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Abstract

Despite a general shift toward secularity, very few people of color in the United States identify as atheist. Further, atheists of color are underrepresented in studies of atheists, and the experiences of atheists of color specifically have, to date, not been captured in the extant scholarship. Addressing this gap in the literature, we interviewed 17 self-identified adult atheists of color, predominantly from Christian backgrounds, residing in the United States, using a critical feminist phenomenological approach. Six broad themes emerged from the data: (a) atheist identity development, (b) experiences of discrimination, (c) isolation, (d) violations of cultural expectations, (e) strategic outness, and (f) benefits of atheist identification. Experiences consistent with previous literature and novel and unique experiences specific to atheists of color are reported. Implications for training, practice, and research are discussed.

Public Significance Statement – This study is the first to explore the experiences of atheists of color and found their trajectory to atheism to be similar to previously proposed models of identity

development. Atheists of color experience antiatheist discrimination, navigate atheism as a violation of cultural expectations, use strategic outness, and benefit from a sense of connection and freedom associated with their atheist identity.

Keywords: atheism, minority stress, intersectionality, qualitative research

To date, atheists of color are underrepresented in or absent from extant atheism scholarship in psychology (Brewster, Robinson, Sandil, Esposito, & Geiger, 2014). We sought to address this gap in the literature in the current investigation, recognizing the importance of intersectional understandings of experience (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000) and specifically with interest in exploring the manner by which racism and antiatheist stigma, along with other oppressions and privileges (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017), are experienced by atheists of color. Although the United States (U.S.) has been experiencing a slow shift toward secularity (Pew Research Center, 2015), and the overall rate of atheists is increasing, atheists remain a distinctly small minority (3.1%) of U.S. Americans.

The vast majority of scientific inquiry into atheism has been conducted with White atheists, who compose the majority (78%) of atheists in the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2015). To date, existing research related to atheists has been primarily sociological in nature, exploring common demographic and personality characteristics of atheists (Baker & Smith, 2009; Caldwell-Harris, Wilson, LoTempio, & Beit-Hallahmi, 2011; Kosmin, Keysar, Cragun, & Navarro-Rivera, 2009; Zuckerman, 2009). By contrast, psychologists have primarily explored majority group perceptions of atheists, a stigmatized minority outgroup in U.S. society (Gervais, 2014; Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011; LaBouff & Ledoux, 2016; Meier, Fetterman, Robinson, & Lappas, 2015) and, to a lesser degree, the impact of antiatheist stigma on atheists (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Doane & Elliott, 2015; Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2012). Overall, the aforementioned studies, though not accounting for race, education, or socioeconomic status among other demographic variables, document pervasive antiatheist bias and stigma. Few studies capture the experiences of atheists, especially within their other cultural positionalities, a gap we sought to address by examining the experiences of atheists of color.

Atheists of Color

As atheism constitutes a stigmatizing identity typically chosen rather than conferred through birth, racial and ethnic minorities may be less likely to identify as atheist, despite disbelief in god(s), due to higher social cost of identification given their already devalued racial/ethnic identity. Moreover, the role of faith among communities of color has traditionally served and continues to play an important role for many people of color. Among a sample of participants without belief in god, significantly fewer Black and Other, Non-Hispanic participants identified as atheist compared to White participants (Scheitle, Corcoran, & Hudnall, 2019). Disbelief in god(s) and atheist identity likely constitute two distinct constructs wherein atheist identification and its accompanying stigma is perceived as a greater risk to racial/ethnic minorities than disbelief in god(s) alone.

Historically and currently, the confluence of White supremacy with Christianity has had an indelible impact on people of color, especially among African Americans (Tourish & Wohlforth, 2000). The importance of Christianity among African Americans in the U.S. has roots in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. African slaves were coerced by White, Christian slaveholders into adopting the Christian god and, over time, Christianity began to serve as a coping strategy, provided social and economic support postslavery, and was an integral component of the Civil Rights movement (Evans, 2017). Current religious landscape surveys illuminate the importance of religion in the Black community, with 82% of non-Hispanic Black U.S. Americans identifying with a faith, primarily Christianity (79%), more than any other racial/ethnic group surveyed; further, more than half (53%) of Black U.S. Americans identify with a historically Black Protestant denomination (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Further, despite typical racial ingroup bias, religiously conscious Black Christian participants displayed religious bias, rating Black Muslims and Black atheists less favorably than Black Christians (Van Camp, Sloan, & ElBassiouny, 2014). Therefore, for African American atheists, as well as other atheists of color, faith is often intricately linked with family identity and the absence or rejection of faith may represent a betrayal of heritage (Christina, 2014). Despite the salience of Christianity for most African Americans, the troubling relationship between White supremacy and Christianity persists. Howard and Sommers (2017a, 2017b), for example, demonstrated that exposure to images of Jesus portrayed as White, as is common in past and current depictions, increased both Black and White participants' implicit anti-Black attitudes.

Between 2007 and 2014, more people of color began to identify as religiously unaffiliated; however, rates of atheist identification among people of color remain very low, between 1% and 4% (Pew Research Center, 2015). Hutchinson (2011) posited that low numbers of Black atheists may be attributable to the stigmatization of atheism in the Black community and lack of prominent Black atheist voices leading to the perception by Blacks that atheism is a White phenomenon; this may be true for other racial/ethnic minorities as well. Similarly, Scheitle and colleagues (2019) found reduced atheist identification among Blacks who did not believe in god may be a function of having few atheist-identified friends. Interestingly, Hispanics without belief in god were slightly more likely than Whites to identity as atheist. However, it is important to note that, overall, people of color are significantly less likely to report disbelief in god compared to Whites (Scheitle et al., 2019).

Although higher educational attainment is associated with less religious affiliation (Kosmin et al., 2009), this phenomenon may not hold true among people of color. For example, followers of the historically Black Protestant tradition reported stronger belief in god, more use of prayer, more regular church attendance, and stable overall religious commitment as level of education increased (Pew Research Center, 2017). However, among Black, Latinx, and bi/multiracial atheists, the highest frequencies of atheists were found among those earning more than $100,000 per year, followed closely by those earning between $50,000 and $99,999 annually (Pew Research Center, 2015).

