Abstract

Atheism in the United States: Investigating How Atheists Make

Meaning of Stereotypes and Discrimination.

By

Kevin Roy Simonson

Social injustice and unequal treatment based on group membership are prevalent in

United States culture. As a result, many minority groups are marginalized and

discriminated. Minority groups experience both individual and systemic discrimination,

which has direct physical and psychological costs for the individual and the group (Sue &

Sue, 2008). Atheists have been argued to comprise a minority group (Jenks, 1987).

Existing literature suggests that Atheists are the least trusted group in the United States

(Edgell et al., 2006; Jenks, 1987). Further, anecdotal reports, qualitative studies, and

quantitative studies suggest that anti-Atheist discrimination does occur (Downey, 2004;

Heiner, 1992; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006, Hwang, 2008; Nash, 2003; Nussbaum,

1999; Peters, 2009; Pollit, 2005; Reisberg, 1998; Saeed & Grant, 2004; Smith-Stoner,

2007; Volokh, 2006). Using grounded theory methodology, this study attempted to

understand how individuals who are Atheist make sense of stereotypes and

discrimination.

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A Dissertation

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Table of Contents

8

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Abstract

Findings from the literature suggest that Atheists are the least trusted minority group in

the United States (Edgell et al., 2006). As a part of this marginalized role, studies suggest

that anti-Atheist discrimination occurs (e.g., Hwang, 2008). Using grounded theory

methodology with data gathered from 10 semi-structured interviews, results revealed that

Atheists made meaning by using cognitive and behavioral mechanisms which allowed

them to manage, learn, cope, and thrive when faced with being stereotyped and

discriminated. As a result of this study, there are five implications pertinent to clinical

work: Awareness of Discriminatory Activity, Construction of Meaning After

Discrimination, Atheism as Multicultural Construct, The Role of Supportive Factors, and

The Power of Narrative Discourse. Mental health practitioners should be aware of these

factors when working with Atheists who have experienced prejudice or injustice.

Keywords: atheism, grounded theory, meaning making, discrimination

CHAPTER I

OVERVIEW

Social injustice and unequal treatment based on group membership are prevalent in the United States (Sue & Sue, 2008). As a result, many members of various minority groups are marginalized and discriminated. Minority group members experience both individual and systemic discrimination, which has direct physical and psychological costs for the individual and the group (Sue & Sue, 2008). Jenks (1987) argues that Atheists comprise a minority group. Estimates of Atheists in the United States vary between 3.6 and 5.2 million (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009; Lugo, 2008). The latest Gallup poll indicates that Atheists are a clear minority, representing only 7% of the United States, while Theists represent 93% (2011). Although definitions vary as to how to define an Atheist, Cliteur (2009) concludes that the most inclusive definition is someone who does not have a belief in a God(s)/deity.

A collection of studies illustrate that Atheists in the United States are an invisible population (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, & Nielsen, in press; Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Goodman & Mueller, 2009). Researchers have noted that Atheists are a hidden population because they can choose whether to disclose their belief system and the majority chooses not to disclose (Cragun et al., in press; Edgell et al., 2006; Goodman & Mueller, 2009). This invisibility, in conjunction with being a marginalized "other", puts Atheists at risk for becoming victims of stigma, stereotyping behavior, and discriminatory activity (Hammer, Cragun, & Hwang, in review). Existing literature suggests that Atheists have long been stereotyped as a-moral, deviant, and the untrustworthy (Edgell et al., 2006; Harris, 2006; Hwang, 2008; Jenks, 1987; Jones,

2007). Although empirical data contradict these stereotypes (Caldwell-Harris, Wilson, LoTempio, & Beit-Hallahmi, 2008), Atheists continue to be stigmatized as not having values, evil, and God hating (Goodman & Mueller, 2009). In addition to being stigmatized, Atheists face discrimination, including being: (a) denied employment; (b) physically harmed by others and; (c) shunned by their families (Downey, 2004).

Although we have a general understanding of what discriminatory acts Atheists experience, what we do not have at this time is an understanding of the meaning made from these acts. The current study is in response to D'Andrea and Sprenger (2007) who called for additional research on Atheists and their experiences.

Literature Review

The foundation of literature that exists examining Atheists as a population has identified three themes/findings: Atheists, as a group, are (a) distinct (Bainbridge, 2005; Hayes, 2000; Hayes & McAllister, 1995); (b) highly distrusted (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Jenks, 1987; Jones, 2007) and; (c) subject to discrimination (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Hwang, 2008; Nash, 2003; Nussbaum, 1999; Peters, 2009; Pollit, 2005; Saeed & Grant, 2004; Smith-Stoner, 2007; Volokh, 2006).

Atheists as a Distinct Group

Atheists have unique characteristics in their patterns of social and political beliefs when compared to Theists (Hayes, 2000; Hayes & McAllister, 1995). Bainbridge (2005) found that in comparison to Theists, Atheists were: (a) younger, (b) predominantly male, (c) well educated, and (d) less likely to marry and/or have children. Moreover, a qualitative study identified several emerging themes among Atheists, including: (a) having a desire for others to accept their nontheistic belief system; (b) having a personal

morality (e.g., purpose, values) that focuses on how he or she can contribute to the human condition (e.g., taking care of the environment, service to humanity); (c) being good for the sake of goodness rather than following scripture; (d) having a general knowledge of science, various cultures, religious traditions, and philosophies, and; (e) having no interest in converting others to their belief system (Mueller, in progress). Atheists as a group appear to have common characteristics when compared to Theists.

Atheists as a Highly Distrusted Group

Members of minority groups are frequently plagued by negative stereotypes (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2007). Stereotypes specifically targeting Atheists are pervasive in United States culture (Harris, 2006; Hwang, 2008; Jenks, 1987). Atheists have long been perceived as immoral and deviant, having less education, having had more permissive parents, having more liberal views, belonging to lower social classes, and having greater need for psychological counseling (Edgell et al., 2006; Hwang et al., 2010; Jenks, 1987; Jones, 2007). Other stereotypes include Atheists as joyless, skeptical, nonconforming, valueless, evil, and God hating (Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Harris, 2006; Jenks, 1987). Harper (2007) noted that religious believers have complex stereotypic beliefs about nonreligious people. Participants from Harper's study volunteered labels such as aggressive, arrogant, empty, evil, freaks, ignorant, lost, miserable, sinners, stupid, and shallow in describing nonreligious individuals. These studies are noteworthy because nonreligious people who live within religious communities are vulnerable to labeling, stereotyping, and as a result, to discrimination and marginalization (Downey, 2004).

Atheists Face Discrimination

In addition to being denied employment, physically harmed by others and shunned by their families, other accounts of discrimination include Atheists: (a) experiencing proselytizing and unrequested or unwanted prayers by hospital staff and clergy (Smith-Stoner, 2007); (b) having requests for a non-religious funeral superseded by the beliefs of significant others (Saeed & Grant, 2004); (c) needing to swear an oath to God before admission to Veterans of Foreign Wars or the American Legion (Heiner, 1992), and (d) being informed that Atheism was just a phase of being angry with God (Hwang, 2008). Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer and Nielson (in press) found that 42% of self-identified Atheists reported experiencing inequity and prejudice in at least one context (e.g., workplace, school, family) in the past five years as a result of their lack of religious identification. Additionally, from the same study, one in seven Atheists was found to have experienced discrimination socially at least once in the past five years.

Although literature exists indicating Atheists are a distinct and distrusted group vulnerable to discrimination, researchers have argued that this group has been overlooked in the literature (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007; Weinrach & Thomas, 1996). The authors point to the paucity of scholarly material, evidenced by the lack of articles in major educational, medical, and psychological databases (e.g., ERIC, Medline, PsycLIT, and PsychINFO). Linnenberg (1997) noted that this may be because people in the helping professions tend to assume that everyone's belief system includes one or more deities or some type of supernatural power.

In contrast to a number of studies that document the frequency of anti-Atheist discrimination (e.g., Downey, 2004; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006, Hwang, 2008;

Nash, 2003; Nussbaum, 1999), the current study was designed to explore how Atheists made meaning of discrimination in order gather information that could aid clinicians working with Atheists. The current study attempted to understand how Atheists explain to themselves acts of intolerance by addressing the following research questions using qualitative methodology:

1. How do Atheists explain or make meaning of stereotypes and discrimination?

2. In the construction of meaning, what factors are present that assist Atheists in making sense of stereotypes and discrimination?

Qualitative Approach to Research

Qualitative research typically involves examining a purposeful sample, often small in number, in order to collect information-rich data (Patton, 2002). This type of methodology usually involves an attempt to understand the participants' lived experiences as they relate to a social phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Whereas quantitative research examines data by counting how many times an idea appears or is endorsed, qualitative research analyzes the meaning behind the language data while noticing the themes and patterns that emerge (Fassinger, 2005; Patton; Polkinghorne, 2005). In addition to discovering emerging themes, qualitative research holds the possibility of developing theory from the themes and patterns (Fassinger; Patton; Strauss & Corbin). The current study employed qualitative research because it focuses on the experience of the individual in depth versus breadth as well as linking research and clinical practice (Patton).

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory design is a means to gather data in order to yield new insight and understanding of those participants' lived experiences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory can provide results such as: (a) construction of substantive theory, (b) greater understanding of the meaning of the existing quantitative data, and (c) a foundation for future research to build on regarding participants' personal experiences. Existing literature has explored the nature of anti-Atheist discrimination yielding quantitative data (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Furnham, Meader, & McClelland, 1998). A study employing grounded theory methodology would provide a greater understanding of the meaning of existing quantitative data, in the form of how Atheists make meaning of stereotypes and discrimination. Utilizing this approach allows for in-depth examination of the complexities of lived experiences in an attempt to learn new and rich information from the participants.

Methods

Participants

Participants in the current study were 10 self-identified Atheists between the ages of 18-75 ($M = 37$). All participants identified as Caucasian. The majority of participants stated that they resided in the Southern Region of the United States ($n = 7$). Although all 10 of the participants reported having some college education, seven said they had a Master's or Doctoral degree. With regard to sex, the current sample consisted of 7 men and 3 women. Finally, the majority ($n = 7$) reported being married and the remaining participants reported being single ($n = 3$).

Instruments

Brief demographic questionnaire. Prior to the interview, participants were administered a brief (3-5 minute) demographic questionnaire in order to obtain background information. This form asked about age, sex, marital status, number of children, ethnicity, level of education, occupation, location in the country, community population, and religious or nonreligious identification. This information was requested to ensure that participants self-identified as Atheist and to determine whether the sample was similar to previous studies for descriptive purposes. This demographic information can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Demographic Information

Participant Number	Sex	Age[a]	Race	Marital Status	State of Residence	Level of Education	Prior Religious Affiliation
1	M	75	Caucasian	Married	Virginia	Doctorate	None
2	F	46	Caucasian	Married	Virginia	Master's	Catholic
3	M	36	Caucasian	Married	Iowa	Master's	Mormon
4	F	28	Caucasian	Married	Virginia	Master's	None
5	M	40	Caucasian	Married	Virginia	Doctorate	Pentecostal
6	M	29	Caucasian	Married	Virginia	Bachelor's	Christian (Not Specified)
7	F	37	Caucasian	Single	Washington, D.C.	Master's	Mormon
8	M	18	Caucasian	Single	Virginia	High School	Catholic
9	M	33	Caucasian	Married	Arizona	Bachelor's	Mormon
10	M	30	Caucasian	Single	Virginia	Bachelor's	None

[a]$M = 37.2,\ SD = 15.3$.

Semi-structured interview guide. The semi-structured interview guide was developed by the researcher in order to obtain information regarding how Atheists make meaning of stereotypes and discrimination. Open-ended questions were used to

understand how Atheists live with and make sense of the negative stereotypes and discriminatory activity in the United States. Qualitative literature suggests that a funnel-like approach (i.e., from broad to narrow) throughout the course of the interview is likely to yield data that replicates or reinforces the participant's earlier account (Rennie, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For this reason initial questions, such as "How do you know you are an Atheist" and "Tell me the story of how you became an Atheist," were broad in scope, allowing the participant to describe the area of inquiry. Subsequent questions were more specific and narrower in scope, such as: "Tell me about a time when you felt/believed that your belief system was not respected," "Now, having lived through that experience, how do you explain to others what happened," and "Explain to me how you make meaning of that experience." Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, were recorded via audiotape, and subsequently transcribed by the researcher. Each participant was assigned a number and all identifying information, including the name of the participant or names mentioned during the interview, was coded according to this number. To increase credibility and trustworthiness, after the interview and following transcription of the interview, each participant was given the opportunity to read over a hard copy of the interview transcription. The participants had the option to make corrections if their information was not recorded accurately and were provided the opportunity to clarify and/or provide additional narrative.

The interviewer as instrument. The researcher was the primary tool when conducting semi-structured interviews (Fassinger, 2005). Grounded theory was specifically chosen for the current research because it offers interpersonal flexibility between researcher and participant (Patton, 2002). In other words, grounded theory is

adaptable, allowing the researcher to alter and modify questions in order to alleviate confusion for the participant and clarify the research question. In addition to the researcher providing clarification, Fassinger emphasized the importance of the researcher establishing rapport with the participant. Building rapport and a degree of trust between the researcher and the participant was a way to increase the likelihood that the participant felt safe. This was accomplished by spending approximately 5 to 10 minutes conveying purpose of the study, confidentiality, and answering any questions participants had regarding the nature of the study.

Sampling Method, Data Collection, Data Analysis

Sampling method. In an attempt to access an invisible population, such as Atheists, the current study utilized chain sampling. Chain-sampling, a form of purposeful sampling, has been validated as a means to gain access to populations that may otherwise be difficult to reach (Patton, 2002). For this study, participants were required to meet three criteria: (a) 18 years of age; (b) self-identifying as Atheist and; (c) having experienced some form of anti-Atheist discrimination. The initial pool of participants, the researcher's social and professional network, was contacted via email. These individuals were asked to communicate with their family, friends, and members of their community in order to put the researcher in contact with those individuals who might meet the criteria for participation in the study. The initial pool of participants included a total of 40 individuals who either emailed or telephoned the researcher expressing an interest in participation. After the researcher and the potential participant discussed the nature of the study and the three criteria required for participation, 15 of the 40 participants were considered viable participants and scheduled for interviews. From the pool of 15, a total

of 11 interviews were conducted (1 pilot interview and 10 semi-structured interviews).

After 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted and no new theme emerged, it was

concluded that saturation had been met. Saturation is the point at which additional data

fails to reveal any new information regarding participants' lived experiences. This point

of saturation is consistent with the writings of Charmaz (2006) and Patton (2002), who

noted that saturation typically occurs between 8 and 15 participants.

Data collection. Following completion of the consent document, the researcher

and the participant conducted the interview, which was recorded via audiotape. A pilot

interview was conducted to assess the adequacy of the semi-structured interview. The

pilot interview showed that question #3 of the original semi-structured interview, which

read, "*What does it mean to you to be an Atheist,*" needed to be modified. The initial pilot

study evidenced that the participant did not understand what the question was attempting

to solicit, appeared confused by the wording, and therefore had no response to the

question. After consultation, the researcher replaced the original item with the question,

"*What drew you to this belief system?*" Although the pilot interview provided valuable

information regarding the length of interview and clarity of questions, the data gathered

as a product of the interview was not informative and therefore not included in the

analysis. All interactions with participants were in accordance with the Ethical Principles

of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2010) and

Radford University's Institutional Review Board policies.

Data Analysis. Open coding, as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is a

process whereby the researcher identifies, labels, categorizes, and describes the

phenomenon as it is recorded in the transcribed text. In the current project, the researcher

reviewed each transcript and identified the meaning units as expressed in each line of text. Meaning units are descriptive labels created by the researcher that are congruous with the account of the participant. For example, when asked what drew him to identify as an Atheist, one participant reported, "[Atheist Literature] helped me believe I'm a powerful person and I have more control over myself" (P6). The meaning unit of this statement was simply "Being Powerful." Once meaning units were extracted from each interview, the transcripts were re-reviewed to establish accuracy between data, with the research team and researcher conferring about the accuracy of meaning unit creation. Similar meaning units were subsequently grouped together. These grouped meaning units were then developed into categories. For example, "Being Powerful," was grouped with similar meaning units, "Empowerment," and "Thriving." From this, the category *Reclaiming Power* was generated from the grouped meaning units. The researcher identified 14 meaning units (see Table 2).

Table 2
Initial Line-by-Line Meaning Unit Groups

Themes	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10
Acceptance	X			X					X	X
Understanding	X		X	X	X	X			X	
Internalizing/Personalizing				X	X				X	
Cognitive Rationalization		X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Social Justice/Political			X	X					X	X
Authenticity/Genuineness			X				X			X
Hesitation in Disclosure	X	X		X		X	X			
Witnessing for Atheism				X					X	
Tolerance	X								X	X
Uninformed		X								
Empowerment				X	X			X	X	
Opportunity to Grow				X					X	X
Combating Stereotypes			X	X					X	
Countercultural/Nonconforming					X					

When three or more participants reported data congruent with a meaning unit group, then the meaning unit group was labeled as a thematic phrase. Thematic phrases are groups of meaning units terms that represent a pattern or cluster of data (Boeije, 2010). Seven thematic phrases were generated during data analysis: *Authenticity, Engaging in Dialogue, Identification with Theist, Opportunity for Growth, Practicing Nonresistance,* and *Reclaiming Power*.

After the seven open coding themes were identified, axial coding was conducted. This phase of data analysis involves examining the similarities and commonalities among the thematic phrases in order to create key categories. Key categories represent a collection of similar thematic phrases, used to sort and fit phrases into a basic frame of generic relationships (Boeije, 2010). This process was guided by a combination of inductive and deductive thinking, consulting with the research team, and reviewing transcripts. For example, the thematic phrases *Opportunity for Growth* and *Social Activism* both involve accounts of moving forward after participants reflected on negative events. These similarities led to the researcher to believe that these thematic phrases should be grouped together. As a result of the axial coding process, the seven thematic phrases were grouped into two key categories: *Creating Meaning During Discrimination* and *Growth Through Intolerance*. As was noted by Strauss and Corbin (1998) key categories are intended to be both broad in scope and explanatory.

Results

This section explains the results of the semi-structured interviews and conveys the content regarding the themes that emerged during data analysis. Additionally, an

overarching theme is discussed, explaining how Atheists use events involving

discrimination or intolerance directed toward them as a way to affirm their core beliefs.

Open and Axial Coding

A total of seven themes emerged from the open coding phase. The themes related to

the first research question, regarding how Atheists made meaning of stereotypes and

discrimination. Data analysis evidenced seven themes including three process themes

(*Engaging in Dialogue, Identification with Theist,* and *Practicing Nonresistance*) and

four content themes (*Authenticity, Reclaiming Power, Opportunity for Growth* and *Social

Activism*).

When participants were asked how they made meaning of stereotypes and

discrimination seven themes emerged from the open coding phase: three process themes

(*Engaging in Dialogue, Identification with Theist,* and *Practicing Nonresistance*) and

four content themes (*Authenticity, Reclaiming Power, Opportunity for Growth* and *Social

Activism*). A process theme in the current study focused primarily on the activity of how

the participant made meaning during the act of intolerance. The first process theme was

Engaging in Dialogue, whereby participants reported accounts involving how they

responded behaviorally when rejected, harassed, or stereotyped by others. Each

participant explained how he or she made meaning by engaging with the individual who

was verbally attacking or harassing. One participant stated, "the only way to move

society and challenge the ways things are is by going out and talking to people and seeing

people's preconceptions about unbelievers" (P9). The second process theme,

Identification with Theist, involved meaning making through the process of

understanding and imaginatively entering the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of a Theist.

Here, participants reflected on his/her preconceived notions about Theists (e.g., their

24

feeling obligated to save souls). The third process theme was *Practicing Nonresistance*. The dimensions of this theme included responding to a stereotype or act of discrimination with acknowledgment and acceptance rather than avoidance, which was reportedly meaningful. Participants who reported content related to *Practicing Nonresistance* made a conscious choice not to argue, resist, or fight what had happened. Participant number one (P1) reported that he made sense of being stereotyped as an Atheist, stating, "It just is what it is."

