THE ATHEIST IDENTITY IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION WORKPLACE

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

BY

CARRIE REISNER

DR. THALIA MULVIHILL – ADVISOR

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

MUNCIE, INDIANA

DECEMBER 2018

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Ball State University
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION

Earning a doctoral degree is a selfish endeavor. It requires hours, days, weeks, months, and years away from the demands of everyday life and I could not have done this without the support of my family. I dedicate this dissertation to my husband who has provided endless support by keeping our household running and by comforting me in the moments that ended in tears; to my son who always understood when I had to be away or otherwise occupied with school work; and to my parents who have seen me less and less each passing year as I made my way through this program. I promise to be more present with you all in the years to come.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of many people. First, I would like to acknowledge the participants in this study, as well as my two pilot studies, a total of 16 individuals who identify as atheists and work in higher education. I truly appreciated your time and willingness to share your stories. I enjoyed speaking with each of you and look forward to reconnecting again in the future. I especially appreciated the courage of those who do not feel comfortable sharing this identity freely. I hope that this study can make a difference for others who feel this way about their atheist identity in the workplace.

Next, I would like to acknowledge my network of faculty and peers at Ball State University. I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Thalia Mulvihill, Dr. Roger Wessel, Dr. Amanda Latz, and Dr. Renae Mayes. I was quite nervous to tell you all what I was interested in studying, but your support was overwhelmingly positive and continued throughout the entire process. Your feedback was invaluable, you made me feel that I was exploring something important, and you helped me to create a study that I am truly proud of. I also made wonderful friends who were my classmates and comrades in this journey. I do not think that I could have done this without all of your support and am proud to share in your excitement as you cross the finish line. I am especially thankful to Dr. Jessika Griffin, who reached back to pull me along as you finished your journey.

Finally, I am eternally grateful for the support I have received from my family and friends, as well as my supervisors and colleagues at Indiana University East. I always felt that I had a group of cheerleaders who were rooting me on from the sidelines. You kindly celebrated my successes along the way and were ready to pick me up when I felt like I could not make it. I share this accomplishment with all of you.

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: The Atheist Identity in the Higher Education Workplace

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DEGREE: Doctor of Education in Adult, Higher, and Community Education

COLLEGE: Teachers College

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A growing body of literature has examined the lived experiences of atheists in the United States (Fitzgerald, 2003; Garneau, 2012; Pond, 2015). While a subsection of this research focuses on the experiences of atheist college students (Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Mueller, 2012; Small, 2011), this study specifically examined the lived experiences of professional staff members who work in higher education and identify as atheists. The study utilized Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and examined the findings through the lenses of stigma management and Christian privilege. The findings indicate that an individual's comfort in his or her identity, the context of the workplace environment, and the influence of campus leadership in the religious environment act in combination to create an experience that is unique to each individual. The implications for practice include the need for atheists to assess the environment prior to accepting employment in higher education, and the importance of including non-religious worldviews into campus diversity programming and human resource workplace diversity training programs.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Not long after I began my mid-level administrative position at a public, four-year

institution in a rural community in Indiana, my secretary invited my son and me to her church

carnival. There would be food, bounce houses, kids, and plenty of activities for my then five-

year-old son to enjoy. I was still new to the area and my son had not yet made friends, so I

appreciated the invitation. We arrived on that Sunday afternoon, parked the car, and walked into

the large crowd of parishioners enjoying the sunny July day. With each step, however, I could

feel a sense of dread and wondered if I had made a mistake by coming. I was at a Pentecostal

Evangelical Church just down the street from my campus. As people began to notice me, it felt

like a record screeching to a stop. I was dressed in capri pants and a t-shirt. Every other woman

at the carnival was dressed in a long skirt. That small difference was an alert to everyone there

that, at the very least, I was not one of them. I could feel their eyes on me, wondering who I

was. I knew in those moments that the people at this carnival were very different from me. But I

quickly realized that it was not they who were different; it was I. This was my new life as an

atheist in Indiana, and I was overcome with a sense of otherness that I had never felt before. An

otherness that was not likely to be well received by people such as Pentecostal Christians, who

are one of the many Christian denominations in the region. I knew that day that I would have to

keep this aspect of my identity to myself to feel welcome in this new community, both on

campus and off.

I kept my religious beliefs private as best I could for several years, but, inevitably, it was

hard to keep completely secret. At times I have experienced discomfort socially or felt that my

professional work was judged unfairly because of my atheism. When it came time to explore

areas of interest for my dissertation research, this concept of otherness was the first to come to

mind. Higher education, as a professional field, attracts individuals from a wide variety of ethnic, racial, religious, and other demographic backgrounds. Although I knew that the number of atheists in the area would be small, I also knew from discussions with colleagues that I was not completely alone. I decided to explore how individuals who share this identity experience it in the higher education workplace.

Background

The most current research on the religious identities of Americans indicates that the number of people in the United States who identify as non-religious is on the rise (Cox & Jones, 2017). The percentage of people who are classified as religiously unaffiliated has steadily risen since the 1990s from 6% to 24%. This group includes those who are religious but do not claim a particular religious denomination (16%), as well as those who identify as secular (58%), atheists (14%), and agnostics (13%). Although only 3.1% of Americans identify as atheist, experts expect this trend to continue to grow as those who identify as atheists tend to be younger, including more Generation Xers and Millennials than Baby Boomers (Pew Research Center, 2015). Coleman, Hood, and Streib (2018) also suspected that the number of atheists is highly underestimated because of the social desirability to identify with the religious norm of a given culture. Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) credited the decline in religiosity and shift toward non-belief to a variety of factors, including a shift in social norms associated with religious participation, contradictions within and disengagement from religious teachings, decreased participation in religion as children, perceived hypocrisy in religion, and a sense that religion is less relevant to the problems of today.

The definition of atheism is complicated as it is intertwined with religiosity and spirituality (Fitzgerald, 2003; Pew Research Center, 2015). Some individuals are not religious,

but they may still believe in God, while others do not believe in God but still consider

themselves spiritual. Even among atheists there is a difference in opinion about the basic

definition of atheism, with some insistent that it is a lack of belief in a god, while others contend

that it is, in fact, a belief that there is no god (Smith, 2013). Additionally, while some may align

with either of those definitions, they may not use the term atheist as a means of identification.

Instead, individuals may use terms such as non-theist, humanist, freethinker, and even agnostic,

which contends that one can never know if a god exists, instead of atheist. Further, non-belief

itself cannot be defined with a singular definition. Silver, Coleman, Hood, and Holcombe (2014)

broke down non-belief into six distinct categories: intellectual atheists/agnostics enjoy reading

and discussing religion and nonreligion; activist atheists/agnostics value the socio-political

aspects of nonreligion and may act on injustices they encounter; seeker-agnostics are open to

exploring the possibilities of religion but with the assumption that one will never know if a God

exists; anti-theists are more vocal in their rejection of belief and are commonly part of the New

Atheist movement; non-theists are more passive in their non-belief and are apathetic about their

lack of religious views; and ritual atheist/agnostics value the ceremonial aspects of religion and

may participate in activities such as meditation or yoga and seek meaning through these

experiences. Indeed, non-belief is a multidimensional worldview.

     As a collective, however, atheists and other non-believers tend to subscribe to a common

set of values including ethical and moral reasoning, critical thinking, individualism, naturalism,

and empiricism (Smith, 2013). Politically, atheists are most likely to espouse liberal values and

identify as either Democrat or independent (Cox & Jones, 2017). In terms of the historical and

social contexts of this study, which is set in the state of Indiana, I will discuss atheism in relation

to the Judeo-Christian God. As such, I have defined atheism as the denial of the existence of

God, with the personal philosophies associated with this identity to be explained by my participants.

Atheist Stigma, Stereotype, and Discrimination

The atheist identity in the United States is one that is marred by stigma. Stigma is a social construction of identity based on distinguishing characteristics that serves to devalue an individual (Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000). The stigma serves as a means of creating and perpetuating descriptions of groups, known as stereotypes, which are used to influence how we think, feel, and react to others (Biernat & Dovidio, 2000). Perceptions of atheists in the United States are notoriously negative, as they are frequently viewed as a group who lack morals and pose a criminal danger to society. At best they are viewed as narcissistic (Dubendorff & Luchner, 2016), and at worst they are equated with rapists (Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011).

Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann (2006) stated, "Atheists are at the top of the list of groups that Americans find problematic in both public and private life, and the gap between acceptance of atheists and acceptance of other racial and religious minorities is large and persistent" (p. 230). Compared to other minority groups in the United States, second to Muslims, researchers cite atheists as not sharing the same vision of American society, are not welcome as potential sons- and daughters-in-law, are considered self-interested elitists who value material wealth or criminally dangerous individuals and pose a threat to the common good (Edgell, Hartmann, Stewart, & Gerteis, 2016). A threat to values drives these perceptions (Cook, Cottrell, & Webster, 2014) along with a sense of distrust stemming from the assumption that, without a religious belief system, an individual cannot have a sense of morality (Gervais et al., 2011; LaBouff & Ledoux, 2016). The perception of atheists varies in the United States from region to

region, with those least accepting of atheists living in the South and Midwest (Edgell, Gerteis, &

Hartmann, 2006).

In comparison to those who identify as religious, those who identify as atheist or agnostic

report significantly higher instances of discrimination in the workplace, which is difficult to

detect as it can be easily camouflaged by other explanations (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer,

& Nielsen, 2012). Slander is the most common form of discrimination that atheists experience,

followed by coercion; social ostracism; denial of opportunities, goods, and services; and anti-

atheist hate crimes, which include property damage and physical assault (Hammer, Cragun,

Hwang, & Smith, 2012). Garneau (2012) found that atheists experienced discrimination in the

workplace in the forms of being held to a different standard than Christian colleagues and the

loss of opportunities, such as promotions, while Pond (2015) noted that individuals reported

being fired for their atheism. Hammer et al. (2012) also found that a relationship exists between

perceived discrimination and the strength of an individual's atheist identity and the extent to

which one is out in his or her atheist identity. In other words, those who are most open about

their atheist identity are more likely to experience discrimination.

When compared to the experiences of atheists in other countries, American atheists feel

more stigmatized, especially compared to their European and Scandinavian counterparts. Arcaro

(2010) found that while 57% of American atheists felt that they could be discriminated against in

the workplace, only 15% of those in the United Kingdom and 12% in Western Europe felt that

way. Similarly, 61% of American atheists felt that they would experience repercussions from

their families and 68% from their communities, while 20% or less felt that way in the United

Kingdom and Western Europe. Those in the Bible Belt and Midwest were most likely to feel

this form of stigma or discrimination.

Atheist stigma and discrimination in higher education. Colleges and universities are not exempt from the risk of discrimination for atheists, with younger atheists and those in lower income brackets reporting higher instances of discrimination on campus (Cragun et al., 2012). Religious college students have labeled non-religious students with derogatory terms such as immoral, evil, ignorant, shallow, and self-centered (Harper, 2007). Research regarding religious diversity in colleges indicates that those in the religious minority feel marginalized and dominated by Christian norms (Dalton & Crosby, 2007; Lane et al., 2013). Mueller (2012) conducted a phenomenological study of atheist students and found that they struggled to balance experiencing tolerance of their stigmatization and the need to challenge assumptions about atheism. Students needed to be selective about who they were out to about their atheism and were cautious of engaging in religious dialogue on campus.

Current trends are moving toward the creation of multi-faith campuses to be attentive to the varied religious and spiritual identities that students bring to campus and to attend to the holistic development of the student (Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006; Patel & Giess, 2016; Waggoner, 2016). However, this may not be beneficial to students who identify as atheists. Goodman and Mueller (2009) claimed that colleges and universities exclude atheism from the spectrum of religious diversity that is supported on campuses, furthering the stigmatization of this student group, and suggested that institutions should do more to make atheist students feel included.

Researcher Positionality

In qualitative research, "The study reflects the history, culture, and personal experiences of the researcher" (Creswell, 2013, p. 54). I entered this study as an individual who has identified as an atheist for more than 20 years and as a student affairs professional who is

employed at a public, four-year institution. My relocation to a small city in rural Indiana from

Western New York, where my atheism was not an issue in my daily life, piqued my interest in

this topic. Growing up, most of my friends were Catholic. That alone made me different, but at

the time I did not have a sense of what religion meant in my life. My family was not religious,

and I only began attending church in my teens because my friends were being confirmed and I

felt left out. When I began attending a Lutheran church with one of my childhood friends, I felt

comfortable because I had attended Brownie and Girl Scout meetings there for more than a

decade. I attended Sunday school, took the required confirmation classes, and was eventually

confirmed as a Lutheran. I cannot say, however, that I ever subscribed to the teachings of

Lutheranism, or Christianity in general. I never felt connected to the idea of a god, although at

the time, I would never have denounced the existence of one.

After high school, I attended two different Catholic universities, one as an undergraduate

and one as a graduate student, institutions I chose not for their religious affiliation, but for the

quality of their academic programs. It was actually the theology classes that I took as an

undergraduate student that sparked my disbelief, and in the fifteen years between the time I took

my first theology class and the time I enrolled in graduate school, I had completely de-converted.

While I came to my conclusions about religion on my own, I read books like *Letter to a*

Christian Nation (2008) by Sam Harris and *The God Delusion* (2006) by Richard Dawkins,

which helped me to articulate the feelings that I had toward religion, especially after the events

of September 11, 2001. My lack of religious beliefs was known to close friends and family, but

it was never an issue in my personal or work life in New York. It was not even a concern at the

Jesuit graduate institution I attended, where many of my fellow classmates and colleagues

attended Catholic mass on a regular basis. It was not until I moved to a rural community in

Indiana that I felt the need to assimilate this aspect of my identity into my life.

Upon my arrival it became quite clear that religion, specifically Protestant Christianity,

was a large part of the community in which I live, and an important aspect of my colleagues' and

students' lives. They frequently spoke about their participation in church activities and their

dedication to the teachings of Christ. It was not uncommon to see symbols of Christianity in the

offices of professional staff members around campus and Christmas décor in December. My

institution even includes a Christian invocation during the commencement ceremony. In the

community, the parents of my son's friends and members of organizations with which I am

associated through my position at the university asked what church we attended. I felt the need

to hide my atheist identity for fear that students, staff, and community members would stigmatize

my son and me for our lack of belief. I started reading atheist blogs and other information online

to identify a community that could help me to understand better what my atheist identity would

mean in this new environment.

For several years I disclosed this aspect of my life to only a select few. I was thankful

that my direct supervisor accepted my beliefs, as well as a few students and faculty members.

Still, although I never publicly proclaimed my atheism, other colleagues began to figure it out.

Two colleagues, to whom I had never disclosed this information, brought it up in conversations

about their own faith with comments such as "I know that you don't believe this but. . .", one of

whom made large arm gestures and spoke loudly in the hallway, making a spectacle of my

atheism to all within earshot. It seemed to me that they were not able to discuss their own beliefs

without pointing out my otherness. Another colleague, who I consider to be a trusted

professional confidant, once suggested that a communication problem I was having with a new

staff member, who was a devout Christian, was because of our difference in religious beliefs.

Finally, one of my staff members transferred to another position when I confronted her about

holding small group church meetings in our office after hours without my permission. Although

I was careful to frame the conversation around institutional policies regarding the use of campus

space, it was apparent that I was not informed of the space being used because of my views on

religion. These experiences have led me to wonder how others who are employed in institutions

of higher education experience the atheist identity.

Statement of Problem

In the years since moving to Indiana, I have met other atheists who work in higher

education. We are a very small subsection of a population who live in a highly Christian region

of the country. Many of us are not open about this aspect of our identity, instead tending to

sense each other's atheism through subtle clues in language and other markers, such as political

opinions. We should feel free to express this aspect of identities, just as our Christian students

and colleagues do; however, this is not always the case, as the risk of stigmatization and

discrimination of atheists can be felt on college campuses. This has driven my desire to

understand better how atheists who live in Indiana experience this identity in the higher

education workplace. I utilized a qualitative, phenomenological methodology, which allowed

me to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of atheists in higher education.

