

CONCEALMENT OF NONRELIGIOUS IDENTITY:  
SCALE CONSTRUCTION AND VALIDATION

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## ABSTRACT

The number of nonreligious Americans has increased over the past few decades; however negative attitudes toward the nonreligious persist in America, especially in areas with high levels of religiosity. This may compel some nonreligious individuals to conceal their identity in order to manage stigma in areas with high proportions of religious individuals. However, no existing measures systematically assess the concealment of nonreligious identity. To address this gap in the literature, I created a measure of concealment of nonreligious identity that I administered to nonreligious individuals from online sources. Participants who lived in the Southern United States were further assessed with semi-structured interviews. Results showed that Southern atheists/nonreligious individuals had higher concealment scores than participants from other regions of the United States. Additionally, Southern atheist/nonreligious individuals used the stigma management strategies of counterfeiting, avoidance, and integration. Implications for the role of social tension in psychological research are discussed.

*Keywords: atheism, nonreligion, concealment, identity, stigma*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	v
LIST OF TABLES .....	ix
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	x
LIST OF SYMBOLS .....	xi
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	4
Key Terms and Concepts.....	4
Difficulties of Studying the Nonreligious .....	6
Demographics of Atheists and Nonreligious Individuals.....	12
Why are Americans Leaving Religion? .....	14
Atheist/Nonreligious Discrimination.....	19
Stigma.....	28
Atheist/Nonreligious Disclosure and Concealment.....	34
Religion in the South .....	37
Overall Method.....	47
III. STUDY 1 .....	49
Participants .....	49
Materials .....	51
Demographics.....	51
Concealment of Nonreligious Identity (CNRI) Scale .....	51
Nonreligious-Nonspiritual Scale .....	52
Modified Stigma Consciousness Questionnaire.....	52
Modified Internalized Stigma of Mental Illness Scale .....	53
Modified Internalized Homophobia for Gay Chinese Men .....	53
Moral Identity Scale – Internalization Subscale.....	54
Self-Concealment Scale .....	54

Religious Schema Scale .....	55
Outness Scale .....	55
Detroit Area Survey (DAS) Discrimination Scale .....	56
Salience Measure.....	56
Procedure .....	57
Results .....	58
IV. STUDY 2 .....	66
Participants .....	66
Materials and Procedure .....	67
Results .....	68
V. DISCUSSION.....	80
Limitations.....	82
Implications and Future Directions .....	84
REFERENCES .....	88
APPENDIX	
A. IRB APPROVAL LETTER .....	98
B. SURVEY INFORMED CONSENT.....	100
C. INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM .....	103
D. INITIAL CONCEALMENT OF NONRELIGIOUS IDENTITY SCALE .....	107
E. DEMOGRAPHICS.....	109
F. NONRELIGIOUS-NONSPIRITUAL SCALE .....	112
G. MODIFIED STIGMA CONSCIOUSNESS QUESTIONNAIRE.....	115
H. MODIFIED INTERNALIZED STIGMA OF MENTAL ILLNESS SCALE.....	117
I. MODIFIED INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA OF GAY CHINESE MEN SCALE .....	119
J. MORAL IDENTITY SCALE – INTERNALIZATION SUBSCALE.....	121
K. SELF-CONCEALMENT SCALE.....	123
L. RELIGIOUS SCHEMA SCALE.....	125

M. OPENNESS SCALE .....	127
N. DETRIOT AREA SURVEY (DAS) DISCRIMINATION SCALE .....	129
O. SALIENCE MEASURE.....	131
P. FINAL CONCEALMENT OF NONRELIGIOUS IDENTITY SCALE.....	133
Q. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	135
VITA.....	138



## LIST OF TABLES

4.1 Identity Difference Scores Between Public and Private Settings .....	56
4.2 Concealment of Nonreligious Identity Scale Item Means and SDs.....	57
4.3 Factor Analysis of Concealment of Nonreligious Identity Scale.....	59
4.4 Descriptive Statistics of Scales .....	60
4.5 Correlations between CNRI Total Scale and Subscales with Scales for Convergent Validity .....	61
4.6 Aliases, Residency, and Religious Information for Interview Participants .....	64

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CNRI, Concealment of Nonreligious Identity

CSI, Concealable Stigmatized Identity

DAS, Detroit Area Survey

EFA, Exploratory Factor Analysis

ISMI, Internalized Stigma of Mental Illness

LGBTQ, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer

PCA, Principal Components Analysis

SCQ, Stigma Consciousness Questionnaire

SNBR, Spiritual but Not Religious

UCT, Unmatched Count Technique

## LIST OF SYMBOLS

ANOVA, Analysis of Variance

$F$ , F-statistic

HSD, Honest Significant Difference

KMO, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin

$M$ , Mean

$N$ , Number

$p$ , Significance Statistic

$SD$ , Standard Deviation

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Religion is a topic that has long been discussed, critiqued and analyzed. Nonreligion, however, is just now being investigated (Bainbridge, 2005; Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Nonreligion can be understood as “anything which is *primarily* defined by a relationship of difference to religion” (Lee, 2012, p. 131; emphasis in original). For example, agnosticism is *primarily* defined by its relationship to religion while not being a religious phenomenon in and of itself (Lee, 2012). Besides a few pioneers in the field (Campbell, 1971; Vernon, 1968), relatively few social scientists have looked at nonreligion in any form in the past. However, with the rise of the nonreligious population in America and elsewhere, social scientists are now looking into this phenomenon. This is surprising, considering some of the most influential social scientists (e.g., Sigmund Freud and Emilé Durkheim) were nonreligious themselves (Bullivant & Lee, 2012). Indeed, it has been long known that scientists are less religious than the general public (Leuba, 1934). Perhaps nonreligious social scientists believed that explaining religion, a concept that they did not understand, was more important than looking at their own lack of religious beliefs.

From the limited research that has been done on this topic, two facts have been made clear: atheism and nonreligion are not well-received by many Americans (Edgell et al., 2006), and American atheists and nonreligious individuals are painfully aware of this fact, as discrimination against them is common (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, & Nielsen, 2012;

Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2012). Furthermore, derogation against even those with “no belief in God” (i.e., the nonreligious) is just as intense as derogation against atheists (Swan & Heesacker, 2012). Therefore, individuals who lack religious beliefs but do not call themselves atheists or agnostics may feel the need to hide their beliefs from others, given situational and social factors. Past research has suggested that atheists and the nonreligious selectively disclose and conceal their nonreligion (Foust, 2009; Garneau, 2012). There seem to be several factors that affect this; for example, atheists may feel compelled to conceal their beliefs more when their family is not accepting of atheism (Zimmerman, Smith, Simonson, & Myers, 2015). Another factor that plays into this is cultural and regional factors. For example, Foust (2009) found that atheists in Chicago felt no need to conceal the fact that they were atheists, while atheists in North Carolina did feel the need to conceal their atheism. Family and social factors fall into the larger variable of *social tension*. It would make sense to disclose and conceal nonreligion selectively based on these factors of social tension. However, it is very rare to find a nonreligious person who is totally open to everyone about their beliefs; on the flip side, nonreligious people do not totally conceal their beliefs, either (Foust, 2009; Garneau, 2012).

Despite the myriad scales for religious individuals of all kinds (Hill & Hood, 1999), very few scales for the nonreligious exist (Coleman & Jong, 2018). Moreover, only one study (Hammer et al., 2012) has looked at concealment of an atheist/nonreligious identity systematically. Hammer et al. (2012) used a dichotomized Outness Inventory adapted from Mohr and Fassinger (2000). This means that one either was totally open to a particular group (e.g., relatives) or completely “closeted” with that group. However, given that nonreligious individuals rarely tell everyone or no one about their beliefs but instead selectively disclose and conceal (Foust, 2009), Hammer et al. (2012) lose the ability to capture the variability of nonreligious

experience when dichotomizing this variable. To address the gaps in the field of nonreligion, I created a scale that measures disclosure/concealment as a multifaceted construct to capture this variability.

Having a scale to assess nonreligious disclosure and concealment as Hammer et al. (2012) have used is warranted; however, looking at concealment from only one lens misses important information that needs to be addressed with other methods. Foust (2009) and Garneau (2012) found that atheists selectively disclose and conceal their identities to others depending on a variety of factors, such as setting (e.g., concealing their identity in the workplace). It is no coincidence that both studies are qualitative. Such studies give the researcher access to more detailed information not obtainable by quantitative means (Creswell, 2013). Finding the reasons why nonreligious individuals selectively disclose and/or conceal and the methods they go about doing such are important factors to take into consideration. I interviewed Southern atheists and nonreligious individuals to investigate the reasons why they conceal their identities and the methods they use to conceal their identities.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Key Terms and Concepts**

Before I can delve into the research, I need to explicate the definition of terms relating to the nonreligious. First, I need to define nonreligion. Lee (2012) and her definition above of nonreligion as phenomena primarily defined by their relationship of difference to religion will be used throughout the current studies. This definition is an umbrella term meant to capture a wide variety of expressions linked to a lack of religion. There is a separation from religion as well as a connection to religion. Atheism and agnosticism are examples of nonreligion, seeing as they are related to religious phenomena but are defined by their differences from religion, but the term can be expanded to include the religiously unaffiliated or those who are “nothing in particular” when asked about their religious preference. When atheism, in particular, is being discussed in the following studies, I will use the term atheism. Nonreligion will be used to refer to other stances that stand about (but different from) religion, such as agnosticism and religious nonaffiliation.

Atheism can be defined as “a denial of the claims of theism” (Cliteur, 2009, p. 5). Cliteur (2009) has defined theism with a more specific understanding of *monotheistic* religion being the only religion where the term “theism” applies. Streib and Klein (2013) argued that researchers working in cultures with multiple religious sects must be specific as to which God is being rejected and which religious institution is being opposed. Beyond that, Cliteur (2009) argued that

it is a very specific monotheistic God, one that is omnibenevolent and omniscient, that atheism rejects. Delineations of atheism usually entail either a claim of the nonexistence of a God, sometimes with a polemical stance against religion entirely (“hard” atheism), or no claims about the lack of a God’s existence (“soft” atheism; Baker & Smith, 2015). “Soft” atheism includes agnostic positions as well (Zuckerman, Galen, & Pasquale, 2016). Cliteur (2009) delineated a trichotomy of atheistic positions: private, public, and political. Private atheism is one’s own beliefs; public atheism is a “missionary” style of atheism where individuals try to “convert” others to atheism (which is rare; Langston, Hammer, & Cragun, 2015); and political atheism is state-sponsored atheism in the vein of the Soviet Union. The most common expression of atheism in the trichotomy is private atheism.

Agnosticism denotes the lack of knowledge of a god’s existence (Cragun, 2016). Focusing on epistemology, agnosticism is more about the lack of knowledge about God’s existence rather than a truth-claim. That is, agnosticism refers to the inability to claim that a god or gods exist because there is simply no way to prove this claim one way or the other. However, some laypersons believe agnosticism to be a more wishy-washy position where one cannot make up their mind about the existence of a God, among other definitions (Bullivant, 2008).

Finally, there is a group who may believe in a higher power but are not affiliated with any religion in particular: the religiously unaffiliated, also known as the “nones” or those who are “nothing in particular” (Baker & Smith, 2009; Funk & Smith, 2012; Kosmin, Keysar, Cragun, & Navarro-Rivera, 2009; Pew, 2015). Cragun et al. (2012) define the nonreligious simply as “individuals who do not identify with a religion” (p. 106). This group also includes “spiritual but not religious” (SNBR) individuals who do not identify with a particular religion but do believe in the supernatural.



Another group to take into consideration are the “culturally” religious. I designate this group as those who claim a religious identity but do not believe in a higher power. For example, “culturally Jewish” individuals may identify ethnically with Judaism and practice religious traditions and holidays such as Hanukkah, but they do not believe in God. These individuals are religious by affiliation and atheist/agnostic by belief. Zuckerman (2008) has found that Scandinavians will also identify as culturally religious (mostly Lutheran) but will not hold any religious beliefs. These groups occupy a conceptual gray area but will fall into the large nonreligion umbrella I have conceptualized above. Of course, this list is not an extensive conceptualization of terms related to nonreligion, given the complexities involved with defining both religious and nonreligious terms. Any definition of religion or nonreligion will be flawed, since focusing on one facet of religion (e.g., personal belief) weakens focus on other facets of religion (e.g., religious practice; see Baker & Smith, 2015, for a review).

### **Difficulties of Studying the Nonreligious**

Just as conceptions of God and religion are as numerous as they are varied (Dennett & LaScola, 2010), nonreligion can be said to have this self-same problem. While there are many terms for nonbelief, there is overlap between these terms and the beliefs their adherents espouse (McGowan, 2013). This does not mean that people’s self-identification matches the beliefs that the identification is usually understood to be, however. For example, a person may describe themselves as “agnostic” but claims to not believe in the existence of a god or gods. According to the previously mentioned definition, this person would not be considered to be an agnostic but an atheist. When asked about it, though, the person would respond that they are in fact agnostic. While the study of nonreligion is in its infancy, most studies have not taken these discrepancies

into account. The few that have looked at the differences between self-identification and belief are intriguing.

Bullivant (2008) surveyed Oxford University undergraduates and found discrepancies between nonreligious self-identification and beliefs. The first question he asked was “what is your religion?” in which 49.6% of the sample answered ‘none.’ He then asked, “regardless of how you answered the previous question, do you consider yourself to be Christian, Muslim, Jew etc.?” Bullivant had 32.9% atheists and 24.4% agnostics. Intriguingly, 3.3% of atheists and 13.6% of agnostics chose Christianity as their self-identified religion. In addition to this, “only 50.4% of self-identified agnostics affirmed the classically agnostic option ‘I don’t know whether God exists, and I don’t believe there is any way of finding out’” (Bullivant, 2008, p. 365). Over a quarter of these agnostics (28.5%) said that they unequivocally believed in God. This goes to show that self-identification and belief do not overlap totally. One must be aware of this discrepancy when studying the nonreligious.

Qualitative evidence corroborates the quantitative results that indicate that self-identification and belief do not always match. Silver (2013) found that, while there was no consensus on terminology between nonreligious individuals in his qualitative study of nonreligious individuals, there was a consensus on definitions. That is, people did believe that there were nonreligious identifiers that related to not believing in a god or gods (i.e., atheism) and lack of knowledge of a god or gods’ existence (i.e., agnosticism), but not what they were called. Lee (2014) discovered that the nonreligious themselves might define nonreligious positions themselves and use labels based on their personalized definitions. One interviewee identified as humanist but believed that not believing in God (an atheistic position) is one of the major defining factors of humanism. Despite this, the participant did not see herself as an atheist

as well as humanist. Even the larger term “nonreligion” was used in several different ways in the sample. Most respondents used nonreligion either as a synonym for another term such as “atheist” or a generic term for those who did not have religious identities. Later, Lee (2015) found that the nonreligious identify as other identities such as “humanist” to differentiate themselves from the more overtly anti-religious atheists. Otherwise they would take up the atheist label. Nonreligion was also used as an indicator of indifference to the topic of religion altogether.

Similarly, just as Christianity has Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox designations, the nonreligious have several “denominations” themselves. Tomlins and Beaman (2015) relay the difficulty of having a complete set of nonreligious identities: “[the nonreligious] may self-identify as agnostic, atheist, agnostic-atheist, apathetic, anti-atheist, bright, freethinker, humanist, irreligious, materialist, naturalist, rationalist, sceptic, secularist, a mix of these descriptors, or something else altogether” (p. 1). When one takes the findings of Bullivant (2008) into account, it becomes difficult to extrapolate a self-identification onto a pre-established definition, given the combinations of identifiers and personalized definitions of each identifier. Therefore, just as there are problems with defining religious terms (e.g., does a self-identified Catholic who is not affiliated with a religious body still a Catholic?), nonreligion has the same problems.

Beyond simply identifying who is atheist/nonreligious and what that means, most atheists that have been studied have been contacted by atheist organizations (e.g., Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Atheist groups do not represent the average atheist well, given that the majority of atheists do not join such organizations (Langston et al., 2015). This may lead to bias in the psychology of nonreligion regarding the samples one uses. Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006), for instance, found that their sample doubted the veracity of religious teachings and

practices greatly; those who are simply “nothing in particular” may have more ambivalent stances toward religion in this manner. Langston et al. (2015) also studied nonreligious individuals affiliated and unaffiliated with atheist organizations. They found that while affiliated and unaffiliated atheists share the same priority of charity, the atheists affiliated with more than one atheist organization see many other functions of these organizations, such as social justice activism and politicking, as more important than even those who are in only one atheist organization. Secular nonaffiliates saw all functions of atheist organizations as less important.

Additionally, atheists affiliated with multiple organizations were twice as likely to identify as anti-theist compared to former members and secular nonaffiliates. Anti-theists are openly hostile toward religion and can be considered “eliminationist” according to (Campbell, 1971, p. 345). Eliminationists believe religion should be completely abolished. In contrast, “accommodationists” believe that the religious and nonreligious can “coexist” with one another (Langston et al., 2015, p. 73). While most nonreligious individuals are accommodationist in nature, atheists who are in many atheist organizations are more likely to be eliminationist in nature. Therefore, studies of atheists from secular organizations that are meant to be generalizable to a wider nonreligious may not be very representative.

Moreover, the vast majority of the nonreligious in America do not identify as atheist or agnostic (Funk & Smith, 2012). They are defined simply by being “nothing in particular” according to Pew’s designation, meaning that they do not have any religious affiliation but do not claim to be atheist or agnostic. In fact, 71% of the religiously unaffiliated are “nothing in particular,” with 17% being agnostic and 12% atheist. Funk and Smith (2012) found that 84% of atheists/agnostics saw religion as not too or not at all important, while only 58% of those whose were “nothing in particular” saw it as not too or not at all important. Regarding identity, 57% of

atheists/agnostics identified as neither religious nor spiritual, while only 36% of nothing in particulars believe the same. More importantly, 23% of nothing in particulars saw themselves as religious to some capacity while only 7% of atheists/agnostics did the same. “Nothing in particulars” also were more certain about belief in God or a higher power (39%) compared to atheists/agnostics (9%). Additionally, atheists/agnostics were more homogeneous in makeup than “nothing in particulars,” being significantly younger and more likely to be White than “nothing in particulars.” Altogether, it seems as if the religiously unaffiliated are more representative of the general population than atheists/agnostics. Baker and Smith (2009) looked at the distinctions between those who claimed no religion but had “superempirical beliefs” (what they termed “unchurched believer”), atheists, and agnostics. First, and unsurprisingly, they found that atheists had the lowest means of the private practice of religiosity and spirituality, namely religious salience, prayer/meditation, and identifying as “spiritual.” Atheists were the least likely to endorse any of these positions, followed by agnostics, unchurched believers (i.e., the religiously unaffiliated), and a group of affiliated believers as a comparison. However, atheists, agnostics, and unchurched believers are politically liberal at similar levels. Interestingly, unchurched believers were as opposed to the increased religious presence in the public sphere as atheists were, while agnostics were more lenient of such displays.