Content themes involve the more conceptual or abstract cognitive component of deriving meaning following discriminatory activity. When participants were asked how they made meaning of stereotypes and discrimination, they responded with data that could be grouped into four content themes. Participants who endorsed content themes explained what meaning they made from discriminatory activity. The first content theme generated was *Authenticity*. Participants who endorsed content related to *Authenticity* explained that they made meaning by seeing discrimination as a product of authentic living. They explained that they perceived discrimination and stereotyping to be unavoidable or inevitable as a result of being true to oneself. A subsequent emerging theme during data analysis was *Reclaiming Power*. Participants reported that Atheists are seen as the symbol of immorality in the United States. Rather than feeling shamed by this stereotype, participants *Reclaimed Power* by embracing words, messages, and stereotypes intended to be painful or rejecting. Another theme that emerged was *Opportunity for Growth*. Participants who endorsed content related to this theme explained that they made meaning by perceiving events of discrimination as a venue to grow, by being open to learning new ideas in the hope of possibly revising their own belief premises. The fourth

content theme that emerged was *Social Activism*, which was explained "coming out", or as choosing to disclose one's belief system. *Social Activism* is the product of being "out" not only to be true to oneself, but to in order to advocate for the entire group of Atheists. Participants explained that "coming out" was seen as meaningful because it was necessary that Atheists be visible in order to combat negative stereotypes pervasive in society.

The axial coding phase generated two key categories: *Creating Meaning During Discrimination* and *Growth Through Intolerance. Creating Meaning During Discrimination* involves the creation of meaning in the moment of the discriminatory activity. *Growth Through Intolerance* explains how participants looked back on the event and made sense of what occurred. The seven themes and two key categories are shown in Table 3. Table 3 also includes meaning unit examples.

Table 3
Open Coding and Key Categories

Key Categories	Thematic Phrase	Endorsed by Participants	Meaning Unit	Meaning Unit Example
Coping With Intolerance	Authenticity	P3, P7, P10	Honesty	"I just made the decision that I wanted to be more honest with myself and be more authentic and sincere with others"
	Engaging in Dialogue	P3, P4, P9, P10	Important to Talk	"Again I think it's important to talk about these issues. That's kind of how you influence people and change minds and hopefully move the world to a better direction"

	Identification with Theist	P1, P3, P4, P5, P9	Understanding	"I would have said the same thing because it's a hard thing to get from within a paradigm"
	Practicing Nonresistance	P1, P4, P5, P9, P10	Acceptance	"I understand it [stereotypes about Atheists] and I don't have to make any meaning beyond that. Just understanding why a believer understands what they do about an Atheist"
Growth Through Intolerance	Opportunity for Growth	P3, P9, P10	Intellectual Enhancement	"…I probably was a little hopeful that I would get some negative reaction so I could consider what they were saying and think about it. And come up with a response that was meaningful for me"
	Reclaiming Power	P3, P4, P8, P9	Standing up for Oneself	"…it's sad to be judged, to understand that you are going to be judged constantly, but I was actually very proud of it because I'm able to stick up for myself"
	Social Activism	P3, P4, P9	Fighting Misconceptions	"I think it is really important to stand up for goodness… for human values, for rationality from a secular standpoint"

Table 4

Additional Factors Present in Meaning Making

Key Category/ Theme	Endorsed by Participants	Meaning Unit	Meaning Unit Example
Atheist Literature	P1, P3, P5, P8	Validating Identity	"I think reading the *God Delusion* was one of the most important books for me to read to feel comfortable identifying myself as an Atheist and feeling proud that I'm an Atheist and also being willing or thinking it's important for political and cultural reasons, social reasons, to be out as an Atheist."
Belief Factor	P3, P4, P9	Positive Human Values	"I like to associate with people who want to promote positive human values, that's more important to me whether they are Atheist or not. I have some friends who are very faithful Christians that I have long conversations with that I respect more than some angry Atheists that I've talked to."
Interpersonal Factor	P1, P5, P8	Unconditional Support	"My parents are the most open minded and loving people anybody could ever ask for and I love them to death. They are the greatest people on Earth and they've helped a lot. Even though my mom is practicing Irish Catholic she still loves me for who am I and I still love her for who she is. They show me the most respect ever so I show them twice as much respect back."

After completing data analysis of content related to the first question, the researcher revisited the data examining meaning units related to the second research question, what factors were present in assisting Atheists in meaning making (See Table 4). As a result of revisiting the meaning units, three themes emerged. Each theme fell into its own category, which were labeled *Atheist Literature, Belief Factors,* and *Interpersonal Factors*. Participants spoke about how *Atheist Literature* aided in the

28

meaning making process by learning the skills to be a more conscious and informed

Atheist. Another factor present in the construction of meaning was *Belief Factors,* which

involved the participants' personal values. The third theme was *Interpersonal Factors*.

Here, participants explained that having a strong emotional support system provided a

sense of security, which acted as a buffer when being stereotyped and discriminated.

Theory Building

Results of final phase of data analysis, selective coding, yielded the overarching

theme: *Opportunity to Affirm Core Belief Structure*. This overarching theme

communicates the narrative whereby Atheists use events involving intolerance or

rejection directed toward them as avenues to affirm and strengthen their belief system.

One participant illustrated this affirmation when he reported:

> I look at it as a challenge for me to come up with a response that's not only
>
> respectful, because I really believe in being civil in my discourse, but also in a
>
> way that is supported by evidence, research findings, because that's important to
>
> me… So for example the post that I had originally put out [on social media], let's
>
> make the national day of prayer community service day, I probably was a little
>
> hopeful that I would get some negative reaction so I could consider what they
>
> were saying and think about it. And come up with a response that was meaningful
>
> for me. (P3)

Another participant expressed how he was able to keep his belief system intact despite

rejection from others:

I believe it [inaccuracy of Theism] so strongly… I enjoy talking to people, even

with people on the street when they have a negative reaction. I still get a lot out of

it. It helps me to refine a way to present. (P9).

Understanding that the participants in this sample perceived stereotypes and

discrimination as an opportunity to test their belief structure is noteworthy. Although

dealing with intolerance can be challenging, participants in this study explained that they

perceive it as an opportunity to keep their belief structure intact. Here, another participant

noted how he affirms his beliefs:

I guess one of the ways I deal with it [discrimination] is just by… this is a war

metaphor, but arming myself with the foundation why the naturalistic perspective

is better for me and why it makes more sense, and learning more about

philosophy and science, reading books about evolution or Atheism. (P3)

Within the overarching theme, *Opportunity to Affirm Core Belief Structure*, exists the

underpinnings of being open minded. Each participant communicated this notion in his or

her own fashion. One participant report illustrated this concept:

I've altered my views too many times to ever say I'll never change my mind

again. That only happens by having your ideas challenged by talking to people,

learning new things. I really like the process of refining such points and if I've

made a mistake or somehow I missed something and there really is some sort of

Supreme Being or plan I think that's really important. (P9)

Although discriminatory acts send the message that the Atheistic belief system is wrong,

participants in this sample seemed to be able to come away from events by perceiving

those events as an opportunity to affirm and strengthen their core beliefs while remaining open minded.

Discussion

This section explains the relevant clinical implications when working with clients who self-identify as Atheist. These five implications include: *Awareness of Discriminatory Activity, Construction of Meaning After Discrimination, Atheism as Multicultural Construct, The Role of Supportive Factors,* and *The Power of Narrative Discourse.*

Clinical Implications

Awareness of discriminatory activity. Collectively, participants in the current study reported that they were seen as the symbol of immorality in a country built upon a Theistic belief system, and that being an Atheist is a direct contradiction to the current status quo (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006). Additionally, participants in this study believed that negative stereotypes about Atheists in the United States were pervasive. Participants in this study identified a number of forms of discrimination including death threats, loss of dating relationships, loss of friendships, shunning by family, social media harassment, social ostracism, subject to proselytizing, threat of divorce/losing child custody, and verbal harassment. Although none of the participants internalized negative stereotypes, it would be worthwhile for mental health professionals to explore this area because clients who internalize negative messages are at a higher risk for self-blame (Downey, 2004; Weaver et al., 2007). Moreover, those individuals who experience self-blame are at a higher risk for developing depression, grief, and Post Traumatic Stress

Disorder (Boelin, van den Bout, & van den Hout, 2003; Brewin & Holmes, 2003; Prigerson & Jacobs, 2001).

Construction of meaning after discrimination. It is important for clinicians to know how meaning is made for Atheists in order to aid Atheists in making meaning following discriminatory activity. Meaning making has been found to play a critical role in healing and positive personal transformation, as well as in decreasing psychological distress (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Newman, 2000; Park & Folkman, 1997; Skaggs & Barron, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Wade, 1998; Willis, 2008; Weaver, Turner, Schwarze, Thayer, & Carter-Sand, 2007).

The current study found that Atheists attempted to make meaning of their discrimination at both a process level and a content level. At the process level, the current study found that the majority of participants ($n = 6$) were successful utilizing coping skills including *Engaging in Dialogue, Identification with Theist,* and *Practicing Nonresistance*. This ability to cope with rejection, whereby the participant did something active, was utilized by the majority of the participants ($n = 6$). In addition to how Atheists actively managed stereotypes and discrimination, participants described meaning making on a content level, which involved the more abstract component of deriving meaning from stereotypes and discrimination. In this study, participants explained four different ways of meaning making. First, through the use of more abstract thinking, participants were successful in perceiving stereotyping behavior and discrimination as a consequence or product of authentic living (*Authenticity)*. These participants explained that they perceived discrimination and stereotyping to be unavoidable or the inevitable consequences of being true to oneself. Second, participants perceived discrimination as

an *Opportunity for Growth.* That is, participants explained that they perceived events of discrimination as a venue to grow by either being open to learning new ideas in the hope of revising their own belief premises or seeing this event as an opportunity to raise others' consciousness. The third meaning making content theme was *Reclaiming Power.* Rather than feeling shamed by discrimination, participants *Reclaimed Power* by taking ownership of hurtful words, messages, and stereotypes. As a result, participants reported feeling empowered. Finally, participants explained that they had a choice whether to disclose their belief system and referred to this as "coming out," a component of *Social Activism*. Participants who endorsed *Social Activism* spoke about two essential elements critical to meaning making. First, participants reported that they made meaning by seeing stereotyping and discrimination as a consequence of "being out" and living a visible life. Second, participants explained that "coming out" was seen as meaningful because it was necessary that Atheists be visible in order to combat negative stereotypes pervasive in society.

The attempt to make meaning is not necessarily beneficial to the individual but rather the benefit comes when meaning is created (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Park & Folkman, 1997; Segerstrom, Stanton, Alden, & Shortridge, 2003). In fact, as reported by Park (2010), who conducted a comprehensive review of the meaning making literature, meaning making is "widely considered essential for adjusting to stressful events" (p. 261). The current findings suggest making meaning of stressful events is beneficial, which supports existing literature.

Atheism as multicultural construct. Competent practitioners are able to recognize their clients as multicultural beings (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007; Sue & Sue,

2008). A multicultural perspective allows clinicians who respect diverse belief systems in order to promote social justice by empowering clients from disenfranchised populations (D'Andrea & Daniels, 2005). Within the multiculturalism framework, practitioners should have basic knowledge about the minority populations with whom they work (Sue & Sue). D'Andrea and Sprenger suggested that Atheism should be part of the multiculturalism conversation because viewing Atheism within the multicultural frame helps clinicians respect, understand, and help the diverse clients who enter therapy.

Atheists in the United States are marginalized, stigmatized, and discriminated (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Goodman & Mueller, 2009). As a result, disclosure as Atheist is low (Caldwell-Harris, Wilson, LoTempio, & Beit-Hallahmi, 2008; Goodman & Mueller). In this study, participants reported loss of relationships, shunning by family, and verbal harassment as a result of disclosing their belief system. If a client makes the choice to disclose their belief system to others, the results from the current study will help practitioners be aware of the challenges the Atheist may encounter, being the symbol of immorality (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann). Awareness of these stereotypes that exist may assist clinicians in initiating dialogue with clients in order to prepare them for what may occur as a result of disclosing the belief system.

The role of supportive factors. In the construction of meaning, several factors were present that assisted individuals in coping with adversity. One factor was having an emotional support system. That is, having partners or family members who exhibited unconditional love and support regardless of differences in belief. Participants explained that people in their lives who were supportive and provided unconditional positive regard allowed them to have a strong sense of security. The presence of emotional support has

been related to growth in college students (Armeli, Gunthert, & Cohen, 2001), survivors of cancer (Sears, Stanton, & Danoff-Burg, 2003), and individuals who experienced sexual assault (Frazier, Tashiro, Berman, Steger, & Long, 2004).

Another factor that was present during meaning making was *Atheist Literature.* That is, literature related to Atheism as a belief system. Here, participants explained that reading *Atheist Literature* allowed them to feel empowered and validated their belief system, despite being stereotyped and discriminated. It may be worthwhile for the clinician to refer clients to relevant literature. The findings from this study suggest that solace was found by drawing on written materials that helped explain and validate the Atheist's point of view.

Finally, participants communicated that seeing the advancement of LGB acceptance, resulting from a more visible LGB community, was inspirational and instilled hope regarding Atheism becoming more accepted in the United States. Seeing that "coming out" was effective for the LGB community, participants reported that it was meaningful to make the decision to disclose their belief system to others. One participant coined the term "Witnessing for Atheism," which she explained as being visible and living a life contrary to stereotypes. Other participants echoed similar accounts explaining that although everyone interacts with Atheists, they may not be aware that they are because some Atheists hesitate to disclose. Practitioners should be aware that some Atheists were able to find meaning when relating to other marginalized groups.

The power of narrative discourse. Providing participants in this study an arena to tell their story appeared to be cathartic and therapeutic in and of itself. Each participant seemed empowered by having the opportunity to tell their story. This was evidenced

when participants thanked the researcher for spending time with them and expressed interest in whether this research project would be published someday in the hopes of reading it. Discovering that storytelling was empowering for the participants is congruent with the findings of narrative therapy research (Bower, Kemeny, Taylor, & Fahey, 1998; Bruner, 1990; White & Epston, 1990). Thus, clinicians may want to give space and time in the therapeutic process for Atheists to speak to their experience because telling one's story in the presence of an interested other has been shown to create meaning (Dimaggio, Salvatore, Azzara, & Catania, 2003; Gilbert, 2002; Rosenthal, 1993; Pals, 2006; Willis, 2008).

Limitations

Several limitations exist in the current study. First, the generalizability of the results should not be assumed to apply to other Atheists. Although the grounded theory approach is the most influential paradigm for qualitative research, it is not intended to be generalizable as most experimental, hypothesis-testing studies are (Denzin, 1997). That is, this study can only speak for the lived experiences of the 10 participants who engaged in this study at the static moment of the interview. Therefore, the consequence of this limitation is the inability to make broad and sweeping generalizations about other Atheists.

According to Fassinger (2005) and Patton (2002), there is always the possibility that the lived experience of the researcher may impact the data that is collected. Although precautions can be taken to limit the impact of the researcher's lived-experience on the data, it is impossible to fully assess the interaction between participant and researcher. As Patton noted, the researcher can influence data collection, analysis, and interpretation

negatively or positively. Patton explained that documentation should be conducted (e.g., memos, consultation) as if a researcher were involved in any other potential conflict of interest such as evaluating a family counseling program and experiencing a divorce at the time of fieldwork. This researcher has always had a scholarly interest in belief systems, so in order to limit personal impact on the data, the researcher consulted periodically with research team and had them subsequently review data interpretation (e.g., line-by-line coding). In addition, the researcher attended to writing memos after each interview. These memos assisted the researcher and the team regarding the interaction between the participants and the researcher during the data collection process. The content of these memos include the researcher's personal reactions to data, monitoring thoughts, feelings, and reactions regarding how the participants responded in the semi-structured interview. The chair of the dissertation committee reviewed these memos. Both consulting with team members and memoing were measures taken to increase credibility, transparency, and trustworthiness.

Recommendations for Future Research

To the researcher's knowledge, no other published study has attempted to examine the meaning that Atheists construct after experiencing discrimination. Thus, the results of this study provide a greater understanding of the types of discrimination that Atheists face, as well as an understanding of how individuals make sense of the discrimination. Although the present study addresses a gap in the literature, the generalizability of the findings is limited given the research methodology. Future researchers are encouraged to use these results as a foundation to design a series of focused quantitative studies in order to corroborate the qualitative findings of the present

study. For example, researchers may want to examine whether Atheists perceive acts of stereotyping and discrimination as an *Opportunity to Strengthen Core Belief Structure* within a larger sample. Quantitative studies in conjunction with current findings may be more likely to be generalizable to Atheists as a population. In addition to quantitative studies, future researchers should continue investigating other methods (e.g., longitudinal, mixed methods) to explore how Atheists construct meaning from acts of injustice. Longitudinal qualitative studies may provide the opportunity for participants and researchers to build stronger models between the acts of discrimination and meaning making variables. In addition, the benefit of longitudinal qualitative studies is that it allows participants and researchers time (e.g., months, years) to become familiar with one another, which "increases trustworthiness and that supports credibility both within and outside the study" (Patton, 2002, p. 567).

Conclusion

The researcher in the current study sought to understand how Atheists constructed meaning of stereotypes and discrimination. As a product of the 10 semi-structured interviews, seven themes emerged including three process themes (*Engaging in Dialogue, Identification with Theist,* and *Practicing Nonresistance*) and four content themes (*Authenticity, Reclaiming Power, Opportunity for Growth* and *Social Activism*). These seven thematic phrases were grouped into two key categories: *Creating Meaning During Discrimination* and *Growth Through Intolerance*. The factors that were present during meaning making included *Atheist Literature, Belief Factors,* and *Interpersonal Factors*. These factors in conjunction with the two key categories provide the foundation for the overarching capstone, *Opportunity to Affirm Core Belief Structure*, which

represents the core story of how Atheists make meaning of stereotypes and

discrimination. In addition, *Opportunity to Affirm Core Belief Structure* communicates

the narrative whereby Atheists use events involving stereotypes and discrimination

directed toward them as avenues to affirm and strengthen their belief system. The results

of this study, taken collectively, suggest that Atheists may successfully make meaning by

using cognitive mechanisms that allowed them to manage, learn, cope, and thrive when

faced with being stereotyped and discriminated against. Therefore, mental health

practitioners should be aware of these factors when working with Atheists who have

experienced prejudice or injustice.

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CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The chapter that follows critically reviews the available literature regarding

Atheists in the United States. Three themes emerged from the literature: (a) Atheists as a

distinctive group; (b) Atheists as a highly distrusted group and; (c) Atheists, as a group,

face unique forms of discrimination.

Atheists as a Distinctive Group

Religious and Nonreligious Estimates in the United States

It is estimated that the majority of people in the United States believe in some

deity (Johnson & Hayes, 2003). Estimates of those who do not believe in some deity vary

between 3.6 and 5.2 million (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009; Lugo, 2008). Researchers rely on

private surveys as opposed to public and government funded surveys because the United

States Census Bureau is prohibited from inquiring about religious affiliation (United

States Census Bureau, 2000). In February 2008, researchers at Trinity College carried out

the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) which questioned 54,461 people

throughout the United States. Findings indicated that 15% of respondents reported that

they had no religion (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009). Out of this 15% subset, only 2.3% self-

identified as Atheist. For the purposes of this research, an Atheist is defined as someone

who does not have a belief in a deity and is non-spiritual (Cliteur, 2009).

Unique Traits and Characteristics of Atheists

Demographic Differences. Atheists are a distinctive group in their pattern of

social and political beliefs when compared to Theists (Hayes, 2000; Hayes & McAllister,

1995). In order to compare the religious convictions and sociodemographic backgrounds

of Atheists versus Theists affiliates, Hayes and McAllister (1995) examined data from 1991 Northern Ireland Social Attitudes. Results indicated that Atheists were more likely than their Theistic counterparts to be: (a) younger; (b) male; (c) more educated; (d) more affluent; (e) less likely to marry and; (f) more likely to reject traditional or conventional trappings of married life such as domestic and child-care responsibilities. Hayes (2000) analyzed the Eurobarometer Survey of 1994 and the 1994 General Social Survey of the National Opinion Research Center in an attempt to replicate the findings from Hayes and McAllister (1995) and to determine if participants in the United States were similar to participants in the United Kingdom. In examining the variables of-age, gender, marital status, education, fertility, occupation, and employment status for people who identified as Theists and Atheists, Hayes reported similar findings to the 1995 study, thus suggesting the similarity of Atheists in the two countries.

Values and Issues of Morality. A number of researchers have examined differences in the values and moral beliefs between Atheists and Theists. Hayes and McAllister (1995) found that Atheists were more likely than Theists to be: (a) committed to new morality issues (e.g., premarital sex, divorce, and abortion rights); (b) hold a liberal view on homosexuality and extra-marital sex; (c) cynical of political parties and the influence of religious leaders in politics; and (d) non-partisan in politics.

