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## PERCEIVED STIGMA AND STIGMA MANAGEMENT OF MIDWEST SECULARS

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PERCEIVED STIGMA AND STIGMA MANAGEMENT OF MIDWEST SECULARS

By

Christopher R.H. Garneau

A DISSERTATION

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# PERCEIVED STIGMA AND STIGMA MANAGEMENT OF MIDWEST SECULARS

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University of Nebraska, 2012

Adviser: Philip Schwadel

Prior work demonstrates that atheists and other secular individuals experience especially low trust among the American public. This line of research suggests that those with no religious belief encounter societal stigma related to their non-belief. Yet it is unknown how non-believers perceive and manage stigma. I explore perceived stigma and stigma management strategies employed by atheists, agnostics, and other secular individuals in the Midwest using a mixed methods approach. Results from survey data from more than 2,200 secular individuals as well as 24 in-depth interviews with seculars living in the Midwest show that prejudice and discrimination are common experiences for these individuals. Furthermore, perceived stigma is positively correlated with utilization of secretive and especially proactive stigma management strategies. Additionally, I examine how perceived stigmatization of secular individuals in the Midwest relates to their psychological distress. Results from mixed methods analyses show that perceived secular stigma is associated with distress related to having a secular status. This research is important because it provides a context for the consequences of having a secular status in a predominantly religious society.

## DEDICATION

To Skyler, Conor, Kylie, and those who wave the banner of tolerance into the future. I sincerely hope you leave the world a brighter place.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Religious belief and adherence are normative in the United States. More than 90 percent of American adults profess some sort of belief in god or a higher power (Hout and Fischer 2002). Religious adherence has increased since the founding of the United States and was reported to be as high as 86 percent in 1992 (Finke and Stark 1992). Despite indications of strong religious belief and adherence in the United States, there has also been a recent increase in the percentage of Americans who express no religious preference. During the 1990s, the percentage of Americans with no religious affiliation doubled from seven to fourteen percent, and recent studies have shown that about seventeen percent of Americans claim no religious affiliation (Hout and Fischer 2002; Putnam and Campbell 2010).

The increase in religious “nones” in the United States has important implications for non-religious individuals and particularly for non-believers in the United States. Religious non-believers face considerable public image problems. For instance, recent research reports that Americans find atheists to be “untrustworthy” (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). Compared to Muslims, recent immigrants, homosexuals, Jews, African Americans, and Catholics, atheists are consistently ranked among the least trusted groups in the United States. Atheists are cited as the group least likely to share mainstream society’s view of America (Edgell et al. 2006). Seculars, such as atheists, clearly face societal stigmatization linked to their non-religious status.

The societal stigmatization of non-religious Americans has important consequences for seculars, who I define as individuals with either no belief in god or gods, or those who are uncertain about the existence of a god. Seculars have been labeled as “arrogant,” “evil,” or even

“freaks” (Harper 2007). Seculars experience tension with family over their non-religious status (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997). This labeling can have repercussions for mental well-being. Seculars, for example, have lower levels of psychological well-being compared to religious individuals (Meyer 2000). Religious doubt has been correlated with poor life satisfaction, depression, stress, and poor mental adjustment (Gauthier et al. 2006; Hunsberger et al. 1996; Krause et al. 1999). In sum, individuals professing no religion are stigmatized; and this stigma may be associated with psychological distress.

In this dissertation, I examine how Midwest seculars, like members of other stigmatized groups, find ways to manage and negotiate their stigmatized status in a highly religious nation. I also investigate relationships between perceived stigma and stigma management and psychological well-being. I address the following questions. Do seculars in the Midwest perceive stigma related to their secular status? What stigma management techniques do Midwest seculars employ to deal with their stigmatized status? Finally, how do perceived stigma and the use of stigma management associate with the psychological well-being of Midwest seculars?

I employ both quantitative and qualitative data to address my research questions. I obtain quantitative data from a web survey of Midwest Seculars. I obtain qualitative data through interviews with Midwest secular group leaders and participant observation in a secular social group located in Nebraska. Using these research strategies, I evaluate perceived stigma of Midwest seculars. I accomplish this by assessing whether secular individuals have ever been subject to discrimination or potential discrimination as a result of their secular status in various aspects of daily life, including work and family. I also explore stigma management techniques employed by Midwest seculars. Questions in my web-survey and qualitative interview schedule are designed to assess if and how respondents use various strategies of stigma management to

deal with their stigmatized status. Additionally, I assess the mental well-being of Midwest seculars with survey measures for psychological distress to evaluate whether or not stigma management techniques mitigate or exacerbate negative psychological outcomes. In this project, I also pay special attention to differences in perceived stigma, preferred stigma management techniques, and psychological well-being by secular identification (i.e. atheists versus non-atheist seculars).

This research is important to social science for several reasons. First, there is a dearth of empirical research that explores perceived stigmatization of seculars, and no known research that employs a mixed methods approach. Secondly, this research adds to a general understanding of stigma and stigma management by examining if seculars use inward or outward stigma management strategies commonly used by other stigmatized groups such as homosexuals and individuals with mental illnesses. This research also has implications for the importance of secular stigma on psychological distress. In other words, how do secular individuals deal with issues of mental well-being if they are not using religious resources to cope with personal problems? This research is also important because research on seculars has been scarce in prior decades. Secularism, which I define as a theological orientation dealing with non-belief in god or uncertainty of the existence of god, has been a neglected area of study in sociology because the sociology of religion has historically been rooted in religious organizations and denominations and because a good deal of research has been funded or commissioned by religious organizations. Finally, this research is important because it is a formal recognition of difficulties related to stigma felt by secular Americans. Research on individuals who face difficulties associated with a secular status can lead to policy suggestions or other strategies to mitigate negative effects associated with having a secular status in a highly religious environment.

*Defining the Population: Midwest Seculars*

I define “secular” as an individual who falls into one of the following categories: 1) an individual who claims to have no religious or supernatural belief or 2) an individual who makes no claims to knowledge of the existence of religious or supernatural entities and phenomena. This definition of secular includes those who would identify themselves as atheists, agnostics, secular-humanists, Brights, and free-thinkers. I do not consider individuals with no religious affiliation who believe in god (i.e. unchurched believers) to fall within the “secular” category. My definition of secular largely comports with the overarching “secular” definition used by Smith and Cimino (2012) which includes several secular subgroups including atheists, agnostics, Brights, and humanists.

For practical purposes, I focus solely on seculars in the Midwest region of The United States. For this project, I use the United States Census’ definition of the Midwest region, which includes the states of Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio (<http://www.census.gov>). This region of the United States has a relatively high rate of religious affiliation compared to other regions of the United States (Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States 2000). North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Nebraska all rank in the top twenty for states with the highest rates of religious affiliation (Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States 2000). Because Midwest seculars are situated in such a religious region, they may have greater probability of encountering stigma related to their non-religious status.

*Direction of this Dissertation*

In the next chapter (Chapter Two), I review literature on seculars and stigma. I begin with a discussion of the importance of religion in the United States and recent increases in secularism. I continue with a description of American seculars, highlighting historic and current trends of seculars in The United States as well as evidence of perceived stigma. To incorporate theory on stigma and the experiences of American seculars, I review literature on the nature and consequences of stigma as well as known forms of stigma management. I argue that the consequences of stigma and stigma management strategies employed by other stigmatized groups are applicable to Midwest seculars. I also develop hypotheses, which will be tested in later chapters.

In Chapter Three, I discuss data sources and explain analytical techniques. I provide a justification of a mixed methods approach for this research and describe the instruments used for the web survey.

In Chapter Four (the first results chapter), I explore perceived stigma. Specifically, I investigate correlates for experiencing prejudice and discrimination related to a secular status. Using a mixed methods approach, I assess the prevalence and nature of perceived stigma, how it varies by secular identification, and how seculars construct a secular identity. In general, I find that atheists perceive more stigma than other seculars. I also find that the construction of a secular status is accomplished over time and in multiple stages.

In Chapter Five, I examine how seculars manage the stigma associated with their secular identities. I explore the prevalence and nature of both inward and outward forms of stigma management. Inward stigma management techniques are those in which stigmatized individuals hide or conceal their secular status including withdrawal, secrecy, and passing. Outward stigma

management strategies (including disclosure and educating techniques) focus on proactive approaches to stigma management that require stigmatized individuals to interact others. In general, I find that an atheist identity, perceived stigma, and support from family and peers positively correlate with the utilization of outward, rather than inward stigma management strategies. Additionally, I analyze qualitative data to explore how Midwest seculars “neutralize” or justify their secular status.

In Chapter Six, I assess correlates of psychological distress with perceived stigma and stigma management. Utilizing two measures of distress, I investigate how secular identification, perceived stigma, and stigma management relate to psychological well-being. The mixed methods results show that non-atheist identification, perceived stigma, and inward stigma management are positively associated with psychological distress.

I conclude the dissertation with a discussion of secularism and social stigma in Chapter Seven. I synthesize findings from the results chapters to summarize the key findings. I expand on the importance of secular identity and discuss why non-believing atheists differ from other seculars with regard to issues of stigmatization and distress. I also expand on the implications of this study for seculars’ mental health. I end the dissertation with a call for future research on seculars in the United States.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There is much debate as to whether the United States and the Western world as a whole have become more or less religious. While there are arguments hinting at overall secularization and weakening of religious authority (e.g. Berger 1967; Chaves 1994), there is a surfeit of evidence that the United States is a highly religious nation. For example, Finke and Stark (1992) show that religious adherence rates have increased in the United States from 16 percent at the time of the country's founding to 86 percent in 1992. In addition to high rates of religious adherence, more than 90 percent of Americans report believing in god or a "higher power" (Hout and Fischer 2002). High levels of religious adherence and supernatural belief make the United States distinct as one of the most religious nations in the Western, industrialized world (Finke and Stark 1992; Halman and Draulans 2006). The prevalence of religious affiliation and belief in the United States suggests that seculars are a "religious minority;" and, as such, seculars face stigmatization from the vast majority of Americans with traditional religious beliefs.

#### SECULARS

##### *Profile of American Seculars*

Despite high levels of religious adherence and belief in god in the United States, there is a growing pattern of individuals with no religious affiliation as well as no belief in god. Using General Social Survey data, Hout and Fischer (2002) find that during the 1990s, the proportion of individuals with no religious affiliation doubled from about seven to 14 percent. Current statistics from multiple surveys show that religious non-affiliates account for somewhere

between 15 and 17 percent of Americans (Kosmin et al. 2009; Lugo et al. 2009; Putnam and Campbell 2010). While religious “nones” have no religious affiliation, a majority have traditional religious beliefs (Hout and Fisher 2002). Kosmin and colleagues (2009) find that only seven percent of unaffiliated Americans do not believe in god while 35 percent are theologically agnostic and an additional 24 percent are deists. In terms of self-identification, only four percent of unaffiliated Americans self-identify as atheist while six percent self-identify as agnostic (Cragun et al. 2012). Despite the fact that a minority of unaffiliated Americans are atheists or agnostics, the percentage of non-believers in the United States has grown in recent decades (Hout and Fischer 2002).

There are several subgroups of non-religious individuals that fit under the larger “secular” category that I defined in Chapter One. Among non-religious subgroups of interest to this study are atheists, agnostics, deists, secular-humanists, freethinkers, and Brights. Many of these subgroups overlap, and while most seculars identify with one secular subgroup more than others, an individual could belong to almost all of these categories simultaneously (Galen 2009).

Classification of “secular” as it is defined in this dissertation is complex because many individuals in this category are seculars by level of unbelief (theologically secular) while others are seculars by identification with a secular group (self-identified secular). These types of secular identification often overlap. Atheism, agnosticism, and deism are theological secular orientations, while atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, and Brights are groups based on subjective self-identifications that stem from worldviews and philosophies attached to established social groups (Cragun et al. 2012). An individual may be theologically atheistic or agnostic but not self-identify as an atheist or agnostic or might even self-identify as a religious affiliate (Kosmin et al 2009; Sherkat 2008). Additionally, secular identity is flexible as seculars



sometimes change their self-identification over time - for example from agnostic to atheist (Smith 2011). Theological secular orientations are also subject to change as individuals may experience different “levels” of unbelief (Glazier 2008). In sum, secular identification is a complex and malleable concept and can be expressed in different levels and contexts.

Theological secular orientations (those defined by level of unbelief) include atheism, agnosticism, and deism. The American Atheists Association defines atheism as “the lack of belief in a deity, which implies that nothing exists but natural phenomena (matter), that thought is a property or function of matter, and that death irreversibly and totally terminates individual organic units” (<http://www.atheists.org>). Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006:115) define agnosticism as “the belief than one cannot ever know whether God exists.” *Deism* is a theological orientation where one may believe in a creative force (not necessarily a god), but does not believe that a creative force takes an active role in one’s life (Jacoby 2004).

Self-identified seculars include atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, secular-humanists, and Brights. Atheists are characterized as individuals with no belief in god or the supernatural (McGrath 1987). Agnostics are unsure about the existence of a god (McGrath 1987). *Freethinkers* encompass a large portion of non-believers including individuals who are theologically atheist, agnostic, and deist (Jacoby 2004). Jacoby (2004:4) defines freethought as “a phenomenon running the gamut from the truly antireligious ... to those who adhered to a private, unconventional faith, revering some form of God or Providence but at odds with orthodox religious authority.” *Secular-Humanists* are united by principles of religious non-belief as well as values in human dignity and worth. The Council for Secular Humanism defines humanism as “a comprehensive nonreligious life stance that incorporates a naturalistic philosophy, a cosmic outlook rooted in science, and a consequentialist ethical system”

(<http://www.secularhumanism.org>). *Brights* are individuals who are part of the “Brights Movement.” On the official website for the Brights Movement, a bright is described as someone who has a naturalistic worldview, who has a worldview free of supernatural and mystical elements, and whose ethics and actions are based on a naturalistic worldview (<http://www.the-brights.net>). The “vision” of the Brights movement as stated on their official website is that “persons who have a naturalistic worldview should be accepted as fellow citizens and full participants in the cultural and political landscape, and not be culturally stifled or civically marginalized due to society’s extensive supernaturalism” (<http://www.the-brights.net>). While this list of secular self-identification likely covers most of the individuals in the United States that self-identify as secular, it is certainly not an exhaustive review of secular subgroups. Other names for seculars might include *skeptics*, *anti-theists*, *apatheists*, and *naturalists* as well as numerous other groups that are not commonly discussed in secular literature.

### *Historical and Current State of American Seculars*

Secularism has been noted in American society since the founding of the United States and seculars have been a salient fixture throughout American history (Jacoby 2004). Secularism arose in Europe as many academics began to distance themselves from religion in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century (Turner 1985). This was largely due to rifts over new scientific evidence that contradicted long-standing religious beliefs (Turner 1985). The earliest beginnings of the American independence movement were guided by a group of rationalists emerging from a post-enlightenment era (Jacoby 2004). In fact, several early founders of the republic were reportedly deists, including Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, and Thomas Paine (Jacoby 2004). Secularism grew substantially in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century in the wake of Civil War

reconstruction, on the heels of a religious revival (Turner 1985). Seculars have been at the forefront of various social movements in the history of the United States, aligning themselves with abolitionist, feminist, and free speech movements (Jacoby 2004). Ironically, American secular-humanism, as a social movement, began with religious roots as the humanist wing of the Unitarian-Universalist Church, which provided seculars with a legitimate outlet for civic engagement (Walter 1998).

Modern secular activism operates under what Cimino and Smith (2007) refer to as the “new atheist movement.” The new atheist movement (or “new atheism”) has sprung up around the popularity of books by notable atheist scholars including Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris. Writings by these movement leaders have established a narrative that the new atheist movement utilizes to pursue a collective agenda (Cimino and Smith 2011). New atheism is more visible today than in prior decades and it has generated a good deal of media attention (Cimino and Smith 2011). It has been theorized that the momentum of the new atheist movement comes from an atheist “outgroup” identity in a largely religious society (Cimino and Smith 2007). In a similar way that Christian Smith (1998) asserts that evangelicals remain strong as a subculture that is “embattled” with mainstream society, seculars are a subculture whose momentum is defined by the opposition their movement engenders (Cimino and Smith 2007). Finally, new atheism has been successful in gaining momentum through the use of the internet. The internet currently serves as a powerful tool to develop group consciousness and to formalize agendas for secular causes (Smith and Cimino 2012).

There is much diversity in how seculars characterize their nonreligious identity. When given a choice of only one label to describe themselves, 57 percent of “Godless” respondents report that they are atheists, 24 percent identify as humanists, 10 percent consider themselves to

be agnostic, and two percent say they are spiritual (Galen 2009). Of all secular groups, atheists are the most steadfast in their secular identity. Compared to other seculars, atheists are less prone to dilute or “soften” their identity when given the option of choosing more than one descriptive label for their non-religious identity (Galen 2009). The non-religious identity that seculars use to define themselves may be important for stigmatization. The negative connotations attached to their label (Edgell et al. 2006) leaves atheists more susceptible to negative experiences compared to other seculars. For this reason, distinguishing between atheists and other seculars within the population of this study is important for investigating the negative aspects of secular stigmatization.

Seculars are relatively distinct demographically. Most notably, seculars are disproportionately male (more so among atheists than agnostics), which is not surprising given higher rates of religious adherence and participation for women compared to men (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Hutchinson 2011). Seculars are overrepresented by white Americans and underrepresented by African Americans (Jacoby 2004). Seculars are more educated than the general public, and atheists tend to be slightly more educated than agnostics (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Sherkat 2008). The demographic makeup of seculars is important to stigmatization. Stigmatization may affect individuals differently based on sex, race, and education level. Seculars who are female, non-white, or less educated could be especially vulnerable to the negative effects of societal stigma because they face public distrust without the advantage of a privileged social status.

Seculars also vary in their religious backgrounds. Only about fifteen percent of seculars report no religious upbringing while 35 percent come from upbringings that are described as very religious (Galen 2009). Recent research shows that birth cohort effects account for increases in

those raised with no religious affiliation as well as those raised without belief in god (e.g. Merino 2012; Schwadel 2010). The religious background of seculars is important because seculars with religious backgrounds experience more stigmatization from family compared to those with no religious background (Galen 2009).

## HYPOTHESES FOR SECULAR STIGMA

Theoretical work on stigma suggests that seculars are candidates for stigmatization. Erving Goffman (1963) asserts that stigma comes from a discrepancy between the assumed identity and real identity of an individual. In other words, stigma is the negative outcome resulting from the response of others to an inconsistency in the assumed and real identities of a stigmatized individual. To give an example germane to the research at hand, most Americans expect that others have some kind of traditional belief in god. Therefore, meeting someone with no belief in god leads to an inconsistency between a secular individual's assumed and actual identity. The result is the stigmatization of the secular individual. Goffman (1963) posits that there are three kinds of stigma: abominations of the body, blemishes of individual character, and tribal stigmas attached to race, ethnicity, and religion. The latter two categories of stigma are applicable to seculars as secularism may appear to be a blemish of character and because membership in stigmatized tribal religions (or non-religions) is a source of stigma.

The stigmatization of individuals and groups occurs in a social context. Theoretical work on labeling theory suggests that stigmatization occurs when an individual is labeled deviant by an audience, whether that audience is a family member, friend, or stranger (Becker 1963). Stigmatized individuals either internalize the deviant label or counter the stigmatization by justifying their deviant behavior or stigmatized status (Rogers and Buffalo 1974; Sykes and

Matza 1957). Labeling theory is also applicable to seculars because prior research has shown that the word “atheist” is not only used to describe a theological orientation but that it is also a deviant label that carries negative connotations for many Americans (Edgell et al. 2006; Swan and Heesacker 2012).

Negative experiences associated with stigmatized statuses are varied in scope and severity. Goffman (1963) identifies prejudice, discrimination, and even violence as negative consequences for stigmatized individuals. Corrigan and Matthews (2003) assert that stigmatized individuals regularly deal with avoidance from others, even those close to them. Ex-convicts, for example, find that their stigmatized label makes finding a job difficult (Pager and Quillian 2005). Similarly, revelations of a homosexual status have been linked to employment and housing discrimination (Ragins and Cornwell 2001).

There is a good deal of evidence that suggests seculars are a stigmatized group in the United States. Americans commonly rely on religious affiliation or religious belief as a proxy for morality (Edgell et al. 2006). Having no religion is associated with a lack of morals (Hood, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch 1996). Americans tend to feel that religion is important to social belonging (Bellah 1967; Herberg 1960). It is not surprising then that atheists are one of the least, if not the least trusted of all stigmatized groups in the United States (Edgell et al. 2006). Public distrust of atheists is possibly attributed to extreme negative feelings that come from either the label “atheist”, which many Americans have traditionally viewed as a pejorative term (Edgell et al. 2006; Jacoby 2004), or a lack of belief which may be interpreted as a moral character flaw (Harper 2007). While there is research showing that Americans have become more willing to grant civil liberties to atheists (Bobo and Licari 1989; Schafer and Shaw 2000; Whitt and Nelson

1975), other research shows that atheists have not experienced the dramatic increase in tolerance that has been noted among other stigmatized groups (Edgell et al. 2006).

Secular stigma has also been noted in research in which secular individuals self-report stigmatization. A small body of qualitative work demonstrates various contexts in which atheists and other seculars experience prejudice and discrimination related to their secularism (e.g. Altemeyer and Hunsberger 2006; Cimino and Smith 2011; Heiner 1992; Smith 2011). Using nationally representative data from the American Religious Identification Survey, Cragun and colleagues (2012) find that 41 percent of theological atheists and 44 percent of theological agnostics report secular discrimination. Other quantitative research finds that secular discrimination is a common experience for atheists (Cragun 2012). In Cragun's (2012) study, atheists with stronger atheist identities, those who are more "out" about their atheism, and those who come from more religious families report more discrimination.

Seculars face many of the tangible consequences of a stigmatized status that other stigmatized groups have encountered. Prior research shows that seculars not only perceive stigma but that these perceptions are pervasive and impactful (e.g. Cragun 2012; Cragun et al. 2012; Smith 2011). Additionally, perceptions of stigmatization may vary by secular self-identification or theological orientation, an issue that has not been addressed in previous research. Atheists are especially seen as untrustworthy by Americans and therefore are likely to perceive more stigma than other seculars because their lack of religious belief situates them outside of mainstream society's "moral boundaries" (Edgell et al. 2006).

*Hypothesis 1a: A majority of seculars report prejudice, unfair treatment, and discrimination due to their secular status.*

*Hypothesis 1b: Atheists are more likely than other seculars to report prejudice, unfair treatment, and discrimination due to their secular status.*

The construction of a stigmatized identity is an important process for those who identify with a stigmatized status because they are slowly internalizing a label or identity that they know is negatively viewed by mainstream society. Stigmatized individuals often achieve their identity gradually over time because they acknowledge potential negative repercussions of adopting such an identity. Research on sexual identity construction, for example, shows that the process of internalizing a homosexual identity is achieved in several steps (Sophie 1985). Similarly, the stigma of atheism leads atheists to adopt their atheist identity as a gradual process that begins with questioning religion and ends with achieving an atheist identity (Smith 2011; Zuckerman 2012). I predict that Midwest seculars experience a similar gradual process in achieving their secular identities.