More studies should consider differences between nonreligious identities. Just because a person is not in a religious tradition does not mean that one is not religious, as the 7% of atheists/agnostics who see themselves as religious shows (Funk & Smith, 2012). The opposite is also true: being a part of a religious tradition does not guarantee that one is, in fact, religious (Silver, Coleman, Hood, & Holcombe, 2014). Silver et al. (2014) found that some atheists participate in religious rituals even when they do not believe in the religious traditions, a group

they term “ritual atheists.” These individuals could be considered “culturally religious” as well. Overall, more nonreligious individuals will tell researchers that they do not believe in God over saying that they are an atheist, even when they fit the definitional form of atheism (Zuckerman & Bernlinerblau, 2014). It is important to ask questions about self-identification as well as belief in order to capture the unique perspectives of American nonreligious individuals.

Traditional methods of getting demographic data (e.g., survey) seem problematic for studying the nonreligious. The nonreligious may not feel comfortable telling others about their identity. If they do feel comfortable telling others about their beliefs, they may not know what identification to put on a survey. Even the questions surveyors ask can change the percentage of responses. Kosmin et al. (2009) found that 15% of Americans self-identified as those with no religion. When asked “regarding the existence of God, do you think...?” however, only 2.3% of the sample responded with “there is no such thing,” an atheistic belief. While there are more nominally nonreligious individuals in the United States than explicitly nonreligious individuals, one would presume that the discrepancy between belief and self-identification would not be as large as presented here. Therefore, the number of nonreligious individuals in America may be underreported. Studies with nonreligious populations have usually lumped these groups together into a group referring to religiosity as “none,” even when these groups differ, as Funk and Smith (2012) attest. This may get a larger number of nonreligious individuals in a study, but it decreases the variances of nonreligious identity that one can possess. One way to get an accurate number of atheists/nonreligious in this context would be to ask the question while those taking the survey are not privy to the questions being asked.

Gervais and Najle (2018) used a non-invasive measure of atheism via the unmatched count technique (UCT; Dalton, Wimbush, & Daily, 1994). The UCT measures socially

unacceptable behavior by asking innocuous behaviors that do or do not describe respondents (e.g., *I exercise regularly*). A statement about the socially undesirable behavior (e.g., *I smoke crack cocaine*) is added to a sample's UCT. The difference between the number of total choices marked between the two samples is used to identify how many picked the socially undesirable item. Using this technique, Gervais and Najle (2018) asked participants to either answer negatively to innocuous statements plus the target stem *I believe in God* after self-reporting belief in God or answer positively to innocuous statements and the target stem *I do not believe in God*. Aggregated together, 26% of the samples were purported to be atheists, quite a large difference from self-report measures found in telephone polling (e.g., Pew, 2015). This finding suggests that noninvasive ways of asking about atheism may increase the number of people who claim to be atheist (or not religious in general).

### **Demographics of Atheists and Nonreligious Individuals**

Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) surveyed atheists in the San Francisco Bay Area, Alabama, and Idaho. These samples were similar in composition: mostly male, mostly Democrats, and mostly older adults. The authors suggest that these groups do not represent the average atheist well since these individuals were recruited from secular organizations. They posited that being involved in one of these groups is not indicative of the average atheist. Further research (Langston et al., 2015) indicates that atheists in secular organizations are not representative of the general atheist population regarding demographics and belief, with those in multiple groups being older than those in one group, former members, and those not in organizations at all (secular nonaffiliates). Those in multiple groups were also more fervent in furthering secular causes. Either way, atheists in these organizations do not represent the average

atheist who is not affiliated with a secular organization, let alone other nonreligious individuals who do not claim such an identity.

Funk and Smith (2012) examined a larger, more representative sample with their Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. They found that atheists and agnostics were more likely to be White, male, slightly more concentrated in the Western United States, and less likely to be married, than the general public. They also tend to be younger, more educated, and more liberal than the general public, according to the Baylor Religion Survey (Baker & Smith, 2009). This prevalence of single atheists is most likely due to the average young age of the atheist community. Furthermore, atheists seem to be more introverted than theists (Hout & Fischer, 2002). As for nonreligious people in general, the “nones” follow similar demographic patterns to atheists and agnostics; however, they are closer in demographic makeup to the general population. They were more likely to be male than the general US population, younger, only slightly less likely to be single and never married, more likely to be White, slightly more likely to be college educated and make over \$50,000 a year, and more likely to be Democrats (Kosmin et al., 2009). They were also less likely to live in the American South and more likely to live in the Northeast and Western states (Cragun et al., 2012).

Note that the description of the average atheist (white, male, financially well-off) is privileged. It would be reasonable to assume that because of these privileging factors, atheists are less likely to feel the repercussions of being a stigmatized minority. Bainbridge (2005) has argued that having fewer social ties plays into becoming an atheist. Financial and social privilege gives these groups more to work with, therefore making them more likely to become atheist rather than saying that they are agnostic or another nonreligious identity.



However, the nonreligious population is growing in America (Funk & Smith, 2012). As they become a larger part of the population, their demographics should more closely reflect the general population. Therefore, “if rates of non-affiliation continue to rise in the United States, the profile of the average nonaffiliated will more and more approximate the profile of the average American citizen” (McCaffree, 2017, p. 218). This suggests that the nonreligious population will grow increasingly similar to the general US public, as indeed Kosmin et al. (2009) imply. For example, Hispanics made up 6% of the American population and 4% of the population of ‘nones’ in 1990. By 2008 they made up 13% of the population and 12% of the ‘nones.’ Furthermore, as the nonreligious grow in number, it is expected that tolerance toward these groups will increase. Gervais (2011) found that when atheism was perceived as prevalent, anti-atheist prejudice decreased. However, this begs the question: why exactly are the nonreligious growing in the United States?

### **Why are Americans Leaving Religion?**

The United States’ social, religious, and political climate has shifted over its existence. Religious intermarriage, once considered taboo among many, is now so ubiquitous that nearly no one sees it as a problem in America (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Non-Christian groups are becoming more visible in America as well, even in rural areas (Lippy, 2005). Perhaps the most surprising change is the growth of the nonreligious in America. The Public Religion Research Institute (2016) found that 24% of respondents indicated that they were religiously nonaffiliated—those who identified as “atheist,” “agnostic,” or “nothing in particular.” This makes the nonreligious the second-largest religious “group” in America. This growth of the nonreligious has been precipitous, increasing 8.5 percentage points between 1990 and 2000

(Hout & Fischer, 2002). In 2007, 15% of Americans were religiously affiliated; in just five years, this number increased to over 20% (Funk & Smith, 2012). The magazine *Parade* found in a 2009 survey that 27% of Americans did not practice any religion and 22% said that religion “not a factor” in their lives (as cited in Zuckerman, 2011). This growth has occurred across at a time when the number of Catholics and Protestants, the largest religious groups in America, are decreasing (Cheyne, 2010). These changes are most evident in the younger generations: 32% of those in the 18-29 age group are religiously unaffiliated, compared to 9% in the 65+ age group (Funk & Smith, 2012).

America has had nonreligious individuals since its conception, including several Founding Fathers, most notably Thomas Paine (Jacoby, 2004). However, religion has always been associated with American identity. De Tocqueville (1836/1954) observed that religion permeated public life in America in the country’s early days. America remains unique among industrialized countries in terms of religiosity. In Europe and a few select industrialized nations (e.g., Canada), religiosity and spirituality have been waning (Zuckerman, 2014). In contrast, American religiosity has stayed relatively high and is just now starting to show declines. Of course, religious fervor has ebbed and flowed, and there have always been regional differences in religious content. Nevertheless, religious fervor had remained strong in America for quite some time. However, with the growth of the religiously unaffiliated and explicitly nonreligious, religion is seemingly losing its place as a cultural cornerstone in America.

In modern American history, there has been a “shock” and two “aftershocks” in the religious, political, and cultural zeitgeist (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). The “shock” came from the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s. Social upheaval and a counterculture in defiance to the status quo that had arisen during the 1950s grew in numbers during this time. As a byproduct of this

upheaval, the number of nonreligious Americans grew during this time, since religious institutions were among the institutions that Americans were combating. Catholicism and Mainline Protestantism lost many adherents, especially among the young. Fringe groups and New Religious Movements such as the Unification Church (i.e., the “Moonies”) also blossomed during this era. Individual conscience was preferred over institutionalized religious teachings, and this manifested in the growth of an individualized spirituality in the populace, as evidenced by Sheila Larson:

Sheila Larson is a young nurse who has received a good deal of therapy and describes her faith as 'Sheilaism' ... "I believe in God," Sheila says. "I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." Sheila's faith has some tenets beyond belief in God, though not many ... "It's just to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, and take care of each other. I think God would want us to take care of each other." Like many others, Sheila would be willing to embrace few more specific points (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, p. 221)

The most obvious metric of religious decline during this time was the fraction of Americans who believed that religion was “very important.” In 1952, 75% of Americans saw religion as “very important.” In 1978, this number dropped to 52%. The nationwide averages were more pronounced among the youth of the era. For example, weekly religious attendance was not subdued in the over-50 group, but among the 18-29 group (i.e., the Boomers), where it was cut nearly in half from 51% to 28%. All these changes were felt by the people themselves, as can be evidenced by the belief that the influence of religion in America was growing. In 1957, 69% of Americans believed that the influence of religion in America was growing. By 1970, this number was a paltry 14%. The decreases in mainstream organized religious attendance, religious belief, and other religious metrics prompted Time magazine to title an issue released during the end of the 1960s “Is God Dead?” That answer appeared to be “no” after the next big cultural change took place not long afterward.

The first “aftershock” refers to the conservative era that came at the end of the 1970s and was in full swing in the 1980s. In 1976, 44% of Americans believed that religion was growing in influence (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Compare that to the 14% of Americans believing the same thing in 1970! Religious attendance increased in the 18-29 age group, but interestingly not in the lower educational groups. The seeking Baby Boomers returned to religion as shown in the study by Roozen (1980) investigating rates of unchurched Americans. Most church dropouts returned either in their early 20s (24.5%) or 25-34 (25.3%) age range.

Religious participation, especially among youth, dropped considerably in the 60s, but most of these youth returned to church sometime later. Very few young adults left the fold entirely. However, during this same period, the number of people who identified as Mainline Protestant and Catholic declined. Why, then, did religious fervor in America uptick? The most likely explanation for a reversal in cultural attitudes was the success of Evangelicals to move their conservative ideology into the mainstream, which was the only religious group to gain adherents during this period (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). At their peak, Evangelicals made up 28% of the US population. This era started with the emergence of the Moral Majority, a conservative political group hellbent on getting conservative Christianity (particularly Evangelicalism) mainstreamed into the political sphere. In this, they mostly succeeded. The Moral Majority and other religious organizations connected itself to the Republican Party. This, in turn, created the Religious Right and further connected conservative theology with Republican ideology. However, the Evangelical movement could not sustain their movement.

The second “aftershock” occurred in the mid-1990s. Its effects can be seen today. This aftershock was directly implicated by the first aftershock, as Hout and Fischer (2002) have documented. As the Republican Party grew increasingly tied to conservative politics and

conservative theology, individuals with more moderate and liberal political beliefs distanced themselves from the Republican Party (Hout & Fischer, 2002). As a byproduct, many moderates and liberals, especially younger ones, dropped their religious beliefs entirely. Partially spurring on this pattern was a generational effect: those raised with at least one nonreligious parent in 1973 were more likely to become nonreligious themselves. Nonreligious individuals, unsurprisingly, did not raise their children with religion, thus perpetuating the cycle of secularization (Hout & Fischer, 2002). While the religious resurgence dropped off by 1990, the political resurgence of the Moral Majority remained. As liberal stances such as the acceptance of gay marriage increase across America, it is expected that this number of nonreligious Americans will continue to rise (Zuckerman & Bernlinerblau, 2014). However, this may change, as even Evangelical Protestants are starting to approve homosexuality more and more (Fingerhut, 2016). This seems that the Moral Majority has won and lost, becoming a major influencer of American politics while also fighting a losing battle in the culture wars.

Today, the partisan gap between Democrats and Republicans is also a religious gap. Democrats and progressives are much more likely to be nones than Republicans (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). However, there are exceptions. Black Protestants consistently vote Democratic despite their religiosity (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Now, the biggest difference religiously between Americans is not what religion they are but how religious one is. During the election of 1960, Catholic support was mainly for John F. Kennedy, a fellow Catholic. In 2004, John F. Kerry, another Catholic, had a split vote among Catholic voters, who were differentiated by how religious they were. The most religious Catholics voted for George W. Bush while the least religious Catholics voted for Kerry (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Again, the major exception to

religious voting is Black Protestants, who overwhelmingly voted for Kerry. These facts will be influential as the youngest (and least religious) generations reach voting age.

These cultural shifts have changed American religious life. The shift from an institutionalized religious culture to a more individualized spirituality has opened the door to more personalized religious identities. An increasing number of Americans claim to be “spiritual” than “religious,” and fewer still claim to be both (e.g., Streib & Hood, 2016). With individualized spirituality, there is less of a need to attend religious services, possibly leading to the drop in religious attendance among the major religious groups in America. Church leaders are in fear of dwindling numbers in their pews (Goodstein, 2006). Subsequently, if religious behavior decreases, religious affiliation among Americans will decline as well (McCaffree, 2017). Religious affiliation among Catholics, Jews, Mainline Protestants and even Evangelicals are experiencing a decline in recent years (Funk & Smith, 2012). The only groups growing in number in America are non-Christians and the nonreligious. The growth of the nonreligious and the decline of the religious may exacerbate issues between these groups.

### **Atheist/Nonreligious Discrimination**

While the number and visibility of nonreligious individuals continue to increase in America and tolerance of non-Christian groups increases, negative evaluations of atheists and the nonreligious do not diminish. Edgell et al. (2006) have looked at this question for over the past decade. In 2006, they found that 39.6% of their respondents believed that atheists did not at all fit their vision of American society. Additionally, 47.6% of the sample said they would disapprove of their child marrying an atheist. In a later study, Edgell, Hartmann, Stewart, and Gerteis (2016) found that 41.9% of Americans saw atheists as not at all fitting into their vision of American

society, while only 12.0% saw a spiritual, but not religious (SNBR) person not fitting into that vision. Not only does this show that animosity toward atheists remains virtually the same over time, but it also shows that animosity does not extend to persons who are “spiritual,” a term denoting belief in a higher power (Fuller, 2001). However, the prospect of there being a rising percentage of “nones” did not sit well with 40% of their respondents (Edgell et al., 2016).

Problems related to atheist discrimination may worsen in America because as outgroup sizes objectively grow, perceptions of this growth turn increasingly negative because of the threat to the majority’s values (Schlueter & Scheepers, 2010).

However, one cannot assume that atheists are the only nonreligious group that is disliked by Americans. Swan and Heesacker (2012) conducted a study involving a description of a person named Jordan described as either atheist, “without belief in God,” religious, or “single,” a control group. In four additional experimental conditions, a short, positive vignette describing Jordan’s job and hobbies were included. Atheist and “without belief in God” categories received negative evaluations along six dimensions pulled from a semantic differential scale in the description-only and description-vignette conditions. These differences were statistically equivalent. Evaluations of Jordan were more positive when vignettes describing Jordan were introduced, regardless of labeling.

Why would spiritual but not religious people escape derogation but “nonbelievers” are denigrated? It is possible that the findings in Edgell et al. (2016) that spiritual but not religious individuals are not as derogated as atheists because spirituality presumes the belief in a higher power (Fuller, 2001). While America’s relationship with non-Christian groups has been dicey, as can be seen in their disapproval of Muslims (Edgell et al., 2016), they share a belief-based ideology with these religious groups. This can lead to increased tolerance over time. For

example, while it was taboo for a Catholic and a Protestant to intermarry in 1960, the vast majority of Americans see no problem with such a relationship now (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). As non-Christian religions grow in visibility and number, they are starting to join in on this civil religion (Wuthnow, 2005), an ideology combining American ideals with religious (vaguely Judeo-Christian) ideals (Bellah, 1992). The same process could be said to be happening to SNBRs (Fuller, 2001). SNBRs can pass Americans' litmus test of American identity because of their shared belief in a higher power. Civil religion never fully dictates what God or Higher Power one must believe in, only that one must truly believe (Bellah, 1992). Atheists and agnostics, on the other hand, are more indicative of the outgroup with lack of a belief in a higher power and religion and are concomitantly demonized (Cragun et al., 2012). To the average American, atheists and agnostics do not believe in anything and thus are left out of the civil religion.

This increased tolerance and integration of religious groups into American society "may reinforce intolerance of those who reject religion" (Edgell et al., 2006, p. 214). More importantly, it may be the case that atheists both are symbolically marked as "other." Edgell et al. (2006) interviewed some of their respondents in Los Angeles. Interviewees gave disparate descriptions of the average atheist. Some equated atheism with criminality of the basest variety, such as drug use and prostitution. Others saw atheists as materialist, elitist, individualists who are above the average American and beholden to no one. These descriptions seem contradictory until one realizes that they serve a larger purpose: they show that atheists exemplify the values that the average American does not want. They see "increasing criminality, rampant self-interest, an unaccountable elite" as markers of values that "undermine trust and a common sense of purpose" that all Americans share (Edgell et al., 2006, p. 228). The average person's first instinct when



engaging with nonreligion is “defining themselves by announcing their distance from [nonreligion]” (Foust, 2009, p. 24). By doing so, they present themselves as a model American citizen. Thus, atheism works as a versatile symbolic boundary of American identity.

Cottrell and Neuberg (2005) found evidence that there is a sociofunctional approach to prejudice where different groups possess qualitatively different threats, and in turn, qualitatively distinct reactions to face these threats. For example, participants had different emotional reactions to gay men, activist feminists, and fundamentalist Christians; however, they all had similar amounts of prejudice aimed at them. Researchers have found that atheists are perceived as immoral (Cook, Cottrell, & Webster, 2015; Gervais, 2014), disgusting (Ritter & Preston, 2011), materialistic and elitist (Edgell et al., 2006), criminal (Edgell et al., 2006; Gervais, 2014), and untrustworthy (Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011). Americans designate atheists as un-American because of the above stereotypes applied.

For example, Americans react with moral (Cook et al., 2015) and physical (Ritter & Preston, 2011) disgust to atheist ideas. Cook et al. (2015) discovered that atheists were seen more as a threat to *values* than a threat to physical health. In other words, they elicited moral disgust, not physical disgust, when compared to Muslims, gay men, and people with HIV. Furthermore, they manipulated people’s beliefs about threats to moral values. Those in the experimental condition expressed more discriminatory behavioral intent to not vote for atheist candidates, support atheist-run businesses, or believe that the Supreme Court should include atheists. However, Ritter and Preston (2011) found that atheists ideas in the form of a passage from *The God Delusion* by Dawkins (2006) led to perceiving a tonic of lemon juice as more disgusting than when participants read from a control text. Given the right medium, the moral disgust that atheists elicit translates into physical disgust.

