

Spring 2015

The Atheist Experience: A Sociological Approach to Atheist Identity in College Students

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**THE ATHEIST EXPERIENCE:
A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO ATHEIST IDENTITY IN COLLEGE STUDENTS**

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3 April 2015

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are a number of people that I would like to thank, without whom this project would have been impossible. I would first like to thank Professor Joanne Belknap for all of her time brainstorming ideas, editing drafts, and sharing her own research experiences. I would also like to thank Professor Sanyu Mojola for her time, expertise, and valuable ideas. Also, thank you to Professor Rolf Norgaard for helping this project through its early stages through encouragement and many interesting *NPR* articles. Thank you to the University of Colorado Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP) for granting funding to my project so that I could offer compensation to research participants and cover the cost of printing and other materials. In addition, I would like to thank all of my research participants who took the time to share their fascinating experiences with me. Finally, thank you to Andrew Ormsby for all of your ideas, guidance, editing, and most of all, constant support.

ABSTRACT

Atheists in the United States remain a largely invisible minority in a highly religious social climate. College atheists as individuals have also been largely dismissed in sociology and the sociology of religion, especially with regard to their identity formation, identity salience, and experiences of stigma and stigma-coping mechanisms. Based on in-depth, qualitative interviews with 14 self-identified atheist college students, I argue that atheists begin the process of forming their identity during adolescence as a result of numerous background factors and through an ongoing negotiation of a society that they perceive as unaccepting on some level. I also argue that college plays a role in providing a supportive context in which atheists can affirm and crystallize their identities as a result of processes set in motion before college. This thesis seeks to gain a nuanced understanding of how college atheists as individuals have formed their identities and how they negotiate this embattled identity that remains stigmatized by U.S. society based on social constructions of the atheist as immoral. Respondents reported similar trends in their backgrounds and events in their childhoods or young adulthoods that sparked the eventual adoption of an atheist identity. They also reported variations in atheist identity salience as well as perceptions stigma and acceptance. Respondents coped with stigma by redefining friend groups, controlling information, and positing themselves as moral people without believing in God.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

With only 2.4 percent of the population claiming an atheist identity, to be an atheist in the United States is to belong to a clear minority (Lipka 2013). Indeed, 82.0 percent of the U.S. population report that religion is either “very important” or “somewhat important” in their lives, and 78.4 percent of U.S. adults describe themselves as specifically Christian (Carriere-Kretschmer and Holzwardt 2008). These figures place the United States as the most religious developed country in the world, ranking closer to countries such as Mexico, Brazil and India where 86, 87, and 89 percent (respectively) of these populations cite religion as “very” or “somewhat” important. By contrast, in the developed West, 42 percent of the British population and 37 percent of the French population rate religion as “very” or “somewhat” important (Carriere-Kretschmer and Holzwardt 2008). Sociologists of religion have recognized how deeply ingrained religion and more specifically, a “normative” belief in God is in U.S. society (Smith 2010:6). This social fact has certain implications for the minority of U.S. citizens who reject a belief in God and who claim an atheist identity.

I. What is an Atheist?

In a highly religious social climate, to be an atheist in the U.S. is to deviate from the norm of believing in God and to be cast as a social “other” (Smith 2010:15). Until recently, scant research has been conducted on irreligion and nonreligious individuals, but in order to truly understand the religious landscape, both religion and irreligion must be taken into account (Bainbridge 2009:319). Although there is some debate about the true denotation, *irreligion* is most commonly cited as the absence of religious belief or the indifference to religion. It can also imply negative attitudes toward religion or a rejection of religion (Cline 2015). Campbell explains that although terms such as “irreligion,” “secularism,” and “atheism” are sometimes

conflated, there are nuances, and irreligion does not necessarily have to include a feeling of hostility toward religion (1972:22). In fact, as Campbell observes, there exists many “religiously sympathizing unbelievers” inside and outside churches and religious institutions who are raised in a religious culture, but who cannot make themselves believe (Campbell 1972:22). This is important to note because not all non-believers feel the same way toward religion, even though they are often cast as uniformly hostile and rejecting of religion in all of its forms. Among atheists, there exists a more complicated and nuanced spectrum of beliefs than a simple dichotomy between religious and irreligious (1972:25). Ultimately, Campbell urges scholars to take into account the beliefs, actions, attitudes, and experiences of nonbelievers when studying irreligion in the same way these aspects of behavior are taken into account when studying religion and religious believers (1972:23).

It is important to note that my use of the term “atheist” is intentional. In the United States, the word “atheist” is sometimes hesitantly used even by atheists themselves due to the stigma the word carries that maligns atheists and often labels them as immoral and untrustworthy (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006:211). However, what does it really mean to be an atheist? Even the atheist community is somewhat split on this issue. Bainbridge observes: “In a monotheistic society, an atheist may be someone who simply does not subscribe to a belief in God while in a polytheistic society, an atheist may be one who does not believe in *enough* gods” (2009:320). Bainbridge also contrasts an implicit atheist with a lower-case “a” from an explicit Atheist with a capital “A.” The implicit atheist is one who simply does not subscribe to a belief in God, while the explicit Atheist consciously rejects a belief in God and actively proclaims this (non) belief (2009:320).

For the purposes of my study, I refer to atheists in the sense of those who do not subscribe to a belief in any god(s) and who do not consider themselves a member of any religion.

For the purpose of ease and clarity, I will conflate terms such as “secular,” “irreligious,” “unbeliever,” and “apostate” with “atheism” with the understanding that each of these terms is itself nuanced and not necessarily equivalent. To encompass all of these individuals, I refer to all atheists with a lower-case “a.” Agnosticism will not be a focus of my examination since agnostics often “disagree less strenuously with those who possess religious faith”¹ (Bainbridge 2009:320). In my own research, I employed the word “atheist” on all recruitment material, but allowed interview participants to expand on their preferred terminology, asking them to give their own definition of what being an atheist means to them personally. This is important because views on religion and other personally held beliefs are often very subjective and difficult to define in very strict terms or as a binary (atheist versus religious).²

II. Research Focus and Questions

Important studies have already been conducted on atheist identity formation in recent years with an emphasis on atheists in a social context, studying what LeDrew (2013:1) terms “active atheists,” and more specifically, atheists that are members of atheist clubs and social groups. Empirical work also points to trends in the ebbs and flows of religious practice across the life-course, with the least religious years (operationalized by a low practice frequency) most typically occurring during an individual’s college years (Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977; Regnerus

¹ In my own interviews, it was clear that some atheists were still in a “seeking” phase, or they preferred other labels since their own views were nuanced and evolving. Some participants even referred to themselves as “agnostic atheists.”

² A note on spirituality: It is a widely held misconception that atheists cannot be spiritual. Spirituality does not necessarily require a belief in a higher being. Therefore, spiritual people can indeed be atheists and vice versa. According to Greenberg (2008), spirituality can be defined as involving “feelings of significance, unity, awe, joy, acceptance, and consolation. Such feelings are intrinsically rewarding and so are sought in their own right, but they also help us in dealing with different situations involving death, loss, and disappointment.” Sam Harris, a famous neuroscientist, philosopher, and author explained: “spirituality begins with a reverence for the ordinary that can lead us to insights and experiences that are anything but ordinary” (Harris as cited by Frank 2014).

and Uecker 2007; Schweitzer 2004). The Pew Research Center reports that young people make up the least religious group in the U.S. with only 48 percent of people between the ages of 18 and 39 citing religion as “very important” compared to 55 percent of adults aged 40 to 59 and 64 percent of people 60 and older (Carriere-Kretschmer and Holzwart 2008). This trend of younger people being the most disinterested in religion is mirrored by the typical demographics of self-identified apostates who tend to be “liberal, Democrats, independents, younger, living in the West, students, and those who are living with someone without being married” (Beit-Hallahmi 2011:301). Several studies that have explored the trend of lessened religious practice in the younger demographic have hypothesized that a tendency toward a lessened religious salience or practice may just be a phase, and that individuals will eventually return to religion (Regnerus and Uecker 2007; Schweitzer 2004). However, this thesis will address a gap that seems to appear in the research relating to a disaffiliation with religious *belief* early in life (not simply religious *practice*).

This thesis seeks to supplement the extant literature by focusing primarily on the individual, biographical experiences of college atheists who do not necessarily fall inside the group context studied by scholars such as LeDrew (2013) and Smith (2010), or whose identity formation processes are compared to those of other religious college students (Bowman and Small 2010). This research also seeks to fill the gap in the literature regarding the role of college. I argue that college functions as an institution that serves to crystallize an identity-achievement process already set in motion in childhood and adolescence, rather than as an institutional moment in a person’s life that causes a person to become an atheist, as suggested by Caplovitz and Sherrow (1977). My research will aim to understand the lived experiences of atheists including their backgrounds, how they come to identify as an atheist, their own personal

definitions of an atheist identity, how salient this identity is, and the experiences of stigma and of coping with stigma. I therefore ask the following research questions:

- 1. What are the background factors that lead college students to adopt an atheist identity?*
- 2. What is the process of adopting an atheist identity?*
- 3. How salient does an atheist identity become?*
- 4. Do people feel that this part of their identity is stigmatized? If so, how do they cope?*

CHAPTER 2: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review of the literature is comprised of three main sections. In the first section, Embattled Identity: Stigma and Casting Atheists as the “Other,” the concept of stigma will be discussed, given its importance in casting an atheist identity as an embattled and stigmatized identity. Included in the examination of stigma are subsections discussing commonly held beliefs regarding morality that contribute to the stigma surrounding atheists. The second section, Atheist Identity: Formation and Salience, discusses existing research documenting the various pathways taken by individuals in adopting an atheist identity. This section also discusses other aspects of identity such as salience. The third section, College and Atheism, focuses on the institution of college and its controversial role in the formation of an atheist identity.

I. Embattled Identity: Stigma and Casting Atheists as the “Other”

Although levels of stigma against an individual or group can vary in intensity, historically, there has been and continues to be a certain level of stigma and societal unacceptance of atheists. This informs the idea that to be an atheist is to claim a stigmatized and embattled identity. Campbell explains the significant development during the Victorian era that shaped the current societal consciousness toward atheists:

The Victorian caricature of the atheist as a depraved, friendless and tortured soul has left its mark on the collective consciousness of contemporary society (and equally upon contemporary sociology) in the form of a tendency to view his modern counterpart as an aggressively nonconforming and neurotic person who is alienated from his social milieu. (1972:39)

These ideas of the atheist as “depraved,” “friendless,” and so on, are important to understand when exploring the atheist identity as embattled and stigmatized. This section will discuss stigma as applied to an atheist identity as well as the causes and effects of the stigmatization of atheists.

According to Erving Goffman, the term *stigma* refers “to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier” (1968:1). Goffman uses this term to refer to a personal characteristic including race, religion, addiction, homosexuality, and so on that discredits a person and denies them “full social acceptance” (1968: Preface-5). He explains:

By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class. (1968:5)

Different types of stigma exist in society and do so to varying degrees of visibility. Goffman explains that the visibility of a stigma is important to a person’s identity in social situation. If, for example, the stigma is visible or impedes interaction (such as having a large birth mark on one’s face or speaking with a stammer), the person is stigmatized upon contact with others (1968:48-49). Atheists are an interesting group because they can usually “pass” or be secretive about their “failings” in order to get along in every day life by being perceived as “normal” (1968:73).³ “Passing” can be achieved through the use of a strategy suggested by Goffman where only a controlled amount of information is shared about oneself to a majority of the public. A stigma-bearer might only reveal her true identity to a trusted minority, thereby dividing the world into two groups: a large majority to which little information is shared and a small minority to whom the stigma-bearer “tells all” (1968:95). Similarly, in many cases, atheists do not disclose their beliefs or identity to most acquaintances and may only talk freely with close friends and other trusted individuals.

³ Although Goffman never applied his work on stigma to atheism and atheists, it is certainly relevant for this stigmatized group. Smith (2010:15) also uses Goffman’s concept of “spoiled identities” (stigmatized identities) in reference to atheists as a group, but to my knowledge, this thesis along with Smith’s work are the first works to apply Goffman’s concepts to atheism.

Forming in-group and out-group affiliations is another way people cope with stigma. In-groups are “fellow-sufferers” of a particular stigma (1968:112). Goffman suggests that in some cases, in-groups adopt a militant or secessionist ideology where members might actually “flaunt” some of their traits that clearly “other” them from the rest of society or the “out-group” (people who do not share their stigma) (Goffman 1968:113). Through this framework, some atheists take on an “us” versus “them” mindset and adopt a more combative approach against the people who stigmatize them. A good example of this in-group affiliation where atheists make themselves more visible is Richard Dawkins’s online “Out Campaign.” This website is a space where atheists can read, share stories, blog, and buy bumper stickers, T-shirts, and other merchandise relating to atheism. Atheists are encouraged to “come out of the closet” in order to publicly affirm their identity and make themselves more visible rather than trying to “pass” (Dawkins 2013).

Smith explains that forming social atheist groups is yet another way that atheists form in-groups instead of trying to “pass” (Smith 2013). Some atheists who “come out” publicly manage their stigmatized identities by finding common ground with other atheists through atheist-run charities, social groups, and activism campaigns. These collective group affiliations have become much more common and provide spaces for atheists to reaffirm their identities and mobilize for a common cause (2013:96). Despite forming their own in-groups, atheists are still cast by the majority of U.S. society as the external “out-group” (Smith 2010:14). The importance of the designation of an atheist identity as a deviance from the norm cannot be understated when trying to understand the implications of adopting this embattled identity. Smith explains:

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...(2010:15)

It is important to explore some of the reasons why much of the U.S public casts atheists as the “other.” One of the major sources of othering and stigma is the belief that atheists reject the foundations of morality.

Causes of Stigma: “Rejection” of Morality

A passage of the King James Version of the Bible (Psalm 14) states: “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good” (as cited by Bainbridge 2009:324). This passage is an example of a moral argument against atheists that roots itself in religion. Further, words such as “wickedness” are often conflated with atheism (2009:324). As a result, it is no surprise that language surrounding atheism in religious texts and ideology is where much hostility against atheists begins. The ideological structure of the U.S. sets a baseline of “good” and “moral” in the context of believing in God. Thus, anyone who does not adhere to this baseline structure may be viewed as “wicked.”

An interesting historical note is that in the nineteenth century, “free-thinkers” were seen as “naturally immoral and depraved,” and the term “atheist” was used in a derogatory fashion “to denote the immoral” (Campbell 1972:97-98). Campbell explains that the historical conflation of atheism and immorality has changed to an idea that if an unbeliever was raised by Christian parents, then he or she “absorbed a Christian moral ethic” (Campbell 1972:99). However, there exists a fear that this moral ethic will eventually disintegrate with the successive generations of unbelievers, thus a “time-lag” in the acquisition of immorality (Campbell 1972:99). Although Campbell wrote these theories on atheism several decades ago, his findings are still relevant to the current social landscape. The fear that the moral fabric of society is disintegrating is present today where about 74 percent of United States citizens think that “it is a bad idea to raise children without any religion” (Edgell, et al. 2006:213). Indeed, 45 percent of U.S. citizens believe that religious beliefs are necessary for morality (as cited by Bainbridge 2009:324).

Although not a majority, this is still a significant portion of citizens who agree with the historical view that “since religion fosters morality, irreligion fosters immorality” (Campbell 1972:97). According to Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann, “Americans construct the atheist as the symbolic representation of one who rejects the basis for moral solidarity and cultural membership in American society altogether” (2009:230). The conflation of religion with morality comes, in many ways, from both an idea of divine policing and a culture based around Christianity as *the* acceptable ideology, used as a yardstick to judge any other moral views.