People of color who are members of other marginalized groups (e.g., women, sexual and gender minorities) may also be less inclined to identify as atheists to avoid

identification with another oppressed group and the accompanying stigma. Atheist organizations, often composed of primarily White, heterosexual, cisgender men, may not always be welcoming to people of color or other marginalized groups (Christina, 2014) and often disregard racial and social class inequalities (Hutchinson, 2013). On the other hand, some marginalized populations may be drawn to atheism as a result of their marginalization. Among 10 nonreligious but not necessarily atheist-identified, formerly Christian, Black and Afro-Latina/o/x LGBTQ people interviewed regarding LGBTQ-directed harassment, participants described finding LGBTQ-affirming spaces often to be nonreligious in nature and their LGBTQ identity perceived as unchristian in the Black community. Thus, the intersection of race, faith, gender, and sexuality drew them toward a nonreligious identity (Kolysh, 2017).

Of note, Gervais and Najle (2018) posited that national estimates of atheists may be misleadingly low, in part because of antiatheist stigma and fear of atheist identity disclosure. Therefore, despite the aforementioned barriers to atheist identification, there may be more atheists of color than surveys capture. In fact, Hutchinson (2013) suggested that as a result of the conflation of Evangelical Christianity with efforts to undermine racially and economically progressive social justice causes in recent years (Evans, 2009), more people of color than in past decades may be exploring secularity.

Minority Stress

Minority stress is a chronic, socially-based stressor based on marginalized group membership and resulting from experiences of prejudices, expectation, and awareness of such stressors (e.g., stigma) and the concomitant internalization of negative perceptions of one's group by society (Meyer, 2003). Minority stress has been associated with psychological distress among sexual (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Meyer, 2003) and racial/ethnic minorities (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). Emerging data suggest minority stress may be likewise associated with psychological well-being and distress among atheists (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Brewster, Hammer, Sawyer, Eklund, & Palamar, 2016; Doane & Elliott, 2015).

Perceptions of atheists

Recent literature suggests that atheists are perceived as angry (Meier et al., 2015), immoral (Cook, Cottrell, & Webster, 2015; Didyoung, Charles, & Rowland, 2013; Gervais, 2014; Simpson & Rios, 2017; Wright & Nichols, 2014), and untrustworthy (Franks & Scherr, 2014; Gervais et al., 2011). Compared to other marginalized groups, atheists are least likely to receive an endorsement for the U.S. presidency (Jones, 2012) or be accepted as a member of a family (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Edgell, Hartmann, Stewart, & Gerteis, 2016). Researchers have not yet explored the intersectional nature of stigma associated with atheism, particularly the intersection of race and atheism, an oversight we intended to correct.

Minority stress and atheists

Doane and Elliott (2015) found that atheists who experienced discrimination and perceived their group membership to be marginalized reported decreased psychological and physical

well-being. By contrast, stronger identification as an atheist predicted improved psychological and physical well-being (Doane & Elliott, 2015). Similarly, we (Abbott & Mollen, 2018) previously found anticipating stigma related to atheist identification, low levels of atheist identity disclosure, and high levels of atheist identity concealment were associated with lower psychological and physical well-being among atheists. Similarly, Brewster and colleagues (2016) found experiences of atheist discrimination were associated with loneliness and psychological distress. Of note, the demographics of these samples were generally consistent with the national demographics of atheists (Baker & Smith, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2015) such that participants were predominantly White, hetero-sexual, educated, and of higher social class. Therefore, little is known about the effects of antiatheist prejudice on atheists experiencing diverse constellations of privilege and oppression, including atheists of color.

Qualitative investigators have suggested two important consequences of atheist identification among people of color are the loss of social support, either due to the absence of engagement in religious communities or rejection by racial ingroup members and the concomitant loss of a social justice community (Christina, 2014). Black women may be especially at risk of social isolation as a result of their atheist identification and face particular stigma pursuant to their gender role identification within the Black community, as religiosity is strongly associated with gender-defining roles such as mothering and caregiving (Hutchinson, 2011).

Further, true intersectional analysis requires evaluation of all identities, privileged and marginalized, as well as the systemic, structural, and political power, that accompany or are denied by those identities (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Atheists of color possess other identities that inevitably influence their experiences of faithism (Reber, 2012). For example, as it is generally more difficult for women than men to challenge cultural expectations, identifying as atheist may be even more complicated for Black women (Fonza, 2013). By contrast, highly educated Black men may feel freer to identify as atheist as a result of their relatively privileged identities. Inquiry regarding the role of other dimensions of human experience including social class, ability status, gender, and sexual orientation among atheists of color is also needed.

The Present Study

To date, previous qualitative explorations of the experiences of atheists of color have been theoretical (Holland, 2008); gathered through individual storytelling; captured in unpublished dissertations; and, primarily, focused on Black atheists (Swann, 2018). We sought to contribute to the extant atheism literature in psychology by eliciting the stories of atheists of color, defined broadly, related to atheist identification, antiatheist discrimination, and consequences for well-being using an empirical approach. Specifically, the questions guiding our study, generated after our review of the literature, were: (a) How do atheists of color navigate their experiences of being atheist within and outside of their respective communities? (b) What types of antiatheist messages or discrimination, if any, do atheists of color experience? (c) How does antiatheist discrimination impact the psychological well-being of atheists of color?

Method

The current investigation received institutional review board approval from Louisiana Tech University. Our study was underpinned by critical theory, recognizing the importance of intersectionality of identities and unique lived experiences influenced by power and systemic oppression, and with the intention of advancing social justice (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011; Morrow, 2007; Ponterotto, 2005). Specifically, we used critical theory to inform our study's design, including implementing strategies to address potential researcher bias (e.g., peer debriefers, researcher reflexivity), recruitment aimed at obtaining the most diverse sample possible, and acknowledging the relationship between the researcher and participants as transactional (Ponterotto, 2005). Consistent with this paradigm, we employed a feminist phenomenological approach to analysis to understand better the experiences of atheists of color through participants' subjective experiences. Given the dearth of scientific exploration of the intersectional nature of atheist and racial/ethnic minority identities and differences between the researchers' and participants' identities outlined below, allowing the phenomenon to reveal itself via data collection was a cogent fit for our aims (Churchill, 2018). Importantly, though phenomenology seeks to allow a common phenomenon to emerge from the lived experiences of participants, given the intersections and diversity of identities and experiences among our participants, and with knowledge that individuals are gendered (Fisher, 2000) and, further, raced, classed, sexed, and the like, we intentionally integrated a feminist lens through which we listened for the manner by which systems of privilege and oppression influenced the story of each participant.