*Hypothesis 2: The construction of a secular identity occurs as a process accomplished in several stages.*

## STIGMA MANAGEMENT

Stigmatized individuals often adopt strategies to mitigate the negative consequences of stigmatization. In this section, I review ways in which stigmatized individuals manage their stigma. I review literature pertaining to inward stigma management strategies of withdrawal, secrecy, and passing and outward stigma management strategies of disclosure, and education. I also review literature on neutralization strategies.

*Inward Stigma Management: Withdrawal, Secrecy, and Passing*



Withdrawal is a process in which stigmatized individuals carefully select their associations and friendships to avoid negative consequences related to their stigmatized status. Stigmatized individuals may choose to avoid those who are not aware of their stigmatized status and instead spend time with individuals who are aware of their stigmatized status (Lee and Craft 2002). Withdrawal is a common strategy used by those with sexually transmitted diseases who are more comfortable in the company of those who are “wise” (meaning those who know about their stigmatized status) to their affliction (Lee and Craft 2002). Withdrawal is also a common strategy employed by female collegiate athletes who socialize mostly with each other in order to avoid being misidentified as homosexuals due to stereotypes about their female athlete status (Blinde and Taub 1992).

Seculars also might choose withdrawal as a strategy to manage stigma. Secular individuals are likely selective about the company they keep. They may choose to limit interactions to those who are also secular. I anticipate that atheists will be especially likely to use withdrawal strategies compared to other seculars given their high levels of stigmatization.

Secrecy is stigma management strategy that results from fear related to perceived stigma. For example, female collegiate athletes sometimes conceal their athlete status when meeting new people for fear of being labeled homosexual (Blinde and Taub 1992). Cain (1991) asserts that homosexuals sometimes do not disclose their sexual orientation to others because it might cause unnecessary friction in their personal and professional lives.

While the seculars I am studying are open and “out” to their secular social groups, I expect that they do employ secrecy in other dimensions of their social lives. Because religious identity is not outwardly visible, it may be relatively easy for seculars to conceal their nonreligious status. Compared to other seculars, atheists should be especially likely to hide their

secularism to avoid negative interactions. As with other groups, seculars probably keep their secular status a secret if they fear friction with family members and coworkers (Kalichman et al. 2001).

Passing is a strategy where stigmatized individuals “pass” their stigmatized status as something else. This may be as simple as concealment or omission. For example, those with genital herpes pass themselves as unafflicted individuals when they are able to do so (Lee and Craft 2002). Changing company or associations accommodates passing. Transsexuals commonly hold on to both sex statuses in order to pass themselves as their original sex around those who may not be privy to their sex transformation (Kando 1972). They accomplish this by compartmentalizing their social networks and deciding with whom they should “pass” their identity (Kando 1972).

Passing is a stigma management technique that could be common for Midwest seculars. Atheists should be particularly likely to pass their status compared to other seculars due to their especially high level of stigmatization. Seculars may keep their wise and unwise social groups separate so they can pass as non-secular with certain company and be openly secular with their “wise” acquaintances. In other words, seculars might pass as religious. Passing as religious is especially likely if the secular individual had been brought up with religion. Seculars might also “soften” their label. For example, an atheist may try to pass as an agnostic or claim to be a humanist to avoid the negative connotations of the label “atheist.” Or an atheist may choose to say they are agnostic because it gives the impression that they are open to religion or are seeking a religion, which mollifies the stigma of having no belief.

*Hypothesis 3a: A majority of secular individuals report using withdrawal, secrecy, and passing techniques.*

*Hypothesis 3b: Atheists are more likely than other seculars to report using withdrawal, secrecy, and passing techniques.*

*Hypothesis 3c: Seculars who perceive more support from family members and coworkers are less likely to keep their secular status a secret to avoid negative judgment.*

*Hypothesis 3d: Seculars often pass their secular status as non-secular with specific “unwise” individuals while remaining open to “wise” individuals.*

*Hypothesis 3e: Seculars with a previous religious affiliation are more likely than seculars with no previous religious affiliation to pass as religious to avoid negative judgment.*

*Hypothesis 3f: Seculars often pass their secular status as a “softer” stigmatized status to avoid negative judgment.*

### *Disclosure*

Disclosing a stigmatized status is a common stigma management strategy. Disclosure often relieves the stress of keeping a secular status a secret (Rosario et al. 2001). Disclosure is an attractive stigma management strategy because it is usually easier than maintaining a hidden identity (Cain 1991). Preventative disclosure is a useful strategy when the stigmatized individual feels that disclosing their status later in a relationship will cause complications. For example, ex-offenders sometimes choose preventative disclosure where they disclose their ex-convict status shortly after meeting others because they fear relationships might end when others eventually find out about their ex-offender status. In other words, they choose to tell others about their stigmatized status to “filter out” those who would likely reject them and to avoid investing too much effort into relationships that are apt to dissolve at a later time (Winnick and Bodkin 2006).

Several factors either facilitate or suppress the likelihood of disclosing a stigmatized status. Family support is one such factor. Previous research suggests that individuals with HIV who feel they have more support from family are more likely to disclose their illness to their family (e.g. Kalichman et al. 2003). Other factors may discourage disclosure. For instance, Shehan and colleagues (2005) show that highly educated individuals with HIV are less prone to seek support from family. The authors contend that educational attainment is a factor for successfully coping with a stigmatized status which reduces the need to disclose. Additionally, individuals who perceive themselves as stigmatized are more selective about who they inform of their status (Herman 1993). Conversely, individuals who perceive less stigmatization engage in indiscriminate disclosure where they do not conceal their status at all because they are unconcerned with how others might judge them (Herman 1993).

While seculars are likely to use inward stigma management strategies like secrecy and passing, they are also inclined to utilize disclosure to manage stigma and minimize the stress and complexities of keeping their secular status hidden.<sup>1</sup> Seculars may find that informing others of their secular status is easier than worrying about who knows about their status. Seculars may choose to engage in preventative disclosure to “filter” out those who would disapprove of their lack of religious belief before investing time and effort into a relationship. Seculars might also be relatively likely to disclose their secular status when they believe disclosure will be met by the support of their family and friends. Conversely, seculars with more education might be less likely to disclose their status because they use their education as a resource to buffer the negative consequences of secrecy. Finally, seculars who perceive themselves as stigmatized should be

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<sup>1</sup> While hypothesizing that seculars are likely to utilize both secrecy and disclosure seems to be a contradiction, prior literature shows that stigmatized individuals often use both of these strategies at different times and in different contexts (Cain 1991; Rosario et al. 2001). Research on atheists shows that secrecy is often used early in the process of secular identity construction while disclosure and other outward stigma management techniques are more common once the atheists have “come out” to others (Smith 2011).

more selective with whom they choose to disclose their status while those who do not perceive themselves as stigmatized may be indiscriminate in disclosing their secular status.

*Hypothesis 4a: Seculars are more likely to disclose their secular status if they find keeping their status a secret to be stressful or difficult to manage.*

*Hypothesis 4b: Seculars are likely to engage in preventative disclosure of their secular status.*

*Hypothesis 4c: Seculars who perceive greater support from family and coworkers have higher levels of disclosure than seculars who perceive less support from family and coworkers.*

*Hypothesis 4d: Seculars with higher levels of education have lower levels of disclosure compared to seculars with lower levels of education.*

*Hypothesis 4e: Seculars who perceive secular stigma have lower levels of disclosure than seculars who do not perceive secular stigma.*

### *Educating Others*

The goal of educating others is to reduce stigma in society by informing others and changing attitudes toward a stigmatized group. For example, female collegiate athletes often choose to educate others about the inaccuracy of the lesbian stereotype associated with female athletes (Blinde and Taub1992). Educating others allows stigmatized individuals to be more proactive in managing their stigma. Public educating practices such as protests and demonstrations (civic involvement) are effective ways to counter public stigma (Corrigan and Matthews 2003).

Another form of stigma management related to education is contact. This strategy entails stigmatized individuals purposely being open about their status and making contact with others

in society to reduce stigma. Couture and Penn (2003:293) give a definition of contact with respect to mental illness by asserting that contact “involves direct, face-to-face contact in some capacity ... this may include having a neighbor, relative, or friend with a mental illness.” Stigma is reduced when the experience with the stigmatized person is inconsistent with stereotypes about the stigmatized group (Corrigan and Matthews 2003; Couture and Penn 2003; Link and Cullen 1986).

Seculars, particularly those in secular groups, might educate others as a way to change societal attitudes about nonreligious individuals. Seculars likely educate others to change individual attitudes by addressing inaccuracies and stereotypes about secular individuals. For instance, a secular may educate a friend about how seculars are good people and are able to live moral lives. Seculars might also educate others to try to change their community’s perception of seculars. Attending rallies and protests or signing petitions for secular causes are examples of educating the public. Seculars may use contact to change the prejudiced attitudes that people they know have toward seculars. Seculars may “out” themselves to friends or family as a way to show that seculars can be good people. Atheists likely differ from other seculars in their likelihood to educate others. The high level of distrust of atheists could make them more inclined to educate others about secular individuals because they might be more motivated to combat their stigmatization. Compared to other seculars, atheists are especially likely to educate others about seculars through informative conversations, civic engagement, and personal contact.

*Hypothesis 4f: A majority of seculars use educating techniques to manage stigma.*

*Hypothesis 4g: Atheists are more likely than other seculars to use educating techniques*

*Neutralization*

Neutralizing a stigmatized status is a common stigma management strategy. When a stigmatized identity is known by others, stigmatized individuals commonly use neutralizing strategies to counter the negative connotations of the stigma. These strategies either change the negative aspects of the identity to positive aspects or discount the negative characteristics of the stigma. Sykes and Matza (1957) identify different strategies of neutralization including “condemning the condemners,” and “appealing to higher loyalties.” There are several ways in which seculars might neutralize the negative connotations of their stigmatized status including those posited by Sykes and Matza (1957). While I cannot specifically test all possible neutralization techniques, I expect that seculars find ways to defend or justify their secular status.

*Hypothesis 5: Seculars use neutralization to manage their stigmatized status.*

#### SECULAR STIGMA, STIGMA MANAGEMENT, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

Perceived stigma is relevant to seculars’ psychological well-being. Allport (1954) notes that the effects of discrimination and prejudice lead to inward feelings of depression. Additionally, Lee and Craft (2002:268) find evidence of mental distress related to perceived stigma when they state that “stigmas, by definition, cause persons to experience shame, guilt, and mistreatment from others.” I expect that seculars who perceive themselves as stigmatized are likely to experience negative emotions that are indicative of psychological distress.

The non-religious orientation of secular individuals might make them particularly susceptible to psychological distress. In general, religiosity and spirituality correlate with positive mental health (Gauthier 2006; Hill and Pargament 2008). Religious participation is a source of social support that also leads to better mental well-being (George et al. 2000; Hadaway 1978; Pargament 1997). Considering that secular individuals are unlikely to be involved in

religious activities, they have fewer resources and coping mechanisms to buffer the negative aspects of their stigmatized secular status.

The level of religious unbelief or doubt common in seculars also has important implications for their psychological well-being. Stronger religious belief and religious faith correlate positively with mental health outcomes (Hadaway 1978; Meyers 2000). Conversely, religious doubt has negative effects on mental well-being (Gauthier et al. 2006; Hunsberger et al. 1996; Hunsberger, Pratt, and Pancer 2002; Krause et al. 1999; Nielsen 1998). While it may seem that the positive correlation between religious doubt and negative mental health would mean that seculars are at greater risk for psychological distress, there is reason to believe that these effects do not impact all seculars in the same way. For instance, Galen and Kloet (2011) find that religious individuals and atheists report better mental well-being than agnostics and religiously uncertain individuals. This research suggests that it is religious certainty, and not necessarily religious belief that fosters positive psychological well-being. These findings are important to this study because they might highlight meaningful variations in psychological outcomes between atheists and those with other secular identities.

Identity salience of a stigmatized identity is also relevant for psychological well-being. Prior work shows that the negative effects of stigma are more damaging to self-esteem if an individual's stigmatized status is more important to their overall identity (Crocker and Major 1989). Thus, seculars who think of their secular identities as more important to their overall identities are also more apt to experience psychological distress in response to stigma.

I expect that stigma management will have important consequences for seculars' levels of psychological well-being. It is likely that some stigma management strategies positively associate with the psychological well-being of seculars while others are negatively associated



with well-being.<sup>2</sup> Prior research shows that keeping a secret related to a stigmatized identity correlates with poor psychological well-being (e.g. Rosario et al. 2001; Wegner and Lane 1995). As such, I suspect that the inward stigma management strategies of secrecy, withdrawal, and passing are negatively associated with psychological well-being because these strategies involve hiding the true status of a stigmatized individual. While stigmatized individuals choose to withdraw from certain social interactions with the intent of reducing stress, the loss of social networks can lead to further isolation and loneliness (Blinde and Taub 1992). There is no direct link between passing and poor mental well-being in prior literature, but I theorize that similarly to the use of secrecy and withdrawal, the act of hiding or lying about a stigmatized status will result in poor mental well-being.

While hiding a stigmatized status may have negative repercussions for an individual, prior literature suggests that being open about a stigmatized status can greatly alleviate stress and depression related to keeping a secret. I hypothesize that the stigma management techniques of disclosure and educating others are positively associated with psychological well-being. Disclosure is found to be an effective stigma management strategy for minimizing the stress of secrecy (Rosario et al 2001). Disclosure is likely to reduce stress for Midwest seculars as it has been shown to do with atheists in other studies (Smith 2011; Zuckerman 2012).

I hypothesize that educating others is positively associated with psychological well-being. Educating others is a proactive strategy for stigmatized individuals to express their desire to be positively perceived (Corrigan and Matthews 2003). While past literature does not explicitly link education to positive psychological well-being, the pro-active approach of this strategy suggests that individuals looking to change the perceptions of their acquaintances and

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<sup>2</sup>I have no way to directly test the association between neutralization and psychological distress and therefore exclude this stigma management strategy from my final set of hypotheses.

communities are participating in public disclosure which arguably leads to better mental health outcomes.

*Hypothesis 6a: Seculars who perceive themselves as stigmatized experience more psychological distress than seculars who do not perceive themselves as stigmatized.*

*Hypothesis 6b: Seculars who rate their secular identity as more important to their overall identity experience more psychological distress than seculars who rate their secular identity as less important to their overall identity.*

*Hypothesis 6c: Seculars who use inward stigma management strategies experience more psychological distress than seculars who do not use inward stigma management strategies.*

*Hypothesis 6d: Seculars with higher levels of disclosure experience less psychological distress than seculars with lower levels of disclosure.*

*Hypothesis 6e: Seculars who use educating techniques to manage their stigma experience less psychological distress than seculars who do not use education techniques.*

## LOOKING AHEAD

Addressing the primary research questions regarding Midwest seculars and stigma management requires a broad range of research techniques. In the following chapter, I discuss the use of mixed methods to address my research questions. I then describe how I collect both quantitative and qualitative data. I provide a detailed description of how the data is organized to test specific hypotheses. I end the following chapter with a discussion of appropriate analytical techniques to test my hypotheses.

## CHAPTER THREE

### DATA AND METHODS

I examine my research questions with a mixed methods approach. The availability of survey items that directly address my research questions is limited in existing secondary-data sources. For this reason, I construct my own survey. Because quantitative methods are not appropriate for addressing all of my hypotheses, I also use qualitative methods. Including qualitative methods in a study is generally preferred for conducting comprehensive research in a largely understudied subject area (Creswell 2007). As such, qualitative methods are useful because there is little previous research in this area to build on and because this study is largely exploratory. Finally, exploring perceived stigma and stigma management likely entails an interpretive approach, for which qualitative methods are well-suited (Neuman 2006).

I employ a parallel convergent mixed methods research design as defined by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011). In a parallel convergent design, quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analyzed concurrently. Both strands of data are given equal weight in analyses and neither strand is dependent on the other. A parallel convergent mixed methods design is an appropriate research design for this project because both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used in this field of inquiry, yet little research has incorporated both. Furthermore, a parallel convergent design is useful to explore a topic when there is no justification to give priority to either strand of data (Cresswell and Plano Clark 2011).

#### THE DATA

##### *Quantitative Data*

Quantitative data are obtained from a web-survey. The sample for this survey is non-representative. Previous work has documented the usefulness of web-surveys to collect data on non-representative groups that are difficult to find through national, representative sampling (Gosling et al. 2004). Additionally, recent work on atheists also utilizes an internet survey to generate a non-representative sample (e.g. Cragun 2012). The population for this study is composed of seculars in the Midwest region of the United States.

The sample is based on members of secular social groups in the Midwest. I conducted internet searches for groups in Midwest cities and universities with search terms like “atheists,” “secular humanists,” “skeptics,” “freethinkers,” and “Brights.” I then contacted group leaders from secular groups and asked them to forward an email to members of their respective groups (see Appendix A for an example of the email to the group leaders). The email that was forwarded to members of the secular groups contained a link to my web survey (see Appendix B for an example of the email to secular group members). The email also requested that group members forward the message to any seculars they may know in the Midwest. Thus, I employ purposive as well as “snowball” sampling methods (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). Authorized consent was obtained through the informed consent page of the website prior to taking the survey. The survey contains 92 items with various skip patterns (see Appendix C for the full survey). The items are designed to assess demographics and information related to my general expectations. To ensure anonymity, I did not collect information that could be used to identify survey respondents.

I deleted cases for individuals who do not live in the Midwest region, are not secular, or have missing data on any of the dependent variables in the quantitative analyses. The final sample size is 2,242. I impute data for all missing data on variables that are not used as

dependent variables in regression analyses. Multiple imputation is a useful strategy for dealing with missing data when missing cases cannot be avoided (Acock 2005).

A few of the variables dealing directly with perceived stigma (e.g. the discrimination variable) have large a large number of “don’t know” responses. I ran several analyses to determine if the “don’t know” responses should be included in analyses or coded as missing (e.g. combining “don’t know” with “no,” dropping “don’t know,” and using multinomial regression models to compare “no,” “yes,” and “don’t know” responses). Ultimately, the “don’t know” responses are very similar to the “no” responses on retrospective questions dealing with perceived stigma. Consequently, “don’t know” and “no” responses are combined into a single category and contrasted with “yes” responses. For consistency and to preserve sample size, I also use this strategy with other stigma-related dependent variables based on retrospective questions that have a relatively small percentage of “don’t know” responses. In all cases, regression analyses (not shown) reveal that the “don’t know” and “no” responses do not substantially differ, as such they are combined to create dichotomous variables (i.e. no/don’t know vs. yes).

### *Variables for Quantitative Analyses*

All variables for quantitative analyses are derived from the Midwest Secular Survey. Descriptive statistics for quantitative measures are shown in Table 3-1.

*Religious Identification and Identity:* Religious identification is measured with primary self-reported non-religious identity (from survey item #1) as well as level of religious unbelief (from survey item #2). I use a typology that splits seculars into four groups based on primary secular self-identification and level of unbelief. Self-identifying atheists are accordingly referred to as “atheists.” Respondents who identify with any secular identification other than atheist

(agnostic, humanist, or freethinker for example) are referred to as “non-atheists.” In terms of unbelief, seculars who say they do not believe in god or a higher power are referred to as “non-believing.” Respondents who say they do not know if there is a god or higher power, say there is a “higher power,” only sometimes believe in god, or believe with some doubts are referred to as “uncertain.” Using this typology, I create a secular identity scheme with four categories: (1) **Non-believing Atheists** (those who primarily self-identify as atheist and do not believe in god or a higher power), (2) **Uncertain Atheists** (those who primarily identify as atheist but are unsure about the existence of god or a higher power), (3) **Non-believing Non-Atheists** (those who self-identify with a secular identity other than atheist and do not believe in god or a higher power), and (4) **Uncertain Non-Atheists** (those who self-identify with a secular identity other than atheist and are unsure about the existence of god or a higher power). Using this typology, I can account for differences in secular identities due to subjective self-identification or differences in type of unbelief. These secular identification variables are the focal independent variable used for hypotheses that compare non-believing atheists to other secular identifications on various dependent variables (hypotheses 1b, 3b, and 4g).

**Religious Affiliation at 16** is a variable that contrasts those who report a religious affiliation at age 16 versus those who report no religious affiliation at that time. This measure is the focal independent variable for hypothesis 3e and is constructed from question #48 on the survey. **Secular identity salience** is a variable that measures how central a respondent’s secular status is to their overall self-identity. Respondents indicate on a scale of one to 10 how important their secular status is to their identity with ‘10’ indicating that their secular status is the most important aspect of their overall identity and ‘one’ meaning that their secular status is not very

important to their identity. This variable is the focal independent variable for hypothesis 6b and is derived from question #31 on the survey.

*Perceived Stigma Variables:* The **prejudice** variable measures whether or not respondents believe they have ever been judged negatively as a result of their secular status. Responses reporting perceiving prejudice are coded as '1' while responses indicating no perceived prejudice as well as "don't know" responses are coded as '0'. This measure is the focal independent variable for hypotheses 4e and 6a and the dependent variable used to test hypotheses 1a and 1b. This measure is created from question #22 on the survey.

I operationalize discrimination with two separate variables for a more robust measurement. While most individuals would likely recognize unfair legal or work-related experiences as discrimination, they may not recognize general unfair treatment from family, friends, and acquaintances as discrimination. Asking for reports of unfair treatment is a useful method to assess discrimination in a way that many respondents may not recognize as such. Previous research suggests that incidents of unfair treatment are a better measure of interpersonal discrimination while reports of subjective discrimination are more likely to capture institutional discrimination (e.g. Malat and Hamilton 2006; Yen et al. 1999). The **unfair treatment** variable assesses whether or not a respondent believes they have been treated unfairly due to their secular status. Responses reporting unfair treatment are coded as '1' while responses indicating no perceived unfair treatment as well as "don't know" responses are coded as '0'. It is the dependent variable used to test hypotheses 1a and 1b. It is derived from question #23 on the survey. The **discrimination** variable assesses if a respondent has ever been discriminated against as a direct consequence of their secular status. I assign a '1' for responses of perceived discrimination and a '0' for responses of no perceived discrimination as well as "don't know"

responses. This is the focal independent variable for hypotheses 4e and 6a and the dependent variable used to measure hypotheses 1a and 1b. It is constructed from question #24 on the survey.

*Stigma Management Variables:* The **withdrawal** variable measures the secular composition of a respondent's network of friends. This variable is coded '1' if a respondent indicates that all or most of their friends are also secular and '0' if they indicate that some, few, or none of their friends are secular.<sup>3</sup> This measure is the focal independent variable for hypothesis 6c, the dependent variable for hypotheses 3a and 3b, and is constructed from question #59 on the survey. The **secrecy** variable assesses whether or not respondents have purposely kept their secular status a secret to avoid negative judgment. Responses reporting secrecy are coded as '1' while responses indicating no secrecy as well as "don't know" responses are coded as '0'. This measure is the focal independent variable for hypothesis 6c, the dependent variables for hypotheses 3a through 3c, and is created from question #6 on the survey. **Passing** is a variable that assesses whether a respondent has tried to pass as religious to avoid negative judgment. I assign a '1' for responses indicating passing and a "0" for responses indicating an individual has not passed as religious as well as "don't know" responses. This measure is the focal independent variable for hypothesis 6c, the dependent variable for hypotheses 3a, 3b, and 3e and is derived from question #7 on the survey.

