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"Breaking Free": A Grounded Theory Study of Atheist Women in the United States

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Abstract

Using a critical, grounded theory approach, we interviewed 31 atheist-identified women to ascertain the ways in which women develop and navigate an atheist identity and how their experience is influenced by patriarchal, hegemonic Christianity in the United States using a concealable stigmatized identity framework. Qualitative analysis resulted in six core categories: (1) Embracing Atheism as Liberation, (2) Escaping Christian Patriarchy, Challenging Atheist Patriarchy, (3) Low Identity Salience Provides Protection from Anti-Atheist Discrimination, (4) Expectations to Conform to Christian Norms, (5) Disclosure Requires Thoughtfulness and Purpose, and (6) Connecting with Other Atheists is Valuable and Elusive. Although atheist women experienced sexism within atheist communities that made connecting with other atheists challenging, participants viewed atheism as liberating them from religious patriarchy. Anti-atheist discrimination was common early in women's atheist

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identity development, but not as frequent or salient over time. Rather, Christian hegemony and the expectation to adapt to Christian norms were more distressing than individual acts of anti-atheist discrimination. Therefore, concealment and disclosure were used to reduce personal discomfort and protect others' feelings, rather than to avoid overt anti-atheist stigma. Integration with previous concealable stigmatized identity and atheism literature is discussed. In the interest of more equitable and healthy atheist communities for women atheists, community members and leaders are encouraged to dismantle patriarchy within secular organizations and center women's voices and experiences. Clinicians and researchers can increase awareness of how hegemonic, patriarchal Christianity influences their professional work and the women they serve and eradicate such bias from their methods.

Keywords: atheism, women, concealable stigmatized identities, grounded theory

Historically and contemporaneously, Christian tradition and scripture have been interpreted in hierarchical and patriarchal ways that subjugate women (Ruether, 2014). Biblical stories frame girls and women as property, encourage their subservience to men, and conflate their value with sexual purity and the capacity to reproduce (Tarico, 2018). Although these are not tenets of all Christian faith communities, patriarchal authority is central to the theology of White Christian Evangelicals, who hold disproportionate power and influence policy in the United States (U.S.; Kobes du Mez, 2020). Although women and others with marginalized social locations (e.g., people of color) are increasingly leaving Christianity (Burge, 2021; Mohamed et al., 2021), they are less likely to identify as atheists as compared to people with relative privilege (e.g., White men; Scheitle et al., 2019). Women remain a minority (32%) among atheists (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Anti-atheist stigma in the U.S. is enduring and pervasive (Edgell et al., 2016); atheist women disproportionately experience anti-atheist discrimination as compared to men (Edgell et al., 2017). A sense of connection to other atheists (Abbott & Mollen, 2018) or engagement in a secular community may serve as a buffer for the minority stress experienced by atheists (Brewster et al., 2020). However, most atheist public figures are men who perform intellectualism in traditionally masculine ways, operating as purveyors of universal truths rooted in a heteronormative male perspective (Finger, 2017); such perspectives may make atheist communities exclusionary and off-putting to women atheists. However, as women are generally underrepresented and rarely centered in atheism scholarship, little is known about the ways antiatheist stigma manifests for atheist women, the manner by which women develop and navigate their atheist identity, and the influence of patriarchy and Christian dominance on these experiences. Guided by a critical framework and conceptualizing atheism as a concealable stigmatized identity (CSI; Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2011), the present study used a grounded theory design to develop a framework of atheism among women in the U.S.

Concealable Stigmatized Identities

Concealable stigmatized identities (CSIs) are group memberships that are devalued and not immediately visible to others. Such identities are comprised of their centrality and salience (magnitude), and the anticipation, internalization, and experience of stigma generally and in response to a disclosure of the identity (valenced content; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2011). These variables, along with determinations about disclosure and concealment of the identity, determine the influence of the CSI on psychological health (Camacho et al., 2020; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). Although the benefits of disclosure are context-dependent (Camacho et al., 2020), concealment, in particular, is associated with psychological outcomes, such that hiding a CSI likely decreases social belonging and acceptance (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). Further, people with multiple CSIs reported greater anticipation of stigma, more rumination regarding that stigma, and lower quality of life (Reinka et al., 2020). Atheist identity is one such CSI (Abbott & Mollen, 2018).

Atheism as a Concealable Stigmatized Identity. Though personal definitions vary, generally, atheism refers to the absence of belief in god(s) (Bullivant, 2013). People who meet this definition may identify as an atheist; however, some may use other terms (e.g., humanist, agnostic) that better describe their worldview and/or are less stigmatized in the U.S. Thus, the prevalence of atheists in the U.S. is difficult to ascertain. Pew Research Center (2019) found that 4% of people explicitly identify as atheists, though 17% report their religion as “nothing in particular.” Gervais and Najle (2017) estimated as many as 26% of U.S. adults may be atheists. Differences in identification, or strength of atheist identity, may be the result of differences between experiences of nones, or those who have never identified as religious, and dones, those who were at one time affiliated with faith (Schwadel et al., 2021). Likewise, identification may be influenced by the possession of other identities. Scheitle et al. (2019) found women and Black adults without belief in God were less likely to use the term atheist as compared to men and White adults; among Black participants, reduced use of the term atheist was related to the absence of atheist-identified friends. Similarly, Baker (2020) found racially and ethnically minoritized people were more reticent to identify as atheists as compared to White people and this was particularly true among women of color.

Atheist Identity and Gender. Patriarchy, the hierarchical social arrangements that afford men power and devalue women structurally and ideologically (Hunnicut, 2009), may underlie reticence among women to disaffiliate from faith, use the label atheist, or influence their experience of living as an atheist. Among Black and other people of color in the U.S., affiliation with religion and involvement with a church community often serve as crucial supports in the face of societal injustices (Dempsey et al., 2016). Therefore, racialized and gender-based oppression and concomitant economic insecurity associated with leaving a faith community may represent a greater risk for women as compared to men (Schnabel, 2016). Likewise, though fewer women than men identify as atheists, other social categories influence this gender gap; for example, rates of man-and woman-identified atheists are roughly equal among highly educated and politically liberal people (Baker & Whitehead, 2016; Schnabel, 2016). Thus, relative privilege and/or marginalization among women likely informs nonbelief itself as well as labels used to describe oneself.

In the U.S., though many atheist women deconverted from faith, often Christianity (e.g., Protestantism, Catholicism, and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints), even those who were not raised with religion were likely socialized within hegemonic Christian culture or the overarching system that advantages Christians and results in the oppression of non-Christian people. For example, Christian-based perspectives are prioritized in school curricula, work and school calendars are structured to recognize Christian holidays, and Christian imagery (Western/U.S. depictions of god) and architecture (e.g., churches) are disproportionately visible as compared to other faiths (Blumenfeld et al., 2009). Therefore, even women who are nones are influenced, perhaps detrimentally, by Christian norms. Advocating for women's rights and freedom from faith, Garst (2018) asserted the subjugation of women in the U.S. and the world is rooted in religion, particularly monotheism and Christian faiths. Religion may specifically disenfranchise Latine women, as machismo and misogyny are Catholic and colonial influences on Latine culture that lead to the underrepresentation of Latine women in positions of power among other inequities (Alexandria, 2018). Similarly, Gorham (2013) suggested religion is oppressive and noted the detrimental impact of religious expectations for and messages to Black women (e.g., the burden of caring for and preserving large, extended families; attributing depressive symptoms to sinful behavior) communicated by the Black Church on their mental and physical health. However, it is unclear whether and to what degree these potential dangers to women influence the development of their atheist identities.

