of others. Unlike some stigmatized and marginalized identities, atheism is not something that is readily apparent to others, or that has physical or even social indicators. For Goffman then, atheism would be a discreditable identity that must be explicitly claimed for it to become “spoiled” (1963:4). Further, on some level declaring an atheist identity is similar to the coming out process gays experience. That is, though difficult in the beginning, for some, publicly adopting the label and coming out as an atheist was an important step toward a new self-concept and a feeling of independence and empowerment. And like the social stigma faced by those who adopt a marginalized sexual identity (Weinberg et al. 1995) for these respondents, claiming their atheism not only influenced their self-concepts, but shaped their future interactions. Importantly, it was at this stage that an atheist identity began to crystallize, acquire greater salience, and move closer to the top of the hierarchy of identities that comprise the self (Stryker 1968).

The setting in which participants came out – that is, first applied the label atheist to themselves in the presence of others, ranged from the virtual and abstract (e.g. MySpace, Facebook, e-mail) to the concrete and personal (e.g. face-to-face interactions with family members). James for instance, remarked, “It was on MySpace. You know, under the ‘religion’ thing, I put ‘atheist.’ It just made it very public. It’s kind of cool too, because I actually started to realize that some of my friends were atheists too, and I didn’t even know it.” For James, declaring the identity online led to important validation from friends. He went on to talk about how some of his friends too, ended up posting “atheist” on their MySpace accounts after they saw his. Further, he discussed how he and one of his religious friends got into a “huge debate” after he made his atheism public, which changed the dynamic of their friendship. When asked why he decided to come out on his account, James replied that he had been thinking about it for

Becoming an Atheist

some time, and that he eventually just worked up the “nerve” to do it. Clearly, he had an internal conversation with himself, knowing that this label was appropriate for his identity, he was preoccupied with these thoughts until he was able to “put it out there” online. Several others shared experiences with claiming their atheism on their profiles of similar social networking websites. For most however, their coming out occurred during face-to-face interactions with family and/or friends. Moreover, like James, many had experienced a period of time where the “internal pressure” built up to the point where they felt a strong desire to adopt the label publicly, and reveal their “true” selves, even if in an environment that may disapprove. Samantha, a thirty-year-old entrepreneur from the South, discovered that this can be an uncomfortable or even painful experience:

I first told my parents...and that was certainly a negative experience. I told my mom about 5 years ago and I told my dad as well. I think they both were doing the whole cognitive dissonance thing because they just couldn't accept it...I don't even know if they really believe that I'm an atheist. I think they were in some pretty serious denial about it...and there have been some rough periods, my dad has been pretty cruel and has sent us some cruel e-mails about how bad liberals and atheists are...

Nevertheless, despite the pain it sometimes caused, being open about her atheism and discussing it with believers and non-believers alike, ultimately led Samantha to become more convinced that her position was correct. That is, much like the gay Christians O'Brien (2004) studied, the challenges that arose from *claiming* the identity gave further substance and meaning to the identity. And although the social setting varied, the application of the label shaped, and in some cases, fundamentally changed the nature of their relationships with important others. This in turn, shaped their future interactions, and in most cases reinforced their identities as atheists.

Becoming an Atheist

Again, as O'Brien argued, the pain and social discomfort that arises from problematic identities, is itself an important source of meaning and self-understanding.

“Liberation.”

Although a few did experience some distress during the process, unlike Heiner's atheists who often experienced “anomie” even beyond their “conversion to unbelief” (1992:11) these atheists felt their coming out was an overall positive experience. For example, Jason remarked, “It felt good you know? Like this is what I *really* think...It was liberating; liberation from the whole religion thing.” With even greater enthusiasm, Matt put it this way, “I'd reached this breakthrough, it's like I'd broken the chains, and I felt free! It was such a relief; it's a huge weight off your shoulders.” And Dennis, a college student majoring in philosophy said, “it was very empowering, because – I mean – when you lose the idea of God, it *could* be like you're lost, like there's no higher purpose...but for me it was the idea of setting your own purpose, that it's just you, [that] it comes from within; that's pretty exciting!” Further, this initial excitement tended to produce greater confidence in claiming the identity in the future, and with an expanding group of people.

