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Anti-atheist Discrimination, Outness, and Psychological Distress among Atheists of Color

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Abstract

Using a Concealable Stigmatized Identity (CSI) framework, the present study explored disclosure and concealment of atheist identity, anti-atheist discrimination, and psychological distress among participants ($N = 87$) identified as both atheists and people of color residing in the United States (US). Path analysis was utilized to examine the relationships among variables. Consistent with past CSI and outness research, the final model suggested small, significant associations between higher disclosure of atheist identity and more experiences of anti-atheist discrimination as well as between higher concealment and higher psychological distress. Unexpectedly, higher concealment of atheist identity was associated with higher anti-atheist discrimination and, contrary to previous studies, higher disclosure was associated with higher psychological distress. Notably, there was no significant relationship between anti-atheist discrimination and psychological distress in the final model. Implications for future research, training, and practice are provided.

Keywords: atheism, concealable stigmatized identities, outness

Atheism represents a concealable stigmatized identity (CSI; Abbott & Mollen, 2018), a marginalized identity that may be hidden and is generally associated with negative perceptions

or stigma in US culture (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2011). The degree to which an atheist identity is known to others and associated anti-atheist discrimination has implications for atheists' psychological health (Brewster et al., 2016; Cheng et al., 2018; Doane & Elliott, 2015). Extant literature related to atheists, an understudied CSI (Brewster et al., 2014), although generally consistent with national atheist demographics (Pew Research Center, 2015), often underrepresents or excludes atheists of color. The present study sought to highlight and investigate the experiences of atheists of color (AOC) related to anti-atheist discrimination, outness, and psychological distress using a concealable stigmatized identity framework.

Atheists of color

Atheist identification is rare in communities of color, possibly because of the cultural importance of faith, including social and economic support historically and currently provided by faith organizations (Evans, 2017). According to the Pew Research Center (2015), approximately 22% of atheists also identify as racial/ethnic minorities (REMs), despite REMs composing 34% of the general public, suggesting people of color are less likely than Whites to identify as atheist. Black, Latino, and Other/Mixed race/ethnicity US Americans report they are fairly certain to absolutely certain god(s) exist at higher rates as compared to White US Americans. Conversely, Asian Americans report lower rates of belief in god(s) than all other racial/ethnic groups (Pew Research Center, 2015), perhaps driven by the secular nature of some East Asian countries (e.g., China, Japan).

Atheism, in part because of stigma and few prominent atheists of color, is often viewed as a White phenomenon, particularly in Black communities (Abbott et al., 2020; Hutchinson, 2011). The term atheist, itself, may invoke negative stereotypes that deter those who disbelieve in god(s) from identifying as atheist despite meeting the definition of atheism, particularly within communities of color. For example, in a study of atheist identification, fewer Black and Other, Non-Hispanic participants without belief in god(s) identified as atheist compared to White participants without belief in god(s). Notably, in the same study, Hispanic participants without belief in god(s) were more likely than Whites to identify as atheist (Scheitle et al., 2019); however, nationally, only 10% of atheists are Latino-identified. In other words, among nonbelievers, Hispanic people may be more likely to use the term atheist than Whites, but there are still far fewer Hispanic and Latinx atheists than White atheists. Gervais and Najle (2018) suggested national surveys of atheists may not represent the actual prevalence of atheists in the US because of underreporting resulting from anti-atheist bias and fear of disclosure of atheist identity. Using Bayesian estimation, they suggested national rates of atheism may be as high as 26% of the population. Therefore, atheism rates among people of color may be higher than suggested by surveys to date.

Anti-atheist discrimination

Common stereotypes of atheists include immorality (Cook et al., 2015; Didyoung et al., 2013; Gervais, 2014; Wright & Nichols, 2014), mistrust (Franks & Scherr, 2014; Gervais et al., 2011), and anger (Meier et al., 2015). Compared to other marginalized groups, atheists are least likely to be accepted as a member of a family (Edgell et al., 2006, 2016) or receive an

endorsement for the US presidency (Jones, 2012). Further, in a study of stigma-by-association, religious participants were less likely to trust and vote for a hypothetical Christian candidate for public office who supported atheist rights (Franks et al., 2019), suggesting mere association with atheism results in stigma.