Additionally, Americans are distrustful of atheists. Gervais et al. (2011) ran several studies to see just how much atheists are distrusted. In Study 1, they found that religious individuals viewed atheists with *distrust* and homosexuals with *disgust*. This effect even held for religious nones, who presumably should be more accepting of atheists. More interestingly, Gervais et al. (2011) used a conjunctive fallacy paradigm (Tversky & Kahneman, 1983) to show that atheists are just as distrusted as rapists, even with a rather secular, liberal sample from the Pacific Northwest. They relayed a vignette about a man who bumped into a car, pretended to write down insurance information, and drove off; the man also found a wallet on the sidewalk, took all the money in the wallet, and threw the wallet in the trash. Results showed that participants committed the conjunctive fallacy when the target was either a rapist or an atheist, but not a Christian or Muslim target. Additionally, they found that atheists were less likely to be recommended for jobs that involved high amounts of trust (e.g., daycare worker). Altogether, Gervais et al. (2011) mount evidence that atheists are distrusted more than they elicit disgust, and this distrust holds over several paradigms.

Further research into this topic has shown atheist distrust is pervasive, even in countries with majority-nonreligious populations. Atheists in countries like China (but not Finland) are subject to intuitive bias as well; even atheists themselves are more likely to intuitively say that atheists are likely to be serial murderers (Gervais et al., 2017). In Scandinavia, religion is not equated with morality like in many other countries including the United States, which explains why Finnish participants did not have an intuitive bias against atheists (Zuckerman, 2008).

Because of this distrust, voting intentions against atheists are repeatedly found throughout this literature (Cook et al., 2015; Jones, 2012). Franks and Scherr (2014) voting intentions and anti-atheist discrimination, finding that Christians were less likely to vote for an atheist

heterosexual candidate than either a White heterosexual Christian, Black heterosexual Christian or a White homosexual Christian. Semantical differential scales were also used to determine which groups elicited more distrust, disgust, and threat. Christians described the atheist candidate as more untrustworthy than the other candidates. Atheists elicited disgust in the Christian sample as well, but not to the extent of the homosexual candidate. This disgust was significantly more than the White heterosexual candidate. Additionally, all three minority candidates were perceived as similar, threat-wise. Nevertheless, only atheists were negatively evaluated in all three semantic differential scales.

Atheist distrust may lead to atheists to overcompensate with religious outgroups to prove themselves as decent, moral people. Cowgill, Rios, and Simpson (2017) found that atheists allocate more to Christians in a dictator game when they believe that the Christians know about their atheism and/or their “moral reputation.” Atheists gave equal amounts of money in a dictator game to both ingroup and outgroup members, while Christians gave more money to other Christians, the ingroup. This effect was more pronounced when atheists were aware that their partner was a Christian. The plethora of issues that people have with atheists give credence to the idea that atheism in particular and nonreligion, in general, is a symbolic boundary marker for negative behaviors that Americans do not want (Edgell et al., 2006). Distrust and moral threat are some of the ways that people’s qualitatively distinct reactions to the nonreligious (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005).

Because of this symbolic boundary and where atheists and agnostics are placed in relation to it, discrimination against atheists and the nonreligious is common in America and heterogeneous in nature (Downey, 2011). More than likely, this is because derogating an outgroup (in this case, atheists) can alleviate the loss of self-esteem and bolster social identity in

many different ways (Tajfel, 1982). Hammer et al. (2012) had a study consisting of two parts to elucidate anti-atheist discrimination: a qualitative component looking at discrimination stress narratives and a quantitative component of perceived anti-atheist discrimination and its correlates. As part of the quantitative component, Hammer et al. (2012) surveyed atheists via an online survey and found that a near-unanimous majority was subject to slander (96.7%) and a sizable minority were subject to serious discrimination such as hate crimes (13.7%). The three most common forms of discrimination were as follows: witnessing anti-atheist comments in newspapers or on television (94.7%), being expected to participate in religious prayers against one's will (79.1%), and being told one's atheism is sinful, wrong, or immoral (75.2%). Garneau (2012) found similar results. A majority (71%) of "seculars" (as he termed the nonreligious) reported being negatively judged; 11% reported that they were not negatively judged and 18% did not know. Only 37% reported unfair treatment regarding discrimination.

Hammer et al. (2012) had three hypotheses regarding atheist discrimination: that atheists with stronger identification with their identity would experience more discrimination; the more "out" an atheist, the more discrimination they would experience; and strictness of familial, religious expectations would be associated with familial ostracism, and this relationship would be moderated by one's "outness." There was a slight but significant correlation between atheist self-identification and perceived discrimination, consistent with past identity and discrimination research (e.g., Sellers & Shelton, 2003). There was also a slight but significant correlation between atheist outness and perceived discrimination as predicted by past research (e.g., Jasperse, Ward, & Jose, 2012). Additionally, familial, religious strictness was slightly but significantly associated with familial ostracism; outness also moderated the relationship between

familial religious strictness and perceived discrimination such that the more out a person was, the more they were ostracized by their family.

Qualitative evidence of discrimination against atheists gives a more detailed explanation of the kinds of dangers atheists and the nonreligious go through in America. Hammer et al. (2012) had a qualitative portion of their work and discovered six themes regarding atheist stress narratives regarding their discrimination: assumed religiosity, lack of a secular support structure, lack of church and state separation, negative effects on family, unreciprocated tolerance, and anticipatory stress. Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) reported similar experiences of discrimination such as vandalism and social ostracism. One participant relays some serious discrimination:

I have had crosses planted in my yard, my kids have been harassed at school, I've been a victim of religious discrimination at work, my car has been vandalized, I've received death threats via email, mail and under my windshield wipers (p. 45).

Foust (2009) relayed overt discrimination stories such as death threats, among other instances through her in-depth interviews with atheists in various areas in the United States. Several different interviewees relayed workplace discrimination. One interviewee had to move out of the community they lived in because her children were being harassed at school because their mother was a psychologist and an atheist. Many of the participants in Foust (2009) faced overt discrimination, such as people telling them that they are going to hell. This type of discrimination was shared among many in her sample. Most participants, when telling others about their atheism, got quick negative comments and dismissals. These actions gave the atheists in the sample reason to believe that they were being treated differently. Garneau (2012) had interviewees who received more subtle remarks related to their nonreligious status, such as being told "but you're such a nice person" in response to the disclosure of their atheist identity (p. 43).

Open atheists also perceived prejudice through social interactions in which people acted “unfriendly” toward them after the disclosure of their atheism. Similar to Foust (2009), some interviewees in Garneau (2012) reported instances of more extreme discrimination such as vandalism and even physical violence, though these cases were less common than the subtler forms of discrimination.

Employment may be difficult for an atheist as well. One study sent resumes with religious identification (or lack thereof) or a control resume with no religious information out to prospective employers in the Southern United States (Wallace, Wright, & Hyde, 2014). Atheist identification on a resume led to fewer callbacks and emails compared to a control resume with no religious identification. Of course, religious information on any resume usually leads to fewer callbacks and emails in the first place (Wallace et al., 2014), but Protestant identification did not lead to fewer callbacks or emails, suggesting that outgroup identification played a role beyond just having (non)religious identification on a resume. Similarly, Scheitle and Corcoran (2018) found that 20.94% of nonreligious individuals, 17.51% of agnostics, and 31.09% of atheists who reported perceptions of more than never being discriminated against because of their (non)religious beliefs.

Overall, research on discrimination against atheists has found discrimination against them to be commonplace and varied (Hammer et al., 2012). Discriminatory acts run the gamut from verbal putdowns to vandalism to death threats. This discrimination affects many different avenues of a nonreligious person’s life, from getting a job (Gervais et al., 2011; Wallace et al., 2014) to running for public office (Franks & Scherr, 2014). These negative evaluations even reach to those “without belief in God,” (see Swan & Heesacker, 2012) so discrimination does not

seem to be tied to a particular nonreligious label. These negative evaluations of atheists and the nonreligious lead to an identity that is stigmatized.

## **Stigma**

With the amount of derogation and discrimination that atheists and the nonreligious face, it comes as no surprise that these identities are stigmatized in America. According to Goffman (1963) stigma is “an attribute which is deeply discredited” by society at large that “spoils” a normal identity (p. 3). He divided stigma into two groups: discredited and discreditable. Discredited stigma cannot be concealed. Race, for example, is a discredited stigma. Discreditable stigma can be concealed. Atheism is an example of a discreditable stigma. Those with discreditable identities can “pass” as normal by concealing their stigmatized identity. For example, gays and lesbians can act in ways that present themselves as heterosexual to people who are not “wise” to their true sexual orientation.

Link and Phelan (2001) presented the factors necessary for stigma to arise. First, differences must be recognized between groups. Differences must then be problematized before they can be stigmatized. Stigma “causes some groups to be devalued and others to feel that they are superior in some way” (Parker & Aggleton, 2003, p. 16). For example, those who are prejudiced against atheists can claim that atheists are immoral because they do not believe in God, giving them a sense of superiority over the atheist. Atheism and nonreligion, in this case, make an easy target to problematize. The label (e.g., atheism) becomes associated with stereotypes (e.g., immorality) that become increasingly difficult for the stigmatized individual to shake. These labels then form the basis of creating a distinction between the ingroup (“us”) and the outgroup (“them”). As atheists and nonreligious individuals grow in number, religious

majorities (i.e., Christians) must combat their loss of numerical hegemony by arguing for superiority in other matters, such as morality. This gives them perceived preeminence over the outgroup and ameliorates negative self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Labeled individuals are discriminated against and their status is devalued in a particular society. Finally, stigma and discrimination depend on cultural context and power (Maman et al., 2009). An important factor that Link and Phelan (2001) discuss is that stigma and discrimination occur within a matrix of power: stigmatized groups have less power than those who do the stigmatizing. The ones who stigmatize control the narrative of a given group's attitudes and behaviors and can either directly or indirectly discriminate the group, depending on their ideological endgame.

Concealable stigmatized identity (CSI) is a specific type of identity that is discredited as per Goffman (1963) and is concealed to not accrue stigma onto a person. These identities can affect psychological well-being by either the valence of the content about one's CSI or the magnitude of the CSI (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). Internalized stigma refers to believing in the stereotypes that are thrust upon oneself. The stereotypes applied to stigmatized groups become attached to a person's self-concept. Several scales have been made to measure this internalized stigma for a variety of stigmatized groups (Ren & Hood, 2018; Ritsher, Otilingam, & Grajales, 2003). Each stigmatized identity seems to have components unique to them. For example, homosexuals may internalize the idea that they are disgusting, but not that they are distrustful, which is a characteristic of atheist discrimination. It would make sense to think that atheists who are disclosing their beliefs feel ambivalence about their identity. Of course, people with stigmatized identities may combat the stigma instead of internalizing it (Ritsher et al., 2003). One such way of combating stigma is by doubling down on one's identity and telling others about that identity, known as "outing" oneself, as borrowed from the LGBTQ community.



Being “out” with one’s stigmatized identity may bring benefits (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013), with “[fewer] feelings of social isolation, the potential for more social support, greater feelings of authenticity” being beneficial outcomes of disclosing a stigmatized identity (p. 43). Galen and Kloet (2011) found evidence for a curvilinear relationship between one’s openness of religious/nonreligious beliefs and well-being. Those who were less sure if God existed or not had lower scores on a scale of life satisfaction and emotional stability; those who believed there was *no* God had higher scores than the unsure but similar scores to those who were sure that there was a God. Atheists tend to be more convinced that a higher power does not exist than other nonreligious individuals (Cliteur, 2009); therefore, it seems as though they would have higher well-being than an unaffiliated religious individual who is more ambivalent toward religion and God in particular.

Another factor to take into consideration is the magnitude of the CSI. This is usually divided into two subfactors: centrality and salience (Tajfel, 1982). Centrality refers to whether the identity is a major part of a person’s self-concept. Salience is how aware one is of this identity. Those who consider their CSI to be more central to their identity are going to be more affected when engaging with discrimination. This pattern is no different for the nonreligious (Abbott, 2017). If a person sees their stigma as a negative, they would likely internalize the stigma. Salience, however, has no valence. It is simply the frequency of times a person is aware of their CSI. For the nonreligious, their identity is going to be highly salient in places with high concentrations of religious people, a place of high social tension. Those who claim atheism or nonreligion as central to their identity will be most affected by salience and stigma.

Because atheism is stigmatized, atheists may try to distance themselves from the atheist label. Qualitative research has found evidence of this effect. McClure (2017) and Armstrong

(2017) found that nonreligious parents and students, respectively, tried to distance themselves from the atheist label, even when their beliefs matched definitional forms of atheism. The label of atheist was tied to being “inherently militant” (McClure, 2017, p. 341) to the parents in McClure’s study, who avoided using the term entirely. Armstrong (2017) found that her sample of nonreligious students avoided atheist labeling for many reasons, such as not offending others, being stuck with the label, and concealing the very fact that they were nonreligious. Even the “gnostic atheists”—those who do not believe in a deity and are certain none exist—believed that going to college moderated their beliefs and made them less angry and caustic. This trepidation at claiming the atheist label extends to groups that may have less impetus to remove themselves from the atheist label, such as atheist group leaders in the Midwest United States (Garneau, 2012) and nonreligious Scandinavians (Zuckerman, 2012). The reasons why these groups avoid claiming the atheist label is the same: others’ reactions to the label.

Atheists and the nonreligious may identify themselves in ways that contrast with they actually believe. Streib and Hood (2016) found that atheists sometimes self-identify as spiritual, religious, or both. However, these self-identifications are problematic without realizing that social tension may necessitate taking a self-identification that is less problematized. For example, Armstrong (2017) had an interviewee who explicitly stated that she identifies as agnostic atheist but will “throw out” terms like humanist or secular as identities to make others “feel better” (p. 726). Because others might react negatively to the “agnostic atheist” label, she would present alternative labels to avoid unnecessary awkwardness in interactions with others. Nonreligious individuals have to take others’ opinions into account when navigating the world. Therefore, atheists and other nonreligious individuals may take up self-identifications such as “spiritual but not religious” but in actuality do not have belief in the supernatural.

Foust (2009) interviewed atheist groups and found that many people within these groups distance themselves from the label to not come off as confrontational. However, there were many disagreements as to if they should disengage from the label. Some said that they should “take back the term” similar to how the LGBTQ community “took back” the word “queer” (Foust, 2009, pp. 74-75). Others argued that the word should be avoided because of the negative connotations already attached to the label. However, in some cases, they felt compelled to tell their loved ones because they wanted to be honest with them, which has been found in other samples (Zimmerman et al., 2015). Homosexuality and atheism have similarities in the way that the characteristic that makes them looked down upon is not visible. Therefore, both groups can “pass” for normal in mainstream culture. The relationship between these marginalized identities was made clear in a passage from Brewster (2014), where the speaker is describing when he first came out as gay: “When I uttered those words, a weight came off of me. My parents took it fairly well. There were tears, of course, and then my mother admitted she thought I was going to say I was an atheist” (p. 99).

Both the nonreligious and the LGBTQ community share an attribute that has to be disclosed to others. Both groups have grown in number over the past few decades as well. In contrast to the nonreligious, the LGBTQ community has found themselves receiving popular support. In 2016, support for same-sex marriage was at 55%; this number is the same that opposed it in 2006 (Fingerhut, 2016). It is not impossible for nonreligion to grow in popular support. However, atheists have continued to be one of the most disliked groups in America. As a counterpoint, younger individuals are more likely to be nonreligious (Funk & Smith, 2012), and nonreligious individuals tend to be more tolerant in general (Schwadel & Garneau, 2014).

These two issues combined may lead to difficulties in removing stigma from atheism and nonreligion.

Atheists in recent years have based their movement around the tactics that the LGBTQ movement used to change public opinion; namely, they have adopted the parlance of “coming out” atheist or being “in the closet” with one’s atheism. Atheists use the term “coming out” unprompted (Klug, 2017) and atheist leaders encourage atheists to “come out” to as many people as possible (Christina, 2014). Tactics to conceal these stigmatized identities could be shared between atheists and the LGBTQ community since both homosexuality and nonreligion are discreditable attributes. Button (2004) purported three types of concealment strategies in his study of gay and lesbian employees. First, *counterfeiting* involves behaving in ways that portray a false identity. Second, *avoidance* tactics might be used not to discuss the stigmatized identity or by staying away from those who would not tolerate a stigmatized identity. Finally, *integration* involves selective disclosure of a stigmatized identity to “integrate” one’s true self into certain social contexts. The nonreligious could easily follow these patterns, where they pretend to be religious (i.e., counterfeit), avoid religious topics to present themselves as normal (i.e., avoid) and/or selectively conceal and disclose their identity (i.e., integrate). These do not have to be the only strategies used between the groups or for stigma management in general; however, there seems to be evidence that these strategies have been found in use with nonreligious populations (Foust, 2009; Garneau, 2012). Integration is a rather interesting concept, seeing as it involves selectively disclosing and concealing one’s identity according to context. I will explicate on integration, or, as I will present it, selective disclosure.

Selective disclosure and concealment of identity (i.e., integration) seem to be a strategy to keep their identity hidden in the right context. One reason why atheists and the nonreligious

would employ this strategy is to conceal the very fact that they are not religious, as Armstrong (2017) found in her study. Foust (2009) found that her respondents were “out” in some capacity, even if “only to the members of their atheist group” and the researcher (p. 37). Most people were out to their romantic partners and close friends, but not in the workplace. However, some atheists were not out to their parents because they knew that they were religious and believed that they would not take their nonreligion in a good way. As a rule of thumb, most atheists deemed close relationships “worth it” but do not extend this to “less intimate relationships” such as between co-workers (p. 40). Garneau (2012) found that atheists will disclose if they believe that concealing their nonreligion is too stressful and/or hard to keep hidden. They may also disclose preemptively for others to find out about it in less-than-advantageous circumstances. However, individuals may deviate from these generalizations. Some atheists and nonreligious individuals would tell absolutely everyone about their nonreligious beliefs; others would tell nobody except perhaps a social researcher. Most atheists and nonreligious individuals tell some and not others for a variety of possible reasons.

To summarize, atheists and the nonreligious perceive stigma. Because of this stigma, they may differentially disclose or conceal their identity in a variety of ways. For example, atheists may avoid calling themselves atheists with others, opting for a possibly less stigmatized nonreligious identity or even saying that they are religious (Armstrong, 2017; McClure, 2017). This selective disclosure is affected by many factors, which are explained below.

### **Atheist/Nonreligious Disclosure and Concealment**

Since nonreligion is concealable, one must go out of their way to disclose their identity to others. However, several factors come into play in determining if concealing one’s stigmatized

identity is warranted. In places where nonreligion is more prevalent, for example, it may be safer for a person to “come out” as an atheist. However, if one’s family is highly religious, “coming out” may not fare so well for the atheist. Zimmerman et al. (2015) looked at relationships between atheists and their family and significant others after coming out. Many participants cited tension with family members as a result of telling them about their nonbelief. Others relayed more positive stories where relationships were not strained after disclosing their atheism. These positive stories occurred when the atheists’ family or significant other was less dogmatic with their religious beliefs and more accepting of nonreligious beliefs in general (Zimmerman et al., 2015).

Familial ostracism is moderated by one’s “outness,” meaning the more open an atheist is with their atheism, the more ostracism they receive from their family (Hammer et al., 2012). This may be because one’s beliefs may affect one’s family members’ social status. Family members become guilty of nonreligion by association. Therefore, some family members may feel compelled to ostracize their intransigent family member as a response. However, the measure that Hammer et al. (2012) used to look at disclosure was a dichotomous measure, meaning that one was either disclosed or concealed to a particular person or group of persons (e.g., coworkers). It is doubtful that concealment and disclosure work as a dichotomy, seeing as atheists selectively disclose their identities. Foust (2009) found that selective disclosure was an important aspect of being an atheist in her sample. The most widely used example was not disclosing their beliefs in the workplace not to rock the boat. For example, one atheist relayed that, at her workplace, they prayed together before meals. While this participant felt uncomfortable with this situation, she saw no need to cause a scene and therefore did not speak

up. Others hid their atheism from their family because of their rejections to atheism in general. They saw that it was not “worth it” in this situation.