In the eyes of some religious people, the suggestion that “God is always watching” keeps the faithful on their best behavior, and this idea of constant policing serves as a religious foundation for morality (Gervais and Norenzayan 2012:484). The presumption that morality is rooted in God or in religion proves problematic for atheists who do not subscribe to the idea of a divine being policing their actions, and creates a certain amount of distrust from people who fear that immoral actions may accompany a lack of belief in eternal punishment for wrongdoing. This is the primary explanation for atheists being stigmatized, labeled as deviant, and sometimes confronted with marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion from their communities.

Profound examples of this stigmatization are evident in political life. Although the Constitution of the United States prohibits the use of religious tests in order to hold public office (U.S. Constitution, Article 6, Section 3), several states have laws excluding atheists from holding office. The Arkansas Constitution forbids atheists from holding public office or serving on juries because they are not considered “competent” (Arkansas Constitution, Article 19, Section 1). Mississippi, Texas, South Carolina, and other states contain similar provisions in their constitutions (Bulger 2013). Although many regard these provisions as irrelevant in the twenty-first century, atheists in public office are far and few between, indicating that legal prohibitions still on the books may play a factor in the election of atheists or the attitudes of the voting

population.⁴ There are currently no (uncloseted) atheists in the United States Congress, and only one open atheist, California's Pete Stark, has ever served in the U.S. Congress (Moreno 2014). Not only are atheists institutionally excluded from political life, but their status as outsiders sometimes results in experiences of discrimination and feelings of otherness from the rest of "mainstream" society. Previous research has noted other instances of atheist marginalization including bullying and harassment of atheist children in schools (Hamblin 2013) and the exclusion of atheists from organizations such as the Boy Scouts (Hill and Sprigg 2013).

In addition to the umbrella notion of "religion" indicating a baseline for moral goodness (and as a requisite for holding public office and being able to fully participate as a U.S. citizen), Christianity, specifically, is seen as the baseline of morality with which other sources of morality are judged. Campbell explains:

Measurement of the degree of immorality of various groups in society thus becomes a very slippery exercise in which there is a real danger of projecting the morality of a dominant ethnic or class group on to a nonconforming minority and hence 'defining' immorality into existence. Even where all groups in society are agreed on the acts which are to be regarded as immoral, they may attach a very different emphasis to the degree of immorality involved. (1972:103)

This statement explains how any variations in moral belief outside of Christianity (the dominant religious belief) can be perceived as immoral. For example, since orthodox Christian doctrine forbids premarital sex or homosexual activity, these acts can become "immoral" in the eyes of society as a whole. Thus, it may be seen as problematic when a person has premarital sex or engages in homosexual activities even though the person may not see these actions as morally wrong (Campbell 1972:103-104). This heavily Christian-influenced idea of morality is still seen

⁴ It is worth noting that the United States has never seen an atheist president, nor a president with a religious faith that falls outside of Christianity. Over half of the presidents have been either Episcopalian or Presbyterian, with other Protestant groups represented (Sahgal 2009). To date, there have been no Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or other religious tradition represented in the White House. This is perhaps telling of how deeply ingrained Christianity is in U.S. society.

today in several states that still have anti-sodomy and anti-homosexuality laws on the books (Ayres and Eskridge 2014). Many of the arguments that influence policies banning gay marriage are heavily rooted in religion and Christianity specifically, thus making debates regarding such subjects more about whether or not such acts should be legal from a Christian standpoint. Campbell suggests that even if atheists do not share a specifically Christian or religiously informed morality, this does not mean that they are immoral or have a lessened “capacity for self-control,” but rather that there exists a variation in moral judgments (Campbell 1972:104). It is worth noting that several studies have been conducted that have refuted the assumption that atheists are less moral than their religious counterparts (often measured by the willingness to commit crimes). In a study performed in the United States between 1924 and 1934, it was shown that delinquency and criminality were actually lower in people without religious affiliation than in Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, indicating a lack of a correlation between immorality and lack of religious affiliation (as cited by Campbell 1972:101).

Despite a lack of correlation between religious belief and morality, atheists continue to suffer from negative stereotypes that have serious social consequences. In fact, Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann cite atheists as one of the most stigmatized groups in the United States (2006:212). The same researchers explain that more people in the U.S. would have their children marry or otherwise associate with a person from a background of just about any other cultural, minority, or religious group than atheist(s). Most U.S. citizens also believe that atheists are the group least likely to share their worldview (2006:216). In a list comparing commonly stigmatized groups including Muslims, homosexuals, immigrants, and African Americans, 39.6 percent of participants cited atheists as least likely to share their vision of American society. This is compared to 26.3 percent of participants who cited Muslims and 22.6 percent of participants who cited homosexuals as the least likely to share their vision. Further, 47.6 percent said they

would oppose their children marrying an atheist compared to 33.5 percent and 27.2 percent of people who were opposed to their child marrying a Muslim or an African American, respectively (Edgell, et al. 2006:218).

Not only are atheists commonly mistrusted for not sharing a common “source” of morality, but they are often disliked and maligned by other groups. The Pew Research Center performed a study of how different groups of Americans rated other groups on a “feeling thermometer” where a temperature of 100 was the warmest in terms of feeling, and a 0 was the coldest (Cooperman et. al. 2014). According to this study, the American public viewed Jews, Catholics, and Evangelical Christians most warmly on the “feeling thermometer.” These groups were given a rating of at least 60 degrees. Atheists and Muslims were on the coolest side of the thermometer with atheists receiving an average of 41 degrees and Muslims an average of 40 degrees. Atheists were rated on the coldest part of the scale by 40 percent of the studied population with Evangelical Christians tending to rate atheists the lowest with an average of 25 degrees (Cooperman et. al. 2014).

As discussed above, atheists encounter a large amount of mistrust in the social world, which reinforces the idea of an atheist identity as an embattled identity that is difficult to outwardly affirm without the possibility of consequences such as marginalization and exclusion. Despite the stigmatization of atheists, people continue to achieve this identity, often undergoing a process of identity formation.

II. Atheist Identity: Formation and Salience

Religion is often taken to be an important part of a person’s identity. Similarly, a *lack* of a religious identity can become just as important to an individual. Social psychologist George Herbert Mead, introduces the concept of the self, an important entity that comprises a person’s identities. He suggests that the self is not present at birth, but arises through a gradual process of

social interaction with other individuals (Mead 1934:135). Mead's conceptualization of the self is instructive when studying identity because it provides a framework for viewing the self and identity as emergent through socialization, experience, and interaction. The self comprises a variety of identities arranged in a hierarchy of importance. Smith articulates the term "identity" as referring to "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" (2010:3). The idea of atheism as an achieved rather than an ascribed identity is important when looking at the factors involved in the process of *becoming* an atheist. This section will focus on the identity formation process of atheists as well as the religious disaffiliation of adolescents and young adults. Later sections will deal with identity salience and the factors that play in to the identity salience of atheism as an embattled, minority identity.

Atheist Identity Formation

In his study of 40 active members of atheist social groups, Smith identified a process that his participants underwent to become atheists. According to Smith, an atheist identity is one that consists of a "not-self" identity (2010:14). This means that many atheists explain their identity based on beliefs that they do not have or activities in which they do not participate (2010:14). Smith likens atheists to vegans, nondrinkers, and virgins (2010:14) in that all of these particular identities imply behaviors in which the individual does not partake such as believing in God, eating animal products, drinking alcohol, or having sex. The process of "becoming" an atheist that many atheists shared is outlined by Smith in four major steps: (1) the realization of the "ubiquity of theism," (2) "questioning theism," (3) "rejecting theism," and (4) "coming out atheist" (2010:1).

According to Smith's study, many of the atheists cited a prior belief in God, and many verified that even if they grew up in a secular household, they noticed the normative belief in

their communities was the belief in God, and specifically in the Christian God. One participant said that even though she was raised in a secular household, she still went to church with her friends because she wanted to feel included (2010:7). This indicates how a belief in God can be a “default” stance in the United States that one, especially as a child, may take in order to be accepted by peers and the dominant culture. Smith states, “even when there was low religious *participation*, the normative *belief* in God was still present” (2010:7).

The step of questioning theism was experienced by many of Smith’s respondents upon entering college when they began to doubt the beliefs with which they had been raised. In college, respondents encountered new points of view, engaged in new relationships, and in the cases of those who had a religious background, attended church less and less. One respondent commented, “They [fellow students] didn’t go to church on Sunday and nothing bad was happening to them!” (2010:8). Respondents in college also had interactions with atheist peers who would engage them in critical conversation about religion. This began a questioning process for the respondents who came to view religion as illogical and contradictory (2010:9). Smith explains the social process that respondents had to undergo in order to reject religion by stating, “Because religious beliefs and practices are socially learned, there must take place an *unlearning* process for those who eventually come to reject it” (2010:9). People would undergo a “role-exit” process where they would critique the beliefs with which they grew up and would realize that they were dissatisfied with the incongruence of their previous beliefs and their new worldviews informed by new experiences and interactions in college. They would then reinterpret the teachings of the Bible or other religious texts with a new, more skeptical understanding of their previous beliefs (2010:9) leading to a crossroads of deciding whether or not to reject their former religious beliefs.

The third step suggested by Smith in becoming an atheist was the rejection of theism where respondents explicitly rejected both the idea of God and religion and found a new way to legitimate a worldview without God using scientific explanations (2010:13). This “coming out” phase occurred when the new atheist acknowledged that atheism is a deviant view in a predominantly religious culture, and then found empowerment by actively stating the new beliefs. A respondent in Smith’s study reported upon “coming out”: “It was very empowering...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!” (2010:17).

For many, the new atheist identity became a salient part of self-identity even if the person experienced negative reactions from others after “coming out” (2010:15). Smith explains that even if these new atheists recognized their marginalized position in society, rather than feeling a sense of anomie, many respondents cited feelings of autonomy because it was through their own personal identity construction that they achieved this particular aspect of their identity (2010:17).

Another important piece of the literature in regard to atheist identity formation is a 2013 study by LeDrew. In his article, LeDrew explores the experiences of “active atheists,” who in LeDrew’s terms are actively engaged atheists who are involved in atheist groups and organizations. He explains their attitudes toward their own identity formation as well as attitudes toward the religious community. LeDrew explains identity development as a process of discovery including three steps: the discovery of ideas, self-discovery, and the discovery of the collective (2013:1).

LeDrew identified what he termed the “standard trajectory” in atheist identity formation as: “people experiencing a religious socialization who were believers, but went through a process of questioning and doubt that eventually resulted in abandoning their beliefs and adopting an atheist identity” (2013:5). LeDrew references Smith’s work, mentioning the normative view and

socialization including a belief in God (a “theistic socialization and social environment”) that the atheist comes to reject after progressing through questioning and doubt phases that result from education and exposure to new ideas (2013:5). LeDrew specifically identifies a “period of doubt” in a person’s teenage years through their twenties (2013:5). One of LeDrew’s participants identified that between the ages of 13 to 16 he experienced doubt because “things weren’t making sense because questions weren’t being answered” (2013:6). The participant educated himself more about science, realizing the inconsistencies of his religion and the perceived consistencies of science. This questioning continued into his college years, especially after his exposure to atheist friends and roommates (2013:6). The participant read *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins and was finally convinced of his full-fledged transformation to atheism, with Dawkin’s book providing him with the “language and concepts to articulate the doubts and questions he had struggled with for years” (2013:7).

An important distinction made by LeDrew relates to his participants’ backgrounds in terms of either secular socialization or religious socialization. Secular socialization is a background where religion was never important and the respondent’s atheism proceeded from socialization. Some participants actually explored religion before doubting and going back to atheism (2013:10). In respondents who described a religious socialization, some claimed to be skeptics from the beginning. Others were termed “seekers” who sought out religion, but “could not make themselves believe what they had been taught” (2013:13). An interesting theme discovered was that many atheists adopted a narrative of a “discovery” of atheism rather than a conversion or deconversion, meaning that they recognized something about themselves that had previously existed (2013:8).

Although the level of education is certainly a factor mentioned in the apostasy of his participants, LeDrew mentions that education is certainly not the only factor that influences

religiosity or a lack thereof as there are contradictory findings in the area of the level of education in relation to the level of apostasy. LeDrew also cites socioeconomic status and namely financial stability as a factor in nonbelief. This is important to note as many celebrity atheists like Richard Dawkins link religiosity to a lack of education or just sheer ignorance. As LeDrew succinctly states: “religiosity is closely related to social conditions rather than simply a product of ignorance that is eradicated with science education” (2013:7).

Emergence of Atheism in Adolescence and Early Adulthood

The emergence of atheism in adolescence and early adulthood in some individuals has been a rarely studied topic, however, some sociologists have attempted to understand the social conditions present that precipitate the decline of religiosity in young people. In his study of the emergence of atheism in adolescents, Hunsberger claims that many adolescents who become atheists are often raised in households where religion is not heavily emphasized or where parents are not necessarily good models of religion (2000:234). Therefore, “most apostasy does not represent a reversal in the socialisation process, but rather it might be characterized as a slight bend in the religious socialisation line” (2000:234). Hunsberger explains that a weak level of religion in the home can cause adolescents to “drift” away from this religion during these years (2000:234). When compared to adolescents who come from fairly secular households and who actually convert to religion with very high levels of religiosity, apostates begin questioning their beliefs much earlier in life, mainly at the onset of adolescence. Hunsberger explains, “when young people start questioning a lot of things...their edifice of beliefs then began to crumble bit by bit, until finally the whole structure came crashing down” (2000:240). This process is described as taking a relatively large amount of time (usually a few years) because many apostates view leaving the family religion as a “daunting” process (2000:240). Hunsberger also states that low levels of religious influence in the home are not necessarily always indicative as

causes of “drift” away from religion. This is simply a trend among adolescents, especially those who grow up with tendencies to question their beliefs and actively seek out truth and answers (2000:241).

In a study of German and U.S. adolescents, Schweitzer finds that age plays perhaps the largest role in an individual choosing to leave religion, and that young people within the ages of 18 and 30 are the group most likely to leave the church (2004:66). However, Schweitzer says that later in life, many of these people who previously leave the church may cycle back, and that this “moratorium period” will be abandoned as “experimental attitudes” are left behind (2004:70). Regnerus and Uecker explain that people may simply abandon a high level of religious participation in college due to numerous factors such as a late-night orientation, deviance from religious norms (having sex, drinking, and so on), and the social norm of not appearing too outwardly religious (2007:4). Despite a decline in religious practice frequency, Regnerus and Uecker claim that the majority of college students maintain the same level and importance of religious faith that remain “largely untouched for the duration of their education” (2007:3-4). This faith “lies dormant,” during many students’ college years, and is often returned to later in life (Regnerus and Uecker 2007:3-4). Findings by Christianist sociologists such as Schweitzer (2004) suggest a similar cycle where apostates later return to religious practice.

Salience of Atheist Identities

Along with explanations of identity and identity formation of atheists, it is also important to discuss identity salience, as the salience of an atheist identity is particular to the fact that atheism is a minority status embroiled in a highly religious social climate in the United States. In her definition of *identity salience*, Morris refers to this concept as “the likelihood that a given identity will be active across situations” (2013:24). Identities reside in a hierarchy of importance related to identity commitment, where identities with the most commitment also are the most

salient (Morris 2013:24). Identity salience is particular to an individual, and different identities can become more important or salient at different times or in different situations. For example, if a woman finds herself in a large room with many men and she is the only woman, her identity as a woman will become more salient than if she were in a room with all females.