Doane and Elliott (2015) found atheists who experienced discrimination and perceived their group membership to be marginalized reported decreased psychological and physical well-being, although stronger identification as an atheist predicted improved psychological and physical well-being. In a related study, the anticipation of discrimination based on atheist identity was associated with reduced physical and psychological well-being (Abbott & Mollen, 2018). Similarly, among atheists experiencing higher levels of nonreligion-related microaggressions, including assumptions of inferiority and pathology of nonreligious identity, higher levels of depression were observed (Cheng et al., 2018).

Atheists of color, specifically, report social isolation resulting from reduced engagement with or rejection by faith communities as well as loss of a social justice community as consequences of atheist identification (Christina, 2014). In a study of religious bias, religiously conscious Black Christians attributed more negative traits to Black atheists than Black Christians and Black Muslims, suggesting religious intergroup bias despite typical racial ingroup bias (van Camp et al., 2014). Similarly, when evaluating White and Black job applicants of various faiths, Black Christians were more likely to evaluate applicants based on religion, as compared to race, and demonstrated a preference for Christian over atheist applicants (van Camp et al., 2016), perhaps suggesting the presence of anti-atheist bias in communities of color toward racial ingroup members. Thus, atheists of color are likely experiencing anti-atheist stigma outside of and within communities of color and, given the importance of faith in many racial/ethnic cultures (Pew Research Center, 2015), perhaps less acceptance of their atheist identity within communities of color than in predominantly White settings (Abbott et al., 2020).

Notably, unique cultural positionalities, some marginalizing and others affording power, influence individual experience (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017), including among atheists. For example, a Latinx atheist man's male privilege may offer some protection against anti-atheist discrimination; however, atheists of color possessing multiple marginalized identities, such as Black atheist women, may find their atheist identities more complicated (Fonza, 2013), particularly given cultural expectations for religiosity among women of color, specifically (Abbott et al., 2020; Hutchinson, 2011), and higher rates of religiosity among women, generally (Pew Research Center, 2015). To date, studies of atheist discrimination have not focused on atheists of color.

Atheism as a concealable stigmatized identity

Atheism constitutes a CSI and, as compared to conspicuous stigmatized identities, represents an advantage in that atheists may choose to disclose or conceal their atheist identity. CSIs comprise the degree to which the identity is incorporated into one's overall sense of self (magnitude) and various experiences of (e.g., internalized, experienced, perceived) and responses to stigma (valenced content), both of which contribute to a person's experience of their CSI (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2011). In studies of CSIs other than atheism (e.g.,

mental illness, sexual orientation), higher magnitude and negative valenced content, specifically higher reported stigma, were associated with more psychological distress (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009).

Outness, or the degree to which one makes a concealable identity known to others (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000) may constitute a positive form of identity valence; for example, outness is generally positively associated with well-being for individuals with CSIs (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010; Corrigan et al., 2013; Meidlinger & Hope, 2014), including atheists (Abbott & Mollen, 2018). However, out atheists also report higher incidence of discrimination (Hammer et al., 2012). As a result, two components of outness, disclosure, or explicitly sharing one's atheist identity with others, and concealment, intentionally hiding one's atheist identity from others (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014), may be strategically used to attempt to mitigate the harmful effects of anti-atheist stigma (Abbott et al., 2020).

In a sample of participants with mental illness, chronic physical illness, or a sexual minority identity, active concealment of identity, rather than disclosure, was significantly associated with lower psychological quality of life (Quinn et al., 2017). Similarly, Newheiser and Barreto (2014) found concealment of a CSI was associated with reduced authenticity and lower sense of belonging, despite participants' expectation that concealment would result in positive interpersonal experiences. The benefits of outness are likely context-dependent such that disclosure is more beneficial in supportive environments (Legate et al., 2012; Ragins, 2008), and recent studies suggest concealment may demonstrate a stronger relationship with psychological well-being than disclosure such that higher concealment of a CSI is associated with higher psychological distress (Camacho et al., 2020). As outness varies by context and is used strategically to protect oneself (Orne, 2011), atheists may simultaneously report both high levels of disclosure and high levels of concealment based on differences in outness related to setting (e.g., with friends/family; in the workplace).