Purpose

Empirical research about atheists in higher education is growing but still fairly limited. I

believe this study will address a gap in the research by specifically examining how those who

work in higher education experience the atheist identity. The current literature about atheists in

higher education focuses on how students experience the atheist identity in college (Bowman,

Felix & Ortis, 2014; Bowman, Rockenbach, Mayhew, Riggers-Piehl, & Hudson, 2016; Bowman & Small, 2012; Bowman & Smedley, 2012; Cragun, Blyde, Sumerau, Mann, & Hammer, 2016; Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Harrington, Jacob, Harbert, & Saiid, 2014; Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014; Mueller, 2012; Nash, 2003; Rockenbach, Mayhew, & Bowman, 2015; Small, 2011). The purpose of this research was to specifically explore how professional staff members who identify as atheists experience this identity in the higher education workplace.

Research Questions

In this phenomenological study, I examined the lived experiences of professional staff in higher education who identify as atheists. I have defined professional staff as any employee who is not classified as faculty or support staff. Institutions of higher education employ a wide range of professional staff in departments including, but not limited to: student affairs, enrollment management, auxiliary services, athletics, campus police, physical facilities, human resources, business affairs, gift development, marketing, and communications. I did not limit the type of professional position in this study.

Atheists are a marginalized minority group in the United States, and although institutions of higher education tend to be more accepting of diversity than some other workplaces, atheists may still feel that they cannot divulge this aspect of their identity to supervisors, co-workers, faculty, or students. My primary research question was: How do professional staff members who identify as atheists experience that identity in the higher education workplace? This study is informed by two pilot studies (discussed in Chapter Three), which revealed two findings that are critical to the development of this study: the use of stigma management in the negotiation of the atheist identity in the workplace and the presence of Christian privilege in the higher educational environment in Indiana. Therefore, my secondary research questions were: What strategies do

they employ to manage the stigmatization of the atheist identity? What role does the religious

environment of the institution play in the navigation of this identity? I explored my participants'

backgrounds as they related to religion and their atheism, their current and past experiences

within higher education, and how they experienced their atheist identities within the higher

education environment.

Definitions

As mentioned earlier, terms surrounding atheism and non-belief can be confusing and

have been a topic of discussion by scholars of atheism (Cragun, 2016; Smith, 2011). Throughout

this report I have used terminology that may not be commonly known to the reader. As such, I

have provided definitions for understanding the terms that are used throughout this report.

Atheism/Atheist: Atheism is defined as "to be without belief in a god or gods" (Cragun,

2016, p. 303). An atheist, then, is an individual who is "without belief in a god or gods" (p.

303).

Agnosticism/Agnostic: Agnosticism is an acknowledgement that one can never know

whether a god or gods exists. As such, an agnostic is an individual who does not deny the

existence of a god or gods but rather believes that he or she can never know if a god or gods exist

(Cragun, 2016).

Bible Belt: A geographical region in the southeast quadrant of the United States

characterized by "an ardent fundamentalism, and in particular to places that are populated by

those valuing a literal interpretation of the Bible" (Heatwole, 1978, p. 50).

Catholicism: The largest Christian religion in the world, Catholicism, or the Roman

Catholic faith, was founded by Jesus of Nazareth (Bokenkotter, 2005). In the United States, 23%

of the population identifies as Catholic (Gallup, 2018).

Christian: An individual who ascribes to the tenets of Christianity, the largest world religion. Christians believe Jesus Christ is the Messiah and son of God, was born of the Virgin Mary, was executed, resurrected from the dead, and will return again, and that salvation comes through Jesus Christ alone (McDowell & Brown, 2009).

Christian Privilege: An invisible, unearned, and largely unacknowledged array of benefits accorded to Christians (Blumenfeld, Yoshi, & Fairchild, 2009, p. vii).

Evangelical: A branch of Christianity which "which lays special stress on personal conversion and salvation by faith in the atoning death of Christ" (Livingstone, 2013, para. 3).

Freethinker: An individual who rejects religious beliefs and ascribes to critical thought, "espousing the use of reason, logic, empirical study, and/or scientific enquiry to determine the truth of a claim" (Bullivant & Lee, 2016, para. 1).

Marginalization: Marginalization is the process of pushing a particular group or groups of people to the edge of society by not allowing them an active voice, identity, or place in it (Syracuse University Counseling Center, n.d., para. 1).

Midwest: A geographical region of the United States, comprised of states west of the Mohawk River Valley, including Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, and Eastern Colorado. A high number of individuals who value Protestant Christianity live in this region (Lieske, 1993).

Professional staff: An employee in higher education who is not classified as faculty, clerical, or support staff.

Protestantism: A branch of Christianity that can be traced back to Martin Luther and the Reformation and rejects the Roman Catholic doctrine (Dixon, 2010). In the United States, 48% of the population identifies as Protestant/Other Christian faith (Gallup, 2018).

Religious nones: The religious nones is a common category used in polling of religions which indicates that an individual does not affiliate with any religious denomination. Individuals in this group may still believe in a god or higher power, or may identify as atheist, agnostic, or secular (Pew, 2015).

Rural: The United States Census Bureau (n.d.) defines rural in opposition to urban. While urban refers to areas that are "densely developed territory, and encompass residential, commercial, and other non-residential urban land uses" (para. 1), a rural area is one that is not encompassed by an urban area.

Secular: Secular is a broad term used to describe things that are not religious; however, it is frequently used as a synonym for non-belief worldviews, such as atheism and agnosticism (Cragun, 2016).

Secular Humanist: Rooted in non-belief, secular humanism is a philosophical worldview that values naturalism, the scientific method, and positive ethical values (Council for Secular Humanism, n.d.).

Stigma: A social construction of identity based on distinguishing characteristics that serves to devalue an individual (Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000).

Summary

In this chapter, I have provided a background for understanding atheism, including the stigma and stereotypes associated with this identity, and the types of discrimination atheists may experience. I have explained my positionality as a researcher, which includes my experiences as an atheist who works in higher education. Finally, I have discussed the purpose of the study and the specific primary and secondary research questions posed to fill a gap in the research regarding the atheist identity in higher education.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study examines how professional staff members in institutions of higher education experience the atheist identity. This identity experiences stigmatization through stereotypes that devalue the individual (Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000). This study took place in a particular location, the state of Indiana, which is in a highly Protestant Christian region of the country. As such, literature regarding atheist identity development, as well as stigma and stigma management, shaped the study, and will provide a framework for understanding the complexity of the atheist identity and how it is navigated in social and professional situations. Literature about Christian privilege also guided the study and will provide context for understanding the institutional and cultural environment in which my participants work. Finally, the literature about the experiences of atheist college students, which is highly relevant to my study, will shed light on the unique experiences of atheists in institutions of higher education.

I conducted my literature search by utilizing a variety of electronic databases, including Academic Search Premier, ERIC, PsycINFO, Social Sciences Full Text (H.W. Wilson), JSTOR, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses A&I. Although the majority of my sources came from refereed journals, I also used the Ball State University CardCat system to locate books that were relevant to my search. I frequently searched for new literature and I established several Google Scholar alerts with key terms such as "atheism," "Christian privilege," and "stigma management," which pushed notifications of relevant literature to my Gmail account. Finally, I follow several atheist blogs through social media, which share new, peer-reviewed literature on a regular basis.

Atheist Identity Development

In order to explore how the atheist identity develops, it is essential to note that identity is a social construct. Smith (2011) described identity as "that which individuals use to describe and define their membership in groups, their relative positions in social life, and the various ascribed and achieved statuses they hold" (p. 217). The atheist identity is one that is most often developed from the rejection of another religious identity. Smith (2011) described four phases of atheist identity development. The first phase, the ubiquity of theism, is characterized by automatic participation in religion as part of a societal culture. For most Americans, this is some form of Christianity. Belief in God is assumed, participation in religion is the norm, and most individuals enter into the practice of religion before they are old enough to make a conscious decision about their participation.

The second phase, questioning theism, occurs when an individual begins questioning societal norms associated with religion. This phase often begins when an individual starts college or is otherwise exposed to a new environment in which he or she is exposed to diverse ideas and worldviews. Interactions with devout religious believers or a close reading of the Bible is a common impetus for evaluating long-held beliefs. Characterized by doubt, within this phase one begins to unlearn beliefs and practices in a slow progression toward disbelief. Simultaneously, an individual begins to assign new meaning to the concept of morality, which is traditionally viewed as a religious value (Smith, 2011).

The third phase, rejecting theism, begins when an individual has firmly rejected the notion of God and has moved toward viewing the world through a secular lens. Smith (2011) compared the atheist identity to other identities formed from the rejection of and non-participation in larger societal norms, such as veganism or non-drinkers. This phase also marks

when individuals must view themselves as members of an out-group, which could have

significant implications for their acceptance by others, including family and friends.

The final phase, coming out atheist, occurs when individuals feel validated in their atheist

identity and can make this explicit to others. Those who are out and find community with other

atheists tend to have a stronger sense of identity. However, this phase comes with significant

risk, as religious believers stigmatize many atheists as being immoral or deviant. For this reason,

many atheists do not always fully reach this phase, or may only be out in this aspect of their

identity to certain individuals. In this way, atheists are managing the impact that their

stigmatized identity has on their social experiences, including the potential for discrimination

and other forms of marginalization (Smith, 2011).

Stigma

Stigma is a social construction of identity based on distinguishing characteristics that

serve to devalue an individual (Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000). Goffman (1963)

distinguished between individuals' virtual social identity, which society places on them through

stereotypes, and their actual social identity, which is a set of characteristics they actually possess.

The attributes assigned to someone's virtual identity make others view him or her as less human

than what Goffman (1963) referred to as "the normals" (p. 5), those without a particular

stigmatized identity. Stigmatized identities may be visible to others through physical

characteristics or abnormalities. These mark an individual as "discredited" (p. 4), while those

whose stigmatized identities are not visible are considered "discreditable" (p. 4). Invisible

stigmatized identities include "blemishes of the individual character" (p. 4) such as mental

illness, addiction, or criminal behavior, as well as "tribal stigmas" (p. 4), such as race,

nationality, and religion. Jones et al. (1984) further broke down stigmatized identities into six

dimensions: (a) concealability, which is the extent of the visibility of the stigmatized identity; (b) course of the mark, which addresses whether the stigma will become more pronounced over time; (c) disruptiveness, which considers the extent to which the stigmatized identity interferes with daily life; (d) aesthetics, which concerns the subjective reactions to the stigmatized characteristics; (e) origin, which refers to how the stigmatized identity was formed and the extent to which the individual is responsible for its creation; and (f) peril, which addresses the perceived danger the stigma presents to others.

 The rejection of a religious identity most often forms the atheist identity. It is considered a tribal stigma; therefore, it is an invisible stigmatized identity. Our culture perceives the atheist identity as one that an individual has chosen for him or herself through the rejection of the religious norm, one that is potentially dangerous to others because of the cultural assumption that religion is necessary for morality. Stigmas rely upon a cultural context, are constructed locally, and depend upon time (Stangor & Crandall, 2000). Therefore, what may have been stigmatized in one geographic or cultural region during a particular time may not be stigmatized in another region or at another time. Silver et al. (2014) explained how cultural context is important to the atheist perspective:

> The stark distinction of atheism lengthens where a single religion happens to
> stand as the dominant cultural influence. In more secular cultural contexts such
> distinctions lose their social gravity in lieu of more democratic discourse and private
> manifestations of belief. Atheism and religiosity become a zero sum proposition where
> perceived cultural threat is small or does not exist. (p. 990)

A stigma etiology explains how culture forms and perpetuates a stigma (Stangor & Crandall, 2000). First, a physical or symbolic threat to self and society forms an impetus for the

stigma. These threats can be ascribed to intergroup conflict, health, physical features, a belief in a just world, or morality, which is most relevant to the atheist identity. Moral threats occur when others perceive a group to possess a different value system that could potentially undermine the common good of society. Once the threat has been established, perceptual distortions amplify group differences and the perceptions are then shared amongst group members, resulting in stigma. This etiology helps us to understand how atheism's rejection of religion, and what are deemed to be religious values, became not just a stigmatized identity, but one of the most vilified stigmatized identities in a highly-Christian, modern American society.

Expanding further on Goffman's (1963) work, Link and Phelan (2001) developed four components that explain how stigma eventually leads to stereotypes and discrimination. First, society must distinguish between differences through the use of labels, some of which are deemed to be more important than others. In turn, society deems some labels to be of lesser value, assigning stereotypes to the undesirable characteristics and coding them into our cognitive processes for quick judgments and decisions about others. Next, we use these labels to form an "us" versus "them" distinction, assigning multiple negative attributes to those with a particular label, sometimes to the extent that those who are not "us" are deemed less human. Once this occurs, it becomes easy to reject those who are labeled as different, resulting in status loss and both individual and institutionalized discrimination of those with the stigmatized identity. Link and Phelan (2001) stated that "stigma is entirely dependent on social, economic, and political power" (p. 375) to be created and perpetuated. The fear of being labeled, stereotyped, and discriminated against by those with power is what drives individuals with invisible stigmatized identities to control who has knowledge of that particular identity and who does not.

Stigma Management

Individuals will manage their stigmatized identities differently depending on a confluence of factors that affect their self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989). These include the concealability of the stigma, the amount of time that has passed since the stigma was acquired, the acceptance of negative attitudes toward the stigmatized group, the responsibility of the stigmatizing condition, the centrality of the stigma in the individual's self-concept, and whether an individual is a token member of the stigmatized identity in a given situation. Goffman (1963) identified information control as the primary mechanism for the management of invisible stigmatized identities. Individuals continually make decisions "to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case to whom, how, when, and where" (p. 42). They may choose to disclose information about their stigmatized identity to select individuals, or "the wise" (p. 28), whose particular circumstances make them a trusted confidant who accepts the stigmatized identity. They may also choose to "pass" (p. 42) as a member of the normative group as a means of concealing their stigmatized identity.

Research on the management of various types of invisible stigmatized identities includes studies of those who have been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS (Foster & Gaskins, 2009; Poindexter & Shippy, 2010); LGBT individuals (Beals, Peplau, & Gable, 2009; Cain, 1991; and Hylton, 2006); individuals with drug addictions (McKenna, 2013); individuals whose parents have been incarcerated (Luther, 2016), as well as those who have been incarcerated themselves (Winnick & Bodkin, 2008); those who have been diagnosed with mental health illness (Elliott & Doane, 2015); college students who are non-drinkers (Herman-Kinney & Kinney, 2012); and atheists (Fitzgerald, 2003; Garneau, 2012; McClure, 2017; Pond, 2015). This research has revealed that individuals use a wide variety of strategies to conceal their stigmatized identities.

Stigmatized individuals use disclosure decisions as their primary stigma management strategy, motivated by a given situation or relationship. The types of disclosures include non-disclosure, when the individual keeps the stigmatized identity completely secret; selective or partial disclosure, which could be anticipated and intentional or unintended and undesired; or full disclosure which may be used in an attempt to fight stigma resistance (Poindexter & Shippy, 2010). Disclosure decisions can also be broken down by the reason for sharing information about the stigmatized identity (Cain, 1991). Therapeutic disclosures can help individuals feel better about their stigmatized identity and less burdened about holding the information secret. An individual's desire to feel closer to someone else motivates relationship-building disclosures. Problem-solving disclosures result when the individual feels that others are continually questioning their stigmatized identity or making assumptions based on normative values. Individuals use preventative disclosures to avoid anticipated problems or to inform those who may be in a position to learn the information from someone else. Individuals use political disclosures in an effort to challenge misconceptions, bring awareness to a stigmatized identity, or to fight injustice. Finally, spontaneous disclosures happen through slips of the tongue or opportune moments that make sharing the stigmatized identity less burdensome.

Assessing the social setting of a given situation can also mitigate information control (Hylton, 2006). Stigmatized individuals may look for cues that others in the setting are associated with a similarly stigmatized individual or group, such as other atheists. They may also listen for language or look for symbols that indicate that those in the setting are either part of the stigmatized group or accepting of it. This may include listening and looking for indications that those in the setting have values and ideologies that favor other types of stigmatized identities, such as liberal political leanings.