Anti-Atheist Discrimination

In part a result of hegemonic Christianity, and the conflation of religiousness with nationalism (Blumenfeld et al., 2009), anti-atheist stigma is common in the U.S. (Smith & Cragun, 2019). Atheists are often perceived as immoral (Gervais, 2014) and untrustworthy (Gervais et al., 2011), despite the absence of evidence to support such stereotypes (Ståhl, 2021). Distrust of atheists, specifically among Christians, persists even when atheists hold stereotypically Christian attributes (e.g., conservative and traditional) suggesting antiatheist stigma is related to nonreligious identification rather than personal characteristics or behaviors (Grove et al., 2019). Notably, Moon et al. (2021) found people also hold positive stereotypes of atheists as fun, open-minded, and scientific concurrently with the negative, and stronger, stereotype of immorality.

Anti-Atheist Discrimination and Gender. Nonreligious women, particularly atheist women, are more likely to experience nonreligious discrimination as compared to men, and this social risk leads women to choose alternative terms for their nonreligion (e.g., spiritual, but not religious; Edgell et al., 2017). Qualitatively, atheist women of color described family and community members' perception that they abandoned their responsibility as the spiritual leader of their families and attributions of challenges in the family, such as children's behavior, to their failure to infuse the family and home with faith (Abbott et al., 2020a). Thus, women atheists appear to be impacted by unique manifestations of antiatheist stigma and employ strategies to reduce the possibility of related discrimination.

In a study of social identity threat or awareness of the devaluation of atheists, stigma consciousness was associated with higher levels of concealment and a lower likelihood of public atheism, especially among atheists residing in the Southern U.S. (Mackey et al., 2021). Atheists, particularly those belonging to other marginalized communities (e.g., people of color and low-income atheists), engage in a process of strategic outness (see Orne, 2011) in which they exercise caution with regard to disclosure of their atheism and use concealment to protect relationships, avoid negative consequences in the workplace, and ensure emotional and physical safety (Abbott et al., 2020a; Abbott et al., 2021). Indeed, Frost et al. (2022) found women were more likely to conceal their atheism as compared to men. In a cross-national study of feminist, atheist women, participants described methods of making their atheism and feminism palatable to others, thus avoiding aggression and balancing femininity (Trzebiatowska, 2019).

Some atheists seek connection with other atheists informally or in atheist communities and organizations and doing so appears beneficial to psychological well-being and belonging (Brewster et al., 2020; Galen, 2015). Organized atheism, particularly among White and male atheists, is often rooted in New Atheism, an activist form of atheism that emerged in the early 21st century. New Atheism is critical of religious privilege and cultural legitimacy of belief in supernatural forces and challenges the assertion that religion is necessary for moral behavior (Kettell, 2013). The faces of the New Atheism movement are the "four horsemen," a term describing four prominent White, male atheists whose voices and writings are central to the movement (Finger, 2017). Although credited with bringing awareness to the global political influence of religion and other potential dangers of hegemonic faith (Kettell, 2013), these four White men are also criticized for a lack of contextualization and nuance in their positions on faith as influenced by their distinctly male and Eurocentric perspectives. Notably, the contributions of women atheists in the New Atheist movement have been virtually erased (Finger, 2017). The horsemen associate scientific-mindedness, including rationality and critical thinking, with masculinity and espouse other erroneous, sexist explanations for New Atheism's lack of appeal among women. Women may be silenced, locked out, or, expecting similar perspectives among male members, uninterested in engaging in organized nonbelief (Finger, 2017; Schnabel et al., 2016), resulting in the loss of a healthy form of social support in the face of anti-atheist stigma and Christian dominance.

Anti-Atheist Discrimination and Psychological Health. Importantly, though religiousness has been associated with psychological health, studies of (non)religion and health that are inclusive of nonreligious people and measure (non)religiousness accurately suggest there are no differences between the health of theists and atheists (Speed & Hwang, 2019). Religiousness, and participation in religious activities, is beneficial to religious people for whom this engagement is congruent (Speed & Fowler, 2021), but does not indicate that atheists are less healthy than theists due to the absence of religiousness or religious practice.

Some atheists' health, however, is negatively impacted by their relative marginalization as compared to Christians in the U.S. Consistent with CSI theory, the anticipation and experience of anti-atheist discrimination, for example, is deleterious to atheists' psychological health (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Brewster et al., 2016; Cheng et al., 2018). Doane and Elliott (2015) suggested an indirect relationship between perceptions of anti-atheist discrimination and psychological well-being through the strength of atheist identity, such that when discrimination led atheists to identify more strongly with atheism potential harm to well-being was attenuated. Relatedly, more disclosure and less concealment of atheist identity are generally associated with higher psychological well-being (Abbott & Mollen, 2018) and lower psychological distress (Brewster et al., 2020). However, in a small sample of atheists of color, both disclosure and concealment of atheist identity were associated with increased experiences of anti-atheist discrimination as well as more psychological distress (Abbott et al., 2020b).

Thus, relations between aspects of CSIs seem to vary among atheists in the U.S. with different cultural positionalities (e.g., race and social class). For example, low-income and working-class atheists did not describe their atheism as salient and, therefore, were not distressed by anti-atheist stigma despite awareness of its pervasive nature (Abbott et al., 2021). Atheists of color often described the challenge of being an outsider within communities of color, due to their nonbelief, and within atheist communities, as they were not White (Abbott et al., 2020a). In both these studies, male participants described asserting their atheist identity and intentionally challenging religious others to intellectual debates more often than women participants, perhaps reflecting their relative privilege and safety. Therefore, women, too, may uniquely navigate atheism as a result of concurrent gendered marginalization (e.g., misogyny) and general antiatheism, as well as the distinctive anti-atheist stigma associated with their gender.

The Present Study

Hierarchical, patriarchal forms of Christianity are harmful to and subjugate women (Moder, 2019). Additionally, the hegemonic nature of Christianity in U.S. culture and concomitant attacks on women's rights marginalizes nonreligious women and women of other faiths (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). Atheism may represent an alternative worldview for women opposed to such values. On the other hand, given sexism communicated by influential atheist leaders, atheism, specifically, as opposed to other forms of nonbelief, and atheist communities may be less appealing to women as compared to men.

Extant research focused on atheist people has demonstrated the psychological harm of anti-atheist discrimination (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Brewster et al., 2016), potential psychological benefits of atheist identity (Abbott et al., 2020a; Galen, 2015), and the complex role of outness for atheists. However, to date, most studies of atheists were conducted with mixed-gender samples, most often predominantly men. Further, emerging scholarship related to atheists who are members of other minoritized communities suggests variation in their lived experiences and relationships among CSI variables. Therefore, informed by critical theory and using a grounded theory qualitative design, we sought to examine a framework of atheism as a CSI among woman-identified atheists. Our investigation was guided by two research questions: (1) How, if at all, does patriarchal Christianity influence women's development of and relationship to their atheism? (2) How do women navigate an atheist identity in the context of anti-atheist stigma in the U.S.?