The present study

Participants in previous studies of atheism as a CSI were predominantly White, and atheists of color may experience unique forms of anti-atheist stigma within their communities of color that influence their experiences as atheists. The present study sought to examine the experiences of atheists of color, specifically, using a concealable stigmatized identity framework. In particular, and consistent with studies of atheists and other CSIs, we predicted that (1) higher disclosure and lower concealment of atheist identity would be associated with more experiences of anti-atheist discrimination, (2) more experiences of anti-atheist discrimination would be associated with higher levels of psychological distress, and (3) lower disclosure and higher concealment would be associated with more psychological distress, with concealment's relationship to distress representing a stronger relationship than that of disclosure. The proposed study adds to a sparse but growing literature related to the experiences of atheists in the US and is, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, the first quantitative psychological study focused on atheists of color.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited via the Atheist Research Collaborative (ARC) and snowball sampling. A total of 140 participants began the study; 28 participants who did not meet criteria (e.g., identified as a theist or agnostic, did not reside in the US, and/or did not identify as a person of color) for participation and 25 who did not complete at least one measure were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 87. Some participants chose to skip some demographics questions, at their discretion; however, no fewer than 84 of the 87 participants completed each demographics question and no participants skipped more than three total demographic questions. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 74 ($M_{\text{age}} = 35.84$, $SD = 10.90$) and identified as women (54%), men (43.7%), and nonbinary/gender variant (2.3%). With regard to race/ethnicity, 32.2% identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 25.3% as Multiracial, 17.2% as Black/African/African American, 13.8% as Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander, 6.9% as Native American, and 4.6% as Other. Most participants (70.1%) identified as straight/heterosexual, 11.5% as bisexual, 11.5% as gay or lesbian, 2.3% as pansexual, 2.3% as asexual, and 2.3% as Other. Most participants were from the Western US (43.7%), followed by the South (27.6%), Northeast (14.9%), and Midwest (13.8%). Of those who were financially independent (88.4%), 24% earned below \$33,000 per year, including 9% with income below the federal poverty threshold; 35% earned between \$33,000 and \$60,000 annually, 21% between \$61,000 and \$100,000, and 20% over \$100,000 per year. Years of education ranged from less than a high school degree (e.g., 10 years of education) to 25 years, with over half (52.5%) earning a four-year degree or higher. Participants identified a range of belief systems with which they were raised; Christianity was indicated most frequently (79.3%). Other identified religions of origin included Islam (3.4%), Hinduism (3.4%), Buddhism (2.3%), and Agnosticism (3.4%). Of note, three (3.4%) participants noted two religions of origin involving a combination with Agnosticism, and two (2.3%) participants noted a combination of two religions of origin involving a combination with Christianity. Other religions of origin were reported by 12% of the overall sample including: Quakerism, Sikhism, Shamanism, and Taoism.

Procedure

Data were collected via Qualtrics, an online survey platform, and participants were recruited via social media utilizing snowball sampling, targeting online atheist groups. Participants were asked one question to confirm they identified as a racial/ethnic minority and resided within the United States. A criterion question adapted from Scheitle et al. (2019) was used to confirm absence of belief in god(s). Participants were asked to choose which of the following statements best described their personal beliefs about god(s): "I do not believe in a god or gods," "I do not believe in a god or gods and identify as an atheist," "I neither believe nor disbelieve that a god(s) exist," or "I believe in a god or gods." Only participants who indicated the first or second option were invited to continue participation. Participants completed three measures in the order presented in the next section. Given some participants identified explicitly as atheist and others met the definition of atheism, though may not have identified as an atheist, we provided a brief statement preceding the surveys

defining atheism and advising participants to insert their preferred nonreligious identity when they saw the word atheist and suggesting they respond with their personal (non)beliefs about god(s) in mind.

Although the study is survey-based, the authors acknowledge our experiences may have influenced the study's design and our interpretations of the results (Does et al., 2018). In the interest of transparency, the research team for the present study consisted of Black- and White-identified cisgender men and women, including both atheists and people of faith. The authors engaged in critical dialogue at all stages of the study in the interest of decreasing the ways in which our biases and personal experiences may have influenced the design or interpretation of the results.