The primary investigators have previously quantitatively studied stigma among U.S.-based atheists. Of note, members of our research team identified as Black, White, and Latina and were composed of both atheists and people of faith, with one member identifying as an atheist of color; all members identified as cisgender women. Another self-identified atheist of color and scholar in the area of experiences of atheists of color served as a peer debriefer, reviewing interview questions and consulting during development of the study design (Morrow, 2005). Additionally, aware of the potential for researcher bias to influence our study, we engaged in ongoing reflective journaling and research team reflective discussions throughout the study (Berger, 2015). Generally, given our diverse identities with multiple marginalized groups, we expected participants would have complex experiences of their identities, valuing their atheist identity but also experiencing antiatheist discrimination that negatively impacted their well-being. We attempted to be vigilant in our awareness of this bias and others for the duration of the study in order to remain open to all possible experiences and phenomenon, including challenges and strengths.

Participants

Adults residing in the U.S. and identifying as both a person of color and an atheist were initially recruited via a post to the Facebook page of an online research collaborative designed for the study of atheism in the fall of 2018. Per participant reporting, many respondents became aware of the study after the original call for participants was shared by social media users to prominent atheism-related and/or Black atheist-focused social media

groups on Facebook. Respondents answered a "yes/no" question inquiring as to whether they resided in the United States and identified as an atheist and a person of color. Those who chose "yes" continued to a demographics survey where they more specifically identified their racial/ethnic identity, as well as other identities, and provided detail related to their faith/nonfaith history. Initially, 107 respondents provided demographic data and expressed interest in participating in an interview. All interested respondents were contacted, and 24 scheduled an interview; 7 did not attend their interviews, resulting in a total of 17 completed interviews in the fall of 2018. Researchers determined that sufficient depth and meaningfulness was attained, as no new information appeared to be emerging (Morrow, 2005); therefore, no additional interviews were conducted. Participants who completed an interview were compensated with a $10 Amazon gift card.

Participants ranged in age from 25 to 73 years (M_{age} = 38.53, SD = 13.01) and identified as men (35%) and women (65%). Several participants identified as bi- or multiracial/ethnic (41%). Of those with one racial/ethnic identity (59%), one was Native American, three were Hispanic/Latina/o/x, and six were Black/African/African American. The majority of participants resided in the Southern (35%) or Western (35%) U.S. with the remaining from the Midwest (24%) or Northeast (6%) U.S. Most (n = 10) identified as heterosexual, with two identifying as bisexual, one as gay or lesbian, and four as other. All participants were financially independent, and most earned $33,000 or more annually (71%). Years of formal education ranged from a high school degree to 22 years; 59% reported having earned a bachelor's degree or more education. Although three participants were raised without a focus on religion and one with Judaism, most (76%) were raised in Christian families. The number of years that participants identified as an atheist ranged from five to 56 (M = 15.29, SD = 12.14, Mdn = 13.00).

Sources of Data

Dena M. Abbott, Debra Mollen, and Caitlin Mercier conducted semistructured interviews ranging from 45 min to 1 hr consisting of (10) open-ended questions (see Appendix) to elicit the lived experiences of participants via Skype or by phone, depending on participants' preferences. Interview questions were generated and refined by Dena M. Abbott and Debra Mollen based on extant atheist literature in psychology and related disciplines. A peer debriefer reviewed and provided feedback regarding the interview, and subsequently, academic terms such as "people of color" were removed in favor of using participants' personal racial/ethnic identification. We added age to the inquiry about intersections of identity, and, as needed, modified question 2 for participants who were raised with atheism and, therefore, may not have a coming out experience. The semistructured nature of our interviews allowed us to ask additional questions based on participants' responses to the standard interview and inquire about participants' unique experiences associated with their intersectional identities. We took field notes during and immediately following interviews to capture descriptive and reflective data. In addition to noting important or powerful data and bias as it arose, field notes were especially useful in tracking the experiences of, including similarities and differences between, participants in the context of their unique intersectionality. Skype interviews were recorded with QuickTime Player V. 10.4, and phone interviews were recorded using TapeACall, a

mobile-based software application; all interviews were transcribed by Elyxcus J. Anaya and Victoria A. Rukus.

Analysis of Data

All interviews were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo V. 12 for analysis. First, the primary investigator (PI) engaged in active reading of the transcriptions and review of audio/video recordings, making preliminary notes to guide subsequent formal coding. Throughout the study and during this initial reading of the transcriptions, the PI engaged in bracketing, the setting aside of presuppositions about each story in the interest of organizing it into a meaningful whole (Hycner, 1985). Consistent with our feminist phenomenological approach, Dena M. Abbott, using an inductive approach, then generated codes driven by the data to identify units of meaning after which codes relevant to the research questions were retained and all others were eliminated (Hycner, 1985). Dena M. Abbott and Caitlin Mercier independently and then as a dyad reviewed the units of meaning for coherency, narrowing codes through integration and avoiding redundancies, reread all transcriptions to ensure they fit the data set as a whole, and developed a final codebook with clusters of meaning organized beneath tentative themes guided by the total number of times a code was used and the number of interviews in which a particular code appeared. Debra Mollen reviewed the final codebook and agreed with the thematic structure. Remaining themes were named, and all research team members reviewed the themes and provided feedback, after which modifications were made as needed.

Results

Six broad themes related to the experiences of atheists of color emerged from the data and are presented below in the following order: (a) atheist identity development, (b) experiences of discrimination, (c) isolation, (d) violating cultural expectations, (e) protection of self and others through strategic outness, and (f) benefits of atheist identification.