Identity salience is important to discuss when considering atheism as an embattled, minority identity. Seifert exemplifies the formation of atheism as a salient part of some individuals' identities in her article regarding "Christian privilege" (2007). Seifert introduces an idea that college students who identify as Christian in a heavily Christian-dominated society enjoy "Christian privilege," defined as "the conscious and subconscious advantages often afforded the Christian faith in America's colleges and universities" (2007:11). She explains that in some universities, Christian students are afforded privilege through having entire breaks planned around religious holidays like Christmas and through maintaining a predominant "Christian ethos" even though many universities no longer identify themselves in religious terms despite commonly religious foundations (Seifert 2007:11). In addition to the "formal privileges" that Christian (and other religious) students enjoy such as having the Christmas holiday off from school,⁵ Seifert explains "informal privileges" that Christian students experience that can be applied to broader society. Many people, for example, have become accustomed to attributing behavior such as volunteering to being a "good Christian" or that these behaviors are "Christian" in nature (2007:12).

It may also be argued that Christian privilege has expanded to religious privilege in general. While college campuses seemed to once be seen as the bastions of science, reason, and secular thinking, Nash explains that today, religious pluralism on college campuses is booming

⁵ All students have the Christmas holiday off from school, but the Christian ethos appears in that this holiday is formally recognized in the academic calendar.

while secularism and humanism are “in retreat” (2010:2). This is seen in the explosion of student-run and university-funded organizations for students of a variety of spiritual and religious affiliations (Nash 2010:2).⁶ Nash explains, “Presently, it is the fashion on many campuses throughout America to celebrate religious difference and spiritual diversity, as a way of enlarging the meaning of multiculturalism” (2010:2). Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann also explain that in general, the increasing tolerance of religious pluralism may actually lead to an increasing *intolerance* of people who reject religion (2006:214). They explain:

Religious acceptance may be driven largely by assumptions that religious people, of whatever faith, are ‘like me’ in two ways. In private life, they are understood to be moral people, worthy of trust that is the basis for close personal relationships. In public life, the boundaries that separate religious identities (for example, evangelical versus mainline Protestant versus Catholic or Jew) are understood to be encompassed by and to constitute a broader identity—being a good American. In such a setting, how do Americans view those who reject religion, and what does that tell us about how Americans view their nation and themselves? (2006:214)

Nash echoes this idea that college campuses are actually becoming less tolerant of atheists. He introduces the idea of “atheophobia” (the fear and hatred of atheists) that is “alive and well on college campuses” (2010:3). Bowman and Small explain in their study of college students and their spiritual development that “students from all faith backgrounds described a perceived three-tier structure of religious privilege in society with Christians at the top, atheists at the bottom, and other religions in the middle” (Bowman and Small 2010:599). This may cause atheist college students to feel as if their needs are not being met by universities or to feel uncomfortable and defensive about their beliefs in a highly religious social climate on college campuses (Bowman and Small 2010:599).

⁶ Interestingly, the campus culture at the University of Colorado Boulder (the context of this study) supports Nash’s idea. CU Boulder is home to over 30 religious or spiritual clubs and groups available to students. The vast majority of these clubs are Christian (University of Colorado Boulder 2015). There is only one secular student group on the CU Boulder campus.

These privileges extended to religious students on college campuses along with the “theophile”-dominated social culture⁷ exclude individuals who do not identify with the dominant or normative campus culture and create situations for students where they feel ignored or invisible if they do not identify as religious or spiritual (Siner 2007:14). However, the experience of Christian privilege (or religious privilege) by an atheist college student also creates opportunities for this non-religious identity to become more salient.

Siner (2007) uses this same idea of Christian privilege to explain the experiences, identity development, and salience of college students who do not identify as Christian. According to Siner, 21 percent of college students do not believe in God and are often seen in a negative light by their peers, being described as “bitter, mean-spirited, Satanic, immoral, empty, or ignorant” (2007:14). However, marginalization and judgment imposed on nonreligious students commonly leads to a greater importance in the irreligious aspect of the students’ identity. Siner explains that people have a multiplicity of identities, but some tend to be more salient or important than others at different times and places. He states that “oppressed, marginalized, and minority identity statuses tend to be more salient to an individual” while others fall to the periphery of one’s sense of self (2007:14). This can be likened to the Black Community, where many people experience the fact of being a person of color in a society that is predominantly white as a very salient part of their identity. Siner states: “Just as any minority identity is likely to be more salient, faith identity may be particularly salient to those students from minority religions that are not valued in the Christian-dominated culture of the United States” (2007:15).

⁷ “Theophile” is a term used by Nash to refer to a “God-loving” culture that permeates U.S. society in general as well as university campuses (Nash 2010:3).

III. College and Atheism

An interesting contradiction arises in the important works performed by both Smith and LeDrew in regard to the role of higher education in the making of an atheist identity. In Smith's study, many of the participants did not begin to question their beliefs until college (Smith 2010). However, LeDrew makes an important reference to other research that shows that higher education might not cause apostasy (2013). Historical research by Caplovitz and Sherrow of "religious drop-outs" points to college as "a breeding ground for apostasy" (1977:109), saying that in their study of college students, more students, regardless of religious background, left college as apostates than the number of apostates who entered college (1977:109). This study indicates factors such as being away from families who would otherwise sustain religious beliefs and contact with new peer groups as factors that push students away from religious beliefs in college (1977:108). In a more recent study, Regnerus and Uecker take on the issue of college and apostasy, explaining that college itself may not be the reason that people choose to disaffiliate themselves from religion (2007:1). They state that many people who became irreligious often are a product of "processes set in motion long before young people ever set foot on a college campus: Those students who 'lose their faith' in college or drop out of organized religion after high school are primarily those already at considerable risk for doing so *for other reasons* that predate these actions" (2007:3). The authors thus reject the common belief that college is a secularizing force that turns people into atheists. As the authors suggest, there is little evidence for this today as much of the research that made this claim came out of the 1960s and 1970s, when the counterculture was at its strongest in U.S. universities (Regnerus and Uecker 2007:2).

Regnerus and Uecker (2007) explain that the commonly believed explanations for a lapse in at least outward religiosity may be due to the "secularizing tendencies of higher education" as well as "cognitive dissonance" that may result from activities such as drinking, having sex, or

using drugs that deviate from religious teachings or parental guidance (Regnerus and Uecker 2007:1) Other reasons to temporarily abandon religion in college include logistical conflicts resulting from being faced with the responsibilities of young adulthood (2007:5) or adhering to norms that discourage a person from being too outwardly religious since “to appear over-religious can be the social kiss of death” (2007:4). Despite the lessening of outward religiosity, it is clear that many people remain privately religious, with four out of five students stating that they do not experience a diminishing religious salience during college years (2007:4). Regnerus and Uecker further questioned the assumption that college is the reason for deconversion or decreased salience of religion in young people, finding that while 64 percent of young people who went to church at least once per month decreased their attendance upon enrollment in a four-year institution, 76 percent of people the same age who never attended college curtailed their church attendance (2007:2). This suggests that religious disinterest probably occurs some time before college (or the typical college age). Other factors that lead to a decrease of salience in religiosity include cohabitation (which may imply sex before marriage), or other behaviors such as binge-drinking that are criticized by many religious traditions. However, these activities do not necessarily indicate a causation of secularity, but rather serve as a reflection of a secular orientation already present in the individual (2007:2).

IV. The Current Study

As demonstrated above, the existing literature has focused on atheist identity formation in a social context and on the institution of college as (historically) a direct cause of religious rejection or (more recently) as a force that causes religious practice to temporarily go underground. In order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the identity formation and experiences of atheists outside of the group context as well as the role that college plays in these processes, the next chapters of this thesis will describe my own qualitative analysis I used to

study college atheists. A chapter describing the research methods will first be described, followed by the findings of the study. My findings will be discussed and placed into the context of the existing research in my final chapters.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Before embarking on this research project, I worked with two University of Colorado (CU) offices. First, I obtained CU Internal Review Board (IRB) approval for my recruitment materials, study design, interview, and data-storage protocol. Second, I applied for and was awarded CU Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP) funding to cover my material costs and costs for providing interview participants with a small compensation.

I. Setting

This study was conducted at the University of Colorado in Boulder, Colorado. The university is home to approximately 25,000 students and is predominantly white with a slightly greater number of male than female students (“University of Colorado-Boulder” 2015). The city of Boulder is mainly composed of liberal, Democrat, upper-middle class, white, young, and physically active individuals. Notably, Boulder is one of the least religious towns in the United States with less than twenty percent of inhabitants claiming to be “very religious” (Florida 2013). It is not surprising that this city claims less religious inhabitants as information previously stated in my literature review points to the least religious people tending to be predominantly white, male, liberal, Democrat, and so on. The status of Boulder as one of the least religious cities in the United States proved to be very important in my informants’ responses, as many of them felt comfortable affirming their atheist identity in this supportive normative context.

II. Recruitment Process

Recruitment methods included presenting information about the study to undergraduate classes, writing on classroom chalkboards, distributing flyers, advertising in the weekly “Buff Bulletin” (an online publication that lists events, notices, services, and so on), presenting to an on-campus secular group, and through snowball sampling. In order to attract the most attention,

recruitment materials included titles such as “Don’t Believe in God?” or “Are you a Godless Heathen?” The flyers (See Appendix A) included information about the study and my contact information. The flyers made explicit the parameters of the research, requesting participants who considered themselves to be atheist, were between the ages of 18 to 24, and who were current undergraduate students at the University of Colorado Boulder. The flyers also stated that participants would be compensated with a \$10 gift card. Interested individuals called me on my personal cell-phone to schedule an interview or e-mailed me on an account that was set up specifically for the study. After conducting an interview, I would give the participant an extra flyer and copy of the consent form along with a \$10 gift card. I would then ask him or her to pass along the information about my study to any other friends who were atheists and who might be interested in participating. One woman referred her friend to me, but most participants reported that they found out about the study through seeing advertisements on chalkboards in their classrooms. One student responded after hearing my presentation in a student-run skeptics club meeting.⁸ One participant was recruited through a presentation to an on-campus academic journal organization,⁹ and several other participants were acquaintances who expressed interest in participating.

III. Sample

From September to December 2014, I conducted 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews. A sample size of 14 participants was large enough to yield data saturation and an ability to achieve a rich data set providing an understanding of atheist identity formation, atheist identity

⁸ This is a club for students who are atheists, agnostics, skeptics, and so on. Members of the club meet to converse about recent scientific findings and to provide an accepting place for people who are not religious (though not necessarily atheist).

⁹ This student-run organization publishes University of Colorado undergraduate work in all fields including the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, art, poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. The names of the student-run clubs are omitted to protect the privacy of participants.

saliency, and several other recurring themes among this college sample. Eight of the participants were women (six were men), with ages ranging from 18 to 23. The average age was 19.6 years, while the modal and median ages were 18 years and 19.5 years, respectively. Regarding class rank, the sample was bimodal, predominantly freshmen and seniors (6 freshmen, 1 sophomore, 2 juniors, and 5 seniors). There was a range of majors with an over-representation in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields, with ten participants having at least one major in one of those fields. Three of the participants had exclusively social science majors, and one was majoring in anthropology, which could encompass both natural and social sciences. Interview participants were “traditional” students at the university, meaning they followed a trajectory of entering their undergraduate education shortly after completion of high school and were on a four or five year track to finish their degree(s). Twelve of the participants were white, and two were bi-racial (Mexican-American and Japanese-American). The response rate was high, with 14 out of the 16 total respondents who contacted me participating in an interview. Most respondents contacted me over e-mail, and only two people who expressed interest over e-mail never responded. When I received an e-mail from an interested individual, I would reply within 24 hours and give them my phone number and more information about the study. If they did not respond within three days, I would send one follow-up e-mail.

IV. Interviews

During the interviews, my status as a college student helped me establish rapport with my participants, who were also students. Many of the participants also asked me about my own religious beliefs during the interviews. I answered them honestly, telling them that I, like them, am an atheist. As expected, this seemed to comfort many of the participants who may have otherwise not shared with me some of their reservations regarding organized religion and other personal beliefs. Since I was seen as part of the “in-group,” fellow stigma-bearer, or fellow

sympathizer, it seemed that the participants' knowledge of my own identity provided a more comfortable situation for them to share their experiences.

Most of the interviews were conducted in the CU campus library in private, reserved study rooms (one interview was conducted at the participant's home). This comfortable and private setting allowed participants to freely talk about their experiences. Consent forms (see Appendix B) were signed before beginning the interviews. An additional consent form was provided to audio-record the interviews for later analysis. All participants agreed to participate in the study and to be audio-recorded. The interviews ranged from approximately fifteen minutes to slightly over one hour, depending on how much the participants chose to expand on their responses to the interview questions. On average, the interviews lasted about one-half of an hour. The interview questions were used as a guide, but flexibility was allowed depending on the flow of the conversation. Some participants did not need any follow-up questions or probing and would answer some interview schedule questions prior to me asking them. Conversely, other participants provided limited responses until I used probes to acquire more complete responses.

An interview schedule (see Appendix C) was used to structure the interview, but participants could expand on their experiences beyond what was in the interview guide. Further probing questions were asked in order to help clarify points or to provide a deeper understanding of the participants' responses. The interview questions encouraged participants to take a narrative, conversational approach with an emphasis placed on their upbringing (religious or otherwise), family life, experiences with religion, experiences with atheism, and personal beliefs surrounding morality and what it means to be an atheist. Participants were asked to rate and explain the importance (salience) of their atheist identity in their lives and what role it played in family and other social settings and relationships. Questions were also asked regarding

respondents' perceptions of stigma,¹⁰ with further probes added to see how the person coped with any perceived stigma or unacceptance. After the interviews were performed and recorded, they were transcribed verbatim in order to most accurately search for common themes. The participants' actual names were substituted with pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity. It is worth noting that although I told my participants that all names would be changed in my data transcriptions, analyses, and written reports, none of them were concerned about their identities being known and were fully willing to disclose their personal information.

¹⁰ When analyzing interview responses, stigma was operationalized by the perceptions of an atheist identity being under attack and the perceptions of acceptance of this identity by friends, family, and other people in the participants' lives. The exact questions were: 18. "Do you feel like as an atheist your identity is under attack?"; 19. "Does your family know you're an atheist? If not, why? If so, how did/does your family react (to your atheism)?"; 20. "Do most of your friends, co-workers, and other people in your life know you're an atheist? If not, why? If so, how do they react (to your atheism)?"; 21. Do you feel accepted by society as an atheist? If yes, in what ways, and if not, in what ways don't you feel accepted?"

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The atheists in my study all proved to be individuals with nuanced views and varied ways of incorporating atheism into their daily lives and personal beliefs. After carefully combing through and coding my qualitative interviews with 14 CU student atheists, I identified three primary themes in my data: (1) precursors to atheism; (2) pathways to atheism; and (3) experiences with an atheist identity. All of these primary themes are further parceled into subthemes of the primary themes. Thus, this chapter of my thesis will elaborate on these three primary themes and their corresponding subthemes, providing examples through some of the participants' quotes.