Measures

Experienced discrimination

Experienced discrimination was measured using the Measure of Atheist Discrimination Experiences (MADE; Brewster et al., 2016), a scale measuring minority stress experiences of atheists. The scale consists of 24 items for which participants indicate the frequency with which they have discriminatory experiences on a six-point Likert Scale ranging from "never" to "almost all of the time." Items include "I have been told that, as an atheist, I cannot be a moral person," and, "My property has been vandalized because I am atheist." In initial testing, the MADE demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .94$ and $.95$) and convergent validity with stigma consciousness and awareness of public devaluation (Brewster et al., 2016). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha was $.93$. Levels of reported anti-atheist discrimination were similar to another recent study of atheists, the majority of which were White (Brewster et al., 2020).

Outness

In order to assess levels of disclosure and concealment of atheist identity, outness was examined via the Nebraska Outness Scale (NOS; Meidlinger & Hope, 2014), an outness measure originally developed for use with LGB populations. The NOS is a 10-item measure consisting of two subscales: concealment (NOS-C) and disclosure (NOS-D). Participants indicated the percentage of people who were aware of their atheist identity and the frequency with which they purposefully avoided indicating their atheist identity in five contexts: Immediate Family, Extended Family, People You Socialize With, People at Work/School, and Strangers. Items are scored on an 11-point Likert-type Scale in which higher scores indicate more disclosure and concealment. The NOS demonstrated positive correlations with other measures of outness and Cronbach's alphas of $.80$ (NOS-C) and $.82$ (NOS-D) in initial testing (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014) and $.82$ (NOS-C) and $.75$ (NOS-D) in an atheist sample (Abbott & Mollen, 2018). In the current study, the NOS-C and NOS-D demonstrated Cronbach's alphas of $.79$ and $.74$, respectively. Compared to a larger, predominantly White sample of atheists using the same measure of disclosure and concealment (Abbott & Mollen, 2018), atheists of color in the present study reported comparatively lower rates of both disclosure and concealment.

Psychological distress

The present study measured psychological distress, specifically depressive symptoms, using the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). The CES-D was developed to measure depressive symptoms in the general population rather than for diagnosis in clinical settings (Radloff, 1977) and is one of the most commonly used self-report depression measures (Santor et al., 2006). The CES-D is composed of 20 items to which participants indicate the frequency with which they experience each statement. Items include, “I felt depressed” and “I felt hopeful about the future.” Tests across gender, race, education, and age subgroups indicated strong reliability ($\alpha > .80$) and strong correlation with other self-report scales (Radloff, 1977). In the current study, the CES-D demonstrated a Cronbach’s alpha of .92.

Results

Path analysis, a special case of structural equation modeling, was implemented to simultaneously explore the inter-relationships of attempts to conceal an atheist identity, disclosure of an atheist identity, experienced discrimination based on atheist identity, and level of psychological distress. Analyses were conducted using the statistical package lavaan (Rosseel, 2012) developed for the open-source analytics platform R (R Core Team, 2019). Prior to the primary analysis, endogenous variables were analyzed for normality. In this analysis, Shapiro-Wilk tests were conducted, and estimates of kurtosis and skewness were converted to z-scores to conceptualize the quality and significance of non-normality exhibited in the data. Results indicated that level of distress ($W = .93, p < .001$) and experienced discrimination ($W = .93, p < .001$) were non-normally distributed. The distributions of level of distress and experienced discrimination were characterized by significant skewness with z-scores of 2.96 and 3.14, respectively. To correct for non-normal data, path analysis was conducted using a robust maximum likelihood estimation method (Currin et al., 1996). Bootstrapped correlations with 95% bias-corrected and accelerated intervals, ranges, means, and standard deviations are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Bootstrapped correlations

Measure	1	2	3	4
1. Disclosure	—	—	—	—
2. Concealment	-.28* [-.51, .00]	—	—	—
3. Distress	.12 [-.07, .30]	.19 [-.01, .35]	—	—
4. Discrimination	.18 [-.04, .38]	.18 [-.04, .40]	.21* [.01, .40]	—
Possible Range	0–100	1–11	0–3	1–6
<i>M</i>	48.06	5.69	.76	2.25
<i>SD</i>	22.84	2.78	.56	.95

Note: * $p < .05$; confidence intervals are 95% bias-corrected and accelerated intervals.