Method

This investigation was guided by critical theory, acknowledging the manner by which structural power influences lived realities and the social–historical context and marginalization (Ponterotto, 2005) of atheists and women. A critical approach is in line with our intention to uncover the influence of patriarchy and Christian hegemony on women's experience of their atheism. Grounded theory is an inductive approach to a qualitative inquiry involving an interactive process between data collection and data interpretation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Congruent with our critical framework, we understand the realities uncovered by grounded theory qualitative analysis as co-constructed by participants and researchers within their respective cultural and structural contexts (Charmaz, 2000) and employed Levitt's (2021) guidelines for design and analysis.

The researchers identified as atheist and agnostic, White and White/Hispanic, and cisgender women. The first author conceived and designed the study. The first and second authors collaboratively executed the project; both are well-versed in culturally sensitive interviewing skills through their training and work as clinicians in the discipline of counseling psychology. They have also conducted prior qualitative studies of diverse atheists. Congruent with our critical approach to the project, the researchers were aware of their desire to challenge misogyny and anti-atheism and how our similarities to and differences from our participants, and related dynamics of power, may have influenced data collection (e.g., what we asked, how interviewees responded) and data interpretation. They, therefore, following Levitt's (2021) guidelines, engaged in perspective management including taking notes, documenting their reactions, biases, and observations during and immediately following interviews, and meeting regularly to process their responses to interviews and offer one another alternative interpretations (Morrow, 2005). In the interest of transparency, the researchers also shared their identities with participants, as applicable, and informed participants of the overarching research goals. Particularly, when the researchers' social locations differed from interviewees, clarifying questions were employed to gather detail about cultural experiences, increase researchers' understanding, and avoid making erroneous assumptions. The study was not pre-registered; the de-identified codebook is available upon request from the authors.

Participants

For the purposes of this study, we were specifically interested in atheist-identified women given their higher likelihood of engagement with secular organizations and our interest in how patriarchy influences their experiences within faith and nonfaith communities. Initially, participants were recruited from an email listserv consisting of atheists who previously expressed interest in being notified about scholarly studies of atheism. As most participants were White and many were older women, we then recruited additional participants from a national secular student organization and a national organization for Black nonbelievers. In the final stage, participants were recruited via the email listserv of a national organization promoting separation between church and state. Of those in the first round of recruitment who endorsed interest in our qualitative study, we invited the first 29 to interview, 26 scheduled, and 21 attended and completed the scheduled interview. In the second round of recruitment, aimed at younger atheists and atheists of color, we extended an additional 10 invitations to interview, in the order of responses were received, six scheduled an interview, and four attended and completed the interview. In the third round, in a continued effort to hear from non-White and younger atheists, we invited all non-White respondents and all respondents under the age of 35 not previously invited to interview; six scheduled and all completed an interview. The demographics of our participants (N=31) are reported in Table 1. All participants received a $25.00 gift card in compensation for their interview.

Table 1. Demographics of Qualitative Participants

Pseudonym	*Age*	*Race/Ethnicity*	*Region of U.S*	*Sexual Orientation*	*Highest Level of Education*	*Annual Income*	*Years Identified as Atheist*	*Religion of Origin*
Adwoa	49	Black	Southern	Straight	Master's degree	$61,000–$100,000	9	Christianity
Amanda	52	White	Southern	Straight	Professional degree	$61,000–$100,000	52	Spiritual, not religious
Ana	52	White/Indigenous	Western	Straight	Professional degree	$61,000–$100,000	35	Christianity
Ann	38	White	Midwest	Straight	Bachelor's degree	$61,000–$100,000	13	Christianity
Athena	35	White	Southern	Straight	Master's degree	$33,000–$60,000	20	Spiritual, not religious
Autumn	40	Black	Northeast	Straight	Master's degree	$33,000–$60,000	3	Christianity
Bell	44	Human	Midwest	Straight	Associate's degree	Below $19,000	31	Christianity
Brenda	28	Black	Western	Straight	Some college	$33,000–$60,000	5	Christianity
Brittany	63	White	Western	Straight	Bachelor's degree	$33,000–$60,000	40	Christianity
Chandi	79	White	Western	Straight	Bachelor's degree	$33,000–$60,000	67	Christianity
Elizabeth	33	White	Northeast	Straight	Master's degree	$33,000–$60,000	16	Christianity
Emilie	31	White	Southern	Straight	Professional degree	$61,000–$100,000	17	Christianity
Emily	79	White	Midwest	Straight	Master's degree	$33,000– $60,000	45	Christianity
Ginger	39	White	Northeast	Straight	Professional degree	$61,000–$100,000	9	Christianity
Hypatia	74	White	Northeast	Straight	Professional degree	$101,000–$150,000	74	Agnosticism
Jennifer	57	White	Midwest	Bisexual	H.S. diploma	$61,000– $100,000	15	Christianity
Jessica	45	Black	Midwest	Pansexual	Master's degree	Over $150,000	15	Christianity
Jibutu	78	White/Black/ Indigenous/ African/ Native/European	Western	Straight	Associate's degree	$33,000–$60,000	40	Christianity
Joan	67	White	Western	Straight	Bachelor's Degree	$61,000–$100,000	50	Christianity
Lola	48	Latinx	Western	Straight	Associate's degree	Over $150,000	15	Spiritual, not religious
Lyn	32	White	Southern	Straight	Master's degree	$61,000–$100,000	10	Christianity
Margaret	52	White	Southern	Straight	Some college	$33,000–$60,000	20	Christianity
Marie	40	White	Midwest	Straight	Professional degree	$101,000–$150,000	12	Christianity
Maya	44	Black	Southern	Straight	Professional degree	$61,000–$100,000	10	Christianity
Molly	51	White	Southern	Straight	Master's degree	$101,000–$150,000	34	Christianity
Monica	40	Black/White	Northeast	Queer	Some college	$61,000–$100,000	29	Christianity/Judaism
Sarah	27	Black	Midwest	Bisexual	Bachelor's Degree	$33,000–$60,000	5	Christianity
Sisu	75	White	Southern	Straight	Bachelor's degree	$33,000–$60,000	30	Christianity
Stephanie	42	Asian-American	Midwest	Straight	Bachelor's degree	$33,000–$60,000	22	Christianity
Tara	39	White	Northeast	Straight	Master's Degree	$101,000–$150,000	34	Spiritual, not religious
Taylor	51	White	Southern	Straight	Bachelor's degree	$33,000–$60,000	30	Christianity

Note: Professional degree indicates professional or doctoral degrees. Associate's degree indicates an associate's degree or trade school.

Procedure

This study received institutional review board approval from the authors' institution. Participants were provided a hyperlink to an online survey platform, Qualtrics, where they consented to participation, indicated interest in being contacted for a qualitative interview and completed a demographics survey. To confirm eligibility for participation, respondents were asked to confirm they identified as women, were the legal age of majority in their jurisdiction, and resided in the U.S. A criterion question was used to assess personal belief about god(s) with the following choices: "I do not believe in a god(s). I am an atheist," "I neither believe nor disbelieve in god(s); I am an agnostic," or "I believe in a god(s); I am a theist." Only participants who indicated the first option were invited to continue participation. Participants who expressed interest in an interview were contacted via email to schedule.

Sources of Data

Our primary data source was 31 approximately 45- to 60-min qualitative interviews, conducted via Zoom, an online videoconferencing platform, or phone. Given our inductive approach, we opted for a brief, open-ended, flexible semistructured interview (see Appendix 1) in the interest of eliciting rich narratives and deeper meaning (Morrow, 2005). All interviews were audio/video-recorded and transcribed by a third-party, automated speech-to-text service. Both authors took notes during and following interviews and met to discuss their initial impressions, biases as they arose, and questions at several points during the interviewing stage.