In the event that individuals feel that they cannot share their stigmatized identity in a given situation, they may use several strategies to avoid disclosure (Hylton, 2006). These strategies include truthful evasion, in which an individual may avoid answering a question or discussions about his or her stigma while still providing a response that is truthful in some way; masking, which involves telling a lie that parallels the truth; and limiting contact with those who are not accepting of their stigmatized identity. These strategies for both disclosure decisions and for avoiding disclosure demonstrate the extent to which individuals may go to protect their stigmatized identity.

Although it may feel to some that they are protecting themselves by not disclosing their stigmatized identity, research has demonstrated that it is better for an individual's well-being to share the identity, at least with trusted groups or individuals (Beals & Peplau, 2009; Elliott & Doane, 2015). Concealment of the stigmatized identity leads to decreased social interactions with others who share the same identity. The social support gained through disclosure can increase an individual's mental and physical health through positive interactions with those who share or are accepting of a stigmatized identity. Conversely, suppression of the stigmatized identity can lead to negative thoughts, heightened stress, and decreased psychological health.

Atheist stigma management. Fitzgerald (2003) identified specific strategies that atheists in the United States use to manage their stigmatized identities: selective concealment, selective disclosure, and open/complete disclosure. Selective concealment is broken down into three related strategies: (a) Individuals may pass as Christian by avoiding the discussion of atheism or religion, allowing others to believe that they do believe in God, known as assumptive concealment, or by participating in religious activities to avoid disclosure, known as contradictory activity participation; (b) Use of indirection involves identity substitution, when

individuals choose a less stigmatized identity (e.g. secular humanist); label substitution, when

individuals choose a less stigmatized term (e.g. spiritual); and telling half-truths (e.g. saying that

they are just not religious); (c) Nondisclosure occurs when individuals lie about their stigmatized

identity or refuse to discuss it. Those who use selective disclosure strategies will lay claim to

their atheist identity if directly asked about it, which Fitzgerald referred to as response to inquiry,

or if they feel the need to educate others to reduce stigma and dispel misconceptions, which

Fitzgerald labeled as political disclosure for educational purposes. Finally, those who are open

and disclose their atheist identity may challenge others to justify their religious beliefs and

challenge stereotypes.

Garneau (2012) also examined atheist stigma management. Atheists were most likely to

keep their identity a secret if they felt that their jobs would be in jeopardy, to avoid

uncomfortable interactions with coworkers, or to avoid being judged unfairly in the workplace.

He identified inward and outward stigma management strategies, as well as neutralization

techniques. Inward stigma management techniques included secrecy; selective passing or

compartmentalization, when the individual tells some people but not others; and passing as

Christian. Outward stigma management techniques included disclosure, which individuals

employ when they do not want to keep their atheist identity a secret; education and civic

involvement, which individuals use to dispel stereotypes and to create a positive image of

atheists; and public outings, where participants use social media and other outlets to share their

views and reduce stigma. Finally, neutralization techniques used by individuals included

appealing to higher loyalties, such as science and reason; condemning those who criticize

atheism by pointing out illogical or negative aspects of religion; and redefining the situation by

pointing out the positive aspects of atheism, such as critical thinking and personal moral convictions.

Pond (2015), who studied atheists in the South, also found that atheists were most hesitant to disclose their atheist identity in the workplace because of the fear of losing their jobs or being otherwise stigmatized. One participant reported being fired for challenging the interference of religion in the workplace, while another noted that a colleague was terminated after disclosing his atheist identity. The participants noted public displays of religion in the workplace and described their workplace experiences with religion as uncomfortable. Nondisclosure was the most common strategy used in this study as most of the participants were closeted in their atheist identity. They also used strategies such as label substitution to reduce negative perceptions. Pond (2015) also noted that those who were young and early in their careers were most protective of their atheist identity, while those who were older and more established were more comfortable with disclosing their atheist identity.

Christian Privilege

As Link and Phelan (2001) noted, power creates and perpetuates stigma. An invisible benefit of power comes in the form of privilege. McIntosh (1988) described privilege as an "unearned entitlement" (p. 10) that a dominant group receives strictly by nature of their membership in that group, which results in an "unearned advantage" (p. 10) over others. It is considered invisible because most people in positions of privilege are not aware of the benefits they are receiving as a result of that particular group membership. In other words, "to have privilege is to be allowed to move through your life without being marked in ways that identify you as an outsider" (Johnson, 2006, p. 39). Christian privilege can therefore be defined as "an

invisible, unearned, and largely unacknowledged array of benefits accorded to Christians"

(Blumenfeld, Yoshi, & Fairchild, 2009, p. vii). It is characterized by statements such as:

- It is likely that state and federal holidays coincide with my religious practices, thereby having little to no impact on my job and/or education.

- I can talk openly about my religious practices without concern for how it will be perceived by others.

- If I wish, usually I can be exclusively among those from my religious group most of the time (in work, school, or at home).

- I can assume that my safety, or the safety of my family, will not be put into jeopardy by disclosing my religion to others at work or at school. (Clark, Brimhall-Vargas, Schlosser, & Alimo, 2002, p. 54-55; see Appendix A for additional examples).

The power of Christian privilege lies in the assumption of Christianity as the established norm. By default, this defines those who do not practice Christianity as abnormal, and perceives them to be "evil, wrong, deviant, threatening, and/or sick" (Blumenfeld et al., 2009, p. xiii). Like other forms of privilege (e.g., White, male), this perception leads to the oppression and marginalization of groups or individuals in the minority.

Blumenfeld (2006) used a framework by Hardiman and Jackson (1997) to describe three levels of oppression that serve to perpetuate Christian privilege: individual/interpersonal; institutional; and societal/cultural. These levels are not necessarily distinct from one another; instead, they overlap and provide the basis for each other. At the individual level, conscious and unconscious beliefs about religious minorities may result in discrimination or other forms of oppression, such as avoidance or violence. These individual beliefs then serve as the foundation

for systematic institutional oppression in the form of rules and practices that favor Christians.

For example, many states (including Indiana until March, 2018) still operate under Blue Laws

that prevent the sale of liquor and other business operations on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath. In

educational institutions, this form of privilege can be seen in curriculum selection, academic

calendars that favor Christianity over other religions, cafeteria offerings, and dress codes that

restrict certain religious attire. Finally, societal/cultural oppression manifests in the set of values

and established norms that are deemed to be acceptable by the majority. The idea that the United

States is a Christian nation and the inclusion of phrases such as "In God We Trust" on our

currency and "under God" in the *Pledge of Allegiance* are two such examples of how Christian

privilege is pervasive at the societal level.

Christian Privilege in Higher Education

Institutions of higher education are not immune to the pervasive nature of Christian

privilege. Although it is not a common topic, several published articles identify sources of

Christian privilege in colleges and universities (Clark et al., 2002; Fairchild, 2009; Schlosser &

Sedlacek, 2001; Seifert, 2007). Christian privilege can be seen in both formal structures and

informal norms of an institution. Many institutions, once founded as Christian but now serving

secular missions, still house a Christian chapel, which is likely located at the center of campus.

Some of these chapels have been converted into multi-faith centers in response to the call for

recognition of religious diversity. The architecture of churches, however, is quite different than

that of other religions' places of worship, so it will always serve as a reminder that Christianity is

the dominant religion on campus, leaving those in the minority to feel ill at ease in this space. In

other instances, campuses reserve the chapel for Christian students, giving students of other

religions meeting rooms or other spaces to practice. United States law states that a campus must

allow for the use of campus facilities for religious purposes, but it does not require campuses to designate a specific area to be used on a regular basis (Clark & Brimhall-Vargas, 2003).

The academic calendar is another constant reminder of Christian privilege on campus. While Christian students, faculty, and staff can be sure that they will not have class on their high holidays, Christmas and Easter, those from other religions cannot be assured of the same. Holy observances, such as Ramadan in the Muslim faith and Rosh Hashanah in the Jewish faith, frequently fall within the academic year, forcing students to choose between their religious practices and studying or attending class. Although these may be excused absences for students, many are put into a position where they have to document their faith to be excused (Schlosser & Sedlack, 2003; Seifert, 2007).

Other practices are also indicative of Christian privilege in higher education. Native American and other students whose mourning and burial traditions differ greatly from Christianity may find resistance from professors during their time of bereavement (Seifert, 2007). Faculty, staff, and students whose religious observances require a fasting period may find that campus food services are not provided at appropriate times. Additionally, most campuses do not offer kosher meals on a daily basis. This puts an unnecessary and unfair burden upon students who reside on campus and are forced to purchase a meal plan, as opposed to Christian students who are likely to find meatless meals on Fridays (Seifert, 2007). Finally, athletics is another realm of student life affected by Christian privilege. Many coaches make it a practice to use prayer before and during games, putting non-Christian student athletes in an unfair position. They must either speak up and risk losing a starting position or being released from the team or say nothing and continue to feel marginalized (Clark et al., 2002; Seifert, 2007).

These examples serve as evidence of the power that Christianity has over a wide range of policies, practices, and norms on college campuses for those in the religious minority. Christian privilege has a significant effect on those who identify as atheists on campus as well. The following section will examine atheist college students and how this power differential impacts their educational experiences.

Atheist College Students

My review of the literature did not reveal specific research related to professional staff in higher education who identify as atheist. Yet, a growing body of literature exists on the experiences of atheist college students, which allowed me to understand further how this identity is experienced in this particular environment. The literature examined individuals in relation to their atheist philosophy, their comfort in their atheist identity on campus, and the developmental differences between atheist students and their theistic peers, as well as how the institutional climate toward religion plays a part in their experiences.

Atheist students are multidimensional and vary in their personal philosophies of unbelief. Similar to Silver et al. (2014), Nash (2003) described five types of atheist students whom he has encountered in his time teaching religion and spirituality courses in higher education. Secular humanists believe that instead of a higher power, humans are responsible to ourselves and to each other. Anti-theists are critical of religion and tend to be more vocal about their opinions. Social justice atheists are compassionate individuals who fight for human rights. Scientific humanists lean more toward naturalistic explanations of the world, rooting their belief systems in the scientific method. Finally, existential humanists search for meaning inside themselves, rather than externally. Of course, students could be any combination of these types of atheist philosophies. Students who are active in atheist-based clubs, such as the Secular Student

Alliance, tap into these varied philosophies by engaging in educational programming and events, activism related to church-state separation and freedom of speech, and service projects (Liddell & Stedman, 2011).

While some students may feel comfortable in sharing their views about religion and atheism, other students have reported feeling hesitant to discuss their beliefs both in and out of the classroom for fear of offending those who are religious or fear of being stereotyped as "shallow materialists…totally devoid of an interior life" (Nash, 2003, p. 6) or as "amoral, dangerous, devil-worshippers" (Mueller, 2012, p. 259). Stigma and marginalization are common themes in empirical studies of atheist students (Harrington et al., 2014; Mueller, 2012; Small, 2011). The sense of marginalization may be vague and difficult for students to identify, stemming from exclusion in friendships formed over shared religious beliefs (Small, 2011). It may also be more pronounced as they experience ridicule from friends (Harrington et al., 2014) or start to identify sources of religious privilege on campus, resulting in anger toward the institution and other students (Small, 2011). Atheist students waiver between blending into the campus community by passing as Christian and being outward about their identity. Many ultimately choose to keep this aspect of their lives private to protect themselves from potential stigmatization and discrimination (Mueller, 2012).

Students who identify as atheists may experience developmental and other types of challenges. Studies have found that atheist students have lower scores on issues of well-being related to satisfaction with their overall college experience (Bowman & Smedley, 2012), life and overall mood (Bowman & Small, 2012), satisfaction with friendships, perceived growth in preparing for life after college, and perceived growth in relating to other racial groups (Bowman, Felix & Ortis, 2014). They also have shown less growth in spiritual development but have

indicated that they are equal to their theistic peers in their spiritual quest. This means that while

they are not seeking to find meaning and purpose in college through religious participation,

atheist students still seek meaning and purpose through their college experiences (Bowman &

Small, 2010). These studies indicate that atheist students are not engaging in the campus at a

level that allows them to grow developmentally in ways that are similar to their theistic peers and

leads one to question whether the campus climate has the potential to have a negative impact on

the experiences of college students.

Campus Climate

In higher education, "atheist students occupy the bottom rung of a religious hierarchy that

predominates most US college campuses" (Bowman et al., 2016, p. 101). Students who belong

to majority religious groups (i.e., Protestant, Catholic, and Evangelical) perceive the campus to

be welcoming to students who are non-religious (Rockenbach et al., 2015), yet they do not

indicate that they themselves appreciate the atheist perspective (Bowman et al., 2016). Atheist

students, on the other hand, perceive the campus to be unwelcoming to non-religious individuals

(Rockenbach et al., 2015). This discrepancy in the perceptions of the campus climate is

prohibitive for developmental growth in both the religious and non-religious students.

Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1999) developed a framework for helping

colleges and universities improve the climate for racial and ethnic diversity, which can be

applied to religious diversity as well. "Central to the conceptualization of a campus climate for

diversity is the notion that students are educated in distinct racial contexts where learning and

socializing occur" (p. 4). The framework operates under the assumption that there are external

contexts (i.e., government policies and sociohistorical forces) and institutional contexts that

shape the climate. Within the institutional context, four dynamics are at play: the historical

legacy of inclusion/exclusion, including institutional mission; structural diversity, which is formed by a diverse student body, faculty, and staff; psychological climate, which is shaped by perceptions of discrimination and prejudice; and behavioral dimensions, which involve social interactions among groups, classroom diversity, and campus involvement.

Colleges and universities have been making efforts to improve the campus climate in regards to religious diversity; however, several studies have indicated that efforts to increase structural diversity, such as recruiting more religious minority students, or efforts to increase behavioral dimensions, such as interfaith programming, are not conducive to helping the atheist student feel welcome and supported (Cragun et al., 2016; Mayhew et al., 2014; Rockenbach et al., 2015). Goodman and Mueller (2009) attributed the efforts toward religious pluralism and spirituality on campus to be contributing factors in the marginalization of atheist students. They challenged campuses to assess the campus climate toward atheists by examining ways that they define and discuss religion and spirituality. They also encouraged faculty and staff to understand atheism to break down their own assumptions and biases and normalize the atheist perspective by talking openly about it. If interfaith programming is occurring, they stressed the importance of including the perspectives of nonbelievers. Further, they recommended that atheist students be involved in campus programming, be encouraged to form an organization to build a sense of community, and be provided with a network of faculty and staff who can serve as allies.

Summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed the literature on atheist identity development, stigma, stigma management, Christian privilege, and atheist college students as a framework for understanding the complexities of the atheist experience in higher education. In comparing the first three concepts to the experiences of atheist college students, it is evident that they play an

important role in the environment and climate of higher education for students who identify as

atheists. This study examined how these concepts influence the lived experiences of professional

staff members who share the atheist identity.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The paradigmatic stance of the investigator guides research and provides a framework for how he or she views reality and constructs knowledge (Crotty, 1998; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Spencer, Pryce, & Walsh, 2014). This framework determines the relationship of the researcher to what is being investigated, how the researcher views facts and values in the investigation, and the primary goal of the research (Smith, 1983). On one end of the ontological and epistemological spectrum lies positivism; the belief that reality is objective and exists independent from consciousness, and that knowledge is constructed deductively through the scientific method. Researchers who hold this belief system are engaged in quantitative research. On the other end of the spectrum lies constructionism, which operates under the assumption that reality is subjective, and that knowledge is constructed through an individual's interactions with the social world (Crotty, 1998; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Spencer et al., 2014). Researchers who subscribe to this view of knowledge construction conduct qualitative research.