I measure disclosure with the **Secular Disclosure Index (SDI)** that measures how comfortable a respondent is with disclosing their secular status. In a series of survey items (questions #10 through #14), respondents indicate how comfortable they are disclosing their

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<sup>3</sup> Surveying a respondent on their perception of the secular composition of their friends is problematic. Individuals tend to overestimate the extent to how similar they are to family and friends (Byrne and Blaylock 1963; Jussim and Osgood 1989). Therefore, it is expected that secular individuals will overestimate the general secular makeup of their friendship network.



secular status to friends, family, neighbors, casual acquaintances, and strangers. Responses for these items include very comfortable, somewhat comfortable, and not very comfortable. The alpha for this index is .78. This index is the focal independent variable for hypothesis 6d and the dependent variable for hypotheses 4c through 4e.

Several measures assess the stigma management strategy of educating others. **Educated other** is a dummy variable based on the question “have you ever informed a religious friend or relative about seculars to give them better insight about the true nature of seculars (for example tried to tell someone religious that seculars can also have morals)?” For this variable, I code “yes” responses as ‘1’ and “no” and “don’t know” responses as ‘0’. This measure is the focal independent variable for hypothesis 6e, the dependent variable for hypotheses 4f and 4g, and is constructed from question #28 on the survey. A second dummy variable for educating others is **civic involvement**, which assesses whether or not a respondent has participated in any pro-social activities for a secular cause. Responses reporting civic involvement are coded as ‘1’ while responses indicating no civic involvement as well as “don’t know” responses are coded as ‘0’. This measure is the focal independent variable for hypothesis 6e, the dependent variable for hypotheses 4f and 4g, and is created from question #29 on the survey. The final variable for educating others measures **contact** as a stigma management strategy to reduce societal stigma. For this variable, respondents are asked “have you ever ‘come out’ as secular to someone with the intent of showing them that seculars are good people?” For this variable, I assign a ‘1’ for “yes” responses and a ‘0’ for “no” and “don’t know” responses”. This measure is the focal independent variable for hypothesis 6e, the dependent variable for hypotheses 4f and 4g, and is derived from question #15 on the survey.

*Support Variables:* **Supportive family** is a dummy variable for whether or not a respondent believes that immediate family members who do not know about their secular status would be supportive if they found out. This measure is the independent variable for hypotheses 3c and 4c and is constructed from question #20 on the survey. **Coworkers might judge** measures if respondents feel their unwise coworkers would judge them negatively if they knew about the respondent's secular status. This measure is the independent variable for hypotheses 3c and 4c and is created from question #38 on the survey.

*Psychological Distress Variables:* I gauge **general distress** with a five-item "mini CES-D" scale as developed by Perreira and colleagues (2005). The CES-D is an additive index that gauges psychological distress. For each item, respondents indicate how often the following statements are true during the past week with responses of (1) rarely or none of the time, (2) some of the time, (3) a lot of the time, or (4) most of the time. The five statements are "you felt sad," "you felt that you could not shake off the blues, even with help from your family and friends," "you felt depressed," "you felt life was not worth living," and "you were happy," which is reverse coded in the index. This index has an alpha of .82. The mini CES-D index is the dependent variable for hypotheses 6a through 6e. It is comprised of items #62 through #66 on the survey. I include another measure of psychological distress to measure **direct distress** due to a secular status. This item is coded '1' for individuals who report ever feeling distress due to their secular status and '0' for those who have not and those who "don't know". This measure is used in tandem with the measure for general stress to test hypotheses dealing with psychological distress. This measure is derived from question #25 on the survey.

*Control Variables:* **Age** is measured in years and is centered around the mean. The **age-square** variable is used when significant to compensate for non-linear effects of age. The **non-**

**white** variable is a dummy variable indicating African American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian American, multiracial, or “other race.” Sex is measured with a dummy variable for **female** respondents. **Bachelor’s degree** is a variable for whether or not a respondent has a bachelor’s degree, and it is the focal independent variable for hypothesis 4d. **Income** is an ordinal variable assessing annual household income before taxes. Response categories are (1) less than \$10,000, (2) \$10,000 to \$24,999, (3) \$25,000 to \$49,999, (4) \$50,000 to \$74,999, (5) \$75,000 to \$99,999, (6) \$100,000 to \$199,999, and (7) \$200,000 or more per year. Considering that many of the secular groups that contributed to the survey are university secular groups, college students are over-represented in the sample. Therefore, I control for **college student** status with a dummy variable for those who are currently enrolled in college or university. Urbanicity is measured with dummy variables for respondents living in inner city areas (i.e. urban) and those residing in small towns or rural areas (i.e. rural) with suburban residents as the reference category. The **Great Plains** variable is a dummy variable for respondents residing in the West North Central region as defined by the U.S. Census.

### *Qualitative Data*

The data for qualitative analyses come from in-depth interviews with 24 group leaders of secular organizations in the Midwest (at least one respondent from each state in the region). I found interview participants by asking group leaders (who agreed to pass my survey on to their groups) to participate in an interview. Interviews were conducted by phone and informed consent was given by verbal affirmation prior to the interview. Respondents were asked a series of questions that test several hypotheses from Chapter Two (See Appendix D for the qualitative interview schedule). While I utilized a basic structure for the interview schedule, I also allowed

enough flexibility in an interview to ask supplementary questions, which sometimes resulted in longer but more in-depth interviews. I transcribed and coded all interviews myself. MAXQDA software was used to code qualitative interviews. I coded interviews to correspond to specific hypotheses but I also allowed for open coding for emergent themes in each interview as emergent coding is found to be especially useful for analyzing qualitative data (Cresswell 2007).

The second component to qualitative data collection comes from participant observation. This data was obtained through participation in monthly meetings with a secular social group in Nebraska. I used personal acquaintances to gain access to groups meetings. Access through acquaintances with existing group members is useful because marginalized groups might restrict participation in group activities (Creswell 2007). I attended monthly meetings over the course of one year and kept accounts of several conversations at the meetings that dealt with perceived stigma and stigma management related to secularism.

## ANALYTICAL TECHNIQUES

I test my hypotheses with both quantitative and qualitative analyses. For quantitative analyses, I use means tests and multiple regressions. For hypotheses with no specific relationship posited between independent and dependent variables (for example Hypothesis 1a), sample means are used to assess the prevalence of stigma, stigma management techniques, and psychological distress. For analyses with hypothesized relationships between independent and dependent variables, I use OLS, logistic, or Poisson regressions. OLS regressions are used in analyses with linear dependent variables. Binary logistic regressions are employed for analyses with dichotomous dependent variables. Binary logistic regression models report the effects of independent variables on dichotomous dependent variables in terms of logged odds (Menard

1995). I use Poisson regressions for analyses with the mini CES-D as the dependent variable. A Poisson regression is most appropriate for these regressions because the distribution of the dependent variable is highly skewed towards zero (Cohen et al. 2003). All regression analyses include controls for secular identification, age, race, sex, education, household income, student status, urbanity, and geographic region.

I report significance levels in tables for quantitative analyses but because I do not have a representative sample, I cannot generalize my findings to a population. Due to this limitation, I emphasize the magnitude of associations and relationships in quantitative analyses rather than relying solely on statistically significant findings to highlight meaningful results.

The majority of hypotheses are tested solely with quantitative data from the online survey. Most of the questions in the survey are also included in the qualitative interview schedule.<sup>4</sup> Six hypotheses are tested solely with qualitative data from interviews due to difficulties in testing them with quantitative data.<sup>5</sup> Hypothesis testing from qualitative data entails thematic coding related to specific questions from the interview schedule. In a parallel convergent mixed methods research design, both strands of data are analyzed concurrently, and, as such, are synthesized to provide a robust examination of secular stigma in the Midwest.

## HYPOTHESES RESTATED

*Hypothesis 1a: A majority of seculars report prejudice, unfair treatment, and discrimination due to their secular status.*

*Hypothesis 1b: Atheists are more likely than other seculars to report prejudice, unfair treatment, and discrimination due to their secular status.*

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<sup>4</sup> Hypotheses tested with only quantitative data include 1a, 1b, 3a, 3b, 3c, 3e, 4c-4g, and 6a-6e.

<sup>5</sup> Hypotheses tested with only qualitative data include 2, 3d, 3f, 4a, 4b, and 5.

*Hypothesis 2: The construction of a secular identity occurs as a process accomplished in several stages.*

*Hypothesis 3a: A majority of secular individuals report using withdrawal, secrecy, and passing techniques.*

*Hypothesis 3b: Atheists are more likely than other seculars to report using withdrawal, secrecy, and passing techniques.*

*Hypothesis 3c: Seculars who perceive more support from family members and coworkers are less likely to keep their secular status a secret to avoid negative judgment.*

*Hypothesis 3d: Seculars often pass their secular status as non-secular with specific “unwise” individuals while remaining open to “wise” individuals.*

*Hypothesis 3e: Seculars with a previous religious affiliation are more likely than seculars with no previous religious affiliation to pass as religious to avoid negative judgment.*

*Hypothesis 3f: Seculars often pass their secular status as a “softer” stigmatized status to avoid negative judgment.*

*Hypothesis 4a: Seculars are more likely to disclose their secular status if they find keeping their status a secret to be stressful or difficult to manage.*

*Hypothesis 4b: Seculars are likely to engage in preventative disclosure of their secular status.*

*Hypothesis 4c: Seculars who perceive greater support from family and coworkers have higher levels of disclosure than seculars who perceive less support from family and coworkers.*

*Hypothesis 4d: Seculars with higher levels of education have lower levels of disclosure compared to seculars with lower levels of education.*

*Hypothesis 4e: Seculars who perceive secular stigma have lower levels of disclosure than seculars who do not perceive secular stigma.*

*Hypothesis 4f: A majority of seculars use educating techniques to manage stigma.*

*Hypothesis 4g: Atheists are more likely than other seculars to use educating techniques to manage stigma.*

*Hypothesis 5: Seculars use neutralization to manage their stigmatized status.*

*Hypothesis 6a: Seculars who perceive themselves as stigmatized experience more psychological distress than seculars who do not perceive themselves as stigmatized.*

*Hypothesis 6b: Seculars who rate their secular identity as more important to their overall identity experience more psychological distress than seculars who rate their secular identity as less important to their overall identity.*

*Hypothesis 6c: Seculars who use inward stigma management strategies experience more psychological distress than seculars who do not use inward stigma management strategies.*

*Hypothesis 6d: Seculars with higher levels of disclosure experience less psychological distress than seculars with lower levels of disclosure.*

*Hypothesis 6e: Seculars who use educating techniques to manage their stigma experience less psychological distress than seculars who do not use education techniques.*

Table 3-1. Descriptive Statistics (N=2,242)

	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.E.
<i>Secular Identification</i>				
Non-believing Atheist	.00	1.00	.61	
Non-believing Non-atheist	.00	1.00	.19	
Uncertain Atheist	.00	1.00	.04	
Uncertain Non-atheist	.00	1.00	.16	
Religious Affiliation at 16	.00	1.00	.68	
Secular Identity Salience	1.00	10.00	7.25	2.05
<i>Perceived Stigma Variables</i>				
Prejudice	.00	1.00	.71	
Unfair Treatment	.00	1.00	.37	
Discrimination	.00	1.00	.32	
<i>Stigma Management Variables</i>				
Withdrawal	.00	1.00	.32	
Secrecy	.00	1.00	.72	
Passing	.00	1.00	.21	
Secular Disclosure Index	5.00	25.00	18.07	4.62
Educated Other	.00	1.00	.81	
Civic Involvement	.00	1.00	.60	
Contact Outing	.00	1.00	.59	
<i>Support Variables</i>				
Supportive Family	.00	1.00	.27	
Coworkers Might Judge	.00	1.00	.39	
<i>Psychological Distress Variables</i>				
General Distress (Mini CES-D)	.00	15.00	2.04	2.49
Direct Distress	.00	1.00	.47	
<i>Control Variables</i>				
Mean Centered Age	-20.27	53.73	.00	15.34
Mean Centered Age-Squared	.07	2886.91	235.33	288.37
Non-White	.00	1.00	.05	
Female	.00	1.00	.40	
Bachelor's Degree	.00	1.00	.62	
Income	.00	6.00	2.88	1.66
College Student	.00	1.00	.22	
Urban	.00	1.00	.20	
Rural	.00	1.00	.26	
Great Plains	.00	1.00	.45	



## CHAPTER FOUR

### PERCEIVED STIGMA AND SECULAR IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

In this chapter, I use both quantitative and qualitative data to investigate ways in which Midwest seculars experience stigma related to their secular status. I also use qualitative data to explore how they construct a secular identity. Researching perceived stigma is important because experiences of secular stigma demonstrate real consequences of societal distrust towards secular Americans. Moreover, as I show in subsequent chapters, perceived stigma is associated with stigma management and issues of psychological well-being. Investigating secular identity construction is important because the internalization of a stigmatized status is a meaningful experience for individuals undergoing this process (Smith 2011; Sophie 1985)

#### *Quantitative Results for Perceived Stigma*

I begin by assessing the prevalence of perceived stigma with quantitative data from the Midwest Secular Survey. I hypothesize (hypothesis 1a) that a majority of seculars perceive prejudice, unfair treatment, and subjective discrimination due to their secular status. Results in Table 4-1 show that 71 percent of the sample report being negatively judged while 11 percent say they have not been judged negatively and an additional 18 percent report that they “don’t know.” These results support hypothesis 1a.

In contrast, only thirty-seven percent of seculars in the sample report unfair treatment. While these results do not support Hypothesis 1a, because the majority of the sample does not report unfair treatment, a relatively large proportion (more than one-third) report some sort of unfair treatment related to their secularism. Similarly, just under one-third of respondents report

experiencing discrimination due to their secular status while 39 percent report no discrimination. Even though a majority of seculars are not reporting perceived discrimination, (thus Hypothesis 1a is not supported) these results indicate that a sizeable proportion (about one out of three) of Midwest seculars report discrimination due to their secularism.

The next set of analyses examines how secular identification associates with perceived prejudice. I hypothesize (hypothesis 1b) that atheists are more likely than other seculars to report experiencing prejudice, unfair treatment, and subjective discrimination related to their secular status. Regression results for perceived prejudice provide mixed support for this hypothesis. Results from Model B in Table 4-2 show that compared to non-believing atheists, the odds of experiencing secular prejudice are 28 percent less for non-believing non-atheists and 48 percent less for uncertain non-atheists. Results from the fully controlled model (Model C) demonstrate that the odds of experiencing secular prejudice are 49 percent less for uncertain non-atheists compared to non-believing atheists. These results highlight an important contrast in perceived prejudice between the more “hardlined” atheists and seculars who are less certain about their theological orientation. This finding suggests that secular with atheist identities are particularly likely to experience prejudice compared to other seculars.

Next, I examine results from logistic regression models of experiencing unfair treatment related to a secular status. I hypothesize that atheists are more likely than other seculars to experience unfair treatment (hypothesis 1b). This hypothesis is mostly supported. Results from Model C in Table 4-3 show that all else being equal, the odds of experiencing unfair treatment are 22 percent less for non-believing non-atheists than for non-believing atheists. Additionally, the odds of unfair treatment are 43 percent less for uncertain non-atheists compared to non-believing atheists. These results suggest that experiencing unfair treatment is more prevalent for

self-identified atheists. Seculars who do not identify as atheist, regardless of unbelief, are less likely to report unfair treatment due to their secular status.

I also explore results from binary logistic regressions of experiencing discrimination due to a secular status. I hypothesize that atheists are more likely to experience discrimination related to their secular status (hypothesis 1b). Results in Model C show that compared to non-believing atheists, the odds of subjective secular discrimination are 50 percent less for uncertain atheists and 38 percent less for uncertain non-atheists. These findings show that perceived discrimination is less prevalent for seculars with uncertain beliefs about god compared to self-identified atheists who do not believe in god.

#### *Qualitative Results for Perceived Stigma*

Qualitative interviews with secular group leaders reveal that experiences with perceived prejudice and discrimination are common occurrences that happen in different ways. I begin with an examination of perceived prejudice. Each of the 24 interview participants experienced some form of prejudice related to their secular status, although the frequency and magnitude of the perceived prejudice varied greatly from accounts of “a few times I can recall” to “quite possibly every day of my life.” Most reports of prejudice are described as negative comments or interactions that the secular interviewees perceived once their non-religious status was discovered. A few of the negative comments that interview participants reported included “but you’re such a nice person” and “how do you think this way.” Interview respondents also reported being called names, both in-person and in local media. A few participants even reported that when they disclosed their atheist statuses, the individual they were disclosing to assumed the respondents were Satanists. Nearly half of the secular group leaders talked about using local

media like newspapers and radio stations to make their atheism public, and encountering prejudice as a result. For instance, Ken, a 68 year-old agnostic from Wisconsin, said “there have been lots of references in newspapers that have been critical of me for blogging ... my name comes up in hateful ways.”

Interview participants also claimed to perceive prejudice through social interactions once their secular status became known. A few reported that acquaintances acted “cold” or “unfriendly” towards them. Other interview participants noticed a change in demeanor in friends and coworkers, claiming that “people will stop making eye-contact with you” or that they were given “the evil eye.” Nick, a 48 year-old atheist from North Dakota, reported experiencing prejudice in response to his personalized license plates (the phrase on his plates indicates he is an atheist) when he said, “last week I was in the drive-thru at McDonald’s... a guy leans out the door and gives me the finger.”

The majority of interviewees, and especially those from religious backgrounds, reported a great deal of unease and conflict over their secularism when interacting with family. Most of the conflict with family occurred between the secular individuals and their parents. For instance, Lindsey, a 22 year-old agnostic from Illinois, said, “I knew they wouldn’t be happy but I didn’t know how really upset they’d be. My mom was really angry. She was upset about me not believing.” Other seculars said conflict came about because their family was unsupportive of their public atheism. Ed, a 58 year-old atheist from Kansas stated, “I was told by family members that I shamed the family. I made the family look bad to the community.” Nathan, a 31 year-old secular-humanist from Nebraska shared similar thoughts when he said:

My family sure doesn’t like it. I’ve had difficult conversations with family members... not over the idea that I’m an atheist, but the fact that I’m out of the

closet. They don't like that I don't hide it. It's led to a lot of tension with family members.

Several secular group leaders reported that family members refused to believe that they were no longer religious. These participants said their parents believed they were "going through a phase." Others said their families were dismissive of their secularism and refused to acknowledge it. One respondent said her father-in-law attempted to convert her while he was dying, after discovering she was an atheist. She remembered him telling her "no you can't be [an atheist]. How could you be that?"

Professional relationships were another common source of secular prejudice cited by the interview participants. These accounts, however, varied in scope. A few seculars did not perceive workplace prejudice simply because they were not "out" to anyone at work, either out of fear of prejudice or because they felt it was unprofessional to talk about religion at work. Other seculars were "out" at work, but due to the nature of their job they had no issues when it came to workplace prejudice. For example, a few seculars who worked in academic or research positions reported working with coworkers who found their non-religious status to be unproblematic. While just over half of interview participants expressed no problems with prejudice in the workplace, others clearly felt that their non-religious status placed them in uncomfortable situations. A few interview participants reported strained relationships with coworkers. Most of the secular group leaders who were not "out" at work were fearful of changes in working relationships if their secular status was discovered.

I also asked the 24 secular group leaders about perceived discrimination. Reports of discrimination were less prevalent than accounts of prejudice amongst the interview participants. This supports the quantitative findings which show that Midwest seculars are more than twice as

likely to perceive prejudice compared to either form of discrimination. Even though accounts of discrimination were not as numerous as accounts of prejudice (and several respondents could not recall any time when their secular status led to discrimination), a majority of respondents could provide clear examples of ways in which they were discriminated against due to their secularism.

One of the more common ways in which secular group leaders experienced discrimination was being held to a different standard. For example, some of the group leaders reported that friends and coworkers would openly discuss their faith but were then uncomfortable when the secular interviewee attempted to discuss their secularism. Interview respondents often felt that public discussions of religion seemed more socially acceptable than discussions of secularism. One respondent felt he was held to a double-standard when his Christian coworkers repeatedly challenged his atheism when his atheist group made headlines in the local newspaper. He said “this disturbed me because if I was in the paper as a Jewish person or a Muslim I doubt that I would be confronted about my beliefs.” Secularism was also shown to be a barrier for obtaining professional services. Amy, a 47 year-old atheist from the Great Plains region, talked about her atheism affecting her ability to get medical care from a family physician.

There was a doctor that kind of refused to treat me. She read about me and was a Catholic and didn't want me as a patient. I always fear people will equate non-religious with immoral. For example, should I need pain medication maybe they'll think I'm a junkie. I just want good medical attention.

Another common way in which secular group leaders described discrimination was in the form of lost opportunities in the workplace. Four interview respondents reported that they did not want their supervisor or boss to discover their atheist status for fear of a lost promotion or issues of job security. Ken in Wisconsin decided to take on a lawsuit to remove a Ten Commandments statue from his city park because he was in a position to not have to worry about

job security. He said “I did it because I was retired, I was financially secure, and they couldn’t fire me, boycott my business, or take my job away.” One atheist man discussed his disappointment over losing community support for his secular group’s activist projects after he was outed as an atheist in the local paper. He commented, “[local business owners] said they would have loved to support me but they were afraid it would ruin their business.” While not as common, there were also accounts of workplace discrimination. For example, Amy from the Great Plains discussed how her atheism created stress in her professional life:

There was a very strange dynamic between me and my colleagues. I decided that I wanted a transfer because of discrimination. I was a shoo-in for another job but after I applied, they changed the job description. They wrote back and said, “sorry you’re not qualified.” They pulled out some weird state code and measured my graduate classes with the state code for religious instruction and said I’m disqualified, even though I’ve been teaching for 11 years. I’m pretty certain they did not want to have their religion professor also being known as an atheist. That’s the only thing I can come up with.

Some of the more extreme forms of reported discrimination included property damage, violence, and threats of physical violence. Even though reports of these forms of discrimination were not common in the interviews, these encounters were clearly significant events in the lives of some of the participants. One secular group leader reported that his secular group had a sign stolen from a billboard in his hometown. Another interviewee said his secular group attended a rally and was confronted by individuals who ripped up their signs. Ken from Wisconsin experienced vandalism to his personal property that he felt was a direct response to his well-known secular stances in his community. He estimated the cost of the vandalism to be between \$25,000 and \$35,000.

Other seculars discussed the potential for physical danger related to their secularism. Some of the things the participants said included “there is potential for serious discrimination or

even safety at risk,” “it’s not an exaggeration to say that atheists and humanists that are out about their beliefs could potentially suffer physical harm,” “my husband fears for my safety because I’m an atheist,” “I take every threat seriously,” and “my family was concerned that people might hurt me or that I could get fired.” A few seculars reported specific threats of personal violence. Nathan from Nebraska reported that his secular group encountered angry counter-protesters at a political rally who told members of his group “you’ll get what’s coming to you.” Amy discussed receiving several threats in response to her atheist group’s activities when she said:

I got death threats for starting a [Richard] Dawkins group on campus. I even got death threats to my work email. It was so bad that the President of the college had to send a letter to the paper defending our right to exist. After I created [a national atheist activist organization], I started getting more press and I was getting emails from everywhere. I turned them over to the federal authorities. One email said something like “I hope you have acts of god covered in your insurance because you’re going to need it.” People felt free to write in and wish me dead.