Lau (1989) designed a study that examined whether personal values differed among Protestants, Catholics, and Atheists. The Rokeach Value Survey and Scott's Value Scales were used to obtain data from 1,475 Chinese college students (864 male and 611 female) at five different universities and colleges in Hong Kong. Results from the analyses indicated that Protestant and Catholic students rated moral and relational values

49

(e.g., being forgiving, honest, moral, and non egoistic) higher than did Atheists. Atheists endorsed competency values (e.g., being ambitious and capable) more than their Theistic counterparts. Additionally, Catholics endorsed higher scores for social skills and status. In contrast to the high endorsement of social skills and status by Catholics, Atheists endorsed these values the least. Friendship was most important to Atheists and least important to Catholics. No differences were found on the values of academic achievement and intellectualism.

In addition to differences in personal values, differences in moral beliefs have also been reported between Atheists and Theists. Furnham and Brown (1992) set out to understand how human suffering could be explained by participants who identified as Catholic ($n = 36$), Protestant ($n = 23$), Muslim ($n = 15$), Jewish ($n = 13$), and Atheist ($n = 21$). The sample consisted of a total of 108 participants (38 males and 70 females). The researchers administered a six-component questionnaire. The first component included 15 "explanations" (e.g., God being the cause, nature as the cause, human ignorance, etc.) for the existence of suffering. Participants were asked to rate the importance of each explanation. Subsequently, participants read 4 scenarios: a child born blind, a child blinded by a "madman," 30 people killed in a mining accident, and 30 people killed in an earthquake. Participants were then instructed to rate the importance of each of the previous 15 explanations for each scenario. A factor analysis yielded 3 factors with eigenvalues greater than one. Human ignorance accounted for 25-33% of the variance, God accounted for 12-18%, and Nature accounted for 8-15%. Analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted which yielded: (a) none of the groups (Theist or Atheist) showed significant interactions with type or severity of disaster; (b) theological

50

explanations involving God were endorsed more frequently by Jews and Muslims and least by Atheists; (c) explanations using human ignorance had no significant interaction between any of the groups and; (d) the more important religion was to a participant the more likely he/she would endorse human ignorance rather than God as an explanation. The findings suggest that Theists and Atheists differ in how they explain hardship and disaster and may provide insight in to how individuals cope when faced with painful situations. For example, a more recent study conducted by Hwang (2008) found that non-belief helped Atheist patients cope with their spinal cord injury because they believed it was an accident instead of wondering whether there was "meaning" or "purpose" to their injury.

Benzein, Norberg, and Saveman (1998) carried out several studies to examine differences regarding inner values between people who self-identified as Christian or Atheist. In 1998, the researchers' first study aimed to understand the meaning of hope as expressed by a group of Christians. This study used a phenomenological-hermeneutical approach via personal interviews. Fifteen participants were included in the study, which consisted of seven males and eight females. All participants were members of the congregation of the Pentecostal Movement church. The researchers identified clear and consistent patterns among the participants in that the ultimate hope of the participants was for an afterlife of eternity with Jesus Christ. Hope for many of the participants appeared to be strengthened during periods of prayer, worship, fellowship with other believers, and devotion to scripture. In a subsequent study, Benzein, Saveman, and Norberg (2000) sought to examine the meaning of hope narrated by a group of Atheists. This study also used a phenomenological-hermeneutical approach based on narrative

personal interviews. Twenty-four participants were included in the study (11 men and 13 women). The researchers stated that hope was described by many participants as both something internal (i.e., relating to the person's being) and external (i.e., related to a person's doing). The majority of participants stated that their hope related to events and people in this world. One participant expressed his hope by stating "being a participant in the evolution of the Earth" (p. 309). The researchers noted that their findings suggest that above all, hope is linked to meaning and that the participants conveyed that hope is a lived process. Benzein, Saveman, and Norberg (2000) conclude that both studies (1998, 2000) convey the notion that hope is a component of the existence of being human.

More recently, Farias and Lalljee (2008) conducted a comparison study between people who self-identified as New Age, Catholic, or Atheist in an attempt to understand how Theists differ from Atheists regarding values. The sample consisted of a total of 158 participants (55 men and 103 women). All participants were residents of Oxford or London, United Kingdom. The researchers administered a battery of surveys including: Self-Concepts (20 statements test), New Age Practices, Traditional Religiosity, and Schwartz's (1992) Scale of Values. A between subjects MANCOVA was conducted ensuing the following results: (a) Catholics endorsed items indicating collectivism as most important, whereas Atheists endorsed this item the least; (b) New Age and Atheist groups endorsed Openness to Change considerably higher, whereas Catholics rated this the least; (c) Hedonism, Stimulation, Self-Enhancement, and Self-Direction were also rated highly by New Age and Atheists groups when compared with Catholics; (d) Catholics rated Benevolence, Tradition, Self-Transcendence, and Conformity higher than New Age and Atheists groups; (e) no differences were reported between groups for

Security and; (f) the New Age group rated Universalism more highly than both the Catholic group and the Atheist group. In sum, Farias and Lalljee (2008) noted that there appeared to be a significant amount of overlap in values between New Age and Atheists groups when compared to Catholics. Thus, New Age and Atheists groups were more similar with the dimension of Openness to Change and Self-Enhancement while Catholics were more inclined toward the dimension of Conservatism and Self-Transcendence. While this study contributed additional support that Theists and Atheists are distinct in many ways, Farias and Lalljee also discovered similarities between the group of Atheists and the group of New Age participants in that New Age and Atheists groups endorsed items of Openness to Change and Self-Enhancement.

Atheists as a Marginalized Group

Atheists in the United States are marginalized, stigmatized, and invisible (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, Nielsen, in press; Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Goodman & Mueller, 2009). Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann (2006) stated that Atheists appear to be marginalized because they do not share in the American core value of religion. Further, a 2007 *USA Today/Gallup* poll found that 53% of United States citizens said that they would not vote for an otherwise qualified candidate for United States President who was Atheist (Jones, 2007). This prejudice was exhibited by President George H.W. Bush when he stated, "I don't know that Atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriotic. This is one nation under God" (Sherman, 1988, p. 16). The following studies provide further support for the claim that Atheists are a marginalized group.

A number of researchers have noted that Atheists are a hidden population because they can choose whether to disclose their belief system (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, & Nielsen, in press; Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Goodman & Mueller, 2009). The concept of Atheists as an invisible population was exhibited when Bullivant (2008) conducted a study on how individuals reacted to the book, *The God Delusion*. The thesis of the text is that a super-naturalistic God does not exist, and that there is significant evidence for the claim. The researcher assessed the religious attitudes, beliefs, and reactions to the text at a British university among individuals who had read Dawkins's *The God Delusion*. Six-hundred and ninety-eight students from Oxford University (approximately 50% men and 50% women) completed the survey. Forty-two percent of participants indicated ascribing to some belief (Christian, Muslim, or Jewish), 33% identified as Atheists, and 24% identified as Agnostic. Of the entire sample (698 participants), only 1.3% of the participants said they were part of a formal organization related to being non-secular (British Humanist Association and National Secular Society). The lack of formal Atheist organizations reflects the invisibility of Atheists as a group.

The emphasis of religious pluralism and spirituality on college and university campuses increases the invisibility of Atheists (Nussbaum, 1999; Nash, 2003; Goodman & Teraguchi, 2008). Bullivant (2008) termed this phenomenon "disbelieving without belonging." Bullivant postulated this is the norm for most Atheists, especially among younger populations. The presence of religious clubs on university campuses validates the existence of groups of people who believe in some type of deity. Yet, the absence of formal representation (i.e., clubs, organizations) for non-theistic individuals questions the

legitimacy of this belief system. Thus, this lack of validity for Atheists on college campuses, like Atheists in the general public, may place this group and its group members at risk for further marginalization (Goodman & Mueller, 2009).

In addition to Atheists being an invisible population within the public sphere, they have also been overlooked in academic research (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007). The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI, 2004) found that 17% of college students surveyed endorsed "none" as their stated religious preference. Even with 17% of a college student sample identifying as Atheists, researchers have noted that there has been little research conducted on this age group (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007). Goodman and Mueller (2009) noted that this absence in the research for this age group implies that Atheists on campus, like Atheists in the general public, are invisible, stigmatized, and marginalized. Further, the researchers argue that Atheists are perceived as valueless, immoral, evil, or God hating (Harris, 2006; Hwang, 2008; Jenks, 1987). As a result of this stigmatization, it is, Goodman and Mueller argue, common for Atheists to hide that part of their identity. In essence, Atheists become and remain invisible. In response to this invisibility, Goodman and Mueller called for educating the "majority" about multiculturalism, sexual orientation, nontraditional students, and students of diverse religious backgrounds, including those without religious orientations.

Atheists as a Highly Distrusted Group

As was noted previously, Atheists differ from Theists in their values and social beliefs. As a result, some researchers argue that Atheists have long been perceived as a-moral and deviant (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Jones, 2007). In order to fully

55

understand Atheists, researchers have sought to explain why Atheists are perceived negatively in United States culture. This question is explored in the following studies.

The Perception of Atheists by Others

Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann (2006) examined data from the American Mosaic Project, which was a multi-method study of race and religion. A telephone survey of 2,081 people was conducted to inquire about participant's feelings and beliefs toward various groups (racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, religious/nonreligious). Trust was examined based on participants' responses to several measures. One measure queried whether these groups shared the participant's "vision of America." Another measure assessed prejudice by asking whether the respondent would approve or disapprove if his/her child wished to marry a member from each of the various groups. The researchers hypothesized that Muslims would be the least trusted group. However, findings indicated that Muslims were not the least trusted group. In fact, Atheists were found to be the least trusted group, more so than any other ethnic, religious or other minority group including Muslims, recent immigrants, conservative Christians, Jews, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and gays and lesbians. Both measures indicated that Atheists, as a group, were at the top of the list of perceived problematic groups. In fact, 79% of the sample believed that Atheists did not share the participant's vision of American society. Moreover, 47% of participants indicated that they would disapprove if their child wanted to marry an Atheist. The researchers argue that distrust of Atheists is rooted in moral beliefs and symbolic representation rather than an irrational unwillingness to tolerate the groups. The researchers conclude by noting that participants appeared to be construing Atheists as the symbolic representation of immorality and deviance because of their rejection of cultural

membership in American society. Lastly, the researchers argue that the weakening of boundaries among religious groups may heighten the boundaries between the religious and the nonreligious, increasing the potential for further marginalization of Atheists.

      Labeling Theory. Some scholars on Atheism have attempted to use Labeling Theory to explore the role of stigma. Labeling Theory postulates that once an individual is labeled as deviant then the individual will internalize this label and view himself/herself as deviant (Lemert, 1951). Further, as Becker (1963) argued, if an individual has one deviant trait then it is likely that other people will perceive that he/she has other deviant traits/characteristics. Using Labeling Theory as a foundation, Jenks (1987) administered a questionnaire consisting of 24 items to 146 college students from a small Midwestern university. Participants were asked to rate four groups of individuals (Atheist, homosexual, Catholic, Republican) based on perceived level of education, social class, use of drugs, and satisfaction with various aspects of their lives. Participants were also asked about their attitudes toward each of the four groups. Results indicated that the vast majority of college students believed that both Atheism (95.2%) and homosexuality (97.9%) were wrong. Only 4.8% of the participants stated that Atheism was never wrong. Results indicated that individuals in the Atheist and homosexual groups were seen as having less education, having had more permissive parents, to be more liberal, to be lower in social class, to be more in need of psychological counseling, and to use drugs more often than individuals in the Catholic and Republican groups. The majority of participants believed that individuals who identified as Atheist and homosexual would be more dissatisfied with friends, job, and life in general than the other two groups. Jenks concluded that the study provided support for using Labeling Theory with Atheists in that

57

participants who identified one deviant trait in an individual associated other deviant traits in other areas of the individual's life.

In an attempt to determine if Labeling Theory was applicable outside the laboratory, Heiner (1992) extended the line of research initiated by Jenks (1987) by using qualitative interviews to explore deviant status. The author interviewed ten people; one participant identified as Agnostic, one participant identified as Deist, and the remainder of the participants endorsed the label Atheist. All participants were members of the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF). Findings evidenced that almost all participants had experienced some form of prejudice or discrimination. Most of the examples of intolerance were committed by members of the participants' own families. The researcher argued that Labeling Theory could help explain the acts of discrimination in that those family members who knew of the participant's self-identification as Atheist perceived them as deviant in other areas of life. Heiner argued that Atheists were considered deviant because they were organized unbelievers and outspoken in the southern region of the United States where religion had a high degree of significance.

In-Group and Out-Group Perception of Atheists. In 2003, Kenworthy initiated an experiment to understand how participants (Theists and Atheists): (a) perceived those who hold the same belief (in-group) and; (b) perceived those who hold a different belief (out-group). The sample consisted of 102 psychology students from a private secular university in southern California. Eighty-one participants who self-identified as Theists were included in the in-group and were asked to view the out-group (21 participants who identified as Atheists). The 21 participants who self-identified as Atheists also saw themselves as being in the in-group and were asked to view the out-group (81 participants

who identified as Theists). Both Atheists and Theists characterized the out-group as holding their belief position for less rational reasons. Kenworthy noted that his most significant finding was that interactions with other people may be affected--either beneficially or adversely--by the perceptions of others (Theists or Atheists) as well as how in-group members arrived at that position. Because Atheists were perceived as part of the out-group, they were seen and treated as less rational.

Along similar lines, Hunter (2001) set out to examine self-esteem and intergroup perception. Hunter believed that intergroup discrimination would lead to reports of increased self-esteem. The researcher randomly assigned participants, all of whom self-identified as Christian, to one of two groups--an experimental group or control group. Ninety four participants were assigned to the experimental condition that evaluated in-group (Christian) and out-group (Atheist) target actors who behaved either "positively" or "negatively" when disclosing their beliefs. The control group consisted of 86 participants who completed a distracter questionnaire. Hunter reported that none of the participants in the control or the experimental group indicated experiencing an increase in self-esteem during the study. Findings did indicate, however, that participants in the experimental group evaluated in-group (Christian) targets more highly than out-group (Atheist) targets regardless of the target actor's behavior. Thus, these findings suggest that Atheists are viewed negatively by Theists regardless of whether Atheists behave positively or negatively.

Stereotypes About Atheists. Stereotypes concerning Atheists are pervasive in United States culture (Harris, 2006; Hwang, 2008; Jenks, 1987). Like most stereotypes,

59

these have not been well supported in the literature (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2007). In fact, the following studies shed light on the misperceptions surrounding Atheism.

Harper (2007) wanted to understand the stereotypes believed by religious students about Atheists. Three stages were conducted to address the research question. During the first stage, free responses were gathered about the social perception of Atheists by 105 introductory psychology students (75 women and 30 men) at the University of Johannesburg. Participants responded to the prompt to list "typical characteristics" of each group (e.g., Christians, Atheists, Jews, Muslims). Reported ethnicity in the sample of participants included 51% Black, 36% White, and 12% Asian. Eighty-three percent of the sample self-identified as Christian, 7% Other, 4% Muslim, 3% Hindu, and 3% nonreligious. Participants who self-identified as nonreligious were not included in the analyses. The free response approach provided 269 descriptions of Atheists, which were paired down to 55 descriptions.

Harper's (2007) second stage focused on investigating the degree to which religious students endorsed different subtypes of the Atheist's stereotypes developed in the first stage. Participants included 373 introductory research psychology students (294 women and 79 men). Reported ethnicity in the sample of participants included 77% White, 10% Asian, and 6% Black. Seventy-nine percent of the sample self-identified as Christian, 8% Muslim, 8% nonreligious, 3% Other, and 2% Hindu. Using the 55 descriptive statements from the first stage, participants were instructed to report on a five point scale how characteristic or "typical" the items were of nonreligious individuals. Items chosen by at least 50 percent of participants were retained and subjected to a Chi-squared analysis. Forty-one items were selected, 38 stereotypic and three counter

stereotypic descriptions. Harper identified six subtypes including Judgmental Cads (Hard-hearted, Unbelievers, Hard-headed, Judgmental), Cynical Critics (Cynical, Critical, Argumentative, Opinionated, Headstrong), Hedonistic Bohemians (Daring, Rebellious, Pleasure-seeking, Mysterious, Radical), Skeptics (Faithless, Nonspiritual, Not religious), Straightforward Individualists (Straightforward, Independent, Individualistic), and Seekers (Searching, Looking for something, Self-seeking, Questions everything).

Harper's (2007) final stage was designed to measure the valence of the 38 stereotypic items selected from the two previous stages. Participants included 127 introductory psychology students (99 women and 28 men). Of the sample, 46% identified Black, 41% White, 10% Asian, and 2% unspecified. Seventy-nine percent of the sample self-identified as Christian, 7% nonreligious, 6% Muslim, 6% Other, and 2% Hindu. Participants were instructed to specify how favorable or unfavorable they found the 38 stereotypic descriptions. The author reported that seven of the ten most consensual items had negative valence. In addition, results from the preliminary study were informative in that participants readily volunteered labels such as "aggressive," "arrogant," "empty," "evil," "freaks," "ignorant," " lost," "miserable," "sinners," "stupid," and "shallow" in describing nonreligious individuals. Harper noted that it appeared that religious perceivers had access to complex stereotypic beliefs about nonreligious people. These findings are noteworthy because as Downey (2004) noted, nonreligious people who live within religious communities are vulnerable to labeling and stereotyping, and as such they are of greater risk for discrimination. Although Harper's (2007) study was conducted outside of the United States, it provides critical information because similar results have been found in subsequent studies within the United States.

Hwang (2008) conducted a study in the southeastern region of the United States. She investigated stereotypes including: (a) Atheism is due to bad childhood experiences with religion; (b) Atheists are angry at God and; (c) life for Atheists must be depressing and meaningless. Hwang administered semi-structured interviews to a volunteer sample of Atheists with traumatic spinal cord injuries (SCI). Ten multi-part open-ended questions were administered to 15 participants, seven identified as strongly Atheistic, three as weakly Atheistic, and five as Agnostic. Results indicated that the assumption that Atheism was caused by a negative experience with religion was not supported by the responses from the majority of the participants.

In examining the data on childhood experiences, Hwang (2008) found that although some individuals reported having had negative childhood experiences, the majority of participants stated that non-belief was the result of an intellectual reappraisal of theistic belief. Apostasy manifested due to the unscientific, unreliable, and self-contradictory nature of religion. Hwang stated there was no evidence to support the claim that Atheists were angry at God. Further, participants stated that their non-belief helped them cope with their injury because they believed it was an accident instead of wondering whether there was "meaning" or "purpose" to their impairment. Lastly, the assumption that Atheists were depressed and lack a meaningful existence was not supported.

Caldwell-Harris, Wilson, LoTempio, and Beit-Hallahmi (2008) carried out a study in Boston, Massachusetts. The researchers sought to measure the accuracy of common stereotypes about Atheists. Stereotypes included being joyless, skeptical, cynical, nonconforming, and rarely experiencing awe. In addition to examining stereotypes, the researchers wanted to examine themes between Theists (Christians and

Buddhists) and Atheists on issues of personality, values, and beliefs. Five scales were administered including The Spirituality Scale (Delaney, 2003), Magical Ideation Scale (Eckblad & Chapman, 1983), Friedman Wellbeing Scale (Friedman, 1992), Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2002), and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index to 42 Atheists, 19 Roman Catholics, and 18 Buddhist meditators. In addition, the group of Atheists was instructed to respond to ten free-response questions. A one-way analysis of variance was carried out on each of the five scales.

Caldwell-Harris et al. (2008) reported five findings. First, the researchers noticed that their results countered the findings reported by Jenks (1987) who reported that Atheists are unhappy with their lives, friends, and work. With regard to sociality, joviality, emotional stability, and happiness, Atheists were no different than their Christian or Buddhist counterparts.

Second, Caldwell-Harris et al. (2008) noted that cognitive and rational reasons were endorsed as explanations as to why individuals were Atheist. This finding was consistent with previous research conducted by Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006). Novotni and Petersen (2001) and Exline (2003) put forth the idea that Atheists were angry at God. However, anger was neither reported nor endorsed toward any type of deity within the Atheist group.

Third, Caldwell-Harris et al. (2008) tested the stereotype that Atheists lack a foundation for morality. The authors designed the question, "Who or what influences your moral decision?" in order to address this specific stereotype. Findings indicated that Atheists in general, lived their lives according to their own inner values, personal

principles, and beliefs. A minority of the sample reported that they were influenced by family, friends, and written texts.