Qualitative Inquiry

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of atheists who work in higher education. My research question was: How do professional staff members who identify as atheists experience that identity in the higher education workplace? I have chosen qualitative inquiry for my approach to studying this phenomenon, as qualitative methodologies seek to discover the meaning of experiences and are interpretive in nature (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Qualitative inquiry is naturalistic in that researchers frequently conduct their study in the context in which the phenomenon takes place and, if necessary, for an extended time (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The researcher serves as the instrument for data collection which is

generated through a combination of observations, interviews, or document examination, and the

data are descriptive in nature (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Savin-Baden & Major,

2013). The inductive nature of qualitative research means that themes are generated "from the

bottom up" (Creswell, 2013, p. 45) as investigators pull together pieces of data to form

categories and patterns. The researcher positions him or herself within the study, taking into

account the experiences and biases that could influence the interpretation of the data (Creswell,

2013; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Stewart, 2010). Depending on the specific theoretical lens

the researcher is using, the same data set can also result in multiple interpretations (Honan,

Knobel, Baker, & Davies, 2000). The perspective of the participants, their understanding of the

meaning of a particular phenomenon, and the recognition of multiple realities are paramount in

qualitative inquiry (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Although quantitative inquiry has established generalizable knowledge about atheists, I

was interested in the unique perspectives of this group in a particular place. Only qualitative

inquiry can generate this level of highly contextualized knowledge. Aspects of identity receive

meaning through social interactions and an individuals' interpretations of these experiences. I

have approached this study from a constructionist epistemology as I was seeking to understand

how my participants assign meaning and make sense of their socially-constructed experiences in

the workplace (Crotty, 1998).

Theoretical Perspective

A theoretical perspective identifies the philosophical assumptions behind a particular

methodology (Crotty, 1998). I examined this phenomenon through an interpretive theoretical

lens, which "looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social-life

world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). Interpretivism allows a researcher to understand the phenomenon

on two levels (Smith, 1983). First, it identifies what is happening in a given phenomenon

without any "conscious inferences" (p. 12) of the activity. In this way, it is descriptive in nature.

It then allows the researcher to gain an understanding of how an individual assigns meaning to

the phenomenon and how it is being understood through interpretation.

Methodology

I have chosen to conduct a phenomenological study of higher education professionals

who identify as atheists and how they experience that identity in the workplace. Phenomenology

seeks to discover the meaning and essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). It was my

desire to understand the "exclusively singular aspects (identity/essence/otherness) of a

phenomenon" (van Manen, 2016, p. 27); the examination of my participants' lived experiences

as an atheist makes it phenomenological in nature.

As a methodology, phenomenology has its roots in two primary traditions of philosophy

that are similar at the heart but diverge in distinctive aspects. Transcendental phenomenology,

originally conceived by Edmund Husserl, is descriptive in nature and is rooted in the concept of

intentionality, "the internal experience of being conscious of something" (Moustakas, 1994, p.

28). This approach specifically calls for the bracketing of previous experiences, called epoché,

to separate our preconceptions of the experience being examined (Kafle, 2013; Moustakas, 1994;

Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; van Manen, 2016). The transcendental method utilizes a

process of reduction which helps to create a description of the essence of the experience

(Creswell, 2013; Kafle, 2013; Smith et al., 2009).

The other school of thought about phenomenology stems from the work of Heidegger, a

student of Husserl's (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger's philosophy of phenomenology differs

from Husserl's in that he did not feel it was possible to separate our preconceptions from our

examination of a phenomenon and grounded his philosophy in intersubjectivity–the connectedness of people (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009; van Manen, 2016). Heidegger's approach is also rooted in hermeneutics, which focuses on the interpretation of the lived experience, rather than the description of the lived experience (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009; van Manen, 2016). Van Manen (2016) described the differences between the two approaches: "While Husserl steps out of the world to grasp the meaning from above, Heidegger stays in the world of beings to understand their modes of being from within the world" (p. 220).

Husserl and Heidegger provided the foundation from which other philosophers of phenomenology add nuanced contributions to our understanding of the exploration of the lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). Merleau-Ponty focused on the embodied nature of the lived experience and recognized that the perception of other develops from one's own embodied perspective. Sartre viewed the lived experience as a "developmental, procedural aspect of human being" (p.19) and extended that absence is equally as significant as presence when considering how someone views the world. Finally, Gadamer recognized that preconceptions about a phenomenon are influenced by interpretation, which, in turn, influences the way a phenomenon is interpreted, changing our fundamental understanding of it through interpretation.

Contemporary Phenomenology

Neither Husserl nor Heidegger intended to create a methodology for research (Smith et al., 2009). Contemporary phenomenologists have given structure to the philosophies to create a method for qualitative inquiry. Moustakas (1994) has provided a methodological framework for transcendental phenomenology. The process begins with epoché and is followed by transcendental-phenomenological reduction, which produces a textural description of the

phenomenon, or how it was experienced. It is then followed with imaginative variation, which

provides the structural description of the phenomenon, or where it was experienced.

Van Manen (2016) developed the phenomenology of practice, which is grounded in

hermeneutic phenomenology and "refers to the kinds of inquiries that address and serve the

practices of professional practitioners as well as the quotidian of everyday life" (p. 15). Van

Manen discussed the applicability of phenomenology to the examination of the lived experiences

of professions such as teaching, nursing, counseling, and physicians. He stated, "Practice, in its

social constructivist version, is not only meant to mean something, practice is supposed to make

it possible to explain, interpret, or understand the nature of the phenomena within its scope" (p.

18). Van Manen argued that phenomenology can provide balance to the cognitive and technical

aspects of the professions by exposing their sensitive, pathic nature.

Researchers developed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to provide

structure for examining lived experiences in the area of psychology (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is

grounded in Husserl, Heidegger, and their contemporaries; however, it recognizes that one

cannot fully bracket his or her experience when examining a phenomenon. IPA has its roots in

phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. As such, it seeks to examine the lived

experience through an interpretive lens and is concerned with the particularity of an experience.

Researchers consider it to be a "double hermeneutic" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35), as the researcher

attempts to make sense of the participant, who is attempting to make sense of his or her

experiences.

IPA provides a structure for the methods associated with phenomenological inquiry that

has more flexibility than the transcendental approach. After conducting two pilot studies

(discussed in the following section), I selected this specific methodology because of my

positionality as an insider researcher. An insider researcher is one "who conducts a study that is directly concerned with the setting in which they work" (Teusner, 2016, p. 85). As someone who identifies as an atheist who works in higher education, I am never completely able to bracket my own experiences when examining the lived experiences of others with a similar identity. IPA requires that the researcher be aware of his or her biases but does not expect them to be bracketed, like Moustakas' (1994) transcendental methodology.

Pilot Studies

I conducted two pilot studies to prepare for this research. The purpose of these studies was to determine if I would include both faculty and staff in my participant selection, identify potential challenges to the recruitment of participants, test the interview protocol and modify questions, and examine my ability as an insider researcher to reduce bias in my analysis of the data. The pilots provided me with invaluable information in all of these aspects and also set me on the path to examine this phenomenon from two secondary theoretical perspectives: stigma management and Christian privilege, which I used to identify a priori codes for analysis. A priori codes are those that are developed from existing literature or theories (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Pilot One: Staff

The first IRB-approved study, conducted in fall 2016, involved interviewing three professional staff members from public, four-year institutions in East Central Indiana. In this study, I chose to use a transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) as I was attempting to identify the essence of the atheist experience in higher education. My research question was: How does the atheist identity manifest in the higher education workplace for professional and/or support staff? I examined my participants' family and religious

backgrounds, their transitions to atheism, and their workplace experiences in relation to their atheism.

To recruit participants, I sent email messages to individuals who I knew identified as atheists and worked in higher education. I also posted a recruitment message on the Indiana Student Affairs Association Facebook group page and a colleague posted my recruitment message to an alumni Facebook page for his graduate program. I received responses from four professional colleagues; however, I was only able to set up interviews with three during the timeframe that was allotted for the study. The participants were two male student affairs professionals who were early in their professional careers and one female instructor who held professional staff status and was near retirement. I used a semi-structured interview protocol, a written guide with a flexible set of questions that allowed me to ask follow-up and probing questions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

In transcendental phenomenology, researchers use phenomenological reduction to identify the textural description of the phenomenon, which describes what the participants experienced, and imaginative variation to describe the structural description of the phenomenon, or where the phenomenon occurred (Moustakas, 1994). The textural description for my study revealed that my participants felt as though they needed to keep their atheist identity a secret. They feared exposing their belief system to their colleagues because of the stigma associated with atheism. They wanted their colleagues to view them as good people with strong value systems and did not want to be judged unfairly because of misconceptions about atheists. They believed that relationships with colleagues could be jeopardized, which could have both personal and professional impacts. Fear of discrimination, specifically in relation to the ability to move up in their careers, was a legitimate concern. Because the participants were not out in their

atheist identity, they had not experienced any overt discrimination but did feel as if they were placed in uncomfortable situations at times because of the outward expression of religious beliefs by their coworkers.

The structural description revealed that my participants did not perceive the higher education workplace to be welcoming and inclusive to individuals who identify as atheists when they are employed by institutions located in Christian communities. The campuses do not outwardly promote Christianity, but a critical mass of individuals who are employed at the universities created an environment in which an atheist does not feel as if they can be outward about their beliefs. Participants perceived departmental culture as guided by the religious beliefs of the department supervisor and had a significant influence on how comfortable my participants felt about their identity in the workplace.

I learned several key things during this pilot study. First, participant recruitment would be more challenging than I realized. The fact that only four individuals agreed to participate helped me to understand that word-of-mouth recruitment would likely be more effective as atheists are not necessarily willing to be open about this aspect of their identity. This was evident as my primary finding that my participants were closeted in their atheist identity. I also learned during the recruitment phase that faculty may be a potential source for my study, as one faculty email recipient expressed that he was highly closeted in his atheist identity in the South. I learned that I was able to put my own biases aside as I spoke with my participants and analyzed the data. Their backgrounds and life experiences regarding their atheism were so different from mine that I was able to see early on that my experiences were drastically different from theirs.

My choice of transcendental phenomenology was well-suited for this pilot study; however, my participants were highly homogeneous, even down to the size of town in which

they grew up. I knew that my dissertation study would likely include atheists from more varied backgrounds, so I was able to determine that I would choose a different phenomenological methodology for my dissertation study. My interview protocol proved to be effective as I was able to elicit the information I sought while allowing my participants to share their experiences in a way that was meaningful to them. Finally, the primary finding that my participants were closeted in their atheist identity was more meaningful than I realized as it led me to exploring the use of stigma management as a secondary theoretical perspective. In retrospect, their descriptions of how they controlled who knew about this aspect of their identity and from whom they kept it fit perfectly within the stigma management literature.

I have presented the results of this pilot study three times: at the Ball State University Unity Connections Conference in January 2017; at the inaugural NASPA Religious, Secular, and Spiritual Identities Convergence (RSSIC), held at the University of California Los Angeles in May 2017; and at the Diversity Research Symposium held at Ball State University in September 2017. The purpose of these presentations was to invite feedback about my study and to potentially recruit additional participants. Each conference had a different audience, so the feedback varied each time. The most helpful was the discussion that occurred at the NASPA RSSIC as it was attended by researchers with atheist and religious identities alike. As a result of presenting at that conference, I was invited to submit a manuscript for publication in the *Journal of College and Character*, based on my original research. My manuscript (Reisner, 2018) was accepted to be published in a special issue of the journal based on the RSSIC presentations. This experience provided me with the opportunity to receive valuable critical feedback from scholars in the fields of religion and atheism.

Pilot Two: Faculty

I conducted the second IRB-approved pilot study in spring 2017 and focused on the experiences of faculty members in higher education who identify as atheists. The purpose of the second study was to determine if I would include faculty in my dissertation study. I entered into the study with the assumption that faculty operate within a different set of rules than professional staff in higher education, including academic freedom and tenure, and these rules may affect their comfort in expressing their atheist identities to faculty colleagues, administration, and students. Although each set of principles has its own set of limitations, faculty may feel more secure in their minority identities regarding religion because of these protections. For this study, I employed IPA (Smith et al., 2009) for my methodology. IPA is a method that favors the insider researcher to understand the perspective of the participants, to "stand in their shoes" while simultaneously standing "alongside the participant, to take a look at them from a different angle" (p. 36). My primary research question was: How does the atheist identity manifest in the higher education workplace for faculty members? I explored my participants' backgrounds as they related to religion and their atheism, their choices of profession and how they came to their current positions, and how their atheist identities fits within that environment.

I used purposeful sampling to recruit participants for this study. Purposeful sampling "means careful selection of members of the community who are likely to provide the best information" (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 314) and ensures that the participants are homogeneous and representative of the context and allows for comparison between individuals. My participants were all known to me professionally as either current or former colleagues. I sent each an email requesting their participation in my study. Two participants, one male and one female, were employed at public, four-year institutions in the Midwest, while the third was a

male who was employed at a public two-year institution in the South. All three participants had

academic backgrounds in either the social or natural sciences, and all were serving in academic

leadership positions (i.e., dean, assistant vice chancellor). I conducted two interviews using a

semi-structured interview protocol via Skype and one interview took place in person. The

interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes.

The findings from this study were critical in determining that I would not include faculty

in my dissertation study. My participants were highly representative of the diversity found

within the academy. They differed significantly in their cultural backgrounds and had weak

religious upbringings which led them to have different perspectives of their atheist identities than

the participants from my first pilot. Two of the three were out in their atheist identity, while one,

the male from the two-year institution in the South, was highly closeted because of the pervasive

institutionalization of Christianity in his institution, which included frequent use of religious

language via in-person and written communications, and the presence of religious symbols of

Christianity across campus, including in the president's office. The participants had each held

multiple faculty positions in various regions of the Midwest and the South. They commented

that the institutional environment regarding religion was dependent upon the community in

which it was located, though each described various levels of the presence of Christian privilege

among these institutions. Finally, my analysis confirmed that academic freedom and tenure do

play a role in faculty's ability to feel comfortable in expressing their atheist identities in the

higher education workplace, as two participants explicitly stated that tenure was a determining

factor in when they began to share this identity more openly, and one remains closeted because

of the lack of tenure at his current institution.

IPA proved to be an effective methodology for this study. My participants, although homogeneous in their atheist identity and professional positions, differed culturally from one another, had a wide variety of experiences, and worked in different workplace environments. This helped me to realize that IPA is a more flexible method for analyzing and interpreting the data compared to transcendental phenomenology, which seeks to describe a common essence among participants. This study also helped me to understand that further increasing the homogenization of my sample by recruiting only atheists from the state of Indiana would be beneficial to my study. The third participant in this pilot was in a different geographical region than the others and it was evident that his experiences were drastically different because of this fact. Although it would be interesting to specifically study atheists in the South, it was more practical to limit my recruitment to the state of Indiana to create a more homogenous sample that was more accessible to me.

Finally, the historical and cultural context of a study is critical to understanding a given phenomenon. The presence of Christian privilege was undeniable in the analysis of the data from this study. In retrospect, this could also have been interpreted from the data in my first pilot study, as my participants frequently mentioned the use of Christian language by their colleagues and other forms of privilege which were present on their campuses, including departmental prayer circles and a Christian invocation at one of the university's commencement ceremonies. This finding has led me to the use of Christian privilege as a secondary theoretical framework for analyzing the environments of the institutions in which my participants are employed.

Methods

I used IPA (Smith et al., 2009) for my methodology for this study, primarily for its

acknowledgement that the researcher cannot bracket his or her experiences from the

interpretation of data. I also selected it for its flexible yet simple structure for data analysis, and

for its inclusion of secondary research questions that allow the use of theory as an interpretive

tool. This section outlines the specific methods I employed during my study, including

participant selection, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, and evaluative criteria

used to ensure trustworthiness. When possible, I deferred to the procedural methods of IPA, as

described below, to ensure that my methods most closely aligned with my chosen methodology.