Data Analysis

The authors met regularly during the interviewing stage to discuss the data we were collecting and make determinations about future recruitment needs (e.g., what voices were missing). When the authors agreed saturation was met, no new data were emerging, and no additional recruiting was necessary, interviewing was discontinued (Levitt, 2021; Morrow, 2007). Transcripts were uploaded to and analyzed in NVivo V. 12, a qualitative data analysis software. Each author initially independently read the transcripts of interviews they conducted. Transcripts were checked for accuracy by playing the video during the initial review of the transcript; errors were corrected, as necessary, and edits were made to remove identifying information (e.g., names and locations). Then, we coded all content of the interviews relevant to our research questions as units of meaning, labeled with participants' race/ethnicity, type of atheism (e.g., none or done), and a description of the core meaning of their response. Using constant comparison, these initial units were organized into higher-level categories based on similarity of meaning. After this initial stage of coding, the authors combined their codebooks and, collaboratively, continued the process of constant comparison, organizing codes into higher-level categories. Ultimately, core categories, or themes, were identified with fidelity to participants' stories, consideration of participants' social contexts, and utility of findings in mind (Levitt, 2021). The authors met to compare their final codebooks. Collaboratively, they reviewed the data and dialogued about similarities and discrepancies in their organization of units, making revisions until both authors agreed on the final set of core categories.

Results

Qualitative Findings

Qualitative analysis rooted in critical grounded theory resulted in six core categories, or themes: (1) Embracing Atheism as Liberation, (2) Escaping Christian Patriarchy, Challenging Atheist Patriarchy, (3) Low Identity Salience Provides Protection from Anti-Atheist Discrimination, (4) Expectations to Conform to Christian Norms, (5) Disclosure Requires Thoughtfulness and Purpose, and (6) Connecting with Other Atheists is Valuable and Elusive. Table 2 lists these core categories, as well as the clusters, or subthemes that comprised them. In the description of each theme, the use of the term none refers to a person who never identified as religious or believed in a higher power, though they may have been socialized or raised with religion, whereas done refers to an atheist who once identified as religious or a believer in god(s).

Table 2. Core Categories (Themes) and Clusters (Subthemes)

Core Categories and Clusters	*Number of Participants*	*Total Times Coded*
1. Embracing Atheism as Liberation	**31**	**512**
My pursuit of knowledge led me to atheism.	31	302
Coming out to myself and others took time and reflection.	26	98
Atheism influenced the person I've become.	26	112
2. Escaping Christian Patriarchy, Challenging Atheist Patriarchy	**30**	**347**
Social justice values undergird my atheism.	26	113
Religion as a system is oppressive and incongruent with my values.	27	106
Patriarchy influences religion/atheism in ways that devalue women like me.	25	128
3. Low Identity Salience Provides Protection from Anti-Atheist Discrimination	**31**	**265**
Though pervasive in attitudes, anti-atheism is not often directed at me.	31	166
Privilege offers me protection from anti-atheism.	18	47
It is not necessary to attend to my atheism regularly.	2	1 52
4. Expectations to Conform to Christian Norms	**30**	**343**
I make space for religion to exist in the world and for the people around me.	27	102
I find cultural Christianity is a burden.	27	139
The Christian majority fundamentally misunderstands me.	29	102
5. Disclosure Requires Thoughtfulness and Purpose	**31**	**462**
My disclosure and concealment are fluid and contextual.	31	310
My atheism sometimes negatively influences my relationships.	21	53
Conflict avoidance is a protective strategy for me.	29	99
6. Connecting with Other Atheists is Valuable and Elusive	**30**	**294**
Sometimes I feel isolated as an atheist.	19	44
I encounter barriers to creating meaningful connections with other atheists.	24	108
I appreciate opportunities to feel connected to other atheists.	30	142

Embracing Atheism as Liberation. All participants (n=31) described engaging in a pursuit of knowledge that led them to atheism. Even among nones, most of whom were raised in religious families, participants described a "curious" nature that led them to question the faith of their families and communities very early in life. Most participants (n= 28) reported they were never quite able to make religion fit in their lives, noting the way it made them "uncomfortable," how religious stories and explanations "[didn't] make sense," and their observations of religious people not treating others well. Jessica wondered "how [she] could be a person of color and continue to belong to an organization that spent so long justifying the enslavement of [her] people." For dones, this difficulty aligning religion with their values and worldview along with familial, community, and/or cultural expectations of religion led most to "gradual," sometimes "long," deconversion to atheism. Nones, too, often described "years of study" or using other secular labels (e.g., "agnostic") prior to identifying as atheist. Some (n=11) shared that ultimately embracing atheism meant accepting the challenges of doing so. For example, Brenda described being “terrified” to experiment with atheism, others noted the “advantages” of believing in an afterlife or “wish[ing] [they] could believe” as it might be easier, and uncertainty about how to raise a child “without religion.”

Once embracing atheism, almost all (n=26) participants described the way in which doing so enhanced their lives or their sense of themselves. Bell stated she was “really proud of [her atheism] because [she] discovered it on [her] own.” Others described their atheism as central to “how [they] make decisions” and “look at reality.” Autumn Lily described “feeling empowered to make decisions for [her] self without having to pray about it and wait for god first” and being “less apologetic about being more assertive.” Thus, for some dones, leaning into their atheist identity meant liberation from the parts of faith they, in general, and as women, found restrictive. In many cases, participants reported their atheism was more salient when they were exploring atheism or initially identified as an atheist than it was currently, but noted, as Athena put it, atheism had nonetheless “shaped how [she] reacted to things and how [she] perceive[d] things.” In other words, it was congruent with and undergirded participants’ personal values and the ways in which they constructed meaning and purpose, though they did not think about or discuss it daily in most cases.

More than half of the participants (n=18) also spoke about the benefits of atheism for their mental health including enhanced coping with difficult events, feeling psychologically healthier, and experiencing a sense of freedom. Maya valued that her atheism required her to approach challenges in a “realistic” manner. Stephanie described atheism as a “lifesaver” that prompted her to take action and seek “science and evidence-based therapy” rather than waiting for a supernatural being to “watch out for [her]” as she had earlier in her life. Others described feeling “resilient,” having higher “self-esteem,” and being “stronger.” Molly described “breaking free from all of [her] religious convictions [as] the most liberating thing in [her] life.” Emily summarized the connection between the search for knowledge that brought her to atheism, ultimately leaning into her atheist identity, and her mental health:

> As I learned more about myself, I became more capable as a teacher. My confidence, of course, was boosted....As you realize that you are what you are, not a sinner and you're not going to hell...all of a sudden you can have this self-worth.

Freed from the expectations or limitations of faith, participants were able to fully discover themselves and live in congruence with a set of personally derived values.