Cultural differences also play a role in the disclosure of a nonreligious identity. Indeed, anti-atheist prejudice decreases when the perceived number of atheists is high (Gervais, 2011). Thus, it would be assumed that atheists in areas with high amounts of nonreligious individuals would not feel as marginalized as atheists living in areas with low amounts of nonreligious individuals. Zuckerman (2012) interviewed Scandinavian and American atheists to compare and contrast their perspectives on religion. Both groups had belief in God when they were younger, and both lost their religion. However, American atheists emphasized sudden dramatic deconversion stories while Scandinavian atheists expressed a more casual, gradual deconversion (Zuckerman, 2012). Additionally, Scandinavian participants rarely felt pushback about being atheist, while American participants responded that they had significant conflicts surrounding their nonreligious beliefs. Danish and Swedish atheists did not have to give thought to the reasons why they decided to be nonreligious, given that it is a more widely accepted phenomenon in Scandinavia. In contrast, American atheists who were raised religious and left that religion in a culture that is widely religious forced them to stake their nonreligious claims. In places where being nonreligious is not controversial, one may not have to hide their nonbelief. This is the difference between *mild* and *transformative* apostasy (Zuckerman, 2011). Scandinavians who are not religious are mild apostates because there is no tension involved in their disaffiliation, while Americans who are not religious are transformative apostates because of the religious milieu that most of America finds itself and define itself in opposition to the majority (Zuckerman, 2008).

## Religion in the South

One's status in society is "a product of the intersection of biography and social context" (Baker & Smith, 2015, p. 38). This means that, depending on where someone is in the social hierarchy as well as the prevailing cultural norms of an area, positions may be more or less acceptable. For example, being nonreligious in Oregon, a typically nonreligious American state, may come with more issues in the eastern part of the state, which is more religious than the western part of the state (Killen & Silk, 2004). Klug (2017) adds to this argument, stating that context not only widely differed in her sample of nonreligious in Texas, but that "personal environment and experience" influenced her sample's nonreligious beliefs (p. 224). As an example, being openly nonreligious in a family that is not accepting of nonreligion would be more stressful to an atheist in that particular family than an atheist living with a family that is nonreligious. These two contexts—family and social—seem to be the most common areas which atheists are denigrated (Cragun et al., 2012; Hammer et al., 2012; Zimmerman et al., 2015). In other words, one's biography and social milieu influence whether an atheist or nonreligious person is prejudiced against, ignored, tolerated, or accepted. This becomes a matter of *social tension*. If one's family or the community at large tolerates a stigmatized attribute, then there is no incentive to conceal the stigmatized attribute.

Evidence that social tension affects the nonreligious vis-à-vis a particular context can be found in the finding that individual atheists and the nonreligious base their opposition to religion on the religious groups that they have around them and have seemingly persecuted them in the past. Guenther (2014) found this pattern among active atheists in California. The sharpest criticisms of religion came from religions in which the group members were apostates (or those who leave a particular religion; see Streib & Klein, 2013, for a review). Mormons and



evangelical Christians were the most frequent targets of the apostates' ire and not the Catholics who numerically were more abundant in the area. While some respondents believed that all religions were equally problematic, most members believed that Mormons and evangelicals were the worst offenders and other religions, while problematic, were less of an issue. Altogether, atheists and the nonreligious, just like religious individuals, develop their identity over time with their "biography and social context" influencing them along the way (Streib & Hood, 2016).

Concerning atheism and nonreligion, if no stigma is perceived, this may mean that one would tell others about their beliefs. However, in areas with high social tension and intolerance, it may be more advantageous to conceal a stigmatized identity. There will be some that double down on their stigmatized identity in response to this social tension. The following quote comes from an active atheist in South Texas who explains his departure from an indifferent stance regarding religion to a more critical stance:

If there was no discrimination toward atheists, it wouldn't be a big deal to come out. You know, you say that, 'I'm an atheist,' and no one cared, then you wouldn't really feel the need to tell people. But, since there is discrimination, you... kind of get to the mindset where either I can be pushed around by society or come out. Like that... And you find all these other atheists—millions of atheists that are part of all sorts of atheist organizations, it's kind of empowering. And you get tired of being pushed around, and so you just come out about it... (Klug, 2017, p. 277).

Therefore, if stigma is not perceived, nonreligious people may not feel inclined to defend themselves against discrimination and prejudice. Concealment would be necessary only in places where atheism and nonreligion is an issue. In this particular case, one may not even feel the need to "come out" atheist if they do not feel targeted for having atheistic beliefs. Zimmerman et al. (2015) found a similar effect: in situations where religion is a non-issue, coming out as an atheist was not met with hostility in a family setting. Zuckerman (2008) found that his sample of Scandinavian atheists also had relatively relaxed coming out stories in their rather secular social

milieu. Most Scandinavian atheists could not describe the reasons why they became atheists or nonreligious in the first place. They had not given much thought to an identity that did not seem to feel out of place. In effect, there is nothing to protect when nothing is being attacked. The activist atheist in South Texas outlines the realities of atheists living in the South. Since they do feel pressure from the community at large, they are forced into standing their ground or concealing their identity to avoid discrimination. The characteristics of the South make it a prime area to test my thesis that concealment social tension influences the relationship between discrimination and disclosure because of the qualitatively distinct culture steeped in certain religious traditions.

The Southern United States is more religious than other regions of the United States (Chalfant & Heller, 1991). Diener, Tay, and Myers (2011) found that when asked the question “is religion an important part of your daily life?” respondents from Southern states were more likely to respond in the affirmative. In fact, the top twelve states most likely to respond yes to this question were Southern states, with Mississippi having an 88% agreement rate. Pew (2015) conducted the Religious Landscape Survey found that the South is the most religious region of the United States on a variety of standard religious metrics. Forty-one percent of Southerners said they attend church weekly, compared to 35% of the Midwest, 32% of the West, and 30% of the Northeast. Southerners also said that religion is very important in their lives (62%) compared to the importance of religion in all other regions, with the lowest importance being the Northeast (45%); similarly, Southerners responded that they believe that the Bible is the literal word of God (39%) more than any other region of the United States, with the next highest region, the Midwest, following at 29%. The South also had fewer religiously unaffiliated individuals than other regions, with Alabama having the fewest unaffiliated individuals by state population out of

all 50 states (12%). This pattern—Southerners being the most religious, followed by the Midwest, with the West and Northeast bouncing around being the least religious—followed for all religious metrics.

While the South has been diversifying religiously and has always had pockets of Catholics and Jews (Lippy, 2005), the majority of religious Southerners are Evangelical Protestants, usually Baptist or Methodist. Evangelical Protestantism is a form of Protestant Christianity that emphasizes public worship and adding members to the fold. Their fervor explains why the South is more religious than other region of the United States. For example, 81% of Evangelicals find religion to be “very important” (Pew, 2015). Only 61% of Southern Catholics and 62% of Southern Mainline Protestants believe the same. Weekly religious attendance and belief in Biblical literalism follow this same pattern. Another interesting characteristic of the group is that despite its large and increasing visibility in American culture both church leaders and laity believe that they are losing influence (Goodstein, 2006). This fear may not be unfounded. Evangelicals’ importance of religion, weekly attendance, and Biblical literalism have declined since Pew conducted its last Religion Landscape Survey in 2008. Evangelical religious fervor is fading ever so slightly.

Southerners tend to be less tolerant of left-wing groups, including atheists (Ellison & Musack, 1993). However, fundamentalist religious orientation (another characteristic of some Evangelical sects) only plays a small part in this intolerance. Ellison and Musack (1993) discovered that insulation from opposing viewpoints and people who threaten their values leads to persistent intolerance of those who do not fit the mold, religious orientation be damned. They argue that intolerance in the South is brought on partially by cultural homogeneity, where (presumably intolerant) viewpoints are rarely met with resistance. Burdette, Ellison, and Hill

(2005) looked at discrimination against homosexuals based on religion. Once again, conservative Protestants were more likely to be intolerant of homosexuals, especially if they were Southerners. Biblical literalism significantly predicted intolerance against homosexuals; this mediated the effect of church attendance on intolerance of homosexuals. In other words, parishioners who believed that the Bible is the literal word of God were more predicted to be intolerant of homosexuals, whereas church attendance did not predict this effect. One would expect that intolerance of atheists may be affected by the same variables. Because the South has large numbers of conservative Protestants and those who believe the Bible is literally true, it would be expected that discrimination of the nonreligious would be more prevalent in the South. After all, many Bible verses say that only the foolish do not believe in God and that nonbelievers do abominable deeds in their ignorance.

Additionally, Southerners may believe in civil religion as specifically Christian civil religion (Bellah, 1992) with more fervor than non-Southerners, almost to the point of theocracy. According to this ideology, “America will be blessed with peace, prosperity, and power as long as its leaders sustain the Judeo-Christian tradition and implement its moral values” (Ellison & Musack, 1993, p. 393). Those in positions of power in the South feel they must to set their religious beliefs in stone, literally. In 2003, Alabama chief justice Roy Moore placed a monument of the Ten Commandments at the state’s judiciary building’s rotunda; he was removed for unconstitutional endorsement of a religion. However, he was re-elected to his position for standing up for his (and many others’) beliefs. He narrowly lost the US Senate position in Alabama during the 2017 special election, losing to Democrat Doug Jones, another evangelical Protestant (Taylor, 2017). This hegemony and public grandeur (cf. Burdette et al., 2005) involved with religion in the South influences minority religious groups to change their

religious behavior to match the majority's behavior, such as Hindu temples having services every Sunday to match the majority's religious behaviors (Lippy, 2005).

Taken together, (relative) cultural homogeneity, a particularly exclusive understanding of American civil religion with a public component, fundamentalist religious orientation, and Biblical literalism seem to be factors that explain why Southerners are prejudiced against the nonreligious. Klug (2017) has argued that “the percentage of religious people in might be less important” to why the South (or anywhere) is more socially tense for the nonreligious “than the degree of compulsion with which religious norms are enforced or compliance is expected...” (pp. 233-234). The combined factors of Evangelicalism and heightened emphasis on civil religion makes the South particularly religiously potent. However, the sheer numerical advantage that Evangelical Protestants have in the South plays a factor in the cultural homogeneity in the South. These factors make it so that discrimination against atheists and the nonreligious are at best tolerated and at worst encouraged. After all, there is no reason for Southern Evangelicals to tolerate groups who “are viewed as a threat to ‘traditional’ American values” (Burdette et al., 2005, p. 192).

In the heavily evangelical South, nonreligion is not looked upon in the best light and may lead to the active and public admonishment of atheism and nonreligion. Arcaro (2010) surveyed atheists on the Atheist Nexus website and found that 25% of atheists in the “Bible Belt” (which encompasses the Southern United States as well as surrounding areas with high religious activity) felt a strong stigma related to being atheist and 64% felt very stigmatized in their communities. Foust (2009) had Southern respondents who perceived more discrimination more than other participants in her qualitative study, such as a group of Chicago atheists who do not perceive discrimination at all. Not only did Southern atheists perceive that the South was less

hospitable to atheists, other atheists originally from other parts of the country noticed this difference as well. Many atheist Southerners had lost ties with their family and, in a few cases, experienced major discrimination. One particular participant had to move out of the community they lived in because they were getting harassed for being an atheist.

Scheitle and Corcoran (2018) found that atheists in the South perceived more workplace discrimination (42.3%) than atheists in the Midwest (26.6%), Northeast (21.3%), or West (16.7%) from predicted probabilities via logistic regression. Furthermore, atheists in the South were 3.89 times as likely to report at least some workplace (non)religious discrimination than atheists from other regions. Wallace et al. (2014) found that atheists were less likely to receive callbacks and emails based on a resume with nonreligious identification than compared to a control with no religious information in the South. Protestant identification did not lead to fewer callbacks, suggesting that outgroup identification played a role beyond just having (non)religious identification on a resume. Interestingly, a similar study in the Northeast found that atheists were discriminated against, but not to the extent that Muslims were (Wright, Wallace, Bailey, & Hyde, 2013). At the very least, atheists and the nonreligious tend to perceive more discrimination than those in other parts of the country (Hammer et al., 2012).

However, there are gradations of social tension within the South. Mann (2015) relayed evidence of less perceived discrimination with organized atheists in the Research Triangle of North Carolina, a liberal urban area in an otherwise conservative Southern state. Atheists in the Research Triangle also perceived less discrimination (Foust, 2009). Her respondents also saw differences between urban and rural areas and discrimination. Urban areas are quantitatively different vis-à-vis religion. For example, fewer urban Americans believe the Bible is the literal word of God compared to rural Americans (Chalfant & Heller, 1991). This pattern holds in

Southern cities though not to the extent of Northern or Western cities. Since literalism is related to the prejudice of other stigmatized groups (e.g., homosexuals; Burdette et al., 2005), less literalism would predict less prejudice of atheists. Additionally, cities are more likely to be liberal politically (Bishop, 2008). This may influence the number of nonreligious individuals living in a particular area and tolerance for these individuals. Therefore, a place with higher numbers of liberals and moderates and less fundamentalist religious individuals would be less socially tense for the nonreligious. Indeed, when atheism is perceived to be prevalent, prejudice against atheists decreases (Gervais, 2011). Logically, then, a place with higher numbers of identifiable atheists and nonreligious individuals with fewer fundamentalists would feel less threatening to a nonreligious person. Of course, just because one lives in a diverse area does not mean that they will not encounter discrimination and feel stigmatized. Even atheist professors living in New York City can feel looked down upon (Brewster, 2014). Overall, though, nonreligious individuals would have less impetus to manage their identity in places where it is less of an issue.

### **Conclusion and Declaration of Hypotheses**

While the amount of information about the nonreligious is steadily increasing, there is still a dearth of research on concealed nonreligious identity. Furthermore, scales specifically made for the nonreligious are rare (Coleman & Jong, 2018). Given the multifaceted nature of how stigma works with the nonreligious and how social tension affects disclosure of identity, one would expect to find that research has looked at concealment/disclosure as a multifaceted construct. Unfortunately, atheist concealment/disclosure has only been dichotomized in the literature. Hammer et al. (2012) use a dichotomized form of an Outness Inventory originally used

with gays and lesbians (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). To my awareness, this is the only study that has looked at this construct about the nonreligious. I suspect there is more variation in concealment than a concealment/disclosure dichotomy, as Foust (2009) and Garneau (2012) would attest.

Additionally, the social context in the form of regions of the United States (e.g., South) and type of community (e.g., urban) were taken into account in Hammer et al. (2012), it was not looked at in detail. Nonreligion in the South is a topic that has just started getting attention (Foust, 2009; Mann, 2015). More research needs to be done on the strategies that nonreligious individuals use in the South to see if there are unique strategies to reduce the stigma of being nonreligious. Additionally, the reasons why the Southern cultural context makes for an unwelcoming environment for nonreligious individuals needs to be explicated.

Taken altogether, atheists and the nonreligious are more disliked in America than other groups. Because of this, their identity is stigmatized, leading to atheists not wanting to disclose their identity to some. Social tension and context influence the impulse to disclose or conceal. Because of high social tension, atheists and the nonreligious seemingly have more of a need to conceal. Therefore, Southern nonreligious individuals would be more likely to conceal in this context. Thus, the following studies addressed the shortcomings of previous research by creating a scale that assesses concealment/disclosure in nonreligious populations beyond the dichotomy of total concealment and total disclosure. As part of this project, the Concealment of Nonreligious Identity (CNRI) scale was created to assess nonreligious identity concealment and disclosure beyond a dichotomy. Fifteen items looking at differential levels of disclosure and concealment were tested alongside a variety of other measures to determine the scale's validity. Additionally, in-depth interviews examined how living in the South may influence individuals to



conceal or disclose their nonreligious identity to see how social tension affects disclosure/concealment. A process of triangulation was used whereby multiple modes of analysis are implemented to more accurately capture a phenomenon that may not be able to be captured by only one method (Jick, 1979). The scale systematically assessed the concealment/disclosure of atheist/nonreligious identity while the interviews explicated the nuanced ways that participants conceal and disclose their identity and the reasons why they do so. The interviews provide an extra level of validity to the scale, while the scale provides the background for the interview.

First and foremost, the created Concealment of Nonreligious Identity (CNRI) scale should work as intended. That is, the scale should have acceptable reliability and validity to measure the construct at hand. These issues are encapsulated in the first hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* Nonreligious concealed identity systematically varies. The created Concealment of Nonreligious Identity (CNRI) scale should be able to assess this variability.

As a corollary to Hypothesis 1, nonreligious individuals will self-identify differently depending on the setting. Hypothesis 1b dictates that there will be participants who publicly identify as one identity and privately identify as another identity. To test this hypothesis, two sets of demographic information will be presented: one related to how one religiously self-identifies publicly and another related to how one religiously self-identifies privately. There should be differences between public and private identification. More participants will self-identify as an atheist in private settings than public settings.

*Hypothesis 1b:* Nonreligious participants will self-identify differently depending on the setting. Specifically, nonreligious individuals will self-identify as explicitly nonreligious identities more in private settings over public settings.

By previous research, individuals living in areas with high social tension about religion will be more likely to conceal their nonreligious identity than those living in areas with low social tension. The American South is a high-tension area for nonreligious individuals. Therefore, I hypothesize that Southern nonreligious individuals will score higher on the CNRI scale than other regions of the United States.

*Hypothesis 2:* Southern nonreligious individuals will score higher on the CNRI scale than nonreligious individuals from the West and Northeast.

The qualitative portion of my thesis is an exploratory study on the methods of concealing a nonreligious identity and the reasons why an atheist or nonreligious individual may choose to do so. I investigated whether Southern atheists and nonreligious individuals have unique experiences that lead to the concealment of their atheist/nonreligious identity.

## **Overall Method**

To sample a religious minority with high levels of stigma in America, a survey was created and disseminated through the Internet. Additionally, elaborating on the situations in which concealment of nonreligious identity occurs as well as the methods used to conceal must be studied with a more in-depth design than simply survey-based research. Therefore, a mixed-method design incorporating both quantitative survey measures and qualitative semi-structured interviews will be implemented to study concealment of nonreligious identity. See Appendix A for the IRB approval for this study.

Online groups based around atheism and nonreligion were the targets of initial sampling. Atheist and nonreligious organizations such as the Center for Secular Inquiry and the American Humanist Association were contacted to ensure a sample of atheists and nonreligious

individuals. Atheist bloggers, social media personalities and atheist/nonreligious forums were then recruited to obtain a more heterogeneous sample that, in theory, would consist of more nonreligious individuals who conceal their lack of religious belief in public while privately identifying as atheist/nonreligious. For both samples, an anonymous link was sent for all possible members of these groups could participate in the survey. Participants were asked after completing the survey to recommend potential participants who may be interesting in filling out the survey. Appendix B shows the informed consent page used in the survey.