Participants

I explored the experiences of professional staff members who work in institutions of

higher education in Indiana who identified as atheist. I defined professional staff as any

employee who is not classified as faculty or support staff. This included those in departments

including, but not limited to: student affairs, enrollment management, auxiliary services,

athletics, campus police, physical facilities, human resources, business affairs, gift development,

marketing, and communications. I specifically excluded faculty in my criteria, including those in

administrative roles, because, in theory, tenure provides protections to faculty members that

allows for expression of beliefs through academic freedom (AAUP, 1970). Professional staff are

not given this same protection in their work. Participants were to be over the age of 18,

employed at an institution of higher education in the state of Indiana, and classified as

professional staff. Individuals under the age of 18, students, support staff, faculty, and those who

do not work in higher education were not included. Demographically, atheists tend to be White,

male, and highly educated (Pew Research Center, 2015); however, efforts were made to recruit demographically-diverse participants for this study, including women and people of color.

I used purposive, homogeneous sampling to identify participants for whom my research question would be meaningful (Smith et al., 2009). I limited my recruitment to the state of Indiana to maximize the homogeneity of the sample, as recommended by IPA. I designed my sample size to be in the range of five to eight participants, also recommended for IPA, to develop "meaningful points of similarity and difference between participants" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 51). I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to recruit participants. Purposive sampling ensures that the participants are homogenous and representative of the context, and allows for comparison between individuals, while snowball sampling allows for a prior participant to nominate additional participants who meet the criteria for inclusion (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). IPA also recommends the use of referrals from "gatekeepers" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 49) who, in this case, would be individuals who have access to atheists in higher education, as well as opportunities, which are a "result of one's own contacts" (p.49). Once I began speaking openly about my study, several individuals indicated an interest in participating, some of whom I have known professionally for a significant amount of time but was not aware of their atheist identity. As such, I relied on the use of opportunities to recruit participants. I asked my participants to forward my recruitment messages to those they believed met the criteria for selection. This particular population can be challenging to reach as many atheists do not live openly in this identity, so I utilized a combination of multiple sampling approaches to maximize the number of participants.

I began recruitment by sending an email message (see Appendix B) to individuals who I knew meet the criteria for selection. I then sent it to those who identify as atheist but did not

meet the other criteria for selection (i.e., faculty, the Secular Student Alliance) but may have

been able to help identify potential participants and could forward my message. I also sent the

email message to individuals who do not identify as atheists but may have been able to pass my

message along to individuals in their networks who they believed meet the criteria for selection.

Finally, I used social media platforms as a means of recruitment, specifically the Facebook group

page for Indiana Student Affairs Professionals and Secular Student Affairs Professionals, to

extend my reach beyond my own network and to increase the potential for recruiting a diverse

participant pool. To ensure that my participants met the criteria for selection, I asked several

screening questions prior to committing to the interview, including their definition of atheism,

how long they have identified as atheists, the institution in which they are employed, and the

type of position that they hold.

Description of participants. Ten individuals participated in this study. All of the

participants work in public, four-year institutions in the state of Indiana. The participants

represent five different campuses ranging in size from small (<10,000 students) to mid-sized

(10,001-25,000 students), to large (>25,000 students). They are employed in a variety of

functional areas including student affairs, advancement, library sciences, and information

technology. Although their jobs are more specific, I have used the broadest job categories

possible to best protect their identities. The participants grew up in a variety of religious

backgrounds, including Protestant Christian, Catholic, and none/atheist/secular (see Table 1).

Aside from their demographic information, the participants all described themselves as

having liberal or progressive values. Nearly all of the participants also described themselves as

being creative in some ways. Some were creative in their professional work, while others had

creative outlets through hobbies. These creative outlets included music, dancing, photography,

graphic design, film making, beer and wine making, and cooking.

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant	Family Religion	Job Category	Institution Type
Angela	Episcopalian	Library	Mid-sized public
Carl	Secular	Advancement	Small public
Daniel	Catholic	Information Technology	Large public
Erin	Jehovah's Witness	Advancement	Small public
Gwen	None	Student Affairs	Large public
Patrick	Catholic	Student Affairs	Large public
Samantha	Catholic	Advancement	Large public
Sarah	Evangelical Christian	Student Affairs	Large public
Sherlock	Catholic	Library	Small public
William	None	Advancement	Small public

Data Collection

I used interviews to collect my data. When possible, I conducted the interviews in person, and I conducted eight of the interviews this way. When it was not possible, I used the online video conferencing website, Zoom (https://zoom.us/), to conduct the interview. I conducted two interviews using this method. I employed a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix C) that allowed me to generate information that was descriptive, narrative, structural, evaluative, and comparative in nature (Smith et al., 2009). Semi-structured interviews "allow interviewees to express their perspectives on a topic or issue and also allow for comparable data that can be compared across respondents" (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 359). The purpose of these interviews was to gain insight into the unique experiences of atheists. I focused on four primary areas: family and religious background, philosophy and experiences related to atheism, professional background and workplace environment, and workplace

experiences related to the participants' atheist identity. I found these areas effective during my

two IRB-approved pilot studies as they provided context for understanding how my participants

came into their atheist identities, the environments in which they work, and how they assign

meaning to their experiences.

The participants signed and returned their informed consent form (see Appendix D) and

were reminded of their rights as participants before the interviews began. Before beginning the

interviews with the participants with whom I was not previously acquainted, I briefly explained

my positionality and my interest in researching this particular topic. This was intended to

establish rapport and to help the participants feel comfortable speaking with me about their own

experiences with atheism. The interviews ranged in length from 60 to 90 minutes and were

recorded using a digital voice recorder. Prior to closing, I asked my participants to supply the

following demographic information, which I used to make comparisons to national statistics

about atheists, to make comparisons across participants, and to potentially examine the

intersectionality of these demographics with the atheist identity: race, ethnicity, age, gender,

sexual orientation, educational attainment level, income range (see Table 2).

My participants ranged in age from 27-58 years old. Similar to the statistics on atheists,

all of the participants were White except one who reported being biracial. With the exception of

one gay male and one participant who identified as non-binary, all the participants identified as

straight and cisgender. (The non-binary participant disclosed that she is still exploring this

identity and still uses female pronouns; as such, I will use female pronouns during the written

report.) The participants had the most variation in their education attainment, with some

possessing bachelor's degrees and others possessing master's and doctoral degrees; however, all

reported income ranges that situate them within the middle class.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Educational Attainment	Income Range
Angela	58	White	Female	Straight	Doctoral Coursework	$50-75,000
Carl	38	Biracial	Male	Straight	Bachelor's	$25-50,000
Daniel	27	White	Male	Gay	PhD student	$50-75000
Erin	40	White	Female	Straight	Bachelor's	$25-50,000
Gwen	48	White	Female	Straight	Master's	$100,000+
Patrick	33	White	Male	Straight	PhD	$50-75,000
Samantha	43	White	Female	Straight	Graduate Certificate	$50-75,000
Sarah	36	White	Female	Straight	PhD	$50-75,000
Sherlock	40	White	Non-binary	Straight	Master's	$25-50,000
William	51	White	Male	Straight	Master's	$50-75,000

Data Analysis

I transcribed my interviews using the online transcription software, Transcribe (https://transcribe.wreally.com/), which allowed me to slow down rate of speech and rewind easily. I assigned pseudonyms for each of my participants, as well as their institutions and all other identifiable persons and places. I transferred the transcriptions into a Word document, which I numbered by line, leaving room in the right margin for notes. Hard copies of the transcripts were placed in a three-ring binder.

IPA stresses an iterative approach to data analysis conducted in six steps (Smith et al., 2009). First, I read and reread the first transcript carefully and multiple times to acquaint myself with the data and to allow the narrative to take shape. I then began initial noting, a step that "examines semantic content and language use on a very exploratory level" (p. 83). These notes contained a combination of brief summaries of statements, descriptive comments, linguistic

comments, and conceptual comments. Once I completed this step, I created an Excel

spreadsheet to begin to identify emergent themes. I transferred the codes and notes from the

Word document to the spreadsheet with each code on a separate line. I then highlighted similar

codes and notes and sorted them into categories of themes.

Once these steps were complete for the first transcript, I repeated the process for each

subsequent transcript, creating a new tab on the spreadsheet for each participant. I then copied

and pasted all of the codes into a separate tab, resulting in a total of 413 unique codes and notes

(see Appendix E), before moving to the final step, which was to look for patterns of themes

across transcripts. I compiled the theme clusters from each of the interviews into one tab on the

spreadsheet, then identified similar themes and categorized them into three primary theme

clusters: comfort in identity, context of workplace environment, and influence of campus

leadership in the religious environment. I also identified codes and themes that related to stigma

management and Christian privilege, my two secondary research questions. To aid in my

analysis, I created a new Excel spreadsheet with separate tabs for each theme and copied the

corresponding codes for each theme into the spreadsheet.

It was at this point that I looked for deeper levels of interpretation, following the

hermeneutic cycle of comparing the part to the whole to determine my findings. Through this

process, I reviewed each transcript to identify codes that did not emerge as themes for individual

participants but were common across participants. I then grouped those codes into their own

subtheme and nested them within one of the three primary themes. For example, religious

diversity on campus was discussed briefly by each participant but not to any extent that it

emerged as a theme for any given transcript. However, as I reviewed the codes and compared

them to the whole, it was evident that the way the campus addresses religious diversity was

important to the theme of influence of campus leadership, so I added it as a subtheme.

Once I had thoroughly reviewed all the codes and sorted the themes, I organized and

analyzed the collection of emergent themes to determine what the findings were. For each

primary theme, I developed two to three subthemes. I have organized those themes into the chart

in Table 3. As I began to write my findings, it became evident that the theme of stigma

management was inextricably tied to the participants' comfort in their identity and Christian

privilege was tied to the subtheme of religious diversity on campus, so I nested the findings for

those themes within the three primary themes.

Table 3

Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme 1	Subtheme 2	Subtheme 3
Comfort in Identity	Religious Upbringing	Atheist Identity Development	Out, Closeted, and In Between
Context of Workplace Environment	Departmental	Institutional	Community
Influence of Campus Leadership in the Religious Environment	Supervisor's Role	Leadership's Role	Religious Diversity on Campus
Stigma Management	Awareness of Stigma	Fear of Repercussions	Stigma Management Techniques
Christian Privilege	Individual Level	Departmental Level	Campus Level

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Ball State University Institutional Review Board (see Appendix F). I adhered to the human subjects protocol, employing informed consent, which addressed the benefits and risks of participation. Participants were reminded that they were free to refuse to answer any question and could withdraw from the study at their discretion. I created pseudonyms for each of my participants' names, institutions, and all other identifiable people and places to protect their identity. I kept the electronic data housed on a password-protected flash drive and the hard copies in a secure drawer in my locked office.

Evaluative Criteria

My paradigmatic approach, use of phenomenology as a methodology, and specific use of IPA as a novice and insider researcher has guided me in designing a high-quality study as I sought to examine and understand the lived experiences of atheists who work in higher education. The explicit alignment of the elements of the study–epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, methods, positionality, and interpretations–was essential to claiming that my study was sound (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002; Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002).

I also used procedural strategies such as thick, rich description, peer debriefing, and reflective and procedural journaling, to ensure trustworthiness within my methods. The use of thick, rich description is a primary source of trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2013; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This technique allows for transparency in the interpretations by including quotations in the written report that provide context to the analysis. I also included tables in the written report which outline the themes and corresponding supporting participant statements.

I engaged in peer debriefing while developing my interview protocol and throughout the analysis of my data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define peer debriefing as "a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308). For this step, I sought out individuals with an expertise in the study of atheism as well as individuals with an expertise in qualitative research. In developing my protocol I consulted with peers from my doctoral program who were experienced in using qualitative methodologies. Once I developed my findings and wrote my discussion, I sought out a fellow doctoral student who is also researching aspects of atheism and using a phenomenological methodology. This process helped to identify potential biases within my protocol and analysis, identified any flaws within my methodological design, and tested emerging themes to ensure that my interpretation is accurate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, I used journaling as a method of ensuring quality. My position as a member of this group allowed me insider status. My participants may have felt comfortable speaking with me because of our mutual understanding of the most common meanings of atheism as well as perceived atheist experiences. However, I needed to be careful not to make assumptions about their responses based on my own experiences. I wrote reflexively after each interview, noting how my participants' experiences were similar to or different than mine so that I could identify any conflicts in my knowledge and potential biases as they arise. I also utilized a journal as a form of audit trail to track the logistics of the study, including times, dates, and memos I wrote about the interviews, and in which to note methodological decisions and rationales that were made throughout the process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the epistemological underpinnings of research, the theoretical framework from which I approached my study, and the philosophy that underscores contemporary phenomenological methodologies. I provided an overview of two pilot studies that I conducted as preparation for this research, which served to narrow my participant selection and choice of methodology and uncovered two additional theories that I will use in my analysis. I detailed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009), including the prescribed methods for participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. I have also described the steps I took to ensure trustworthiness in my study, which come from the complete alignment of my epistemological stance, theoretical framework, use of IPA as a methodology, and procedural measures such as using thick, rich descriptions, peer debriefing, and reflective and procedural journaling.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This chapter will provide a comprehensive explanation of my findings as they were developed using the methodological structure of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). I will describe the process for developing each theme through analysis and interpretation, and provide thick, rich descriptions which will provide an understanding of the theme development. I have included tables in each section which detail each finding with the supporting subthemes and have provided a comprehensive list of codes in Appendix E.

My primary research question for this phenomenological study was: How do professional staff members who identify as atheists experience that identity in the higher education workplace? This study was informed by two pilot studies which led to the examination of the use of stigma management in the negotiation of the atheist identity in the workplace and the examination of the presence of Christian privilege in the higher educational environment in Indiana. As such, my secondary research questions were: What strategies do they employ to manage the stigmatization of the atheist identity? What role does the religious environment of the institution play in the navigation of this identity?

I developed three primary themes which form my findings: comfort in identity, context of workplace environment, and influence of campus leadership in the religious environment. I developed these themes through the interpretation of several subthemes for each finding. After analyzing the data and developing my primary themes, I conducted a secondary analysis related to stigma management and the presence of Christian privilege in the institutional setting. Once my interpretation was complete, I determined that the findings for my secondary research questions are directly related to two of my three primary findings: stigma management is directly related to my participants' comfort in their identity and how they navigate it in social and

professional settings, and Christian privilege is directly related to the religious environment of

the institution and how campus leadership addresses religion on campus. As such, I have nested

these secondary research questions within the findings for the primary research question. Taken

together, each of these findings contributes to the understanding of the unique experiences the

participants have in relation to their atheist identity in the higher education workplace.

Comfort in Identity

This first theme was developed by synthesizing several emergent themes across

participants related to religion in their family backgrounds, the development of their atheist

identity, and the degree to which they were out in this identity (see Table 4). I first grouped the

corresponding emergent themes by individual participants by similarity, then interpreted them in

their relation to one another to form subthemes. I then developed the primary theme, comfort in

identity, within my interpretation of how these subthemes came together. I discovered that the

way these three areas intersected and shaped their comfort with their atheism was important to

how my participants experienced and subsequently managed their atheist identity in the

workplace, as well as other social situations. I then merged stigma management with this theme

as a fourth subtheme within the findings.

Religious Upbringing

The participants' experiences with religion growing up varied significantly. Gwen,

William, and Carl grew up in the least religious families. Gwen's experience is unique

compared to the rest of the participants as she stated that she comes from "a long line of atheists"

who were also academics. She was a confident atheist as a child who asserted her belief in

evolution to her peers and challenged a Girl Scout camp director who forced her to attend

church. Gwen indicated that her family members managed their atheist identities from time to

time. She was surprised to learn as an adult that her grandparents participated to some extent in

the Unitarian Universalist church, but she also felt that they did so for the appearance of having a

social connection to a church while still maintaining their atheist beliefs. She also recalled a

period of time when she questioned why her mother was downplaying her atheist beliefs and

progressive values to fit in while she attended a conservative law school. These two examples

indicate that her family recognized the need to mask their atheist identities when necessary. For

Gwen, the atheist identity is the only religious identity she has ever known, and she rarely has

the inclination to hide or downplay it in any way.