Escaping Christian Patriarchy, Challenging Atheist Patriarchy. Most participants (n=26) identified a social justice orientation as underpinning their atheism and personal values, particularly related to the separation of church and state; most engaged in activism via individual acts of defiance against Christian hegemony, membership in national secular organizations, or for causes other than secular ones. Joan noted how "loud" religion was in the U.S. and the "outsized" impact of Christianity "on our policies and what's happening in the world." Like Joan, many saw the political power of Christianity as detrimental to marginalized groups to which they may or may not have belonged. In particular, a majority of participants (n=27) described Christianity as an "abusive," unjust system for girls and women. Emily asserted that "anybody who is involved in the women's movement, I seriously...can't help but to shed religion because so much of religion is to put women down, to keep them in their place." Commonly, women reported receiving and eventually rejecting messages via religion, typically forms of Christianity, to be "subservient" to men. Further, more than half (n=18) saw the violation of typical gendered expectations for women in Christianity as influencing perceptions of atheist women. Participants were aware of the common stereotype of atheists as immoral and added that for atheist women this manifested in the perception of them as sexually "loose" or "whores." Some noted their atheism was a violation of an expectation that women be people of faith or, at minimum, spiritual. Black women participants added that they were sometimes seen as "deeply defective" as atheists by Black people of faith given cultural expectations of religiousness for women. Other stereotypes of atheist women described by participants were "selfishness" and the perception that they "wouldn't be a good mother because [they] don't have that [religious] foundation."

Yet, as atheist women rejected expectations for their lives and behaviors rooted in hegemonic Christian patriarchy, they often encountered challenges related to patriarchy in atheist communities. For example, 18 participants observed that atheists were predominantly men and/or they knew few atheist women. Emilie highlighted how this was true among atheists, generally, as well as among high-profile atheists: “women atheists are kind of invisible. I can’t think of any in popular culture who are known, out atheist women.” Speaking about her fear of repercussions for her career, Jessica provided some insight as to why some women may hide their atheism, leading to perceptions of fewer atheist women as compared to atheist men:

> … visibility matters and here is a place where I’m not visible by choice, by societal dictate. It kind of hurts because the same way I want the next generation of Black women to know that they can go into engineering and do anything a man can, the same way I want the gay woman on my team to know that that is not a problem for her and her career and her life, I can’t be that for atheists.

Women in the study discussed the absence of women within the atheist movement, either in reality or their perception, the prevalence of men in their experience of engaging with other atheists, and the challenge of increasing the visibility of women atheists and/or diversifying atheist communities with regard to gender.

Women atheists in the study (n=12) also noted similar and unique ways in which patriarchy operated within atheist communities as compared to religious communities. Participants described encountering “creepy” men, “prejudice against women,” being “talked over,” and invalidation when sharing their experiences of sexism in atheist groups. Sarah acknowledged that “we live in a patriarchal society, so pretty much any structure or system that you have is going to have some dents or sprinkles of patriarchy in it,” including among atheists. Similarly, Taylor found “it turns out misogyny transcends all faith perspectives.” In attempts to proposition her for sex at atheist events, Brittany described atheist men using the absence of religious expectations for abstinence to “make inroads with women,” asking “what [she was] worried about” when she declined their advances. Several of the women identified these factors as “disappointing” and influential in their decisions about how to engage in atheist communities.

Low Identity Salience Provides Protection from Anti-Atheist Discrimination. A majority of participants (n=26) described awareness of stereotypes of atheists and other anti-atheist biases. They stated religious people believed atheists were "jaded with the world," probably not "a good American," "elitis[t]," "not nice," and "the cause of a lot of the impurities and immorality in the world." However, few (n=6) described anti-atheism as a common occurrence in their lives; those who noticed anti-atheism more regularly often identified the source as people "online" and noted it was not directed at them individually. About two-thirds (n=21) of participants said they did not spend much time thinking about the discrimination they faced or might face, as atheists. In some cases, women atheists did not think about discrimination because they "did not care" what others thought. Adwoa, for example, said her loved ones were the "only people whose opinion [she] cared about in life, so after [she] got through that conversation and were good [she] didn't care what anybody thought." Amanda attributed her indifference to age, saying, "I'm 52 years old. I just don't care what people think." Relatedly, others described potential differences across generational cohorts such that "there [was] no longer any risk" to being atheist. Lyn shared that she "[was] not worried about discrimination" and "in the millennial cohort a lot more people [were] nonreligious."

Others seemed to attribute the absence of difficult experiences as an atheist to luck. For example, Autumn Lily acknowledged the "bad experiences" of other atheists, but stated she had personally "only had a couple." Chandi, too, noted that she had not "had the terrible experiences that other people have" and that although some people had "backed off" after her disclosure "no one [had] been really that intolerant." In some cases, participants (n=18) pointed to various privileges that allowed them to infrequently think about the potential for anti-atheist discrimination. Athena disclosed:

> I'm a straight, White, female that grew up in a very conservative environment. So I always fit in and [atheism] was this one thing about me that didn't fit in for the most part... I could easily hide it or brush it off and it just was usually easier to do that.

Passing as a member of one or more dominant social groups, therefore, may have afforded some participants a feeling of security that discrimination, even if experienced, would be manageable. Monica similarly identified the invisibility of her atheism as an advantage, noting atheism was not "as on the surface, primary as not being White or being a woman...I can't choose to hide those things...." For others, their geography was deemed protective. Some identified living in a Western or Northeastern U.S. state that was generally "liberal," "accepting," and/or "independent." Even within a "red state," the area in which Amanda lived was described as "well-educated" and, therefore, "live and let live."

For many (n=21), once they finished exploring (non)religion and identified as atheists, atheism was no longer particularly salient in their daily lives. Lyn explained:

> As you get a little older and then you have professional things, you're thinking about family things. It just wasn't on the top of my mind anymore, and while I still think of [atheism] as a part of my identity, it's probably in the top three, but I feel removed enough from it that it's not something I have to feed if that makes sense.

Although atheism was frequently the "foundation on which [their] understanding of everything else [was] built," atheism simply did not come up often in participants' lives. For some, atheism did not come up because they had "cultivate[d] friendships" with like-minded people. Elizabeth felt "lucky to have friends and colleagues that [were] very, very open and accepting of pretty much anything." Emily, too, described "tolerant" friends, "even the ones that claim to be religious;" therefore, she was able to "put that religion crap away" and "focus on children, and humans, relationships, and equal pay for equal work, social justice issues." Likewise, Jessica said it was unlikely atheism would come up with coworkers or friends, but more likely they would discuss "the impact of religion on culture and politics and policy." In other words, once participants were no longer experimenting with nonbelief and identified as atheists, and in the absence of common anti-atheist discrimination, they rarely needed to think about their atheism. Rather, the critiques of religion that brought them to atheism were salient and likely to come up in their everyday lives.

Expectations to Conform to Christian Norms. Christian hegemony was described as an unwelcome presence in the lives of participants (n=27) and often resulted in others assuming women atheists were Christians or otherwise religious/spiritual. For example, Lola said, "I work with people and I meet people all the time and a lot of times they just assume that I'm the same religion they are." Maya shared that people assumed she was religious because she was "Black, a woman, and currently over 40 [years of age]." Ana, too, said people expected her to have a "deep, spiritual understanding" as a "Native woman." Others, like Jibutu, were assumed religious and a "good Christian" when engaging in community service. When meeting new people, atheist women were sometimes asked where they attended church which communicated an assumption of religiousness. These assumptions often felt harmful and isolating to participants. Describing her friends' infusion of spirituality and religion into the support they provided when she was grieving the death of her husband, Chandi said:

> As an atheist I believe I will never see my husband again. He's only with me in my dreams and my memories of him. It's irritating. They're trying to be nice. So, I bit my tongue…it's hurtful and, of course, they are trying to do the exact opposite. They're not trying to make you feel bad.

Thus, these assumptions of religiousness and spirituality can be emotionally harmful, particularly when they are not aligned with or invalidate women atheists' worldviews.