A few secular individuals reported experiencing physical violence due to their secular status. For instance, Elizabeth from Michigan reported being slapped by a Sunday school teacher as a child for stating that she did not believe in god. Another humanist man discussed having rocks and beer cans thrown at members of his secular group during a protest.

While the vast majority of the accounts of discrimination involved interpersonal encounters of unfair treatment by individuals, there were some accounts of institutional discrimination. A few secular individuals recalled discrimination in an official or legal sense such as having to “go through more hoops” to get community recognition for their secular groups.

The high degree of discrimination and especially prejudice reported by leaders of secular groups demonstrates that a secular identity is a stigmatized identity. Research on stigmatized



groups suggests that stigmatized individuals perceive the negativity of their identity and, accordingly, adopt their stigmatized identity as a gradual process that is achieved through several stages (e.g. Smith 2011; Sophie 1985;). In the next section, I examine qualitative data to determine if the same gradual process for identity construction holds true for seculars in the Midwest.

### *Constructing a Secular Identity*

I hypothesize that the construction of a secular identity, as with other stigmatized identities, is a process accomplished in several stages (hypothesis 2). Results from interviews largely support this hypothesis. Nearly all respondents reported that their secular identity was constructed over a period of time ranging from months to years and that it happened in several stages. Evidence that a secular identity was constructed over time included comments like “it happened over a few months,” “steps were involved,” “it was a gradual move that lasted 10 to 15 years,” “it was an evolution,” “it took a while,” and “it wasn’t overnight.” Those who discussed their secular identity construction as a longer process often described their transition to secularism occurring in various steps. Ed from Kansas exemplified this when he said:

Of my friends, I was the first to not believe in Santa, the first to stop watching cartoons ... just a natural skeptic. That’s what got me toward being an atheist. I found church boring. I got every job I could think of to work Sundays to stay out of church. I was an “apatheist”... didn’t care. I would pray occasionally. I would say I don’t have [a religion] when I was young... not until my 20s that I said I was an atheist.

In the previous account, Ed recalled when he finally took on the label of “atheist.” This was a common theme amongst the qualitative interview participants when describing secular identity construction. Participants in this study reported using alternative labels before finally

describing themselves as an atheist. Some of the alternative labels they used to avoid the atheist label included “not religious,” “irreligious,” “apatheist,” “agnostic,” “me-ist,” and “secular.”

This common experience comports with previous research by Smith (2011) who reports that the final step of becoming an atheist is to internalize the label.

Past work on atheists demonstrates the importance of science and logic for the secular identity construction process. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (2006) find that atheists invest a great amount of mental energy into “coming out.” They find that atheists are well versed in issues of religion and science because they put a great deal of effort into making an informed decision when becoming secular. The extensive reliance on science and logic in the process of becoming secular is also a prominent finding in the current study.

Two-thirds of the qualitative interviewees said the process of becoming secular was related to cognitive changes that accompanied changes in belief. Many seculars asserted that their identity construction process included investigations of scientific research or significant shifts in logic. Several respondents cited the importance of reading books on atheism and science in general while undergoing the construction of a secular identity. Four respondents said they began questioning while taking college courses in the natural or behavioral sciences. The same number of respondents cited reading the works of popular contemporary atheist authors (e.g. Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, etc...) while contemplating their secular identity. Five of the respondents mentioned their fondness of science and reason usurping religion as a resource for knowledge and comfort. For example, Eddie, a 37 year-old atheist from Illinois, described how his education helped him replace religion as resource for understanding the world while becoming secular:

I was raised to believe that you don't question [religious explanations]. I think the awakening occurred probably as I was in college and began to read copious amounts of books and information from all the different classes I took. Psychology had a big impact. I took a lot of the humanities classes like sociology and history and that had a big part in looking at the world in objective terms. Then you began to understand things for yourself a bit more.

Prior research shows that the intense process of secular identity construction leads secular individuals to place a great deal of importance on their secular identities (e.g. Altemeyer and Hunsberger 2006; Smith 2011). This was supported in the qualitative interviews with Midwest seculars. Most of the interviewees reported that the processes of intense self-reflection and scientific discovery helped strengthen their secular identities. This finding is best exemplified by the answers I received on a question dealing with religious and secular choice. I asked respondents: "is being religious or not religious a choice?" followed by the question: "could you choose to be religious and believe in god if you decided to do so?" The answers to these questions suggest that 1) Midwest seculars overwhelmingly believe that their secularism is not a choice, 2) Midwest seculars do not believe they will ever become religious or theistic in any way, and 3) Midwest seculars come to these conclusions through examination of rationalism and scientific inquiry during the course of their secular identity construction.

Every interview participant said that their move to (or life-long affiliation with) secularism was not a conscious choice. The interviewees cited their quest for scientific knowledge in their identity construction process as the reason that they do not believe they "chose" to be secular. A common theme from these interviews was that participants found "truth" in science and rationality and that they could not choose to believe in a god or gods with the knowledge they now possess. Adam from Illinois emphasized this point:

I think it's as much of a choice as homosexuality. You can fake it or pretend to be normal but you cannot reject what you know to be true and who you really are. You can't pretend that you're not rational. You can't pretend that reality isn't reality.

Secular interviewees described the importance and finality of their secularism. This point is highlighted by the following comments: "you can't unprogram or unlearn the things that you've learned," "once you go through the coming of age and realize that science is real you can't go back to believing in Santa Clause or the tooth fairy," "now that I know that science is key, I couldn't be a member of a religion in good conscience," and "I couldn't believe if I wanted ... I don't believe the sun will come up ... I know it will." Five seculars underscored the indelible nature of their secularism by claiming that it would take nothing short of physical evidence of god to lead them to become believers. One respondent even reported a personal, supernatural religious experience as a teenager that they now believe to be a psychological misunderstanding of a scientifically explainable experience.

These results show that a gradual transition to secularism is the most common method of identity construction. This falls in line with past work by Smith (2011). A few seculars reported that their secular identities were not constructed over a longer period of time, but that it had always been a part of them. None of the interview participants recalled that they believed in god or the supernatural and then suddenly decided that they did not. In every case, the seculars in this study either came to adopt their secular status later on, in a long, drawn-out process, or they were always secular. This supports prior work by Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) that shows atheists invest a good deal of effort into adopting their atheism and do not take on the label lightly.

The fact that most secular respondents put so much mental and emotional effort into constructing a secular identity seems to explain another major finding in the qualitative data, which is that the majority of seculars rate their secular identity as being important in their lives. The interview participants overwhelmingly reported a strong and indelible secular status that was often derived from the process of constructing a secular identity. The qualitative results mirror results on a survey item that asks secular respondents to rate the importance of their secular status to their identity on a scale of one to 10. The mean for the sample is 7.4 with 57 percent of respondents giving a response of eight or higher (results not shown).

While the qualitative respondents are diverse in terms of their experiences with secular identity construction, the process of secular identity construction can be summarized in the following way:

- 1) Midwest seculars in this study are aware of the stigma related to their secular status.
- 2) Awareness of a stigmatized status is a contributing factor for secular group leaders to adopt their secular identity in a long process that is often accomplished in multiple steps.
- 3) The complex and lengthy process of adopting a secular identity along with the potential for stigmatization leads Midwest seculars to invest a great deal of thought and effort into their secular identity.
- 4) The intense mental effort involved in the achievement of a secular identity likely explains the centrality and indelibility of the secular identity among interviewees.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I use data from a survey and in-depth interviews to explore how secular individuals in the Midwest perceive stigma related to their secular status. Quantitative results show perceived discrimination related to a secular status. Qualitative data from interviews corroborate this finding as interview respondents report numerous instances of prejudice and discrimination stemming from their secular status.

Qualitative results also reveal a variety of ways in which Midwest seculars experience stigma. Results from interviews with group leaders show that prejudice was perceived from social interactions ranging from strange looks to negative or critical comments related to a respondent's atheism. Discrimination was most commonly perceived in the form of a double-standard or loss of opportunities. Interview participants cited interactions with their families and their coworkers as common sources of both prejudice and discrimination. Midwest seculars perceive prejudice more routinely than discrimination. Nonetheless, perceived discrimination is more important for individuals because it often happens in official capacities or involves more extreme consequences such as violence, vandalism, and harassment.

Results from survey data show that atheists are more likely than other seculars to perceive stigma. This supports past research that shows that atheists in particular are heavily stigmatized in the United States (Edgell et al. 2006). In all quantitative analyses, uncertain non-atheists are less likely than non-believing atheists to perceive stigma. This finding suggests that both subjective secular self-identification as well as level of unbelief are important factors for experiencing secular stigma. The differences in perceived stigma between these groups are likely explained by the particular low levels of distrust towards atheists. Furthermore, these findings suggest that a less "hard-lined" secular identity probably elicits lower levels of overall

stigmatization. These findings also imply that both the atheist label and level of unbelief are disconcerting to Americans.

Finally, in this chapter, I report results from qualitative data on the construction of a secular identity. As hypothesized, I find that the vast majority of interviewees construct their secular identity in a lengthy, complex process that is often accomplished in several stages. The data show that the complex nature of secular identity construction at least partially results from seculars recognizing that they are adopting a low-status identity and must come to terms with the implications of the stigmatized status before finally internalizing it as their own. These data also show that the amount of effort that secular participants invest into constructing their secular identities results in a high level of importance placed on their secular status relative to their identities as a whole. The process of secular identity construction comports with Smith's (2011) work on atheist identity construction in that secular statuses are achieved.

These findings also align with Smith's (2011) identity construction work in that social interactions shape the construction of a secular identity. The results in this chapter, however, move this line of research forward by positing that it is not only social interactions that guide secular identity construction but that the societal stigmatization of seculars plays an important role in how seculars construct and maintain their secular identities. The findings in this chapter emphasize that the negative consequences of secular stigma push Midwest seculars to thoroughly explore their beliefs and worldviews during the process of identity construction. Interviews with secular group leaders show that the level of tension that they feel with a religious society strengthens their secular identity, a finding that comports with prior work showing that secular contention with a religious society accounts for the strength of the subculture identity in atheists (e.g. Cimino and Smith 2007). Of course, it is possible that individuals choose not to be secular

while considering a secular identity, but the results of this study suggest that those who achieve a secular identity are mindful of the stigma that accompanies a secular status and consider the implications of stigma when undergoing the construction of secular identity.

The findings here clearly show that secular individuals in the Midwest experience stigma related to their secular status. The question now is: what do they do about it? How do they negotiate a secular status in a region that is highly religious? Do they keep their secularism a secret? Do they try to educate others or use social justice causes to alleviate the stigma associated with secularism? In the next chapter, I explore ways in which Midwest seculars respond to their stigmatization, or, how they manage their secular stigma.



## TABLES

Table 4-1. Frequencies and Percentages of Perceived Stigma, N = 2,242

	Yes		No		Don't Know	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
...been negatively judged	1585	70.7%	244	10.9%	413	18.4%
...been treated unfairly	839	37.4%	760	33.9%	643	28.7%
...experienced discrimination	717	32.0%	882	39.3%	643	28.7%

Table 4-2. Binary Logistic Regressions of Experiencing Negative Judgment Related to a Secular Status

	Model A O.R.	Model B O.R.	Model C O.R.
<i>Secular Status</i>			
Non-believing Atheist (Ref)	--	--	--
Uncertain Atheist	--	.71	.65
Non-believing non-atheist	--	.72 **	.80
Uncertain non-atheist	--	.52 ***	.51 ***
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Age	1.00	--	1.00
Age-Square	1.00 *** <sup>a</sup>	--	1.00 *** <sup>a</sup>
Female	.99	--	1.06
Non-white	.75	--	.78
Bachelor's Degree	.81	--	.82
Income	.93 *	--	.92 **
College Student	.98	--	.99
Rural Residence	.94	--	.95
Urban Residence	1.02	--	1.01
Great Plains Region	1.10	--	1.12
-2 Log Likelihood	2364.91	2682.36	2339.41
BIC	2442.06	2705.51	2439.71

\*  $p \leq .05$  \*\*  $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed test)

<sup>a</sup> Denotes a coefficient that has been rounded up to 1.00. This coefficient has a negative correlation with the dependent variable.

Table 4-3. Binary Logistic Regressions of Experiencing Unfair Treatment Related to a Secular Status

	Model A O.R.	Model B O.R.	Model C O.R.
<i>Secular Status</i>			
Non-believing Atheist (Ref)	--	--	--
Uncertain Atheist	--	.69	.64
Non-believing non-atheist	--	.74 **	.78 *
Uncertain non-atheist	--	.60 ***	.57 ***
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Age	1.00	--	1.00
Age-Square	1.00 ** <sup>a</sup>	--	1.00 ** <sup>a</sup>
Female	1.04	--	1.10
Non-white	.97	--	1.00
Bachelor's Degree	.75 **	--	.75 **
Income	.91 **	--	.90 ***
College Student	.96	--	.97
Rural Residence	.98	--	1.00
Urban Residence	1.01	--	1.01
Great Plains Region	1.28 **	--	1.29 **
-2 Log Likelihood	2647.11	2943.76	2624.67
BIC	2724.26	2966.91	2724.97

\*  $p \leq .05$  \*\*  $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed test)

<sup>a</sup> Denotes a coefficient that has been rounded up to 1.00. This coefficient has a negative correlation with the dependent variable.

Table 4-4. Binary Logistic Regressions of Experiencing Discrimination Related to a Secular Status,

	Model A O.R.	Model B O.R.	Model C O.R.
<i>Secular Status</i>			
Non-believing Atheist (Ref)	--	--	--
Uncertain Atheist	--	.59 *	.50 *
Non-believing non-atheist	--	.76 *	.80
Uncertain non-atheist	--	.65 ***	.62 ***
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Age	.99 *	--	.99
Female	1.04	--	1.09
Non-white	1.06	--	1.08
Bachelor's Degree	.65 ***	--	.64 ***
Income	.93 *	--	.93 **
College Student	.90	--	.92
Rural Residence	1.04	--	1.06
Urban Residence	1.10	--	1.10
Great Plains Region	1.29 **	--	1.30 **
-2 Log Likelihood	2493.98		2794.36
BIC	2571.13		2817.51

\*  $p \leq .05$  \*\*  $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed test)

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SECULAR STIGMA MANAGEMENT

As noted in Chapter Two, there has been a historic and persistent distrust of secular individuals in the United States (Cragun 2012; Edgell et al. 2006; Jacoby 2004). The overwhelming body of literature showing intolerance towards seculars led me to investigate whether or not distrust of seculars in the Midwest translates to perceived stigmatization. In Chapter Four, I find that seculars in the Midwest perceive prejudice and discrimination related to their secular statuses. This chapter takes the research one step further by addressing how Midwest seculars deal with perceived stigma. The difficulties that arise from a stigmatized status often require stigmatized individuals to adopt stigma management strategies (Goffman 1963). These strategies include withdrawal, secrecy, passing, disclosure, educating others, civic involvement, contact “outing,” and neutralization.

First, I examine the prevalence of inward forms of stigma management such as withdrawal, secrecy, and passing. Second, I explore outward forms of stigma management such as disclosure, educating others, civic involvement, and passing. Third, I look at ways in which Midwest seculars use neutralization techniques to justify their secularism. For both inward and outward forms of stigma management, I use a mixed methods approach. For each stigma management technique, I present quantitative results to assess the prevalence of the stigma management techniques and then qualitative findings to contextualize the quantitative results. The examination of neutralization is based on qualitative data from interviews with secular group leaders.

### *Quantitative Results for Inward Stigma Management*

Stigmatized individuals commonly use inward stigma management strategies to manage their stigma. The primary inward stigma management strategies are withdrawal, secrecy, and passing. Stigmatized individuals may avoid negative encounters related to their stigmatized status by disproportionately interacting with other stigmatized individuals, and, whenever possible, “withdrawing” from the company of non-stigmatized individuals (Blinde and Taub 1992; Lee and Craft 2002). In addition to withdrawal, stigmatized individuals often use secrecy to avoid dealing with the anxiety of being a member of a social outgroup (Blinde and Taub 1992; Cain 1991). Prior research also shows that stigmatized individuals often deal with potential negative interactions by “passing” their stigmatized status as a non-stigmatized status (Kando 1972; Lee and Craft 2000).

I hypothesize that a majority of Midwest seculars report using withdrawal, secrecy, and passing (hypothesis 3a). I assess withdrawal with a measure for reporting that “all or most” of a respondents’ friends are secular. To assess secrecy, I examine responses to a survey item that asks if respondents have ever purposely kept their secular status a secret to avoid negative judgment. I assess passing with a survey item that asks if respondents have ever told someone they were religious to avoid negative judgment.

Table 5-1 reports the percent of respondents using each of the three inward stigma management strategies. The findings on secrecy provide mixed support for hypothesis 3a. The majority (72 percent) of respondents report having intentionally kept their secular status a secret. These results demonstrate that secrecy is a common stigma management strategy for Midwest seculars. On the other hand, fewer than half of the respondents use

the withdrawal or passing strategies. Just under one-third of seculars say that most of all of their friends are secular. While this does not support hypothesis 3a, it is important to note that some respondents may not have the option to self-select a secular network due to geographic limitations such as living in a rural area where there are not many other secular individuals. Passing is even less frequently reported than withdrawal. Twenty-one percent of Midwest seculars have told someone they were religious to avoid negative judgment. While only one fifth of the sample reports passing as religious, these results indicate that a sizeable proportion of Midwest seculars have directly dealt with stigma by pretending to be religious.

Next, I examine logistic regression results for inward stigma management strategies. Since Americans are particularly distrusting of atheists, I hypothesize (hypothesis 3b) that atheists are more likely than other seculars to report using withdrawal, secrecy, and passing techniques. I begin regression analyses with the measure of withdrawal (reporting that most or all friends are also secular). Results shown in Table 5-2 partially support this hypothesis. Compared to non-believing atheists, the odds of having most or all secular friends are 56 percent less for uncertain atheists and 37 percent less for uncertain non-atheists (Model C). Non-believing non-atheists, however, do not differ from non-believing atheists. These results suggest that non-belief, rather than an atheist identity, is associated with withdrawal.

Table 5-3 shows results from logistic regression models of keeping a secular status a secret. The results in Model C do not support hypothesis 3b. Non-believing non-atheists and uncertain non-atheists do not meaningfully differ from non-believing

atheists. An additional and surprising result is that uncertain atheists are twice as likely as non-believing atheists to keep their secular status a secret.

Next, I explore logistic regression results for passing as religious (Table 5-4). As with the other two forms of inward stigma management, I hypothesize that atheists are more likely to “pass” their secular status compared to other seculars because they face more societal stigma (hypothesis 3b). Results from binary logistic regressions do not support this hypothesis and instead show that atheists are less likely to pass compared to others seculars. Results from the fully controlled model (Model C) show that uncertain atheists are no different from non-believing atheists with regard to passing as religious. Uncertain non-atheists, however, are nearly twice as likely as non-believing atheists to pass as religious.

I expect that social support is important for the likelihood of using secrecy to manage secular stigma. I hypothesize that perceived family support negatively correlates to secrecy and that Midwest seculars who perceive negative judgment from coworkers are more likely to report using secrecy (Hypothesis 3c). Model D in Table 5-3 shows results from a logistic regression of keeping a secular status a secret with independent variables that measure perceived support. The results from Model D support hypothesis 3c. Compared to those who do not perceive family support, the odds of keeping a secular status a secret are 57 percent less for those who say their family would likely support them if they found out they are secular. The results for potential judgment from coworkers also support hypothesis 3c. Compared to seculars who do not anticipate negative judgment from coworkers, those who say they fear negative judgment from coworkers are more than three times as likely to report ever keeping their secular status a

secret. These results show that those with the support of family are particularly unlikely to use secrecy. Even more profound is the likelihood of seculars who fear judgment from coworkers to keep a secular status a secret. These findings emphasize the importance of having the support of family and peers on the decision to keep a secular status a secret.

I also hypothesize that seculars with a previous religious affiliation are more likely to pass as religious compared to those raised with no religious affiliation (Hypothesis 3e). Results from Model D in Table 5-5 support this hypothesis. The odds of passing as religious are 56 percent greater for those who had a religious affiliation at age 16 compared with those who were raised with no religious affiliation.

#### *Qualitative Results for Inward Stigma Management Strategies*

In assessing the use of withdrawal by secular leaders, I find that just over two-thirds of the qualitative respondents reported that most or all of their friends are also secular (more than twice the proportion reported by seculars in the survey data). The proclivity of secular group leaders to report a highly secular network compared to survey respondents is likely because group leaders are more immersed in secular group work and secular communities and would therefore have a far more secular network as a result. While a large proportion of interview respondents report a highly secular network, the qualitative data reveal that the secular group leaders in this study were not self-selecting secular friends to withdraw for the sake of stigma management. None of the 24 respondents said they selected a secular friendship network to manage secular stigma. In fact, the most common explanation for having a mostly secular network was involvement with secular group work. Another prevalent explanation for having a largely secular

network was that some of the respondents felt their worldview was too far removed from that of religious individuals. For example, Charlie, a 64 year-old secular humanist from Minnesota said he stopped working with a local ecumenical organization associated with his local Unitarian-Universalist church because he became annoyed with the religious tones of the meetings. He told me, “I had to quit. The religious nonsense was just saturated there . . . It’s irritating to be around that absurdity.”

I also asked secular group leaders if they had ever used secrecy to avoid negative judgment. Ten of the 24 interview respondents reported keeping their secular status a secret from others (about half the rate found among survey respondents). Avoiding the stigma associated with their secularism was a motivating factor for those who used secrecy. In most cases, secrecy was employed to avoid negative interactions with religious family members and coworkers. While avoiding negative interactions was the most cited motivation for secrecy, professionalism was also a prevalent theme. Several respondents said they kept their secularism a secret from coworkers because discussing their non-belief at work would be unprofessional.

Group leaders were also asked questions about passing their secular status as a way to manage their secular stigma. As with results from the survey data, a minority of qualitative respondents (one-fourth) reported passing as religious to avoid negative interactions. In most instances, interviewees said that passing as religious involved passing with family members during religious activities such as praying before dinner or attending religious services during the holidays. A few respondents discussed that passing as religious was a way to “keep the peace.” Natalie, a 36 year-old atheist from Illinois discussed passing with her in-laws to alleviate stress:



My husband's parents don't know [we are atheists]. When we visit them, they go to church every day. We would do the rosary together. In the last year, we said we're not going to pretend that we go to church when we don't. Since then, they stopped asking us to pray the rosary. But we never had a conversation. My daughter is five... coming up on the age of first communion. That weighs heavily on my mind because the [in-laws] will have to know at that point.