The first model tested included all hypothesized relationships and an expected covariance relationship between the two factors of the NOS (Disclosure and Concealment). As the model was just-identified, fit statistics were not interpreted. The modeled covariance

of $-.281$ between the two factors of outness, disclosure of an atheist identity and attempts to conceal and atheist identity, was found to be significant ($p = .032$). When examining contributors to experienced discrimination against an atheist identity, both disclosure, $\beta = .246$, $p = .025$, and concealment, $\beta = .250$, $p = .014$, of an atheist identity were significantly related to experienced discrimination. The model demonstrated two nonsignificant relationships. The relationship of highest probability in the model was that displayed between experienced discrimination against an atheist identity and level of distress ($\beta = .148$, $p = .158$). The second relationship of highest probability was between disclosure of an atheist identity and level of distress ($\beta = .149$, $p = .092$). The final modeled contributor to level of distress, attempts to conceal an atheist identity, was found to be significant ($\beta = .209$, $p = .033$).

To understand how well the final model fit the data, a final, over-identified model ($df = 1$) was created (see Fig. 1). To accomplish this, the relationship between experienced discrimination based on atheist identity and level of psychological distress was removed from the model. This relationship was selected for removal due to its degree of nonsignificance as indicated by its associated p -value ($p = .158$). A secondary rationale was that by eliminating such a relationship, overall model parsimony would be strengthened should fit indices beyond absolute fit be needed for model evaluation. The second model evidenced perfect fit ($\chi^2(1) = 2.148$, $p = .143$, CFI = .933, RMSEA = .115(.000 – .324), CFit = .185, SRMR = .036) as indicated by a nonsignificant evaluation of absolute fit. Robust estimates for indices of comparative fit and model parsimony, as well as an alternative index of absolute fit, were calculated and reported in an attempt to verify the findings of the Chi-square test, which can be biased by limited sample size. The observed CFI evidenced acceptable fit (Bentler, 1990). The value of RMSEA was above the widely accepted standard for model rejection; however, provided the wide confidence interval of RMSEA, CFit was referenced in the evaluation of RMSEA. CFit is a probability value that RMSEA is equal to or less than .05 with nonsignificant results (CFit > .5), indicating acceptable model fit (Brown, 2015). When considering CFit as an indication of a value of RMSEA below .05, in combination with the observed value of SRMR, excellent model fit was evidenced (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

The final model displayed both attempts to conceal an atheist identity, $\beta = .246$, $p = .014$, and, contrary to expectations, disclosure of an atheist identity, $\beta = .186$, $p = .034$, were significantly related to level of psychological distress. A post-hoc contrast of each the standardized beta weights indicated that attempts to conceal an atheist identity contributed significantly more to level of distress as compared with disclosure of an atheist identity ($\beta_{diff} = .061$, $p = .024$). The significance of this contrast is preserved even after a Bonferroni correction is implemented to limit bias incurred by the secondary, unplanned analysis. Also evidenced were significant contributions of attempts to conceal an atheist identity, $\beta = .250$, $p = .014$, and disclosure of an atheist identity, $\beta = .246$, $p = .025$, to experienced discrimination based on atheist identity. A post-hoc contrast examining the difference between these two relationships was not significant after a Bonferroni correction was implemented ($\beta_{diff} = .004$, $p = .030$). Thus, the relationship between concealment of an atheist identity and experienced discrimination was not significantly different than disclosure of an atheist identity and experienced discrimination.