The sheer visibility of religiousness was another manner by which cultural Christianity, or the infusion of Christianity into secular life, was a burden to participants. Hypatia remembered feeling "excluded" by the use of prayer in public grieving after the terror attack on 9/11. Molly expressed discomfort with people publicly giving thanks to god following tragedy rather than appreciating essential workers and other people providing support. Others noticed the abundance of religious "billboards and signs and bumper stickers," crosses and other religious imagery "on every corner," and Christian television specials during the month of December. Sarah reported she refused to go to some medical offices because "they deny women [services] because of their religious beliefs." Therefore, being surrounded by Christianity was disruptive to participants' lives, leaving them feeling othered, and more salient than overt anti-atheism.

Most participants (n=25) described their respect for religious people and their beliefs and values. However, they did not perceive this respect was reciprocated by religious people. Using her family as an example of her consideration for religious belief, Brittany shared:

> It's fine because they believe it works, and it makes them feel better that they're doing something. They're very sad that they're not going to see me again when we all die. I lost a sister two years ago and she was another born again, and she died knowing for certain she was going to go to heaven. Well, I could see the advantage in that so I'm not going to do something that takes that away from people.

Others shared this sentiment and described adapting important life events to make the religious family comfortable, attending religious services to not disrupt social gatherings, and being open to friendships with people of any (non) religious orientation. Conversely, atheist women did not find religious others offered similar respect for their nonbelief. Several participants described the ways in which religious people were "offended" by the simple disclosure of their atheist identity or "[took] it personally" when they challenged religious ideas. Simultaneously religious people felt emboldened to tell participants they were "going to hell" or question their morality. Margaret described her religious community as "horrified" when her secular group put up a billboard inviting nonbelievers to join them if they were looking for a supportive group. Altogether, participants often felt disrespected by the Christian majority.

Commonly, atheist women (n=18) expressed the view that Christians fundamentally misunderstood the reasons for their atheism. Ann remarked that some believed younger generations were too "lazy" to "get up and go in [to church] on Sunday morning." Others shared that parents and others in their lives attributed atheism to a "phase" or "rebellious stage" they would "grow out of," being "mad at god," a "response to trauma," or, for Athena, a product of the music to which [she] listened. Among dones, religious peers asserted they "never really knew" god or were just "confused." As an academic, some told Ginger her atheism was a product of her chosen "career path." Other misconceptions were gendered. For example, Bell's grandmother thought her atheism was a "hormonal teenage girl thing," and Autumn Lily was told she had not “met the right man” yet who could be the “spiritual head of the house” and bring her to religion. Similarly, people assumed Molly’s atheism was a product of the negative influence of a man, leaving her “jaded.” Ana commented that religious people thought atheists were “evil and self-serving” and “the exact opposite [was] true.” Thus, participants were highly critical of the ways in which Christian dominance disregarded and misunderstood their atheistic worldviews.

Disclosure Requires Thoughtfulness and Purpose. Balancing the centrality of their atheism to their worldview, their awareness of anti-atheist bias despite few experiences of overt discrimination, and often feeling misunderstood by religious people, all participants (n=31) described their disclosure and/or concealment of their atheist identity as fluid and contextual. In most cases (n=25), participants said the people closest to them, friends and/or family, were aware of their atheism, and some, if not all, of those people, were “supportive,” nonjudgmental, or atheists as well. Otherwise, women atheists made choices about when and how to disclose their atheist identity. Most participants explained their outness as not going “out of [their] way to hide it,” but not “broadcast[ing]” it either. In general, participants usually did not feel the need to “bring [atheism] up,” but disclosed it as relevant to conversations, when they desired to stand up against anti-atheism or Christian dominance, or if asked directly about their beliefs.

When choosing to conceal, frequently cited reasons were to avoid “devastating” a religious loved one or internalized messages about not discussing politics or religion in public settings. Others simply wanted to avoid “rocking the boat,” including women like Molly who described a high degree of outness; she shared, “I’m a pretty outspoken person, but I’m also a smart person and I know when to just save myself the grief.” Based on the setting and people involved, rather than concealing some participants modified the language to describe their atheism, using terms that felt accurate but less stigmatizing like “nonbeliever” or “humanist.” Others discussed their atheism publicly as an intentional strategy to “weed out” people who would not be “on [their] side or have [their] back.” These decisions about disclosure and concealment were often informed by the nature of prior disclosures. Though Lyn’s colleague’s response to her disclosure was curious rather than negative, it was nonetheless uncomfortable:

> Somehow she found out that I used to be religious and that I no longer was and she just badgered me a lot after that. "Just one story. Tell me more. I really want to know." And she would do it when other people were around and I just kind of regretted that I had brought it up.

A majority of participants (n=21) described at least one instance in which their disclosure of their atheist identity harmed a relationship. Some described "big rifts" with family and losing friendships. In addition to harming existing relationships, sometimes anti-atheist stigma and discrimination seemed to get in the way of creating new relationships. Brenda, for example, "removed [herself] from the larger part of the Black community because of not being religious or not wanting to have those conversations all the time, fighting at family reunions over nonsense." Several participants (n=7) noted that being an atheist made dating difficult, as men were often looking for a religious partner. Emily also noted that men were not interested in the strength of an atheist woman:

> If some guy is putting the make on you and you are standing up to them because you have this self-worth now, you don't have to submit to this kind of BS. It sure can put a damper on the relationship or it can nip it in the bud.

Therefore, though participants typically were out as atheists in some settings, perhaps online or with trusted others, and were not necessarily hiding their atheism, concealment most often occurred in the form of omission of their atheist identity from a conversation based on negative past disclosure experiences.

Although 13 women explicitly described positive disclosures, 29 suggested concealment was best under certain conditions. This form of concealment primarily served the purpose of conflict avoidance (n=29) in the interest of protecting themselves and their families from harm, discomfort, or inconvenience. Alluding to the experiences she was avoiding by concealing her atheism, Bell said, "If I don't mention it to somebody, they would have no idea I'm an atheist. But, I know if I did [disclose] I would see that look in their eyes." Based on reactions from religious people in her life, Lola noted that the word atheist, itself, was essentially "an argument." Many participants expected disclosure would accompany a discussion about religion that would be “a waste of time” or “turn [their] identity into an argument.” Tara stopped posting about atheism on social media because “people don’t want their kids hanging out with your kids if you’re an atheist.” Others concealed to protect their or their partner’s employment. For example, Brittany was self-employed and many customers were “religious types.” At the office, Emilie’s supervisor expressed anti-atheist views, so she “kept [her] mouth shut” as she “count[ed] on them for [her] performance review.” As a nurse, Lyn expressed some concern that disclosure would compromise trust among her colleagues, an essential element in such a collaborative profession. Therefore, the infrequency with which participants attended to their atheism or experienced antiatheist discrimination seemed likely related to the limited contexts in which they chose to disclose their atheism and the use of concealment to avoid conflict.