This quote from Natalie also highlights passing by compartmentalization, which was another common way that group leaders reported passing as non-religious. Natalie is open about her secularism with most of her friends and family but not out to her in-laws. Similarly, 10 out of the 24 group leaders reported passing with certain individuals while remaining out with others. This selective passing is a common stigma management strategy for other stigmatized groups (Kando 1972). Thus, I hypothesize that Midwest seculars pass their secular status as non-secular with specific “unwise” individuals while remaining open to “wise” individuals (hypothesis 3d). The qualitative data support this hypothesis. In some circumstances, professionalism at work was a motivating factor for passing with coworkers. The most common reason for passing through compartmentalization was to avoid conflict with family or because the respondents felt that someone would be hurt to hear about their secularism. This sentiment was articulated by Alex, a 31 year-old atheist from Kansas:

I tend to be fairly open. It's easier to be around people who do know [that I am an atheist]. I'm never going to break it to my grandma though. I'd like her to go to her grave thinking I'm Catholic. It's more upsetting to her than the benefit of me being an open and out atheist. I hold my tongue in situations where it's going to be an issue.

I hypothesize that seculars pass their secular status as a “softer” stigmatized status to mitigate negative judgment (Hypothesis 3f). This hypothesis is largely supported as

two-thirds of the qualitative interview respondents reported softening their label in one way or another. Nearly all respondents who had softened a secular label did so with a vague statement like “I’m not religious” or “I don’t go to church.” Roughly half of the atheist interviewees said they had passed as something other than atheist because they were afraid of the response that the term “atheist” would elicit. This was exemplified by Charlie from Minnesota who said:

I’ve used the word “non-theist” ... “Atheist” has negative connotations of being immoral. The words are so close together in definition but the term “non-theist”... that takes the edge off. A lot of times I say I’m a member of the UU fellowships. “Atheist” is a loaded term. For a lot of people, it means more than “without a belief in theism.” The word has some semantic baggage.<sup>6</sup>

The data from qualitative interviews show that, to varying degrees, Midwest secular group leaders utilize inward forms of stigma management. In general, they find comfort with secular social networks by withdrawing from the company of “unwise” individuals (much more so than the secular survey respondents). They are also likely to use secrecy to avoid negative interactions and to uphold a degree of professionalism in their place of employment. The qualitative data also show that many of the interviewees used passing to avoid stressful and awkward situations. The most prevalent form of passing was to soften the negative connotations associated with the “atheist” label. So far, this chapter has focused on inward strategies of stigma management related to hiding a secular status. In the following two sections, I explore quantitative and qualitative data to

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<sup>6</sup> UU stands for Unitarian-Universalist. This is a denomination that is friendly to secular individuals. Consequently, several participants in this study reported some kind of affiliation with a Unitarian-Universalist congregation.

assess the use of outward forms of stigma management to determine how secular individuals in the Midwest employ more proactive forms of stigma management.

### *Quantitative Results for Outward Stigma Management Strategies*

In this section, I present quantitative findings for how Midwest seculars use outward stigma management strategies. These strategies include disclosure, education, civic involvement, and contact outing. Prior research shows that members of stigmatized groups outwardly deal with stigma by disclosing their stigmatized status to relieve stress (e.g. Cain 1991; Rosario et al. 2001; Winnick and Bodkin 2006), educating others to engender positive societal attitudes toward the stigmatized group (e.g. Blinde and Taub1992; Goffman 1963), utilizing civic involvement to affect public perceptions of outgroups (e.g. Corrigan and Matthews 2003), and outing themselves to acquaintances to reduce societal stigma (e.g. Corrigan and Matthews 2003; Link and Cullen 1986).

Table 5-5 shows results for reported use of outward stigma management strategies. As hypothesized, a majority of Midwest seculars report using educating techniques (hypothesis 4f). Specifically, 81 percent of respondents report having educated someone else about seculars, 61 percent report using civic involvement, and 60 percent report outing themselves as secular.

Table 5-6 displays results from OLS regressions for the Secular Disclosure Index (SDI). While I do not develop any specific hypothesis with regard to differences in the levels of disclosure between atheists and other seculars, results shown in Model C demonstrate that uncertain atheists and uncertain non-atheists score significantly lower

than non-believing atheists on the SDI. These results show that Midwest seculars with an uncertain belief about god are relatively unlikely to disclose their secular status.

Next, I assess the relationship between perceived stigma and levels of disclosure. I hypothesize that seculars with high levels of perceived stigma have relatively low levels of disclosure (Hypothesis 4e). Results shown in Model D somewhat support this hypothesis. While perceived prejudice is not associated with levels of disclosure, perceived discrimination is associated with a .76 reduction in the SDI.

I also assess the importance of family and peer support for levels of disclosure. I hypothesize that seculars who perceive greater support from family and coworkers have higher levels of disclosure than seculars who perceive less support from family and coworkers (hypothesis 4c). Results from Model E in Table 5-6 support Hypothesis 4c as those who perceive family support score 1.83 higher on the SDI than those who do not perceive support.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Model E also shows that those who fear potential negative judgment from coworkers due to their secular status score 2.69 lower on the SDI, on average, than those who do not fear negative judgment. These results suggest that perceived social support from family and peers is an important factor in how comfortable secular individuals are in disclosing their secular status.

Turning to the dependent variable of educating others about seculars, I hypothesize that atheists are more likely than other seculars to use educating strategies of educating others, civic involvement, and contact outing (hypothesis 4g). Results in Model

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<sup>7</sup> Because one of the items for the SDI asks about comfort in disclosing a secular status to family members, I ran separate regressions to separate the statistical importance of family in the event that comfort in family disclosure might drive the relationship between perceived family support and overall levels of disclosure. Separate OLS regression results (not shown) reveal that while the comfort in telling family item has a stronger correlation to perceived family support than the overall SDI, the omission of this item from the index does not significantly change the results shown in Model E.

C of Table 5-7 report odds ratios of educating others. The findings provide partial support for this hypothesis. Compared to non-believing atheists, the odds of educating others about seculars are 31 percent less for uncertain non-atheists. Non-believing non-atheists and uncertain atheists, however, are shown to be no different from non-believing atheists when it comes to educating others.

As with the stigma management strategy of educating others about seculars, I hypothesize that atheists are more likely than other seculars to utilize civic involvement (hypothesis 4g). Results from logistic regressions of reports of civic involvement in secular causes are shown in Table 5-8. Findings from Model C provide some support for Hypothesis 4g. The odds for civic involvement in a secular cause are 33 percent less for uncertain non-atheists compared to non-believing atheists. Uncertain atheists and non-believing non-atheists, however, are shown to be no different from non-believing atheists.

I also hypothesize that atheists are more likely than other seculars to use contact (hypothesis 4g). Results shown in Model C of Table 5-9 offer some support for this hypothesis. Compared to non-believing atheists, the odds of using contact are 47 percent less for uncertain non-atheists. Uncertain atheists and non-believing non-atheists, however, do not differ from non-believing atheists with regard to the use of contact. Overall, these results show that non-believing atheists often differ from uncertain non-atheist in their likelihood of using outward stigma management techniques, which suggests that the more ardent stance of non-believing atheists is conducive to the use of more proactive forms of stigma management compared to the “softer” secular status of uncertain non-atheists.

### *Qualitative Results for Outward Stigma Management*

I begin with a qualitative assessment of disclosure from the interviews with the 24 secular group leaders. I hypothesize that seculars are disproportionately likely to disclose their secular status if they find keeping their status a secret to be stressful or difficult to manage (hypothesis 4a). Qualitative results provide some support for this hypothesis.

One-third of the interview participants reported disclosing their status due to complications associated with keeping it a secret. Six of the eight respondents who said they used disclosure in this way cited online social networking or internet involvement with secular groups as a problem for keeping their secular status a secret from relatives and coworkers. In many cases, respondents were confronted by acquaintances who discovered their secular status on a social networking website like Facebook. One respondent said someone “googled” their name on the internet and found out about their atheist activism. In these cases, the seculars had no choice but to disclose their secular status. Some of them knew that they might be found out due to their online secular activist activity and decided that maintaining secretive activities from family and peers was too difficult. These sentiments are exemplified by Nathan from Nebraska who said “I don’t want to live in secret; it’s frustrating to live with discrimination but I don’t want to lead a double life and keep everything secret.”

A second hypothesis (hypothesis 4b) related to disclosure is that seculars are likely to engage in preventative disclosure of their secular status to avoid negative consequences that might occur if their stigmatized status becomes known later on in their relationships. Results from qualitative data provide limited support for this hypothesis. None of the respondents reported explicitly using preventative disclosure to preserve

future relationships. The only support for hypothesis 4b is found with comments related to dating. Three secular respondents indicated that they would want to know right away if a potential partner would be comfortable with their secularism because they did not want to invest time in a relationship that might be jeopardized if their partner was uncomfortable with their secular status. This was noted by Nathan from Nebraska who said “secularism isn’t a deal breaker for partnership but it’s something I want to know right away.”

Turning to the idea of educating others about a stigmatized status, I asked interviewees if they could recall educating someone else about secular individuals. The majority (19 of the 24) of group leaders reported educating someone about seculars in order to manage stigma. Representative comments included “I look forward to opportunities to talk to religious individuals,” “I have to do it all the time,” and “I constantly try to explain how my moral compass operates to others.”

As with educating others, secular group leaders reported civic involvement as a common outward stigma management strategy. A little over half of the secular group leaders discussed using civic involvement as a way to combat secular stigma. Interview participants mentioned different motivations for engaging in civic involvement including the desire to highlight positive aspects of seculars and secularism. This was demonstrated with comments related to civic involvement like “I’m trying to improve the image of seculars and freethinkers,” “we’ve got to show people that atheists are good people,” and “I prepped the atheists to be nice ... we can’t slam religion ... we just gotta’ say ‘this is how we live and this is what we’re all about.’” Other motivating factors for civic involvement included public education about seculars, demonstrating for legal issues

important to secular causes such as the separation of church and state, demonstrating in solidarity with non-secular groups for social justice causes (e.g. same-sex marriage and reproductive rights), and protesting in order to give seculars “a public voice.” Nathan from Nebraska described his group’s activities by saying: “we would stand on the other corner [from a religious demonstrator] with a sign saying ‘humanists accept all people’ - just countering his vitriol and dogma with positive messages - like a sign that said ‘there is no hell’ with a happy face on it.”

I also asked the secular group leaders if they had ever used contact outing where they had purposely “outed” themselves to others to reduce stigma towards seculars. Fifteen of the 24 respondents reported outing themselves as secular with the intent of reducing societal stigma towards seculars. Responses from interviewees suggested that “outing” was a common occurrence. Representative comments included “I do it all the time,” “I’ve outed myself in the community,” and “I declared [my atheism] on Facebook.” Jason, a 23 year-old atheist from Illinois, said, “I had a friend who was talking about being a Christian and she assumed I had Christian values and I said ‘no I just have human values.’” While many instances of “outing” occurred in an organic fashion between the secular individuals and their acquaintances, such as the example from Jason, a few respondents discussed outing themselves to as many people as they felt comfortable to reduce stigma. Common tactics for public outings included using social media like Facebook as well as the use of newspapers to announce a secular status in order to reduce societal stigma.

While the secular group leaders utilized diverse methods in outing themselves, the reason for outing was consistent amongst the responses: the interview participants wanted



to reduce stigma and make secularism more acceptable. This was often accomplished by outing themselves to acquaintances with the goal of demonstrating that there are a lot of seculars “out there.” This strategy is similar to the outing campaigns employed by advocates of LGBTQ groups in the 1960s and 1970s – come out to those who already like you and they will be less likely to maintain or develop prejudiced views towards the stigmatized group. This sentiment is best exemplified by Alex from Kansas who referenced a quote from an atheist website advocating outing when he said “the quote about atheists outing themselves is really true here – ‘it didn’t change how I viewed you; it changed how I viewed atheism.’ That really sums it up.”

#### *Qualitative Results for Neutralization Techniques*

In addition to inward and outward forms of stigma management, prior literature shows that stigmatized individuals often use neutralization techniques to mitigate the negative effects of stigmatization. Sykes and Matza (1957) identify different strategies of neutralization including “condemning the condemners,” and “appealing to higher loyalties.” I hypothesize that seculars use neutralization to manage their stigmatized status (hypothesis 5). I assessed this hypothesis by asking secular group leaders if they had ever defended their secular status to others, and if so, how they went about it. Hypothesis 5 is supported as all three of the neutralization techniques discussed by Sykes and Matza (1957) were reported by the secular group leaders.

The most prevalent neutralization technique reported by secular respondents was “appealing to higher loyalties.” Literature on neutralization shows that stigmatized individuals may justify their stigma by citing loyalty to a cause that supersedes

conforming to societal norms (Sykes and Matza 1957). The qualitative data suggest that Midwest secular group leaders tend to appeal to science and reason as the “higher loyalty.” Fifteen of the 24 secular interviewees justified their secularism by reporting that they were compelled to incorporate scientific study and logical reasoning into their worldview, which in turn, influenced their secularism. Some of the comments about science and reason included “I require observations and data before I can believe something,” “I don’t see evidence for a supernatural being... if I did, I would change my mind,” and “now that I know that science is key, I couldn’t be a member of a religion in good conscience.” In these accounts, the secular leaders reported that they were not capable of theistic belief because they were compelled to uphold tenets of science and reason. This is exemplified by a quote from Lindsey from Illinois:

Atheism just makes sense to me. I don’t want to say there is no proof but that’s really what it is. It seems really hard to believe that some historical text written by man is a direct order from god. Why would a supernatural being want that? I’m more scientific-minded than to believe in the supernatural.

Another neutralization technique discussed by Sykes and Matza (1957) that was prevalent in the qualitative data is to “condemn the condemners.” This neutralization technique provides justification for a stigmatized status by discrediting those who criticize the stigmatized individuals. Fourteen of the 24 interviewees provided comments that fit into this category of neutralization. In “condemning the condemners,” secular group leaders discussed their ire with various dimensions of religion including religious leaders, denominations and congregations, and religious texts.

The most common form of “condemning” expressed by interviewees was to point out what they perceive to be illogical dimensions of religion. Some of the comments on this subject included “I noticed contradictions in the bible,” “[theistic believers] are making an extraordinary claim about the world,” and “I want to ask [theistic believers] how is it possible to be accepting of faith at [their] age and have an imaginary friend.” Isabel from Illinois expanded on this sentiment when she stated “the notion of a personal god is ridiculous - to think that I can communicate with a person or entity and get a raise from my boss. That’s when I started to see that religion doesn’t encourage people to think for themselves.”

Another form of “condemning” that secular interviewees engaged in was to point out the negative aspects of religion or to highlight harmful things done by religious individuals. Comments along these lines included “faith causes problems,” “religious people have done terrible things in the name of religion,” and “religious texts promote an evil morality.” There were also a few personal stories of “condemning the condemners.” For instance, Ed from Kansas reported that his atheist group was treated poorly by leaders of a Baptist church. Jen from Nebraska asserted that the leaders in the “cult” she was raised in arranged romantic and sometimes abusive relationships amongst members. A more extreme story of condemning the condemners comes from Luke from Wisconsin:

[My friend] was Catholic and went on a retreat with his youth pastors as a kid and he got molested. This is during the time that stories of the abuse started coming out. How can you have a belief in god if one of his messengers would molest children? I couldn’t go along with something like that.

A third form of neutralization observed by secular group leaders was “redefining the situation.” Stigmatized individuals may justify their stigmatized status by redefining the underlying assumptions of their social situation to neutralize the negative perceptions of their stigmatized status (Park 2002). Of the 24 group leaders that participated in qualitative interviews, 11 reported using neutralization by redefining the situation. A common way in which secular respondents redefined their secularism was to emphasize positive aspects of secularism. Some of the comments from respondents included “being an atheist is a proactive lifestyle because it encourages you to solve your own problems” and “most atheists I know are some of the best people I’ve met.” Secular respondents also redefined the situation by defining their secularism as a valid alternative to religion. In some cases, this was conveyed by asserting that morality is not solely a religious concept and can exist in secular philosophies. Some comments on the equivalence of secular morality to religious morality included “I think people would be good to each other whether there's a god or not,” “morality doesn’t come from god; it’s for the betterment of society,” and “I break it down into basic morals we learned from pre-ancestors like don’t steal or lie ... the rest of morals are cultural; atheists are correct in rejecting those morals.” Secular group leaders also viewed secular activities as equivalent alternatives to religious activities. For example, Luke from Wisconsin said “people get into religion for the music and fellowship and human connections. Atheists get those things from other places.”

In addition to the primary forms of neutralization outlined in this section, there were other ways in which seculars justified their secularism. For example, Amy from the Great Plains region reported feeling that she was neurologically “wired” to be an atheist.

Natalie from Illinois recalled a situation regarding a medical emergency when she said, “I was recently in the I.C.U. thinking I would not pray. I thought, ‘if there’s a god who will leave two little children without their mother for the rest of their lives, then fuck him.’”

All of the interview participants were able to articulate complex and often unique ways in which they had neutralized their stigma. This finding is important because it shows that secular stigma management is not just about keeping secrets or feigning religion, or about “coming out” and publicly educating against stereotypes. For these interview participants, managing stigma is also about the mental process of justifying and normalizing their secularism.

### *Conclusion*

In this Chapter, I find that Midwest seculars utilize both inward and outward forms of stigma management in addition to neutralization techniques. The quantitative results for inward stigma management show that the secrecy strategy is far more common than the strategies of passing and withdrawal. Results from qualitative interviews showed that passing as religious was not as common as passing with a “softer” status (e.g. identifying as agnostic instead of atheist). As with passing, a minority of survey respondents reported that all or most of their friends are secular (the measure for withdrawal). Of course, having most or all secular friends is only one indicator of withdrawal. Past literature identifies other withdrawal strategies such as limiting interactions to those with individuals who are “wise” to a stigmatized status (Blinde and Taub 1992; Lee and Craft 2002). This alternate withdrawal strategy was evident in results

from qualitative data that showed that group leaders often felt most comfortable interacting with acquaintances who are “wise” to their secular status.

Analyses of the influence of secular identification on inward stigma management techniques provide conflicting results. I expected that atheists would be more likely than other seculars to utilize inward stigma management strategies due to the particularly low level of tolerance towards atheists in mainstream American society. In line with this expectation, I find that non-believing atheists are more likely to use withdrawal compared to seculars with “uncertain” levels of unbelief. Non-believing atheists, however, are less likely than uncertain non-atheists to use secrecy or to pass as religious.

What might account for non-believing atheists’ (compared to other secular groups) greater likelihood to use withdrawal but not secrecy and passing? One explanation might be that the survey items for secrecy and passing explicitly ask if these strategies were employed to avoid negative judgments while the survey item for withdrawal is a latent measure. The finding that non-believing atheists are more likely to withdraw may be misleading, and, furthermore, it may signal that the measure for withdrawal (reporting that most or all friends are also secular) is most likely measuring involvement in secular networks. The finding that non-believing atheists are less likely than other seculars to pass and use secrecy suggests that their “hardlined” secular status makes them more likely to be “out” about their secularism. This proposition is discussed in more detail later in this section. Contrary to my hypotheses, atheists do not appear to be less likely than other seculars to utilize inward stigma management techniques.

In contrast to inward stigma management, Midwest seculars report high levels of outward stigma management. The mean score on the SDI (with a range of five to 25) is

18.1. Additionally, a majority of Midwest seculars report participating in civic involvement for secular causes and using contact “outing” to manage stigma. Also, more than four out of five survey respondents report having educated someone else about seculars. The prevalence of outward stigma management aligns with findings from the qualitative data. Interviews with group leaders reveal that most of these individuals had participated in outward forms of stigma management. A majority of interviewees cited regular involvement in civic activities for secular causes and educating other about seculars. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative data paint a picture of Midwest seculars as active and outgoing with regard to their secular activities. Despite some evidence of inward stigma management, outward forms of stigma management appear to be more commonplace among secular individuals.

Results from this chapter show differences in outward stigma management with regard to secular identification. Uncertain atheists and uncertain non-atheists scored significantly lower than non-believing atheists on the SDI. This finding suggests that uncertainty about theistic belief decreases comfort in disclosing a secular status. This is a somewhat surprising finding because prior research (e.g. Edgell et al. 2006) suggests that the “atheist” label is more important in determining the decision to be “out” about a stigmatized status. As with perceived prejudice and discrimination (discussed in Chapter Four), comfort in disclosure is influenced more by certainty of non-belief than by the “atheist” label.

Another important finding from this chapter is that perceived support from family and coworkers is an important factor for reports of both secrecy and disclosure. Results show that perceived support from family correlates to less secrecy and more comfort in

disclosure. Additionally, perceived negative judgments from coworkers is associated with more secrecy and less comfort in disclosure. These findings show that seculars may gain a great deal of comfort from having the support of family and friends. They also suggest that knowledge of a supportive social network facilitates the ability to be “out,” which is important because past research on stigmatized groups show that being “out” can provide psychological benefits (Cain 1991; Rosario et al. 2001).

Results from qualitative interviews showed that leaders of Midwest secular groups neutralized the negative aspects of their secular statuses in several ways that comport with Sykes and Matza’s (1957) classic work on neutralization. Specifically, Midwest secular respondents used the neutralization techniques of “appealing to higher loyalties,” and “condemning the condemners.” Secular group leaders appealed to higher loyalties by citing science and reason as a higher calling that superseded the cultural norm to hold a theistic belief and they condemned the condemners by pointing out what they considered to be the illogical position of religious individuals or highlighting the negative things done in the name of religion. Comporting with other research on stigmatized individuals (e.g. Park 2002), secular group leaders also neutralized stigma by redefining their secularism as a benevolent worldview and presenting their secularism as a valid alternative to religion. Nearly all the group leaders felt the need to “justify” their secularism. This demonstrates their awareness of the ubiquity of religion in society as well as the stigma associated with having a secular status. The process of neutralizing a secular status shows that seculars perceive themselves to be embattled in a religious world. This comports with research that suggests secular individuals see themselves as a



distinct subculture separate from the religious majority in their communities (Cimino and Smith 2007).

In Chapter Four, I found that Midwest seculars perceived stigma related to their secular status. In the current chapter, I expand on reports of perceived stigma by showing that Midwest seculars manage their stigma through the use of multiple stigma management strategies. What are the implications of perceiving and managing stigma related to a secular status? Past empirical and theoretical work suggests that societal stigma can lead to negative self-perceptions that may have adverse effects on mental well-being (e.g. Allport 1954; Goffman 1963). In the next chapter, I explore the consequences of secular stigma perception and stigma management on the mental well-being of Midwest seculars. Chapter Six sets out to answer two primary questions. First, does perceiving stigma related to a secular status associate with mental well-being? Secondly, does managing secular stigma exacerbate or attenuate those associations?