The last finding of Caldwell-Harris et al. (2008) related to how Atheists found meaning in life. Harris (2006) discussed the stereotype that Atheists find life meaningless and without purpose. The researchers explained that on the spirituality scale, Atheists endorsed items such as "I find meaning in life experiences" and "I have a sense of purpose." A key difference appeared to be that Atheists identified with constructs that were rooted in "eco-awareness" (e.g., respect for nature), human relationships, and self-discovery so long as items did not contain "sacred" or "spiritual" language. Atheists did not endorse "I meditate to gain access to my inner spirit," but they did endorse "I use silence to get in touch with myself." Atheists indicated they were "closed to spiritual experience," and did not believe in the world of the spirits. Therefore, Atheists are non-"spiritual." The authors stated that Atheists do indeed search for meaning and purpose in life. Atheists indicated that they discovered meaning in their interpersonal relationships with friends and family and possessed a great love and appreciation for nature. In addition to the wonderment of nature, science, art, and music were all noted as meaningful areas of interest.

Caldwell-Harris et al. (2008) concluded that the scales and free response items provided a more thorough understanding of Atheists as a group. They cede the stereotype of Atheists as logical, skeptical, and nonconformist. However, the researchers noted that the stereotype that Atheists were cynical and joyless was without merit.

In an attempt to understand the stereotypes that Atheist college students encounter, Mueller (in progress) conducted a qualitative study of 20 Atheist college

students. The researcher tested common stereotypes such as Atheists have no morals, live without purpose, and are devil worshipers. In contrast to stereotypes, Atheists were found to: (a) have a personal morality (e.g., purpose, values) based less about salvation after death and more about contributing to the human condition (i.e., taking care of the environment, service to humanity); (b) make choices for the sake of goodness rather than following scripture and; (c) have a general knowledge of science, various cultures, religious traditions, and philosophies, which was reported to have an impact on their nontheistic belief system. Additionally, the researcher found that Atheist college students were aware that their nontheistic belief system was generally not accepted in the United States. Further, the majority of participants reported not disclosing their belief system out of fear that they would offend others or make others uncomfortable. Mueller argues that these beliefs result in Atheist invisibility and leaves them at risk for further marginalization.

Atheists Face Unique Forms of Discrimination

Anecdotal reports, qualitative studies, and quantitative studies suggest that anti-Atheist discrimination does occur (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997; Dawkins, 2007; Dennet, 2006; Downey, 2004; Furnham, Meader, & McClelland, 1998; Heiner, 1992; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006, Hwang, 2008; Nash, 2003; Nussbaum, 1999; Peters, 2009; Pollit, 2005; Reisberg, 1998; Saeed & Grant, 2004; Smith-Stoner, 2007; Volokh, 2006). Downey (2004) argues that two categories of discrimination exist toward Atheists: acts of discrimination common to marginalized groups in general and acts of discrimination unique to Atheists.

Acts of Discrimination Toward Atheists Common to Marginalized Groups

The first category of discrimination toward Atheists are those acts common among other marginalized groups (e.g., LGB) including: (a) being denied employment (Downey, 2004); (b) being physically harmed by other people (Downey, 2004); (c) being threatened to be killed (Downey, 2004; Kaye, 2008; Nussbaum, 1999); (d) being shunned by families (Downey, 2004) and; (e) not being allowed to join community organizations (Downey, 2004; Heiner, 1992).

Acts of Discrimination Unique to Atheists

Atheists face some unique forms of discrimination. Researchers have documented accounts which include: (a) proselytizing and unrequested or unwanted prayers by hospital staff and clergy (Smith-Stoner, 2007); (b) having desires and requests for a non-religious funeral superseded by the beliefs of significant others (Saeed & Grant, 2004); (c) swearing an oath to God before admission to Veterans of Foreign Wars or the American Legion (Heiner, 1992) and; (d) minimizing or dismissing one's belief system by being informed that Atheism is just a phase of being angry with God (Hwang, 2008).

While there have been anecdotal claims of discrimination reported by Atheists (Flynn, 2007; Goodstein, 2000; Heiner, 1992; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Koproske, 2007; Pollitt, 2005; Reisbuerg, 1998, Zorn, 2008), Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, Nielsen (in press) provided the first systematic assessment of discrimination toward Atheists. The researchers designed a study to measure the percentage of Atheists in the United States who had experienced discrimination, in what context (e.g., family, workplace), and potential factors that may have contributed to the discrimination. The researchers analyzed data from the 2009 American Religious Identification Survey,

which included responses from 54,461 adult participants from across the United States. Of the 54,461 participants, 1,106 identified as Atheists (2%). Forty-two percent of the sample of Atheists reported experiencing inequity and prejudice in at least one context (e.g., workplace, school, family, socially) in the past five years because of their lack of religious identification. With regard to context, Atheists were more likely to face prejudice in family settings and social settings than they were in the workplace, school, volunteer organizations, or the military. In fact, one in seven Atheists was found to have experienced discrimination socially at least once in the past five years. Specifically, the percentage of Atheists who experienced discrimination in various contexts included: socially 26%; workplace 14%; school 13%; family 13%; volunteer organization 9% and; military 3%. The strongest predictor of discrimination was self-disclosure as Atheist, especially in school and college settings. With regard to perceived discrimination in the military, the authors noted that discrimination was often lowest in settings where it was possible to file suit against those engaging in discriminatory behavior. Lastly, results from this study indicated that Atheists were possibly unwilling to acknowledge their Atheism to family, friends, and co-workers out of concern that if they were open about their beliefs it would increase the likelihood of encountering intolerance.

Hammer, Cragun, and Hwang (in review) conducted another study in order to understand the nature of anti-Atheist discrimination. Participants consisted of a volunteer sample of 307 Atheists residing in the United States. The researchers collected first-person accounts of anti-Atheist discrimination and documented the frequency of the acts. Four hypotheses were tested: participants who more strongly identified with their Atheism would report great occurrence or more frequent accounts of discrimination;

participants who exhibited passionate thoughts and feelings more outwardly regarding activism and advocacy would experience more discrimination; participants who were "out" concerning their Atheist identity to more people would report more discrimination; and that a positive relationship would exist between strictness of family religious expectations and the frequency of social ostracism by one's family. The researchers adapted measures originally developed for studying discrimination faced by gays and lesbians in order to examine anti-Atheist discrimination. Participants were administered a battery of measures including Discrimination Stress (Lewis, Derlega, Berndt, Morris, & Rose, 2001), Atheist Discrimination (Highlen, Bean, & Sampson, 2000), Identification (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997), and Outness (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). Internet recruitment included a sample of Atheists from the United States solicited by the Center for Atheist Research. A One-Way ANOVA and three Pearson correlations were conducted. All analyses were statistically significant and in the direction hypothesized. Subsequently, a multiple linear regression was performed that indicated that outward passion (i.e., activism, advocacy) for Atheism coupled with the degree of being "out" increased the participant's likelihood of reporting greater discrimination overall. The implication of these findings suggests that the more "out" an Atheist is, whether to their family, friends, and/or co-workers, the more likely he/she is to report experiencing discrimination.

Hammer, Cragun, and Hwang (in review) documented the frequency of discriminatory acts. Social ostracism was reported by more than half of the sample, suggesting that social support for some Atheists might be compromised. The most frequently reported act of discrimination was slander. Ninety-eight percent of the sample

reported that they had witnessed anti-Atheist acts of prejudice through the media (e.g., television shows). Moreover, 86% of the sample reported observing four or more anti-Atheist messages in the media. Seventy-seven percent of the sample indicated having experienced coercion (e.g., pressure to participate in religious activities) as a result of their Atheist identity. Participants explained that they felt pressured to participate in religious activities because of the possible consequences of not following the norm. One fifth of the sample reported that they had been "outed" or "exposed" against their will. The researchers remarked that Atheists encountered messages that paralleled those directed at other minority groups. For instance, the majority of the sample reported that they had been told that to be an Atheist was an immoral decision, similar to members of the LGB community being told that their sexual orientation was a choice (Meyer, 2003). Hammer, Cragun, and Hwang emphasized that the findings in the current study paralleled those in the literature on LGB individuals, noting that persistent and deprecating messages can lead to the internalization of negative attitudes about oneself (Meyer, 2003). With regard to institutional inequity, almost half of the participants indicated that they had experienced disapproval for joining and participating in secular organizations. Along similar lines, about one fifth of the sample said that denial of opportunities with respect to goods and services had occurred. Individual discrimination (e.g., by employers, landlords, law enforcement officials, medical personnel) was reported more often than systemic discrimination (e.g., when judges deny or limit custody rights based on a divorced parents' non-belief). Other forms of discrimination reported included hate crimes. Sixteen percent of the sample said that they had experienced property damage or physical assault due to their identification as Atheists. Stereotyping was indicated by two

thirds of participants who indicated that they were either treated differently or unfairly due to their perceived minority status. The findings shed light on the hypothesis that discrimination toward Atheists may be subtle and covert ranging from questioning the parenting ability of Atheists to discriminatory language toward Atheist veterans in the United States military.

The Treatment of Atheists in Medical Settings. In addition to social ostracism and coercion experienced with the family and other settings, data suggest that Atheists face unique forms of discrimination in medical settings. For instance, Hammer, Cragun, and Hwang's study (in review) found that one in seven Atheists said that while hospitalized they were proselytized by visiting clergy even after asking for no religious intervention. Additional researchers have also reported acts of discrimination against Atheists in medical settings, such as end-of-life issues (Furnham, Meader, & McClelland, 1998; Hwang, 2008; Saeed & Grant, 2004; Smith-Stoner, 2007).

Smith-Stoner (2007) originally set out to explore end-of-life preferences for Atheists. However, the study also yielded evidence regarding anti-Atheist discrimination. A pilot study was carried out to assess the appropriateness of potential end-of-life interventions for Atheists. The author administered questionnaires to 88 participants, all of whom identified as Atheist. Participants reported the desire for a "good death." This included clinicians being respectful of their non-belief, specifically withholding prayer or any references to deities. With regard to a "good death," participants conveyed a deep desire to find meaning in their own lives (intrapersonal), to feel a sense of connectedness with family and friends (interpersonal), and to experience gratitude for the natural world (natural interconnectedness) through the dying experience. Although the participants in

the study voiced their desire for a "good death," the researchers found that participants experienced anti-Atheist discrimination during their end-of-life care by having those requests ignored. Several participants reported being proselytized by hospital workers and subjected to unwanted prayer even though they requested no religious intervention.

In an attempt to examine treatment of Atheists in medical settings, Hwang (2008) interviewed individuals with spinal cord injuries and reported that Atheist participants experienced discrimination or situations where they thought that they could not discuss their Atheism openly among friends and family members. For instance, some Atheists were told by clerical and hospital staff that their Atheism was just a phase of being angry with God. Subsequently they were told that if they prayed to God they may be cured of their spinal injury. Hwang also reported that it was likely that some participants failed to recognize discrimination that was present or that anti-Atheist prejudice was disguised by other forms of discrimination (anti-disability).

Furnham, Meader, and McClelland (1998) explored what factors affected participants' judgments in constructing a ranked wait list for kidney patients requesting access to dialysis. One hundred and sixty-seven hospital staff (100 female, 67 male) were included in the sample. Forty-six percent self-identified as Christian, 25% Hindu, 14% Atheist, 11% Muslim, and 4% Sikh. Each participant was administered a survey consisting of 16 hypothetical patients. Each hypothetical patient's demographic details varied according to gender, income, alcohol consumption and religious beliefs. The researchers hypothesized that the vignettes which contained Christian patients would be chosen over Atheists because of in-group favoritism. A Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test and MANOVA were conducted indicating participants favored females over

males, nondrinkers over drinkers, poor over rich, and Christians over Atheists. Interestingly, participants who identified as Christian ranked individuals who drank alcohol more deserving of treatment than Atheists. This last finding exhibits the prejudice that Atheists face.

Making Meaning of Discrimination

Meaning-making and finding both the positive and negative in one's lived experiences has been shown to be critical regarding healing and positive personal transformations (Clarke, 2006; Frankl, 1984; Henery, 2007; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Newman, 2000; Park & Folkman, 1997; Skaggs & Barron, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Wade, 1998; Willis, 2008). Further, it may also play a critical role in shaping psychological distress (Weaver, Turner, Schwarze, Thayer, & Carter-Sand, 2007). The following studies substantiate the claim that making meaning of discrimination is worthwhile for individuals who have experienced an act of injustice.

In an attempt to understand the meanings gay men attribute to discrimination, Willis (2008) performed individual interviews with seven gay men who had experienced a hate crime. The researcher found consistent themes including: (a) being a victim of discrimination because of their identity; (b) attempting to preserve a sense of human integrity; (c) meaning can be transformative for the victim when having shared their story with another person; and (d) positive meaning-making appears to be an integrative human process. Willis also reported that meaning-making as related to acts of discrimination appears to be critical to the healing that occurs after the event.

Weaver, Turner, Schwarze, Thayer, and Carter-Sand (2007) set out to explore how intimate partner violence (IPV) victims make meaning of their residual IPV-related

72

injuries. The sample consisted of 16 women who resided in a large, Midwestern metropolitan area. Participants were divided into 4 separate focus groups. The researchers reported that making meaning of acts of injustice may play a critical role in shaping psychological distress. For instance, when participants attributed meaning to what transpired, they reported thoughts: (a) of self-blame; (b) that diminish one's identity (e.g., damaged, ruined, smashed, destroyed) and; (c) that construct one's identity (e.g., survivor, empowered, resilient).

The Present Study

Based on the review of the literature, Atheists are: (a) a distinct group (Bainbridge, 2005; Hayes, 2000; Hayes & McAllister, 1995); (b) a highly distrusted group in the United States (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Jenks, 1987; Jones, 2007) and; (c) a group that faces unique forms of discrimination (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997; Dawkins, 2007; Dennet, 2006; Downey, 2004; Furnham, Meader, & McClelland, 1998; Heiner, 1992; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006, Hwang, 2008; Nash, 2003; Nussbaum, 1999; Peters, 2009; Pollit, 2005; Reisberg, 1998; Saeed & Grant, 2004; Smith-Stoner, 2007; Volokh, 2006).

Researchers have been able to document the prevalence of discriminatory activity among Atheists. Further, scholars have been able to both broadly define categories of discrimination (common to minority groups and unique to Atheists) as well as account for individual acts of discrimination, including being proselytized by hospital staff and clergy (Smith-Stoner, 2007). Although researchers have an understanding of the nature of the activity, what has been absent in the literature is how Atheists make sense, or assign meaning to, the acts of discrimination and stereotypes. Moreover, in contrast to a number

of studies which document the frequency of anti-Atheist discrimination (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, & Nielsen, in press; Downey, 2004; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006, Hwang, 2008; Nash, 2003; Nussbaum, 1999), the current study attempts to build theory regarding how Atheists make sense of discrimination.

Although this study has not been addressed for Atheists, similar qualitative methodological approaches and research questions have been utilized to examine other minority groups, such as LGB and victims of IPV (Weaver, Turner, Schwarze, Thayer, & Carter-Sand, 2007; Willis, 2008). As a result, mental health professionals have literature to help guide them when working with members of those groups. The current study will provide mental health professionals with data to assist them when working with clients who identify as Atheist.

Research Questions

In response to D'Andrea and Sprenger (2007) who called for more attention studying Atheists, the following study is proposed. The present study attempts to understand how Atheists explain to themselves acts of intolerance by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do Atheists explain or make meaning of stereotypes and discrimination?

2. In the construction of meaning, what factors are present that assist Atheists
    in making sense of stereotypes and discrimination?

In order to address the questions of interest, grounded theory methodology will be used. Utilization of a grounded theory design will serve two purposes. First, it allows the researcher to conduct in-depth interviews yielding the participant's experience of how he/she makes meaning of stereotypes and discrimination. This is commonly called the

participant's "lived experience." Second, grounded theory provides the potential for theory development. As a result of using grounded theory, this study will yield languaged data. Languaged data is a form of qualitative data that is significantly different from quantitative data (Polkinghorne, 2005). A key difference is the in-depth nature of the data on the richness and fullness of the experience of being an Atheist in the United States.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter articulates the underlying principles for utilizing grounded theory research design, prospective participants, conditions for inclusion in this study, rationale for interview questions, and procedures for data analysis. In addition to addressing the rationale as to why grounded theory was chosen, this chapter addresses how the current study was conducted.

Grounded Theory

Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed grounded theory research design as a means to gather data in order to yield new insight and understanding of those participants' lived experiences. Grounded theory research has been said to be the most prominent approach for qualitative research in the social sciences (Denzin, 1997). The core tenet of grounded theory is the construction of theory out of the lived experiences of participants. Given that this design integrates theory and practice, it is held as a methodological exemplar of the scientist-practitioner model (Fassinger, 2005).

Grounded theory is advantageous for several reasons. First, this methodology allowed for in-depth examination of the complexities of the lived experiences in an attempt to learn new and rich information of those peoples. Second, grounded theory offered interpersonal flexibility between researcher and participant. Third, this methodology was adaptable, which allowed the researcher to alter questions in order to alleviate confusion for the participant and clarify the research question. Finally, grounded theory produced theory derived from participant data.

Voids in the Research

As was noted in Chapter II, missing from the existing research includes: (a) how Atheists make meaning of stereotypes and discrimination; (b) what factors are present that assist Atheists in making sense of stereotypes and discrimination (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007; Goodman & Mueller, 2009) and; (c) theory explaining how Atheists reconcile discrimination. Although numerous studies have provided a collection of facts, there is little theory by which to understand those facts. Therefore, grounded theory can provide three potential outcomes: (a) construction of substantive theory; (b) greater understanding of the meaning of the existing quantitative data and; (c) a foundation for future research to build on regarding participants' personal experiences.

Application to Current Study

Although a number of studies (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, & Nielsen, in press; Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Furnham, Meader, & McClelland, 1998) have explored the nature of anti-Atheist discrimination yielding quantitative data, a grounded theory methodology provided the opportunity to understand how Atheists make meaning of stereotypes and discrimination. Grounded theory permits the researcher to examine Atheists from a unique angle (i.e., through semi-structured interviews).

<div align="center">Participants</div>

In the present study, participant criteria included being a minimum of 18 years of age and self-identifying as Atheist. For the current study, an Atheist was defined as someone who self reported that he/she does not have a belief in a God(s)/deity (Cliteur, 2009).

Atheists in the public are invisible and marginalized and as a result, it is not surprising that self-identifying as Atheist in the public is low (Caldwell-Harris, Wilson, LoTempio, & Beit-Hallahmi, 2008; Goodman & Mueller, 2009). Therefore, it made sense to utilize chain-referral sampling. This approach involved interviewing individuals through the researcher's established social network. Chain-referral sampling is a useful technique when attempting to recruit "hidden" populations.

Sample size is generally not fixed when using grounded theory (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The purpose of interviewing participants was to learn new information. Therefore, data collection continued until the description of the experience was saturated. That is, the researcher continued iteration until the new sources of data repeated what had been previously learned and the participant's explanation duplicated what the researcher already knew (Polkinghorne, 2005). Grounded theory allowed the researcher to repeatedly analyze the data after each interview, which permitted recognition of saturation throughout the data collection process. It was anticipated that the researcher would conduct between 8 (minimum) to 15 (maximum) participant interviews by March 3rd 2011. Number of interviews was based on available literature. Findings generally indicate that saturation occurs between 8 and 15 participant interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Patton, 2002).

Instruments

Demographic Information Form

All Participants were administered a demographic information form (see Appendix C). This form inquired about age, sex, marital status, number of children, ethnicity, level of education, occupation, location in the country, community population,

and religious or nonreligious identification. This information was requested to ensure that they self-identified as Atheist and to see if the sample in this study was similar to previous research samples.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix D) was developed by the researcher in order to obtain how Atheists make meaning of stereotypes and discrimination. Open-ended questions were used to understand how Atheists live with and make sense of the negative stereotypes and discriminatory activity in the United States. Initial questions for each section asked the participant to broadly describe the area of inquiry. Subsequent questions were more specific and narrower in scope. Qualitative literature suggests that a funnel-like approach (i.e., from broad to narrow) throughout the course of the interview is likely to yield data that replicates or reinforces the participant's earlier account (Rennie, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In order to assess the adequacy of the proposed semi-structured interview, a pilot interview was conducted. The pilot interview consisted of meeting and interviewing one participant (an Atheist). The focus of the pilot interview was to discover any questions or prompts which would need to be modified. As is addressed in the subsequent chapters, the pilot interview revealed that one item was not sufficient to collect that data of interest. The researcher consulted with the research team to determine whether the pilot data could be included in the current present study.