I. Precursors to Atheism: Backgrounds

The first theme in my findings, Precursors to Atheism, includes the participants' religious backgrounds and upbringings. This discusses the level of religiosity in their homes as well as their own personal levels of religious belief and religious practice. This theme is further parceled into the five subthemes that are common background or upbringing experiences of the study participants. The first subtheme, *Church Attendance*, explains the backgrounds of participants in terms of religious participation as children and adolescents. The second subtheme, *Christianity as the Norm*, describes the normative belief that many of the atheists had growing up with a specifically Christian tradition. The third subtheme, *Obligation by Friends and Family*, describes how many participants adhered to their parents' (or grandparents') religious beliefs and practices because they often had no other choice or because they felt obligated by their friend groups that were centered in the religious community. A discussion of participants' experiences and opinions of their religious upbringings is included in the fourth subtheme: *Experiences at Church*. Finally, the fifth subtheme, *A Background of Skepticism*, describes participants who grew up in a

household where religion was not emphasized, or where they had at least one parent who taught them to question or who gave them permission to seek out their own religious identities.

Church Attendance

Regardless of the presence of actual religious belief during childhood, there was a relatively high religious practice frequency among my sample early in the participants' lives. Twelve of the fourteen respondents reported going to church during their childhood, but with varying degrees of frequency. Four of my respondents reported attending a religiously affiliated school. Two respondents (Sophie and Mark) went to a Catholic school. However, Sophie (who grew up in an "open-minded" family with a very low rate of religious participation in the home) only attended Catholic school because she lived in an area with a poor public school system where the Catholic school was the only alternative. Although her family was not highly religious and only went to church on some holidays like Christmas, Danielle went to a Lutheran preschool. In addition to attending religiously affiliated schools, Aria and Mark both had very high religious practice frequencies. Aria went to a Quaker school, attended an Old Apostolic Lutheran Church, and participated in an intensive confirmation program one summer. Mark, who was raised a Catholic, went to mass every Sunday with his parents and frequently worked as a server in masses and at funerals.

Three participants (Julie, Matthew, and Bethany) went to Sunday school every Sunday when they were young (Matthew went on Wednesdays *and* Sundays until he was 8 years old). Five participants (Edward, Jennifer, Dillon, James, and Karen) went to church sporadically as children, either only on holidays, or when their parents wanted to go. Karen only reported going to church with her grandparents when she stayed at their house. Brian was somewhat of an anomaly in the sample because he grew up in a secular home but went to church with his grandmother often because she played the organ at the services. He also became interested in

religion later in his childhood and began attending youth groups until his sophomore year of college. Only one respondent (Cora) had a completely secular upbringing where she never attended church, although she did go to a friend's youth group several times.¹¹

Christianity as the Norm

Of the 14 participants interviewed, 13 had at least some religious influence in their upbringing, whether it was in practice (going to religiously-affiliated events like church and youth groups) or in some level of a “normative” belief in God (Smith 2010:7). All respondents with any religious influence had specifically Christian influences in their childhoods, whether with actual religious practice, or simply labeling oneself as a Christian because it was seen as the normal thing to do. James, who was raised in a reportedly secular family with a “spiritual” mother and an atheist father (who lacked any spirituality or religious belief), said he considered himself to be a Christian during his childhood:

I kind of took myself to be a Christian because it was the norm. And so, I kind of viewed everyone else as being that way as well. But not necessarily because I believed in religious things. Just because that's just the way it was, and that's what I was taught, and that's how everyone else seemed to be.

When asked where he learned that being religious was the norm, James replied that these messages came from school, people around him, and his mother taking him to Sunday school several times to give him a chance to experience it and decide what he wanted to believe. James certainly felt a social pressure to believe in *something*, and remembered thinking during his childhood:

There are so many people in the world that believe in a god that there must be one...It was just kind of taken-for-granted. And really, it was thought that if you didn't believe in a god, that was pretty stupid because clearly you're not paying attention to what the rest of the world is believing.

¹¹ See Appendix C for a table with childhood religious information for each participant.

Karen grew up in a secular household but went to church sporadically when she stayed at her grandparents' house. She said that before middle school, she adopted Christianity simply because she celebrated Christmas. However, she said, "It wasn't really anything about the actual practices of the Bible. It wasn't like 'the Bible tells you to do this, and this, and this.' It was 'oh, we celebrate Christmas and it's about Christ.'" Many respondents also reported feeling a sense of comfort in the idea of religion growing up. Jennifer, who grew up going to church on Easter and Christmas said:

It's just a nice thought when you're a kid that your life means something. And when you're kind of learning about death as a kid, it's a nice thought to have like 'oh, your grandpa is in heaven, and oh, they went on to a better place.' I think it's a nice, comforting idea to have when you're growing up and when you haven't matured yet and you don't really have the capacity to understand what life is.

The idea of a heaven and an afterlife seemed compelling also to Julie, who was drawn to church and religion because she liked the idea of salvation and Heaven, saying: "When I did believe in salvation, or when I contemplated Heaven, I was like: 'Yeah, that'd be cool. Chill up on a cloud...'" To many of the respondents, religion served as a comforting childhood idea that answered many often-difficult questions when they were younger about death and the meaning of life.

Obligation by Friends and Family

When asked why respondents adhered to their family's religious beliefs when they were growing up (if applicable), most respondents with religious backgrounds answered that it was because they were obligated to attend religious services and show outward signs of religiosity as a part of being a member of their family or because many of their friends were centered in the church community. Mark, who attended his Roman Catholic church regularly said that he believed in and followed Roman Catholicism "because they [my parents] did. One hundred percent. Because it was what was ingrained in me since I was zero years old." Jennifer

commented: “You listen to your parents when you’re growing up. When they make you do something, you do it.” Edward, Dillon, Matthew, Bethany, Danielle, and Mark all shared this sentiment, saying that they were given little to no choice in attending religious functions with their parents. Brian, Aria, and Julie cited both family and friend influences in going to church. Brian was an interesting case because although he had two parents who were not interested in religion at all, he was obliged to go to church with his grandmother, and later in his high school and early college years, he reported a high church attendance. Brian reported having a high religious practice frequency because of the social aspect of youth groups, saying:

My friend group was centered entirely in the church at one point...I enjoyed the culture and the friendship aspect of it far more than I felt any sort of personal relationship with Jesus or anything. I guess I would say I sort of defaulted to that as a condition of considering myself a Christian.

For Aria, whose mother had her at a very young age, the Old Apostolic Lutheran Church was compulsory because she was raised in part by her grandmother who stipulated church attendance as part of her upbringing. Aria also attended a Quaker school and between these two religious groups, she had a circle of friends that served as a large reason for continuing her church attendance.

Experiences at Church

Some respondents reported enjoying many aspects of the church community growing up. Jennifer enjoyed getting dressed up and going out to eat as a family after a church service: “We always did fun stuff afterwards, like we’d go out to eat or something. So while it was a little bit boring there when I was younger, it was still kind of a special event, so you felt like it was a sacred thing that you were doing.” Brian expressed positive memories of attending church even though he did not have much of a choice when he was staying with his grandmother. He mentioned loving the music and the free cookies after the service. However, his enjoyment of

church had nothing to do with the religious aspect of it and was mixed with irritation at his experiences at Sunday school. He remembered:

They had a little Sunday school in the place, and my sister and I at one point went there for like one week. And it was terrible! We just didn't have a good time [laughs]. It was annoying. They told us about this dumb Noah story, and it was stupid. And we had to color. And I'd just rather sit and watch grandma play the organ because it was more interesting.

Matthew, who was obligated by his mother to go to church on Wednesdays and Sundays, reported very negative memories of church as a child: "I remember, I hated going to church because, I mean you have to wear the nice clothes all the time, you can't get the clothes dirty. I remember my mama used to hit me a couple times if I spilled something on my clothes." Other participants reported other examples of negative experiences with the church they attended, but these will be explained in a later section, as many of these experiences actually proved to be instrumental in the slow progression of these participants out of their religious beliefs and toward atheistic beliefs.

A Background of Skepticism

A final important trend in the backgrounds of participants was having at least one parent who was not religious or who taught the participant to question their beliefs (religious and otherwise) at an early age. Out of the fourteen participants, three had at least one parent who taught them to question their beliefs as children. Also, ten individuals had parents who were skeptical of religion themselves or who allowed their child the freedom to choose their own religious beliefs. Matthew, whose mother heavily stressed church attendance and religious belief, got a completely different message from his father, who himself was aggrieved at being forced to be a Christian by his parents while he was growing up. Matthew commented, "I mean, my daddy came up with the idea: 'I don't want to have to force my children to be the religion that I am, that my parents forced me to be.'" Matthew noted that his father would make fun of everything,

including religion and emphasized to Matthew that he had a choice of what to believe: “He stressed choice. He stressed that every man has a choice to make...And that choice is never right nor wrong. It is his own.” This led Matthew to give up going to church when he was 8 years old, and to take seriously the choice that his father gave him to believe or not to believe in Christianity. Edward had a similar experience at home where his mother was the one who brought the family to church on occasion, but whose father did not feel strongly about religion although he was raised a Christian. Edward commented:

He [my father] was raised a Christian, but he just neglected it. It wasn't really an interest of his. So he didn't pursue it. But he shares a lot of my views now too with it. A lot of organized religion doesn't make sense to us...My dad went to church because my mom did.

For Edward, he and his father went to church because of his mother, but the indifference of Edward's father clearly influenced Edward's beliefs and vice-versa.

Both of Dillon's parents went through a questioning of religion phase when he was still living at home. Dillon remembered:

They bought books like the *Act of God* and the *Hand of God* and *How the Earth Came to Be*. And things about the universe and whatnot. And I wouldn't say they pushed it on me, but I flipped through the books, and we had discussions...It was always 'you have to make your own decisions and we're not gonna make you think one way or the other.'

Dillon and his family explored both religious belief and secularity, and he used these experiences to explore both religious and scientific explanations to questions he had. Karen and Sophie had similar relatively secular upbringings with unaffiliated parents. Sophie said that her parents never really spoke about religion, but told her that she could believe whatever she wanted. Karen mentioned that her father was forced as a child to go to church, and this influenced his decision to never make Karen go to church even though he expressed some interest in being a part of a community (religious or otherwise). Karen's parents also raised her to be accepting of others and to question. They never answered her questions about religious matters however, asking her

instead what she thought about it. Karen stated: “I guess my parents were never really explicit about their own beliefs. Like they just told me about their own backgrounds, like what they grew up doing.”

Cora had an interesting background that was different from the other 13 participants in that she grew up in a specifically *atheist* household. Although Cora grew up in an extremely conservative, predominantly Evangelical Christian community, she was raised in an upper-middle class family with two liberal, atheist university professors. For her parents, teaching Cora and her brother to question at an early age was of the utmost importance in a context where faith-based thinking and high levels of religiosity was more prevalent in the public schools and in the community. Cora remembered:

My parents raised my brother and myself with this mindset of always questioning. It was a really open household, so if we had any questions, they would really answer them...[it was] really important to my parents that my brother and I felt free to ask questions, but they said you need to think critically and you should always ask for evidence and shouldn't take things based on faith value, which is good to keep in mind no matter what you do, especially in college. If you're going to say something, you should probably have evidence to back it up.

It is important to note that Cora's parents did not force her to be an atheist. If a friend invited Cora to a Christian youth group, her parents were excited for her, telling her that she should be open to everything.

II. Pathways to Atheism: “The Spark”

The second primary theme, Pathways to Atheism, refers to the different experiences and processes participants had that precipitated a questioning phase or the direct adoption of an atheist identity. This primary theme included five subthemes. The first subtheme, “*I never really believed any of it,*” describes the trajectory of atheists who never viewed themselves as religious in their childhoods, regardless of the presence of a religious upbringing. The second subtheme,

Negative Experiences with Religion, describes participants who strayed from religion after perceiving experiences with their church or religious acquaintances as wrong, contradictory, or negative in some way. The third subtheme, *Traumatic Experience*, is where participants described negative experiences that happened to them early in life that set them on a course of questioning their religious beliefs. The fourth subtheme, *Friends*, explains the impact some of the participants' friends had in the raising of doubts regarding the participants' religious beliefs. The final subtheme, *Questioning Beliefs and Losing Religion*, is included in order to explain the step after the "spark" that many participants experienced where they questioned their beliefs. Two further sections are involved. The first, *External Questioning*, involves participants who went through a process of acquiring information about atheism and religion through seeking out information, and then making a conscious and rational decision to reject religious belief and adopt atheism. The second section, *Internal Questioning*, describes the experiences of people who still questioned their religious beliefs, but on an internal, personal level.

"I never really believed any of it"

An interesting finding from my interviews is that many participants reported never truly *believing* in God. I asked respondents to rate their religious *belief* (a separate measure from religious practice frequency) on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 denoting the most sincere and committed belief in God and in their religion. Only two respondents rated religious belief over a 5 at the most religious point in their lives. Jennifer, who only attended church occasionally and who grew up in a household where religion was rarely a topic of conversation, rated her most religious point as a 3 or 4 until she was around 13 years old. She remembered feeling indifferent about religion in general and not being sure of whether or not to believe in God. In fact, although Jennifer's parents sometimes attended church, they expressed opposition to people being extremely religious, and thus steered Jennifer away from attending youth groups as a child.

Edward rated himself as a 3 or 4 at his most religious point when he was age 4 or 5. He remembered believing Bible stories simply because he liked them. He followed with the comment: “I believed in magic and stuff as a kid. Now I believe less in magic [laughs].” When asked if he ever felt any closeness to God, James, who attended Sunday school a handful of times, responded:

[At Sunday School] I always pretended that I was praying, but I could never figure out what they were actually getting at. They always wanted me to connect with something, and I was always waiting for some voice to answer me while I’m saying stuff in my head, and I never heard anything...But it wasn’t like I believed or knew anything about scripture or took it very seriously.

Matthew commented that when he was a child, he would go through the motions of praying to God, but only when he got in trouble, saying, “God, pull me a favor. I don’t want to get in trouble today.” Matthew later stated that he never truly believed in God saying, “I never wrapped my head around it, that there was something more than what was here.” For Matthew, there existed a religious socialization in his family centered around religious practices like praying and attending church. Although Matthew participated in these practices, he could never make himself truly believe.

For all of the participants, even a minute level of religious belief did not last, almost as if religious belief was a childhood phase. Bethany, who grew up in a conservative Christian household, reaffirmed this idea of religiosity being likened to a phase that one eventually grows out of, saying:

I find it fascinating to see how these people can devote their lives to this religion. And especially since I...felt like I almost grew out of Christianity. Like it was just like this *phase* when I was little. And to see these people that don’t grow out of it [laughs]. Like these large masses of people that still believe in it is just really interesting to find out *why*. That’s what interests me. And to see what they get out of it. Because I felt like I didn’t get much out of it.

Negative Experiences with Religion

Several respondents mentioned negative experiences with members of their religious community or religious family members as a reason for beginning a questioning process of their faith. Bethany grew up in a conservative Christian family that went to church every Sunday. Bethany explained that her family got kicked out of the Catholic Church when she was about six years old because her mother did not convert to Catholicism. At the next church she attended, the pastor got fired and disowned by the community due to an affair scandal. She also cited her parent's intolerant beliefs as reasons for her questioning. She said, "As a got I little bit older, I was always pretty accepting of people from other religions. My parents weren't [laughs]. Yeah, like especially my dad. I mean, basically like 'Christian' and 'good person' were synonymous to him. And so, that part...I never really understood that..." She also said that both of her parents thought people of other religions were confused and did not know the truth. Bethany remembered being skeptical of this, saying, "How do I know that this [religion] is right, but then all these other people in the world are wrong?"