Table 5-1. Frequencies and Percentages for Inward Stigma Management Strategies

	Yes		No		Don't Know	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Most or all friends are secular	707	31.5%	1535	68.5%	--	--
Purposely kept secular status a secret	1605	71.6%	613	27.3%	24	1.1%
Passed as religious to avoid negative judgment	465	20.7%	1742	77.7%	35	1.6%

Table 5-2. Binary Logistic Regressions of Reporting Most or All Friends are Secular

	Model A O.R.	Model B O.R.	Model C O.R.
<i>Secular Status</i>			
Non-believing Atheist (Ref)	--	--	--
Uncertain Atheist	--	.54 *	.44 **
Non-believing non-atheist	--	.90	.90
Uncertain non-atheist	--	.65 ***	.63 ***
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Age	.98 ***	--	.98 ***
Age-Square	1.00 ***	--	1.00 ***
Female	.96	--	1.01
Non-white	.86	--	.88
Bachelor's Degree	1.37 **	--	1.37 **
Income	.97	--	.96
College Student	1.24	--	1.26
Rural Residence	.98	--	.99
Urban Residence	1.79 ***	--	1.82 ***
Great Plains Region	.92	--	.94
-2 Log Likelihood	2440.90	2779.91	2426.98
BIC	2518.05	2803.05	2527.28

\*  $p \leq .05$  \*\*  $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed test)

Table 5-3. Binary Logistic Regression for Purposely Kept a Secular Status a Secret to Avoid Judgment

	Model A O.R.	Model B O.R.	Model C O.R.	Model D O.R.
<i>Perceived Support</i> <sup>b</sup>				
Supportive Family	--	--	--	.43 ***
Coworkers Might Judge	--	--	--	3.18 ***
<i>Secular Status</i>				
Non-believing Atheist (Ref)	--	--	--	--
Uncertain Atheist	--	2.22 **	2.01 *	2.32 **
Non-believing non-atheist	--	1.08	1.10	1.17
Uncertain non-atheist	--	.99	.92	.95
<i>Control Variables</i>				
Age	.99	--	1.00 <sup>a</sup>	.99
Age-Square	1.00 *	--	1.00 * <sup>a</sup>	--
Female	1.69 ***	--	1.69 ***	1.68 ***
Non-white	.55 **	--	.56 **	.57 **
Bachelor's Degree	1.09	--	1.09	1.17
Income	1.03	--	1.03	1.04
College Student	1.20	--	1.18	1.27
Rural Residence	1.11	--	1.10	1.01
Urban Residence	.91	--	.90	.89
Great Plains Region	1.21 *	--	1.21 *	1.16
-2 Log Likelihood	2354.96	2667.93	2347.17	1602.57
BIC	2432.11	2691.08	2447.47	1705.96

\*  $p \leq .05$  \*\*  $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed test)

<sup>a</sup> Denotes a coefficient that has been rounded up to 1.00. This coefficient has a negative correlation with the dependent variable.

<sup>b</sup> Regressions using these variables use a smaller sample of those who are employed at least part-time (N=1,612)

Table 5-4. Binary Logistic Regressions for Passed as Religious to Avoid Negative Judgment

	Model A O.R.	Model B O.R.	Model C O.R.	Model D O.R.
Religious at 16	--	--	--	1.56 ***
<i>Secular Status</i>				
Non-believing Atheist (Ref)	--	--	--	--
Uncertain Atheist	--	1.82 *	1.62	1.54
Non-believing non-atheist	--	1.07	1.17	1.13
Uncertain non-atheist	--	1.91 ***	1.97 ***	1.89 ***
<i>Control Variables</i>				
Age	.98 ***	--	.99 **	.98 ***
Age-Square	--	--	1.00 * <sup>a</sup>	--
Female	1.03	--	.95	.96
Non-white	1.00	--	.95	.96
Bachelor's Degree	1.17	--	1.14	1.14
Income	1.02	--	1.02	1.02
College Student	1.14	--	1.26	1.14
Rural Residence	1.27	--	1.27	1.27
Urban Residence	1.06	--	1.05	1.07
Great Plains Region	1.28 **	--	1.27 *	1.25 *
-2 Log Likelihood	2049.03	2263.29	2021.75	2012.21
BIC	2118.47	2286.45	2122.05	2112.51

\*  $p \leq .05$  \*\*  $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed test)

<sup>a</sup> Denotes a coefficient that has been rounded up to 1.00. This coefficient has a negative correlation with the dependent variable.

Table 5-5. Frequencies and Percentages for Outward Stigma Management Strategies

	Yes		No		Don't Know		Mean
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	
Secular Disclosure Index (25 Points)	--	--	--	--	--	--	18.1
Educated Someone About Seculars	1821	81.2%	388	17.3%	33	1.5%	--
Civic Involvement for Secular Cause	1349	60.2%	861	38.4%	32	1.4%	--
Used Contact	1331	59.4%	787	35.1%	124	5.5%	--

Table 5-6. OLS Regressions for Secular Disclosure Index

	Model A		Model B		Model C		Model D		Model E	
	b	S.E.	b	S.E.	b	S.E.	b	S.E.	b	S.E.
Support Factors <sup>a</sup>										
Supportive Family									1.83 ***	.21
Coworkers Might Judge									-2.69 ***	.21
Perceived Stigma										
Prejudice	--		--		--		.07	.23	--	
Discrimination	--		--		--		-.76 ***	.22	--	
Secular Status										
Non-believing Atheist	--		--		--		--		--	
Uncertain Atheist	--		-1.49 **	.52	-1.36 **	.52	-1.45 **	.51	-1.51 **	.49
Non-believ. non-atheist	--		-.37	.25	-.36	.25	-.39	.25	-.48 *	.24
Uncertain non-atheist	--		-.96 ***	.27	-.71 **	.27	-.77 **	.27	-.81 **	.26
Control Variables										
Age	.00	.01	--		.00	.01	.00	.01	.01 *	.01
Age-Square	.00 ***	.00	--		.00 ***	.00	.00 ***	.00	--	
Female	-1.49 ***	.20	--		-1.41 ***	.20	-1.40 ***	.20	-1.28 ***	.19
Non-white	.28	.42	--		.30	.42	.32	.42	.15	.40
Bachelor's Degree	-.58 **	.21	--		-.57 **	.21	-.65 **	.21	-.75 ***	.20
Income	-.05	.07	--		-.06	.07	-.07	.07	-.12	.06
College Student	-.50	.29	--		-.47	.29	-.47	.29	-.49	.26
Rural Residence	-.54 *	.23	--		-.51 *	.23	-.50 *	.23	-.37	.23
Urban Residence	.83 ***	.25	--		.85 ***	.25	.87 ***	.25	.81 ***	.24
Great Plains Region	-.55 **	.19	--		-.53 **	.19	-.49 *	.19	-.32	.18
R-Square	.06		.01		.07		.07		.15	

\*  $p \leq .05$  \*\*  $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed test)

<sup>a</sup> Regressing using these variables use a smaller sample of those who are employed at least part-time (N=1,612)

Table 5-7. Binary Logistic Regressions for Educated Someone about Seculars

	Model A O.R.	Model B O.R.	Model C O.R.
<i>Secular Status</i>			
Non-believing Atheist (Ref)	--	--	--
Uncertain Atheist	--	1.04	.94
Non-believing non-atheist	--	.82	.85
Uncertain non-atheist	--	.73 *	.69 *
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Age	.99	--	.99
Age-Square	--	--	--
Female	1.06	--	1.10
Non-white	1.41	--	1.45
Bachelor's Degree	.87	--	.88
Income	.94	--	.94
College Student	1.21	--	1.22
Rural Residence	.95	--	.95
Urban Residence	.85	--	.85
Great Plains Region	1.09	--	1.10
-2 Log Likelihood	1922.86	2159.85	1915.29
BIC	1992.30	2183.00	2007.87

\*  $p \leq .05$  \*\*  $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed test)

Table 5-8. Binary Logistic Regressions for Civic Involvement for Secular Cause

	Model A O.R.	Model B O.R.	Model C O.R.
<i>Secular Status</i>			
Non-believing Atheist (Ref)	--	--	--
Uncertain Atheist	--	.92	.88
Non-believing non-atheist	--	.87	.85
Uncertain non-atheist	--	.70 **	.67 ***
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Age	1.01 *	--	1.01 *
Age-Square	--	--	--
Female	1.19	--	1.24 *
Non-white	1.33	--	1.36
Bachelor's Degree	.88	--	.88
Income	.99	--	.98
College Student	1.24	--	1.25
Rural Residence	.89	--	.90
Urban Residence	1.38 **	--	1.37 **
Great Plains Region	.91	--	.92
-2 Log Likelihood	2701.33	3005.83	2690.80
BIC	2770.77	3028.98	2783.38

\*  $p \leq .05$  \*\*  $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed test)

Table 5-9. Binary Logistic Regressions for Purposely Used Contact "Outing"

	Model A O.R.	Model B O.R.	Model C O.R.
<i>Secular Status</i>			
Non-believing Atheist (Ref)	--	--	--
Uncertain Atheist	--	.87	.80
Non-believing non-atheist	--	.88	.89
Uncertain non-atheist	--	.57 ***	.53 ***
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Age	.99	--	.99
Age-Square	--	--	--
Female	1.33 ***	--	1.43 ***
Non-white	.92	--	.97
Bachelor's Degree	.89	--	.89
Income	.98	--	.98
College Student	.98	--	.99
Rural Residence	.94	--	.94
Urban Residence	.83	--	.82
Great Plains Region	1.14	--	1.16
-2 Log Likelihood	2715.11	3006.55	2690.19
BIC	2784.55	3029.70	2782.77

\*  $p \leq .05$  \*\*  $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed test)

## CHAPTER SIX

### SECULAR STIGMA AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

In this chapter, I explore ways in which Midwest seculars experience psychological distress related to their secular status. Specifically, I investigate the implications of secular identification, perceived stigma, and stigma management as they relate to psychological distress. Research on secularism and mental health suggests that seculars are at greater risk for psychological distress because religious doubt, low levels of religiosity, low levels of religious participation, and religious non-affiliation are all positively correlated with poor mental well-being (Gauthier et al. 2006; George et al. 2000; Krause et al. 1999; Pargament 1997). I employ a mixed methods approach to assess correlates of psychological distress. I use quantitative methods to examine ways in which secular identity, perceived stigma, and stigma management relate to distress directly related to a secular status (direct distress) as well as a measure of overall psychological distress (general distress). I also report results from qualitative data related to the distress of Midwest secular group leaders. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of implications for the psychological well-being of secular individuals residing in the Midwest.

#### *Quantitative Results for Psychological Distress*

I use two items from the Midwest Secular Survey to measure psychological distress. The first is a measure of whether or not a survey respondent has experienced distress related to their secular status (direct distress) and the other is a measure of



general distress, which is an index for psychological distress (CES-D).<sup>8</sup> Results displayed in Table 6-1 show that nearly half (47 percent) of survey respondents report experiencing distress directly related to their secularism. The mean score for the CES-D is 2.04 with a range of zero to 20.

Binary logistic regression results for experiencing distress directly related to a secular status are displayed in Table 6-2. Poisson regression results for the CES-D index are shown in Table 6-3. The findings from regression analyses provide mixed results with regard to the association between secular identification and psychological distress. Results from Model C in Table 6-2 show that direct distress does not vary by secular identification. Uncertain non-atheists, however, differ from non-believing atheists with regard to general distress. Specifically, results from Model C in Table 6-3 show that the expected CES-D score is 14 percent greater ( $e^{.13} = 1.14 - 1 = .14$ ) for uncertain non-atheists than for non-believing atheists.

I hypothesize that seculars who perceive themselves as stigmatized are disproportionately likely to experience psychological distress compared to seculars who do not perceive themselves as stigmatized (hypothesis 6a). Results from regression analyses support this hypothesis. Binary logistic regression results from Model D in Table 6-2 demonstrate that individuals who perceive both secular prejudice and discrimination are roughly twice as likely to report direct distress compared to those who do not perceive prejudice and discrimination. Perceived prejudice is also linked to general distress. Results from Model D in Table 6-3 demonstrate that the expected CES-D score is 12 percent greater for those who perceive secular prejudice compared to those who do not. Discrimination is not associated with general distress.

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<sup>8</sup> This is a five-item CES-D index developed by Perreira and colleagues (2005).

Next, I explore the relationship between secular identity salience and psychological distress. I hypothesize that Midwest seculars who rate their secular identity as more important to their overall identity are disproportionately likely to report psychological distress compared to seculars who rate their secular identity as less important to their overall identity (hypothesis 6b). This hypothesis is partially supported. While secular identity salience is not related to general distress, it is positively associated with direct distress. Binary logistic regression results from Model E in Table 6-2 show that for each one-unit increase in the secular identity salience scale, the odds of experiencing distress related to a secular status increase by 14 percent.

Turning to the relationship between inward stigma management strategies and psychological distress, I hypothesize that Midwest seculars who report using withdrawal, secrecy, and passing (hypothesis 6c) are relatively likely to experience psychological distress. Results from logistic and Poisson regressions for results reporting the association between withdrawal and distress do not support hypothesis 6c. Withdrawal is not related to general distress, and, contrary to my hypothesis, withdrawal is negatively associated with direct distress. Logistic regression results from Model F in Table 6-2 show that the odds of reporting direct distress are 21 percent lower for those who report that most or all of their friends are secular. Regression results for associations between secrecy and distress provide mixed support for hypothesis 6c. While using secrecy is not related to general distress, logistic regression results from Model F in Table 6-2 show that those who report keeping their secular status a secret are nearly three and a half times more likely to report direct distress compared to those who do not use secrecy. I find support for hypothesis 6c with regard to the association between passing and distress. Results

from Model F in Table 6-2 show that the odds of reporting direct distress are 80 percent higher for those who report passing as religious compared to those who do not.

Additionally, results from Model F in Table 6-3 show that the expected CES-D score is 14 percent greater for those who have passed as religious compared to those who have not.

Finally, I examine the relationship between the use of outward stigma management and psychological distress. I hypothesize that seculars who report using disclosure (hypothesis 6d) and education techniques (hypothesis 6e) to manage stigma report lower levels of psychological distress. Regression results support hypothesis 6d. Results from Model G in Table 6-2 demonstrate that for each unit increase in the secular disclosure index (SDI), the odds of reporting distress due to a secular status decrease by 15 percent. Also, Poisson regression results from Model G in Table 6-3 show that the expected CES-D score decreases by three percent for each one-unit increase in the SDI.

Regressions results provide mixed support for hypothesis 6e. Contrary to my expectations, logistic regression results from Model G in Table 6-2 demonstrate that the odds of reporting direct distress are 56 percent higher for those who report civic involvement versus those who do not, and 73 percent higher for those who have used contact outing compared to individuals who have not outed themselves. Educating others is not related to direct distress. Results from Poisson regressions (from Model G in Table 6-3), however, generally support hypothesis 6e. While civic involvement is not related to general distress, the expected score on the CES-D is 17 percent lower for those who have educated others about seculars compared to those who have not. Outing oneself as secular is also associated with lower psychological distress as the expected CES-D score is nine

percent lower for respondents who report using contact outing versus those who do not. These findings show that, in general, outward stigma management techniques are positively associated with direct distress but negatively associated with general distress.

### *Qualitative Results for Psychological Distress*

Qualitative data from interviews with the 24 secular group leaders are analyzed to provide a more in-depth understanding of psychological distress related to a secular status. I asked respondents if they had ever experienced distress due to their secular status. Fourteen of the 24 respondents stated (either in response to this question or elsewhere in the interview) that they had experienced distress related to their secular status. While distress was noted by more than half of the interviewees, most of them did not report extensive or pervasive mental anguish related to their secularism. In most cases, respondents discussed distress retrospectively and had to “think back” to an instance when they previously felt distressed. A minority of the respondents reported no distress related to their secular status. They said things like “it’s never been a big deal” or “I’ve never really had any issues with it.” Nick from North Dakota said “I don’t get personally upset. The few times anyone said anything to me... it’s like being yelled at by a five-year-old... it’s not a big deal.”

About half of the interview respondents who experienced distress said it originated from perceived stigma. In general, these interviewees discussed tense situations or sadness associated with being judged for their secular status. Family and coworker interactions dominated this theme as the respondents cited these as the main sources of distress with regard to perceived stigma. Amy from the Great Plains discussed

several distressing situations in dealing with coworkers, conveying various emotions including sadness, anger, anxiety, stress, and fear:

I've experienced outright depression to frustration to rage about not getting transferred... to dumbfounded. I get that dreaded feeling. It's strenuous. I have to prove a little bit more that I'm a good person and my morality is as good as [my coworkers]. I kind of feel scared in a professional sense... or maybe a little awkward. It's been really stressful. I've lost lots of sleep over this.

Results from qualitative interviews show distress was sometimes related to inward stigma management. This finding was observed in one-fourth of the interviews. Distress related to secrecy was most commonly discussed. For instance, Nathan from Nebraska said "when I wasn't upfront about it, it was more stressful. Coming out is important for people." Two respondents associated distress with passing as religious. One of them, John, a 37 year-old atheist from Illinois, discussed passing as religious in the course of his employment:

I saw that my coworkers would end their conversations with "god bless you" and it helped them to be more personable with clients. So I would use "god bless you" to connect with others. I didn't feel good about myself after doing that. And I don't think I ever did that again. I'd rather be true to who I am.

Another one-fourth of the group leaders related outward stigma management to distress. Results from interviews show that the use of education techniques in particular was often linked to distress. For example, Natalie from Illinois discussed a tense situation while educating her father about secularism:

I was on the phone with dad. He sent me an email about Ben Stein saying atheists are ruining society and how society is more secular and I couldn't

let it slide. So I sent a response about how Ben Stein is an idiot. And I had a stressful conversation with my dad. He said “I can’t believe [you’re an atheist].” He was disappointed. He said he failed as a Catholic father. It was stressful for him too.

Three secular group leaders discussed stress that arose from educating the public using local media such as radio and newspapers to advance secular causes. For instance, Alex from Kansas said, “my face was on the front page [of the newspaper] with the title ‘Believers and Skeptics Prepare for the Rapture.’ It was a little distressing being outed at that level.” Two seculars cited stressful relationships with family and coworkers over their civic involvement with atheist causes. Nathan from Nebraska said:

[My family] thought the reporter was implying I was raised atheist from the paper article. But that’s not what happened. My mom called me. She was very emotional. She didn’t want to be discriminated against by other people. She was afraid of people saying “you’re teaching your kids to be atheist.” Those debates were distressing emotionally. Also the things at work were really awkward. I didn’t lose sleep over it but I was preoccupied with it. I want people to like me just like everyone else.

Results from qualitative interviews with secular group leaders demonstrate a modest degree of distress related to disclosure. A few of the interviewees reported a stressful or tense situation while disclosing their secular status to their family. While there was evidence that disclosure was a stressful act, there were far more reports of disclosure linked to positive mental well-being. One-fourth of the secular group leaders reported that disclosing their secular status led to long-term psychological benefits. Four respondents described being out as “a relief.” Others comments from interviewees included “it’s a liberating feeling,” “it was unburdening,” and “I’m happier being out.”

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I explore how perceived stigma and stigma management relate to psychological distress. Results from survey data and qualitative interviews highlight the complex and varied relationships between secular stigma and distress. While nearly half of the survey respondents indicate experiencing distress due to a secular status, the average score for distress on the CES-D is roughly two on a scale of zero to 20. To contextualize this finding, a score of two means that on all five items that make up the CES-D, a respondent reports experiencing two of items “rarely” or one item “some of the time” during the past week. Results from qualitative data show that a majority of the secular group leaders indicated some type of distress related to their secular status, though their experiences were quite diverse.

The above findings show that secular identification is an important factor for general distress but not direct distress. Compared to non-believing atheists, uncertain non-atheists are significantly more likely to report general stress. This is a somewhat surprising finding because non-believing atheists perceive more stigmatization than other seculars. One potential explanation for this finding is that atheists have “come to terms” with their atheism and any corresponding stigmatization. Perhaps uncertain non-atheists are in a psychological position that leaves them more vulnerable to negative mental health outcomes. This comports with prior research that shows religious doubt is correlated with poor life satisfaction, depression, stress, and poor mental adjustment (e.g. Gauthier et al. 2006; Hunsberger et al. 1996; Krause et al. 1999). Results from qualitative data with the 24 secular group leaders may also provide insight. A few of the interview respondents discussed the “relief” associated with finally coming to terms as an atheist. It

is possible that some uncertain non-atheists are in a transition phase on their way to atheism, a phenomenon in the construction of a secular identity that is noted in Chapter Four as well as in prior research (Smith 2011). The “relief” or “unburdening” associated with adopting a more hard-lined secular identity might explain why atheists do not experience the same general distress as uncertain non-atheists despite higher levels of perceived stigma associated with atheism.

As hypothesized, secular identity salience is positively associated with direct distress. Secular identity salience, however, does not correlate with general distress. It is possible that Midwest seculars who put more emphasis on their secular identities are “out there” more, which may lead to public backlash and distress as a consequence. Another possibility is that those with stronger secular identities are more sensitive to stressful situations directly dealing with their secularism because their secular identity is so highly intertwined with their larger identity.

An important finding in this research is the positive association between perceived stigma and both measures of distress. Perceived prejudice and discrimination positively correlate to direct distress and perceived prejudice positively correlates to general distress. Additionally, qualitative results show that a majority of secular group leaders reported distress related to perceived stigma, usually dealing with family and work situations. This finding supports classic work by Allport (1954) and Goffman (1963) as well as more recent research (Lee and Craft 2002) that suggests prejudice and discrimination have a negative impact on mental well-being. A question that arises from these findings is why does perceived prejudice significantly associate with general distress while perceived discrimination does not? In Chapter Four, I find that Midwest



seculars perceive prejudice far more often than discrimination. It is possible that prejudice is more important for psychological well-being because prejudice is more commonly perceived and is therefore a more salient experience. It is also possible that the prejudice measure is tapping into more interpersonal forms of stigmatization (such as conflict with a family member) while perceived discrimination might be measuring institutional or structural forms of stigma (such as employment discrimination). The intimate nature of prejudice might be more meaningful for seculars than bureaucratic forms of stigma.

While the findings on the association between inward stigma management and psychological distress are not uniform, overall they suggest that inward stigma management leads to greater distress. This is supported by prior work showing similar negative mental health effects for other stigmatized groups that employ inward stigma management (Rosario et al. 2001; Wegner and Lane 1995). Not surprisingly, secrecy and passing are found to lead to more direct distress. Withdrawal, however, is negatively associated with direct distress. As with results from Chapter Five, the discrepancy between findings on withdrawal and other inward stigma management techniques can likely be attributed to the fact that the withdrawal measure (having most or all secular friends) may not actually be measuring withdrawal. Having a more secular network may provide Midwest seculars with like-minded friends who offer them social support, thus potentially buffering the negative consequences of stigma. This is supported with qualitative results from Chapter Five in which several secular group leaders discuss the importance of networking with other seculars because it creates a greater sense of comfort and belonging.

Findings for associations between inward stigma management and general distress show that passing correlates with higher distress while withdrawal and secrecy do not. One potential explanation for the importance of passing might be attributed to the wording of the survey measure. The variable for passing comes from a question for whether or not a respondent has pretended to be religious. Results from Chapter Five show that seculars with a previous religious affiliation are more likely to report having passed as religious. It is possible that seculars who pass are disproportionately connected to individuals, including family members, who are religious, which might increase the chances for stigmatization and conflict, resulting in stressful situations.