Atheist Identity Development

All participants described a progression to their atheist identity (see Figure 1), although the timeframe during which this change took place varied widely among respondents from months or years to decades. Atheists of color in the present study began life with some orientation to faith, typically Christianity. Orientation to faith ranged from identifying as a person of faith to being raised with at least one religious caregiver, or immersion in a culture of faith as a result of the pervasiveness of faith and Christianity in their racial/ethnic community and/or the United States (e.g., cultural Christianity). Therefore, for a period of time, typically in childhood or adolescence but sometimes extending into early adulthood and midlife, atheists of color spoke about strong identification with, passive belief in, or indifference to Christianity.
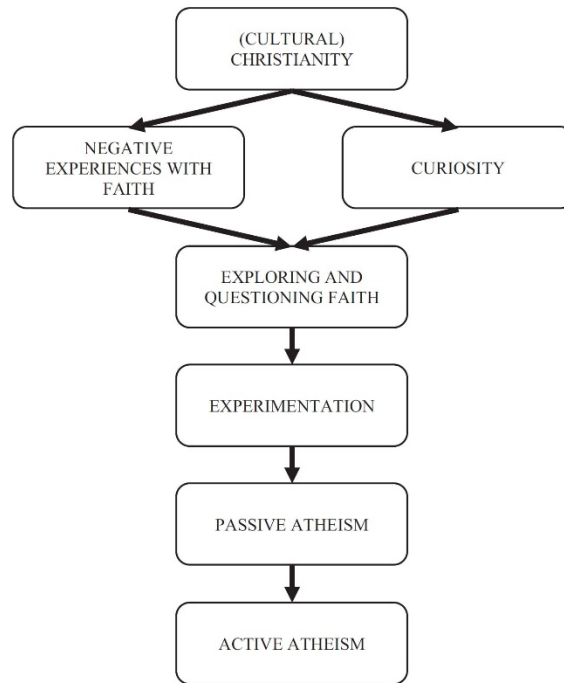
Figure 1. Flow chart depicting progression of atheist identity development among atheists of color.

Most participants associated eventual questioning of or exploring faith with their "curious," critical thinking, "rebellious," or scientific nature. Skepticism, a trait commonly associated with atheists, was described by our participants. However, another path to exploration of and questioning faith, in conjunction with curiosity, was negative experiences with faith and faith communities. Examples of negative experiences of faith included "not fitting in" among communities of faith, the conflation of conservative politics with faith resulting in feelings of incongruence or oppression, and spiritual abuse, the use of religion "as a weapon" resulting in harm. One Black woman with reported experiences of spiritual "trauma," including as an adolescent being forced to apologize to her congregation after being physically abused by her father, stated that spiritual abuse was "what makes people stay" or remain believers, although she acknowledged her spiritual trauma was a catalyst for questioning faith. Similarly, five atheists of color described the prosperity gospel as harmful to them and their communicates and, therefore, a catalyst for questioning their faith orientation. One Black man noted that "[people of faith] need to pay in order to get favor . . . it bothers me because it's untrue and it's just very manipulating." In essence, participants spoke to the manner by which the belief that faithfulness bred prosperity did a disservice to their communities, encouraging them to look inward when experiencing financial difficulties rather than outward to a system that perpetuates economic injustice in communities of color. A Black woman noted, "Our neighborhoods have churches on every corner, yet we're the poorest communities."

Explorations of faith were dynamic journeys that vacillated between questioning what participants learned or believed, gathering information regarding alternative faiths to those with which they were raised, and passive acceptance of the prominent faith in their racial/ethnic community or family in a nonlinear fashion. Whereas questioning one's faith is typical, particularly in late adolescence and early adulthood, this exploration may often result in refinement of beliefs and a personal interpretation of religious teachings generally consistent with one's religion of origin. Among our participants, explorations and questions distanced them from faith, rather than building or strengthening a unique experience with faith. One Black woman described the process as an "unravel[ing]."

Experimentation followed such explorations, in which participants tried on other faith orientations than those with which they were raised, the most common of which were nonreligious identities (e.g., agnosticism, atheism, spirituality not associated with organized religion). Five participants designated such experimentation a privilege. A Latina woman commented on her progression to secularity:

> I do consider it a position of privilege because I do think I got to this place because I had the opportunity to go to college, because I didn't have to worry about surviving. I was able to think about my future; I was able to think about deeper things. I didn't worry about where my next meal was coming from or I was not dealing with trauma or anything that I think would impede that process.

Though our participants described diverse class backgrounds ranging from poor and working class to upper-middle class, consistent with national atheist demographics, most, at the time of interviewing, had attained a bachelor's degree, and some were in the process of attaining a graduate degree. As a result, many of our participants seemed to be afforded privileges that provided emotional, and possibly financial, comforts that may have eased the challenges of exploring existential concerns and determining the absence of a higher power. Further, many participants described some level of immersion in White culture in the form of living in primarily White communities, attending predominantly White institutions of education, and/or having White family members; thus, perhaps they operated in systems in which atheism was less stigmatized or, at least, more acceptable.

Atheist identification was the culmination of participants' exploration and experimentation, although passive atheism wherein participants did not believe in god(s) but did not identify as atheist and/or disclose their atheism to others preceded more active forms of atheist identification. As with the overall trajectory of atheist identification, the period of time participants spent in passive atheism varied considerably. Active atheism, the final stage of atheist identity development, was marked by pride in and dedication to one's atheist identity, with participants describing themselves as "bold," "entrenched," and "militant." A Hispanic participant describing his atheism when he was a young man stated he viewed it as a "badge of courage to hold unpopular beliefs. . . . I thought it was really cool." Eight participants referenced personal activism or social justice endeavors they associated with their atheist identity and participation in organizations composed of atheists, particularly groups connecting atheists of color to one another. Individual, local, and systemic efforts were noted ranging from responding to sneezes with something other than

"god bless you," making "charitable contributions," and writing legislators to "encourage them to support secular legislation."

Experiences of Discrimination

Atheists of color in the present study described numerous overt and covert personal experiences of antiatheist discrimination across settings (e.g., with family, at work). All participants expressed that the predominant view of atheists, particularly by people of faith, in the U.S. was overwhelmingly negative. Of note, this was somewhat informed geographically such that many participants described a tangible increase in stigma associated with atheism during their experiences in the Southern and Midwestern U.S. and states traditionally associated with the Bible Belt. In general, antiatheist sentiment was communicated more overtly than discrimination associated with participants' other identities (e.g., racism, sexism). However, participants also reported experiences with microaggressions. In one instance, while talking to a friend, a participant recounted the friend saying, "Oh, you know atheists; they're not good people," without knowledge of the participant's atheist identity. Dissimilarly from other oppressions experienced by participants, antiatheist prejudice was incurred from ingroup members with regard to demographics such as race and gender, rather than outgroup members, though the perpetrators did share membership, generally, in the dominant Christian, or other Judeo-Christian-based, faith.