Aria explained her experiences at the Old Apostolic Lutheran Church as a child. She remembered being appalled by the treatment of women in the church, saying: "Women aren't allowed to cut their hair, or you're not allowed to watch TV. Women aren't supposed to go to school." Women also had to cover their heads with a scarf after they were confirmed in the church. Aria said that as a small child, she did not mind going to church with her grandmother, but then as she got older, she would think, "This is horrible. This is oppressive." Eventually, when she was around the ages of 10 to 14, in a small act of defiance during church services, she would pull off her headscarf if she disagreed with the pastors:

It was my own little form of protest. And so I would say there was some antagonism towards organized religion in that form for me...And I would say that questioning God was a lot easier for me because of the Old Apostolic Lutheran Church. Because I was

like, there's no way this was right. And this belief that these people have...it can't be right. So they would say things like, 'we are the true Israelites...everyone else is going to Hell. All of the Catholics are going to Hell; all of the other Lutherans are going to Hell. Definitely the Jewish people are going to Hell.' To me...maybe because the teachings were so intense...And that's where the questioning began because...you're not supposed to have friends from the world. That's what you're called if you're not in the church: 'from the world.'

Interestingly, Aria's very positive experiences with the Quakers from attending a Quaker school made her more skeptical of religion in general. Because she had the two influences: one very accepting and liberal, and one very oppressive and conservative, she opted for the critical thinking and questioning taught by the Quakers, eventually rejecting religious belief and a belief in God entirely.

Interestingly, Brian was the only participant who continued religious practice and some level (albeit very low) of religious belief into his college years. Brian attended Wednesday Bible studies in college until his sophomore year. He said that upon the first week of going to a Presbyterian church, "two things happened that sort of were the catalyst for the whole house of cards to come down." Apparently, the youth pastor at the church with whom Brian was very close was forced out of the church because of her unconventional style of teaching. Brian explained, "She was very passionate, and she was not afraid to address difficult topics. She would talk about sex and cursing in a very real and tangible way. She was sort of more in touch with the world than the head pastor of the church." Brian explained that her contract was changed to the point that her pay was cut in half, essentially forcing her to resign. In the same week, Brian also heard that one of the staff members from the church he attended in high school had been fired because he was gay. This, according to Brian was the last straw. He said, "I had come to realize that the church was fallible, and that was pretty much all it took for the entire house of cards to come down. And I just started asking questions and researching. And I read quite a bit on the topic over the course of two years from both sides."

Mark was also heavily influenced by negative experiences with religion. Mark described going to Roman Catholic mass every Sunday and attending a Catholic grade school. Mark developed reservations about the establishment of the church and power structure within the Catholic church when he got confirmed:

When we got confirmed, they were telling us that we had to bow and kiss the ring of the Bishop. And it just infuriated me! No one is better than me, in terms of that I need to kiss their ring! And why should the person be the vassal for an omnipotent creature?

Mark also described noticing a spiritual difference between himself and the other members of his church saying, "I couldn't get all spiritual and be so devout...I have a problem with super conservative beliefs."

Cora, although never having a religious belief nor growing up in a religious family, had a phase of questioning sparked by a negative experience with religion when she was in middle school. In sixth grade, Cora remembered that a classmate told her that she was going to Hell because she was not religious and her parents were atheists. Some parents of her friends in grade school also would not let her come over to their houses for the same reason. Also, during her eighth grade year, Cora had a science class where the theory of continental drift was explained. Cora remembered that the teacher described the scientific theory, but then told the class that what really happened was that "God's hands came down and separated the continents. And that's the theory just like the scientific theory." Cora explained how appalled she was about the lack of separation between church and state. She said that up until this point in her life, she was not "mature enough or had enough background knowledge to really start thinking about [atheism]." After these negative experiences with religious people however, Cora began to become very interested in the debate between religion and atheism, realizing: "I need to start standing up for this."

Traumatic Experience

Some participants cited experiencing a life-changing event that made them question their religious beliefs, and especially their belief in God, reporting that if there was a god, it did not make sense for there to be evil and suffering in the world. Bethany cited both negative experiences in the church as well as her conservative parents' intolerant views of others as reasons for her skepticism of religion. Moreover, the trauma of her parents' divorce when she was 15 essentially shattered most of her childhood religious beliefs. Bethany remembered:

I mean, a lot of stuff was changing in my life then... And since I was questioning everything and religion had been such a big part of my life, I just started questioning that too. And I mean, there was also the part where if there is a god and he's supposed to be good, then why is all this happening to me?

After the divorce of her parents, which Bethany describes as a "turmoil," Bethany's entire worldview changed. She said:

I would go to church with her [my mother]. At that point I sort of started to see... how, you know, *judgmental* they were. And the more negative aspects of it. And so, then I started to question, why do I identify with these people? And, just thinking back to all the negative experiences that I told you before about church and everything. And then I just started on my own, just researching other religions, And just figuring out... and I even talked to some of my atheist friends too... And so I guess after all of that, then I just kind of realized that I actually don't agree with this religion that I've been practicing my whole life.

Matthew also experienced trauma at an early age when his friend died. According to Matthew:

He died when I was young. And it made me think if there is somebody who is all-powerful who can save anybody, who can kill any person, why would He let us die? And it was that point I was like, there must not be anything or, I mean, if He's better than us, He [God] wouldn't let people die. So that was the big revelation.

For both Bethany and Matthew, life-changing experiences made them question the beliefs with which they had been raised. For Bethany, the divorce of her parents made her begin to question

everything she had ever been taught, while for Matthew, the death of his friend seemed to be more of an affirmation of his suspicions that there was no God.

Friends

For some participants, friends in school were the most instrumental in setting a path of questioning for the participants. Julie grew up in a single-parent household and was very involved in the church community (going to Sunday school every Sunday), although she said her beliefs in God and Christianity were mainly out of fear of going to Hell. In fifth grade, she stopped going to Sunday school because her best friend also stopped going. Julie commented:

It was a motivation between us two. It was almost like a competition. Like who is more Christian than the other. So that was like some of the motivation I had to go. And as soon as her interests turned, mine started to as well, and I decided not to keep up on it... There for a while, my mom would make me go to church on Easter, with my grandma and everything, and I was like, 'this is stupid. I don't want to hear anything about this.' Like yes, they're good messages, but I just felt that they were...misinformed.

After she stopped going to church, Julie entered a "rebellious phase" when she was 12 and 13, listening to death metal and being "gothic." She mentioned that being in the gothic crowd implied being a Satanist, which she did not want to identify with, saying:

Just because I don't like what Christianity teaches doesn't mean I have to go to the polar opposite...there could be a common ground. And that's when I discovered atheism...and then, yeah, science kind of stepped in...atheism just is more appealing for me. I guess the main appeal was I wasn't gonna get judged for not believing in salvation...or not believing in the devil as well.

For Julie, atheism served as the "middle ground" between her religious upbringing and her social group who were Satanists. For Julie, there did not seem to be a questioning phase that followed her rejection of Christianity and Satanism, but rather an adoption of atheism and the contentment that came with getting her questions answered with science.

Although Mark was skeptical about some of the more traditional and conservative practices in his Roman Catholic church, he said that up until high school, he was still a devout

Catholic (though with a relatively weak belief in God) and “would have defended Catholicism.”

It was not until one of Mark’s friends began introducing him to new ideas around his sophomore year of high school that Mark began questioning his beliefs. Mark explained:

My friend, my good friend now, who is a year older than me, started talking a lot. And he’s not atheist at all, but he has some crazy beliefs. Always changing his mind...I always loved reading. I knew all about these different things...so he would tell me all these things, and I would look into them... all this spiritual science, all this pseudoscience... And then sort of day-by-day, I’d read different sources. So, it didn’t take me long to get rid of Christianity, to say I’m no longer Catholic, but it took me a little bit longer to come to myself and be like, ‘Alright, yeah, I believe I’m an atheist. I *am* an atheist.’

Mark went on to explain that although his friend was never an atheist, his strange views about conspiracy theories, eastern religion, Buddhism, and so on, made Mark open to beliefs other than the ones with which he had been raised. The friend being interested in far-fetched beliefs had a large impact on Mark allowing himself to begin the questioning process of his own religion, which eventually led him to become an atheist.

Questioning Beliefs and Losing Religion

Many of the participants reported numerous influences in their final adoption of an atheist identity. Never truly believing in God or religion, having negative experiences with religion or religious people, experiencing a traumatic event, and being influenced by friends all were common threads that were seen among my participants.¹² After experiencing certain events, some participants were “sparked” into a questioning phase (although some went straight from the

¹² It is worth noting that several of the participants (Cora, Sophie, and Karen) adopted an atheist identity less through a process, but more as a “default” status. Cora, who never had any level of religious belief nor a religious upbringing, actively adopted and reinforced her atheist background and identity, while Sophie and Karen described never being able to *make* themselves believe. Karen said: “just learning about other religious traditions, none of them really seem super compelling to me. And maybe I’ll find on that seems really legitimate to me, but it’s just like, none of them seem compelling for the questions that I have.” Sophie had a very similar comment saying: “So far, since I haven’t run into any religions that I do believe in, for the most part, I’m an atheist.”

“spark” to adopting atheism without a questioning phase) that was described just briefly in some of the quotations above. For many, this questioning period involved reading a variety of sources about God and religious belief as well as atheism. Not all participants went through an externally visible questioning phase of researching religion or irreligion, but it certainly was a common trend. Another trend among people who questioned themselves was a less visible and more internal personal questioning that led to the adoption of an atheist identity.

External Questioning

Of the 14 participants, Brian underwent perhaps the most dramatic questioning phase. After his youth leader was fired for encouraging questioning attitudes from her youth group and a staff member from Brian’s childhood church was fired for being gay, Brian repeated several times that the “whole house of cards came down.” He said that after these two events occurred during his sophomore year of college, he began reading literature from “both sides,” and did so for two years. Brian explained:

I read a lot of Peter Kreeft, the Christian apologist. I read basically every book by Lee Strobel, who is a converted- a reconverted atheist, I suppose you would say. And I read C.S. Lewis, but I also read Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens. And I just came to realize that they [the atheists] had much more contact with reality. They had a lot more tangible arguments. I was watching debates on YouTube and listening to Podcasts on both sides, so I just kind of mainlined information into my head for about two years. And by the end of it, I was beyond convinced....after a while it was like reading the same book over and over again, hearing the same arguments that had been put to bed over and over again...I guess that was sort of the deconversion story in a nutshell.

Brian’s questioning and research period was very long, and through a highly methodical process, he rejected religion and God and adopted an atheist identity by the time he was a junior in college.

Although Bethany described a period of questioning beliefs after her parents’ divorce when she was 15, she did not fully adopt an atheist identity until her freshman year of college. She explained that she began actively gathering information that she had previously ignored on a

variety of topics including other religious beliefs and atheism. She describes beginning a process of researching other religions and talking to some of her friends who were atheists just to understand their points of view on religion and Christianity in general. She also remembered having conversations with her brother who adopted an atheist identity as well (interestingly, the two of them came to the same conclusions independently of one another). Upon entering college, Bethany took a philosophy class that presented various arguments for and against the existence of God. This sparked further questioning where Bethany began to read more articles for and against God and became convinced with “all the evidence against God” that there was no God.

Aria began questioning her religious beliefs as young as fourth grade, sparked by her experiences in the Old Apostolic Lutheran Church. The church’s intolerant, rigid beliefs were in direct conflict with the very accepting views of the Quaker school that taught Aria to be a critical thinker and that the “truths that people tell you aren’t necessarily ultimately truth.” Aria’s outward questioning and dissidence in the church was demonstrated through her open form of protest where she would pull off her headscarf in the middle of a church service. Aria later came to reject all of the beliefs with which she had been brought up at the Old Apostolic Lutheran Church and went a step further to reject a belief in God entirely.

During her questioning period when she was 12 or 13, Julie said that she began to realize a trend that led to her adoption of atheism. She remembered studying medieval times and noticing that whenever people could not explain something like a drought, they would often attribute the event to an act of God. Julie remembered realizing that religion and God were a “theory for everything” that people did not understand or that they could not explain. Julie came to reject religious explanations for events and began to adopt atheism and scientific reasoning as better explanations for natural events and her questions.

Internal Questioning

A common trend among people who were less personally religious growing up but who accepted a “normative” belief in God, was undergoing a less outwardly visible questioning phase where they tended to simply question the normative belief they had and eventually reject it without doing heavy research, protesting against religion, or seeking out other atheists. James was a good example of this trajectory. He said that although his beliefs were in line with atheism since he was in middle school, he did not describe himself as an atheist until the very end of high school or the beginning of college. James said that he was in middle school when he began to think that the things he had learned about religion in Sunday school and from his religious friends were “kind of silly.” James said that he “rationally” came to the conclusion that there was no God because that seemed to be the most logical conclusion to him.

Danielle also described a type of personal questioning. She said that she first became aware of atheism when she stayed with a friend whose entire family was atheist. That was the first time Danielle came across the idea that she did not *have* to believe in anything. Around eighth grade, Danielle solidified her identity as an atheist after her experiences of questioning whether or not there truly was a higher being. For Danielle, a failure to experience God served as a catalyst for her rejection of a religious belief. She remembered trying to pray, nothing happening, and subsequently concluding that God did not exist.

Jennifer experienced oscillation between religious and irreligious beliefs as a child, but described a point in high school when she concluded that there was no God. She admitted that she could not identify exactly what triggered this revelation. She went to a youth group with some of her Mormon and Christian friends and said: “Church just started giving me the heebie-jeebies. I just was really uncomfortable there, just because I felt like they were just kind of lying to me. People were just up at the pulpit, just lying.” She said that she became very interested in

science in high school, and that the more she learned about evolution, the more it made her feel like the world did not need a god. Jennifer stated: “There’s so much science and so many things we know about the world, and so much beauty just in nature and biology and physics, and...how this world works, that I didn’t feel like there needed to be a god.” She also took a high school class called the Theory of Knowledge, which emphasized theories of how humans know what they know. In the class, Jennifer described feeling very negatively about religion when she learned about “all the oppressive things that happened out of religion” in this specific class. All of these factors culminated, as Jennifer stated, “I think all those things: the science, the growing up, some of the atheist friends, not liking church...it all kind of pushed [me]...it was a very gradual thing for me to go like, ‘maybe [there is a god]’ to ‘no, there is *no* God.’ ”

III. Experiences with an Atheist Identity

The third primary theme, Experiences with an Atheist Identity, encompasses the lived experiences of college atheists after they adopted their atheist identity. This primary theme is further divided into the subthemes: *Atheism Personally Defined*, *Atheist Identity Salience*, and *Perceptions of Stigma*. In the first subtheme, *Atheism Personally Defined*, participants expand on their own personal definitions of what it means for them to be an atheist. The second subtheme, *Atheist Identity Salience*, constitutes the importance of atheism to the participants’ identities. The third subtheme, *Perceptions of Stigma*, covers the participants’ awareness of a stigma surrounding their atheist identity, if any, and how accepted participants felt as they navigate the social world as an atheist. The last two sections: *Coping with Stigma: Redefining Friend Groups and Controlling Information* and *Coping with Stigma: Redefining Morality* describe the two main ways that college atheists cope with a sometimes unaccepting society, how they are able to find accepting friend groups, and how they define (or redefine) themselves as moral people who are undeserving of a cultural stigma.