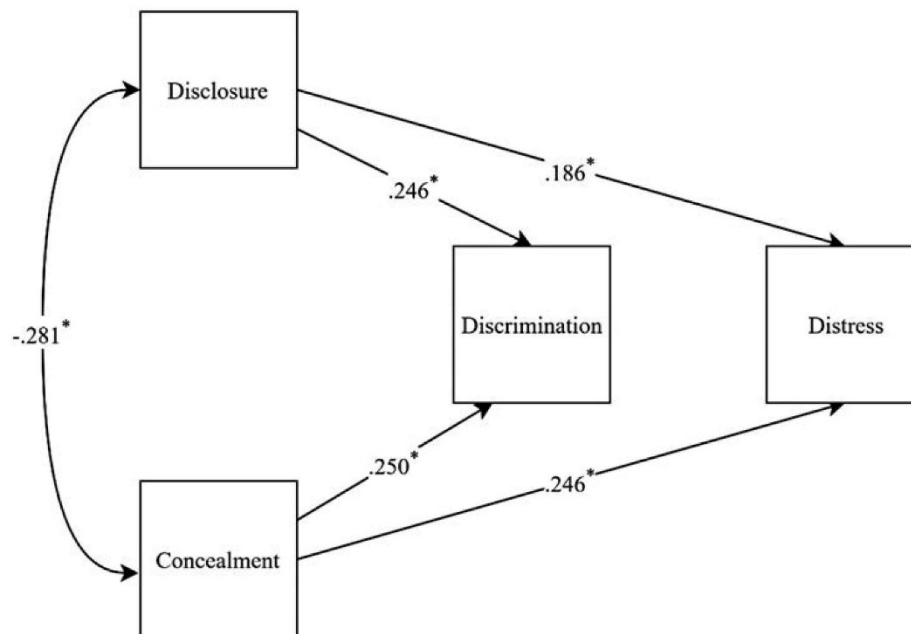


Figure 1. Final, over-identified path model. $\chi^2(1) = 2.148, p = .143, CFI = .933, RMSEA = .115(.000 - .324), CFI = .185, SRMR = .036$. This figure displays standardized regression coefficients. Disclosure and Concealment as measured by the NOS_D and NOS_C, respectively. Discrimination as measured by the MADE. Distress as measured by the CES_D. $n = 87. *p < .05$.

Discussion

In the present study, as hypothesized, atheists of color who reported higher disclosure of atheist identity experienced more anti-atheist discrimination. Contrary to predictions, higher levels of concealment of atheist identity was also associated with more discrimination experiences. Consistent with a growing body of literature related to identity concealment, concealing an atheist identity was associated, to a significantly greater degree than disclosure, with higher levels of psychological distress; however, notably inconsistent with most outness scholarship including among atheists, more disclosure was also associated with higher levels of distress. Unexpectedly, anti-atheist discrimination experiences were not significantly associated with psychological distress.

Integration with previous research

Outness is often strategic, in that methods of determining outness and concealment are continually employed as new opportunities for outness occur (Orne, 2011). Atheists of color, specifically, appear to utilize strategic outness in an effort to manage emotional safety and interpersonal relationships (Abbott et al., 2020). Although an individual may view concealment as a method of reducing distress, the link between concealment and psychological distress found in the current sample has been suggested in previous literature

(Newheiser & Barreto, 2014; Quinn et al., 2017). However, in the present study, disclosure, too, was associated with psychological distress. Given the ubiquity of faith within communities of color, and the possible expectation of anti-atheist stigma, being an out atheist may result in psychological distress as a result of fear and anxiety regarding consequences of outness.

Novel to this sample is that experienced discrimination was not a significant contributor to psychological distress, suggesting that other factors may be more meaningfully related to distress including attempts at identity concealment and, in this case, disclosure of atheist identity. In a past study of atheists using CSI framework, perceived stigma was associated with psychological distress (Abbott & Mollen, 2018). It is possible that perceived stigma, the expectation of discrimination associated with atheist outness, or internalized stigma is more related to well-being than actual experiences of anti-atheist discrimination. Such possibility is consistent with previous findings regarding the form and effects of stigma associated with other CSI such as mental illness (see Corrigan, 2004; Eisenberg et al., 2009; Williams & Polaha, 2014). Furthermore, the effort to manage a CSI may impact psychological distress to a greater degree than discrimination itself.

Claiming a CSI and its effects on behavior may be compounded by the simultaneous possession of other stigmatized aspects of identity (Sickel et al., 2014). However, atheists of color are underrepresented in extant atheist-related scholarship; therefore, CSI theory, as previously suggested, may not be applicable. Additionally, it is unclear how the possession of a conspicuous stigmatized identity, like race/ethnicity, in addition to a CSI, specifically an atheist identity, influences one's experience of the CSI.

Both attempts to conceal an atheist identity and disclosure of an atheist identity were related to experienced discrimination. The strength of the relationships were no different from one another, suggesting concealment could expose a person to an equivalent amount of discrimination as disclosure of identity. Thus, attempts to conceal an atheist identity may not serve the intended purpose, assuming the purpose is to avoid experiences related to discrimination. As anti-atheist bias is pervasive (Edgell et al., 2016) and discrimination may occur even when others are unaware of one's identity, as is sometimes true of anti-atheist microaggressions (Abbott et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 2018), even atheists of color with high levels of concealment likely observe anti-atheist sentiment that may be experienced as personal discrimination.