Participants described discrimination associated with others' perceptions of the manner by which they arrived at an atheist identity and/or the potential consequences of their atheist identification. Many participants noted that others assumed they must have experienced a personal trauma or incurred "some sort of damage" resulting in anger with god and, ultimately, atheism. It seemed people of faith often could not conceive of a healthy person rejecting faith. A queer, lesbian biracial woman discussed the intersection or her identities, describing others as perceiving her sexual identity as the reason for her atheism as she chose "to live this heathen lifestyle over the salvation of god." Thus, for atheists of color also identifying as gender or sexual minorities, there was a sense that religious others sometimes perceived their atheism as a natural consequence of, or a choice to accommodate, their behaviors rather than a rational worldview. In terms of consequences of their atheist identity, four participants shared explicit messages from others that they would "burn in hell" as a result of their atheism. A Latina and Native American woman recalled an experience with a family member:

> We were sitting at the table talking and she said to me, "You know, I'm going to miss you," and I was like, "I'm right here." She said, "No, I'm going to miss you in the afterlife. You know, you're not going to be there, and I'm going to miss you."

As a result of this perception, many participants (*n* = 8) described unwelcome proselytizing in which family members, friends, and strangers attempted to convert them to faith. These attempts often changed relationships such that they "turned into a 'I need you to go to church with me'" dynamic that participants experienced as "annoying" and "oppressive."

Of the 17 participants, 15 described stereotypes attributed to atheists including antithe-ism and "lonely" or lacking relationships, and used strong language like "evil," "monster," and "maniac" to describe others' perceptions of them. The most commonly endorsed ste-reotypes were immorality (*n* = 8), anger (*n*= 5), and "Satanist" or conflation of atheism with "devil worship" (*n* = 5). The message participants seemed to receive was that they were not only a danger to themselves but a danger to others, including being inherently threat-ening to others' faith. Six participants identified the manner by which discussing their atheism caused people of faith to question their own belief, resulting in changes to the nature of the relationship due to others' discomfort and defensiveness. A Black man noted the incongruence between others' perception of him before and after awareness of his athe-ist identity:

> [Someone] has never heard an allegation . . . that would cause you to question whether I'm a trustworthy person or whether I'm a moral person and then dec-ades later they find out I'm an atheist and they're like, "What stops you from stealing . . . how do I know I can trust you?"

Thus, despite familiarity and intergroup contact, both of which may soften prejudice against other groups, atheists of color described enduring discrimination from others re-lated to their atheism. Overall, the stereotypes discussed suggested participants experi-enced others as having "strong preconceived ideas" about them and, specifically, the perception that atheists "hate a lot of things" and are "very dark people," though partici-pants, without exception, denied these assertions were accurate or could be attributed to the absence of belief in god(s).

Isolation

Atheists of color in the present study described numerous experiences of isolation, pre-dominantly within family and social settings. Participants shared numerous ways in which antiatheist bias had a negative impact on their interpersonal relationships, the most com-mon of which, highlighted by 13 of 17 participants, was feeling "misunderstood." In some cases (*n* = 6), participants reported experiencing "disappointment" from family members regarding their atheist identity. A Black woman recalled the "look on her [mother's] face" and how it "hurt her feelings that I wasn't religious." Similarly, a Latino man described the "sadness" and "pity" others conveyed. A number of participants (*n* = 12) described their experience as atheists as "difficult" and "lonely" as a result of these interactions and subsequent isolation. Many attributed their loneliness, in part, to the unusualness of an atheist identity in their respective racial/ethnic communities.

Participants (*n* = 8) discussed "not fitting in" with other people of color due to their atheist identity with one participant stating, "I just find it really hard to find anyone to relate to." A Black woman described her experience:

> I guess it's like Black student unions. . . . I feel personally like I should be in this union, but then being there it feels like we're always praising god and we're al-ways, I do not know, there cannot go 10 min without somebody saying

something about god, and so then it ends up feeling like I do not actually fit in there where I want to fit in.

In essence, while these participants were part of their respective racial/ethnic communities, they experienced an absence of connection with their racial/ethnic community because of their atheist identification and the inability to relate to one another through faith. As a result of these lack of connections, several participants noted intentionally isolating themselves.

Among people of color, participants noted that atheism was generally perceived as a White phenomenon, and many of the atheism-related groups to which they belonged were predominantly White. Therefore, although atheists of color may desire connection with other people of color, their atheism may make that task challenging as they are perceived as "weird," an "oddball," or even "harmful" within communities of color. Further, among people of color, experiences of discrimination related to atheism may not be welcome or perceived as legitimate as compared to other marginalized identities, leading one participant to feel "self-conscious" sharing their experiences of antiatheist discrimination. In fact, multiple participants described personal discomfort with comparing experienced antiatheist discrimination to systemic racism, noting faithism was a more manageable oppression. Participants described the idea of an atheist of color as "inconceivable" to people of color, leading one participant to state that "the intersection of atheism and Blackness feels sort of impossible."

Atheists of color in the present study also discussed being a "minority" among atheists, with one participant describing the experience as "disheartening." Although participants acknowledged that the idea that all atheists were White was false, they simultaneously experienced the Whiteness of atheism as they attempted to connect in atheist communities that were "dominated" by men and included few people of color. Some biracial participants drew a comparison between the experience of "not belonging to any [racial/ethnic] community" and the atheist of color experience, noting being a biracial atheist was "tough socially." Therefore, as a result of existing on the margins among atheists, the White majority, and people of color, atheists of color described ostracization, "rejection," and isolation.

Many atheists of color in the present study described the absence of a "strong social network" or, if they had one, the unique challenges of developing those relationships as a result of their atheist and racial/ethnic identities. Difficulty initiating or maintaining romantic connections was a particular interpersonal challenge noted by participants. One woman described an ex-boyfriend taking her atheism personally and being "insulted." The challenge of finding a romantic partner who was agreeable to their atheist identity was often attributed to the "social pressure" for people of color to seek a partner of faith. For example, one heterosexual man joined a dating site and noted a "god-fearing man was a major criteria [*sic*]" for selection by prospective partners and attributed the breakdown of a previous marriage, in part, to his wife's discomfort with his atheism. A heterosexual woman noted that despite lower levels of religiosity among men of color, as compared to women of color, heterosexual men of color still desired a religious partner. Thus,

community and connection, essential components of wellness and buffers for minority stress, may be absent or difficult to attain for atheists of color as compared to people of faith.