Terms such as “liberation” and “freedom” were used repeatedly, and it was clear from their accounts that although they acknowledged their views were non-normative, and that atheists are a heavily stigmatized group in America, each described a sense of satisfaction and confidence with having labeled themselves atheists. That is, they felt good about labeling themselves with a term that best represented not only their point of view, but their “real” selves. And yet, during this process, atheism became more than simply an identity label. It became an increasingly salient and meaningful aspect of the self (Stryker 1968). Framing their coming out as a necessary and positive milestone in their biographies contributed greatly to their self-

Becoming an Atheist

conceptions. Through the development of this personal identity, they carved out their own sense of self and suffused it with meaning based on constructing “a sense of difference and separateness” in society. But this also provided a “sense of location and meaning within society” based on the perception that it was their individual autonomy and personal biographical experience that got them there (Hewitt 2000:98). Rather than simple non-belief, participants constructed coherent identities with their own meanings and boundaries, which challenged the norms of American culture. This speaks to the power of religiously based identity in America, from which, participants could not simply stand apart. Rather, they had to specify and articulate just what their departure from this dominant way of thinking means.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the process of identity construction in opposition to dominant ideologies. Much of the literature on identity emphasizes the influence of group membership. Identity “denotes a situatedness of the person in terms of standing in the context of a particular social relationship or group” (Gecas and Burke 1995:45). People can give certain identities more or less salience, but they always make behavioral choices within the groups that verify the meaning of those choices. In this framework, it is difficult to imagine how a person might depart from familiar groups that offer long-standing confirmation of who and what one is. Within the literature on religious identity, Peek’s research on Muslims adds the insight of how “religious identity emerge[s] and gain[s] salience,” but the Muslims she interviewed had been born into Islam (2005: 221-226). To be sure, she argues that “religious identities are ultimately ‘achieved identities’” yet the analysis does not illuminate the processes through which people adopt an identity that contradicts not only their ascribed identity but also the dominant cultural ideology.

Becoming an Atheist

This is what the study of atheist identity contributes to the discussion. It offers insight into the construction of an achieved identity for which the culture at-large offers no validation.

Moreover, the atheist does not step into a “ready-made” identity, with a specific and definable set of roles or behaviors attached to it. To contrast, a religious identity is usually comprised of discernable social behaviors, (e.g. worship, adherence to dietary codes, tithing, professing belief in specific doctrines) which become the indicators, and to some extent, the content of the identity. Such is generally absent among atheists. This is why the structure and content of an atheist identity is best framed as biographical and rejection-based; a product of interaction, and an achieved identity to be sure, but one constructed out of negation and rejection, rather than filling culturally defined social roles. Important parts of this construction process include appealing to science, committing one’s self to a secular value-system and articulating and justifying a moral sense of self (Ecklund 2010). Each contributing to the increasing salience of the atheist identity, as it moves up the identity hierarchy and finds placement among the myriad other social and personal identities that comprise the self, ultimately becoming a central and meaningful component of one’s self-understanding (Stryker 1968).

I have argued that becoming an atheist in America involves four basic elements: the ubiquity of theism, questioning theism, rejecting theism, and coming out atheist. Although the first part differs from the others in that it is not always an action taken by the individual, this difference underscores my argument. In the United States, theism is not only the starting point for any religious identity; its pervasiveness is also what drives atheism. This model captures the process that the atheists I interviewed underwent. It is worth asking whether *all* of those in this study conform to the model outlined. For instance, would not those who came from secular families differ in some sense from those from religious backgrounds? There are some

Becoming an Atheist

differences. I found for example, that the atheists who came from particularly strong religious backgrounds tended to have greater feelings of acrimony toward religion, and may have been more likely to be outspoken with their non-belief. And there are variations in terms of specific life experiences and personal biographies. No one became an atheist in exactly the same way. The point however, is that in terms of identity process, each individual in this study – whether from a religious or nonreligious background – had to *engage* with theism in a particular (and rather consistent) way in order for them to ultimately claim *atheism*. Variations in personal relationships, political views, skepticism, intellectual inclinations, and social interactions applied varying pressures to become an atheist, but the model captures the generic identity process each respondent underwent as these issues brought them all to adopt the same identity label, atheist.