Atheism Personally Defined

When defining what atheism meant in terms of a personal definition, most participants mentioned that atheism at its most basic level is a lack of a belief in God. Most respondents also added that it is a rejection of any religion. James stated simply: “At its most basic level, I think it [atheism] means that you don’t believe that there is a god. And I think that can mean different things to different people, but I think at its base level, that’s what it is.” Bethany stated: “I think to be an atheist is to not practice any religion. To not identify with any religion. And to not believe in any sort of god or other supernatural being.” Danielle’s definition was: “I don’t believe that there is a higher power or a man in the sky or whatever.” She also added, “But, I don’t judge anyone who believes that.” Aria also added this sentiment of a non-judgmental, personal belief to her definition of atheism, echoing that she does not believe in God, but adding that she does not feel compelled to tell people about this belief or to force it on other people. Several participants added this caveat of not wanting to push their atheism onto other people, mainly because they felt resentful of religious people who try to push their beliefs.

Some respondents had more involved and personal answers of what atheism meant to them based on science or other reasoning outside of religion. Jennifer, an evolutionary biology and secondary science education major responded:

I think being an atheist means not believing in any higher being. That, like what you see on earth is what you get. There’s nothing after and there’s nothing before. You’re not here for a specific reason. There’s no one up there who has a plan for you and has a plan for the world. The world just...it is...I think because I’m a scientist, I very much believe in just the natural way of things. When you die, maggots eat ‘ya! You decompose [laughs]. And I think atheism has become this thing where you’re kind of combative against people who are religious, and I don’t necessarily agree with that...I really try not to be combative.

To Edward, morality outside of religion informed his definition of atheism:

It’s to write your own moral code. Like the definition of atheism is to be, like if I were to look it up, it would be to abandon God. But to me, it’s to abandon the Bible and to write

your own moral codes and write your own beliefs and philosophies. A lot of it has to be based on what you see and what you learn from the world...[to] start from square one and start writing everything over from the beginning.

For Edward, atheism and adopting an atheist identity was very much about reinventing himself and the way he viewed morality and the world. His analogy of “starting from square one” implied that his atheism made him reevaluate everything he thought he knew about the world from a more critical, scientific standpoint than the religious, faith-based philosophies with which he had grown up.

Most participants also added something about the rejection of religion in general and that atheism implies critical thinking to their definitions of atheism. Cora stated that atheism is “not believing in a god or any gods...it’s looking at anything with a critical eye. So, for me, I don’t take things based on faith value; I want to know why something is this way. I love to ask questions...” Cora also made an interesting point that atheists and religious people are not as different as they may seem, saying atheists are defined based on what they do not believe in, but that “any religious person could be considered an atheist because...the only god they do accept is their own, and so in any other religion, they’d be considered an atheist...I believe in one less god than they do, which doesn’t separate us by much, but they don’t like to hear that.”

Notably, two participants did not even mention a lack of belief in a god as a defining feature of atheism. Sophie stated: “I think for me, it means just keeping an open mind. Just not believing in anything that comes by, but also really deeply thinking about anyone’s opinions. Yeah, bottom line, keeping an open mind.” Julie’s definition was very similar: “To be an atheist to me is to definitely accept everyone’s religions...Also what atheism means for me is [to] educate yourself on all other religions and obviously science as well. So to me, atheism is just learning as much as you can about everything.” These were two interesting responses because instead of citing a lack of a belief in God, the two women described atheism as encompassing

characteristics such as acceptance, open-mindedness, knowledge, and knowledge of other religions as defining features of atheism. These specific features are undoubtedly characteristics of many religious people, but it was interesting that these two respondents saw them as stereotypical of atheists. Brian also underlined the stereotype of atheists as open-minded and scientific saying: “I find that if somebody is an atheist, there’s a high likelihood that I will find them an interesting person because chances are, they are intellectually honest and intellectually curious.” This was an interesting finding indicating that atheists themselves make generalizations and have stereotypes about other atheists. These included assuming that all atheists develop this identity through reason, curiosity, critical thinking, and so on, and that the antithesis to atheism is accepting any belief based on faith, which is a common stereotype of religious people held by some atheists.

Atheist Identity Salience

The importance of atheism as an identity or as part of participants’ identities varied greatly. In order to get an idea of how important an atheist identity was to participants, I asked each one to rate the importance of atheism to their identity on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all important and 10 being the most important. If respondents did not feel that a scale captured their feelings about their atheist identity importance, I allowed them to explain it to me differently. A majority of the respondents (10 of the 14) rated atheism as being a very important part of their identity with ratings of 7 or higher (or saying that it was “important” or “very important”). Four of the participants rated the salience of their atheism between 3 and 4 (or “not important”). These responses will be expanded upon in the two following sections.

Atheist Identity as “Very Important”

Jennifer rated atheism as a salient part of her identity as a 10, saying:

I think it's very important to me in the sense that I think about it a lot, and it's a big part of my life, just because I spend so much time doing science, and I like that I don't have to reconcile the scientific part of myself with a religious side because I don't have one... And I think it's made me more confident in some ways in how I move about the world just because once you realize that you're on your own, in a certain sense, I think you can be very purposeful and very... confident in how you make decisions.

Cora similarly rated atheism as very important to her identity (8-9), also saying that with an atheist belief, she does not have to reconcile science and religion. Cora stated: "I feel like if I did have beliefs that were more on faith, it would be harder for me, especially in the sciences. So, I think that having that evidence-based kind of belief system or acceptance has really helped me... so I think that's why it's really important to me."

Edward rated his atheist identity as an 8, saying it "grounds a lot of the decisions I make. And I don't go around making decisions like 'what would an atheist do?' I just have written my moral code along the lines of who I am, and who I am also happens to be along the lines of being an atheist."

James based his answer on of an idea of rationality, rating his atheism as a 7 (out of 10) in importance to his identity. He said that he did not feel strongly enough about his atheism to join an activist group (which is what he would consider to be a 10), but he stated:

I also think that a lot of who I am is based on my idea of rationality and thinking about things in a certain rational way. And I think that's a big part of it is how you see yourself in relation to the rest of the world and other people... So I'd say atheism is a topic that really does a good job of representing how I think about the world.

Mark also mentioned rationality in his description of atheism as being "very important" to his identity. He described wanting to gather knowledge and information, saying, "atheism is huge for me because I'm rational and, you know, this is just part of who I am. Huge. Huge part of who I am."

In contrast to his peers who answered that their atheism was very important to them, Brian rated his atheism as a 2 in importance to his identity, but rated his *skepticism* as a 10 saying:

That's the main way I interact with the world. It just depends as what you mean by atheism. So atheism in a vacuum is not extraordinarily important to me. I just happen to think it's true. I also happen to think fairies and unicorns don't exist. I'm exactly as passionate and as firm in my beliefs against fairies, leprechauns, and the tooth fairy as I am against Yahweh. If you take atheism as a stand-in for skepticism and having a realistic outlook, then it's extraordinarily important.

This reveals an important distinction that not all atheists see their *nonbelief* as extremely important, but that their certain way of thinking about life (that one could define as skepticism, atheism, humanism, freethinking, and so on) simply differs from the norm of religious belief or faith. In this sense, semantics mattered for the participants, but the most important concept was establishing that their identity and worldview are informed by science, reasoning, and so on, rather than a non-belief in God.

Atheist Identity as "Not Very Important"

Of the participants that rated their atheism as not an important part of their identity, most stated that the lack of importance was due to an overall lack of importance of religion as a topic in their lives. For Karen, her atheism is not important because she said that she never really thinks about it, saying: "It's just not really a big part of my life. It's like, why would I make a non-belief a big part of my life? It seems counterintuitive." For Aria, it is very important that people do not see her as an Old Apostolic Lutheran, but she stated that it is not at all important that people know she is an atheist because it is not a part of her "core identity." Aria explained, "It's just, you know, just one of my beliefs. Like my political beliefs or anything like that."

Dillon said that he does not define himself in relation to other people's religious beliefs and that

he is not influenced by others' ideologies. He stated that atheism too is very low in importance to his identity.

Perception of Stigma

Just as there were variations in how the atheist students defined atheism when referencing their own specific beliefs, there were variations of how accepted people felt in society as atheists. Several people experienced varying degrees of unacceptance from individuals and from society in general due to the general stigmas that surround an atheist identity. This section will discuss the experiences of individuals encountering various forms of acceptance and unacceptance from their family, friends, and society and will later explain the ways that individuals coped with perceived stigma.

In order to understand how participants navigate the world with a minority identity and if they perceive any stigma as attached to this identity, I asked a variety of questions in order to gain an understanding of how accepted these people felt as atheists by other individuals as well as society. The concept of acceptance was a way to operationalize perceived stigma with the idea being that levels of perceived unacceptance would translate to feelings of being stigmatized. I did not ask a direct question if participants felt that their identity as an atheist was stigmatized because I wanted to allow them to explain their experiences rather than run the risk of projecting an idea onto them that they might not experience. All participants that were interviewed had informed their parents of their identities and many of their friends. Many individuals cited Boulder or the university campus as overall accepting settings, but said that they might feel unaccepted if they lived in different areas.

When asked if she felt accepted by society as an atheist, Cora answered: "I would say more and more. I think too though, as within college and then in graduate school, the people are more liberal....I think liberals generally are more open-minded, so especially being in Boulder, it

has not been hard for me to say I'm an atheist..." She explained that in the city in which she grew up, which was predominantly conservative and Evangelical Christian, she felt less accepted since she lost friends because she had different religious beliefs. Aria also mentioned academia as a very accepting place for atheists. Although she cited feeling like she had to defend her atheist identity around her boyfriend's religious family and around her grandmother who would prefer that she went to church, Aria said that she generally feels accepted by the academic community and by society as a whole.

When asked about how accepted she felt by society and individuals, Karen stated that she felt as if the atheist part of her identity is often under attack by individuals and society because "you see stuff that's like, 'you can't have morals without a religious background.'" Although Karen said she feels comfortable with her atheist identity and has told her parents, she still has not told her grandparents, saying that they would be "upset" and "nothing really good would come out of bringing it up." Otherwise, Karen had a positive overall feeling about the level of societal acceptance, saying that she feels accepted and especially among younger people. This may also be because Karen does not choose to talk about her nonbelief, saying that it is not a large part of her life. Dillon also felt accepted in general by his family and society as an atheist, but then added that he also does not talk about religion on a daily basis anyway. He also mentioned that he might feel differently outside the college environment, saying "if you go out into society and you start talking with elders or your other cohort within your work environment, if your beliefs don't match up with the majority of the beliefs, you might be discriminated against. I have not personally had that experience, but I'd imagine it's out there."

Unfortunately, some participants did feel some level of fallout upon informing their family members of their rejection of religion and adoption of atheism. Bethany said that her mom was "a little bit sad that I had adopted that [atheism]. Just because she had spent so much

time trying to raise me as a Christian.” She also does not have contact with her father, but said that he would likely be very unaccepting of her new identity. Apart from her parents, Bethany felt generally accepted by society, especially in Boulder. She added a disclaimer that she had not identified as an atheist for long, implying that she may feel differently as she spends more time in society with this particular identity.

Jennifer also said that her mom was “bummed out” upon finding out about Jennifer’s atheism although her father was fully supportive. She also mentioned that her religious grandmother does not know because Jennifer has simply avoided opening up “that can of worms.” It seemed as if Jennifer felt more accepted as an atheist in areas and situations outside of her family where there remained some uncomfortable feelings surrounding her identity. She mentioned Boulder as a supportive context, saying, “Boulder is a very good place to be an atheist. I think it’s almost like a popular thing. It’s more common in some ways than being religious.” Jennifer also mentioned the university setting as largely accepting and especially in her niche of an evolutionary biology lab which according to her, is a sort of atheist microcosm where most scientists in the lab are openly atheist.

James reported feeling accepted as an atheist by his father, who he suspects is also an atheist, but feels slightly different about his mother, saying: “My mom, I don’t think really completely believes that I am [an atheist]. Although I think she’s fine with me believing whatever I want to. But I think she’s in denial of what I really am.” James acknowledges his identity as stigmatized, but said that he is able to get by because religion does not come up in routine conversations. He commented: “I don’t feel like it’s [the atheist identity] under attack on a daily basis because I don’t think it really comes up, but I think that’s because it’s a stigmatized topic...” James mentioned a fear of discrimination by potential employers based on his atheist identity, saying that he keeps this information off of social media pages like Facebook.

Mark also had similar experiences to James, as his parents seemed to be in denial over his atheist identity. Mark seemed to have the most difficulty of all the participants interviewed informing his Roman Catholic family of his atheist identity. He said that he felt attacked by his parents and his whole family. When he first came out to his parents as an atheist, they forced him to continue attending church, saying: “You still live in our house.” Mark responded by writing an essay to them about his beliefs. Eventually they stopped making him go to church, and his father eventually accepted him. However, his mother was apparently “worse. Much, much worse.” Mark stated, “My mom still has this hope that I’ll turn the corner, and one day I’m just going to show up at the door and be like ‘I’m Catholic again!’ I don’t know. I think it’s a little far-fetched, but it’s alright. Whatever helps them sleep at night [laughs].” Although Mark has told many of his cousins and other family members about his atheism, he has not told his grandparents saying, “I love them too much.” Mark’s aunt reacted poorly to his transition to atheism, questioning the possibility of morality without a belief in God. He stated, “They [atheists] are mistrusted. They are... Apparently no one believes that anyone can have their own moral compass. It’s too bad.” He explained that his aunt “doesn’t understand how people can be moral without religion. Greatly upsetting. Because then it makes her [think] that humans must be so weak-minded that they can only act rightly out of fear... I think we should be able to act right out of what’s good inside of us.” On a societal level, Mark feels that he could never come out publicly as an atheist if he wanted to run for public office, saying: “I would feel entirely more accepted in Europe. I feel like if I ever did something major and came out as atheist, there would just be huge backlash... if I did that in America. One hundred percent.”

Matthew said that his mother wished that he were still a Christian, although this fact is not a point of contention in their household. He also did not tell his grandparents about his identity “out of respect.” Matthew said that he was sure his grandparents would still love him if

they knew, but that they would undoubtedly “prefer” that he was a Christian. Matthew raised this idea of “preference” by describing how he does not feel completely accepted in society as an atheist. He explained, “Does society wish I wasn’t an atheist? Completely. I believe they [society] wished that I believed in some religion....One of the things is that...certain [political] parties would never accept me for being an atheist. So while society will accept that I’m an atheist...they will always try to change [me].”

Brian mirrored this idea of his family “preferring” that he was not an atheist. His whole family is aware of his atheism and Brian said they still love him saying: “It’s not like they don’t show me the same affection that they show the other cousins. It’s just sort of like passive aggressive. It’s sort of like ‘I’d really prefer if you weren’t an atheist, but I still love you.’ ” These examples show that although many participants do not experience dramatic consequences for their atheism such as being disowned as a family member, there is still a discomfort that accompanies an atheist identity that many respondents expressed.

Coping with Stigma: Redefining Friend Groups and Controlling Information

Many atheists interviewed coped with stigma by surrounding themselves with like-minded people, often other atheists. Cora mentioned that most of her friends are liberal, and her best friends are not religious. Aria too found herself in friend groups with less religious individuals. She said that she surrounds herself with other atheists as friends in order to avoid constant conflict: “I choose to surround myself with people—because I can’t get into debates all the time about stuff. I can’t debate about feminism. I can’t debate about atheism. It would be so draining. So, my friends are all people who feel similarly, I’d say. None of them go to church.”