Researcher as Instrument

The researcher was the primary tool when conducting semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002). Grounded theory research involves having the participant tell his/her story

as he/she responds to open-ended questions. The participant must feel like he/she is in a secure environment. Building rapport and a degree of trust between the researcher and the participant was a way to increase the likelihood that the participant felt safe. As a result, participants felt more comfortable sharing what was meaningful and intimate to him or her. Fassinger (2005) discussed how she was able to appreciate the complexity inherent in the relationship between the researcher/interviewer and the participant. She explained that in order to enhance the relationship, sometimes culturally appropriate gestures of respect are necessary to ensure trust and deference. It was not necessary during the interview to convey any particular cultural gesture. However, attempts were made to ensure trust and deference by building rapport with each participant prior to the interview. This consisted of spending approximately 5 to 10 minutes conveying purpose of the study, confidentiality, and answering any questions participants had regarding the nature of the study.

It is common practice to encourage and prompt participants to elaborate and clarify their responses (Fassinger, 2005). As a result of this interaction, the researcher influenced what areas are emphasized. The researcher was more than an instrument that was gathering data. The researcher had his or her own values and biases which may have influenced data collection and analysis. Therefore, as recommended, the researcher took part in a process known as memoing. The memoing process allowed the researcher to explore any preconceptions, assumptions, and biases pertaining to the research topic. Recognizing this reality, the researcher will carried out the memoing process and attended to a reflexive journal, noting thoughts, feelings, and assumptions throughout the duration of the interviews. In addition, the research team acted as consultants and

reviewers to help monitor any apparent biases that may surface. Once the memoing process was undertaken, the research team systematically reviewed these notes following each participant interview. The team included the dissertation chair and two chair members of the research team. Although the researcher's biases cannot be eliminated altogether, these precautions and safety measures increased the credibility and trustworthiness to the research findings.

There is no consensus in the literature that indicates that the researcher/interviewer needed to be a member of the group or groups with whom he or she is interacting (Fassinger, 2005). The researcher, who is in his late 20s was not raised within an organized religious belief system. However, after high school he attended a Christian undergraduate school near Boston, Massachusetts. During this time he identified as a Christian and was active in church (e.g., Bible study, devotions). Subsequently, the researcher indentifies as neither Christian nor Atheist and would self-classify as nonreligious.

Procedure

Prior to interviewing participants, this study underwent review by the Radford University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once the researcher received approval from the IRB, the initial pilot interview was conducted. It is anticipated that this first interview will identify any questions or prompts in the semi-structured interview guide that may need modification. In addition, this initial pilot interview will help determine the length of interviews and whether the audiotape equipment is working properly. Following each interview, a participant debriefing was conducted to solicit feedback from the participant, in order to ensure accuracy of participant report.

Sampling Method

As was noted, Atheists may be invisible in the public. In order to access this sample that may not readily be identifiable, the research used chain-sampling, a form of purposeful sampling. Chain-sampling has been supported as a means to gain access to populations that may otherwise be difficult to access. Chain-sampling required identifying the initial pool of participants that may or may not possess the desired variable(s) of interest. The initial pool was asked to contact their family, friends, and community in order to put the researcher in contact with individuals who qualify for participation in the study. In the current study, the researcher began by contacting friends and colleagues in the community by email to request that they put the researcher in contact with their friends and colleagues who identify as Atheist and have experienced some form of anti-Atheist discrimination (See Appendix A). Once participants were recruited via chain-referral sampling, the researcher sought verbal commitment to participate (i.e., via telephone) or written commitment to participate (i.e., via email), and then scheduled an interview with each participant in-person.

Semi-Structured Interview

Following completion of the informed consent document (See Appendix B), the researcher and the participant conducted the interview. Throughout the interview, the researcher worked to maintain rapport. Once the participant felt comfortable and was ready, the interview commenced. The interview was recorded via audiotape and computer software in order to be transcribed. All identifying information regarding the name of the participant or mentioned names during the interview was coded according to the number given to that participant. To increase credibility and trustworthiness, after the

interview and following transcript of the interview, each participant was given the opportunity to read over a hard copy of the interview transcription to confirm that information was recorded accurately. The participants had the option to make corrections if their information was not recorded accurately and were provided the opportunity to clarify and/or provide additional narrative. All interactions with participants were in accordance with the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct and Radford University's Institutional Review Board policies (American Psychological Association, 2002).

<div align="center">**Analyses**</div>

Data analyses utilizing grounded theory consisted of three distinct phases: open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding consisted of organizing transcribed data into themes. These themes were: (a) a shortened phrase of a much larger phenomenological experience; (b) labeled as close as possible to the actual words mentioned in the interview and; (c) questioned and scrutinized to examine alternative interpretation and conditions surrounding the meaning (Fassinger, 2005). Themes drawn from the participants were compared, categorized (grouped by themes), and recategorized following each participant's interview. As additional data is gathered, groups of themes underwent modification, recategorization, and/or were placed into new categories.

The second phase of analysis in grounded theory was axial coding. This phase examined the connections and associations among themes. The researcher attempted to further arrange and organize themes into key categories and subcategories. Key categories are often more broad and explanatory, whereas subcategories are more specific describing various aspects of the participants' phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Interview data was analyzed during axial coding. The researcher examined the consequential relationships between key categories and subcategories. It was during this process that hypotheses was created and refined with each additional interview. In order to document how hypotheses were generated, memos were kept. Memos provided documentation to explain why hypotheses were generated and contributed to the credibility and trustworthiness of this process.

Fassinger explained that grounded theory is a constant comparison method stating that it involves:

> a) comparing and relating subcategories to categories, b) comparing categories to new data, c) expanding the density and complexity of the categories by describing their properties (attributes of a category) and dimensions (ordering of the properties along a continuum), and d) exploring variations (e.g., disconfirming instances) in the data and reconceptualizing the categories and their relationships as necessary. (2005, p. 160)

Grounded theory's constant comparison method eventually reached categorical saturation. Categorical saturation is the point when additional data failed to reveal any new information concerning participants' lived experiences. Once this point was reached, the researcher then identified the specific properties (attributes of a category) and dimensions (ordering of the properties along a continuum) of the key categories and subcategories.

Selective coding was the third and final phase in grounded theory. Here the researcher identified a central "core" category which tied all of the key categories together in order to develop "an explanatory whole" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Fassinger

emphasized that a core story is produced for the group, "which is a brief narrative of the most important aspects of the data, subsuming all of the other categories and articulating their relationships to the core story" (2005, p. 161). Throughout this stage, the researcher and his team were repeatedly examining the original narrative data to make sure that themes, key categories, subcategories, and central-core categories were accurately represented. The dissertation chair and members of the research team acted as reviewers and consultants throughout this process. Their role was to provide feedback throughout open, axial, and selective coding analyses. Subsequently, any feedback provided among the reviewers was discussed among the research team and any recommended changes were implemented. The data reexamination process from a team approach was purposeful to ensure that the emerging theory was congruent with the lived experiences of the participants.

Conclusion

In an attempt to understanding the meaning made of discriminatory activity experienced by Atheists, grounded theory was proposed. In some cases grounded theory offers the formation and creation of new theory. However, it was not anticipated that the current study would result in the creation of a new theory. This expectation is based on the infancy of our understanding of how Atheists make sense of stereotypes and discrimination. What was expected, however, was that data analyses would yield substantive theory and create foundation for future researchers to build on regarding participants' lived experiences. Strauss and Corbin (1998) define this theory as a framework of "well developed categories," interrelated among one another, and "explain who, what, when, where, why, how, and with what consequences an event occurs" (p.

22). Specifically, a substantive theory is drawn from the original data and offers a "coherent, contextualized explanation of a phenomenon, and interrelationships among the constructs" (Fassinger, 2005, p. 162). In sum, it was anticipated that the use of grounded theory methodology would create a framework of how Atheists make meaning of discrimination.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This chapter reviews the research questions in order to provide context to the reader in interpreting the findings of the study. Subsequently, the data analysis process is discussed including participant demographics, grounded theory overview, credibility and trustworthiness, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Finally, themes that emerged from data analysis are identified and explored.

Review of the Research Questions

The research questions are reviewed in order to frame the results within context. As was noted in Chapter Two, in response to D'Andrea and Sprenger (2007) who called for more research regarding the experiences of Atheists, the following study was proposed in order to understand how Atheists explain to themselves acts of intolerance by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do Atheists explain or make meaning of stereotypes and discrimination?

2. In the construction of meaning, what factors are present that assist Atheists

in making sense of stereotypes and discrimination?

What follows is the analysis conducted on the first research question, which served as the primary focus of the research: understanding the creation of meaning after discriminatory encounters. Subsequently, themes that emerged in response to the second research question are explored.

Data Analysis

In order to address the research questions, a total of 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted. An initial interview was conducted in order to pilot the interview

questions. Results from the pilot interview showed that semi-structured question #3,

"*What does it mean to you to be an Atheist,*" needed to be modified. The intent of

question #3 was to understand why Atheism was a natural pairing for the participant.

That is, to understand what salient features of Atheism resonated within the belief system

of the participant. However, the initial pilot study evidenced that the participant did not

understand what the question was attempting to solicit, appeared confused by the

wording, and therefore had no response to the question. After the researcher consulted

with the dissertation committee chair, both agreed that it should be replaced with the

question, "*What drew you to this belief system?*". Although the pilot interview provided

valuable information regarding the length of interview and clarity of questions, the data

gathered as a product of the interview was not informative and thus was not included in

the analysis. A total of 10 interviews were used in the analysis.

Upon completion of the pilot interview, semi-structured interviews were

conducted in order to discover patterns and themes among participants. As is common in

grounded theory, sample size is generally not fixed and collecting data is completed when

saturation is met (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Saturation, the point at which

new sources of data repeat what has been previously learned and the participant's report

duplicates what the researcher already discovered, has no pre-established point

(Polkinghorne, 2005). After 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted and no new

theme emerged, the researcher and his team agreed that saturation had been met. Finding

that saturation had occurred after 10 participants is consistent with the writings of

Charmaz (2006) and Patton who noted that saturation typically occurs between 8 and 15

participants. After the semi-structured interviews were conducted, the interviews were

then transcribed by the researcher. Interviews were transcribed in the order in which they were conducted. Throughout the analysis process, the researcher and the dissertation committee chair met on a regular basis to review and discuss the interview data. Upon completion of each semi-structured interview, line-by-line coding was conducted and meaning units (concepts) were developed. Following the creation of meaning units, the transcripts were re-reviewed to establish reliability between data, with the dissertation committee chair and researcher conferring about the accuracy of meaning unit creation.

As noted previously, the analysis team consisted of the researcher and the dissertation committee chair. Both researchers reviewed interview data from a sample of Atheists. Other research team members agreed that the researcher and the dissertation committee chair would be primarily responsible for the data analysis process and acknowledged their willingness to serve as consultants as needed. Although the data analysis process was primarily conducted by the researcher, the dissertation committee chair acted as an arbiter to ensure objectivity, credibility, and trustworthiness.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Credibility and trustworthiness refers to the accuracy of the findings throughout the data analysis process. As Corbin & Strauss (2008) note, credibility involves validation through a system of checking interpretations with participants and against the data. The data analysis process was collaborative between the research team and the primary researcher. When conducting grounded theory research, the primary tool is the researcher because he/she conducts the semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002). It is critical that the researcher take steps to be as objective as possible when analyzing data. Fassinger (2005) recommended that researchers create memos when utilizing grounded theory in order to explore the interaction between the participant(s) and the researcher during the data

89

collection process. In the current study, the researcher kept personal memos noting

personal reactions to data, monitoring thoughts, feelings, and reactions regarding how the

participants responded in the semi-structured interview. The chair of the committee

reviewed these memos and provided feedback regarding the interaction between

participant(s) and researcher.

Participant Characteristics

Participants in the current study included 10 self-identified Atheists between the

ages of 18-75 (See Table 1). All participants identified as Caucasian. The majority of

participants indicated residing in the Southern Region of the United States ($n = 7$). While

all of the participants reported having some college education, seven out of ten

participants indicated having a Master's or Doctoral degree. Finally, the majority ($n = 7$)

of the participants reported being married.

Table 1
Participant Demographic Information

Participant Number	Sex	Age[a]	Race	Marital Status	State of Residence	Level of Education	Prior Religious Affiliation
1	M	75	Caucasian	Married	Virginia	Doctorate	None
2	F	46	Caucasian	Married	Virginia	Master's	Catholic
3	M	36	Caucasian	Married	Iowa	Master's	Mormon
4	F	28	Caucasian	Married	Virginia	Master's	None
5	M	40	Caucasian	Married	Virginia	Doctorate	Pentecostal
6	M	29	Caucasian	Married	Virginia	Bachelor's	Christian (Not Specified)
7	F	37	Caucasian	Single	Washington, D.C.	Master's	Mormon
8	M	18	Caucasian	Single	Virginia	High School	Catholic
9	M	33	Caucasian	Married	Arizona	Bachelor's	Mormon
10	M	30	Caucasian	Single	Virginia	Bachelor's	None

[a]$M = 37.2$, $SD = 15.3$.

Grounded Theory Overview

The interview data were analyzed using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory is described as a type of methodology that provides the possibility for discovering new insight and understanding of participants' lived experiences (Glaser & Strauss). Utilization of this approach allows for in-depth examination of the complexities of lived experiences in an attempt to learn new and rich information from those participants. Grounded theory was specifically chosen for the current research as it offers interpersonal flexibility between researcher and participant. In other words, grounded theory is adaptable, allowing the researcher to alter and modify questions in order to alleviate confusion for the participant and to clarify the research question.

Grounded theory methodology has been used to examine marginalized populations in order to explore social process and contextual conditions. For example, grounded theory has been utilized to understand: (a) the social process and contextual condition of how intimate partner violence (IPV) survivors made meaning of their residual IPV-related injuries (Weaver et al., 2007); (b) how gay men made sense of hate crimes (Willis, 2008) and; (c) how individuals with HIV/AIDS created meaning in their lives following their diagnoses (Timmons & Fesko, 2004). In the aforementioned studies, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews in order to examine how individuals made meaning of traumatic events. Given the findings noted in Chapter 2, which indicated that Atheists are a disenfranchised group who experience discrimination and stigma, grounded theory appeared a natural pairing in understanding the construction of meaning for individuals who experienced discriminatory activity. In order to understand

the construction of meaning, data were analyzed in the model proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) which begins with open coding.

Open Coding. Open coding as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is a process by which the researcher identifies, labels, categorizes, and describes the phenomenon as is recorded in the transcribed text. In the current project, the researcher carried out a process known as line-by-line coding, which involved reviewing each participant transcript and identifying the meaning units as expressed in each line of text. Meaning units are descriptive labels created by the researcher that are congruous with the account of the participant. For example, when asked what drew him to identify as an Atheist, one participant reported, "[Atheist Literature] helped me believe I'm a powerful person and I have more control over myself" (P6). The meaning unit of this statement was simply "Being Powerful." Once meaning units were extracted from each participant interview, similar meaning units were grouped together across the participant interviews. These grouped meaning units were then developed into categories. For example, "Being Powerful," was then grouped with similar meaning units, "Empowerment," and "Thriving." From this, the category *Reclaiming Power* was generated from the grouped meaning units. The researcher identified 14 categories based on the grouped meaning units (See Table 2). After identifying 14 categories that emerged from the interviews, the researcher then re-analyzed the interviews. This approach is consistent with the model proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). When three or more participants reported data congruent with a category, then the category was labeled as a thematic phrase. Thematic phrases are terms that represent a pattern or cluster of data (Boeije, 2010). Seven thematic phrases were generated during data analysis (See Table 3).

Table 2

Initial Line-by-Line Meaning Unit Groups

Themes	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10
Acceptance	X			X					X	X
Understanding	X		X	X	X	X			X	
Internalizing/Personalizing				X	X				X	
Cognitive Rationalization		X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Social Justice/Political				X	X				X	X
Authenticity/Genuineness				X			X			X
Hesitation in Disclosure	X	X		X		X	X			
Witnessing for Atheism				X					X	
Tolerance	X								X	X
Uninformed		X								
Empowerment				X	X			X	X	
Opportunity to Grow				X					X	X
Combating Stereotypes				X	X				X	
Countercultural/Nonconforming					X					

Table 3

Open Coding and Key Categories

Key Categories	Thematic Phrase:	Endorsed by Participants	Meaning Unit	Meaning Unit Example
Coping With Intolerance	Authenticity	P3, P7, P10	Honesty	"I just made the decision that I wanted to be more honest with myself and be more authentic and sincere with others"
	Engaging in Dialogue	P3, P4, P9, P10	Important to Talk	"Again I think it's important to talk about these issues. That's kind of how you influence people and change minds and hopefully move the world to a better direction"

Growth Through Intolerance	Identification with Theist	P1, P3, P4, P5, P9	Understanding	"I would have said the same thing because it's a hard thing to get from within a paradigm"
	Practicing Nonresistance	P1, P4, P5, P9, P10	Acceptance	"I understand it [stereotypes about Atheists] and I don't have to make any meaning beyond that. Just understanding why a believer understands what they do about an Atheist
	Opportunity for Growth	P3, P9, P10	Intellectual Enhancement	"…I probably was a little hopeful that I would get some negative reaction so I could consider what they were saying and think about it. And come up with a response that was meaningful for me"
	Reclaiming Power	P3, P4, P8, P9	Standing up for Oneself	"…it's sad to be judged, to understand that you are going to be judged constantly, but I was actually very proud of it because I'm able to stick up for myself"
	Social Activism	P3, P4, P9	Fighting Misconceptions	"I think it is really important to stand up for goodness… for human values, for rationality from a secular standpoint"

Each of the seven themes was in response to how Atheists made meaning of stereotypes and discrimination. Each of the seven themes is addressed below in more detail. Participant quotations are provided in order to help clarify the specific theme being addressed as well as to flesh out the meaning of the theme.

Meaning of Discrimination

During data analysis, the dissertation committee chair and the researcher identified that the participants provided data that fell into two categories: process themes and content themes related to meaning making. Recall that the research question focused on "how" Atheists made meaning of discriminatory activity. Participants in the study provided data that reflected that "how" could be conceptualized as a process whereby the participant *did* something active at a cognitive and/or behavioral level. A process theme in the current study focused primarily on the activity of how the participant managed stereotypes and discrimination. For example, when participants *Engaged in Dialogue* (a thematic phrase)*,* they made a conscious choice to have a conversation with the individual who was verbally attacking or harassing in an attempt to make meaning of their experience. Process themes and content themes both involve cognitive processes; however, they differ in that process themes involve preconceived attitudes and opinions whereas content themes are the end result of deriving meaning from stereotypes and discrimination. For example, *Opportunity for Growth*, was explained as a content theme. Here, participants reported that they used abstract thought when reflecting on what occurred during that event, which enabled them to learn and grow. Although process themes are the result of previous cognitions, content themes are the product of cognitions after the event has occurred. Participants who endorsed content themes explained what

95

meaning they made from discriminatory activity. Process themes are addressed first followed by content themes.

Process Themes. When participants were asked how they made meaning of stereotypes and discrimination they responded with three process themes. These themes included: *Engaging in Dialogue, Identification with Theist,* and *Practicing Nonresistance.* Each theme is discussed in greater detail below.

Engaging in Dialogue. *Engaging in Dialogue* was endorsed by four participants. These four participants reported accounts involving how they responded behaviorally when rejected, harassed, or stereotyped by others. Each participant explained how he or she engaged with the individual who was verbally attacking or harassing. One participant stated, "the only way to move society and challenge the ways things are is by going out and talking to people and seeing people's preconceptions about unbelievers" (P9). This same participant also explained what was meaningful during the act of discrimination, reporting:

> Well, I think it [engaging with Theists in conversation] is really important
> because there are so many misconceptions about unbelievers. I came to this over
> time dealing with these people that I meet. I think it is really important to stand up
> for goodness, for human values, and for rationality from a secular standpoint. (P9)

Another participant shared his narrative regarding how he *Engages in Dialogue* with others who rejected his belief system, stating:

> I view it as an opportunity to raise people's consciousness and to get them to start
> thinking about issues maybe they haven't thought about and hopefully at some
> point recognize that it's okay to be Atheist; it's a noble perspective to take. (P3)

For these participants, the discriminatory activity engaged in by others became an opportunity for the Atheist to have a conversation with the stereotyping individual or group. Individuals who expressed this theme seemed better able to recognize the behavior of others as an affront toward the idea of Atheism as a whole rather than an attack toward them personally.