Connecting with Other Atheists is Valuable and Elusive. In light of the thought and energy necessary to navigate disclosure of their atheist identities in most settings, the opportunity to connect with other atheist people was described as valuable by almost all participants (n=30). For some (n=13), it was enough to know that other atheists existed. For Adwoa, reading the work of a Black atheist sent her on a quest to find “other people who look like [her] and don’t believe;” she described connecting with other Black atheists as “finding a new family in a sense.” Others did not necessarily connect in person with other atheists but found belonging through consumption of nonreligious literature and media. Access to such content often came from membership in national secular organizations, following people and organizations on social media, and self-initiated learning (e.g., reading books, taking classes). Some participants gathered with other atheists regularly as a part of a formal organization or informally with like-minded friends. Stephanie valued the “accountability” among atheists and noted she was “more comfortable with interacting with other people in the atheist community because [she saw] them as critical, more rational and reasonable” than religious people. For Sisu, referring to the absence of religion in conversation, she appreciated what atheists “didn’t say and what they didn’t do” more than anything particular about their personalities. Molly described the ease of relating to atheists:

> I am a part of a couple of atheist communities and I find that I seem to share a lot of their opinions and they get it and I don't have to convince anyone. It's really nice because nothing is combative and you're not debating. It's like a collective agreement and it's nice to be a part of a group of like-minded people. They're very much about humanness and they're all about equality and fairness and that's what I'm about as well.

Therefore, many participants found ways to feel connected to other atheist people in ways that brought them joy and affirmed their atheism and related values. At the same time, most participants (n=24) encountered barriers to connecting with other atheists and 19 sometimes felt isolated as atheists. Ana attributed this difficulty bringing atheists together to the absence of a shared "core set of beliefs and a set of practices that go along with it." Brenda thought "White people [had] more room to be atheists" than Black people and, therefore, it was tough to find other atheists of color or, specifically, Black atheists with whom to connect. Others described obstacles to connection including having never "lived in a big enough city," atheists not "advertis[ing] like churches," or not being eligible as a non-student to participate in university-based secular alliances. For some, the variety of backgrounds and values among atheists limited the opportunity for connection. As a done, Maya noticed it was "easier to share with people who grew up in a kind of evangelical-type Christianity (e.g., 'ex-vangelicals') than people who didn't grow up with any religion." Though the only participant to cite their politics as a barrier, notably Tara expressed difficulty relating to other atheists as a "hardcore conservative" and "complete opposite of the normal, typical atheist." Some participants ascribed their feelings of isolation, in part, to intrapersonal factors, like being "introverted," "anxiety," or not having enough desire for connection to put in the effort necessary to attend meetings.

The aforementioned sexism among atheists also served as a barrier to connection. Emilie explained:

> As a woman, because I didn't feel that there were other people like me, being torn between being a "not like the other girls" girl, and just not being tokenized as one of the few women in those groups. So, yeah, I probably avoid

> [participating in atheist groups] more than I would have otherwise because I was a woman.

Stephanie, too, noted that “if a new person comes up with a new voice and it’s a woman, there’s a lot of judgment” in the atheist community. Chandi resented the distribution of labor in atheist groups such that “it’s almost like this antiquated thing where the women do the organizing and the men are very happy with that, but they’re the intellectuals.” Thus, participants expressed a strong desire for relationships with other atheists, either through atheist community or cultivating friendships with tolerant and like-minded peers. In addition to the barriers that may exclude people of all genders seeking connection with other atheists, sexism in atheist groups may be a particular obstacle for atheist women.

Discussion

Using a critical grounded theory approach, this study explored a framework of atheism as a CSI among atheist women. As expected, women atheists in this study were aware of anti-atheist bias and experienced discrimination, but, unexpectedly, not typically in an overt or frequent manner or in ways that directly influenced their outness or psychological distress. Participants were most distressed by Christian dominance in the U.S. and contextually disclosed and concealed in the context of this hegemonic Christianity primarily to avoid distressing others and inconvenient and fruitless conversations with religious people about their atheism. Both nones and dones described patriarchy and misogyny as components of their rejection of religion generally and Christianity specifically, though they identified the same systems of oppression occurring within atheist communities in ways that limited the opportunity to make a valuable connection with other atheists, including atheist women. Black and Indigenous women described violating unique expectations from their respective communities to be religious and/ or spiritual as barriers to connection within their racial communities and/or among atheists. Thus, for women, an atheist identity involved a complex process with patriarchal, hegemonic Christianity at the center. These oppressive, societal Christian norms pushed them away from faith, pulled them toward individual and community atheism, and required selective disclosure and concealment of their atheism. They were drawn to other atheists as a resource in the face of anti-atheist stigma but were again pushed away by sexism, leaving many with a sense of isolation and renewed frustration with patriarchy and Christian hegemony.

Atheism as a Concealable Stigmatized Identity Among Women

The findings of the present study diverged from extant CSI scholarship (Camacho et al., 2020; Reinka et al., 2020) in that concealment was not described as causing distress and atheist women were not strongly and negatively impacted by stigma though they were aware of pervasive anti-atheism. Rather, they minimized the frequency and consequence of overt discrimination in their lives but noted the pervasiveness of Christianity in society and disregard of their nonreligiousness by Christians as a primary source of distress. Their narratives did not convey that disclosure facilitated or that concealment hindered their psychological well-being. Thus, cultural stigma, or the social devaluation of atheists, and element of valenced content in CSIs (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009) seemed more related to atheist women's experiences than intraindividual processes like identity salience or anticipated stigma. Findings in this study also aligned with CSI theory (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2011) in that women's atheists' experiences of their atheist identity were influenced by its centrality and their strategic use of concealment and disclosure, though not in the ways expected or found among people with other CSIs or other studies of atheists.

Anti-Atheist Discrimination and Atheist Identity Among Women. Like atheists in Smith's (2011) study of atheist identity formation and atheist women in Trzebiatowska's (2019) interviews, women in the present study found liberation in their atheism, in a general sense and with regard to gendered limitations of patriarchal, Christian hegemony.

Women in the study described the manner in which their atheism guided their lives and decisions, but operated somewhat in the background. Their atheism was often more salient in the time frame during which they were exploring nonreligion and in the years immediately following identifying as an atheist. In fact, though participants did not report much anti-atheist discrimination, they noted the bulk of the discrimination they experienced was during this initial period of exploration and/or identification when they were having more regular discussions about their nonbelief. This finding is congruent with literature positing a curvilinear relationship between (non)religion and psychological well-being such that higher levels of certainty in belief or nonbelief are associated with higher well-being (Galen & Kloet, 2011). Our findings suggest that nonreligiousness likely increases over time, reducing psychological distress associated with an atheist identity as women think less often about their atheism and engage less frequently with others regarding their atheism.

Relatedly, in a prior study, atheism was not central or salient among low-income and working-class atheists; however, unlike women in the present study, low centrality and salience were attributed to the precedence of other roles and responsibilities (e.g., work and children) and/or appeared related to privileges (e.g., maleness, Whiteness; Abbott et al., 2021). By contrast, atheist identity was central, or important to women's sense of themselves, though not salient among participants in the present study. In another study of atheists, centrality and salience of atheist identity were not related to atheists' psychological well-being. Rather, having positive feelings about and feeling connected to other atheists was associated with wellbeing (Abbott & Mollen, 2018). Atheist women in the present study also conveyed that connecting to other atheists was valuable. They were most distressed by the ways in which Christian dominance and stigma about nonbelief created disconnection and interfered with relationships. This may speak to women's psychological strength in and the value they place upon relationality or connectedness (Miller, 1976). By contrast, low-income and working-class atheists, most of whom were men, reported disregard for others' perceptions of their atheism and described their atheism as an individual endeavor with little desire for connection (Abbott et al., 2021). Therefore, knowing a few other atheist women, experiencing sexism in atheist groups, and being misunderstood by Christians, the majority religious group in the U.S., may be particularly difficult for atheist women as compared to men given their proclivity for social connection.