Many participants coped with anticipated stigma by tightly controlling information about their identities to acquaintances to avoid judgment and discrimination. Cora mentioned that as far as romantic interests are concerned, she would avoid telling a person early in the relationship that

she is an atheist. She also took any information off of Facebook concerning her atheist identity saying:

I did before have like 'Pastafarian' and 'Liberal Socialist,' and now I'm making it more of a professional....I don't have those on there because I don't want...that to be the first thing that people see and already start judging me. And when I'm applying for things...even in a liberal society, I do think I don't want somebody to, you know, throw me out of a pool [of job candidates] or something because I am an atheist...and I'm fearful that if there is someone who is Evangelical and looks down upon atheists, that if they just see 'atheist' somehow on Facebook, that I'd been thrown out. You know, I wouldn't want that, and I think that could happen...I wish it didn't have to be that way. I'm proud to be a freethinker.

Jennifer said that the people she is very close to know she is an atheist, but she added that her atheist identity is "not something I advertise, just 'cause while I'm not ashamed of it in any way...it's not something I advertise. I don't know if it's because I'm a private person or what...I don't know."

James commented that he consciously filters himself around certain groups of people, saying, "I guess there's certain situations where I feel it...would be under attack if I brought it up, and that's why I'd be nervous to bring it up in certain situations like around certain...I guess family members or other people...that I knew to be religious." James, like many of his other atheist peers interviewed, said that his closest friends are also atheists.

Dillon cited a specific experience where he had to control information for fear of being seen differently by his friends (he has a diverse friend group in terms of religious beliefs.):

I have a friend group [that] is religious, and I've been told by other people not to bring it up or talk about my identity...because 'they'll think about you differently and might treat you... or hold grudges' or something like that. So I've held my tongue for a few people. But it hasn't come up naturally. I haven't held my tongue.

For Dillon, it seemed that while the threat of fallout from the discovery of his atheist identity by some of his friends finding out about his atheism has caused him to be cautious of what he says,

but at the same time, it is possible that religion is not an important enough topic for him to feel truly fearful of being cast out from his friend group.

Coping with Stigma: Redefining Morality

Another method of coping with stigma associated with an atheist identity was defining or redefining morality outside of religion. A final important aspect to all interviews was the question of morality. All participants were very firm on the fact that they were moral humans, and they were moral without God. Many described a nuanced view of morality as something that had to be constantly negotiated and not black-and-white. Some participants also saw morality as being very different from a religious person's morality, while others saw it as being similar due to a shared social construction of morality by society as a whole.

Actively Rejecting a Divine Morality

Brian actively rejected any idea of a morality based in religion, and specifically Christianity. He said:

I think the Bible is an awful source of morality. There's things advocated in that book that are cringe-worthy. I mean, stoning to death for minor offenses [like] picking up logs on a Sunday... There's awful morality in the Bible. And it's a very slippery slope when you have dogmatically imposed morality. Basically you have to believe the tenets of this book.

Brian articulated his own ideas of morality, explaining the nuances of moral relativism, non-religious objective morality, and other theories, ultimately saying that he is still negotiating his own ideas of where morality originates for humans. He made an interesting point, saying:

I think morality is basically just a subset of human behavior and how we interact with other people, and I think that because it's been given this name and this special status, we've sort of lost sight of the fact that it is just, you know, the way humans interact with one another and there's nothing special or other-worldly about that. It's just human behavior. It falls into the same category as dietary habits, which no one would say there's a god-given diet.

Brian, interestingly, also rejected a morality deriving from atheism saying: “My moral system is not atheism and my intellectual system is not atheism. It’s [just] a consequence or conclusion that I’ve reached.”

Similarly, Jennifer thought that morality derived outside of religion is different from morality based on religious texts or tenets, saying:

I think in some ways, atheists have a very different morality. Or they come by their morality from a very different standpoint from religious people. I think sometimes religious people get stuck on this crutch of like, ‘well I did something bad, but if I go pray about it later, it’s ok.’ Coming from an atheist perspective, I believe you get one shot. Like there is no afterlife where you can have more time to live or you can make better choices. And I think your morality comes from wanting to be a good person and wanting to be nice to the people around you rather than trying to please some higher being or get to some higher place when you die.

Bethany also perceived morals as being possible without religion, and even implied that religion and morals should actually be separate, saying:

Your morals should not be defined by your [religious] beliefs. I think those are two separate things. And that your morals are, you know, if you’re an honest person, if you help others, if you are loyal and trustworthy, and everything like that. And that it *can* go along with your religion, but it does *not* have to.

Through this statement, Bethany posits herself as a moral human and also acknowledges that religion and morality can absolutely be compatible, but that they do not require each other.

Society as a Source of Morality

Several participants defined morality as coming from socialization and societal norms, and therefore concluded that morality exists as a socially constructed fact existing independently of religion. Aria emphasized this point saying: “Religious morals are socially constructed as well as the morals that guide the rest of society, so we can all easily agree that like, you know, harming someone is wrong.” In this way, Aria argued that because morals and norms are socially constructed regardless of whether they are constructed within a religion or not, all people in a society share these basic morals. James had a similar response, saying that morality is “based on

both human nature and society's norms" and thus, "people in general are going to share a lot of what they see to be moral just based on what they grow up with regardless of what their religion is, necessarily." James continued that he believed in a biological reason for morality, saying:

I think certain things like not killing people- that's hardwired into your genes is to feel that way and to be repulsed by certain things. And I think that's kind of where a lot of religious people go wrong is they see that morals are derived from some book...but I see that as more of a human trait than anything.

Mark also thought of morality as an ingrained human trait saying:

There is morality. There's something our consciousness inside of us knows what decision [to make]. It knows the consequences. We're very smart people. All of us...we have an ability to know. Do I think that there is an intrinsic...right and wrong in the universe? No. I don't. I don't think that there's a black and white...

Through articulating their own senses of morality and sources of morality, the participants coped with stigma attached to their identity as atheists and the stereotype that atheists do not have a sense of morality. Through negotiating personal theories of morality derived outside of religion, participants were able to conceptualize themselves as moral beings in order to contradict negative attitudes toward them held by family members, friends, and society. Some atheists even implied that morals that came from religious texts and beliefs were actually morally flawed and that it benefited individuals to look outside religion in order to be truly moral. In these ways, atheists were able to posit themselves as altruistic, moral beings while asserting their identity as atheists.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Atheists have historically been an invisible “religious” minority not only in society but in the field of sociology and within the subfield of the sociology of religion. However, the body of literature that documents the lived experiences of atheists and the different pathways to an atheist identity has expanded in recent years, including empirical studies on college atheists (see Bowman and Small 2010; Siner 2007; Nash 2010), the identity formation of atheists involved in atheist organizations (see Smith 2010; LeDrew 2013), and the collective identity work and stigma coping mechanisms atheists employ (Smith 2013). As existing studies have had a tendency to focus on group identities or to be comparative (comparing atheist identity formation to religious identity formation), this thesis research fills a gap in the extant research by placing the individual college atheist as the focal point in his or her own right. Due to their more private nature outside of a group context, individual processes of atheist identity formation and experiences with an atheist identity are rarely captured and are thus my main contribution to the extant literature. My findings both corroborate and contradict some of the existing literature in this field, indicating the need for further research on college atheists. In this chapter, I discuss the most prominent findings of my study and how they relate to or can be added to the existing literature.

Study Limitations

Although this research fills a gap in the missing literature on atheist identities by focusing specifically on a college population, there are several limitations of this study that should be considered. First, the setting in which the study was conducted seemed to be a supportive context in which most students felt comfortable with their atheist identities. As mentioned previously, the city in which the study took place is highly affluent, liberal, and educated. It also has a very

low rate of religiosity. These contextual factors likely have a reciprocal relationship with the types of people who choose to study at the University of Colorado. A liberal university is likely to attract liberal students who in turn, influence the culture of the city. College students in Boulder also tend to be more privileged in terms of life chances and affluence, which could also bias results. Further, many of my participants cited feeling a high rate of acceptance in Boulder, but stated that they may feel otherwise if they lived in a different city, in the South for example. Further, the methods are limited by the fact that interviews have their own specific way of explaining the social world through a person's perspective at one point in time. Responses to questions may vary based on the audience of the informant, the informant's state of mind, and other external factors. A final limitation to this study is that respondents who were raised in a religious household were all raised in Christian households. Experiences with adopting an atheist identity after rejecting a religion other than Christianity may be an area that could be studied further. Future research should include Jewish, Muslim, and other religiously influenced college students.

Despite these limitations, my study provides an unprecedented exploration of the process by which college students identify as atheists and their experiences with atheism. The findings contribute to the extant research on atheism and on college students.

I. Backgrounds

As suggested by Hunsberger (2000), although many of the atheists that I interviewed came from religious homes, there was a high incidence of at least one parent showing a level of relative disinterest in the emphasis of religion in the lives of respondents. This tended to be the father figure who might acquiesce to the mother's desire to attend church. Many of these "acquiescing" parental figures would eventually stop making the child go to church if resistance was perceived, or as seen in Edward's, Dillon's, and Matthew's cases, family church attendance

was simply discontinued. This reflects the findings of LeDrew who both suggests that children growing up in less religious homes may receive more of a secular socialization, and that some participants go through a “discovery” process of their atheist identity rather than a deconversion from a high level of religious belief (2013:8).

This is not to suggest that even in more secular homes, respondents were not expected to believe in *something*, rather, the desire of parents for their children to choose to believe was very high. Some parents allowed their child to explore other religions and find their own way, but this freedom was allowed with the expectation that respondents would settle on a religious belief. Indeed, many participants felt this pressure believe in something, with most defaulting to Christianity (some in belief and practice, and some only in practice) because it was common in their communities and peer groups, because they celebrated Christmas, and so on. This suggests the extent to which Christianity saturates the culture of the United States. Adopting Christianity “by default” even among participants raised in relatively secular homes is consistent with the findings of Smith (2010:7). In terms of religious practice, levels were fairly high among my participants when they were children. This was due to the influence of parents (and often, grandparents) who required church attendance for practical reasons or as being a member of the family as well as the presence of friends and a social life centered in the church community.

II. Pathways to Atheism

A very important part of adopting an atheist identity was a questioning period as reported by many of my participants raised in a Christian household or who reported having some level of belief in God.¹³ In contrast to previous findings that many atheists went through this phase upon entering college (Smith 2010; LeDrew 2013), almost all of my participants experienced this

¹³For a complete list of the participants and their childhood religious beliefs, denominations, and so on, see Appendix D.

questioning phase sometime before college, most commonly in middle school and high school. All but three participants (Bethany, James, and Brian) declared themselves atheist before entering college. This is an important finding that contradicts the stereotype of college as an institutional moment for identity change, leading one to believe that as Regnerus and Uecker pointed out, many atheists are already on the track to adopting this identity before attending a university (2007:3). However, it is clear that in some cases, college does play a role in crystallizing an atheist identity. This could be through classes where students are encouraged to question their beliefs (such as the philosophy class that Bethany took her freshman year) or perhaps through participants being in a supportive normative context away from their homes where their atheist identity may not have been as accepted by their families. Many respondents cited Boulder and the academic community at the University of Colorado as being generally accepting places for atheists. Coming into contact with other atheists as roommates and as classmates may play a role in allowing a “dormant” atheist identity to emerge and become formally adopted while in college even if the person was already questioning their beliefs and had beliefs that were in line with atheism (such as James).

The background effects of participants and the role of college as a force that crystallizes atheist identities rather than an institution that creates them, indicates that more research needs to be done on atheist identities throughout the life-course. As suggested by Schweitzer (2004), people may cycle back to religious practice after exiting the period in their lives associated with exploration and experimentation. However, Schweitzer’s findings seem to pertain more to religious *practice* that may be temporarily abandoned during adolescence and college years, while my results suggest an abandonment in religious *beliefs*. In order to gain a better understanding of atheism throughout the life-course, more longitudinal studies of atheists who reject religious *belief* and not just *practice* would add to the conversation being developed by

scholars studying atheist identity formation in adolescents and youth (such as Schweitzer 2004; Regnerus and Uecker 2007; Hunsberger 2000).

III. Experiences with an Atheist Identity

As expected, most atheists interviewed had a conception of their own atheism as being defined as a lack of a belief in a higher power. However, there were some interesting themes that emerged where participants often added ideas to their definitions of atheism like stereotypes of atheists as knowledgeable about other religions, open-minded, and critical thinkers. This was an interesting theme that presented itself that raised the idea of atheists having stereotypes of other atheists. It is interesting to note that all of the stereotypes described were positive. This may be in response to commonly negative stereotyping of atheists by some religious people, and may in itself be a coping mechanism on the part of atheists. It may be a way to connect with people who share their “dis-belief” and thereby creates an “us” versus “them” situation where all atheists are seen as fellow stigma-bearers, as Goffman might say (1968). The experiences of stigma will be discussed in more detail later.

Another important finding was related to identity salience. Through my interviews, it seemed as if respondents distinguished between atheism as being part of their identity versus being a belief that had little bearing on their identity. Although a person’s self comprises multiple identities (Mead 1934), some respondents hesitated to say that atheism was very important to their identity. One of these respondents (Brian) said this was a matter of semantics. Although he said he would never deny being an atheist, he felt that in terms of an identity, *skepticism* was more central for him personally. For Brian, this term better informed his orientation toward the world, which was predominantly skeptical, questioning, and cerebral. To Brian, atheism was not a term he preferred, but this is not to say that skepticism (and many other beliefs that are typical of atheists) were not important to his identity. In contrast to Brian, other

respondents who rated atheism as less important did so because it was just a topic that did not arise in daily life. These tended to be atheists who claimed atheist belief due to a “default” status as a result of being raised in a secular household and never being able to make themselves believe, rather than actively adopting an atheist identity. One participant (Aria) saw atheism as being more similar to political beliefs rather than a part of her “core identity” while another (Karen) also said that making a lack of a belief an important part of her identity seemed “counterintuitive.” It is worth noting that several participants continued to be “on the fence” about their beliefs, with two preferring the term “agnostic atheist” instead of “atheist.” If they were not fully ready to adopt this identity, it makes logical sense that this identity would not be extremely salient.

Of the participants who viewed atheism as very salient to their identities, many cited reasons for this being a scientific worldview. Some did not want to reconcile religion and science. Others felt that being an atheist and seeing the world in a more scientific light based on science and reason was simply more rational in their minds.

IV. Perceptions of Stigma

One of the larger implications of my findings is that atheists continue to feel some level of stigma based on their identities as atheists. My participants reported being told that they were immoral by religious people and feeling that they might be discriminated against in the job market if they were open about their identity. Although my findings indicate that atheists continue to feel unaccepted at some level, many participants said that they felt relatively accepted on the CU Boulder campus, perhaps contradicting the findings of previous scholars studying religious social climate on college campuses (see Bowman and Small 2010; Nash 2010). Despite citing the university campus as a supportive normative context, many atheists still acknowledged their identity as stigmatized and still felt unaccepted on a societal level.

Interestingly, many atheists did not cite many examples of discrimination on an institutional or societal level, but there remained a fear of this type of discrimination and the recognition by many that their identity was still not widely accepted. Matthew and other participants used the concept of “preference” to articulate that although society may be becoming more accepting, it would still “prefer” that individuals were not atheists.