Since social context plays a large role in this study, only American participants aged 18 or older were used in this study. Any non-Americans or those aged 17 or younger who took part in this study were removed before analysis. In order to test the hypothesis that social tension in the South would lead to more concealment of nonreligious identity, Southern nonreligious individuals were more heavily sampled. The survey provided initial evidence of social tension for Southern participants, while the following expanded on the concealment of nonreligious identity and how the concealment was used by Southern nonreligious individuals.

The interview expanded on the ideas that the survey presented. Interviewees were selected based on two criteria: 1) they must be currently living in the South as defined by Pew (2015) and 2) they must exhibit a trait that makes them unique (e.g., they respond that they are a religious, but not spiritual atheist). They were interviewed on their nonreligious identity, their lived experience in the South, concealment/disclosure of their identity, and the future of nonreligion in America. The interview was meant to establish how social tension in the South influenced them to conceal as well as the ways in which they concealed their identity. Appendix C shows the informed consent form sent to the potential interviewees.

## CHAPTER III

### STUDY 1

Participants responded to the Concealment of Nonreligious Identity (CNRI) scale in order to provide initial validation and factor structure. The scale was created in order to provide a reliable, valid measure to assess how concealment plays out in atheist and nonreligious individuals, especially in areas of high social tension. Several measures of stigma were modified for the population at hand in order to gauge how stigmatized participants felt. Religiosity and nonreligiosity measures were included to confirm that the sample was indeed nonreligious. Salience questions were asked to assess how often one's identity is made significant as well as how important one's identity is to their core identity. Finally, a concealment measure and a disclosure measure were used to assess convergent validity with the proposed CNRI scale. The fifteen initial items in the CNRI scale can be seen in Appendix D.

#### **Participants**

A total of 1757 participants took the survey. After removing those participants who did not complete at least 80% of the survey and 185 non-Americans who took the survey (12.8% of the 1414 participants left), 1257 participants were used in further analysis. The average age of the sample was 28.67, which is consistent with previous research being than the average American population (e.g., Kosmin et al., 2009). The gender composition of the sample consisted of 445 males (35.4%), 794 females (63.2%), and 18 other (1.4%). This sample is

unlike previous studies of the nonreligious in that there were more females in the sample than males. Racially, the sample was predominantly White, not-Hispanic (90%), with Black or African American (2.3%), Asian (.9%), American Indian or Native, or Alaska Native (.6%), Two or More Races (2.9%), and Other (2.1%), rounding out the rest. Only 4.2% identified as Hispanic or Latino, with all other racial identities. In terms of education, 1 participant had no high school education (.1%), 12 had some high school education but no diploma (1.0%), 49 graduated high school with a diploma or an equivalent (3.9%), 238 had some college credit (18.9%), 58 had technical or vocational training (4.6%), 119 had an associate's degree (9.5%), 410 had a bachelor's degree (32.6%), 260 had a Master's degree (20.7%), 35 had a professional degree (2.8%), and 75 had a doctoral degree (6.0%). The majority ( $N = 1063$ , 84.6%) of the sample were not currently in school.

Unsurprisingly, 88.5% of the sample claimed to neither be religious or spiritual. However, a sizable number (10.8%) claimed to be more spiritual than religious. Similarly, the vast majority (91%) of the sample claimed to not believe in God, while 7.6% responded "I don't know" and 1.6% saying "yes." The majority of the sample either described their religious belief as "I don't believe in God" (the atheist option; 75.7%) or "I don't know whether God exists, and I don't believe there is any way of finding out" (the agnostic option; 18.9%), leaving 5.4% of the sample holding at least some belief in God. This inconsistency mirrors Bullivant (2008). I additionally asked if my participants were affiliated with any secular organizations. The majority (71.2%) of the sample was not involved in secular organizations; 28.5% were involved in such organizations.

## **Materials**

### **Demographics**

Standard demographic questions were included to determine age, race, education, etc. (Appendix E). Further, religious/nonreligious identification questions were asked pertaining to both participants' public and private self-identification to ensure the target population was indeed sampled. At the end of the survey, demographics questions related to the region of residence were asked to determine which participants were eligible for the secondary interview.

### **Concealment of Nonreligious Identity (CNRI) Scale**

Fifteen items were tested in this study for the Concealment of Nonreligious Identity (CNRI) scale (Appendix D). Eighty-three items were piloted tested in the Spring 2018 semester. Weak items were removed from consideration. Then, subject area experts reviewed these items, leaving only those with high content and face validity. After a rigorous vetting, fifteen items were chosen upon to be tested in this study. Items were created from scales of concealing stigma in other populations (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Schwenk, Davis, & Wimsatt, 2010) qualitative research describing tactics that atheists have used to conceal their identity (Zimmerman et al., 2015); and research on atheist discrimination and their experiences (Gervais, 2014; Gervais et al., 2011; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Examples of items include "I fear that my boss would fire me if they found out about my lack of religious beliefs" and "I can be open with my lack of religious beliefs with anyone where I currently reside" (reverse-scored). Items are on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores on the scale indicate more concealment of identity. "Lack of religious belief" has been chosen as the preferred wording for items because respondents who do not identify specifically

as an atheist will not respond to items about atheism. That is, the items should be inclusive to all those who have no religious beliefs, rather than focusing simply on nonreligious identity.

### **Nonreligious-Nonspiritual Scale**

The Nonreligious-Nonspiritual Scale (Cragun, Hammer, & Nielsen, 2015; Appendix F) is a 17-item measure of religiosity/spirituality measured on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Items 4 and 7 are reverse-coded. Higher scores on this scale indicate higher nonreligiousness and nonspirituality. It has displayed high internal consistency ( $\alpha > .94$ ) and validity with several university samples. An example of a religiosity item is “I would describe myself as a religious person” and an example of a spirituality item is “spirituality is important to me.”

### **Modified Stigma Consciousness Questionnaire**

The original Stigma Consciousness Questionnaire (Pinel, 1999; Appendix G) is a 10-item measure of stigma consciousness measured on a 7-point scale from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) with a midpoint of 3 (*neither agree nor disagree*). Seven items are reverse-coded. Higher scores indicate higher levels of stigma consciousness. The original scale has been validated with gender and sexual orientation (Pinel, 1999) and has been previously modified for atheists specifically (Brewster, Hammer, Sawyer, Eklund, & Palamar, 2016). Items have been modified to study those without religious belief. An example item is “my lack of religious belief does not influence how people act around me” (reverse-coded).

### **Modified Internalized Stigma of Mental Illness Scale**

The Internalized Stigma of Mental Illness scale (Ritsher et al., 2003; Appendix H) is a 29-item measure of internalized stigma with five subscales: Alienation, Stereotype Endorsement, Discrimination Experience, Social Withdrawal, and Stigma Resistance. It is measured on a 4-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate more internalized stigma. The scale has been used to assess internalized stigma in a variety of samples (e.g., Iranians with mental illness; Ghanian, Nojomi, & Jacobsson, 2011). Stigma Resistance will be considered a separate construct, seeing as previous research (e.g., Lysaker, Roe, & Yanos, 2007) has found the subscale to work separate from the rest of the subscales. Items have been modified to study those without religious belief. Four items from the Alienation subscale, five items from the Stereotype Endorsement subscale, the entire Discrimination Experience subscale, five items from the Social Withdrawal subscale, and four items from the Stigma Resistance subscale will be used and modified for this study, leaving 23 viable modified items. The items that are not being used cannot be reworded to capture internalized stigma of the nonreligious appropriately. Example items that are in the modified scale include “I feel out of place in the world because of my lack of religious belief” and “being around people who are religious makes me feel out of place” for the Social Withdrawal subscale.

### **Modified Internalized Homophobia for Gay Chinese Men**

The original Internalized Homophobia for Gay Chinese Men scale (Ren & Hood, 2018; Appendix I) is an 11-item scale looking at internalized homophobia that gay men in China feel. Because there is a culture of honor in China as well as the South (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996), this scale is pertinent to the study at hand regarding its socially- and family-oriented subscales. Its



three factors reflect both individual and social factors as to why they may internalize homophobia: internalized heteronormativity, socially-oriented identity, and family-oriented identity. The scale is on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). One item from the socially-oriented subscale was dropped because of its culturally-sensitive context and one item from the family-oriented subscale was dropped because it would not work for the given population, even reworded. Thus, six items from this scale were used.

### **Moral Identity Scale – Internalization Subscale**

The internalization subscale of the Moral Identity Scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Appendix J) consists of five items with a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate greater centrality with one's moral identity. To make nonreligion the "moral identity" that participants think of, participants will be instructed to "think about the following items regarding your nonreligious beliefs." Two items are reverse-scored. An example of an item is "Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am."

### **Self-Concealment Scale**

The Self-Concealment Scale (Larson & Chastain, 1990; Appendix K) consists of ten items about three interrelated tendencies of concealment: keeping things to oneself, possessing a secret that is upsetting, and feeling anxious about disclosing the concealed personal information. Higher scores indicate a higher amount of self-concealment. The scale is rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). This scale was used to assess whether

individuals will conceal things in general and if this is related to concealing their atheist/nonreligious identity.

### **Religious Schema Scale**

The Religious Schema Scale (Streib, Hood, & Klein, 2010; Appendix L) is a 15-item scale that measures religious styles. Scale item scores range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate higher agreement with a given item. The scale has three factors: truth of text and teachings; fairness, tolerance, and rational choice; and xenosophia and interreligious dialogue. Truth of text and teachings corresponds to the mythic-literal faith of Fowler's faith stage model (Stage 2) and the instrumental-reciprocal religious style (Streib et al., 2010). Fairness, tolerance, and rational choice corresponds to Fowler's individuative-reflective faith (Stage 4) and the individuative-systemic religious style (Streib et al., 2010). Finally, xenosophia and interreligious dialogue correspond to Fowler's conjunctive faith (Stage 5) and the dialogical religious style (Streib et al., 2010). The fairness, tolerance, and rational choice and xenosophia and interreligious dialogue subscales were used to see if nonreligious individuals have a religious style, as the truth in text and teachings subscale should not work well with nonreligious individuals who presumably do not read religious holy books.

### **Outness Scale**

An "outness" (i.e., disclosure) scale was created from two outness inventories from Button (2004) and Hammer et al. (2012). The purported scale by Button (2004) original scale was used with gays and lesbians. It consists of six items regarding people (e.g., boss) that one could disclose their identity to immediate family (i.e., mother, father, siblings), extended family

(i.e., aunts, uncles, cousins), physician, coworkers, immediate boss/advisor, and neighbors. “Physician” has been replaced with “counselor” in this study as an appropriate analogue of a profession where disclosure of nonreligious identity would be appropriate. Hammer et al. (2012) had ten dichotomized items based on the Outness Inventory by Mohr and Fassinger (2000). Four of these items based on people one can disclose to (partner, old religious friends, new religious friends, and strangers) were used in the scale for a total of ten items in this outness scale. Both scales have been modified to work with nonreligious individuals. Appendix M shows this measure. This scale will be on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

### **Detroit Area Survey (DAS) Discrimination Scale**

The Detroit Area Survey (DAS) Discrimination Scale (Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997; Appendix N) consists of nine items referring to discrimination against a target group. The scale assumes some disclosure has occurred regarding attribute that is discriminated. It has validated in a variety of racial and ethnic groups such as African-Americans (Williams et al., 1997) and Latinos (Perez, Sribney, & Rodríguez, 2009). The scale is measured on a 6-point scale ranging from 5 (*Almost every day*) to 0 (*Never*). Higher scores indicate more prevalence of the discriminatory action. To properly get the scale to assess nonreligion, participants were prompted with “would you say that this has happened to you regarding your nonreligious identity...?”

### **Saliency Measure**

Three items used by Quinn et al. (2014) to study saliency in populations with concealable stigmatized identities (CSIs) are being used here (Appendix O). The items are measured on a 7-

point scale from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*many times each day*). Higher scores indicate more prevalence of a salient identity. Items have been modified to reflect the nonreligious population. The items are “how often do you think about your lack of religious belief?” “I spend a lot of time thinking about my lack of religious belief,” and “My lack of religious beliefs crosses my mind for no reason.” These three items were averaged together.

## **Procedure**

The survey was sent through an anonymous link via Qualtrics. Participants were recruited from several online mediums. Initial sampling included contacting public atheist personalities with influence in their respective communities, who then disseminated the anonymous link through their online social media. Snowball sampling was used to obtain participants who conceal their identity and are stigmatized. Snowball sampling allows researchers to tap into populations that normally are not adequately sampled with normal methods (Creswell, 2013). Moreover, atheist groups such as the Center for Secular Inquiry and social media related to atheism and nonreligion (e.g., Reddit) were used to recruit participants in the process of targeted sampling. Participants who completed the survey were then asked to recommend people they thought would be interested in taking the survey in the process of snowball sampling. Participants sent information on up to five potential survey respondents. Participants were incentivized to participate in the survey with a random drawing to win one of three \$25 Amazon gift cards. All participants who complete the survey to at least 80% completed were allowed to opt into a lottery to win one of three \$25 Amazon gift cards.

Scales and scale items were presented in a randomized order to reduce order effects. At the end of the survey, the second demographic section commenced. Questions about the region

of the United States were used to determine which participants are eligible to take part in the exploratory interview. Only individuals who are currently living in the South according to Pew (2015) specifications at the time of taking the survey were eligible to become an interview participant. Finally, participants could recommend up to five additional respondents to take the survey.

## **Results**

Table 1 presents a table of the difference between participants' public and private identification of nonreligious belief. Frequencies and percentages of both public and private identity are presented, with the four "nonreligious" categories presented by themselves and "other" being all religious/spiritual identities collapsed into one variable on account of each group having a small sample size. Negative difference scores and percentages in the table refer to identities that gained adherents going from public to private settings; positive difference scores and percentages refer to lost adherents from public to private settings. The difference between the total and percent change in atheism from public to private identification (330; 26.25%) is the same as the total and percent change between all other identities from public to private. That is, exactly 330 participants (26.25% of all participants) identified as something other than an atheist in the public setting but did identify as atheist in the private setting. This is the same as the number of participants who changed their identity between public and private settings for agnosticism, humanism, nothing in particular, and other. This means that 330 participants identified as something other than atheism in the public condition but endorsed an atheist identity in private settings. Therefore, nonreligious individuals use identity labels to conceal their true beliefs, specifically to conceal an atheist identity. Therefore, there is initial evidence for

Hypothesis 1b. Thus, atheists are concealing their identity in public settings but identifying as an atheist in private settings.

Table 1 Identity Difference Scores Between Public and Private Settings

	Public Identity Frequency	Public Identity Percent	Private Identity Frequency	Private Identity Percent	Total Identity Difference	Percentage Identity Difference
Atheism	614	48.8	944	75.1	-330	-26.25%
Agnosticism	133	10.6	113	9.0	20	1.59%
Humanism	130	10.3	80	6.4	50	3.98%
Nothing in particular	233	18.5	29	2.3	204	16.23%
Other	147	11.7	91	7.2	56	4.46%
Total	1257	100.0	1257	100.0	0	0.00%

The Concealment of Nonreligious Identity (CNRI) scale was tested to give initial validation estimates. Fifteen items were tested using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Principal components analysis (PCA) was used to establish what factors, if any, existed for the CNRI scale. After going through a process of testing items and removing those that either had low communalities or high crossloadings with other factors (Larose & Larose, 2015), an eight-item scale was established (see Table 2 for scale items, descriptive statistics, and subscale scores). The eight-item CRNI scale was internally consistent ( $\alpha = .84$ ), as were its two subscales: Interpersonal and Institutional concealment ( $\alpha_{\text{Interpersonal}} = .87$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{Institutional}} = .78$ ).

Table 2 Concealment of Nonreligious Identity Scale Item Means and SDs

		( <i>n</i> =1241) <sup>^</sup>	
<b>Interpersonal Items</b>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	I have told a few people about my lack of religious beliefs, but I don't feel comfortable telling any more than I already have.	3.06	1.89
2	I keep control over who knows about my lack of religious beliefs.	4.12	2.05
3	I don't talk about religious issues with strangers in fear that I might be outed as a person with no religious beliefs.	3.20	1.91
4	I feel like telling any more people about my lack of religious beliefs would cause those who I do not want to tell to find out through others.	3.27	1.88
5	Being an open nonbeliever would make it hard for me to be accepted at social events.	3.39	1.82
<b>Interpersonal Subscale Score</b>		<b>3.41</b>	<b>1.55</b>
<b>Institutional Items</b>			
6	The region I live in is accepting of people with no religious beliefs.*	4.40	2.24
7	I live in a place with a diversity of worldviews where even my lack of religious beliefs is tolerated.*	3.72	2.16
8	I could run for office in my local district and have a decent chance of winning even knowing that I don't have religious beliefs.*	5.36	1.94
<b>Institutional Subscale Score</b>		<b>4.50</b>	<b>1.78</b>
<b>Total Scale Score</b>		<b>3.82</b>	<b>1.36</b>

\* Reverse coded items.

<sup>^</sup> Sample sizes are for scales using listwise deletion; participants were not required to answer the scale questions.

PCA was run on the 8-item Concealment of Nonreligious Identity (CNRI) scale that measured the 1241 participants' identity concealment. Table 3 shows the results of this analysis. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was .858, which is "meritorious" according to Hutcheson and Sofroniou (1999). Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ( $p < .001$ ), indicating that factor analysis would prove useful for the data at hand. PCA revealed two eigenvalues greater than one (Factor 1 = 3.825; Factor 2 = 1.615). These

factors explained 47.94% and 20.19% of the variance, respectively. Altogether, a two-factor solution explained 68.13% of the total variance in scores. A scree plot (Cattell, 1966) indicated two factors should be retained. Eigenvalues over one mean that factors that explain more of the variance in responses to items than a single item would exist in the data (Cattell, 1978). A Direct Oblimin oblique rotation was employed to assist interpretation as to which items corresponded to which factors. Oblique rotations are used when items between factors are likely to correlate with each other, and thus share variance (DeVellis, 2016). The factor correlation of .34 shown in Table 3 is indicative of the need to employ oblique rotations.

The rotation indicated a two-factor structure, as represented by the Pattern and Structure Matrix in Table 3. Based on the content of the items with each factor, the two factors are interpersonal concealment and institutional concealment, respectively. Interpersonal concealment refers to concealing one's identity to an individual in everyday contexts, while institutional concealment refers to concealing one's identity in the larger context, such as the region where one lives. The final scale, the best single item for each subscale, and instructions for scoring the CNRI scale can be found in Appendix P.