William grew up in a small town in Indiana. His parents never took him to church and

explained that they wanted him to make his own decision about participating in religion. He

never believed in God and is admittedly very unknowledgeable about Christianity, which made

him feel intimidated around religious friends at times as a child. In fact, the first time he ever

went to church was in college when he traveled home with a friend for spring break. As a young

adult, however, he felt comfortable enough in his atheist identity to debate friends, which in

retrospect he described as "foolish."

Carl, who grew up in Indiana, described his upbringing as "secular" although his family

did believe in God, went to church on occasion, and he attended summer Bible school. His

family "lived life as you don't have to go to church to believe in God." His stepfather, however,

taught him to not "take everything at face value" and to question everything. So, at a young age

he questioned things he learned in the Bible and in his teens Carl questioned things such as

religious opposition to homosexuality.

Sherlock, Daniel, Samantha, and Patrick all grew up in Catholic families. Like Carl,

Sherlock's father also encouraged skepticism and the importance of questioning. Sherlock and

Table 4

Comfort in Identity Subthemes and Corresponding Emergent Themes

Subthemes Themes	Corresponding Emergent Themes
Religious Upbringing	No religious upbringing
	Raised secular with minimal religious activity; easily converted
	Religious participation as social outlet
	Religious upbringing then converted to non-belief
	Christian upbringing and slow journey toward atheism
	Grew up religious but skeptical
	Family participation because it's the norm
	Atheist/academic family background
Atheist Identity Development	No religious upbringing
	Raised secular with minimal religious activity; easily converted
	Religious upbringing then converted to non-belief
	Christian upbringing and slow journey toward atheism
Out, Closeted, and In Between	Advocate/educator
	Out but cautious about atheism
	Previously open in identity but now highly closeted at work
	Selective about disclosing
	Bad experience at work
Stigma management	Awareness of stigma
	Fear of repercussions
	Stigma management techniques

her siblings were adopted through a Catholic agency in Michigan which required mandatory

religious participation until the age of 14. She attended several different Catholic schools

growing up, but as a gifted student who had "built a very healthy skepticism" from a young age,

she found herself to be viewed as an outsider in the Catholic school environment. Sherlock

describes herself as never having bought into the idea of a God, nor the religious dogma of the

Catholic faith.

Daniel's family attended a Catholic church in Kentucky, but his parents never talked about religion, God, or the Bible outside of church. When he compares his experiences with religion to other people, he would describe his family as "non-practicing" Catholics. He believes that his family's participation in religion is viewed as "a thing you do because that's what good people do." He confronted his mother as a teenager about not attending church anymore. While she was understanding and admitted that she did not necessarily buy into religion herself, she discussed the proposition with his father. They determined that he had to continue to attend church until he graduated from high school but was free to make his own decision about religious participation after that point.

Samantha and Patrick also had Catholic backgrounds. Samantha grew up in a strict Catholic household in a large city in Indiana. Her father entered the seminary in eighth grade with the intention of becoming a priest but did not pursue it. She attended Catholic elementary and high school and described religion as "a huge part" of their lives. Patrick, who grew up in a small city in Indiana, was baptized Catholic, although his family attended a conservative Presbyterian church when he was growing up. He was confirmed as a Presbyterian but took the initiative to be confirmed as a Catholic when he was a young man in the military. In retrospect he believes he did so out of homesickness, not because he believed in the faith.

Angela, Sarah, and Erin grew up in religious Protestant families. Angela, who stated that her family was "poor," attended an Episcopalian church in a wealthy part of Northeast Ohio. She described her grandmother as the person who drove the religiosity of the family, and even though she did not subscribe fully to the idea of a God or the dogma of religion, Angela appreciated the music and participated in the church choir. She stated, "It was just that I loved music so much . . . we had a great organ, we had a great organist, we sang interesting music. I

loved the conductor and I liked getting dressed up and seeing everybody." It was the music and social connections to church that kept her in attendance until her mid-twenties.

Sarah grew up in a very religious, non-denominational Evangelical church, although her parents "were like an MTV version of evangelical" in that they were not as strict about some of the dogmatic restrictions of their faith, such as no dancing or television in the home. Her grandparents did not attend church, but her parents became born-again Christians after feeling that they were unable to control some of their own rebellious behavior. She described herself as a religion "nerd" who loved to study the Bible, which eventually led to her learning more about other types of faith. Her parents later divorced, and each joined other types of Protestant Christian faiths. While her father is no longer active in the Christian faith, she describes her father's side of the family as very conservative, as several are highly involved in positions such as deacons and missionaries.

Finally, Erin grew up in the most religious household. Her parents divorced when she was young. Her father is a non-practicing Catholic and she was raised by her mother who is a Jehovah's Witness. She stated that she "drank the Kool-Aid at a young age" and was baptized into the faith when she was 13. She was discouraged by the church to attend college after high school and had planned to be a professional missionary, but instead attended beauty school. She continued to be active in the faith until her late twenties.

My participants' religious backgrounds are the first key to understanding how they experience their atheist identity, as it provides the foundation for how they form meaning about their religious experiences. The range in religious backgrounds, from non-religious to highly religious, is indicative of the varied identities that are present in American religious culture. The

next key to understanding their comfort in identity is the process through which they developed their atheist identity.

Atheist Identity Development

Because of the varied nature of my participants' religious upbringings, each rejected religion differently while forming their atheist identity. Gwen, William, and Sherlock have never believed in God and have always identified as atheists. Gwen and William were never exposed to religion by their families. Sherlock, who did participate in religion while growing up, commented, "There was no one coming out moment. I was always odd. I was always the different one. I never bought into it." She also recalled a moment when the sexist nature of religion made an impression on her:

> I'm five years old and I'm in 1st grade. It dawned on me that no matter how great I am, no matter how smart, how wonderful of a speaker, how outgoing, how much I know my Jesus facts, I'm never going to be a pastor. I'm never going to be able to preach the love of God in front of an audience because I'm a girl . . . There was never one moment, but if I have to pick a trigger, that's it.

That experience, coupled with her father's encouragement of skepticism, is what spurred her rejection of religion at a very early age.

The rest of the participants, however, believed in God at one point and went through a process of rejecting religion and a belief in a higher power. Daniel was the only participant to explicitly reject religion while still in high school, recalling a conversation with his mother:

> She was driving me to school and I just mentioned you know, "Mom, I don't want to keep going to church with you guys every week, cause frankly, Catholic things kind of freak me out. I don't see the point of it and it makes me uncomfortable."

Daniel participated in religious activities with his family until he graduated from high school.

When he returns home for visits, Daniel joins his family for breakfast after they attend Sunday

church service. With the exception of one comment from his grandmother, his family has not

made him feel badly for no longer attending church.

Carl recalled having conversations with his stepfather about religion as a teen but

considered himself a "fence sitter" until he attended college in his early twenties:

> I think at that point in time, I was starting to get involved in student government clubs
>
> and stuff. We'd wind up talking with different friends about different aspects of life.
>
> One of those questions that kind of kept nagging at me was the earth being 10,000 years
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> old. I was not a young earth creationist, and I thought it was silly that anybody would be,
>
> but I had friends who seemed to be, and I continually asked them questions about why
>
> there were no mentions of dinosaurs in the Bible. They would come back with, "The
>
> word behemoth is in the Bible." I just kind of, like, "Okay." I looked at it. Most times
>
> when things were said, I would have to go back and look things up. I personally have
>
> never read the Bible all the way through, but any time something would pop up, I'd have
>
> to go search for it.

These interactions with people of faith, coupled with his skeptical nature, steered Carl toward

rejecting religion and eventually claiming his atheist identity in his mid-twenties.

Samantha continued to attend church services voluntarily in college but also identified

experiences in college that sparked the beginning of her doubt:

> I think, overall, coming from a small Catholic high school, and wanting to come to the
>
> large college . . . just the overall exploratory environment and being able to actually learn
>
> things that you're interested in learning and, you know, not having to go to religion class

every day. And I think, probably, that I would say, more so the people I was exposed to.

Like, in high school and of course, now, there are folks that have come out as gay or

lesbian. But meeting people who identified, or were gay in college was like, "Oh. And

so, why do we think this is bad again? Why was I taught this was bad?" So, I'd say that

shaped it more. I started thinking, "This is silly. Like, why are we making up rules

against people who are lovely people, they're exactly like us. They have the same

feelings, they have the same drive as us." So, I think that's when I started questioning,

like, "I don't like this stuff about Catholicism at all. And why would some higher power

create all different kinds of people and then cast judgment on some and not on others?

It's ridiculous."

Samantha met her husband, who also came from a strict Catholic family, in college. At the time,

he had already begun his journey toward atheism. Although she did not think that he directly

influenced her rejection of religion, he "was there for the ride" as she began her own questioning.

Patrick and Angela participated in religion voluntarily after graduating from high school

but rejected it in their twenties. Angela recalled moments when she began to doubt her faith in

high school, stating, "And I remember the confirmation process and thinking, 'Well I don't know

about this', but I went through it because everybody else was." However, she continued to

attend church and explored other faiths until her skepticism led her away from all belief:

I think it took like until I was 28. I kept trying to go to different churches. Tried on

different beliefs and had kind of a cycle of that. Finally, when I was living in

Washington, D.C., I went to a church that was similar to the one I'd grown up with, with

a great organist and a good organ and it was all rich people around. And they had 20-

something mixer parties and stuff like that. And I was sitting in church and I had

carefully marked all of the pages for all the hymns that were coming up during the rest of the service. And I finished looking it over and I paid attention to the pastor and he said, I don't remember what he said, but it was something about there being a God. And my knee jerk mental reaction was "Oh, they don't expect us to believe that do they?" And then I kind of reran it in my head. And previous to that I had been trying on the new age type stuff and decided it was baloney. . . . so, I had kind of gone the direction of being more skeptical about other things and then I think I just applied it in church without realizing it. And from then on, I just self-identified as atheist.

Erin and Sarah have the longest journeys toward atheism. For Erin, the dogmatic aspect of faith is what she began to question first:

And then, I got to the point where, you know, I was in my early twenties, I had never really had a boyfriend or anything like that and you know the urges were kicking in and I was like, "Why is this not, this is natural. Why is [this] not acceptable?" And I kind of started pulling away from the religion a bit at that time. I essentially ran away from home in my early twenties, and it was a way of finding myself, I feel like, and kind of pulling away from that religion at that time.

She did not abandon all faith at first, but she did abandon the Jehovah's Witness faith, where she was disfellowshipped, or shunned, by her family. This was difficult for her mother, who had a close relationship with Erin's children. She continued on her journey, however, eventually rejecting all belief:

And so, as my life was progressing, I was starting to question that religion even more, because even though I had pulled away from it, I kind of, I still felt like it was probably the right religion, I just couldn't live up to it. I still believed there was a God . . . But as

my life kept going I just kept on questioning it more and more and wondering, "Well, is

there even really a God?"

She stated that it took her around ten years to fully identify as an atheist, sometime in her early

thirties.

Sarah also described a long process which began with the exploration of other faiths out

of religious curiosity:

As I learned more, there seemed to be fewer differences. There were differences in

detail, but not in a lot of overall concept, so I started to wonder, what makes my religion

more credible than other religions? What is the evidence for my God and for other gods?

Then I sort of slowly transformed into being more agnostic, where it was like I still

believed in a higher power, but there's not really evidence for any one religion being

more credible than another. Then, I don't know. It was a really slow process. As I was

in college it was more and more, the higher power concept, there's not really evidence for

that either. As I became more scientifically literate, as I learned about the range of things

that people believe, other cultures, it just got really solidified.

Both Sarah and Erin's rejection of religion were because of deep understandings of their own

faiths and the slow rejection of the dogmatic idiosyncrasies which made them question the

legitimacy of their faith and the belief in a higher power. Their experiences stand in stark

contrast to William and Gwen who were brought up without any religion, as well as Carl and

Daniel whose families were less dogmatic and began their questioning in their teen years. It is a

combination of my participant's religious upbringings, their rejection of faith, and life

experiences which leads them to their status as an out or closeted atheist.

Out, Closeted, and In Between

The extent to which my participants were out in their atheist identity is the final factor related to their comfort in their atheist identity and how they subsequently experience it in the workplace. Some participants were completely out, while others were out to some people but not to others. Most of the individuals who were hesitant to disclose their atheist identity felt that in relation to their family but were comfortable in this identity at work and with friends. William, however, was the most protective of his atheist identity in the workplace.

William has worked in two different institutions of higher education. Early in his career at a mid-sized public institution in Indiana he was very vocal about his atheism and would playfully tease religious colleagues when they would speak about their faith:

I was a colleague of two very conservative people who were always talking about the Rapture and, "Where am I going to be? I hope I'm not driving a car when the Rapture comes." And I would joke with them because we were colleagues . . . and I would say, "Well, there will be a parking place for me because I'll still be here." And they always wanted to talk openly about Jesus and Bible reading in the office. And I tormented them quite a bit about it, goofing on them about things that they talked about.

At the time, these colleagues were peers, but later William was promoted to a management position and these colleagues became his direct reports. His teasing over the years suddenly became problematic as the colleagues now felt threatened by him:

And then when I was promoted in that department and over those individuals, they both acted out in different ways. The young man left almost right away. The woman started making my life miserable . . . I put like a cartoon pumpkin on my office window, a decal, because I had a window in my office. I put a decal in there. She wanted to file a hostile

workplace grievance against me because I knew she was a Christian, and that was a

pagan symbol, and that was offensive to her that I put a pumpkin, and I did that to insult

her. So, I realized that I'd made a mistake ever talking about religion with her because

she used that as a leverage against me on various occasions, that I was creating a hostile

environment for her.

When that employee's work performance became problematic, William was put in a

position where he felt that she would use his previous behavior against him in retaliation:

Later she really, her work really tapered off, and I actually at one point wanted to

reprimand, like basically do a verbal warning to her for her performance. And my boss at

the time said, "Well, you know all the stuff that she's stacked up to use against you about

all the times you guys talked about religion. And she knows you're an atheist. And you

know she's a Christian." So, he basically told me, "I would not go down that path unless

you want all of that to be heaped on the table." So, I did not write her up or give her a

verbal warning or anything, and it was basically for being gone for long periods of time

from the office. She would go "on break" and be gone for hours, and I had documented

all these times that she was gone, or she was missing, and no one knew where she was.

In retrospect, William was regretful that he was vocal about his atheism and realized that what he

viewed as playful teasing was taken seriously by his colleague. When he transitioned to a new

position at another institution in Indiana, he decided to keep his atheist identity a secret and has

only disclosed to a handful of trusted colleagues.

Like William, Samantha is also protective of her atheist identity in the workplace and has

worked at two different institutions in Indiana (both large, public) but was more comfortable in

her atheist identity at the first one. Since moving into her new role, she has kept this identity

hidden from those who are her direct reports, citing an incident with one staff member which led her this decision:

> And so, I had made, which, of course, I probably shouldn't have done anyway, because it
> was a group setting, but I made some joke, something came up about the Bible, and so I
> said something about propaganda, or something. And she was like, "Whoa." You know,
> she was very offended. I was like, "Oh, okay." And so now she reports to me, and the
> other person that reports to me is also very religious.

Samantha is more concerned with offending her direct reports than she is of their perceptions of her as an atheist. If they were to find out about her atheist identity she thinks they would "be sad" for her but not necessarily think poorly of her. Samantha's friends, previous colleagues, and a select group of current colleagues are aware of her lack of belief, but she has never explicitly told her conservative Catholic parents that she is an atheist. She explains that they know that she does not attend church and holds very liberal political views, but they do not know the extent of her disbelief.

Sarah is open about her atheist identity to coworkers, friends, and some family members, but not all. Both of her parents know; however, she has several conservative Christians on her father's side of the family from whom she keeps this identity:

> I'm not out to all of my family. Let's see. My mom's side of the family knows that I
> don't believe in God. My grandma, the first time I said that I didn't believe in God she
> was like, "Oh, Sarah, that's not true." I was like, "Yeah, it is." Now it's like, we don't
> talk about it a lot. I have a cousin who's also an atheist. They don't bug us about it. My
> aunt is very religious but also very, she's very progressive religious. She has her
> personal belief and feels like it enhances her life, and she feels very strongly about it, but

she doesn't think it's productive to push other people to it. My dad's side of the family is

much more conservative. My uncles do not know. The Methodist minister uncle doesn't

know, and then I have an uncle who's a Baptist who goes on mission trips and he's a

deacon or an elder in his church, and I don't tell him. I think my dad, my dad and I have

talked about it, so my dad knows.