Violating Cultural Expectations

Many participants discussed the centrality of religion, particularly Christianity, in their racial/ethnic communities. Challenges to atheist identification as a result of violating cultural expectations were noted, including loss of support, criticism, and/or alienation from communities of color. Atheists of color in the present study noted discomfort with the assumption that they were religious. Although participants acknowledged that, statistically, people of color were likely to be religious, as atheists they often felt unseen in their communities. A Black woman provided an example: "A lot of times at Black functions they have a prayer . . . and it's assumed that everyone if going to agree and believe the same thing." It was common for participants' immediate and extended family members to assume they shared a Christian faith identity; one participant described their family's "minimum expectation" of belief in a higher power. In other words, atheists of color described a presumed inextricable link between Christianity and a racial/ethnic minority identity, such that the rejection of Christianity constituted a rejection of their racial/ethnic community. A Black woman spoke about her worry:

> It might actually be my main concern. I do not want people to feel I'm ashamed of the part of me that is a person of color. I want people to know that I'm proud of that. I just wish there was a way to associate that I'm an atheist and not feel like I'm denying that part of my background.

This othering of atheists within communities of color may be due in part to a presumed absence of pride in their cultural background, though participants made clear that was an unfounded criticism.

One man commented that "everyone assumes [I'm] Catholic, especially if they hear I'm Hispanic." Therefore, outside of communities of color, participants also experienced a broad "societal expectation" in the U.S. that they were people of faith. A few participants attributed these assumptions of religiosity to low representation of atheists of color. A Black male participant attributed this expectation to an effort by the dominant culture to organize marginalized people, stating assuming religiousness among people of color "makes some White people more comfortable with the situation because they know how to handle it." Whereas among people of color assumptions of religiosity were a product of perceived shared experience, among White people these assumptions were the result of stereotypes.

Religion was described as a "tradition" among families of color and a deeply engrained aspect of participants' cultural experience. Some participants noted the role of the church as a "sanctuary," particularly for Black Americans, in the context of a history of systemic oppression. A Latina woman noted the perception among her family that to abandon Catholicism was "disrespectful" to her elders and "taboo." Participants mentioned people of color questioning their commitment and connection to their culture and heritage and,

further, the possibility that atheists mean to "put down [their] community." Therefore, criticism of Christianity that often accompanied or explained their atheist identification was unwelcome and perceived as detrimental to faith organizations that often initiated social justice efforts in communities of color.

Women, in particular, described the cultural expectation that they adhere to religious tradition and, more so, serve as their family's "spiritual leader." A Hispanic woman described a "conflict" between the strength and independence of Hispanic women and the expectation that they fulfill specific roles and "follow rules." Participants conveyed the expectation that a woman serve as the "moral head of the household" and, as morality is conflated with religiosity, women do so by attending church with their children and "raising [children] in faith." Importantly, this was not an expectation of men in their families.

Further, women in the present study described the presumption by others that their atheist identity was responsible for their parenting challenges. One Latina woman commented, "It's predominantly the mom that . . . keeps faith and teaches children morals and ethics and values. If I'm not able to pass that on . . . [I'm] the problem of why some things are happening in [my] home." In other words, the difficult behavior of the children of atheist women of color, however developmentally typical, was ascribed to their mother's lack of faith and female participants described overt judgment associated with this perception, often from female family members. Atheist women of color thus bore responsibility for the salvation and behavior of their children as well as their children's connection, or lack thereof, from their racial/ethnic heritage and community, an experience not described by male participants. Thus, the intersection of race/ethnicity, faith, and gender may result in unique challenges for female-identified atheists of color who may not be perceived as fully a part of their racial/ethnic culture because of violating the gendered expectation that they fulfill the role of spiritual leader.

Strategic Outness

Atheists of color in the present study recounted experiences of outness, or disclosure of their identity to others, that were positive, negative, and neutral; however, underlying all of their stories were the strategies they utilized to assess the safety of disclosing their atheist identity. Positive experiences of outness included opportunities for bonding with other atheists, specifically atheists of color and receiving validation from loved ones. All participants ($N = 17$) described at least one experience of outness as "easy," citing instances when others assumed or accepted their atheism without judgment or the manner by which the U.S. was "becoming a little more accepting" of atheists. Other participants reported reaching a point at which they cared little, if at all, about others' reactions to their disclosure. Neutral experiences of outness ($n = 8$) were generally described as operating in relationships and settings in which disclosure or discussion about one's atheist identity, although it was known, was not necessary or relevant. In fact, among our sample, most participants described disclosure of their atheist identity in most settings (e.g., family, friends, workplace), though outness was facilitated by operating in systems that may be emotionally safer for atheists including higher education, among family members with low levels of religiosity, and with chosen, nonreligious friends and family.

On the other hand, participants described more negative experiences with outness than positive experiences including, but not limited to, actively avoiding discussions of atheism or religion (*n* = 8), intentionally concealing their atheist identity (*n* = 9), loss of relationship(s) due to disclosure (*n* = 7), and emotionally painful responses from others during disclosure (*n* = 12). Nine participants noted they felt fear associated with coming out as an atheist, and 10 discussed the negative health consequences and stress they attributed to managing outness related to their atheist identity. Though overall there was a high level outness among participants, the coming out process was not without challenges.

The stories participants shared regarding being out as an atheist were undergirded by strategic outness, actions they employed to protect themselves and their relationships. Nine participants described exercising caution and/or testing others when determining with whom and in what settings to be out. One Black woman said, "I kind of decide based off what this person's ability is to critically think, the person's ability to be accepting." The same person shared that she approached religion and race similarly, by broaching each topic with a mildly controversial statement and seeing if the other person "bites" in order to know how to move forward. Another Black woman described a similar strategy of "testing the waters and seeing what the reaction is to be able to figure out if I should say everything or if I should hold back a little bit more." It was generally presumed that others with progressive political ideologies or a liberal stance with regard to social issues were likely to be affirming of participants' atheist identities whereas those with conservative social and religious positions were likely to react negatively to participants' disclosure.

Many participants discussed elaborate planning involved with determining if a person would receive their atheist identity well. Participants (*n* = 10) also spent time educating others and making them feel comfortable with regard to discussions of nonreligion and participants' atheism. A multiracial woman shared a time in her life during which she "realized [her atheist identity] was offensive to people" and "softened it and said agnostic," although she noted this identification did not feel congruent. Others used terms like "humanist" or "secular" when identifying publicly despite internally identifying as an atheist. Whether a result of fear or discomfort with others' discomfort, participants were willing to forego authenticity to avoid using the term "atheist," a label they knew would evoke stronger stereotypes than other nonreligious monikers.