Perhaps the most interesting finding in this chapter is the complex association between outward stigma management strategies and psychological distress. Both forms of distress are negatively associated with disclosure, which suggests that “being out” offers psychological benefits to secular individuals. A more puzzling finding from the quantitative data is that, in general, education-related stigma management strategies positively correlate with direct distress and negatively correlate with general distress. Results from the qualitative interviews provide a potential explanation for this finding. Secular group leaders sometimes discussed the stress that accompanied educating others about seculars and secularism. The accounts of Natalie and Nathan from the previous section in this chapter exemplify how the act of educating others can be stressful. In these cases, the need for educating arose from a misunderstanding or from some sort of conflict. The confrontational nature of educating someone may lead to greater stress. Alternatively, it is also possible that the need to educate others might arise from stressful situations dealing with a secular status.

These qualitative accounts, however, do not consider long term psychological effects of using education strategies. Prior research suggests that stigmatized individuals who use education strategies are taking a proactive approach to confront stigma and that these acts can be empowering (e.g. Corrigan and Matthews 2003). So even though the act of educating others can be stressful, there might be a cumulative effect resulting in a sense of greater self-efficacy which could explain lower levels of general distress. Qualitative data from secular group leaders offers support for this proposition as a few interview respondents reported feeling empowered in their activism. This is best exemplified by Ken from Wisconsin, who in response to public backlash to his secular activism stated, “the net result has been to increase my resolve to fight those bastards. Somebody has to fight back. Somebody should do something about that. Why not me?”

The empirical findings in this chapter provide some interesting answers to the “so what” question that emerges from results in Chapters Four and Five. Midwest seculars who perceive stigma are prone to report greater psychological distress. The ways in which they respond to and manage that stigma have further implications for distress as inward stigma management is associated with more distress while outward stigma management, in general, correlates to less distress. These findings provide important information for secular individuals facing stigmatization as seculars might be advised to consider being more “out” with their secular status and avoid the inward forms of stigma management that have been linked to internalized feelings of fear and shame.

Table 6-1. Frequencies and Percentages for Indicators of Mental Well-being

	Yes		No		Don't Know		Mean
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	
Experienced Distress Due to Secular Status	1045	46.6%	1151	51.3%	46	2.1%	--
Psychological Distress Index (20 Points)	--	--	--	--	--	--	2.04

Table 6-2. Logistic Regressions for Experiencing Distress Related to a Secular Status

	Model A O.R.	Model B O.R.	Model C O.R.	Model D O.R.	Model E O.R.	Model F O.R.	Model G O.R.
<i>Inward Strategies</i>							
Withdrawal	--	--	--	--	--	.79 *	--
Secrecy	--	--	--	--	--	3.41 ***	--
Passing	--	--	--	--	--	1.80 ***	--
<i>Outward Strategies</i>							
Disclosure Index	--	--	--	--	--	--	.85 ***
Educated	--	--	--	--	--	--	1.29
Civic Involvement	--	--	--	--	--	--	1.56 ***
Used Contact	--	--	--	--	--	--	1.73 ***
Secular ID Salience	--	--	--	--	1.14 ***	--	--
<i>Perceived Stigma</i>							
...been judged	--	--	--	2.04 ***	--	--	--
...been discriminated	--	--	--	2.24 ***	--	--	--
<i>Secular Status</i>							
Non-believing Atheist (Ref)	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Uncertain Atheist	--	1.38	1.13	1.35	1.25	.90	.96
Non-believing non-atheist	--	.94	1.01	1.08	1.08	.96	.98
Uncertain non-atheist	--	1.09	.99	1.19	1.16	.91	1.01
<i>Control Variables</i>							
Age	.99 *	--	.99 *	.98 ***	.99 **	.98 ***	.98 ***
Age-Square	1.00 <sup>a</sup>	--	1.00 <sup>a</sup>	--	1.00 <sup>a</sup>	--	--
Female	1.61 ***	--	1.61 ***	1.64 ***	1.63 ***	1.50 ***	1.28 *
Non-white	1.04	--	1.04	1.07	1.04	1.24	1.06
Bachelor's Degree	1.02	--	1.02	1.17	1.01	1.03	.98
Income	.94	--	.94	.97	.95	.94 *	.94 *
College Student	1.17	--	1.17	1.17	1.16	1.04	1.01
Rural Residence	1.18	--	1.18	1.10	1.17	1.13	1.12
Urban Residence	1.28 *	--	1.27 *	1.28 *	1.27 *	1.38 *	1.52 ***
Great Plains Region	1.33 ***	--	1.33 ***	1.28 **	1.35 ***	1.27 **	1.26 *
-2 Log Likelihood	2701.10	3094.63	2700.05	2558.65	2643.60	2513.89	2435.07
BIC	2778.25	3117.78	2800.35	2674.38	2751.61	2637.33	2566.23

\*  $p \leq .05$  \*\*  $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed test)

<sup>a</sup> Denotes a coefficient that has been rounded up to 1.00. This coefficient has a negative correlation with the dependent variable.

Table 6-3. Poisson Regressions for Psychological Distress Index

	Model A		Model B		Model C		Model D	
	b	S.E.	b	S.E.	b	S.E.	b	S.E.
<i>Perceived Stigma</i>								
...been judged	--		--		--		.11 **	.04
...been discriminated	--		--		--		-.07	.03
<i>Secular Status</i>								
Non-believing Atheist (Ref)	--		--		--		--	
Uncertain Atheist	--		.09	.08	.06	.08	.06	.08
Non-believing non-atheist	--		.05	.04	.07	.04	.07	.04
Uncertain non-atheist	--		.14 ***	.04	.13 ***	.04	.14 ***	.04
<i>Control Variables</i>								
Age	.00	.00	--		.00	.00	.00	.00
Age-Square	-.00 ***	.00	--		-.00 ***	.00	-.00 **	.00
Female	-.05	.03	--		-.06 *	.03	-.06 *	.03
Non-white	-.01	.07	--		-.01	.07	-.01	.07
Bachelor's Degree	-.10 **	.03	--		-.10 **	.03	-.10 **	.03
Income	-.08 ***	.01	--		-.08 ***	.01	-.08 ***	.01
College Student	-.02	.04	--		-.02	.04	-.02	.04
Rural Residence	.12 ***	.04	--		.12 **	.04	.12 **	.04
Urban Residence	.09 *	.04	--		.10 *	.04	.10 *	.04
Great Plains Region	-.06 *	.03	--		-.06 *	.03	-.06 *	.03
-2 Log Likelihood	-4556.17		-5130.81		-4549.27		-4543.30	

\*  $p \leq .05$  \*\*  $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed test)

Table 6-3 Continued. Poisson Regressions for Psychological Distress

	Model E		Model F		Model G	
	b	S.E.	b	S.E.	b	S.E.
Secular ID Salience	-.01	.01	--		--	
<i>Inward Strategies</i>						
Secular Friends	--		.06	.03	--	
Secrecy	--		.02	.04	--	
Passing	--		.13 ***	.04	--	
<i>Outward Strategies</i>						
Disclosure Index	--		--		-.03 ***	.00
Educated	--		--		-.16 ***	.04
Civic Involvement	--		--		-.00	.03
Contact	--		--		-.09 **	.03
<i>Secular Status</i>						
Non-believing Atheist (Ref)	--		--		--	
Uncertain Atheist	.06	.08	.05	.08	.01	.08
Non-believing non-atheist	.07	.04	.07	.04	.05	.04
Uncertain non-atheist	.12 **	.04	.12 **	.04	.09 *	.04
<i>Control Variables</i>						
Age	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Age-Square	-.00 ***	.00	-.00 ***	.00	-.00 **	.00
Female	-.06 *	.03	-.06 *	.03	-.09 **	.03
Non-white	-.01	.07	-.01	.07	.00	.07
Bachelor's Degree	-.10 **	.03	-.10 **	.03	-.12 ***	.03
Income	-.08 ***	.01	-.08 ***	.01	-.09 ***	.01
College Student	-.02	.04	-.03	.04	-.03	.04
Rural Residence	.12 **	.04	.12 **	.04	.10 **	.04
Urban Residence	.10 *	.04	.09	.04	.11 *	.04
Great Plains Residence	-.06 *	.03	-.07 *	.03	-.07 *	.03
R-Square	.4521.19		.4545.32		.4501.13	

\*  $p \leq .05$  \*\*  $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed test)

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DISCUSSION

The goal of this dissertation is to assess the nature and consequences of secular stigma among secular individuals in the Midwest. Prior research demonstrates that Americans harbor negative attitudes towards secular individuals (e.g. Edgell et al. 2006; Swan and Heesacker 2012). Furthermore, there is evidence that seculars perceive the stigma attached to their “outgroup” status (e.g. Cragun 2012; Cragun et al. 2012; Zuckerman 2012). Assessing secular stigma is important because the stigmatization of marginalized groups can have negative effects on psychological well-being (Allport 1954; Goffman 1963; Lee and Craft 2002). In this dissertation, I use a mixed methods approach to explore perceived stigma and stigma management of Midwest seculars. I investigate perceived prejudice and discrimination, the strategies that seculars use to manage their stigma, and associations between experiences of stigma and the psychological well-being of Midwest seculars.

#### *Stigma and Stigma Management*

In Chapter Four, I investigate the prevalence and importance of perceived secular stigma. Mixed methods results show that Midwest seculars perceive both prejudice and discrimination related to their secular status. Results from quantitative analyses show that perceived prejudice is more common but qualitative interviews with secular group leaders suggest that discrimination is more important. My approach in quantitatively assessing stigma (using retrospective accounts of perceived stigma) is similar to the method used by Cragun (2012). The results in this dissertation, however, differ from those of Cragun’s study (2012) which assesses discrimination

with an exhaustive list of events that could be perceived as discriminatory, resulting in a higher frequency of perceived discrimination compared to results in this dissertation. While Cragun's (2012) list of discriminatory acts is more comprehensive, it is important to ask how impactful some of these forms of discrimination are to the lives of seculars. Future research should consider advantages to both broad and specific definitions of perceived stigma when assessing its importance.

In Chapter Five, I examine inward stigma management with self-reports of withdrawal, secrecy, and passing. I find that secrecy is a common inward stigma management strategy for Midwest seculars while withdrawal and passing are less common. The results from Chapter Five also show that Midwest seculars commonly use outward stigma management strategies including educating others, self-outing, and civic involvement. Mixed methods results show that Midwest seculars are overwhelmingly "out" to their friends, families, and communities. An important finding with regard to being "out" as secular is that Midwest seculars who perceive discrimination are less comfortable disclosing their secular status. This comports with research that asserts that individuals who perceive themselves as stigmatized are more hesitant to disclose their stigmatized status (e.g. Herman 1993).

Recent research on atheist discrimination, however, offers a second explanation for this finding. Specifically, Cragun (2012) finds a similar correlation between perceived discrimination and "outness" of an atheist status, but proposes that it is atheist outness that leads to greater perceived discrimination. Cragun (2012) theorizes that the brazen attitudes of "out" atheists elicit hostility from others, resulting in stigmatization. Future research is needed to explore the causal direction in the association between secular outness and perceived discrimination.



An interesting result from Chapter Five regarding stigma management is the seemingly contradictory finding that a majority of seculars report using secrecy (72 percent) and a majority also report outing themselves to others to reduce stigma (59 percent). Clearly some of the survey respondents report having used both of these stigma management strategies. There are a few potential explanations for the findings that some seculars report both secrecy and self-outing. The most compelling reason is that the survey items for these measures are retrospective questions asking respondents if they had “ever” done these things. Qualitative results from interviews with secular group leaders in Chapter Four show that stigma management strategies tend to change over time from a general inward orientation to an outward orientation. These results suggest that achieving a secular status accompanies a more outward orientation, a finding that is supported by prior qualitative work on secular identity construction (e.g. Smith 2011; Zuckerman 2012). Thus, seculars may be more prone to using secrecy during the early stages of secular identity development and more prone to using outing during the later stages. It is also possible that these individuals are using both of these strategies simultaneously and compartmentalizing who they are “out” with and who they are not, a strategy noted in research on other stigmatized groups (e.g. Kando 1972). Additional research is needed to examine how stigma management strategies change throughout the process of constructing a secular identity.

### *Implications for Psychological Distress*

In Chapter Six, I explore the relationship between secular stigma and psychological distress. While findings from both quantitative and qualitative data suggest that Midwest seculars do not encounter an overwhelming degree of psychological distress due to their secular statuses, there are many factors related to secularism and stigma that are relevant for psychological

distress. Most notably, non-believing atheists experience less distress than other seculars, perceived stigma is generally associated with higher levels of distress, and inward stigma management correlates with higher levels of distress.

A notable finding from Chapter Six is that outward stigma management positively correlates with direct distress and negatively correlates with general distress. Outward stigma management likely correlates with direct distress because seculars who are more “out” and those who try to educate others about seculars might encounter more stressful social situations. So why then do outward stigma management strategies correlate to less general distress? The findings on secular identity construction in Chapter Four and stigma management in Chapter Five may provide an answer. Several secular group leaders reported that the achievement of a secular identity during the secular identity construction process culminated in coming “out” to others. This outward orientation seems to facilitate outward stigma management techniques such as disclosure and educating others as many group leaders discussed becoming vocal and active in the new atheist movement after finally coming out as secular. Results from interviews with group leaders in Chapter Six show that outward stigma management was possibly related to positive mental well-being. For example, some secular group leaders discussed the “relief” that accompanied disclosure or feelings of empowerment that came with educating others and participating in secular activism. To summarize, the secular identity construction process often culminates in coming out as atheist which leads to outward stigma management and possibly results in better overall psychological well-being; and, at the same time, being out might place secular individuals in stressful situations that can lead to distress directly related to their secular status.

The importance of being “out” for psychological well-being is not lost on organizations leading the new atheist movement. For instance, the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Science and Reason (RDFSR) launched the “Out Campaign” to encourage atheists to be out to family and friends about their atheism as a way to combat societal stigma. The RDFSR uses a similar “outing” strategy that was beneficial for LGBT efforts in the 1970s and 1980s (Corrigan and Matthews 2003). Secular initiatives like the Out Campaign show that leaders of the new atheist movement recognize social stigma and are encouraging seculars to combat stigmatization in a proactive way. The findings in this study largely validate the efforts of new atheist organizations by showing that there are psychological benefits for seculars who are out and who proactively manage their secular stigma.

Another interesting finding in this dissertation is that non-believing atheists are more likely to perceive stigma than other seculars (as discussed in Chapter Four) but report less distress than other seculars (as discussed in Chapter Six). I posit that the high level of outward stigma management utilized by atheists could mitigate negative aspects of perceived stigmatization. During the course of my research, I recognized that seculars in the new atheist movement do not seem to self-identify as victims despite the high level of societal distrust toward seculars. Data from interviews with secular group leaders and participation in secular meetings suggest that a great deal of stress that seculars incur is not due to the internalization of societal prejudice against seculars, but from a sense of justice that leads them to proactively combat what they perceive as negative elements of religion. The proactive approach for dealing with secular social justice issues is a feature that has been at the heart of secular movements for more than a century (Cimino and Smith 2007; Jacoby 2004). The call to social activism that seems to be so prevalent in the new atheist movement, and is also evident in results from this

research, might explain why atheists are not suffering from overall distress related to their secular status. As I found in qualitative interviews, being “out” and addressing secular stigma proactively can instill atheists with a feeling of relief or even empowerment.

Another alternate explanation for why atheists perceive greater stigma yet do not report more distress compared to other seculars is that perceived stigma strengthens their secular identity. This notion builds on Christian Smith’s (1998) subculture identity theory in which Smith claims that evangelical Protestants strengthen their subcultural identity by defining their evangelical identity as embattled with mainstream society. Likewise, Cimino and Smith (2007) theorize that atheists use their “other” status and tension with mainstream society to strengthen their identity. It is possible that perceived stigma does not negatively associate with the psychological well-being of atheists because it emboldens their atheist identity, which could lead to other factors (such as outward stigma management) that can associate with positive psychological well-being.

### *The Importance of Secular Identity*

In Chapter Four, I investigate secular identity construction with interview results from secular group leaders. Findings from qualitative interviews with secular group leaders regarding secular identity construction largely support results from previous studies that document the process of becoming secular (Smith 2011; Zuckerman 2012). As with these studies, the findings from Chapter Four suggest that becoming secular is a process that requires several stages to accomplish. This research builds on past qualitative work by relating secular identity construction to issues of secular stigma. While Smith (2011) asserts that secular identity is

constructed through social interaction, I find that it is not simply social interaction that aids in secular identity construction but interactions in the context of stigmatization. Smith (2011) asserts that a secular's response to being seen as an "other" in society is important to identity construction. I argue that seculars are not just seen as "other," but often as "less than," which is an important factor in their construction of a secular identity. Future research on the identity construction of stigmatized groups should consider the role of stigma in shaping how identities are constructed.

A major theme that cuts across each results chapter in this study is that secular identity is an important factor for secular stigma. Findings from most quantitative analyses show that non-believing atheists differ from other seculars. Relative to other seculars, non-believing atheists are more likely to perceive stigma, less likely to pass as religious, more likely to use outward stigma management, and less likely to experience general psychological distress. As posited in Chapters Five and Six, atheists are different from other seculars in this study, possibly because they have come to terms with their atheism during their secular identity construction. I theorize that the "hardlined" secular identification of atheists leaves them susceptible to stigmatization but, at the same time, their secular identity provides them with a sense of relief due to the unburdening of uncertainty. This interpretation is supported by previous research (e.g. Smith 2011). Furthermore, comfort with their identity negates the need for atheists to be secretive and it facilitates a more proactive (outward) approach to stigma management, which, as my analyses show, provides added benefits for reducing psychological distress. Future research on seculars should consider exploring variations in secular identification as it seems to be correlated with other factors, including perceived stigma, stigma management, and psychological distress.

### *Conclusion*

The results from this dissertation are useful for secular individuals dealing with stigmatization. With regard to stigma and psychological distress, I find that outward stigma management strategies are more beneficial than inward strategies for psychological well-being. Results from this research suggests that secular individuals might consider disclosing their secular status if they can safely do so without fear of serious discrimination. This comports with research on other stigmatized groups that shows keeping a stigmatized status a secret is associated with poor mental health (e.g. Rosario et al. 2001; Wegner and Lane 1995). Secular individuals might also consider self-empowering forms of stigma management like contact outing or civic involvement for a secular cause. Joining a secular group in their local community might provide seculars with opportunities for civic involvement as well as access to a network of like-minded individuals. These suggestions also reflect qualitative results from this project that show secular group leaders find a great deal of personal satisfaction from the secular activist work and sense of community that their seculars groups offer them. In general, a more proactive approach might be helpful for secular individuals struggling with stigmatization.

There are several important limitations to this study. To begin, the quantitative data is not representative of the population I am studying. I recruited survey participants with a purposive sampling method by asking secular group leaders to pass my web survey to group members. I also asked group members to pass the survey link to other seculars in the Midwest who may or may not be affiliated with a secular group. This data collection strategy does not allow me to generalize my findings to all seculars in the Midwest. There is evidence, however, that fielding data with a web survey is a useful strategy to find an underrepresented group of study participants (e.g. Gosling et al. 2004). Additionally, this sampling technique is similar to other

peer-reviewed work on seculars (e.g. Cragun 2012). Another issue with the survey data is that many of my focal variables are derived from retrospective questions that ask about lifetime experiences (e.g. have you ever been judged negatively because of your secular status?). Other work on seculars (Cragun et al. 2012) asks respondents about discrimination experienced in the previous five years. Employing a similar strategy might be more meaningful to a study like this, especially with respect to establishing correlates with my CES-D measure which asks about general mood in the past seven days.

There are also important limitations to the qualitative component of this research. Because I used secular group leaders as my target population, I likely have a sample of interviewees that are not representative of Midwest seculars. To begin, they are members of secular groups which means they are probably quite different from seculars who have not sought out membership in a secular group. Moreover, the fact that they are group leaders suggests that they are likely more engaged in group activities and potentially have more salient secular identities. It is likely that the secular group leaders interviewed in this study experience and deal with secular stigma differently than the larger population of seculars. Nonetheless, using group leaders for interview participants might be advantageous in some regards. One advantage is that group leaders have access to the experiences of other group members. This was apparent in multiple interviews when group leaders said they had never experienced something I asked about (e.g. discrimination in a place of employment) but knew of others in their group who had. The group leaders also seemed to be highly networked to other secular groups and were generally aware of and active in the new atheist movement.

A final limitation worth mentioning is that I am only looking at one region of the country. Prior work (Cragun et al. 2012) shows that perceived discrimination varies by region and that

seculars living in coastal regions experience less discrimination than those living in the Midwest and the South. Furthermore, because many of the participants in this study come from secular groups, there is likely an underrepresentation of seculars from rural areas. With the exception of university groups, few of the secular groups that I contacted were located in cities with a population under 100,000. It is likely that seculars who live in rural areas and small towns have unique experiences with secular stigma. Many of these individuals would have likely been missed by my sampling strategy. Future research might target rural and small town seculars to study the lived experiences of seculars who may be relatively isolated from other seculars.

Despite these limitations, the current research is a timely study given the rapid increase of religious non-affiliates and non-believers in the last twenty years (Hout and Fischer 2002; Sherkat 2008). Atheists and seculars in general are becoming more visible. In March of 2012, over 20,000 individuals gathered in support of secular causes at the Reason Rally held on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. It was the largest gathering of secular individuals in recorded history. The goal was for a greater presence of public secularism as the theme of the rally was a call for atheists to “come out, come out, wherever you are” (Grossman 2012). The increase in seculars in the United States combined with the a greater public presence of secularism has led to a recent increase in peer-reviewed publications on secularism in the last few years (e.g. Cragun et al. 2012; Edgell et al. 2006; Smith 2011) as well as the creation of *Secularism and Nonreligion*, a journal dedicated solely to the academic study of secularism. This study makes an important contribution to this growing field of research.

The implications of stigmatization in the lives of Midwest seculars are clearly laid out in this dissertation. Midwest seculars perceive and manage stigma in complex and fascinating ways that have important consequences for their psychological well-being. With this research, I hope



to open the door to an exciting wave of studies on secular individuals who are working to negotiate a secular status in a highly religious society.

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## APPENDIX A

## EMAIL TO WEB COORDINATORS

Hello (*name of web coordinator*) or current web coordinator of (*name of secular group*). I am a graduate student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and I am conducting a research study on stigma and secular individuals (atheists, agnostics, humanists) located in the Midwest for my doctoral dissertation. I wonder if you would be willing to send an email with a link to my web survey to your group members. All participants in this survey will remain anonymous.

Please reply if you are willing to send out an email request to your group members and I will send a follow up email with a link to the survey that you can forward on to the rest of the group. I may contact you again for follow up requests in the next few months. Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Christopher R.H. Garneau, M.A.  
Graduate Student  
Department of Sociology  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
chrisgarneau22@gmail.com

## APPENDIX B

## EMAIL TO SECULAR GROUP MEMBERS

Thank you for taking the time to read this research request. I am a graduate student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and I am conducting a research study on stigma and secular individuals (atheists, agnostics, humanists) located in the Midwest for my doctoral dissertation. I invite you to contribute to this research by taking part in my web-survey. The survey should only take between 30 and 40 minutes to complete. I want to ensure you that I do not have any means to connect your personal information or IP address to your survey so your participation will be anonymous. The data collected in this survey may be used for future research projects as well. I also ask that you forward this email to other secular (atheist/agnostic/humanist) individuals you know. This is a population that is hard to find and I need as big of a sample as I can get.