She noted that she cares about her connections with her family and would not want to jeopardize

her relationships with her uncles by disclosing her atheist identity.

Patrick, who rejected faith after being confirmed Catholic as a young adult, is open about

his lack of faith to friends and colleagues but is closeted to most of his family. When discussing

how he would tell his family that he and his wife will not baptize their children he commented:

I'm kind of concerned, if we are going to have kids, what's going to happen. . . . There's

that conversation I'm not really looking forward to . . . it's just, I'm not out to my family

as far as my religious beliefs.

For Patrick, it is important to participate in church activities when he is visiting family at home

so as not to let on that he is no longer practicing.

Daniel, who also identifies as gay, discussed the process of coming out twice to his

parents, both around the same time in his later teens. He is open about both aspects of his

identity and commented about the process of feeling comfortable with who he was:

I felt like there were places in my family that were more accepting of atheism. So, I felt

it was a reasonably comfortable place and I also was just kind of getting over the whole

feeling bad about who I am thing . . . so I think it was definitely tied to coming to terms

with my homosexuality, but I don't know, I just kind of wanted to stop. I was like, "It

makes me uncomfortable to live this kind of lie. I'd just rather not be uncomfortable and

if that makes my parents uncomfortable, then I'm gonna make them deal with that.

Cause I don't feel wrong for being the way I am."

While Daniel is openly atheist, he is now dating someone who is a devout Christian and he

anticipates that he will need to be careful about disclosing this when he meets his boyfriend's

friends and family.

The rest of the participants are all explicitly out in their atheist identities. Sherlock

commented that her atheism is "a big part" of her identity and does not make any attempt to hide

it. She is knowledgeable about a wide range of world religions and is comfortable engaging in

religious debate. She has no concerns about sharing her atheist identity at work and noted that

her office décor is composed of images and quotes from well-known non-believers. A theatrical

person by nature, she was once given the opportunity to portray a known atheist at a literary

event that her department hosted on campus.

Erin is fully out in her atheist identity but mentioned that she is sometimes cautious

around outwardly religious students because she does not want to jeopardize her relationships

with them. She is openly supportive of atheist students and is active in the Secular Student

Alliance (SSA) on campus. Carl is also supportive of atheist students, serving as the advisor for

the SSA on his campus but shares Erin's sentiments about alienating religious students. Carl

sees himself as an advocate for and educator of atheism. He hosts a podcast about atheism,

started a free thinkers organization in his community, and posts about atheism on social media.

He feels comfortable speaking about his beliefs in a variety of situations, especially in diversity-

related contexts:

If the opportunity presents itself . . . I'll freely stand up and talk about who I am, what I

believe, whatever. You're in a room where people understand that people are going to

say things that you may not agree with. I mean we're in a liberal university. You're

supposed to talk about things. For the most part, I don't have a problem with it.

Carl would like to eventually make a documentary about atheism and commented that given the

opportunity, he would be a "full-time atheist liberal progressive" activist, although he joked that

he was not sure how that would pay for a living.

Angela is also a vocal atheist. She started a free thinkers organization in her community,

has presented about atheism, has moderated an online forum about morals and religion, and has

served on a panel discussion at her university which featured individuals of different faiths. She

noted that while she is out in her atheist identity at work, the general culture of the department is

to not talk about anything too personal and "to not make waves and be nice." As a librarian, she

has worked in a variety of different settings, both within higher education and in the public

library setting but has never felt compelled to hide this aspect of her identity.

My participants ranged in their comfort in disclosing their atheist identity. On one end of

the spectrum, participants such as Carl and Gwen were completely out and had no fears about

disclosing their atheist identity. On the other end of the spectrum, participants such as William

and Samantha were mostly closeted in this identity in the workplace. As such, comfort in

identity is directly related to my secondary research question: What strategies do they employ to

manage the stigmatization of the atheist identity? I will next discuss my analysis and

interpretation of stigma management concerns as they relate to my participant's atheist identity

both in the workplace and in other social situations, such as interactions with family.

Stigma Management

As discussed, my participants varied in their comfort in disclosing their atheist identity.

As I conducted my interviews and analyzed the data, I listened and looked for cues that indicated

that the participants were conscious of the stigma associated with being an atheist, their fears

around that stigma, and strategies they used for navigating the stigmatized atheist identity. Three

subthemes emerged from the data which described stigma management: awareness of stigma,

fear of repercussions, and stigma management techniques.

Awareness of stigma. The participants were all aware that Christians and other believers

viewed them as a form of other. These perceptions differed, however, among participants.

Sarah noted that people simply cannot understand non-belief:

I think that the perception of atheism is mostly really confusing. I think people just can't

wrap their brains around someone not believing in God, so some of the animosity, I

actually haven't experienced animosity, but I think animosity that people describe, I think

it comes from that confusion where people are just like, I've gotten this question actually

a lot, what *do* you believe?

Sarah is also a strong feminist and believes that atheists are perceived to be "angry"

because of the vocal group of New Atheists who attract media attention, such as Richard

Dawkins and Sam Harris. She likened this perception to that of feminists who have also been

portrayed as outspoken and angry. As a feminist and an atheist, Sarah believes that it is

important to be open about these identities to reduce the stigma associated with them:

It's these people who are very aggressive and are like, "You're stupid if you believe in

God." It's a very vocal minority, but it was kind of a similar process to owning the word

"feminism." When I was young I didn't want to be called a feminist, even though

basically what I believed was feminism. Then I got older and I was like, "You know

what? These connotations continue because people don't meet people that are nice that

call themselves these things." There was like different points. I owned my feminism

much earlier. I own my feminism, own atheism, because then people have interactions
where they're like, "Oh, you're a feminist, but you're actually a nice, reasonable human
being who has normal points of view and has conversations and doesn't yell," which is in
itself kind of playing into the niceties of don't get angry.

Sarah spoke about using her privilege as a White, middle class woman to break down the
stereotypes associated with both identities. She has reached a point in her comfort in these
identities that she does not care what most people think about her.

Other participants felt that the stereotypes of atheists are more extreme. Angela felt that
people's perceptions of atheists are shaped by ministers and other church leaders who believe
atheists "are possessed by the devil." She also acknowledged that some protestant Christian
faiths believe the same to be true of Catholics. Erin also noted the extreme perceptions of
atheists by non-believers but finds humor in it, commenting, "Maybe it's the extreme idea, but
that atheists are baby eaters." She went on to share that she and Carl, who both belong to a free
thinkers group in their town, find comfort in finding the humor and joking about these
perceptions with other atheists.

Others were more wary of the stigma of atheism, sensing that it could be detrimental to
their personal or work lives if people were aware of this identity. Their comments about their
apprehension developed into the next subtheme, fear of repercussions, as many noted that, to
some extent, they worry about the harm that could be done by disclosing this identity.

Fear of repercussions. William's fear of repercussions stemmed directly from his
experience at his first institution of higher education, where his ability to effectively manage his
outwardly Christian staff was hindered because of the conversations they had about their
religious differences. In that experience he was unable to reprimand a staff member who was

missing a significant amount of work and was not performing effectively. He feared that if he

were to give this staff member a verbal warning, she would use his comments about his atheism

against him. He wanted a "clean slate" at his current institution to avoid this type of conflict.

However, he further fears repercussions at his current institution because of his outwardly

Christian supervisor and several other colleagues. He envisions a subtle form of discrimination

if his atheist identity were known, believing that opportunities at work would be taken away or

not be offered to him in the future.

Carl and Erin, who are comfortable in their atheist identities, both commented that they

feared that the Christian students at their institution would not be receptive to working with them

on projects if they were to know about their atheist identity. Erin mentioned that the

relationships that she has with students is essential to her being effective in her position. Carl

commented:

> I think the thing that scares me more than anything is because of the position I have at
>
> work, I work with a lot of students. I interview a lot of students . . . I think the thing that
>
> scares me is because I'm as open about it as I am, I'm afraid that I'm going to run into a
>
> student who's not going to want to work with me for a project that I need to do.

Carl also recalled a story about a Facebook post that his supervisor commented on which caused

him to be concerned about possible repercussions:

> I made the point that the holiday of Christmas has morphed over the years, and before it
>
> became Christmas it was something else. She [his supervisor] didn't like that very much
>
> and she made a comment about it and said, "It is about Christ." . . . I wound up hiding the
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> conversation and then writing a novel the next day. I was on vacation, but I wrote a
>
> novel the next day explaining why I feel this certain way or whatever. Then it just felt

like it wasn't worth it. My whole holiday break I was worried about what my first day

back to work was going to be like.

He noted that nothing ever came of the incident, but it did instill a sense of fear about what the

alternative outcome could have been. Carl also has a side business, so he is sometimes fearful

that if potential customers knew about his atheism that it could cause them not to want to do

business with him.

Angela, another out atheist, recalled feeling scared when she received an unknown

package at her house after participating as an atheist panelist for an interfaith event:

You know shortly after being a panelist a box got delivered to my door accidentally, and

it had nothing on it and so I called the police because I was afraid it was a bomb, but it

was actually just food. It was one of those, you know how the retailers have those plastic

boxes with the flaps? We had kind of like a food island when we had our grocery stores

closed down. And for a while there were no grocery stores in my neighborhood. Well

people were ordering from this place downtown, a food stand . . . you could buy it online.

And they didn't have it branded, didn't have a packing list, it was very amateurish. But

yeah, so I'd say I'm comfortable, but I still think oh my God, someone wants to bomb my

house.

The fear of repercussions that my participants described stemmed from both concrete

experiences they had as a result of expressing their atheism and innate fears they held from their

knowledge about how atheists can be treated in society. Because of these fears, some of the

participants utilized stigma management techniques to avoid negative experiences stemming

from their atheist identities.

Stigma management techniques. The participants who were most protective of their atheist identity employed a range of stigma management techniques depending upon the given social situation. William, who was the most closeted of the participants in the workplace environment, described how he strategically presents himself both in person and online to keep this identity a secret.

> I think sometimes people are surprised even now that I'm liberal just because I present a different way. I've always wore a jacket and tie and have short hair. People don't see me in that way. I think Facebook has maybe opened that up a little bit where . . . you can sort of read people sometimes by looking at their Facebook posts. And I try, with Facebook by and large I try to, or Twitter, it's really the product of me. I try not to make it, I try not to put too much personal business out there, but I think people can see with things that you post, even if you don't post political things, but just what your leanings are.

William presents himself as conservative physically through his style choices and virtually through his online content, so people are less likely to perceive him as an atheist with liberal values. When asked directly about his religious beliefs, William often chooses a form of indirection (Fitzgerald, 2003), telling a half-truth, by saying that his family is Catholic. His wife is a non-practicing Catholic though they do attend mass from time to time. So, in claiming that his family is Catholic, he is not lying, but he is only telling half of the truth by not disclosing his atheism.

Similarly, Patrick will tell people that he is Catholic if he is pressed by someone "pushy, like Jehovah's Witness or others on the street corner." As an individual who was confirmed Catholic, this is a half-truth. In other situations, he may tell people to whom he would like to

remain closeted another half-truth that he doesn't go to church. To many members of his family, however, Patrick chooses to pass as a practicing Christian by attending church when he is home for visits.

Erin also recalled times when she used indirection as a way to avoid using the atheist label when she first began in her position at the university:

> I would've never lied, and said, "Yeah, I go to church," and whatever. But I don't know that I would have come out and said atheist. In fact, I can remember times of describing myself as "non-spiritual," or I think that's probably how I put it. Or, "I don't really go to church, I don't really," you know, "I'm not really a spiritual person." But yeah, I've kind of, maybe, gotten more comfortable in my own skin, and in the fact that, you know, I guess, maybe feeling that it doesn't really matter, if other people like it or not.

Erin and some of the participants have chosen to employ identity substitution and label substitution (Fitzgerald, 2003) as a form of stigma management. The terms secular humanist and free thinker came up with several participants, although they mostly use those terms to describe their values and use them as a substitution in rare situations. On those occasions, they felt that those particular terms were more acceptable or less stigmatized than the atheist label. Erin went on to comment about when she might use the term humanist instead of atheist:

> When people are very, very religious around me, and I feel like it could cause issues if they consider me atheist. And maybe they don't really fully know what a humanist is, and if they won't ask me, then it won't really come up, I guess.

Angela describes herself as a free thinker. She almost always uses the atheist label but sometimes uses the freethinker label if she feels that it may be "less scary" to people and because it "doesn't really have any connotations except for it sounds like free-love. It means that you're

a thinker and that you're free from dogma." She also commented that she is more comfortable

claiming her atheism because she is not a good liar and would not want to tell someone that she

is religious and risk putting herself in a position where she would need to lie about what church

she attends.

Daniel identifies secular humanism as a set of values he ascribes to and commented that

he used that label on his Facebook page at one time. However, he does not feel compelled to use

a label other than atheist, but he did understand why some people do choose to use the secular

humanist label:

I think it's a label that welcomes people who are aware of non-religious approaches to

wholesome lifestyles. It's a code word I think that is more welcoming to other people

who have been intentional and sincere about looking in to different ways to think about

religion and being a good person, values, and morals.

Finally, as discussed earlier in this theme, several of the participants actively work to

dispel the stigma around atheism through various means. Carl, Angela, and Erin's involvement

in activities such as freethinker's associations, the Secular Student Alliance, podcasts, interfaith

panel discussions, and online forums are all evidence of disclosure decisions that they use to

actively reduce the stigma associated with being an atheist. Sarah also mentioned that she

actively works against the atheist stigma by disclosing her identity so that people have the

opportunity to interact with an atheist and develop new perceptions.

The comfort in identity theme emerged through the interpretation of my participants'

experiences with religion, the processes through which they rejected religion and identified as

atheists, the extent to which they are out in their atheist identity, and the strategies they use to

manage their stigmatized identities. The participants then bring these experiences to the higher

education workplace, which they navigate differently depending on the contexts of their

individual departments, institutions, and communities in which they are located.

<div align="center">**Context of Workplace Environment**</div>

Within a few interviews, it was apparent that my participants experienced their atheist

identity differently depending on a variety of contexts. In fact, this was something that I noted

immediately within my memoing after the interviews. The context of workplace environment

theme became clear as several of the emergent themes (see Table 5) indicated that the nature of

individual departments and institutions, as well as the students that attend these institutions and

the communities in which the institutions are located, all contribute to the ways that atheists

experience this identity in the workplace.

Departmental

A common theme which emerged across participants was the nature of their department,

how it compared to other departments on campus, and how religion was addressed within it.

William and Samantha, who both work in the field of advancement and believe that the field

attracts liberally-minded individuals, felt that their religious colleagues within the department set

Table 5

Context of Workplace Environment

Subthemes Themes	Corresponding Emergent Themes
Departmental	Varies by department
Institutional	Institution type and career type Nature of large, public university Working with Christian students
Out, Closeted, and In Between	Differences between institutions and communities Town vs. gown

the tone for their ability to feel comfortable in their atheist identities. Although both had been

open about their religious views in their previous positions at different campuses, their current

departments employ individuals who are outward about their Christianity. William commented:

> I do think if I started talking about it now, it would be challenging to the people I work
>
> with . . . because there's a lot of people that are pretty open in their Christianity. I mean,
>
> not pretty. Very open. And I think they would be shocked if I started saying, "Well,
>
> yeah, actually I'm an atheist. I've never been baptized."

Both William and Samantha had learned in their previous institutions that expressing their

beliefs would offend their religious colleagues, so they choose to not disclose their atheist

identities in their current departments.