In dialogues with religious people, one Black woman used a "scientific approach" that she believed was less "threatening" and described what she might say to a person of faith when discussion religion:

> I'm an atheist and I do not really believe in that; however, I do understand where you're coming from and . . . scientists have proven that meditation and prayer does physically, biologically heal you. It's a neurological response, but people think it's a supernatural thing and I'll let them have it.

Therefore, for some, even when identifying authentically, an obligation was felt to acknowledge and honor others' beliefs while stating their own worldview. Of note, this was most true among women of color; male participants were much more likely to describe

their atheist identification and discussions of faith with others as unapologetic and assertive, stating they did not care or were not bothered by others' perceptions of their atheism.

Often, the education participants provided to others was the result of "curiosity" or being approached with warmth and openness. Many participants were happy to engage in such dialogues, even if it meant justifying their worldview. Nevertheless, educating others and the other strategies participants outlined in order to manage their emotional safety and relationships as they related to their atheist identities constituted sustained work. In general, depending upon the systems in which atheists of color operated, or more specifically the systems they were able to create or join, outness was often a natural and easy process, though it did not prevent the need for ongoing strategic outness when encountering novel people and systems, or familiar, nonaffirming people with whom they attempted to maintain relationship and connection.

Benefits of Atheist Identification
All participants described benefits to their lives associated with their atheist identification, with one stating, ". . . [atheism] made me feel a whole lot better." Other descriptors included "happiness" and "the equivalent of a giant weight [being] lifted off my shoulders."

A Latino man reported atheism "was improving [his] life" through the opportunity to "look for experts and . . . the best argument among those experts." Relatedly, some participants (n = 3) described satisfaction with "shifting away from superstitious thought" and no longer "looking for magical solutions." In other words, their happiness was, in part, associated with a rational or logical approach to life events rooted in data. Participants seemed to value not being "restricted" to messages and information filtered through religion or faith organizations, such that they were able to make informed decisions using a wide variety of sources. One Hispanic man commented that doing so allowed him to "explore alternatives in [his] mental health" that resulted in a reduction in symptoms. A multiracial woman elaborated on personal improvements associated with her atheist identification, stating:

> I think after college, when I started reading a lot of books and listening to a lot of podcasts, I feel like [atheism] made me a more critical thinker. . . . Before, I was very reactionary when I would debate with people, but now I'm more relaxed. I really think a lot more critically.

Thus, atheists of color associated atheism with the expansion of their general knowledge and a healthy skepticism from which they broadly benefited. Further, with time atheists of color described a comfort with their identity such that they managed strong emotional reactions to others' criticisms or challenges in adaptive ways.

Given historical marginalization of people of color, and the role of community-based churches and faith organizations in providing support in the face of such oppression, participants voiced a strong desire for their secular communities to fill the gap left by not affiliating with Christianity. Participants challenged the assumption that development of community required religious involvement, with one multiracial woman commenting, ". . . just because you're not attending church, it doesn't mean that you aren't getting community in

other ways." Nine participants described the development of community and connections through their atheist identity, particularly with and among other atheists. One multiracial participant stated:

> Oh, it's just been amazing. It's been about three years now. Three or four years I've been involved in [an atheist] community, and it's just been so great having people that are like-minded and . . . are very supportive of my beliefs or lack of thereof. . . . I'm really so glad I found this community.

Despite aforementioned challenges related to isolation, and not belonging among White atheists or in religious communities of color, many participants were able to achieve connection with diverse atheist organizations, some of which were dedicated to supporting atheists of color. Further, several atheists in the present study described participation in local and national organizations dedicated specifically to advancing secular causes. Overall, participants spoke to the ways in which developing connections with others atheists resulted in "confidence" and "support."

Notably, six of the nine participants who discussed connection as a benefit described how the Internet facilitated community among atheists. One Black man noted that the Internet "showed me there were others." Thus, visibility of an otherwise concealable and inconspicuous identity, atheism and specifically atheism among people of color, was made possible, in part, through social media as well as other Internet sources (e.g., websites, blogs). The Internet not only increased feelings of connection but provided evidence of a local, national, and/or international community of atheists and atheists of color that resulted in positive feelings and mitigated loneliness and isolation.

Over half (*n* = 10) of the participants described their atheist identity as facilitating a sense of freedom or authenticity. One Latino man discussing his atheist identity stated, "I felt liberated; I felt free. I think that that contributed to my mental health." In other words, for atheists of color, owning their atheism and identifying as such felt authentic and powerful, even reducing depressive symptoms. A Black and Native American woman stated:

> I spent the last two years changing [my identification] to atheist and saying, you know, I'm just going to be my true self, and I'm going to show who I am, who I really am and what I really believe. And, that's okay, if people do not like it. That was the most powerful thing for me.

Atheist identification allowed participants to feel "more relaxed about who [they were]," and to avoid "masking" or hiding their true selves. Participants described confidence, pride, and personal freedom to live in congruence with their worldview.

One participant, a biracial man, associated freedom with the absence of "fear of the approval of an invisible being." Thus, freedom was also described as liberation from living according to the rules and expectations of a higher power, faith leader, or members of a faith organization. Eleven of the 17 participants discussed a strongly held value that they were "good" despite the absence of a faith identity or belief in god(s), resulting in positive feelings about themselves and their atheist community. One Native American woman

stated, "I just try to be a nicer person, not because of God, but because I feel better about myself. I feel happier as a nice person." Similarly, a biracial woman stated, "I believe while we're here that we have to be good to each other, that's what I believe." The intrinsic nature of this motivation to do good work in the world was especially personally rewarding to participants.

One Latina woman challenged the assumption of goodness as a function of religious-ness, stating, ". . . there are multiple tools that we can use that do not involve a god telling us right from wrong." Beyond being free from the restrictions of god(s), innate and organic altruism and kindness was valued and contrasted with good deeds that served the purpose of pleasing a deity or achieving salvation. Several participants suggested that goodness was tied to morality rather than religion. Further, participants conveyed a sense of pride related to their secular morality; one Latina woman described her values:

> . . . I'm somebody who cares about my community and others and I do that with-
> out a bible, without a force telling me to do these things. I do them because
> they're right and now I look forward to being able to share that with people, to
> be able to let them see that, hey, wow you're an atheist and you do all that stuff?

Beyond benefits to the self, participants found valuable the act of debunking common myths and stereotypes of atheists and atheists of color through their actions.