As a rejection identity, atheism is constructed through articulating what it is one does *not* believe. That is, it is part of the “not-self” (Colomy 2007). This conceptualization may be extended to other identities that run against societal norms and social convention. For instance, Mullaney (2005) discusses various types of labels people use that are based on “not-doing.” She argues that such labels are increasingly becoming more central to our personal identities and self-concepts in the context of an increasingly complex modern world where identity options and alternative self-meanings are always expanding. To her analysis, I add the element of departing from the culturally dominant theist perspective. Vegans, nondrinkers, virgins, and self-identified asexuals are a few examples of personal labels and acts of *not-doing* that help define and generate personal and social meaning in contrast to preponderate cultural messages. My research with atheists informs the identity processes involved with regards to the use of these labels. It would be interesting to investigate other viewpoints such as the non-violence movement, to learn whether this conceptualization of identity could facilitate our understanding of the identity

Becoming an Atheist

processes, and the nature of the self-understandings of those who make such identity declarations.

Religion and belief in America receive their legitimacy through the traditional and social institutions in which they are anchored. A theist/religious person in the United States has ready access and recourse to legitimate institutions in which his or her religious identity can find validation and social support. There is a discourse and set of public narratives (Somers 1994) of belief in America, to which theists may appeal, find meaning, purpose, and social mooring for their religious identities. Thus, an important implication that flows from this research regards the question of what replaces the meaning structure that religion offers, or the purpose and guidance that one may receive from the notion of God – both of which find legitimacy in the institutional structures of American culture, and which all of the participants I interviewed came to reject⁸. For as Roof (1999) notes, secularists (and atheists) have rejected both the social institutional and religious/spiritual narratives that are so ingrained in American culture and that are foundational to constructing an identity within it. I found part of the answer to this question lies in participants' recourse to the discourse of science and reason. That is, science, like religion, enjoys an institutional and respected status in American society. These atheists found an effective, institutionally-grounded meaning structure which provided a framework for self-understanding; a secular worldview within which they could situate themselves and find a sense of direction, purpose, and legitimation of their viewpoint by appealing to science, reason, and a secular value system (Ecklund 2010; Evans and Evans 2008).

⁸ Though legitimate, this question is oversimplified. It is important to note that participants understood their divestiture of religion as a positive thing, an endpoint itself. Thus, they did not necessarily feel as though they were “missing” anything by abandoning religion and belief.

Becoming an Atheist

This study has highlighted the interactional and narrative *process* of becoming an atheist, rather than simply describing the socio-demographic correlates of atheism. The process outlined is important for considering the dynamics of identity construction more generally. Much of our understanding of how individuals construct identities is premised on our assumptions about socialization, and the cultural meaning and validation people receive as they inherit and manage the normative cultural messages from which they construct those identities. Thus, investigating the “contradiction” of those who reject the general socialization toward theism, and the normative cultural expectation of belief in God, is necessary for a more complete picture of the social processes by which we construct our identities and create meaningful selves. In addition to extending the inquiry into this process, future research should investigate further the social causes of this rejection, the means through which this stigmatized identity is negotiated and managed once it has been claimed, and finally, as Cimino and Smith (2007) have taken steps toward, come to a better understanding of the organizational dynamics and social movement aspects of the atheist community.

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Appendix: Demographic Characteristics of Sample N=40

Age	18-20	3
	21-30	8
	31-40	12
	41-50	6
	51-60	3
	60 and over	8
Sex	Female	23
	Male	17
Race	White	37
	Black	1
	Hispanic	2
Education	Less than High School	0
	High School Graduate	1
	Some College	6
	Bachelor's Degree	15
	Master's Degree	10
	Enrolled in PhD program	4
PhD	4	
Marital Status	Married	11
	Single	18
	Divorced	11
From religious background	Catholic	14
	Mainline Protestant	15
	Fundamentalist Christianity	2
	Jewish	1
	Other (Non-denom., Eastern, Spiritualist)	3
From non-religious background		n=5
Age declared atheism	13-20	3
	21-30	14
	31-40	12
	41-50	5
	51-60	3
	missing/unknown	3
Context of first "coming out."	To Family	15
	To Friend	18
	To Stranger	2
	Virtual (online)	1
	missing/unknown/could not recall	4

Becoming an Atheist

Sample Topical Interview Questions:

Were you raised in a religious or non-religious family growing up? Tell me about your experience.

Did you think of yourself as an atheist before you publically announced your atheism?

Have you ever experienced discrimination or negativity from others due to your atheism?

Tell me about what brought you to identify as an atheist. How has it affected your relationships?