Implications for training & practice

As (non)religion/(non)spirituality training among psychologists is generally low (Hage, 2006), and working with atheist clients, in particular, represents a gap in counseling competence (Bishop, 2018), the current investigation provides data that may begin to inform the clinical practice of psychologists and psychologists-in-training working with clients identified as atheists and people of color. For example, psychologists and trainees may wish to attend as much to a client's atheist identity as they do to their marginalized racial/ethnic identity in session and conceptualization, based on the personal salience of these identities to each client; at minimum, given the relationship between atheist outness and psychologist distress, psychotherapists should create space for discussion of atheist identity among clients of color. Specifically, the present study suggests psychotherapists pay

special attention to strategies of disclosure and concealment of atheist identity, exploring the function and effectiveness of such strategies with clients.

Implications for research & limitations

The present study offers preliminary data to inform future studies of the current variables and related constructs among atheists of color. For example, future research employing CSI theory would benefit from measuring other components of valenced content, particularly perceived stigma, and magnitude, or identity salience and centrality. Given that atheists of color possess both conspicuous and concealable stigmatized identities, future studies may gather data related to racial/ethnic identity salience/centrality as well as racial discrimination experiences in addition to variables associated with atheism. Further, the incorporation of newly developed measures for use within atheist populations, like the Microaggressions Against Non-Religious Individuals Scale (MANRIS; Cheng et al., 2018) would help capture subtle forms of discrimination.

Disclosure and concealment are context-specific and not dichotomous, therefore an individual may be primarily experiencing discrimination in contexts in which they choose to disclose this aspect of their identity, as the present study does not account for this contextual dynamic. Rather than undercut the present findings, this study limitation represents an important new direction for research to better understand the impact of identity concealment and disclosure beyond an individual's intentions upon implementing one or both strategies. Extending such an understanding to a review of the contexts in which an individual decides to conceal or disclose also represents an important next step in this line of inquiry, as is recruiting atheists who do not participate in atheist organizations. Additionally, the instrument used to measure outness in the present study was not initially developed for use with atheists and, as suggested by their respective internal consistencies, a measure of atheist outness, specifically, would likely better capture disclosure and concealment among atheists.

Another limitation of the present study is that of sample size. Research shows that there are many barriers to recruiting study participants who claim a marginalized identity including mistrust, stigma, and lack of perceived benefit (Clark et al., 2019; Garg et al., 2017; George et al., 2014). This challenge can be exacerbated by the significant level of stigma faced by individuals identifying as atheist (Doane & Elliott, 2015; Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Reisberg, 1998). Therefore, while sample size is a valid criticism of the present study, the current dearth of research involving atheists, and particularly atheists of color, in conjunction with the difficulty of recruiting participants with marginalized identities provides importance to a sample of any size.

A larger sample would, however, facilitate comparisons based on race and gender, given the likely influence of intersections of identity and experience on atheist outness, experiences of discrimination, and related distress, if any. For example, though we chose to include all non-White atheists in the present study, and most noted they were raised with faith, it is unclear how many Asian-identified participants, in particular, might identify with cultures within which secularity is less stigmatized and, if so, how it might have influenced our findings. Future studies should take additional care to maximize recruiting procedures in an effort to replicate and extend the present study's findings in a larger

sample. Additionally, the researchers' personal identities and engagement in past scholarship related to atheists may have influenced the design and interpretation of results, though efforts were made to reduce this potential bias.

Conclusion

This preliminary exploration expands CSI theory to a new, previously unexplored population and provides a foundation for future studies of atheists of color. Additionally, the present study is the first to examine the relationship between an atheist identity and psychological well-being among people of color. Results suggest atheist outness and experiences of anti-atheist discrimination may not have an obvious or expected interrelationship nor relationship with psychological distress. When considering individual experiences it is important to consider the contexts in which individuals are operating, and other relevant factors, as critical to understanding the experience and impact of discrimination and related psychological distress. While the present study explored this for atheists of color, this complexity may extend to all individuals with intersecting, marginalized identities both conspicuous and concealable.

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Data availability statement – Data available upon request from the authors.

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