Identification with Theist. The theme *Identification with Theist* involved meaning making through the process of understanding and imaginatively entering the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of a Theist. Although there is a cognitive component regarding the identification, that the Atheist reflected on his/her preconceived notions about Theists and recognized their feeling obligated to save souls, this cognitive component did not occur as a consequence of the stereotyping and discrimination. Rather, the cognitive thought process was the result of a preconceived understanding of Theistic beliefs. During the negative event, participants actively empathized with the Theist. As a result of practicing empathy, the participant was able to construct meaning around the negative event. In other words, participants explained that they made meaning by identifying with the rejecting Theist. Many participants, having been Theists at earlier periods in their lives, explained that they could understand why other people participated in stereotyping. One participant reported:

In certain segments of Christianity, and a lot of this comes from the Christian students, there is this mission, sort of to save the lost and in these segments of Christianity that these students are coming from, they view me as the lost and some take it as their religious duty to try to bring me in. Try to save my soul. So I

would say that's probably the primary motivation for the comments and feelings like that. (P5)

Another participant illustrated the theme *Identification with Theist* when he reported:

I need to be better at being open about what I am thinking, about things that are being taught in church and so forth, so that she (spouse) not only comes to understand better my perspective and why I hold that perspective […] to grow accustomed to the way I am thinking now. On my part, it is a lot of patience and understanding that she needs that time and she may never come to believe the same way that I do or don't do, don't believe, but as long as there is an understanding about why I think the way that I do, then she will feel more…comfortable. (P3)

Other participants told similar stories explaining that they knew how difficult it was for Theists to accept Atheists. Several participants discussed that they knew Theists were commissioned to "save souls." This is conveyed in the next account:

At this point I just kind of see it as people genuinely are concerned. They're not doing it to annoy me or maybe out of some personal motivation of 'I'll feel really great about myself if I can save this soul.' I think generally it's just that they really genuinely want me to be right with Jesus and get into heaven. (P4)

Participants seemed to be able to cope with adversity common to many Atheists by understanding the perspective of the rejecting person.

 Practicing Nonresistance. Another theme that was identified was *Practicing Nonresistance*. The dimensions of this theme included responding to a stereotype or act of discrimination with acknowledgment and acceptance rather than avoidance.

Participants who reported content related to *Practicing Nonresistance* made a conscious choice not to argue, resist, or fight what had happened. Participant number one (P1) reported that he made sense of being stereotyped as an Atheist, stating, "It just is what it is." Another participant, in response to how she made sense of being stereotyped, reported:

> It is what it is. I think the most amusing example was a guy that refused to date me because of the fact that I'm an Atheist… he told me that God had spoken to him, to tell him that he should not be involved with any Atheists or other immoral individuals. (P4)

Participants that endorsed this theme provided accounts that acknowledged diversity with regard to belief systems. Moreover, rather than becoming embroiled in conflict, participants voiced that they created emotional distance from the stereotype or discrimination. Emotional distance refers to a detachment from the message being sent in order to avoid conflict. *Practicing Nonresistance* involves creating distance which this researcher observed in two ways: *Being Tolerant* and *Rejecting Stereotypes.*

    Being Tolerant. Being Tolerant was endorsed by three participants as a way to create distance from discrimination. Here, participants discussed that they were able to make meaning of stereotypes and acts of discrimination because they practiced tolerance of other people's worldviews. Beyond simply being accepting, *Being Tolerant* also involves an additional element: openmindedness. Being cognitively and behaviorally tolerant allowed participants to manage discriminatory activity. After being rejected for her belief system when dating a Theist, one participant responded with this theme stating: "I was fine with the fact that he was religious, as long as you don't force it on me, and as

long as you don't use it as a weapon, you can believe whatever you want" (P4). Another

participant reported, "For those people who base their belief on faith, I have no issue with

that, it's just a matter of whether you have a belief based on critical thinking or based on

faith" (P1). This same participant explained that in his own life he and his partner have

very different beliefs, but through tolerance have been successful in navigating these

differences. He stated:

> So to realize that a Theist and a non-Theist can live together for 50 years and
>
> never have an issue relative to religion is, I think, is proof that the partnership can
>
> be done, and if we could just extend that to the world, we would get rid of a lot of
>
> wars and other issues. (P1)

Rejecting stereotypes. Another subtheme of *Practicing Nonresistance* that helped

create distance was *Rejecting Stereotypes*. Participants who reported content related to

this theme made a conscious attempt to not internalize the negative stereotype or

discrimination. Although the thematic phrases *Being Tolerant* and *Rejecting Stereotypes*

both involve creating emotional distance from stereotyping and discriminatory activity,

these thematic phrases differ in one key way. Whereas *Being Tolerant* involves

acceptance in an *inter*personal exchange, *Rejecting Stereotypes* appears to be an

*intra*personal phenomenon. That is to say, *Rejecting Stereotypes* involves the internal

dialogue of creating distance between the negative messages and what the participant

knows to be true about oneself. Several participants provided accounts regarding how

they were able to *Reject Stereotypes* by engaging in an internal dialogue:

> You know I have a lot of things that go on in my head regarding my Atheism that
>
> um I don't necessarily share with others… I'm not going to criticize others and I

don't want them to criticize me. That doesn't mean in my head criticism isn't

happening… So whenever students, for example, say that they have congregations

praying for me [because he is an Atheist who needs salvation], it just comes

across as silly in my mind. I mean come on, right? Now I don't share that. That's

internal. My face that I present to the world, I try to be more neutral. My internal

dialogue is a little different. (P5)

Another person explained the internal dialogue that helped her disassociate. She reported:

It's just that's what they're told and what they've been told their whole lives. So I

don't take it personally. I can't get angry at them or I'd be angry every time I read

the news and I've got better things to do with my time than to be angry at a belief

system that really isn't going to change anytime soon. (P4)

These participants ($n = 3$) discussed how it was critical to be able to disassociate, to

create psychological distance, from the message that was directed toward them. This was

apparent when one participant reported, "I don't take it very personally. It's kind of, I

can't really take it personally or I would lose my mind. It's kind of just the way things

are" (P4).

In sum, three process themes were identified from the semi-structured interviews

including: *Engaging in Dialogue, Identification with Theist,* and *Practicing*

Nonresistance. What follows is exploration of the four content themes.

Content Themes. As was noted previously, content themes involve the more

conceptual or abstract cognitive component of deriving meaning following discriminatory

activity. When participants were asked how they made meaning of stereotypes and

discrimination, they responded with data that could be grouped into four content themes.

These themes include: *Authenticity, Reclaiming Power, Opportunity for Growth,* and *Social Activism.*

Authenticity. The first content theme generated was *Authenticity*. Participants who endorsed content related to *Authenticity* explained that they saw discrimination as a product of authentic living. They explained that they perceived discrimination and stereotyping to be unavoidable or inevitable as a result of being true to oneself. After experiencing a loss of dating relationship due to disclosing her belief system, one participant explained how she continued to value authentic living:

> I just feel like it is most important to be honest with myself and have integrity. To be willing to be honest with other people and have integrity. I'm not out to challenge anyone or hurt anyone or convert anyone to my way of thinking. I have to be authentic. I have to be my own self. So yeah, there is no way around it, that's just the way it has to be. (P7)

At a very young age, one participant was asked to leave a Boy Scout meeting because he refused to say the Pledge of Allegiance because it included the phrase "one nation, under God". Although the participant reported that it was difficult at the time, he explained how important it was to be genuine and true to himself after the encounter. He stated:

> Looking back it kind of tells me something about the nature of who I am… if I needed to describe myself in one sentence I think it would be that my highest priority is to kind of be true to myself and not misrepresent myself. Not be someone I'm not; or act like someone I'm not. And that's really important to me. (P10)

Here, participants made sense of discriminatory activity by recognizing that negative

reactions to Atheism were a consequence of authentic living. Thus, in order to be true to

oneself, an Atheist might have to recognize that a non-Theistic belief system may invite

intolerance.

   Reclaiming Power. A subsequent emerging theme during data analysis was

Reclaiming Power. Participants reported that Atheists are seen as the symbol of

immorality in the United States. In addition, participants reported accounts communicating

the idea that the broader culture in the United States believes that Atheists should be

ashamed of their belief system. Rather than feeling shamed by this stereotype of

immorality participants *Reclaimed Power* by embracing words, messages, and stereotypes

intended to be painful or rejecting. The following statement by participant five illustrates

this theme:

   So there is this element of kind of being countercultural as an Atheist in America

   and I actually find pleasure in being different, I find pleasure in having a view of

   the world that most people don't share because it gives me a sense of "I'm not a

   lemming" I'm not a person following the crowd. (P5)

This same participant explains in greater detail:

   So, whenever I encounter those things like "you do the devil's work", or things

   like that, it doesn't hurt me as much as it does reinforce my view that, you know, I

   kind of have a countercultural view of the world and I kind of delight in that in a

   lot of ways and it feels good to me. (P5)

Another participant spoke about the challenge of being labeled. After being labeled with

a demeaning word by a woman in the park who saw him reading Atheist literature, he

decided to get a tattoo of the word. For this participant, the permanence of the tattoo became a symbolic representation of his ability to commit to his beliefs. He noted:

> I actually got a [demeaning label] tattoo because of my label as an Atheist. I've had plenty of experiences you know [of being stigmatized/judged], whether going to the first Baptist church I was constantly judged by the pastor, the youth group leader, by constantly getting into arguments with the seniors there. […] It's sad to be judged, to understand that you are going to be judged constantly, but I was actually very proud of it [the tattoo] because I'm able to stick up for myself. I try to know what I'm talking about and I'm not going to argue something that I
>
> don't know what I'm talking about. (P8)

For these participants, *Reclaiming Power* was a direct response to the pervasive stereotype that Atheists represent the symbol of immorality in the United States. Negative messages become a source of power when reclaimed, rather a source of shame when internalized.

     Opportunity for Growth. Another theme that emerged was *Opportunity for Growth*. Participants who endorsed content related to this theme explained that they perceived events of discrimination as a venue to grow. Some participants perceived events of discrimination as an opportunity to grow by being open to learning new ideas in the hope of possibly revising their own belief premises. Here, one participant spoke about growing after being verbally attacked:

> One of the ways that I make meaning of any attack toward me is that it's a challenge for me to bone up on my own arguments, and like I said, it is

invigorating for me to learn and to think about theological or philosophical issues,

it makes me feel more alive somehow, more interested in the world. (P3)

Another participant illustrated *Opportunity for Growth* stating "I like having the

conversation [theological/religious conversations] because I got to this place by

constantly revising my premises" (P9). Participant ten (P10) indicated a similar way of

thinking stating:

[As an Atheist] you're always open to new information and so the notion of

changing your mind isn't a bad thing because new data comes in, new information

comes up, uh you reassess your prior assumptions, your prior beliefs, and you

adjust as necessary and so it kind of, I think that it makes sense to me because it's

very scientific. That's the way I work. (P10)

Finally, some participants explained living as an Atheist, despite intolerance, as an

opportunity to raise others' consciousness:

I view it as an opportunity to raise people's consciousness and to get them to start

thinking about issues maybe they haven't thought about and hopefully at some

point recognize that it's okay to be Atheist. It's a noble perspective to take. (P3)

These participants saw discrimination as an *Opportunity for Growth* in one of two ways:

either as a venue to revise their own premises or as an opportunity to perhaps elevate the

awareness of others. As a result, this thematic phrase appears to be helpful when making

meaning of stereotypes and discrimination.

   Social Activism. The next theme that emerged was *Social Activism*. Participants

explained that they had a choice whether to disclose their belief system and referred to

this disclosure as "coming out." Participants who endorsed this theme reported that they

lived a visible life in order to disprove the myths and stereotypes about Atheists. While *Social Activism* is similar to *Authenticity* because both involve living "out" lives*, Authenticity* is the product of being "out" in order to be true to oneself. *Social Activism* differs because it involves being "out" in order to advocate for the entire group of Atheists. One participant explained that "coming out" was seen as meaningful because it was necessary that Atheists be visible in order to combat negative stereotypes pervasive in society. The participant stated:

> I feel a sort of political and social commitment to being out as an Atheist and so that provides meaning for me. I genuinely believe that this is one of the ways I can make a difference in the world. It may be a very small difference, but if I can share with people who know me, who respect me, who like me, what my religious perspectives are, that will be one more person who is a good, moral, ethical Atheist. Hopefully if enough of us come out there won't be the stereotypes that exist. (P3)

This participant not only saw it as her responsibility to be visible because this visibility contested stereotypes but she also spoke about silence perpetuating myths when she stated:

> I do think that it is important to be out, because if we do remain silent then that just perpetuates the myth and the thought that there really aren't that many Atheists, and if you don't know people of a certain group, you are less likely to trust them. So anyway, that's one of the ways I make meaning out of the discrimination or backlash that I receive. (P3)

Another participant illustrated this theme when stating:

If people get to know me first, you can see that I'm really not an awful person; maybe they can't hate all Atheists if they realize they know one. Because everybody knows Atheists. I think most people at least in the south, more conservative areas, just don't know that they know an Atheist. (P4)

This participant highlighted that everyone knows an Atheist but that many Atheists do not disclose, therefore stereotypes persist. This participant continued discussing what she termed "witnessing for Atheism" and discussed the importance of "coming out." She continued her account:

Honestly I think, it's kind of like I said, the witnessing for Atheism thing. And because I am, with my job with my career choice, I'm able to be open about things without worrying about how it's going to affect my professional career. I have an opportunity and a situation where I can be open about it. Like I said, I mean, if you know, someone who absolutely hates all gay people suddenly realizes 'oh I've known one for years,' I really don't think you can hate and distrust an entire group if you know and trust even just one member of that group. (P4)

Participants who endorsed this theme spoke in concert, explaining that disclosure was important in order to show others that negative stereotypes about Atheists are inaccurate. "Being out" as an Atheist and living a life contradictory to those negative stereotypes provided meaning for Atheists.

Axial Coding

After the seven open-coding themes were identified, axial coding was conducted. In axial coding, the researcher examines the similarities and commonalities among the

thematic phrases. The axial coding process was guided by a combination of inductive and deductive thinking, consulting with the dissertation chair, and reviewing transcripts and memos. Re-reviewing the original transcripts, memos, and thematic phrases was completed in order to see more clearly the similarities and commonalities among the concepts and thematic phrases. For example, the thematic phrases *Opportunity for Growth* and *Social Activism* both involve accounts of moving forward after participants reflected on negative events. These similarities led to the researcher to believe that that these thematic phrases should be grouped together.

The seven thematic phrases were identified and were grouped into two key categories: *Creating Meaning During Discrimination* and *Growth Through Intolerance*. As was noted by Strauss and Corbin (1998) key categories are intended to be both broad in scope and explanatory. Key categories represent a collection of similar thematic phrases, used to sort and fit them into a basic frame of generic relationships (Boeije, 2010). Each key category is addressed below.

Creating Meaning During Discrimination. During axial coding it became clear that four of the seven themes involved ways of *Creating Meaning During Discrimination*: *Authenticity, Engaging in Dialogue, Identification with Theist,* and *Practicing Nonresistance*. These four themes have a common thread in that each assisted the individual in when creating meaning in the moment of the event. Participants were successful in doing so by participating in the cognition and behaviors described by one of these four themes. For instance, here is an example of *Creating Meaning During Discrimination* when one participant was accused of "do[ing] the devil's work" (P5):

So when students say "you do the devils work," internally it reinforces the idea

that "your [the Theist] premise about the world is wrong. Where you're coming

from, I think it's wrong. I don't believe there is a God. So in a lot of ways what

you're saying to me is just nonsense." (P5)

Another participant, a former Christian, spoke about being verbally harassed as a result of

his belief system. After being told by a Theist "[Expletive] you, if you don't believe in

God" and "you weren't a real Christian, if you had been, there's no way you could have

stopped believing," this participant explained how he *Creates Meaning During*

Discrimination such as this, stating (P9):

Yeah, I admit I would never had believed it if it hadn't happened to me. I would

have said anyone who says they're a Christian and stops believing, they probably

want to justify all their sins or they don't want to be responsible for their

behavior. I would have said the same thing because it's a hard thing to get from

within a paradigm. (P9)

Here, even at the time of this discriminatory event, the participant was able to understand

the perspective of the Theist and empathize with how difficult it must be to understand

the rejection of the Theistic belief system from within that paradigm.

Although each of the four themes, *Authenticity, Engaging in Dialogue,*

Identification with Theist, and *Practicing Nonresistance,* differ, they contain the common

thread of *Creating Meaning During Discrimination.* The four themes of *Creating*

Meaning During Discrimination work in tandem explaining how Atheists are able to

endure the challenges of being members of the least trusted group in the United States

(Edgell et al., 2006; Jenks, 1987).

Growth Through Intolerance. *Growth Through Intolerance,* the second

thematic phrase, appeared to capture and illustrate the accounts reported by participants.

The themes within this key category include: *Opportunity for Growth, Reclaiming*

Power, and *Social Activism*. The collection of these themes works together by explaining

how participants looked back on the event and made sense of what occurred. Each

participant who endorsed content related to *Growth Through Intolerance* explained that

growth was not caused by the discrimination on its own, but rather, as a result of making

meaning with that event. One participant illustrates this concept of *Growth Through*

Intolerance when he first spoke about being confronted by his spouse and her church

leader. He stated:

> In the book of Mormon there is the character named Koribor and he is considered
>
> the anti-Christ. So after I had come out to my wife and my bishop had come
>
> over… Koribor is a critical thinker, he is a skeptic. He disbelieves in god. And he
>
> gives a lot of the same reasons for disbelieving in God that I think most atheists
>
> will or do. Koribor is called wicked…and so this effectively confounds atheism
>
> with wickedness in the minds of most members of the Mormon Church. …God
>
> strikes Koribor dumb and Koribor is forced to go from house to house begging for
>
> food. ... [Book of Mormon says] for anyone who perverts the way of the lord and
>
> we see that the devil will not support his children in the last day but speedily drag
>
> them to hell. So the moral of the story is resist valuing evidence because it will
>
> turn you against Christ. You will become hard hearted and wicked and then you
>
> will be drug down to hell. (P3)

After discussing the adversity he endured, he talked about how he was able to grow from this negative experience. He reported:

> So I guess I kind of developed a thick skin and I recognized that if someone feels threatened or calls me the anti-Christ or something awful like that, that they're not rejecting me, that they are rejecting the idea of an Atheist or what their perception of Atheism means… One of the ways that I make meaning of any attack toward me is that it's a challenge for me to bone up on my own arguments, and like I said it is invigorating for me to learn and to think about theological or philosophical issues, it makes me feel more alive somehow, more interested in the world […] It is a way for me to deepen my own understanding about different issues.

Although each theme, *Opportunity for Growth, Reclaiming Power,* and *Social Activism* suggests different ways of making meaning of negative events, each approach results in thriving despite being rejected or harassed.

Selective Coding

The final phase of data analysis was selective coding. This stage of data analysis involved generating a central "core" category which ties the two key categories together. Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to this "core" category as "an explanatory whole." After the researcher examined, reexamined, and reflected on the meaning units, themes, and key categories, an overarching theme emerged. This overarching theme is the capstone, describing the meaning making after discriminatory activity. *Opportunity to Affirm Core Belief Structure* best illustrated the story of how Atheists make meaning of stereotypes and discrimination. The concept, *Opportunity to Affirm Core Belief Structure*, represents the core story. As Fassinger (2005) noted, the core story is "a brief narrative of the most

111

important aspects of the data, subsuming all of the other categories and articulating their relationships to the core story" (p. 161). Thus, within the current literature, the core story of *Opportunity to Affirm Core Belief Structure* is revealed. This concept captures the narrative of how each participant was successful moving forward despite rejection, harassment, and belittlement. In addition, *Opportunity to Affirm Core Belief Structure* communicates the narrative whereby Atheists use events involving stereotypes and discrimination directed toward them as avenues to affirm and strengthen their belief system. One participant illustrates this overarching theme when he reported:

> I was a missionary and I became a missionary because I believed it so strongly. And I became an Atheist because I believe it so strongly so it's the same kind of zeal, a lust for knowledge and I think you get that by finding out what other people know. […] And I enjoy talking to people, even with people on the street when they have a negative reaction. I still get a lot out of it. It helps me to refine a way to present. (P9).