These findings can be seen as part of a greater conversation about stigmatized identities on and off college campuses. Navigating the world with an embattled identity is not particular to atheists and is very prevalent among members of other minority groups, especially sexual minorities. Concepts of stigma, identity formation, and coping mechanisms have been applied frequently to members of the LGBT community who are often labeled as sexual deviants by U.S. society and who suffer similar marginalization, discrimination, and lack of access to the same rights that members of the heterosexual majority of U.S. society enjoy (See Kaufman and Johnson 2004; Bernstein 2002; Fassinger 1996). The LGBT community has been compared to the atheist community by several sociologists of religion as well, some even borrowing models of LGBT identity development (Fassinger 1996) and applying it to atheist identity development (Siner 2007; Smith 2010). On college campuses specifically, the experiences of atheists could also be related to other stigmatized religious minorities such as Muslim students. Muslim women on college campuses in particular are more visible if they choose to wear a hijab, and therefore navigate certain social stigmas on U.S. college campuses (See Mir 2009; Cole and Ahmadi 2003).

V. Individual Coping Mechanisms

Whether or not they felt accepted by society or individuals, many participants reported some sort of stigma coping mechanism whether it was surrounding themselves with other like-minded individuals, controlling the amount of information they shared with certain groups of

people, and/or negotiating their own sense of morality. The previous research done on managing atheism as a stigmatized identity has focused on other stigmatized groups excluding atheists (Goffman 1968) or on the collective in terms of how atheists seek out groups of people with whom to connect and create community (Smith 2010). To the extent of my knowledge and research, little has been done on how atheists as individuals cope with stigma if they do not necessarily join atheist charities, activist groups, and so on. From my interviews, it was made clear that many respondents did have a way of managing their identities. Friend groups of respondents commonly comprised of mostly other atheists, people who were not very religious, or at the very least, liberally-minded individuals. Respondents explained not wanting to argue about core beliefs all the time and freely admitted to having like-minded people as their closest friends. This serves as evidence for Goffman's theories of stigma that suggest that people create in-groups with "fellow-sufferers" of the stigma (1968:112). Many respondents cited great enjoyment out of being able to freely discuss any topic they wanted or to share information without feeling socially hindered or judged as a part of these in-groups.

Only sharing information about one's atheist identity to a select group of people in one's life corroborated Goffman's idea of controlling information as a stigma-coping mechanism (1968:95). This strategy was exemplified by participants in this study who avoided openly "advertising" their atheism, especially on social media sites where they feared discrimination from potential employers. Several respondents specifically said that they removed or avoided posting information on Facebook that stated their affiliation with atheist beliefs. Many also added that they do not talk about their atheism in groups of people who are not close friend or family members unless someone else brings it up first. None of the respondents said that they would deny their identities, but most simply chose to keep that particular topic off the table to avoid potential conflict. Thus, acquaintances, employers, and friends outside the participants'

inner circles make up the large group to which respondents do not share intimate information that could “other” them in a social situation. The small group with which the respondents chose to openly share their atheism and beliefs included close friends, family, and intimate partners.

Morality was another key point that respondents continuously negotiated in coping with their identities as atheists. Since morality is the main point of contention between many religious and atheist people, with much of the stigma surrounding atheists arising from the common belief that atheists are rejecting common foundations of being a “good” person (and, in the United States, being a good “American”), the idea for my respondents that they were moral beings was crucial. Every single respondent had their own thoughts about morality whether or not they believed that religious people and atheists share the exact same morals. Many thought that regardless of whether or not one is religious, morals come from socially constructed norms in society as well as biological drives to keep the human species alive. Declaring oneself a moral being was important for respondents, many of whom actively rejected, and even showed disdain for morality derived from religion.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the understanding of college atheists and their adoption of an identity that remains stigmatized and embattled in the context of a society where being religious continues to be the norm. The participants in my study showed how important background factors are in the adoption of an atheist identity. I found that the role college played in relation to an atheist identity was to crystallize an identity-achieving process already set in motion in an individual's childhood or adolescence. The specific campus of CU Boulder played a role as a supportive normative context where some atheists were able to finally adopt this identity and where most atheists felt comfortable being relatively open about their atheist identity. For some, atheism was not considered an identity, but rather a set of beliefs that were low in salience. However, most participants perceived atheism as a very important part of their identity. Regardless of identity salience, many atheists that I interviewed continued to perceive a social stigma, and whether or not direct discrimination based on this identity, it was still feared. It is unfortunate that some atheists feel that they have to censor themselves at any level for fear of experiencing discrimination or proselytizing. Although many religious people may mean well when they make comments about praying for an atheist or wanting them to come to church, for many atheists, this is offensive. It negates an atheist identity as legitimate and assumes that atheist people have an identity that is "less than" a Christian or other religious identity. It also assumes that atheists are not moral beings, when the findings of my study show the exact opposite. Atheists can be just as moral as religious individuals. In fact, many of the atheists in my study stated that they greatly enjoy contemplating morality and its implications. Thus, it is time for U.S. society to dispel these negative stereotypes of atheists as rejecting morality and to see atheists as just as moral and just as "American" as any other religious individual. This need

extends to families of atheists, political parties, employers, and universities. Atheists should be able to live in a society alongside Christians and other religious groups without feeling uncomfortable or stigmatized. It is time to hear the atheist point of view without clouding the social climate with fear, stereotypes, and judgments.

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U.S. Constitution, Article 6, Section 3.

APPENDIX A: Recruitment Material

Email Advertisement text (Body of the text will also be used for class presentations)

Subject: Opportunity to be involved in a research study

Body: University of Colorado senior, Cali Greksa is performing a study regarding atheist identity formation. If you identify as an atheist and are a CU student between the ages of 18-24, please contact Cali to learn more about the study and consider if you would be interested in being interviewed. Interviews will likely last between a half hour to an hour and will cover your personal experiences and views regarding atheism and religion. Participants will be compensated with a \$10 gift card.

Contact information: email: atheist.study@gmail.com

Phone: 970-333-4618

Flyer 1

1. Are you a Godless Heathen?
2. Do you want to be part of a research study?
3. Are you a CU student between the ages of 18 and 24?
4. Could you use \$10?

If you answered “yes” to the above questions, I want to talk to you! I’m a CU senior conducting a sociological study involving 30-minute one-on-one interviews regarding Atheist identity formation for my honors research project. If you are interested in learning more about my study and possibly participating, please call 970-333-4618 or email atheist.study@gmail.com.

Participants will be compensated with a \$10 gift card

Flyer 2

Don't Believe in God?

Get paid to share your personal experiences
as an Atheist.

A senior at CU is conducting a sociological study involving 1/2 -1 hour one-on-one interviews regarding Atheist identity formation. If you are a CU student between the ages of 18 and 24 and identify as an Atheist, please call 970-333-4618 or email atheist.study@gmail.com to learn more about the study and see if you'd like to participate.

Participants will be compensated with a \$10 gift card to your choice of Starbucks or Amazon.com.

APPENDIX B: Consent Form (HRP-502)

Title of research study: The Atheist Experience: A Sociological Approach to College Students' Identity and Identity Saliency

Investigator: Cali Greksa

Why am I being invited to take part in a research study?

I invite you to take part in a research study because I would like to understand how college students who identify as atheist come to adopt this identity and how they experience it, for example, do they feel there is stigma associated with being an atheist? There is little research conducted on this particular topic as pertaining to college students and as a result, they will be the focus of my study.

What should I know about a research study?

- I will explain this research study to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.
- You can skip any of the questions or decide to quit your participation at any time.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the research team at 970-333-4618 or cali.greksa@colorado.edu. If you would rather speak to someone other than the primary researcher, you can contact Dr. Joanne Belknap at joanne.belknap@colorado.edu.

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board ("IRB"). You may talk to them at (303) 735-3702 or irbadmin@colorado.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Why is this research being done?

This research is being done to better understand why college students identify as atheist and to identify the pathways there are to adopting or maintaining this identity. This research, ideally, will better explain concepts of identity and especially stigmatized identity as many groups and individuals in the United States view atheists as immoral and "un-American." The goal of this study is to advance the understanding of an atheist identity formation, identity saliency, and whether stigmatizing is something atheists experience and if so, how.

How long will the research last?

I expect that the interview will take approximately one-half to one hour, but it may be longer if you want to answer the questions in more depth.

How many people will be studied?

I hope to interview between 10 and 30 people in this study.

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

You will be interviewed by Cali Greksa, a senior studying Sociology at CU Boulder. The interview will last from a half-hour to one hour, depending on the depth of your responses and will be scheduled taking into account both your and my schedules. A series of questions will be asked about your experiences of being or becoming an atheist. Questions will include background information about religious experiences, deconversion experiences, and reasons for becoming (or remaining) an atheist. If you give your consent, a recording device may be used to make data collection more accurate. If you would like to participate but not have your interview recorded, I will not record it. The interview will be performed wherever you feel the most comfortable (within reason) with recommended sites being library study rooms or a coffee shop. All personal information that participants provide will be kept confidential. Names and other identifying information will be changed. The study findings will not be written in a manner that could identify any of the participants.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

You can leave the research at any time with no repercussions. If you decide to leave before the interview is complete (with the exception of skipping a few questions), no compensation will be given.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

If it is difficult for you to talk about your atheist identity, your pathway to atheism, and/or response to your atheist identity by family, friends, and so on, it is possible that you will feel uncomfortable during the interview. For example, you will be asked about reasons for leaving a previous religion (if applicable) and whether as an atheist you have experienced any discrimination.

Will being in this study help me any way?

Other than the \$10 gift card, I cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits include being able to talk openly about a commonly stigmatized identity and understanding your own identity. Ideally, I will publish my findings in order to broaden the knowledge base and improve the understanding of atheists, particularly college student atheists.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

I will make every effort to ensure that your participation is confidential and anonymous. You can tell people you participated, but I will not. The only individuals that could possibly have access to the data are members of the University of Colorado-Boulder Institutional Review Board.

Information collected will be used to discover trends and better explain atheism as a sociological phenomenon. Your information will be used to write a formal research paper that will be presented as an honors thesis to a committee of faculty. During the study, your information will be kept in a secure location. Your real name will be replaced with a number and later (for publishing purposes or for the final research paper) you will be given a fictitious name. Any recordings and other documents with personal information will be destroyed after the data have been collected.

What else do I need to know?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be compensated with a \$10 gift card for your time and effort. No amount will be paid if the interview is abandoned without being completed (unless only a few questions are skipped).

Signature Block for Capable Adult

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

Signature of subject	Date
Printed name of subject	
Signature of person obtaining consent	Date
Printed name of person obtaining consent	IRB Approval Date

Permission to be Audio-Recorded

****not required****

Your signature documents your permission to be audio-recorded as part of this research.

Signature of subject

Date

Printed name of subject

Signature of person obtaining consent

Date

Printed name of person obtaining consent

IRB Approval Date

APPENDIX C: Interview Schedule (HRP-503: Protocol)

**The Atheist Experience:
A Sociological Approach to College Students' Identity and Identity Salience**

Interview Schedule

Section I: Demographics

1. Participant Name:
Recruitment Method:

2. Age:

3. Year in School:

4. Field of Study/Major:

Section II: Background Information

5. Tell me a little bit about your background (family, siblings, etc.) Where did you grow up? (neighborhood, type of house, etc.)

6. What was it that your parents/guardians do/did for a living? (Note if parents are still together or divorced)

7. Did you grow up religious? If yes, what religion? If no, see below (#8. A-E)

8. What was your religious practice frequency; how often did you attend religious functions, worship, and so on?

9. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being not at all religious and 10 being extremely religious, what number would be the highest you would say describing you over your lifetime when you were the most religious? Tell me more about this—how old were you, what do you think made you the most religious then?

10. Growing up, what was your general attitude towards your religion? (positive, negative, indifferent) What were your experiences as a member of your church, synagogue, etc.?

11. If you adhered to your family's religion/religious practices, why would you say that you did so?

12. What was your attitude towards people of other religions when you were growing up?

13. What was your attitude towards atheists when you were growing up?

Section III: Experiences with Atheism

14. What does it mean to you to be an atheist? (Prompt: Can you give your definition?)
15. What were your first experiences with atheism? How old were you?
16. Why would you say that you identify as an atheist now?
17. What has been your general attitude towards atheists/atheism now that you identify as an atheist?
18. Do you feel like as an atheist your identity is under attack?
19. Does your family know you're an atheist? If not, why? If so, how did/does your family react to your atheism?
20. Do most of your friends, co-workers, and other people in your life know you're an atheist? If not, why? If so, how do they react (to your atheism)?
21. Do you feel accepted by society as an atheist? If yes, in what ways, and if not, in what ways don't you feel accepted?
22. What are your views about other religions or religious people?
23. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all important and 10 being extremely important, how important is your atheism to you? Can you explain why?
24. Does your atheism affect your personal relationships? If so, how?
25. Does your atheism affect the way you see the world? If so, how?
26. What about morality? What is your view of morality from an atheistic standpoint?
27. Are you a part of any atheist groups/organizations?

Part IV: Closing

28. Thank you for taking part in my interview. Are there any questions you wish I'd asked? Do you have any more to add that wasn't captured in the questions I asked?
29. Finally, little research has been conducted on atheists. Can you tell me why you agreed to participate in this research study?
30. Do you have any friends who you think may be interested in this study? If so, would you be willing to give them my contact information?

****If person grew up atheist, refer to questions below:**

8. A. What was your attitude towards other religions/religious people?

B. Did the religion of others affect you in any way? If so, how?

C. Did your parents stress their nonbelief/atheism? If so, how?

E. Did your atheism ever become a very important part of your life while you were growing up?
If so, how?

****Return to question #15**

APPENDIX D: Religious Information of Participants

Name	Age	Major	Most Religious Point (1-10)	Childhood Religious Denomination	Age of Adopting Atheist Identity	Atheist Identity Salience
Edward	20	Aerospace Engineering and Engineering Physics	3-4 (age 4 or 5)	Lutheran	12 th grade	8
Cora	20	Math and E-Bio			8 th grade	8-9
Jennifer	21	E-Bio and Secondary Science Education	3-4 (up to age 13 or 14)	United Church of Christ (Methodist)	High School	10
Dillon	21	Environmental Studies and Geology	_____	Christian	High School	(didn't provide number) Low Salience
James	21	MCDB and Political Science	_____ (Described normative belief at an early age)	_____	Senior Year of High School-Freshman Year College	7
Karen	18	Linguistics and German	(Described normative belief at an early age)	_____	8 th or 9 th grade (end off middle school/beginning of high school)	3
Aria	23	Women's Studies and Anthropology	5 (age 8)	Old Apostolic Lutheran and Quakerism	4 th or 5 th grade	3
Danielle	18	Environmental Design	"In between" (very young age)	Lutheran	10 th grade	7
Mark	18	History	7 (before 7 th grade)	Roman Catholic	10 th grade	Very Important (No number provided)
Bethany	18	Anthropology	8 (through middle school)	Non-denominational Christian (Conservative)	Freshman Year of College	4
Matthew	18	Biological and Chemical Engineering	_____	Christian	Early Middle School	Important (No number provided)
Brian	22	Calculus, Physics, Astronomy	5 (up to sophomore year of college)	Presbyterian	Junior Year of College	Atheism:2 Skepticism:10
Julie	19	Computer Sciences	Low belief, but high practice (up to 5 th or 6 th grade)	Christian	Age 12-13	8-9
Sophie	18	IPHY and Neuroscience	_____	Catholic school, but no religion in home	"always an atheist"	7