Overall, results show that atheists of color experience antiatheist discrimination, isola-tion, and self- and other-perceived violations of cultural expectations. Their atheist identity development, though variable in duration, generally moved from cultural Christianity, through questioning and experimentation, and, ultimately resulted in an atheist identity after which a strategic approach to disclosure and concealment of the atheist identity is common. Finally, atheists of color gained a sense of satisfaction and freedom from ac-knowledging their atheist identity and derived community by connecting with other atheists.

Discussion

Our study is, to our knowledge, the first with a primary aim of exploring the experiences of atheists of color. As people who identify with multiple minority identities, atheists of color navigate a complex landscape in which they transcend traditional notions linking people of color with people of faith. While participants shared some experiences in com-mon with those typically reported by White atheists, we noted findings unique to atheists of color. Participants in our study reported experiences with discrimination and isolation, though notably, they also demonstrated strengths including experiences of connection, freedom, and a desire to uphold strong morals for their own value versus being motivated toward goodness by faith. Participants' ability to cultivate community, derive satisfaction and freedom from their atheist identity, and experience pride reflect survivance, a strength-based response to managing the experiences of minority stress and historical trauma (Hartmann, Wendt, Burrage, Pomerville, & Gone, 2019). Participants often dis-cussed their racial/ethnic experience distinctly from their atheist experience, particularly when discussing discrimination, even when prompted to comment on their experiences as

atheists of color. Atheists of color may often navigate these oppressions, antiatheism and racism, independently, perhaps due to the relatively visible indicators of race and conceal-ability of atheism.

Integration with Previous Research

Among atheists of color in the present study, we found support for previous research conducted with predominantly White atheists. The atheist identity development described in the current study is relatively consistent with Smith's (2011) "standard trajectory" in which atheists move from the ubiquity of theism, through questioning and ultimately rejecting theism, and, ultimately, coming out as atheist and experiencing outness as liberating. Participants described experiencing stereotypes consistent with those most commonly cited in antiatheist bias literature, specifically immorality and anger (Cook et al., 2015; Gervais, 2014; Meier et al., 2015; Simpson & Rios, 2017). A relatively novel stereotype, the conflation of atheism with Satanism or devil worshipping, emerged that may be unique among communities of color or particularly religious communities.

Our findings are applicable to the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003) and extend the work of researchers who have previously established relationships between atheist identity and experiences of discrimination and concomitant stress responses (Brewster et al., 2016; Doane & Elliott, 2015) among primarily White atheist samples. By capturing the experiences of atheists of color, our study helps broaden the scholarship on atheists' experiences and identity development. Atheists of color, endorsing at least two marginalized identities, may experience the effects of minority stress to an even greater degree than White atheists. Among our participants, experiencing rejection from communities of color, especially family members, may have significance for coping with minority stress. As with other historically marginalized groups, atheists of color may be particularly equipped to cultivate community, demonstrate resilience, and adapt flexibly in response to familial and cultural rejection (Hartmann et al., 2019).

Implications for Training and Practice

Based on our findings and consistent with other scholars' recommendations, we encourage educators to include religion and irreligion, particularly its intersection with race/ethnicity, as part of our shared commitment to effective and inclusive multicultural training (Bishop, 2018; Magaldi & Trub, 2018; Sahker, 2016). Given the stigma atheist clients face and in consideration of the impact of identifying with multiple marginalized populations, we recommend psychologists examine their own biases around communities of faith and non-faith and become adept at welcoming and managing therapeutic conversations in which clients are safe to explore their identities and experiences as atheists of color.

We encourage psychologists to consider and challenge their assumptions about people of color and the role of faith in their lives, demonstrating cultural humility by engaging respectfully, remaining open, and honing an other-oriented stance (Mosher et al., 2017). Psychologists can utilize supervision and consultation to explore their reactions to working with atheists of color and monitor and challenge their biases. Consistent with the American Psychological Association's (2017) multicultural guidelines, psychologists who work with atheists of color should recognize the fluidity and intersectionality of identity,

understand and challenge their biases, and adopt a strengths-based approach that helps atheists of color develop and hone their resilience for coping with stigma that results from identifying with multiple marginalized communities.

Implications for Research and Limitations

Many participants noted they became aware of the present study through social media–based groups for atheists. Although some participants concealed their atheist identity in some settings, in general, atheists of color in our study reported high levels of outness and salience and centrality of their atheist identity. Further, most participants identified at least one of their racial/ethnic identities as Black or Latina/o/x and were raised in a Christian faith. Although this was a deliberate choice given similarities between the cultural experiences and, in particular, typical cultural faith orientations among these two groups, other people of color and those with marginalized religions of origin (e.g., Islam and those from non-Abrahamic religious cultures) were underrepresented. Future researchers should intentionally consider the impact of identifying as atheist after being raised with Christianity versus other Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic faiths (see Edwards, 2018).

Studies focused on the experiences of specific intersections, such as Black woman-identified atheists or queer Latinx atheists, are also warranted. Many participants in the present study identified some level of immersion in White spaces. It is possible that these experiences lend themselves to the exploration and adoption of an atheist identity. In other words, as atheism is viewed as a White phenomenon, people of color with higher intergroup contact with Whites may be more likely to be introduced to atheism as a viable identity and find more acceptance among White peers. Further, access to White spaces may allow for higher levels of outness as compared to within communities of color, resulting in the similarities we found between prior research among White atheists and this study's subjects. Thus, challenges in atheist research that should be addressed by future research are the recruitment of atheists with low levels of outness, studying atheists of color with less integration with White culture, intentionally studying atheists raised with non-Christian and non-Abrahamic faiths, and exploring the experiences of atheists of color not represented in the present study. Future research among atheists of color will benefit from additional qualitative inquiry as well as quantitative studies of variables including atheist identity, outness, minority stress, and well-being.

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Appendix

Sample Items from Semi-Structured Interviews

1. Tell me about the development of your atheist identity.
2. Tell me about your first, or most powerful, experience of "coming out" as atheist.
3. How do you decide with whom and in what settings to disclose or conceal your atheist identity?
4. What messages have you received from others about your atheist identity?
5. What messages have you received specifically from other [insert racial/ethnic identification] about your atheist identity?
6. What perceptions, if any, do you believe others have about you and other atheists?
7. What do you think people misunderstand most about atheists?
8. How do others communicate to you their perceptions about atheists?
9. How do others' perceptions of atheism impact your life, happiness, and/or health?
10. What are other important parts of your identity (for example, age, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, geographic location) that intersect with your atheist identity?