Understanding that the participants in this sample perceived stereotypes and discrimination as an opportunity to test their belief structure is critical. Although challenging, participants in this study explained that they perceive stereotypes and discrimination toward Atheists as a way to keep their belief structure intact. One participant illustrated this core category when he reported:

> I guess one of the ways I deal with it [discrimination] is just by… this is a war metaphor, but arming myself with the foundation why the naturalistic perspective is better for me and why it makes more sense. And learning more about philosophy and science, reading books about evolution or Atheism. (P3)

This same participant also added:

> I look at it as a challenge for me to come up with a response that's not only
>
> respectful, because I really believe in being civil in my discourse, but also in a
>
> way that is supported by evidence, research findings, because that's important to
>
> me… So for example the post that I had originally put out [on social media], let's
>
> make the national day of prayer community service day, I probably was a little
>
> hopeful that I would get some negative reaction so I could consider what they
>
> were saying and think about it. And come up with a response that was meaningful
>
> for me. (P3)

Within the broad category, *Opportunity to Affirm Core Belief Structure*, exists the underpinnings of being open minded. Each participant communicated this in his or her own fashion. Here is one report illustrating this concept:

> I've altered my views too many times to ever say I'll never change my mind
>
> again. That only happens by having your ideas challenged by talking to people,
>
> learning new things. I really like the process of refining such points and if I've
>
> made a mistake or somehow I missed something and there really is some sort of
>
> supreme being or plan I think that's really important. (P9)

Although discriminatory acts send the message that the Atheistic belief system is wrong, participants in this study were to be able to come away from events by perceiving those events as an opportunity to affirm and strengthen their core beliefs while remaining open minded.

Factors That Assist in Meaning Making

Participants addressed the second research question when discussing the factors that assist in meaning making. The second research question states:

2. In the construction of meaning, what factors are present that assist Atheists in making sense of stereotypes and discrimination?

Upon completing data analysis of content related to the first question, the researcher revisited the data examining meaning units to discover the factors that address the second research question. As a result of revisiting the meaning units, three themes emerged. Each theme fell into its own category, which were labeled *Atheist Literature, Belief Factors,* and *Interpersonal Factors*. The identified factors appear to assist participants in making sense of stereotypes and discrimination (see Table 4).

Atheist Literature. In the construction of meaning, *Atheist Literature* was reported to be helpful when participants discussed elements that contributed to meaning making. Three participants spoke about how *Atheist Literature* was a critical component which allowed them to feel empowered despite being stereotyped and discriminated. One participant explained this feeling of empowerment in the following statement:

I think reading the *God Delusion* was one of the most important books for me to read to feel comfortable identifying myself as an Atheist and feeling proud that I'm an Atheist and also being willing or thinking it's important for political and cultural reasons, social reasons, to be out as an Atheist. (P3)

Another participant discussed this point reporting:

One of my friends exposed me to the *Satanic Bible* and I thought this is going to be a joke… but I read it… they don't believe in a God or heaven or hell, they

believe in themselves and they themselves are powerful people and stuff like that.

That just helped me believe I'm a powerful person and I have more control over

myself, stuff like that. (P8)

In both instances, the participants used *Atheist Literature* as a factor that aided in the

Opportunity for Growth. With regard to how this helps participants make meaning, it

appears that *Atheist Literature* was a resource for learning the skills to be a more

conscious and informed Atheist. As a result, *Atheist Literature* increased the likelihood

for participants to find an *Opportunity for Growth*. *Atheist Literature* was informative

and helpful in learning about other Atheists and the common belief system.

Belief Factors. Participants discussed two factors, *Civil Liberties* and *Identifying*

with other Marginalized Groups, which were present during meaning making.

Civil Liberties. Four participants spoke about the presence of valuing human

rights and *Civil Liberties* ($n = 4$). Here, participants discussed that they saw acts of

discrimination as an opportunity to assert their personal beliefs about *Civil Liberties*. That

is, moving society toward equality. One participant explained "One thing that is

important for me is social justice and equality, and Atheists are one of the most distrusted

groups in America…" (P3). Thus, the participant is implying that it is it important for

him to advocate for the acceptance of Atheists because they are a marginalized

population. Another participant reported:

I like to associate with people who want to promote positive human values, that's

more important to me, whether they are Atheist or not. I have some friends who

are very faithful Christians that I have long conversations with that I respect more

than some angry Atheists that I've talked to. (P9)

115

This factor was present for these four participants when discussing meaning making related to *Social Activism.* Participants who endorsed this theme expressed both the awareness of social inequity and the desire to rectify the deficiencies of *Civil Liberties* for Atheists. That is, individuals who appeared to endorse *Social Activism* also seem to value *Civil Liberties.*

     Identifying with other Marginalized Groups. Another factor that surfaced during the analysis process was *Identifying with other Marginalized Groups* (*n* = 3). When discussing the process theme *Social Activism,* these participants spoke about other marginalized groups (e.g., LGB, Muslims). Seeing the plight and progress of other minority groups instilled a sense of hope that people would be more accepting of Atheism in the future. One participant illustrated this factor when she reported:

     And I think it's becoming more acceptable [being an Atheist] but it's going to take a long time. I mean I've always been very hesitant to kind of equate Atheism being an acceptable thing to gender identification, but I think it some ways it's kind of a similar situation. And look at how long it's taken for the LGB community to get any kind of acceptance. We have a long haul. Yeah, we've got a long way to go, but I think, well I hope in my lifetime it will be something that isn't this big horrifying thing, and it's not very stigmatizing. But for now, it's just culturally, Atheism doesn't make sense to people I think. And just the way religion really doesn't make sense to me. (P4)

The factor, *Identifying with other Marginalized Groups* was present while participants discussed *Social Activism* and the act of "coming out." Recall that participants explained that they had a choice whether to disclose their belief system, similar to the choice

members of LGB community they have in disclosing their sexual orientation. Participants communicated that seeing the advancement of LGB acceptance, due to a more visible LGB community, was inspirational and instilled hope regarding Atheism becoming more accepted in the United States. For this reason, participants believed that there is a direct relationship between "being out" and public acceptance in the United States.

Interpersonal Factor. Three participants spoke about the importance of having an *Emotional Support System.* Here, participants explained that people in their lives who were supportive and provided unconditional positive regard provided the participant a strong sense of emotional security. One participant stated:

My parents are the most open minded and loving people anybody could ever ask for and I love them to death. They are the greatest people on Earth and they've helped a lot. Even though my mom is practicing Irish Catholic she still loves me for who am I and I still love her for who she is. They show me the most respect ever so I show them, you know, twice as much respect back. (P8)

Another participant reported a similar account describing his *Emotional Support System*:

My wife is a Theist and we've been married 49 years and my being an Atheist has absolutely no influence on our relationship. She knows me and certainly understands me to be an honest, good person and fair and so forth, so the fact that she's very much a Theist and attends church regularly, and the fact that I'm an Atheist has no bearing on our relationship. (P1)

As a result, these participants had a strong sense of emotional security. The participants explained that an *Emotional Support System* was present and resonated for them when discussing the theme *Authenticity.* Recall that these participants saw discrimination as a

117

product of authentic living. The sense of security provided by a strong emotional support

system acted as a buffer when being stereotyped and discriminated. Therefore, when

faced with discrimination, this factor acted as the ballast helping them weather

discrimination and anchor their authentic life.

Table 4
Additional Factors Present in Meaning Making

Key Category/ Theme	Endorsed by Participants	Meaning Unit	Meaning Unit Example
Atheist Literature	P1, P3, P5, P8	Validating Identity	"I think reading the *God Delusion* was one of the most important books for me to read to feel comfortable identifying myself as an Atheist and feeling proud that I'm an Atheist and also being willing or thinking it's important for political and cultural reasons, social reasons, to be out as an Atheist."
Belief Factor	P3, P4, P9	Positive Human Values	"I like to associate with people who want to promote positive human values, that's more important to me whether they are Atheist or not. I have some friends who are very faithful Christians that I have long conversations with that I respect more than some angry Atheists that I've talked to."
Interpersonal Factor	P1, P5, P8	Unconditional Support	"My parents are the most open minded and loving people anybody could ever ask for and I love them to death. They are the greatest people on Earth and they've helped a lot. Even though my mom is practicing Irish Catholic she still loves me for who am I and I still love her for who she is. They show me the most respect ever so I show them twice as much respect back."

Summary

This chapter reviewed the research questions, reported the results of the semi-structured interviews, and conveyed the content regarding the themes that emerged during data analysis. Data analysis indicated seven themes including three process themes (*Engaging in Dialogue, Identification with Theist,* and *Practicing Nonresistance*) and four content themes (*Authenticity, Reclaiming Power, Opportunity for Growth* and *Social Activism*). These seven themes were condensed into two key categories including *Creating Meaning During Discrimination* and *Growth Through Intolerance. Creating Meaning During Discrimination* includes *Authenticity, Engaging in Dialogue, Identification with Theist,* and *Practicing Nonresistance. Growth Through Intolerance* includes *Opportunity for Growth, Reclaiming Power,* and *Social Activism.* Finally, an overarching theme was developed, *Opportunity to Affirm Core Belief Structure*, which illustrates the narrative of how Atheists make meaning of stereotypes and discrimination. In the following chapter, findings of this study will be discussed, limitations of this study will be addressed, and recommendations will be provided for future research.

This chapter begins with a brief summary of themes indentified through the semi-structured interviews. Next, the findings are placed within the context of extant literature. Subsequently, limitations of the study and recommendations for future research are provided. Finally, potential implications of the current findings to clinical practice are provided.

Summary of Themes

The goal of this study was to understand how Atheists made meaning of stereotypes and discrimination. To accomplish this goal, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted. As a product of these interviews, seven themes emerged including three process themes (*Engaging in Dialogue, Identification with Theist,* and *Practicing Nonresistance*) and four content themes (*Authenticity, Reclaiming Power, Opportunity for Growth* and *Social Activism*).

Four of the seven themes addressed ways of *Creating Meaning During Discrimination*. These four themes include: *Authenticity, Engaging in Dialogue, Identification with Theist,* and *Practicing Nonresistance*. Participants used these themes to explain how they went about making meaning during the event. As a result of meaning making during stereotyping events, participants appeared to be able to endure intolerance.

In contrast to ways of *Creating Meaning During Discrimination*, three themes emerged that reflected *Growth Through Intolerance*. Participants reported that instead of internalizing rejection, they used it as an opportunity to learn and grow. That is to suggest, participants were left in a better psychological state or experienced greater

understanding of themselves as individuals as a result of struggling and making meaning with the negative event. These three themes are: *Opportunity for Growth, Reclaiming Power,* and *Social Activism.*

Finally, an over-arching theme was developed, titled *Opportunity to Affirm Core Belief Structure.* This concept illustrates the narrative in which Atheists use events involving stereotypes and discrimination directed toward them as a way to reinforce and buttress their belief system. The *Opportunity to Affirm Core Belief Structure* represents the core story. This core story encompasses the critical components of the data, incorporating and giving voice to the themes and key categories as they relate to the overarching theme (Fassinger, 2005). The revelation encapsulates the picture of how each participant was successful moving forward despite rejection, harassment, and belittlement.

Current Findings Related to Extant Literature

This section includes an analysis of the current study in reference to existing literature. Areas of discussion include: *Atheists as a Distinctive Group, Atheists as a Highly Distrusted Group, Atheists Face Discrimination, Making Meaning of Discrimination, Creating Meaning During Discrimination,* and *Growth Through Intolerance.*

Atheists as a Distinctive Group. Previous literature suggests Atheists are a distinctive group when compared to Theists (Hayes, 2000; Hayes & McAllister, 1995). Atheists were more likely to be: (a) male; (b) younger; (c) well educated; and (d) less likely to participate in marriage in comparison to their Theist counterparts (Hayes & McAllister). The sample in the current study was predominantly male ($n = 7$) and each

121

participant had some level of college education. Nine participants have, at minimum, a Bachelor's degree while seven have acquired an advanced degree. These findings are congruent with findings of previous literature.

Atheists as a Highly Distrusted Group. Atheists have long been perceived as a-moral and deviant (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Jones, 2007) and negative stereotypes about Atheists are pervasive in United States culture (Harris, 2006; Hwang, 2008; Jenks, 1987). Goodman and Mueller (2009) found that Atheists in the public are stigmatized as valueless, immoral, evil, and God hating. In accord with prior research, participants in the current study voiced that negative stereotypes such as "immoral" and "heathen" are insidious and omnipresent in the United States. The available literature accurately captures participants' report of their lived experiences in the United States.

Atheists Face Discrimination. According to existing literature, researchers have been able to document the prevalence of discriminatory activity among Atheists. Anti-Atheist discrimination includes being: (a) denied employment (Downey, 2004); (b) physically harmed by others (Downey); (c) threatened to be killed (Downey; Kaye, 2008; Nussbaum, 1999); (d) shunned by their families (Downey); (e) denied membership to join community organizations (Downey; Heiner, 1992); (f) proselytized (Smith-Stoner, 2007); (g) informed by a public official that "It is dangerous to even let our children know that your philosophy exists" (Downey) and; (h) being told by a teacher that one is a "child of the devil" with "no right to live in America" (Downey). In the current study, 10 participants identified a number of forms of discrimination including: death threats, loss of dating relationship, loss of friendship, shunning by family, social media harassment,

social ostracism, subject to proselytizing, threat of divorce/child custody, and verbal harassment, similar to previous findings.

Making Meaning of Discrimination. To the researcher's knowledge, the current study is the first to examine how Atheists make meaning of stereotypes and discrimination. Comparing current results to the existing literature, meaning-making as related to acts of discrimination in general appears to be essential to the healing that occurs after the event (Clarke, 2006; Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Frankl, 1984; Henery, 2007; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Newman, 2000; Park & Folkman, 1997; Skaggs & Barron, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Meaning-making has been reported by researchers to be essential for healing and positive personal development for gay men who had experienced hate crimes and victims of intimate partner violence (Weaver, Turner, Schwarze, Thayer, & Carter-Sand, 2007; Willis, 2008). In addition, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) found that growth happens individuals reflect and make meaning of the discriminatory activity after the encounter. Other researchers have found that the construction of meaning was important after discriminatory events among a variety of samples including individuals with cardiac disease, college students, and people living with HIV/AIDS (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Christopher, 2004; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Miliam, 2006; Sheikh, 2004; Tedesci & Calhoun, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Timmons & Fesko, 2004).

Creating Meaning During Discrimination. Participants in the current study reported that they were able to *Create Meaning During Discrimination* through the following: *Authenticity, Engaging in Dialogue, Identification with Theist,* and *Practicing*

Nonresistance. For example, this quote captures how one participant was able to find meaning through *Engaging in Dialogue*.

> For me being open [through dialogue] about it [Atheism] is very meaningful because, I like to tell myself anyway, that by going against those stereotypes maybe people will stop and think twice about what they think Atheists are and what Atheism means. (P4)

She coined the term "witnessing for Atheism," which she described as both being *Authentic* by being out and by having conversations with others. Participating in dialogue has been found useful in resolving conflicts that stem from fear of immigrant populations following the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Cheldelin, 2006). Cheldelin found that when people participated in conversation, the dialogue helped parties change how they perceived one another. In the current research, participants reported finding meaning in their attempt to change the perceptions Theists had of Atheists. The current findings parallel Cheldelin's, providing support that the attempt to help others understand one's belief system was meaningful. As other researchers have reported, interpersonal conversations have been found to be a critical component in making meaning in other situations, such as bereavement (Chun, Moos, & Cronkite, 2006; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002; Tweed & Conway, 2006).

Participants who endorsed content related to *Identification with Theist* and *Practicing Nonresistance* acknowledged acceptance rather than engaging in conflict. Acceptance in the moment of discriminatory activity is a factor in *Identification with Theist* in that while belief systems differ, participants acknowledged their existence. Similarly, acceptance is a factor in *Practicing Nonresistance,* as evidenced when two

participants responded to discrimination with the phrase "it [just] is what it is" (P1, P4).

Acceptance has been well documented as a common type of meaning making tool in cases of life threatening illnesses, end of life issues, surviving cancer, and bereavement (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Evers, Kraaimaat, van Lankveld, Jongen, Jacobs, & Bijlsma, 2001; Pakenham, 2007; Park, Malone, Suresh, Bliss, & Rosen, 2008).

The results of the current study provide qualitative support that *Authenticity, Engaging in Dialogue, Identification with Theist,* and *Practicing Nonresistance* can help those individuals who experience rejection and stereotyping *Create Meaning During Discrimination*. These four themes are similar in that they all focus on cognitive and behavioral means of *Creating Meaning During Discrimination*. Current findings are consistent with the findings of existing literature regarding the benefits of the construction of meaning after discriminatory or traumatic events, such as mourning (Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002), chronic disease (Pakenham, 2007), and life threatening illness (Park, Malonne, Suresh, Bliss, & Rosen, 2008).

Growth Through Intolerance. Some participants appeared to not only cope with acts of injustice but to actually thrive. While listening to the stories of these participants, each painted a picture of how they made meaning from being rejected, attacked, harassed, or belittled. These participants endorsed content related to themes including *Opportunity for Growth, Reclaiming Power,* and *Social Activism*. The researcher observed that participants experienced a negative event then subsequently engaged in a theme (e.g., *Opportunity for Growth, Reclaiming Power,* or *Social Activism*) and emerged in a better psychological state. To illustrate this point, here is one brief narrative:

125

One of the ways that I make meaning of any attack toward me is that it's a challenge for me to bone up on my own arguments, and like I said it is invigorating for me to learn and to think about, theological or philosophical issues, it makes me feel more alive somehow, more interested in the world. (P3)

The participant voiced that he saw the attack, perceived it as a challenge, confronted the challenge by "boning up" on his argument, and as a result experienced exuberance and more interest in the world. What the participant voiced is congruent with the concept of post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Post-traumatic growth implies a positive outcome in which a person is left in a better psychological state as a result of struggling with and making meaning from the traumatic event. Growth is not caused directly by the discrimination, but rather, growth occurs when the individual looks back on the event and attempts to make sense (ascribes meaning) of what occurred (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). A number of studies have reported relationships between discrimination and posttraumatic growth suggesting that individuals can grow after experiencing acts of discrimination by working to construct meaning surrounding these events (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Christopher, 2004; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Miliam, 2006; Sheikh, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Along similar lines, participants in the current study reported how they were able to *Growth Through Intolerance.* As a result of *Reclaiming Power*, each reported feeling empowered. For instance, when one participant was called a demeaning label while reading Atheist literature in a community park, this individual responded by taking ownership over the word. This individual decided to get a permanent tattoo of this word, which became a symbolic representation of his ability to commit to his beliefs. It appears

the tattoo was used to assert ownership over a word that was intended to be used in a harmful way. Further, the tattoo become a permanent marker of his advocacy for his belief system. This phenomenon is similar to when gay men and women two decades earlier reappropriated the derogatory use of the word "queer" as an empowering term. Since the 1990s, activists and those who strongly reject traditional gender identities use the term as an umbrella term when advocating for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenderists, transsexuals, transvestites, cross dressers, and drag queens (Peters, 2001; Phelan 1997). As previously discussed, growth is not cause by discrimination, but when the individual reflects back and participates in meaning making (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The participant in the current study displays this growth by making meaning by reclaiming power over demeaning terms. This occurrence is similar to the findings of a number of studies which have reported growth through adversity (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Miliam, 2006; Sheikh, 2004; Tedesci & Calhoun, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Growth Through Story Telling. Willis (2008) found that meaning could be transformative for those who experienced discrimination by sharing their story with another person. The findings of the current study and Willis' study are similar to narrative therapy, which involves having the client tell their story in order to discover what is meaningful (White & Epston, 1990). The overall impression of this researcher, although anecdotal, was that the participants enjoyed telling their stories and throughout their accounts, seemed empowered to be heard. Every participant verbally expressed gratitude at the end of the semi-structured interview in being able to tell their narrative. Researchers have found that meaning is created through the act of telling one's story in

the presence of an interested other (Bruner, 1990; Dimaggio, Salvatore, Azzara, & Catania, 2003; Gilbert, 2002; Rosenthal, 1993). The current study provides further support that telling one's narrative is a way to discover and explore what is meaningful (Bower, Kemeny, Taylor, & Fahey, 1998; Pals, 2006; White & Epston; Willis).

Strengths, Limitations, Recommendations for Future Research

Strengths and Limitations of the Current Study

The primary strength of this study is that it responded to the call for additional research on the lived experiences of Atheists in the United States. To date, no other study has attempted to examine the meaning that Atheists construct after experiencing discrimination. Thus, researchers and practitioners have a greater understanding of the types of discrimination that Atheists face and also a greater understanding of how individuals make meaning surrounding discrimination. Second, while most studies within the area of Atheists have utilized a college-aged student population, this study contained a relatively diverse sample regarding age with participants ranging in age from 18-75 (*M* = 37). Having such a diverse age range is helpful in understanding the lived experiences of Atheists throughout the lifespan, instead of the rather limited purview of the college-aged population. Finally, although it was not the intent of the research to examine the experience of the rural Atheist, it became a fortunate strength. The majority of the sample (*n* = 7) reported living in smaller rural communities (less than 50,000). The more rural sample communicated the challenges Atheists face living in rural, less densely populated, and highly religious communities. Thus, exploring this population highlights both the need for additional research in the area but also serves as a strength of the study. That is, in contrast to other studies on Atheist discrimination that focus on the experiences of

urban or metropolitan Atheists, this study focused on Atheists in a rural setting, providing insight into the rural Atheist experience.