Table 3 Factor Analysis† of Concealment of Nonreligious Identity Scale

Interpersonal Concealment Items	Communalities	Pattern Matrix		Structure Matrix	
		Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 1	Factor 2
1 I have told a few people about my lack of religious beliefs, but I don't feel comfortable telling any more than I already have.	.738	.866	-.021	.859	.275
2 I keep control over who knows about my lack of religious beliefs.	.675	.846	-.081	.818	.208
3 I feel like telling any more people about my lack of religious beliefs would cause those who I do not want to tell to find out through others.	.659	.815	-.009	.812	.269
4 I don't talk about religious issues with strangers in fear that I might be outed as a person with no religious beliefs.	.654	.813	-.011	.809	.266
5 Being an open nonbeliever would make it hard for me to be accepted at social events.	.620	.676	.234	.756	.456
<b>Institutional Concealment Items</b>					
6 The region I live in is accepting of people with no religious beliefs.*	.761	-.065	.892	.240	.870
7 I live in a place with a diversity of worldviews where even my lack of religious beliefs is tolerated.*	.711	.052	.824	.334	.842
8 I could run for office in my local district and have a decent chance of winning even knowing that I don't have religious beliefs.*	.633	.024	.787	.293	.795
KMO Sampling Adequacy test					0.858
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity					4193.32 ***
Factor Correlation					0.341
		Eigenvalue	% of variance		
	Factor 1	3.825	47.939		
	Factor 2	1.615	20.191		

\* Reverse coded items.

† Principal Axis Factoring with Direct Oblimin rotation

Table 4 Descriptive Statistics of Scales

Scale	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	$\alpha$
Concealment of Nonreligious Identity - Total Scale	1241	3.82	1.36	1	7	.84
Concealment of Nonreligious Identity - Interpersonal Subscale	1245	3.41	1.55	1	7	.87
Concealment of Nonreligious Identity - Institutional Subscale	1249	4.50	1.78	1	7	.79
Nonreligious-Nonspiritual Scale - Religion Subscale	1232	1.68	0.28	1	3.38	.43
Nonreligious-Nonspiritual Scale - Spirituality Subscale	1242	1.57	0.69	1	5	.91
Modified Stigma Consciousness Scale	1238	4.74	0.89	1.9	7	.75
Modified Internalized Stigma of Mental Illness Scale - Alienation Subscale	1245	1.60	0.40	1	3.75	.41
Modified Internalized Stigma of Mental Illness Scale - Stereotype Endorsement	1243	1.35	0.29	1	3.4	.28
Modified Internalized Stigma of Mental Illness Scale - Discrimination Experience	1244	1.92	0.61	1	4	.82
Modified Internalized Stigma of Mental Illness Scale - Social Withdrawal	1246	2.00	0.58	1	4	.75
Modified Internalized Stigma of Mental Illness Scale - Stigma Resistance	1245	1.41	0.39	1	4	.39
Modified Internalized Homophobia Scale for Chinese Gay Men	1241	1.88	0.65	1	4.17	.69
Moral Identity Scale - Internalization Subscale	1232	3.72	0.79	1	5	.85
Self-Concealment Scale	1236	2.65	0.84	1	5	.87
Openness Scale	1202	4.65	1.04	1	7	.81
Detroit Area Study Discrimination Scale	1228	4.91	0.87	1	6	.90
Salience Measure	1251	4.05	1.53	1	7	.81
Religious Schema Scale - Fairness, Tolerance, and Rational Choice	1245	4.39	0.40	3	5	.56
Religious Schema Scale - Xenosophia	1244	3.14	0.63	1	5	.59

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for all scales in the study, including the total scores for the CNRI scale and the two subscales, interpersonal and institutional concealment. Reliabilities for the CNRI scale and its subscales are at acceptable levels.

Correlations (shown in Table 5 for the most pertinent scales) indicate that scales measuring stigma, such as the Modified Stigma Consciousness Scale, significantly correlated positively with the total CNRI scale and both subscales ( $r_{total} = .41$ ;  $r_{Interpersonal} = .36$ ;  $r_{Institutional} = .36$ ; all  $ps < .001$ ). The Alienation, Discrimination, and Withdrawal subscales of the Modified Internalized Stigma of Mental Illness Scale were also positively correlated with the CNRI scale. While small, The Openness measure negative correlated with the CNRI total scale and its subscales ( $r_{total} = -.58$ ;  $r_{Interpersonal} = -.27$ ;  $r_{Institutional} = -.66$ ; all  $ps < .001$ ). Finally, Salience was positively correlated with all the CNRI total scale and both subscales. Altogether, these correlations show convergent validity for the CNRI scale.

Table 5 Correlations Between CNRI Total Scale and Subscales with Scales for Convergent Validity

	Stigma Consciousness	ISMI - Alienation Subscale	ISMI - Discrimination Subscale	ISMI - Withdrawal Subscale	Openness Scale	Salience Measure
Total Scale	.44***	.45***	.51***	.62***	-.58***	.23***
Interpersonal Subscale	.38***	.46***	.45***	.65***	-.66***	.25***
Institutional Subscale	.36***	.28***	.40***	.35***	-.27***	.13***

\*\*\*<.001 \*\*<.01 ISMI = Internalization of Stigma of Mental Illness Scale.

Hypothesis 2 was tested by comparing total mean scores on the CNRI scale between the four regions of the United States as used by Pew (2015): Northeast, Midwest, South, and West. Southern respondents were predicted to score higher on the scale in comparison to all other regions. No further predictions were made based on region. A one-way ANOVA showed that region did affect mean scores on the total CNRI scale,  $F(3, 1232) = 54.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .117$ . A Tukey's honest significant difference (HSD) post-hoc analysis found each region was

significantly different to the other regions of the US. As predicted, the South ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) scored the highest on the CNRI scale, followed by the Midwest ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ), West ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ), and Northeast ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ), in that order. Therefore, preliminary results suggest that the CNRI scale has predictive validity.

## CHAPTER IV

### STUDY 2

As a follow up to the construction and initial validation of the scale, a qualitative study was conducted to elaborate on how concealment manifests in the lived experience of nonreligious individuals living in areas of high social tension. Participants were recruited from the Southern United States given its unique religious makeup in comparison to the rest of the United States. A grounded theory approach was chosen to elaborate on the lived experiences of nonreligious individuals. Grounded theory involves generating theory out of interaction with interviewees and comparing similar experiences (Creswell, 2013). There has been scant research on the concept of concealment in the atheist/nonreligious context; therefore, grounded theory's theory-generating approach is appropriate for the topic at hand. Semi-structured interviews were used to capture nuanced information to provide content validity to the CNRI scale. Also, the interviews were used to assess stigma management strategies as purported by Button (2004) and how they manifested in the nonreligious. Moreover, using a grounded theory approach, comparisons were made between the nonreligious and the LGBTQ community in how identity is navigated in areas of high social tension.

#### **Participants**

Concurrent with the survey, participants who took the omnibus survey were asked if they wanted to participate in a follow-up interview about their nonreligious identities. Participants for

interviewing were vetted through two criteria. First, the interviewees had to be currently living in the South as defined by Pew (2015). Second, they must have exhibited a trait that makes them unique from the average respondent of the survey. Interviews were then set up either in person or online through the video conferencing software Zoom. Thirty-eight potential interviewees were contacted through their emails. A total of 13 people agreed to participate in an interview. Table 6 presents the aliases used for the participants in these interviews as well as pertinent residency and religious information.

Table 6 Aliases, Residency and Religious Information for Interview Participants

Name of Participant	State of Current Residence	Native Southerner?	Religious Context
Angie	Virginia	No	Evangelical
Claire	Texas	Yes	Evangelical
Cory	Oklahoma	No	Evangelical
Danielle	Louisiana	No	Catholic
Franklin	Tennessee	No	Evangelical
Heather	Florida	Yes	Catholic
Helen	Florida	No	Evangelical
Jade	Texas	Yes	Evangelical
Kevin	Texas	No	Evangelical
Marie	Louisiana	Yes	Catholic
Michelle	Virginia	Yes	Evangelical
Simone	Louisiana	No	Catholic
Tyson	Tennessee	Yes	Catholic

*Note.* Names presented are aliases for the purposes of participant confidentiality and anonymity.

## Materials and Procedure

Interviews were set up with survey participants who agreed to be interviewed either in person or through Zoom, a video conference software. Informed consent forms were sent to potential interviewees through personal emails to inform participants what would be entailed in the interview. If they expressed interest in participating, participants were either met in person or

were sent an invitation from Zoom, where full consent was verbally obtained. The interview was semi-structured and consisted of four parts: demographics, nonreligion in the South, concealed/disclosed identity, and the future of nonreligion. Appendix Q shows the full list of questions asked in the interview and the prompts for each section of the interview.

Grounded theory is my underlying methodology, but my analysis is phenomenological. This means that I am generating theory from the data, but phenomenological analysis allows me to elucidate on the concept of discussion (“concealment of nonreligious identity”), informing my theory-building in the process (Creswell, 2013).

Thirteen participants agreed to participate in the interview and were contacted. Interviews ranged in length from 35 minutes to 2 hours and 5 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed into Word for a physical record. Participants were also given aliases to protect their anonymity and confidentiality. After transcribing interviews, coding commenced using Nvivo 12 software exploring the natural themes of concealment, disclosure, and social tension.

## **Results**

I am going to focus my analysis on stigma management strategies used by my interviewees, especially the three categories purported by Button (2004): counterfeiting, avoidance, and integration (i.e., selective disclosure). Counterfeiting was endorsed by the majority of the interviewees. One example of counterfeiting is labeling oneself with a different identity than one believes; that is, one’s public identity is different than one’s private identity. Tyson, a native Southerner, would tell coworkers and strangers that he is Catholic even when he self-identifies as apatheist, which he defines as “I don’t know [if a higher power exists], I know that there is no way of knowing, and therefore I do not care [if a higher power exists].” Later in

the interview, Tyson relayed that he goes to church with his Catholic girlfriend who is aware of his nonreligious beliefs. However, it seemed as though he does this to please his girlfriend and not to get anything out of the sermons. Simone publicly identified as nondenominational Christian but privately saw herself as nothing in particular religiously. She contended that the closest nonreligious identifier that matched her beliefs was atheist. Another strategy of concealment that several participants used was going along with the behaviors of the religious. Kevin, who has lived multiple parts of the country but now lives in the South, relayed a story about praying before meals with his ex-girlfriend's family. He had never seen it happen before but wanted to be their respectful of their beliefs. A more poignant example came from Michelle, a native Southerner who went to a religious school as a lesbian:

Oh gosh. Because we had to take a Bible class every year or whatever, so they asked us about our testimony and our personal experience. We went to a church service every week in school. We had to write about how it increased our faith. And I was really good at BS-ing stuff about it because I didn't care and I hated it sometimes. I'd write about how horrible homosexuality is and how abortion is like – I don't know how I feel about that one just yet – but I mean I just went along with what everybody else is supposed to say, because I had to. It was just what you did.

Several participants admitted to going to religious services. Simone currently attends Catholic services on a weekly basis; however, she does not participate in some of the rituals such as Communion because her fellow churchgoers know she is not Catholic. Of course, they are unaware of the fact that she is not religious at all. However, the interviewees who admitted to going to church did not consider this behavior as concealing their true beliefs. Claire said she goes to church when invited but does not go “for the purpose of concealing [her] atheism.” It is not a “high-pressure situation” like the time she was asked to pray with her boss. At church, she is a guest and it is not her place to say anything about the service. At work, however, she saw her boss compelling her to pray as going too far. For most participants, going to church was not a



concealment strategy. Acting out in a church would be less “disrespecting their religion” as it was disrespecting the individuals that invited them in the first place, according to Franklin.

However, there is another layer to the use of counterfeiting: many participants indicated that they would tell others about their beliefs if they ever were asked. These participants also assumed that the chances of them being asked about their religious beliefs would be rare. Simone called this practice “no ask, no tell.” This is how several participants described themselves in theory. In practice, interviewees tried their hardest not to be put in situations where they might have to bring up their beliefs.

Avoidance was also a multifaceted concept in reality. Jade, who is the vice-president of a secular group in Texas, does not talk about the explicit nonreligious topics that her group discusses. She instead focused on the skeptical side of the group when it is brought up. Marie will “refuse to answer or change the subject” if religious topics are brought up. Angie even has two Facebook accounts, one with her personal information and another for her business information. Claire kept her online persona and real-life persona separate as well. These examples describe active avoidance, where participants acted in ways to avoid topics where their nonreligion would be brought up. In addition to this, interviewees were much more likely to use passive avoidance as a tactic. Passive avoidance is simply allowing others to act on their own without doing anything that may draw suspicion from others. When religious others bring up their beliefs, many interviewees simply stayed quiet and listened. When they heard opinions about religion being unequivocally good or nonreligion being unequivocally bad, they disagreed; however, most participants let those remarks slide. This was because it was easier not to confront others about their beliefs. An example of this passive form of avoidance could be seen in Danielle’s answer to the question:

...My mom goes on mission trips to other countries like Romania...when she brings up things like that; I just try to you know go, “oh, be safe. Traveling’s good.” I try not to engage in what exactly she’s doing and why.

The integration tactic was used by different interviewees as well. Participants were selective as to who they told about their beliefs. Several interviewees said that they were open to telling anyone their atheism if asked but would not express their beliefs without prompting. Danielle responded that “it’s not something I would just announce about myself.” Heather, a native Southerner who has lived in several parts of the United States, put it this way: “I’m not going to shy away from [telling others about my beliefs] necessarily, but you know I’m not just going around yelling that I’m an atheist either...” Marie said that she “doesn’t have to tell everybody” that she is an atheist. Helen does not “go around saying, ‘hey I’m an atheist, nice to meet you.’” This means that they can go throughout their life and not have to disclose their beliefs. This can be compared to “passing” as religious, as the assumption of Americans is that one is religious. Angie relayed that “everybody assumes you’re Christian unless you say otherwise.” Participants avoided situations that would lead to religious topics and the possibility of disclosing their beliefs, leading to a “no ask, no tell” mantra.

Another form of this selective disclosure is that some participants would describe themselves as nonreligious or agnostic instead of their preferred descriptor, atheist. Kevin used the label “nonreligious” when talking to distant others about his religious beliefs. Franklin used the agnostic label when trying to get a job with a small company. Michelle personally identifies as agnostic but calls herself nonreligious with people she believes are religious. This matches what Armstrong (2017) found. Her sample distanced themselves from the atheist label, even if they personally used the label to describe themselves. This is a mild form of counterfeiting as well. Where participants like Simone publicly identify as Christian in order to have job security,

participants like Kevin use a less offensive label in order to not make others uncomfortable and to avoid possible confrontation. Thus, which tactic gets used can depend on the immediate context.

Every participant also selectively disclosed their beliefs to at least one person. Cory, a professor at a university, told his students about his atheism; however, he has not told his family, even know he is aware that his beliefs and his family's beliefs do not match. Marie told only "people of no consequence" or who "have a similar non-religious stance" about her nonreligion. Several participants told their parents, such as Kevin, who says that "they're meant to be trusted" with their beliefs. Many participants told friends and significant others for similar reasons. Tyson told his girlfriend because they are "really close" and "should be able to share [beliefs]" with each other, even if they disagree with each other. Michelle and Jade, the youngest participants in the sample, told coworkers of similar age about their beliefs. For both cases, the experience was nonchalant, with the topic coming up offhand in conversation; reactions to the revealed nonreligion was muted. Altogether, interviewees disclosed their beliefs to people they felt they could trust with their identity and who would accept their identity. After all, people want to be accepted for who are they are by those they trust.

Other times, however, this "coming out" experience did not lead to good consequences, as Zimmerman et al. (2015) showed. For example, Jade told one of her friends in middle school that she was an atheist and was told that she was going to hell. Jade emphasizes that they "were" friends. It is presumed that she is no longer friends with this individual because she told this person about her lack of religious belief. Jade also told an older coworker about her lack of religious belief. This co-worker did not react positively as the younger coworkers did. Relations are now awkward between Jade and this co-worker. Michelle has lost friends because of her

agnosticism as well. Additionally, her relationship with her parents has been strained because of her agnosticism. Marie's husband knows about her nonreligious belief but refuses to talk about it with her.

Every participant used at least one of the stigma management strategies purported by Button (2004). Their reasons for doing so usually stemmed from their interactions with others in social situations. For example, in the workplace, concealing their beliefs led to beneficial outcomes. Franklin once told a prospective employer he was agnostic instead of atheist to land a position at a job. Simone conceals to keep her job as a teacher at a Catholic school. Angie and Danielle both have dealt with religious clients and subsequently avoided talking about their beliefs to keep these clients happy. In all these cases, disclosing their nonreligious identity may cause others to feel uncomfortable at best and could lead to loss of employment at worst. Jade, for example, told another coworker about her true beliefs; now, interactions are awkward between them. Claire, on the flip side, lost her job at a rural school because of her professed nonreligion.

Many participants managed their nonreligious identities for family members as well. Franklin does not want to cause trouble for his daughter, so in situations that involve her, he does not disclose his true beliefs. Marie is in a similar situation and puts it this way: "I don't have to just deal with my own atheism, I have to deal with the religious beliefs of my children as well." These findings are consistent with nonbeliever parents in the Bible Belt (McClure, 2017). Any issues that others may have with an atheist transfer to their children. To avoid causing issues for their children, these nonreligious parents conceal their identity. This relationship works in the opposite as well. Michelle, who was still living with her parents at the time of the interview, was afraid that her parents would face repercussions for allowing her—a lesbian and a nonreligious

person—to continue to live in their house while she attends community college. Her mother works at a religious school, so the situation is made even more pertinent.

Another reason why interviewees concealed their beliefs was to avoid making others feel uncomfortable or disappointed. Marie’s boss wanted to be her Facebook friend; however, he is religious and she is not. Her Facebook feed reflected her beliefs, and Marie was afraid that the cordial relationship she has with her boss would end if he found out she is an atheist, so she refused to accept any request of online friendship with her boss. Angie did not want to cause trouble for others by disclosing her beliefs, while Simone argued that people are “happier not knowing” about her nonreligious beliefs. Some interviewees would be fine telling others about their beliefs but knew better than to try to talk about to just anyone about their beliefs. Heather puts it succinctly: “why talk about [beliefs] if you don’t need to if it’s going to be uncomfortable?” Franklin gave a flat dismissal to any idea that he conceals his beliefs, but when asked to elaborate, did make exceptions for people who are “set in their ways” religiously. He argued that “if somebody’s not going to listen to you, why talk to them?” He also made an exception for situations in which “there is some short-term need to get along” with religious others, usually in situations involving his daughter. Along these same lines, Heather argued that telling others about her religious nonbelief could be construed as confrontational and could make others uncomfortable. Therefore, she avoids confrontation but does not avoid religious topics when they come up.

A few interviewees were afraid that they would be discriminated against if others knew about their beliefs. Tyson repeatedly mentioned discrimination, such as a coworker saying that they could be friends with an atheist. This was not directed toward Tyson, but he took it as a sign to keep his beliefs to himself: “By many people’s definitions, that’s me.” Simone had a more

immediate understanding that she would lose her job as a science teacher at a Catholic school in Louisiana. Along these same lines, she is afraid of adorning her vehicle with atheist stickers for fear someone would want to vandalize her vehicle in retaliation.

Some interviewees had firsthand experience of discrimination. Marie's son was bullied for his atheism, so discrimination affected her and seemed to influence her cynical outlook toward the religious. Claire had lost a teaching position in Texas, something that she attributed to her nonreligious belief that she disclosed against her will. She has also been forced to pray with a principal she used to work with in Oklahoma. Therefore, Claire's suspicions about physical harm coming to her or someone she knows because of her atheism seems justified. For her, "the concern is that if you talk about it anywhere in your town that people will learn" and when they find out, they will not react well.