Experiences of Sexism Among Atheist Women. In particular, given the benefits of organized nonbelief (Galen, 2015), the limited number of atheist women public figures, and the presence of misogyny in predominantly male atheist communities reported by our participants requires remedy. Atheism, specifically the New Atheism movement, is patriarchal in nature (Guenther, 2019; Schnabel et al., 2016) despite the fact that atheist men are usually freethinkers and many support gender equality (Stinson et al., 2013; Zuckerman, 2007), at least in theory (Finger, 2017). Schnabel et al. (2016) suggested engaging feminist men in the fight for equality, in addition to making space for atheist women as members and to speak about their experiences in atheist groups. Guenther (2019) recommended atheist communities go further than merely increasing women's representation in leadership positions. It is necessary to acknowledge that gender inequalities persist outside of religion and the foundational elements of atheism (e.g., science, rationality) are themselves gendered and require dismantling in order to uproot patriarchy in atheist communities (Guenther, 2019).

Anti-atheist stigma and stereotypes of immorality and untrustworthiness are well-documented (Smith & Cragun, 2019), and atheist women reported awareness of these common perceptions of atheists. Like atheist women of color in other studies (Abbott et al., 2020a; Hutchinson, 2011), Black, White, Asian American, and multiracial women in the present study also indicated atheism was viewed by others as incongruent with expectations that they are religious and/or spiritual. Additionally, participants said they were seen as unfit for mother given their nonbelief. Relatedly, a stereotype specific to women and new to the literature, to the authors' knowledge, was selfishness; participants were perceived by others as selfish for defying these gendered expectations and for taking control of their lives rather than deferring to god. Another unique manifestation of the predominant view of atheists as immoral was that atheist women were sexually immoral, presumably as defined by religious expectations for chastity (Owens et al., 2021) and more general expectations for monogamy and women to have few sexual partners (Marks et al., 2018). Thus, women in our study believed the absence of belief in god was seen by religious people as indicative of nonnormative sexual behaviors. Though participants were aware of these and other anti-atheist biases, they had infrequent direct experiences of discrimination and anti-atheist stigma did not drive their decisions regarding outness. Frost et al. (2022), too, found no relation between atheists' perceptions of hostility toward their atheist identity and their concealment of that atheist identity, though women did conceal more as compared to men. They suggested atheists who perceived themselves as social or institutional outsiders were more likely to conceal.

Practice Implications

Bishop (2018) outlined recommendations for therapists to advocate for atheist clients given the widespread marginalization of nonreligious people in the U.S. and the relative lack of counseling scholarship centering on atheism and nonbelief. One such recommendation was fostering counselors' self-awareness related to their views of atheist people through exploring personal values and biases. Consistent with the pervasiveness of anti-atheist stigma in the U.S., an implicit association study suggested psychotherapy trainees possessed high levels of anti-atheist bias toward clients even when trainees, themselves, identified as nonreligious. Participants implicitly associated terms like manipulative and aggressive with nonreligious people (Winkeljohn Black & Gold, 2019). Our study provides data related to unique explicit or implicit stereotypes of women atheists, specifically, psychotherapists and trainees may hold and of which they should be aware, such as interpreting atheist women's sexual behaviors as immoral. Likewise, given expectations of Christian norms were a primary source of distress for our participants, clinicians should be aware of the ways in which they may contribute to the unwelcome infusion of faith and hegemonic Christianity into therapy, such as attributions of events to a higher power (e.g., "Everything happens for a reason") or questions and assessments that assume religious belief/identity as the default (Abbott, 2021; Bishop, 2017).

Bishop (2017) also suggested therapists honor atheist clients' right to freely express their nonreligion in therapy and affirm and validate clients' nonbelief. Our findings suggest this may be particularly important among women atheists as they saw atheism as an important element of the way they interpreted the world. Explicitly inviting discussion of nonbelief or assessing for related data (e.g., discrimination experiences; Bishop, 2017) may be useful as women often conceal their atheism in the interest of protecting relationships, potentially including the therapeutic relationship. Additionally, women in our study desired connection with other atheists but found it difficult to access other women atheists and/or fulfilling nonreligious groups. Thus, if congruent with fostering the therapeutic alliance, woman- and/ or atheist-identified therapists may choose to disclose their nonreligiousness to the benefit of the client and their therapeutic growth (Abbott, 2021).

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

One limitation of the study is that data were collected in Spring 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic and during a time frame in which COVID-19 vaccines were becoming available, but not available to all people. Although many restrictions on travel were no longer in place, community transmission levels varied by geography and there were likely individual differences in behaviors employed to limit exposure. Therefore, some of our findings, like the low frequency of overt anti-atheist discrimination may be related to limited contact with other people given participants' experiences in recent months or years may have been most salient. However, perhaps these findings represent strength as they may reflect future trends in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Future research is needed to determine if these findings can be replicated when, and if, people begin to increase social contact as the COVID-19 pandemic progresses.

Additionally, we intentionally recruited atheist-identified people. Though, in interviews, some of our participants told us they met the definition of atheist but felt other terms were more congruent (e.g., secular humanist), many nonbelieving women who use other terms and/or maintain some spiritual or religious practices were likely excluded from participation (Bullivant et al., 2019). The findings, therefore, reflect the experiences of atheist women with some level of current or past engagement with secular organizations and possibly those who perceive less risk associated with an atheist identity. Likewise, our sample included predominantly ex-Christian women. Although this is aligned with our interest in the role of hegemonic, patriarchal Christianity in women's atheist identities, there may be a better framework to explain the experiences of atheist women with other faith backgrounds (e.g., ex-Muslim women). Future studies should employ quantitative methods to explore CSI variables and use outcome measures that are strengths-based such as non-distress-focused measures of psychological well-being and life satisfaction. Though not directly related to CSI theory, the perception of atheist women as sexually immoral was a novel finding. This stereotype was influenced by religious and cultural messages about with whom and how women should have sex. Not explored in the current study was whether atheism, indeed, changed the ways in which women engaged in sex. Given participants found atheism freed them from expectations for women they found restrictive, they may also have felt free increased sexual freedom. Therefore, future study is warranted as to whether atheism, or nonreligion, facilitates sexual freedom and, perhaps, more sexual satisfaction.

Conclusion

The present study suggests a unique experience of atheist identity among women. Additionally, it adds to emerging evidence that the influence of anti-atheist discrimination on outness and psychological well-being/distress is variable based on social location. In particular, the unwelcome nature of Christian dominance in the U.S. among participants suggests structural change (e.g., separation of church and state) is necessary to advance equity and support the psychological health of women atheists. Future studies of atheists and mental health may benefit from the use of measures that capture perceptions of Christian hegemony and systemic oppression in addition to interpersonal discriminatory experiences.

Appendix 1

Sample Items from Semi-Structured Interviews

1. Tell me about the development of your atheist identity.
2. Who, if anyone, knows you are an atheist?
3. From whom, if anyone, do you hide your atheist identity?
4. What, if anything, do you think non-atheists believe about atheists?
    a. What, if anything, do you think non-atheists believe about women who are atheists?
5. What, if anything, have non-atheists told you about your atheist identity?

a. What, if anything, have non-atheists told you being a woman and an atheist?

6. If you are involved in any atheist groups or organizations, tell me about your experience as a member.
    a. What is it like to engage in these groups/organizations as a woman atheist?
7. How important is your atheist identity to your overall sense of self?
8. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me that we haven't talked about today?

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