There are a number of limitations of the current study. First, the generalizability of the results should not be assumed to apply to other Atheists. Grounded theory research was designed to gather data in order to yield new insight and understanding of those participants' lived experiences at one specific place and time (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Although the grounded theory approach is the most influential paradigm for qualitative research, it is not intended to be generalizable as most experimental, hypothesis-testing studies are (Denzin, 1997). That is, this study can only speak for the lived experiences of the ten participants who engaged in this study at the static moment of the interview. Therefore, the consequence of this limitation is the inability to make broad and sweeping generalizations about other Atheists.

Second, qualitative research contains an inherent weakness in that the researcher impacts the data. The extent to which the researcher can conduct interviews without influencing the participant is unavoidable to some degree because the researcher is the primary tool when conducting qualitative inquiries. According to Fassinger (2005) and Patton (2002), there is always the potential that the lived experienced of the researcher may intersect the data that is collected. Although precautions can be taken to limit the impact of the researcher's lived-experience on the data it is impossible to fully assess the interaction between participant and researcher. It is possible that the personal beliefs of the researcher have somehow shaped the data. As Patton notes, the research can influence data collection, analysis, and interpretation negatively or positively. Patton explained that the researcher should conduct documentation (e.g., memos, consultation) in the same

manner as if he or she were involved in any other potential conflict of interest such as evaluating a family counseling program and experiencing a divorce at the time of fieldwork. With regard to the present study, the researcher has always had a scholarly interest in belief systems, which is why steps were taken to ensure credibility. For example, the researcher consulted with team members in order to limit personal impact on the data. In addition, the researcher attended to writing memos after each interview. These memos assisted the researcher and the research team regarding the interaction between the participants and the researcher during the data collection process. The content of these memos include the researcher's personal reactions to data, monitoring thoughts, feelings, and reactions regarding how the participants responded in the semi-structured interview. The chair of the committee reviewed these memos. Consulting with research team members and memoing were steps taken to increase credibility, transparency, and trustworthiness.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although the present study addresses a void in the literature, how Atheists make meaning of stereotypes and discrimination, the generalizability of the findings are limited given the research methodology. Future researchers are encouraged to use this data to design a series of focused quantitative studies in order to confirm the qualitative findings of the present study. For example, researchers may want to see whether Atheists perceive acts of stereotyping and discrimination as an *Opportunity to Strengthen Core Belief Structure* within a larger sample. In addition to quasi-experimental designs, future researchers should continue investigating alternative methods and designs (e.g., Longitudinal, Quantitative, Mixed Methods) to explore how Atheists construct meaning

from acts of injustice. Longitudinal qualitative studies may provide the opportunity for participants and researchers to build stronger models between the acts of discrimination and meaning making variables. In addition, the benefit of longitudinal qualitative studies is that it allows participants and researchers time (e.g., months, years) to become familiar with one another "increases trustworthiness and that supports credibility both within and outside the study" (Patton, 2002, p. 567). In addition to longitudinal designs, quantitative studies in conjunction with current findings may be more likely to yield findings that generalize to other Atheists as a population.

Clinical Implications

This section is intended to inform practitioners of the relevant implications of this study and how it can impact their work with clients who self-identify as Atheist. As a result of this study, there are five implications pertinent to clinical work: *Awareness of Discriminatory Activity, Construction of Meaning After Discrimination, Atheism as Multicultural Construct, The Role of Supportive Factors,* and *The Power of Narrative Discourse.*

Awareness of Discriminatory Activity

It is important for practitioners to recognize that the United States culture perceives Atheists as the symbol of immorality. Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann (2006) stated that Atheists appear to be marginalized because they do not share in the American core value of religion. This same message resonated throughout each interview when participants stated the belief that the United States is a country built upon a belief system and that being an Atheist is a direct contradiction to the current status quo. Having this

knowledge will increase the practitioner's awareness of the experience of being an Atheist in the United States.

Participants spoke in concert about the idea that Atheists are the symbol of immorality. Each participant reported that negative stereotypes about Atheists are omnipresent and relentless in the United States, especially in rural areas and within highly religious communities. Across the sample, participants reported content congruent with extant literature regarding the power of stigma. Numerous studies have documented the relationship between stigma-related-stressors and psychological well being, especially among marginalized groups including overweight and obese individuals (Brownell, Puhl, Schwartz, & Rudd, 2005), African Americans (Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003), and LGB populations (Meyer, 2003). Collectively, participants in the current study reported that they were seen as the symbol of immorality in the United States. It was clear that the self-identified Atheists in this study believed that negative stereotypes about Atheists in the United States were pervasive and potentially psychologically harmful. In the current study, 10 participants identified a number of forms of discrimination including: death threats, loss of dating relationship, loss of friendship, shunning by family, social media harassment, social ostracism, subject to proselytizing, threat of divorce/losing child custody, and verbal harassment. Although none of the participants internalized negative stereotypes, it would be worthwhile for mental health professionals to explore this area. It is worthwhile to take the time to do so because clients who internalize negative messages are at a higher risk for self blame (Downey, 2004; Weaver et al., 2007). Moreover, those individuals experiencing self-blame are at a higher risk for

developing depression, grief, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Boelin, van den Bout, & van den Hout, 2003; Brewin & Holmes, 2003 Prigerson & Jacobs, 2001).

Construction of Meaning After Discrimination

It is important for clinicians to know how meaning is made for Atheists in order to guide and aid an Atheist in constructing meaning following discriminatory activity. Meaning making has been found to play a critical role in healing and positive personal transformation, as well as in decreasing psychological distress (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Newman, 2000; Park & Folkman, 1997; Skaggs & Barron, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Wade, 1998; Willis, 2008; Weaver, Turner, Schwarze, Thayer, & Carter-Sand, 2007).

The current study found that Atheists attempted to make meaning of their discrimination at both a process level and a content level. At the process level, the current study found that the majority of participants (*n* = 6) were successful utilizing coping skills including *Engaging in Dialogue, Identification with Theist,* and *Practicing Nonresistance*. This ability to cope with rejection, whereby the participant did something active, was utilized by the majority of the participants (*n* = 6).

In addition to how Atheists actively managed stereotypes and discrimination, participants communicated meaning making at the content level. Content level meaning making involved the more abstract component of deriving meaning from stereotypes and discrimination. Here, participants explained four different ways of meaning making. First, through the use of more abstract thinking, participants were successful in perceiving stereotyping behavior and discrimination as a consequence or product of authentic living (*Authenticity)*. These participants explained that they perceived

discrimination and stereotyping to be unavoidable or inevitable in being true to oneself. Second, participants perceived discrimination as an *Opportunity for Growth.* That is, participants explained that they perceived events of discrimination as a venue to grow by either being open to learning new ideas in the hope of possibly revising their own belief premises or seeing this event as an opportunity to raise others consciousness. The third meaning making content theme was *Reclaiming Power.* Rather than feeling shamed by discrimination, participants *Reclaimed Power* by taking ownership of hurtful words, messages, and stereotypes. As a result, participants reported feeling empowered. Finally, participants explained that they had a choice whether to disclose their belief system and referred to this as "coming out." Participants who endorsed the fourth way of making meaning, *Social Activism,* spoke about two essential elements critical to meaning making. First, participants reported that they made meaning by seeing stereotyping and discrimination as a consequence of "being out" and living a visible life. Second, participants explained that "coming out" was seen as meaningful because it was necessary that Atheists be visible in order to combat negative stereotypes pervasive in society. This is important for clinical practice because it may aid clinicians in working with Atheists who are contemplating disclosing their belief system to others. Clients should be aware of the potential benefits when disclosing their belief system, in addition to the possible costs, as both have been reported to be empowering.

The process of trying to make meaning is not necessarily beneficial to the individual trying to make meaning, but rather the benefit comes when meaning is created (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Park & Folkman, 1997; Segerstrom, Stanton, Alden, & Shortridge, 2003). In fact, as reported by Park (2010), who conducted a comprehensive

134

review of meaning making literature, meaning making is "widely considered essential for adjusting to stressful events" (p. 261). The current findings add additional support to existing literature, which suggest that it is beneficial to help clients make meaning of stressful events.

Atheism as Multicultural Construct

Competent practitioners are able to recognize their clients as multicultural beings (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007; Sue & Sue, 2008). Within the multiculturalism framework, competent practitioners should have basic knowledge about the minority populations with which they work (Sue & Sue). As D'Andrea and Sprenger suggest, Atheism should be part of the multiculturalism conversation. Viewing Atheism within the multicultural frame will help clinicians respect and understand the diverse clients who enter therapy (D'Andrea & Sprenger). A multicultural perspective allows clinicians who respect diverse belief systems to promote social justice by empowering clients from disenfranchised populations (D'Andrea & Daniels, 2005).

Atheists in the United States are marginalized, stigmatized, and discriminated (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Goodman & Mueller, 2009). As a result, it is not surprising that disclosure in the public is low (Caldwell-Harris, Wilson, LoTempio, & Beit-Hallahmi, 2008; Goodman & Mueller). In the present study, participants reported loss of relationships, shunning by family, and verbal harassment as a result of disclosing their belief system. If a client makes the choice to disclose their belief system to others, the practitioner must be aware of the challenges Atheists may encounter, being the symbol of immorality (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann). Knowing the stereotypes that exist

135

will provide clinicians with the knowledge necessary to begin a dialogue with clients about possible responses to disclosure.

The Role of Supportive Factors

In the construction of meaning, several factors were present that assisted individuals in coping with adversity. One factor indentified was having an emotional support system. That is, having partners or family members who exhibited unconditional love and support regardless of differences in belief. Participants explained that people in their lives who were supportive and provided unconditional positive regard allowed them to experience a strong sense of security. This sense of security was reported to be a helpful component when creating meaning from events involving stereotypes and discrimination.

Another factor that was present during meaning making was *Atheist Literature.* Here, participants explained that reading *Atheist Literature* allowed them to feel empowered and validated their belief system despite being stereotyped and discriminated. It may be worthwhile for the clinician to refer clients to relevant literature. As a resource, *Atheist Literature* appeared to be a way to be a more conscious and informed Atheist.

Finally, participants communicated that seeing the advancement of LGB acceptance, due to a more visible LGB community, was inspirational and instilled hope regarding Atheism becoming more accepted in the United States. Seeing that "coming out" was effective for the LGB community, participants reported that it was meaningful to make the decision to disclose their belief system to others. One participant coined the term "Witnessing for Atheism." Other participants echoed similar accounts explaining that although everyone interacts with Atheists, they may not be aware that they are

because some Atheists hesitate to disclose. Practitioners should be aware that positive outcomes, in which a person is left in a better psychological state as a result of struggling and making meaning with the traumatic event, are possible in the aftermath of injustice (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The findings from this study suggest that solace was found by drawing on written materials that helped explain and validate the Atheist's point of view. Moreover, supportive networks appeared to help soften the impact of rejection and harassment. Seeking emotional support has been related to growth in college students (Armeli, Gunthert, & Cohen, 2001), survivors of cancer (Sears, Stanton, & Danoff-Burg, 2003), and individuals who experienced sexual assault (Frazier, Tashiro, Berman, Steger, & Long, 2004). Knowing these factors may help guide the clinician as the work to develop coping skills and identify resources.

The Power of Narrative Discourse

Allowing participants in this study an arena to tell their story appeared to be cathartic and therapeutic in and of itself. Each participant appeared empowered by having the opportunity to tell their story. This feeling of empowerment was evidenced when participants thanked the researcher for spending time with them and expressed interest in whether this research project would be published someday in the hopes of reading it. Perhaps being able to tell the story of how they came to identify with this belief system was empowering. Therefore, if the client has experienced being stereotyped and discriminated, then discussing the nature of that event may be worthwhile. The discovery that storytelling is empowering is congruent with narrative therapy research. For instance, meaning can be a product of storytelling, evidenced when Dimaggio, Salvatore, Azzara, and Catania (2003) discovered that people who had the opportunity to share their

personal narrative reaped several benefits. These benefits included being more successful

when anticipating events, planning actions, and orienting the self in the world. In clinical

practice the mere experience of telling one's narrative may be therapeutic. Further, this

study found that storytelling was empowering for the participants. Thus, clinicians may

want to give space and time in the therapeutic process for Atheists to speak to their

experience because telling one's story in the presence of an interested other has been

shown to help facilitate meaning making (Bower, Kemeny, Taylor, & Fahey, 1998;

Bruner, 1990; Dimaggio et al., 2003; Gilbert, 2002; Rosenthal, 1993, Pals, 2006; White

& Epston, 1990; Willis, 2008).

Conclusion

The researcher in the current study sought to understand how Atheists constructed

meaning of stereotypes and discrimination. As a product of the 10 semi-structured

interviews, seven themes emerged including three process themes (*Engaging in

Dialogue, Identification with Theist,* and *Practicing Nonresistance*) and four content

themes (*Authenticity, Reclaiming Power, Opportunity for Growth* and *Social Activism*).

These seven thematic phrases were grouped into two key categories: *Creating Meaning

During Discrimination* and *Growth Through Intolerance*. The factors that were present

during meaning making included *Atheist Literature, Belief Factors,* and *Interpersonal

Factors*. These factors in conjunction with the two key categories provide the foundation

for the overarching capstone, *Opportunity to Affirm Core Belief Structure*, which

represents the core story of how Atheists make meaning of stereotypes and

discrimination. In addition, *Opportunity to Affirm Core Belief Structure* communicates

the narrative whereby Atheists use events involving stereotypes and discrimination

directed toward them as avenues to affirm and strengthen their belief system. The results of this study, taken collectively, suggest that Atheists may successfully make meaning by using cognitive mechanisms that allowed them to manage, learn, cope, and thrive when faced with being stereotyped and discriminated against. Therefore, mental health practitioners should be aware of these factors when working with Atheists who have experienced prejudice or injustice.

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APPENDIX A

EMAIL REQUESTING PARTICIPATION

Date

Dear

I am a student in the Doctor of Psychology (Psy.D.) program at Radford University and I am writing to request your assistance in the completion of my dissertation. Participant criteria include being a minimum of 18 years of age and self-identifying as Atheist, which is defined as someone who does not have a belief in a God(s)/deity. The central focus of my dissertation is to learn how Atheists make meaning of stereotypes and discrimination. I am interested in this area of research because Atheists are currently the most distrusted group in the United States and little research has explored this topic.

Interviews will last approximately 60 minutes. During the interview, people will be asked about their beliefs and experiences and actions that may have occurred because of this belief system. Participants will have the opportunity to review and correct their interview. Although information reported during the interview will be used for the manuscript, the identity of the participants will be kept confidential. If you are interested in being a participant in this study, you can contact the researcher via email or telephone.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Kevin Simonson _____ [insert phone number] _____ or Dr. Tracy Cohn _____ [insert phone number] _____.

Thank you for your time.

Kevin Simonson, M.A.   Tracy Cohn, Ph.D.
Psy.D. Student   Assistant Professor of Psychology
Radford University   Radford University
Krsimonso@Radford.edu   Tcohn@Radford.edu
                                                          Dissertation Chair

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

You are being asked to participate in a study about what it is like to be an Atheist in the United States. The purpose of this study is to learn about your experience as an Atheist. If you agree to participate, we ask that you agree to be interviewed for approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be conducted in person and audiotaped. Although information reported during the interview will be used for the manuscript, the identity of the participants will be kept confidential. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your future relations with Radford University. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without affecting such relationships.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Kevin Simonson ___[insert phone number]___ or Tracy Cohn ___[insert phone number]___.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject or have complaints about this study, you should contact Dr. Dennis Grady, Dean, College of Graduate and Professional Studies, Radford University, dgrady4@radford.edu, 540-831-7163.

You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

Thank You

You are making a decision whether to participate in a research project. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation in this study.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

_____
Signature of Investigator

APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM

Participant Information

    1. Your Name: _____

    2. Age: _____

    3. Sex: (1) Male   _____

                  (2) Female   _____

    4. State residing in: _____

    5. Marital Status: (1) Single   _____

                  (2) Partnered _____

                  (3) Married   _____

    6. Number of children: _____

    7. With which of the following do you most identify (please check one or more)

        (1) Protestant _____   (8) Hindu _____

        (2) Catholic _____   (9) Agnostic _____

        (3) Baptist _____   (10) Atheist _____

        (4) Methodist _____   (11) Would rather not say _____

        (5) Episcopal _____   (12) Nonreligous _____

        (6) Jewish _____   (13) Other (please specify)_____

        (7) Muslim _____

    8. Do you self-identify as an Atheist? (please check one) Yes_____ or No_____

    9. Race (please check all that apply)

        (1) White ____   (8) Filipino ____

(2) Black/African American ____   (9) Japanese ____

(3) Spanish/Hispanic/Latino ____   (10) Vietnamese ____

(4) Asian or Pacific Islander ____   (11) Native Hawaiian ____

(5) American Indian ____   (12) Mexican ____

(6) Asian Indian ____   (13) Puerto Rican ____

(7) Chinese ____   (14) Other: _____

10. Highest level of education completed: _____

11. Occupation: _____

12. Which of the following best describes the area you live in? (please check one)

       (1) In open country, but not on a farm   ____

       (2) On a farm   ____

       (3) In a small city or town (less than 50,000)   ____

       (4) In a medium-size city (50,000-250,000)   ____

       (5) In a large city (over 250,000)   ____

APPENDIX D

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

The questions listed below are meant to be used as a guide for the interviewer. Exact wording and sequence of the questions may be altered or rearranged depending on what areas the participant feels comfortable discussing. In addition, each open ended question contains prompts to elicit and encourage further in-depth response.

1. How do you know you are an Atheist?

   Rationale: The purpose of this question is to get a sense of the participant's definition of Atheism. Additionally, this question will provide information on how he/she knows or perceives that he/she is a member of this group.

2. Tell me the story of how you became an Atheist.

   Possible areas for further follow-up:

   - How did your family upbringing have an influence regarding what you believed?

   - What other factors influenced your belief system?

   Rationale: The goal of this question is to provide the background of the participant's belief system. This particular question is meant to be broad so that the participant may discuss their thoughts and beliefs freely. Subsequent prompts will elicit vital information that may have not been covered.

3. What drew you to this belief system?

   Possible areas for further follow-up:

   - What about Atheism is meaningful?

   - What about Atheism provides purpose?

Rationale: This question is existential in that it is trying to understand if the belief system provides meaning, purpose, or anything else that may be important for the participant.

4. What kinds of stereotypes have you experienced as an Atheist?

   Possible areas for further follow-up:

   - How do you explain why others have those stereotypes?

   Rationale: The fourth question is intended to investigate how Atheist make meaning of stereotypes about Atheists.

5. Tell me about a time when you felt/believed that your belief system was not respected.

   Rationale: The fifth question is intended to investigate: (a) any perceived prejudice by others; (b) acts of discrimination that have occurred in the participant's experience and; (c) whether the participant perceives costs for being a member of that group.

6. What was the most painful event you have experienced due to your belief system?

   Possible areas for further follow-up:

   - Tell me about how you felt after that event.

   - What was helpful in processing this incident?

   Rationale: This question focuses on a significant instance that is memorable for the participant. Further, the participant will provide information on what occurred, how he/she felt afterward, and whether he/she recalls anything that was helpful in processing the incident.

7. Why do you think this event happened?

Rationale: Question seven will provide information on how he/she rationalizes the acts of social injustice and intolerance he/she experienced.

8. Now having lived through that experience how do you explain to others what happened?

   - How do you make meaning out of the incident that occurred?

   Rationale: The purpose of this question is to assess how he/she makes meaning out of what occurred.

9. Explain to me how you make meaning of that experience.

   Rationale: The purpose of this question is to be direct, in the here and now, requesting how they make meaning of what occurred.

10. What do you think would be helpful for me to know to that would assist in understanding your experience?

    Rationale: This question is to allow the participant an opportunity to add any other pertinent information that would help the researcher understand how he/she makes meaning of stereotypes and/or acts of discrimination.

With regard to what resonated throughout all the themes includes the concept that meaning making focused on seeing the act of discrimination as an opportunity to revise their beliefs. As a result, participants reported that their belief structure was strengthened and intact.