Overall, the American South does seem to be qualitatively distinct from other parts of the country, being the highly religious area that it is. Kevin, who has lived in several parts of the United States including the "fringes of the Bible Belt" before settling in Texas, described religion as "very deeply ingrained in every aspect of people's lives." Many interviewees mentioned the fact that one of the first questions one is asked when conversing in the South is a variation of "what church do you go to?" Some interviewees noted that other parts of the country did not have this quality. Jade, for example, noticed that Colorado did not have "a church on every corner." Angie, in contrast, grew up in rural Oregon that she noted "a church on every corner" in that context. Cory grew up in a remote corner of Montana. When he moved to the South, he noticed that Southern religion was more public in nature:

When I first moved to Oklahoma...that's when I really noticed for the first time, the first question people ask you when they find out that you're new is what your name is and the second question is where you go to church.

In terms of the Evangelicals that are down here it's frustrating because Oklahoma is so politically driven by this religious zealotry that they want the Ten Commandments in school, they want it on the courthouse steps. ... We have big three skyscrapers in downtown Oklahoma City, and during Christmas they all light up their windows and sign a cross for all of December and January and it used to piss me off when I'd drive by it. Now I'm just kind of like, fuck, Oklahoma.

Helen, originally from Connecticut, also describes this difference: "I know a lot of people that went to church, but they didn't talk about it the rest of the week. You know it was something that was a Sunday thing..." Religion's public appearance in the South gave a clear indication to these participants that they were a clear minority. Their concealment habits seem to be influenced by this fact.

Researchers looking at nonreligion should take into account the social context in which one is researching (Streib & Klein, 2013). Nonreligious individuals in the South understood themselves vis-à-vis the majority religious sect in which they found themselves. For some, it was the Catholic Church in which they found themselves in conflict. For others, it was evangelical Protestantism. In both cases, the public character of religious life in the South made it difficult for nonreligious individuals to live comfortably.

However, some participants argued that other parts of the country were just as troublesome as the South. Franklin, a 49-year-old who lived in rural Wisconsin at one point his life, said that he has "no desire to go back to that environment." He made the argument that the rural South and rural Wisconsin would be similarly difficult for him to live in, given that rural areas do not have nonreligious people in them and he would be "excluded" from social life. Heather noted that living in Florida allowed her to express her nonreligious beliefs more freely than when she was growing up in rural Arkansas. Angie saw the community she grew up in rural Oregon to be just as religious as the community that she lives in now. Notice that all these experiences were in rural areas of the country. Being nonreligious in an area where the majority

is religious, no matter how many people constitute the majority, could produce the same effect as being in the South with its public religiosity.

What they all could agree on, however, was that being nonreligious in the South came with difficulties or would come with difficulties if the wrong people found out. Marie described herself as being “constantly on guard” and Kevin described it as “tiptoeing on hot coals” when asked to describe what it was like to be nonreligious in the South. Michelle described living in the South as a nonreligious person as “lonely,” especially in the South where “there is nothing to do” but “go to church, hang out with your church friends...”. Angie describes her area of the South as “a mixed bag” where some people do not care about her atheism, but others are against it. However, she adds the caveat that the people who do not care about her atheism are “generally not born and raised here...in the Bible Belt.”

Kevin concealed his beliefs to avoid “sabotaging or damaging existing relationships.” In a sense, this is the overarching theme as to why my participants concealed their beliefs: they did not want to face social repercussions for believing unlike many of the community members that were in regular contact. Overall, the nonreligious sampled in these interviews believed that being nonreligious is more tied to their beliefs rather than through the prism of identity. Franklin may have said it best: “I have many beliefs about religion, I just don’t believe in God.” Every interviewee expressed the belief that they were skeptical people at heart. However, throughout these interviews, another pattern emerged: the interviewees were defining themselves vis-à-vis the community (and its culture) at large. When asked if her nonreligious identity is important to her, Marie responded by saying that it was “important enough” that she does not “actively seek to go to a church meeting.” Here she is explicating her identity in comparison to the community at large, which is highly churchgoing. When asked if her nonreligious identity was important to



her, Claire responded that her identity is made more important because of the culture surrounding her in a small Texas town. Because her lack of religious belief is an extreme minority (and the previously mentioned instance where she lost her job because of her lack of religious beliefs), the fact that she is nonreligious is made more salient.

There was an explicit distinction that the respondents made between belief and identity. Identity was downplayed while belief was emphasized. Heather differentiated between her beliefs, which were important to her, and the label which did not hold importance to her. It did not matter what the beliefs were labeled as if the beliefs were the more important part of her identity. Angie made similar distinctions. She would “try not to use labels” when talking about her beliefs and simply explain her belief system instead. The label is irrelevant. The lack of a belief cannot be a central part of one’s identity to my participants. However, it is always salient in a high-tension society. Silver (2013) indicated that nonreligious individuals disagree on what identifications mean but do agree regarding belief terms. Zuckerman and Bernlinerblau (2014) also argued that atheists would open up about belief more than identity or the labels they use to describe themselves. Most nonreligious individuals are indifferent about their belief; however, because of being in a region with high social tension, Southern atheists and nonreligious individuals need to have identities to define themselves about religious others clearly. They are “atheists in *orientation*, but not in self-designation” (Zuckerman & Bernlinerblau, 2014, p. 53; emphasis in original).

However, this contradicts how atheist and the nonreligious engage with others in public settings. There is a specific label that they use to describe themselves, though some like Jade will answer questions about her beliefs with an answer about her beliefs. This discrepancy between public identity and private belief mirrors what atheists and nonreligious individuals do when

identifying as a less contentious label in public but disclosing their true beliefs to close friends and family. Atheists and the nonreligious identify as such publicly in response to the larger community. In a sense, they must identify as atheist or nonreligious to delineate themselves to others who are not in the know.

This is in contrast to sexual orientation, an identity that atheists try to mirror in their terminology of “coming out” (Christina, 2014). LGBTQ identity “forms the basis for gay community” (Grierson & Smith, 2005, p. 54), while my interviewees who were not in secular groups found the idea of an “atheist community” strange. A few worried that such groups would be subject to attack. Marie compared secular groups to be “too much like church,” while Franklin argued that one does not have to be religious to get together and enjoy each other’s company. He references his local soccer cheer section as such a group, where religious belief is irrelevant, as he prefers. While some of my interviewees like the idea of such a community, they wondered about what such a group would do. Heather argued that nonreligious groups would be too broad and would have to narrow down what the group does. Those in secular groups, unsurprisingly, enjoyed the community that they provided. Those interviewees also held their atheist/nonreligious identity in higher regard than most. For most of my sample, their nonreligious beliefs were far more complex than to be summed up with a single label or any affiliations they may have.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The social context that one grows up in influences the way in which they live, whether they realize it or not. For those living in the majority position, life takes on a taken-for-granted role, where assumptions are made about how people should live their lives. In areas with a homogeneous cultural standpoint, not fitting into the norms can lead to ostracism and social exclusion. Stigma comes as a byproduct of not fitting into the majority group's standard. For some, such as racial minorities, this stigma cannot be concealed. One is forced to live with the open knowledge that they are different in some sense to the larger population. However, some stigma can be concealed. In this study, nonreligious identity, a concealable stigmatized identity was the topic of interest.

Atheism and nonreligion have just now started to be studied empirically to the detriment of understanding how this group lives their life as a perpetual minority regarding total number in America. Homosexuality, another concealable stigmatized identity, has been studied extensively over the past 50 years. This vast network of research has influenced the current study. With those in the atheist community appealing to direct comparison between atheists and the LGBTQ community (e.g., Christina, 2014), it was useful to compare the two groups.

There seems to be a major difference in how atheists and nonreligious individuals understand their identities and how the LGBTQ community understands their identities. LGBTQ identity is usually made an important if not a central component of one's self-identity. This may

be because of the idea that LGBTQ identity is innate. That is, LGBTQ identity is considered an ascribed status earned at birth and unique to the individual. The terminology surrounding the LGBTQ community reflects this, from the broader understanding of “homosexual” identity to “more specific identities based on sexual practice” (Grierson & Smith, 2005, p. 54). In contrast, atheists/nonreligious identity is achieved; one must specifically choose to identify as atheist/nonreligious. Therefore, the labels used by individuals who do not have religious beliefs are secondary in focus. Atheists and other nonreligious individuals seem to use nonreligious labels reluctantly. They are used to distinguish themselves from the religious other. In contrast, LGBTQ identities are used to define oneself. In other words, nonreligious individuals are nonreligious in *orientation* but not necessarily self-identification.

For both groups, social tension is a variable that has been overlooked. In countries are large and diverse as the United States, there will be differences in who the ‘majority’ is. In areas of the country with less strict religious interpretations, for example, one could argue that homosexuality would be more tolerated than places with more conservative Protestants (Burdette et al., 2005). For both the LGBTQ community and atheists/nonreligious individuals, the factors that seem to play into their place in the social order are the same: conservative religious ideology and its public visibility. These characteristics are indicative of several regions in the United States, but none characterize it as well as the American South does.

In this study, it was found that atheists and nonreligious individuals in the South are aware of their differences with the religious majority. This led to identifying as a particular label other than their preferred one in public settings. That is, they concealed their atheist/nonreligious identity in public. Moreover, Southern atheists/nonreligious individuals were aware of the

South's religious uniqueness and commented that it might be those qualities that make it unique that also make it difficult for them to live without the need to hide their true beliefs.

The sample used in this study is the first to the author's knowledge to have majority female respondents. The sample was also heterogeneous regarding public and private (non)religious identity. This provides evidence that the sampling method cast a wider net and thus could locate more individuals that conceal their identity in public. The study also concealed based on what region of the country they resided in, giving credence to the idea that social tension affected their concealment behavior. Finally, interviews corroborated the quantitative findings, with atheist/nonreligious individuals living in the American South commenting on the difficult position in which they find themselves.

### **Limitations**

Because of its highly religious nature, the South influences nonreligious individuals who live or move there to conceal their identity, as measured by the CNRI scale. This is not to say that other parts of America do not have this influence. Heavily-Mormon Utah, for instance, would be another milieu where nonreligious individuals may feel the pressure to conceal their beliefs. However, since this is only an initial validation of the CNRI scale, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to test these assumptions.

While the CNRI scale seemingly works as intended, there are limitations with both the scale and my validation approach. The scale's factor structure coincides with the wording of items. That is, every item in the Interpersonal subscale also happens to be positively worded, while every item in the Institutional subscale is negatively worded. Therefore, it is hard to parse if the wording or the concepts in the items themselves explain the two factor's variance.

Additionally, I used Pew's designation of regions, which delineates which states correspond to which region. While this is a good shorthand for regional definition, there is likely as many variations within regions as between them. For example, the West includes heavily secular states (e.g., Oregon) as well as heavily religious states (e.g., Utah). Collapsing states with very different demographics into larger categories leads to more variance between categories but dissolves differences within categories. Within regions, rural areas are more religious than urban areas. This scale did not control for rural/urban differences in religiosity. Future research should compare smaller categories together to see if these differences hold in comparing small areas against each other. Furthermore, looking at the difference between rural and urban areas regarding concealment would be a fruitful endeavor.

Qualitative interviews provided additional validity to the content of the scale. The interviewees were demographically similar to those who took the scale, and they told of several avenues of concealment. They also provide evidence that the South has a qualitatively different form of religion leading to more social tension for the nonreligious. However, interviewees coming from urban areas had different experiences coming from rural areas, with rural participants claim that rurality may play a larger role in their experience as to why they conceal their identity. Mann (2015) found similar experiences in his qualitative study of atheists in an urban area in the South, with some participants claiming that rural areas were far more treacherous. Future qualitative research should investigate the rural/urban divide in religiosity and how that plays into the concealment of nonreligious identity.

The CNRI scale needs to be tested for further validity. This is already being planned, with a confirmatory factor analysis in the works. Further research should use this scale in other populations, such as nonreligious individuals living in majority-Mormon Utah. Research should

also consider regional differences in variables as I have attempted to do here. Regional differences have been overlooked in psychology. This should be remedied, especially in research involving concealable stigmatized identities. Unfortunately, it is unknown whether the proposed scale would be appropriate for nonreligious individuals living in different social contexts. For example, Scandinavian participants in a highly nonreligious social context may have difficulty responding to the scale's items. Research looking at social tension as a variable may want to initially use qualitative methods to investigate how a certain region may contribute to concealing identity.

Research into religious and nonreligious identity alike should focus on determining beliefs over assessing identity. Nonreligious Americans do not use the terminology of identity when describing themselves. Their beliefs constitute a core part of their identity. The labels they use may be influenced by the social context in which they find themselves. They are also secondary, only used engaging with others. An exploration into religion, atheism, and nonreligion should focus on one's self-identification instead of placing them into categories based on identity.

### **Implications and Future Directions**

The study of nonreligion has come a long way, from being overlooked to having whole research networks dedicated to further understanding nonreligion (Bullivant & Lee, 2012). Both religion and nonreligion should be analyzed as variables in and of themselves, with multiple methodologies engaging these constructs. Religion has for too long been treated as just another identity variable in social psychology. It behooves social psychologists to study religion as its own phenomenon. As America slowly becomes less religious, nonreligion should be studied

under this same paradigm. The future of religion and nonreligion are inextricably intertwined. It is only fair that they be treated with the same respect in social psychological research.

Atheism and nonreligion continue to grow in America; however, there are still many things that we do not know about these constructs. The dynamics of how atheism and nonreligion play out when interacting with the majority religious population will change as the number of self-identified nonreligious people grow in America. Social tension with highly-religious populations will still occur for atheists and the nonreligious. Perhaps tensions between the religious and nonreligious will grow as atheism and nonreligion grow in visibility and objective size (Schlueter & Scheepers, 2010). Anti-atheist prejudice may dissipate over time as the number of self-identifying atheists grows (Gervais, 2011). Research should look into these dynamics to see if growing numbers of atheists and nonreligious individuals are subject to more or less discrimination and ostracism.

Regional differences in social tension for nonreligious Americans should be further explored in psychology. In sociology, social context has been used as a predictor variable. For example, Marshall and Olson (2018) found that regions of the United States with higher evangelical Protestant populations predicted lower generalized social trust while regions of the United States with higher mainline Protestant and Catholic populations predicted higher generalized social trust. Psychology should use region and social context as variables in their analyses. Within-region differences are especially lacking. In Southern states alone, the religious majority in a given place could affect how nonreligious individuals interact with the community. Furthermore, urban/rural differences in religious expression may lead to differential experiences in negotiating atheist/nonreligious identity. Additionally, racial differences in concealment of nonreligious identity is a topic that has not been explored.



Future research into atheism and nonreligion should be aware of these differences while also being aware of the context in which they are being assessed. Workplace discrimination against atheists appears to be more commonplace than previously assumed (Scheitle & Corcoran, 2018). Religious discrimination, in general, is an understudied topic (Wright et al., 2013). More research needs to be done to better understand better how nonreligious discrimination plays out in workplace environments. Moreover, qualitative interviewing of atheists and the nonreligious in workplace settings would illuminate the dynamics of negotiating one's beliefs in socially tense settings.

Atheists and nonreligious individuals know that they are not very well liked in America (Hammer et al., 2012). This held true with my interviewees. Awareness of being different from the norm was not a unique position for my interviewees. While many interviewees claimed not to want to tell others about their beliefs because they did not want to disappoint or disquiet those they were in regular contact with, some were more afraid of discrimination. Future qualitative research should delineate between these two separate lines of thought. It is possible that these ideas are interconnected in function. Moreover, this study used the stigma management techniques purported by Button (2004) as a base to compare concealment tactics between the LGBTQ community and atheist/nonreligious individuals. These are by no means the only methods by which atheists and the nonreligious could conceal their identity. More qualitative research is needed to discover all the stigma management strategies atheists and the nonreligious may use navigating their everyday lives.



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APPENDIX A  
IRB APPROVAL LETTER

**Institutional Review Board**

Dept 4915  
615 McCallie Avenue  
Chattanooga, TN 37403  
Phone: (423) 425-5867  
Fax: (423) 425-4052  
instrb@utc.edu  
<http://www.utc.edu/irb>

TO: Cameron Mackey **IRB # 18-069**  
Dr. Ralph Hood  
Dr. Chris Silver

FROM: Lindsay Pardue, Director of Research Integrity  
Dr. Amy Doolittle, IRB Committee Chair

DATE: May 31, 2018

SUBJECT: IRB #18-069: Concealment of Nonreligious Identity Scale Construction and Validation

The IRB Committee Chair has reviewed and approved your application and assigned you the IRB number listed above. You must include the following approval statement on research materials seen by participants and used in research reports:

***The Institutional Review Board of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (FWA00004149) has approved this research project # 18-069.***

**Annual Renewal.** All approved research is subject to UTC IRB review, at least once a year. Please visit our website (<http://www.utc.edu/research-integrity/institutional-review-board/forms.php>) for the Form B (continuation / change / completion form) that you will need to complete and submit if your project remains active and UTC IRB approval needs to be renewed for another year. Unless your research moves in a new direction or participants have experienced adverse reactions, then renewal is not a major hurdle. You as Principal Investigator are responsible for turning in the Form B on time (2 weeks before one year from now), and for determining whether any changes will affect the current status of the project. When you complete your research, the same change/completion form should be completed indicating project termination. This will allow UTC's Office of Research Integrity to close your project file.

Please remember to contact the IRB immediately and submit a new project proposal for review if significant changes occur in your research design or in any instruments used in conducting the study. You should also contact the IRB immediately if you encounter any adverse effects during your project that pose a risk to your subjects.

For any additional information, please consult our web page (<http://www.utc.edu/irb>) or email ([instrb@utc.edu](mailto:instrb@utc.edu))

Best wishes for a successful research project.

APPENDIX B  
SURVEY INFORMED CONSENT

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT CHATTANOOGA  
Survey Consent Form

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study:

The purpose of this study is to assess the concealment of nonreligious identity. Put another way, some people with no religious belief may tell some people about their lack of beliefs, but not others. You will be taking a survey to see if you conceal your nonreligious identity and if so, how concealed you are.

What you will be asked to do in the study:

Following a brief demographics section, you will be asked to answer a series of questions pertaining to nonreligious identity and how you feel and think about it. At the end of the test session, you will be asked to answer a second set of different demographics questions pertaining to what region of the United States you live in.

Time required:

*15 minutes to 45 minutes*

Risks and Benefits:

All participants can enter into a drawing for one of three \$75 Amazon gift cards. Another potential benefit of the study is learning more about your nonreligious identity. You will not be adversely affected in any way if you choose not to participate. There is a possibility that you will become emotionally distressed during this survey, given its content. If you become uncomfortable during the taking of the survey, you may stop taking it with no repercussions. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence or penalty.

Confidentiality:

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your information will be assigned a code number. The list connecting you to this number will be kept on a datafile on the main researcher's personal computer. Identifying information will not be used in any report or publication.



Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

Cameron Mackey, Master's Candidate, Psychology  
State Office Building Room 376  
540 McCallie Avenue  
Chattanooga, TN 37403  
Phone: 256-523-1258  
Kyf164@mocs.utc.edu

Dr. Christopher F. Silver, EdD  
615 McCallie Avenue  
Chattanooga, TN 37403  
Christopher-Silver@utc.edu

Dr. Ralph W. Hood, Jr.  
State Office Building Room 359  
540 McCallie Avenue  
Chattanooga, TN 37403  
Ralph-Hood@utc.edu

If you become distressed during the interview, you may go to <https://www.seculartherapy.org/> and find a therapist near you.