Additionally, if you have any interest in participating in a phone interview please respond to me via my email address below. I am looking for seculars in the Midwest region that would like to discuss their experiences with having a non-religious status in a highly religious geographic region. Please send me an email if you are at all interested in being interviewed.

Here is the link to the survey: [linktosurvey.com](http://linktosurvey.com)

Thank you very much for your time,

Christopher R.H. Garneau, M.A.  
Graduate Student  
Department of Sociology  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
[chrisgarneau22@gmail.com](mailto:chrisgarneau22@gmail.com)

## APPENDIX C

## WEB SURVEY

**\*Terms and Conditions: By taking part in this survey, you are participating in study involving social stigma and secular individuals in the Midwest. Your answers will be used for data analysis in the current research project as well as future research projects.**

\*This survey is specifically designed to obtain information on secular individuals. In this Survey, I define a secular individual as anyone that meets any of the following criteria:

- a. An individual with no belief in God or a supernatural creative force
- b. An individual with no knowledge of the existence of God or a supernatural creative force
- c. An individual with spiritual beliefs or orientations (such as a belief in a higher power) but no belief in God or a supernatural creative force

1. Which of the following best describes your current religious status?

1. Religious
2. Spiritual – Not Religious
3. Atheist
4. Agnostic
5. Secular-Humanist
6. Freethinker
7. Bright Movement
8. Something Else Please Specify \_\_\_\_\_
9. Don't Know/No Answer

2. What best describes your belief in God?

1. I do not believe in God
2. There is no way to find out if God exists
3. I believe in some higher power
4. I sometimes believe in God
5. I believe in God but I have doubts
6. I know that God exists
7. No Answer

\*If respondent chooses (1, 8, or 9) on question #1 and chooses (4, 5, 6, or 7) for question #2, skip to question #48, otherwise continue with the survey.

3. How many years have you been secular (Had no official religious affiliation or belief)?

4. Did you have a “coming out” moment when you disclosed your secular status to others?

1. Yes
2. Others know I am secular, but I did not have a “coming out” moment
3. No, I have not disclosed my secular status to others
4. Don't Know

\*If respondent chooses (2), (3), or (4), skip to question #6.

5. Did you find the “coming out” experience of your secular status to be stressful or difficult in any way?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know

6. Have you ever purposely kept your secular status a secret to avoid negative judgment from others?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know

7. Have you ever told someone you are religious to avoid potential negative judgment?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know

8. Have you ever purposely avoided discussing your secular status to avoid conflict or negative feelings?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know

9. Which of the following best describes your friends' knowledge about your secular status?
1. All or most of my friends know
  2. Some, but not most of my friends know
  3. Very few of my friends know
  4. None of my friends know
  5. Don't Know
10. On a scale of one to ten, how comfortable are you with disclosing your secular status to your friends?
1. Very comfortable
  2. Somewhat comfortable
  3. Not very comfortable
  4. Don't Know
11. On a scale of one to ten, how comfortable are you with disclosing your secular status to your family?
1. Very comfortable
  2. Somewhat comfortable
  3. Not very comfortable
  4. Don't Know
12. On a scale of one to ten, how comfortable are you with disclosing your secular status to your neighbors?
1. Very comfortable
  2. Somewhat comfortable
  3. Not very comfortable
  4. Don't Know
13. On a scale of one to ten, how comfortable are you with disclosing your secular status to casual acquaintances?
1. Very comfortable
  2. Somewhat comfortable
  3. Not very comfortable
  4. Don't Know

14. On a scale of one to ten, how comfortable are you with disclosing your secular status to strangers?
1. Very comfortable
  2. Somewhat comfortable
  3. Not very comfortable
  4. Don't Know
15. Have you ever "come out" as a secular to someone with the intent of showing them that seculars are good people?
1. Yes
  2. No
  3. Don't Know
16. Are you a member of a secular group that meets at a physical location on a regular basis?
1. Yes, I am a member and I regularly attend meetings
  2. Yes, I am a member and I occasionally attend meetings
  3. Yes, I am a member but I rarely or never attend meetings
  4. No, I'm not a member of a secular group that meets regularly
  5. Don't Know
17. Are you a member of an online secular group?
1. Yes
  2. No
  3. Don't Know
18. Which of the following best describes your immediate family's awareness of your secular status?
1. All or most of my family knows
  2. Some, but not most of my family knows
  3. Very few of my family knows
  4. None of my family knows
  5. Don't Know



\*If respondent chooses (4) or (5), skip to #20 and then to #22

19. Are the immediate family members who know you are secular supportive of your secular status?

1. They are very supportive
2. They are somewhat supportive
3. They are not very supportive
4. They do not know
5. Don't Know

20. Do you think that your immediate family members who do not know about your secular status would be supportive of you if they found out about your secular status?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know

21. Has your secular status ever caused friction within your immediate family?

1. Yes, often
2. Yes, occasionally
3. Yes, but not often
4. No, never
5. Don't Know

22. To the best of your knowledge have you ever been negatively judged by others due to your secular status?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know

23. Have you ever been treated unfairly due to your secular status?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know

24. Have you ever experienced discrimination because of your secular status?
1. Yes
  2. No
  3. Don't Know
25. Have you ever experienced emotional distress due to your secular status?
1. Yes
  2. No
  3. Don't Know
26. Have you ever experienced physical harm because of your secular status?
1. Yes
  2. No
  3. Don't Know
27. Have you ever been evangelized to (someone tried to get you to join their faith) by someone who learned of your secular status?
1. Yes
  2. No
  3. Don't Know
28. Have you ever informed a religious friend or relative about seculars to give them better insight about the true nature of seculars (for example tried to tell someone religious that seculars can also have morals)?
1. Yes
  2. No
  3. Don't Know
29. Have you ever done pro-social or social justice work to raise awareness for secular causes? (examples: signed a petition, joined a boycott, attended a protest or meeting)
1. Yes
  2. No
  3. Don't Know
30. Have you ever sent an email to someone or participated in other internet activities with the

intent of raising awareness for secular causes?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know

31. On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is your secular status to your identity? (10 = your secular status is the most important aspect of who you are and 1 = your secular status is not a very important aspect of who you are)

1. 0
2. 1
3. 2
4. 3
5. 4
6. 5
7. 6
8. 7
9. 8
10. 9
11. 10
12. Don't Know

32. What is your employment status?

1. Working full time
2. Working part time
3. Unemployed, laid off, looking for work
4. Retired/Disabled
5. In school and not working
6. In school and working at the same time
7. Keeping house
8. Other
9. No Answer

\*If respondent chooses (3,4,5,7,8, or 9) skip to #39

\*If respondent chooses (1, 2, or 6) and chose (1, 8, or 9) for question #1 and (4,5,6, or 7) for question #2, skip to #39.

33. Does your employer/supervisor know about your secular status?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Maybe
4. Don't Know
5. I'm Self-Employed

\*If respondent chooses (1) continue to #34 and then skip to #36

\*If respondent chooses (2, 3, or 4) skip to #35

\*If respondent chooses (5) skip #36

34. Do you think your job or future promotions could be at risk due to your employer/supervisor's knowledge of your secular status?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Maybe
4. Don't Know

35. Do you think your job or future promotion could be at risk if your employer/supervisor found out about your secular status?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Maybe
4. Don't Know

36. Which of the following best describes your coworkers' knowledge about your secular status?

1. All or most of my coworkers know
2. Some, but not most of my coworkers know
3. Very few of my coworkers know
4. None of my coworkers know
5. Don't Know

\* If respondent chooses (4 or 5), skip to #38

37. Do you think any of the coworkers who know about your secular status judge you negatively or treat you differently because you are secular?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Maybe
4. Don't Know

38. If any of your coworkers (that do not know about your secular status) found out about your secular status do you think any of them might judge you negatively or treat you differently?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Maybe
4. Don't Know

39. Do you have children?

1. Yes
  2. No, but I plan to have children later
  3. No, and I do not plan to have children
- \*If respondent chooses (1) and chose (1,8, or 9) on question #1 and (4,5,6, or 7) on question #2, skip #42 through #47.
- \*If respondent chooses (1) and chose (2,3,4,5,6, or 7) on question #1, skip #43 through #45.
- \*If respondent chooses (2) and chose (1,8, or 9) on question #1 and (4,5,6, or 7) on question #2, skip #40 through #42, and #44 through #47.
- \*If respondent chooses (2) and chose (2,3,4,5,6, or 7) on question #1, skip #40 through #42, and #46 through #47.
- \*If respondent chooses (3) skip to #48

40. How many children live in your home?

41. Are (were) your children enrolled in religious schooling of any kind?

1. Yes
2. No, but I would consider it
3. No, I would not consider it
4. Don't Know

42. If you currently or have previously raised children as secular, has that decision caused tension with your immediate family?

1. Yes, often
2. Yes, sometimes
3. Yes, but not often
4. No, never
5. Don't Know

43. When you have children, will you enroll your children in religious schooling of any kind?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Maybe
4. Don't Know

44. You earlier responded that you intend on having children. Which statement most accurately reflects your plans regarding their religious upbringing?

1. I plan to raise them as secular with no religious beliefs
2. I plan to raise them as secular but with some religious beliefs
3. I plan to raise them with religious beliefs
4. Something Else
5. Don't Know

\*If respondent chooses (3, 4, or 5) skip to #48

45. Do you fear that when you have children they will encounter negative experiences due to their secularism?

1. Yes, it is a big fear
2. Yes, but not too much
3. No, it's not a fear of mine
4. Don't Know

46. Do you raise your children as secular?

1. Yes, I raise(d) them as secular
2. I raise(d) them secular with some religious beliefs
3. No I raise(d) them with religious beliefs
4. Don't Know

\*If respondent chooses (3), skip to #48

47. Have your children had negative experiences at school or with friends due to their secularism?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know

48. Which religion were you affiliated with at age 16, if any?

1. Catholic
  2. Protestant Christian
  3. Orthodox Christian
  4. Other Christian or just Christian
  5. Jewish
  6. Muslim
  7. Hindu/Buddhist/Other Eastern Religion
  8. Other
  9. No Religion (Including spiritual/atheist/agnostic/secular)
- \*If respondent does not choose (2, 4, or 8) skip to #55.

49. Which denomination did you belong to?

1. Methodist
  2. Lutheran
  3. Presbyterian
  4. Baptist
  5. Other
- \*If respondent chooses (1), continue to #50, then skip to #55.  
 \*If respondent chooses (2), skip to #51, then skip to #55.  
 \*If respondent chooses (3), skip to #52, then skip to #55.  
 \*If respondent chooses (4), skip to #53, then skip to #55.  
 \*If respondent chooses (5), skip to #54

50. Which Methodist church did you belong to?

1. United Methodist Church
2. Other Methodist

51. Which Lutheran church did you belong to?

1. ELCA – Evangelical Lutheran Church
2. Lutheran Church in America
3. Lutheran – Wisconsin Synod
4. Lutheran – Missouri Synod
5. American Lutheran Church

## 6. Other Lutheran

52. Which Presbyterian church did you belong to?
1. Presbyterian Church in U.S.A
  2. United Presbyterian
  3. Other Presbyterian
53. Which Baptist church did you belong to?
1. Southern Baptist Convention
  2. American Baptists Association
  3. American Baptist Church
  4. National Baptist Convention
  5. Free Will Baptist
  6. Missionary Baptist
  7. Other Baptist
54. Do any of these additional denominations best describe your religious affiliation at age 16?
1. African Methodist Episcopal
  2. Apostolic Faith
  3. Assemblies of God
  4. Brethren Church
  5. Central Christian
  6. Christian Reformed
  7. Christian Scientist
  8. Church of Christ
  9. Church of Holiness
  10. Churches of God
  11. Congregationalist
  12. Disciples of Christ
  13. Episcopalian/Anglican
  14. Evangelical Free Church
  15. First Christian
  16. Full Gospel
  17. Independent
  18. Jehovah's Witness
  19. LDS/Mormon
  20. Mennonite
  21. Nazarene
  22. Pentecostal Holiness
  23. Quaker
  24. Reformed
  25. Seventh Day Adventist
  26. Unitarian/Universalist
  27. United Church of Christ
  28. Unity
  29. Wesleyan
  30. Nondenominational



31. Other Evangelical Protestant
  32. Other Fundamentalist Protestant
  33. Other Liberal Protestant
  34. Other Moderate/Mainline Protestant
  35. Other Pentecostal/Charismatic Protestant
  36. Other, please specify\_\_\_\_\_
55. What best describes your belief about the bible?
1. Literal truth and word of God
  2. Divinely inspired word of God
  3. Book of stories with a good message
  4. Book of stories with little value
  5. Just a book of stories – neutral about its value
  6. Other/Don't Know
56. How often do you attend religious services, if ever?
1. Never
  2. Less than once per year
  3. Once or twice per year
  4. Several times per year
  5. Once per month
  6. Two or three times per month
  7. Every week
  8. More than once per week
  9. Don't Know
57. How often did you attend religious services growing up?
1. Never
  2. Less than once per year
  3. Once or twice per year
  4. Several times per year
  5. Once per month
  6. Two or three times per month
  7. Every week

8. More than once per week

9. Don't Know

58. In your opinion, how important is having a religion to the people in your community?

1. Very Important

2. Somewhat Important

3. Not Very Important

4. Don't Know

59. Which of the following best describes the secular status of your friends?

1. All of my friends are secular

2. Most of my friends are secular

3. Some of my friends are secular

4. Very few of my friends are secular

5. None of my friends are secular

6. Don't Know

60. Would you say your community is more politically liberal, conservative, or moderate?

1. Liberal

2. Moderate

3. Conservative

4. Don't Know

61. Which of the following best describes your view of the current relationship between "church and state" in the U.S. today? (In other words how do you feel about religion in public institutions such as the Government or schools?)

1. Religion currently has too much influence on American public life

2. There is currently a good balance of church and state in public life

3. Religion currently has too little influence on American public life

## 4. Don't know/No Opinion

\*\*\*Begin Module on Mental Well-being\*\*\*

\*How often was each of the following statements true during the past week?

62. You felt sad.

1. Rarely or none of the time
2. Some of the time
3. A lot of the time
4. Most or all of the time
5. Don't Know

63. You felt that you could not shake off the blues, even with help from your family and your friends.

1. Rarely or none of the time
2. Some of the time
3. A lot of the time
4. Most or all of the time
5. Don't Know

64. You felt depressed.

1. Rarely or none of the time
2. Some of the time
3. A lot of the time
4. Most or all of the time
5. Don't Know

65. You felt life was not worth living.

1. Rarely or none of the time
2. Some of the time
3. A lot of the time
4. Most or all of the time
5. Don't Know

66. You were happy

1. Rarely or none of the time
2. Some of the time
3. A lot of the time
4. Most or all of the time

5. Don't Know

67. You felt stressed

1. Rarely or none of the time
2. Some of the time
3. A lot of the time
4. Most or all of the time
5. Don't Know

\*\*\*End Module on Mental Well-being\*\*\*

\*\*\*Begin Module on Mastery\*\*\*

\*For the following four statements, state whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree:

68. I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems in my life.

1. Strongly Agree
2. Agree
3. Disagree
4. Strongly Disagree
5. Don't Know

69. There is really is no way I can solve some of the problems I have.

1. Strongly Agree
2. Agree
3. Disagree
4. Strongly Disagree
5. Don't Know

70. I have little control over the things that happen to me.

1. Strongly Agree
2. Agree
3. Disagree
4. Strongly Disagree
5. Don't Know

71. There is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life.

1. Strongly Agree
2. Agree
3. Disagree
4. Strongly Disagree

## 5. Don't Know

\*\*\*End Module on Mastery\*\*\*

72. What is your sexual orientation?

1. Heterosexual
2. Homosexual
3. Bisexual
4. Transsexual/Transgender
5. Other
6. No Answer

\*If respondent chooses (1) (5) or (6), Skip to #77

73. You previously reported a GLBT (Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transsexual) sexual orientation. Which of the following best describes your friends' knowledge about your sexual orientation?

1. All of my friends know
2. Most of my friends know
3. Some, but not most of my friends know
4. Very few of my friends know
5. None of my friends know
6. Don't Know

74. Which of the following best describes your immediate family's knowledge about your sexual orientation?

1. All of my friends know
2. Most of my friends know
3. Some, but not most of my friends know
4. Very few of my friends know
5. None of my friends know
6. Don't Know

75. Did you have a "coming out" moment when you disclosed your sexual orientation to others?

1. Yes
2. Others know I am secular, but I did not have a "coming out" moment
3. No, I have not disclosed my sexual orientation to others
4. Don't Know

\*If respondent chooses (2), (3), or (4), skip to question #77.

76. Did you find the "coming out" experience of your sexual orientation to be stressful or difficult in any way?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know

77. About how often do you pray?

1. Several times a day
2. Once a day
3. Several times a week
4. Once a week
5. Less than once a week
6. Never
7. Don't Know

\*\*\*Begin Module on Group Membership\*\*\*

\*I am interested in which types of groups or organizations you might belong to. For each, please indicate whether or not you are a member of each type of group

78. Fraternal organization

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know

79. Church group

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know

80. Professional society

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know

81. Labor Union

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know

82. Political Organization

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know

83. Other Group or Organization Not Listed

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't Know

\*\*\*End Module on Group Membership\*\*\*

84. What is your current age?

85. What race do you most closely identify with?

1. White
2. Black
3. Latino/Hispanic
4. Asian American
5. Multiracial
6. Other
7. Don't Know

86. What is your highest educational degree?

1. Less than high school
2. High school
3. Some College/Junior College/Technical School
4. Bachelor's
5. Graduate/Professional

87. Which of the following describes your total annual household income before taxes?

1. Less than \$10,000
2. \$10,000 - \$24,999
3. \$25,000- \$49,999

4. \$50,000 – \$74,999
5. \$75,000 – \$99,999
6. \$100,000 - \$199,999
7. \$200,000 or more
8. Don't Know

88. What state do you live in?

1. Illinois
2. Indiana
3. Iowa
4. Kansas
5. Michigan
6. Minnesota
7. Missouri
8. Nebraska
9. North Dakota
10. Ohio
11. South Dakota
12. Wisconsin
13. Other, Please Specify \_\_\_\_\_

89. What is your sex (gender)?

1. Female
2. Male

90. How would you describe the urban/rural orientation of your town/city?

1. Inner city area
2. Suburban area
3. Small town or rural area
4. Other
5. Don't Know

91. What is your political orientation?

1. Very Liberal
2. Liberal
3. Moderately Liberal
4. Moderate



5. Moderately Conservative
6. Conservative
7. Very Conservative

92. What best describes your marital/relationship status?

1. Married
2. Committed Relationship/Partnership
3. Widowed
4. Divorced
5. Separated
6. Never Married
7. No Answer

APPENDIX D  
QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introduction

Thanks again for agreeing to speak with me.

In the next forty five minutes or so, I would like to talk about your life, your experience, your feelings, your problems, or anything else that is important to you.

General Demographic Information

1. What is your current age?
2. What race or ethnicity do you most closely identify with?
3. What is your highest educational degree?
- 4a. What city and state do you live in?  
4b. What is the population there?
5. What is your marital or relationship status?
- 6a. Do you have children?  
6b. Do any live with you in your home?
7. What is your political affiliation or ideology?

Religious Affiliation and Beliefs

8. How would you describe your religious status?
9. What are your views on God?
10. What was your religious status and views on God growing up?
- 11a. What about your parents and siblings' religious statuses?  
11b. What are their religious statuses now?
12. What is your primary non-religious ID?
13. How long have you been secular?  
14a. How did you become secular?  
14b. When did you become secular?  
14c. Did your secularism happen all at once? Did it take a while?
15. How important is your secular status to your identity?

#### Perceived Stigma

16. Have you ever been negatively judged due to your secular status?
17. Have you ever felt discriminated against because of your secular status?
18. Have you encountered physical danger because of your secular status?
19. Have you ever experienced emotional distress due to your secular status?
- 20a. Do you think people in your community believe that having a religion is important?  
20b. What would people in your community generally think negatively of seculars?

#### Withdrawal

21. Do you find it easier to be around people who know about your secular status?
22. Do you tend to spend more time with people who know about your secular status than those who do not know?

#### Secrecy

- 23a. Have you ever purposefully kept your secular status a secret from someone?  
23b. Who was it?

23c. Why did you keep your status a secret?

### Passing

24a. Have you ever told someone you were religious to avoid negative judgment?

24b. If so, can you describe/give examples?

24c. Did you only do this with certain groups of people?

24d. Why did you say you were religious?

25. *For atheist participants:* Have you ever “softened” your secular status? For example have you told anyone that you are an agnostic or “searching” instead of an atheist?

### Disclosure

26. Are you careful or selective about who you disclose your secular status to?

27a. Have you found it difficult to tell others you are secular?

27b. Have you had a “coming out” experience?

27c. How receptive were people when you told them?

27d. How did you anticipate they would take the news?

28. Have you ever disclosed your secular status because you found it hard to manage a secret status?

29. Do you usually tell people upfront about your status or wait until you get to know them?

### Neutralization

30. How have you responded to people who have judged you negatively for your secular status?

### Education/Contact

31. Have you ever tried to educate a religious individual about seculars? For example explain that seculars can be moral people?

32. Do you think that if more people came into contact with seculars they would be less prejudiced toward them?

33. Have you ever told someone about your secular status to demonstrate that seculars are normal people?

Social Support/Peer Groups

34. Are most of your friends also secular?
35. Are you part of a secular group?
36. Are you a member of a religious group?

Family Dynamics

37. Does your family know about your secular status?
- 38a. Is your family generally supportive of your secular status?  
 37b. How do you avoid conflict with your family about your secular status? (If their family has not generally been supportive)
- 39a. Do you raise your kids secular (if they have children)  
 38b. Why/why not?
- 40a. Do you think it's hard to raise secular kids where you live? Have they had negative experiences?  
 39b. Do you think they would have a hard time making friends or dating because they are secular?
41. Do you want your kids to be open about their religious or non-religious beliefs to others?
42. Would you ever consider giving your child religious training (schooling) to help them fit in?

Work Dynamics

43. What is your employment status?
- 44a. Do (did) your coworkers know about your secular status?  
 43b. If not, would you ever consider telling them?  
 43c. If they don't know, do you think anything negative could come about from them knowing?  
 43d. What about your boss or supervisor?  
 43e. Do you think your job could be threatened if you revealed your secular status?

Final Questions

45. Ask about sex or race if applicable.
46. If atheist, do you think people are more judgmental of the term “atheist” or the fact that atheists don’t believe in God. In other words is it the label or the belief?
47. Is being religious or not religious a choice? Could you choose to be religious and believe in God if you decided to do so?

### Conclusion

That’s all the questions I have. Is there anything else that you feel is important to mention that we have not yet talked about?

Thank you so much for speaking with me today. Again, I can assure you that everything you said here today will remain confidential. Do you have any questions?