This research protocol has been approved by the UTC Institutional Review Board, #IRB, 18-069. Additional contact information is available at [www.utc.edu/irb](http://www.utc.edu/irb).

Do you agree to participate in this survey?

APPENDIX C  
INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT CHATTANOOGA

*Concealment of Nonreligious Identity: Scale Construction and Validation*

Interview Consent Form

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study:

The purpose of this study is to assess the lived experiences of nonreligious individuals in the South. The nonreligious are a disliked group and sometimes hide their beliefs from others. I will be interviewing you to see what strategies to conceal your identity in your everyday life. I am also interested in the situations in which you may conceal your nonreligious identity. The research is being conducted at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and has been approved by the Ethics Committees and the university's Institutional Review Board. I would appreciate your participation and are asking you to complete this survey.

What you will be asked to do in the study:

You will be asked to answer a series of interview questions pertaining to nonreligious identity and how you feel and think about it. Specifically, I will ask about your background, experiences as a nonreligious person in the South, concealment/disclosure, and the future of nonreligion in America.

Time required:

*30 minutes to 3 hours*

Risks and Benefits:

The interview may cause you to become emotionally distressed, seeing as discussing identity and stigma can be disturbing. The potential benefits of the study include learning more about your nonreligious identity. If you are younger than 18, you will be excluded from the study.

Incentive or Compensation:

If you become uncomfortable during the interview, I will stop the interview. You will not be adversely affected in any way if you choose not to participate.

Confidentiality:

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. I will be giving you an alias when writing about you and will remove any identifying information from my transcripts. Your answers will be recorded for further analysis at a later time. The transcript connecting your name to this alias will be kept on a datafile on the main researcher's personal computer. However, I will not be able to obtain identifiable information because that information will be removed beforehand. Your real name will not be used in any report or publication.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you elect to discontinue participation, any information already collected will be discarded. There is no penalty or loss of benefit for choosing not to participate.

Right to withdraw from the study:

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence or penalty.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

Cameron Mackey, Master's Candidate, Psychology  
State Office Building Room 376  
540 McCallie Avenue  
Chattanooga, TN 37403  
Phone: 256-523-1258  
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Dr. Ralph W. Hood, Jr.  
State Office Building Room 359  
540 McCallie Avenue  
Chattanooga, TN 37403  
Phone: 423-425-4274  
Ralph-Hood@utc.edu

If you become distressed during the interview, you may go to <https://www.seculartherapy.org/> and find a therapist near you.

This research protocol has been approved by the UTC Institutional Review Board.

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact Dr. Amy Doolittle, the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee, Institutional Review Board at 423-425-5563. Additional contact information is available at [www.utc.edu/irb](http://www.utc.edu/irb).

Agreement:

I understand that I will be recorded by the researcher. These interviews will be kept by the researcher in a personal computer owned by the lab. I understand that only the researcher will have access to these interviews and that they will be discarded by May 1, 2019.

If you wish to participate in this study, please check the appropriate box in the form below.

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Audio Recording of Study Activities:

Interviews may be recording using audio recording to assist with the accuracy of your responses. You have the right to refuse the audio recording. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to audio recording: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX D

INITIAL CONCEALMENT OF NONRELIGIOUS IDENTITY SCALE

1. The region I live in is accepting of people with no religious beliefs.\*
2. The people I work with would not care about my lack of religious beliefs if I told them about it.\*
3. I could run for office in my local district and have a decent chance of winning even knowing that I don't have religious beliefs.\*
4. I generally feel safe being open as a person without religious beliefs.\*
5. I live in a place with a diversity of worldviews where even my lack of religious beliefs is tolerated.\*
6. I can talk about my lack of religious beliefs with some of my friends but not others.
7. I have told a few people about my lack of religious beliefs, but I don't feel comfortable with telling any more than I already have.
8. I feel like telling any more people about my lack of religious beliefs would cause those who I do not want to tell to find out through others.
9. I lie to strangers about being religious, but my friends know otherwise.
10. I keep control over who knows about my lack of religious beliefs.
11. If the community that I live in found out about my lack of religious beliefs, I would have to move.
12. I don't talk about religious issues with strangers in fear that I might be outed as a person with no religious beliefs.
13. I fear that my boss would fire me if he or she found out about my lack of religious beliefs.
14. If I told my friends about my lack of religious beliefs, they would respect my opinions less.
15. Being an open nonbeliever would make it hard for me to be accepted at social events.

\* = reverse-coded

APPENDIX E  
DEMOGRAPHICS



What is your age (in years)?

Are you a United States citizen?

What is your gender?

Do you identify as Hispanic or Latino – A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race? Please select from the answers below.

Of the racial identities listed below, which best represents you?

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? If currently enrolled, indicate highest degree received.

Are you currently a student?

What statement below best identifies your personal beliefs?

Based on the list of various secular and religious groups below, how do you currently identify publicly (this means to people you meet or co-workers who do not know you personally)? Choose the identity you are MOST comfortable expressing in a public setting.

**If publicly identifying as Christian:**

Which type of Christianity do you currently identify most closely with publicly?

What form or denomination of Christian do you currently identify most closely with publicly?

Do you currently identify yourself as a Pentecostal Christian publicly?

Do you currently identify yourself as an Evangelical Christian publicly?

Based on the list of various secular and religious groups below, how do you currently identify privately (in other words, only to yourself or your close friends and family members)? Choose the identity you are MOST comfortable expressing in a private setting.

**If privately identifying as Christian:**

Which type of Christianity do you currently identify most closely with privately?

What form or denomination of Christianity do you currently identify most closely with privately?

Do you currently yourself as a Pentecostal Christian privately?

Do you currently identify yourself as an Evangelical Christian privately?

Do you personally believe in God?

Which of these best describes your personal belief in God?

Are you affiliated in any secular organizations (e.g., American Atheists)?

Please list the secular organizations you are affiliated with below (please note this can include online groups as well).

How many secular organizations are you affiliated with?

APPENDIX F  
NONRELIGIOUS-NONSPIRITUAL SCALE

Many people have heard the word 'religion' before and probably have some understanding of what that means. For this survey, I want you to think about religion in a specific way. When you think about religion for the following questions, I want you to think of institutionalized religion, or groups of people that share beliefs regarding the supernatural (i.e., gods, angels, demons, spirits) that are members of an organization. In this sense, the Roman Catholic Church would be a religion as it is a group of people with shared beliefs toward the supernatural and who are members of an organization. Members of a soccer club would not be considered a religion because they do not have shared beliefs toward the supernatural, while Hindus or Mormons would as they belong to an organization that emphasizes the membership's shared beliefs toward the supernatural.

1. I'm guided by religion when making important decisions in my life.
2. Religion is my most powerful guide of what is right and wrong.
3. When faced with challenges in my life, I look to religion for support.
4. I never engage in religious practices.\*
5. Religion helps me answer many of the questions I have about the meaning of life.
6. I would describe myself as a religious person.
7. Religion is not necessary for my personal happiness.\*
8. I would be bothered if my child wanted to marry someone who is NOT religious.

Some people use the terms 'spirituality' and 'spiritual' in a broad, NON-supernatural sense. They see those terms as just having to do with: a special or intense experience, an appreciation for existence, meaning in life, peacefulness, harmony, the quest for well-being, or emotional connection with people, humanity, nature, or the universe. In this way, an atheist could technically describe her or himself as being 'spiritual' or as having had a 'spiritual experience.' In contrast to that broad approach, when you answer the items in THIS questionnaire we'd like you to think about 'spirituality' and 'spiritual' in the specific, SUPERNATURAL sense. And by 'SUPERNATURAL' we mean: having to do with things which are beyond or transcend the material universe and nature. God, gods, ghosts, angels, demons, sacred realms, miracles, and telepathy are all supernatural by this specific definition.

1. Spirituality is important to me.
2. The rightness or wrongness of my actions will affect what happens to me when my body is physically dead.
3. I have a spirit/essence beyond my physical body.
4. The universe has a supernatural origin.
5. All other things being equal, a spiritual person is better off.
6. The supernatural exists.
7. I engage in spiritual activities.
8. I feel a sense of connection to something beyond what we can observe, measure, or test scientifically.
9. I cannot find worthwhile meaning in life without spirituality.

\* = reverse-scored

APPENDIX G

MODIFIED STIGMA CONSCIOUSNESS QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Stereotypes about those without religious belief have not affected me personally. \*
2. I never worry that my behaviors will be viewed as stereotypical of people who do not have religious belief. \*
3. When interacting with religious people who know of my lack of religious beliefs, I feel like they interpret all my behaviors in terms of the fact that I do not have religious beliefs.
4. Most religious people do not judge people who do not have religious belief on the basis of their nonreligion. \*
5. My being nonreligious does not influence how other nonreligious people act around me. \*
6. I almost never think about the fact that I am not religious when I interact with religious people. \*
7. My lack of religious belief does not influence how people act with me. \*
8. Most religious people have a lot more thoughts against the nonreligious than they actually express.
9. I often think that religious people are unfairly accused of prejudiced toward people who are not religious. \*
10. Most religious people have a problem viewing nonreligious people as equals.

\* = reverse scored

APPENDIX H

MODIFIED INTERNALIZED STIGMA OF MENTAL ILLNESS SCALE



## **Alienation**

I feel out of place in the world because I lack religious belief  
Lacking religious belief has spoiled my life  
Religious people could not possibly understand me  
I feel inferior to others who are religious

## **Stereotype Endorsement**

Stereotypes about atheists apply to me  
People can tell that I am not religious by the way I look  
People with no religious belief cannot live a good, rewarding life  
Nonreligious people shouldn't get married  
I can't contribute anything to society because I lack religious belief

## **Discrimination Experience**

People discriminate against me because I lack religious belief  
Others think that I can't achieve much in life because I lack religious belief  
People ignore me or take me less seriously just because I lack religious belief  
People often patronize me, or treat me like a child, just because I lack religious belief  
Nobody would be interested in getting close to me because I lack religious belief

## **Social Withdrawal**

I don't talk about myself much because I don't want to offend others with my lack of religious belief  
I don't socialize as much as I used to because my lack of religious beliefs might make me look or behave 'weird'  
Negative stereotypes about the nonreligious keep me isolated from the 'normal' world  
Being around people who are religious makes me feel out of place  
I avoid getting close to people who are religious to avoid rejection

## **Stigma Resistance**

I feel comfortable being seen in public with a person in an atheist T-shirt \*  
In general, I am able to live life the way I want to \*  
I can have a good, fulfilling life even if I am nonreligious \*  
People with no religious beliefs make important contributions to society \*

\*=reverse-scored

APPENDIX I

MODIFIED INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA OF GAY CHINESE MEN SCALE

1. If you reveal your nonreligion in the workplace, it will endanger your career.
2. In most situations, I do not care about whether other people know about my lack of religious beliefs. \*
3. I am worried that my nonreligion will disgrace my family.
4. Any mention of the word “atheism” makes me feel panic.
5. Most people with no religious belief will end up living alone.
6. I cannot live up to my family’s religious expectations, which bothers me.

\*=reverse-scored

APPENDIX J

MORAL IDENTITY SCALE – INTERNALIZATION SUBSCALE

1. It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics.
2. Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am
3. I would be ashamed to be a person who has these characteristics. \*
4. Having these characteristics is not really important to me. \*
5. I strongly desire to have these characteristics.

\*=reverse-scored

APPENDIX K  
SELF-CONCEALMENT SCALE

1. I have an important secret that I haven't shared with anyone.
2. If I shared all my secrets with my friends, they'd like me less.
3. There are lots of things about me that I keep to myself.
4. Some of my secrets have really tormented me.
5. When something bad happens to me, I tend to keep it to myself.
6. I'm often afraid I'll reveal something I don't want to.
7. Telling a secret often backfires and I wish I hadn't told it.
8. I have a secret that is so private I would lie if anybody asked me about it.
9. My secrets are too embarrassing to share with others.
10. I have negative thoughts about myself that I never share with anyone.

APPENDIX L  
RELIGIOUS SCHEMA SCALE



### **Ftr (fairness, tolerance, rational choice)**

1. When I make a decision, I look at all sides of the issue and come up with the best decision possible.
2. Although every person deserves respect and fairness, arguments need to be voiced rationally.
3. We should resolve differences in how people appear to each other through fair and just discussion.
4. Regardless of how people appear to each other, we are all human.
5. It is important to understand others through a sympathetic understanding of their culture and religion.

### **Xenos (xenosophia, inter-religious dialogue)**

6. We can learn from each other what ultimate truth each religion contains.
7. We need to look beyond the denominational and religious differences to find the ultimate reality.
8. When I make a decision, I am open to contradicting proposals from diverse sources and philosophical standpoints.
9. Religious stories and representations from any religion unite me with the ultimate universe.
10. The truth I see in other world views leads me to re-examine my current views.

APPENDIX M  
OPENNESS SCALE

1. The members of my immediate family (i.e., mother, father, siblings) are aware that I am not religious.
2. The members of my extended family (i.e., aunts, uncles, cousins) are aware that I am not religious.
3. My partner knows that I am not religious.
4. My old religious friends are aware that I am not religious.
5. My new religious friends are aware that I am not religious.
6. My counselor knows that I am not religious.
7. My coworkers are aware that I am not religious.
8. My immediate boss/advisor is aware that I am not religious.
9. My neighbors are aware that I am not religious.
10. Strangers are aware that I am not religious.

APPENDIX N

DETROIT AREA SURVEY (DAS) DISCRIMINATION SCALE

- a. You are treated with less courtesy than other people.
- b. You are treated with less respect than other people.
- c. You receive poorer service than other people at restaurants or stores.
- d. People act as if they think you are not smart.
- e. People act as if they are afraid of you.
- f. People act as if they think you are dishonest.
- g. People act as if they're better than you are.
- h. You are called names or insulted.
- i. You are threatened or harassed.

APPENDIX O  
SALIENCE MEASURE

1. How often do you think about your lack of religious belief?
2. I spend a lot of time thinking about my lack of religious belief.
3. My lack of religious beliefs crosses my mind for no reason.

APPENDIX P

FINAL CONCEALMENT OF NONRELIGIOUS IDENTITY SCALE



1. I have told a few people about my lack of religious beliefs, but I don't feel comfortable telling any more than I already have.
2. *The region I live in is accepting of people with no religious beliefs.* \*
3. I feel like telling any more people about my lack of religious beliefs would cause those who I do not want to tell to find out through others.
4. I keep control over who knows about my lack of religious beliefs.
5. I could run for office in my local district and have a decent chance of winning even knowing that I don't have religious beliefs. \*
6. *Being an open nonbeliever would make it hard for me to be accepted at social events.*
7. I don't talk about religious issues with strangers in fear that I might be outed as a person with no religious beliefs.
8. I live in a place with a diversity of worldviews where even my lack of religious beliefs is tolerated. \*

\* = reverse-scored

*Italicized items indicate the best single items for the interpersonal and institutional subscales.*

#### Key:

Items are on a scale from 1 to 7, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. To use this measure, reverse-score Items 2, 5, and 8. For example, if someone chose "strongly disagree" on Item 2, they will be scored as a 7. After reverse-scoring, average all the items together. If you average all the interpersonal items together, you will get an interpersonal concealment score; likewise, if you average all the institutional items together, you will get an institutional concealment score. Averaging all the items together creates an overall concealment score. Higher scores indicate higher levels of concealment.

APPENDIX Q  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

## **Demographics**

For the first set of questions I have for you, I would like to ask you about your life story. These questions will relate to how you have grown as a person and the kinds of experiences you have had. I may ask follow-up questions based on your answers; this is not to say something is wrong but to help me better understand your experience.

1. Tell me about your lack of religious beliefs. What do your beliefs mean to you?
2. How do most people define that belief system?
3. How important is your nonreligious identity to you?
4. Where did you grow up? Was it rural, suburban, or urban? Where all have you lived in your lifetime?
5. Tell me about the major religions represented where you are from. Has it stayed the same over time, or has it changed? Why?
6. What has been your preference in how you identify religiously? Or were you raised nonreligious?
7. Why did you become nonreligious? Did you ever think about joining another religious group? If so, why?
8. Are there any other groups you find yourself connected to (e.g., social, intellectual, political, etc.)?

## **Nonreligion in the South**

Thank you for telling me about yourself. Now I would like to focus on your experience in the Southeast United States. Particularly, I am interested in your experiences with other religious individuals and groups in the south.

9. What is it like not having religious beliefs in the South? Are there any places in the US where not having religious beliefs is worse than where you currently live?
10. What is your opinion of religious people in the South? How do you feel about them?
11. Tell me about your interactions with the religious in the South. Have you ever had a tense or stressful experience in interacting with others? If so, what happened?
12. What is your view of religion being within southern culture? How does it affect your attitudes or behavior?
13. What is your view of the separation of church and state?
14. Do you wish that there were places where nonreligious people could meet like religious people have?

## **Concealed/Disclosed Identity**

Now, I will ask a few questions pertaining to your nonreligious beliefs and identity. Specifically, I will ask questions about how you identify in regard to religion. Additionally, I will ask about who you tell about your beliefs and why as well as those that you don't tell.

15. How do you identify to others when asked about religion? What thoughts go into determining when to conceal or disclose your beliefs, if at all?
16. Have you ever disclosed your lack of religious beliefs to anyone? Who did you tell? Why, and what happened afterward?
17. Give me a short list of those you trust with your identity and those you withhold your identity from. For each why did you make this choice?
18. What are the implications of disclosing your nonreligion to those you withhold your identity from?
19. Are you selective in who you decided to disclose your lack of religious belief to? Why?
20. Have there been psychological benefits to telling someone about your beliefs? Do you feel like you can be yourself, in a sense?
21. Have you ever pretended you're religious in order to conceal your lack of religious beliefs? If so, could you give me an example?
22. Do you ever avoid religious topics in order to avoid bringing up your beliefs? If so, why?
23. What are other situations where you feel like you need to conceal your identity?
24. Where do you see yourself in five to ten years related to your beliefs? How do you think you will change as you get older? Would anything change your mind?

## **The Future of Nonreligion**

Finally, these last two questions are about nonreligion in America. I am interested in seeing how you believe that nonreligion in America will change in the future.

25. What misconceptions of the nonreligious do you wish that people would stop believing?
26. Will there ever be a time where not having religious beliefs is not controversial (e.g., an atheist candidate for president)? (Jones, 2012)
27. What is the future of nonreligion in America, in the near and far future?

## VITA

Cameron Mackey was born in Gadsden, AL, to Lance and Stacey Mackey. He is one younger brother, Chandler. Cameron attended Sand Rock Elementary and continued to Sand Rock High School in Sand Rock, Alabama. After graduation, he attended Jacksonville State University in Jacksonville, AL, where his budding interest in psychology turned into one of his passions. Cameron graduated summa cum laude from Jacksonville State University, receiving a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and Sociology. Cameron then went on to the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga to pursue a Master's degree. He earned his Master of Science in Research Psychology in May 2019. Cameron is continuing his education by pursuing a Ph.D. in Experimental Psychology with a focus on Social Psychology from Ohio University.