Several of the participants commented that their departments were liberal in nature and

accepting of non-belief, but noted that other departments on campus present a more religious

culture. They specifically mentioned the field of health care, which included departments such

as nursing and public health. Sarah commented, "My best friend, she's a research scientist and

she works in public health. She has to deal with, because of the culture of her office, she has to

deal with a lot more stuff. Her office, they're more traditional." Carl shared similar sentiments:

> I know, personally, most of the school of sciences, most of them lean toward the
>
> skeptical. That's the nature of the sciences anyway. Humanities, I'd say a really good
>
> big portion of that area is certainly skeptical and they question things . . . our nursing
>
> school is very much the opposite . . . I don't understand what it is, but they have a pledge,
>
> the Nightingale Pledge, or whatever it is, and it's a prayer. That's how people get in the
>
> nursing program.

The participants' perception of these departments indicates the presence of Christian privilege in their business practices. I will further explore this concept later in this chapter.

Most of the participants knew that there was a mix of religious and non-religious people in their departments but aside from casual mentions of church activities, no one discusses religion. They frequently mentioned that their departments were "liberal" or "progressive" and felt that even those who were religious felt that it was a personal matter and were not outward about their beliefs. Gwen noted that when a new person started in her department and they were made aware of her strong religious beliefs, she and another colleague were concerned about how she would feel in a department with non-believers:

So, I would say that for most of the people around me, I really don't know their religious beliefs. I know that there's a new woman . . . I know that she believes strongly in it and it's a big part of her identity. But she's very open and accepting and not very, I don't feel judgment from her. I think my other colleague Mary, who I'm fairly certain if she's not atheist, she's agnostic, she was concerned that when she was coming on and she quickly realized, she realized before I did that [the new woman] was really religious. And Mary was a little nervous about it and then kind of like warned me. She was concerned that maybe she'd be uncomfortable with our lack of religion, and I never ended up feeling that.

Angela and Sherlock, both librarians, also commented that religion is not discussed at all within their departments. Although Angela was aware that most of her colleagues are religious, the culture of the department is to not talk about their personal lives. She did note that there were three other atheists in the department of approximately 100 staff members and they may

"whisper in the halls" to one another. Sherlock noted that besides her Jewish supervisor, she

does not know the religious beliefs of her other departmental colleagues.

The culture of individual departments is dependent upon the individuals who comprise

that department. The participants in this study felt more or less comfortable in their atheist

identity, depending on the religious makeup of their colleagues and how they presented their

beliefs within the department. They also recognize that other departments on campus are more

or less religious depending on the nature of the discipline or field.

Institutional

It is important to reiterate that all the participants in this study are employed at public,

four-year universities. Both Gwen and Sherlock mentioned that they chose higher education as a

career and specifically chose public institutions because the institutional type fits their values.

The participants all indicated that they would not choose to work at a religiously affiliated

institution in the future. The context of the institutional environment emerged as a strong theme

among the participants at the large public research institution, the nature of which seems to set

the tone for how religion is experienced by the campus community. They believe that the liberal

and scientific nature of the institution tends to marginalize religion, specifically Christianity, so

that non-believers are perceived to be the majority. Daniel commented bluntly:

> I think it's understood that if you've got any sort of issue with my atheism then it's none
>
> of your business to tell me. And you should keep it to yourself because you're not
>
> necessarily in like a controlling majority of this community.

Sarah, who has an academic background, noted that her friend group is formed by academic

colleagues she has met at her institution:

Most of my friends, they're humanists or social scientists or they're scientists. I have

friends who are biologists and sociologists and anthropologists, which I think is a little

different than when you have interactions with people in law school, med school, it's a

different perspective. So, among that group, I would say my friends that are Christians

are actually more marginalized. Most of us are atheists or agnostic.

Gwen commented that she believes that the Christian colleagues that she knows tend to

downplay their beliefs to fit in among the non-believers on campus:

I know when I was an assistant director, there was one person who was deeply religious.

None of the rest of us really were, although I think one of them went to the Unitarian

church. I felt like he hid his religion more I guess. 'Cause it seemed like there was kind

of an assumption that you, almost seemed more like there was an assumption that you

wouldn't be religious or not necessarily atheists, but that you wouldn't be practicing.

Yeah, there were few people who used to refer to him as a Boy Scout because he was

kind of religious. And he's very liberal and he's kind of alternative, but he's also a

deeply religious. And people, they think they found he was like too goody two-shoes.

Gwen also commented that the changing demographics of the students at her institution help to

shape how atheists and other minority religions feel on campus:

When I first came in, I felt that Christianity as a religion seemed much more present to

me in the organizations and the students in the environment . . . I feel like it's gotten less

and less so over time. It may have something to do with having more international

students, more out-of-state students that are Jewish. I mean that's been growing and

growing. So, I feel like that kind of assumption of where a student would lie religiously

as well as politically is less present I think as things have progressed.

Both Gwen and Sarah, who work directly with students, mentioned that the students from Indiana tend to be more outward about their religious (Christian) identities than students from out of state. At times, these students discuss how certain classes may challenge their long-held beliefs:

> I've had students choose not to take classes because of their religious beliefs, they've asked about the content of the class. There's this popular class called *What Is the Bible?* It's a religious studies class, and it goes through the history of, it's like how the Bible came to be the Bible that we know today. It's a lot of the historical processes that contributed to the Bible, the versions. It's a really fascinating class, and there are some students who'd consider themselves Christian but find it really interesting, but some of them choose not to take it. I've had students ask me questions about the content of the course, and it's like, "As a Christian will I like this?" It's like, "I can't say for certain because it depends on your belief system. There might be things that are taught in the class that are different from what your pastor would teach. It's kind of up to you." It's really hard with that, and I've had students decide, "No, it's not for me."

Classes that address evolution or other topics that are contradictory to Christian beliefs may also be discussed with students when discussing course selection; however, both Gwen and Sarah mentioned that they do not discuss their lack of religious beliefs with students.

The secular nature of the large, public research institution is something that Gwen, Patrick, Daniel, and Sarah all value and they intentionally choose to work there because of it. In their experiences, Christian staff members and, to some extent, students, are marginalized. Their secular institution is located within a larger secular community, which is the next context in which the participants experience their atheist identity.

Community

The participants who work at the large, public research institution describe the surrounding community as a "liberal bubble" and believe that the community is not very religious. It is likely the nature of the university that has created the nature of the surrounding community. They did mention that they know people who do attend church, but they frequently are members of more progressive denominations such as Unitarian Universalist or Episcopalian churches. Daniel mentioned that he knows of at least four churches that employ outwardly gay pastors and he is more accepting of the people who attend those churches than others.

The remaining participants, however, describe their surrounding communities differently, which can influence the institutional environment as well. Carl described his institution as a liberal bubble but acknowledges that the surrounding community is much more religious. Samantha, who works at a large institution in an urban setting, did not express the same liberal sentiment about her institution and spoke little of the institution and the surrounding community, except to compare her current institution in juxtaposition to her experience at the same large, public, liberal institution that Gwen, Daniel, Sarah, and Patrick work currently.

William, Sherlock, and Angela, however, spoke of the conservative nature of their communities, which are highly influenced by Christianity. Participants in the conservative communities noted that a common question that people will ask upon meeting someone is which church you attend. For example, both Samantha and Patrick have previously lived in the community in which William's current institution is located, and both found this to be a common occurrence. Patrick noted that his family are all Republicans and "People go up to you, 'Where do you go to church?' That's the first or second, when are you having kids and where are you going to church, and that's the first or second thing out of their mouth." William commented

that his current supervisor, who was new to the institution but from the local community, asked the staff in the department where they attend church on his first day on the job.

A common theme across participants was the acknowledgement that support staff on campus tend to be more conservative and religious than faculty and professional staff. Most attributed this to be reflective of the community, as support staff tend to be born and raised in the local community while faculty and professional staff may come from outside the area. Angela summarized it most succinctly:

> I think in higher ed in the various places that I've worked and lived there is kind of a
> class distinction between the professionals and the professors who are likely to have
> come from somewhere else and be much more likely to be atheist and likely to be
> tolerant. And then the lower level clerical staff positions that are drawn from the local
> population and are going to be . . . more provincial.

Even at the large research institution, the participants agreed that the support staff who live in the rural communities surrounding the campus tend to be more conservative and religious than those who live within the city in which the institution is located.

The various contexts of the department, institution, and community all have the ability to influence how the participants experience their identity in the workplace. For those who are employed at a large research institution in a primarily secular community, the atheist identity is part of the norm, so it is not problematic for them in their day-to-day lives. For those who work in more conservative departments in religious communities, however, the atheist identity is outside the cultural norm. As such, it is something that needs to be concealed and managed accordingly.

Influence of Campus Leadership in the Religious Environment

The religious beliefs of department supervisors and campus leadership, as well as how religious diversity was addressed on campus, emerged as common themes across participants and forms my final finding, the influence of campus leadership in the religious environment (see Table 6). The supervisor's role was a theme in my first pilot study, so I recognized this common thread immediately while talking to my participants. As such, I used it as a code across participants and it developed into a common theme as well. To a smaller extent, other campus leaders and the way campuses address religious diversity in general also had an influence on how campuses welcomed religious minorities, including atheists, and these emerged as subthemes for this finding.

My other secondary research question was: What role does the religious environment of the institution play in the navigation of this identity? After completing my analysis and forming my primary themes, I further analyzed my data for the presence of Christian privilege. While it was not a strong finding, it was evident that Christian privilege is related to the religious environment of the institution. As such, I nested the themes related to Christian privilege within this third primary finding as a subtheme.

Table 6

Influence of Campus Leadership in the Religious Environment

Subthemes	Corresponding Emergent Themes
Supervisor's role	Supervisor's role in religious environment
Leadership's role	Campus leaders' roles in religious environment
Religious diversity on campus	Common code across participants Christian privilege

Supervisor's Role

The most influential subtheme that emerged within this finding was the role of the participants' direct supervisors in their ability to feel comfortable in their atheist identity in the workplace. Sarah commented:

> I think it depends a lot on your department makeup and how your supervisors set the tone . . . our supervisors are pretty professional. That kind of stuff doesn't come into department conversations. I think that they've set a good enough tone that it's a pretty collegial department in general and people tend to be pretty respectful.

Sarah, Gwen, and Matthew, who work in different departments but have the same supervisor, commented that their supervisor never talks about religion and they personally have no knowledge of which religion she practices, if any. They felt that it was important that she set the example of how religion would be perceived in the workplace.

Erin commented that her supervisor is Catholic but accepting of other views. Although she and other atheist colleagues may talk about their beliefs from time to time, the department tends to avoid talking about religion and politics:

> I think all of us sort of avoid the whole religion and politics things, like a lot of folks do, when they don't want to cause tensions, 'cause I feel like a lot of us, those that are religious are more conservative, and those that are non-religious are more liberal.

Carl works in the same department as Erin and they have the same supervisor. While he was unsure about disclosing his atheist identity to her at first, she responded positively to his admission:

I kept a lot of my stuff to myself until a particular evening when I was with my boss. We were at a bar/restaurant having a wrap party for a video. She'd asked me a personal question about her then boyfriend. They were having issues and he was asking his church and his whatever for advice, rather than taking his own personal responsibility for a silly thing. She asked me what I thought about it, and it took me about ten minutes to figure out how to say that I didn't believe in God, because I didn't know how she was going to react. When I finally did, she goes, "You're nicer than most Christians I know."

His supervisor's reaction immediately put him at ease about this identity and it "opened up the floodgates" for him to be more comfortable about being himself and expressing his views in the workplace.

Sherlock's immediate supervisor is Jewish, but she feels that their shared status as religious minorities on a highly Christian campus is something that bonds them:

She's really been very protective about all of us. I told her at my interview. She's like, "Yeah, well, I'm Jewish." I said, "Well, I'm an atheist. I don't care." It's just like, "Okay." It's not the kind of thing that you normally talk about at an interview, but I had already been offered the job anyway, so I don't care. Even if I wasn't, it is a big part of my identity and I don't expect to hide that. I don't expect a Christian to hide their cross that they're wearing around their neck. I don't expect the Jew to hide their religious symbols or anyone else for that matter. It's one of those things that shouldn't get in the way, but it does. The fact that I don't have any of it really should mean it does get in the way. I don't feel it here so much, but I think it's to a large part to [supervisor's] work because she's just so good about it.

Like Sherlock, Angela has worked for a Jewish supervisor in the past and never felt that their religious differences were problematic. Her current supervisor is an Apostolic Pentecostal, which Angela believes may contribute to a shared sense of religious minority in the department:

And after someone told me what his denomination was, I discovered that it's kind of a small one even in [town]. So, I kind of have decided to just assume that belonging to a tiny minority of denominational belief has given him kind of the same outlook that I have belonging to a tiny minority.

Samantha could not be sure but assumes that her current supervisor is either an atheist or agnostic. In a position she held prior to working in higher education, she had a very religious supervisor:

I worked at a stuffy bank once, and my boss, who was a lovely person, he was extremely religious type. Ten children, his wife homeschooled them all. He never talked about it like, "You're missing something," or, you know, "Let me tell you about Jesus." But boy, that was his life. And that was completely obvious. And I wouldn't want to be in that situation again with a boss.

Samantha commented that she is more concerned with how she sets the tone in the office as a supervisor herself and is very careful to not bring up religion:

I don't feel that I'm able to be as open about it. And I guess, I suppose since I'm in a supervisory role too, I feel like we should just steer clear of that topic, you know. I'm not gonna, I certainly wouldn't ever say anything bad about, you know, what they do. I think they would probably, I think there would be shocked if I actually said the words, "I'm an atheist."

For Samantha, it is more important for her staff to feel comfortable in the workplace than it is for her to be open about her atheist identity. While only two of her staff members are openly religious, she is conscious of how they feel about their own identities and does not want to risk offending them.

William's current supervisor is a devout Christian and very conservative. He hired several religious staff members since starting in his position a few years ago. William feels that this dynamic has had a large influence on his ability to feel comfortable about his lack of beliefs and liberal values in the workplace:

> I have a new boss that's conservative, and he hired his old secretary, very conservative, hates Hillary Clinton, has a concealed carry permit. Then hired another person, very conservative. And I think it's become more obvious to some of us who are more liberal just that there's a polarity, and we have to be careful. And I've talked to my group, not to really get into politics. We don't talk about religion at all, but not to get into politics with people just because it's very, very divisive.

William feels threatened by this divisiveness and feels that if he was open about his beliefs that his work life would suffer through the denial of opportunities or other subtle forms of discrimination by his supervisor.

It is clear that the supervisor has a direct influence on how the atheists in this study experience their identity in the workplace. The supervisors can either present themselves as completely neutral and not address religion at all or be open about their own beliefs but create two different types of experiences–one where an employee feels safe and one where the employee feels threatened.

Leadership's Role

Outside of the participants' immediate supervisors, some commented that other campus leaders were influential in how atheists experience their identity in the workplace. Erin and Carl's division head is Jewish, which they believe is critical in setting the tone for how their division views religious differences. They also both commented that having a person serving in another leadership role on campus helped to set the tone for the acceptance of religious minorities. Erin commented:

> I think it might help our campus in particular that, up until just last year our, what was her title? She was in the student activities office, she was like in charge of diversity and that type of things. She was Muslim, and so, and she wore hijab, and everything like that. So, you know, it was almost a sensitivity training walking around every day, because it was visible that she was of a different religion, and so they had to stop and think, "Am I saying the right thing? Is this sensitive or not?" It just heightened some awareness about how people talk about and use the language.

Carl further added that in her role, this individual hosted interfaith programming which broadened the campus community's education about individuals of different faiths.

Gwen, Sarah, Daniel, and Patrick work within one very large division on their campus and have no knowledge of their division head's religious beliefs. He and many others in position of leadership on their campus rose from the faculty ranks which could contribute to the lack of importance placed on religious beliefs across the larger campus community. Overall, they did not feel that addressing religious diversity was a priority on their campus. Although the campus is welcoming of those from various faiths in response to their large international student population, it does not directly address non-belief.

Religious Diversity on Campus

How religious diversity is addressed on campus did not emerge as a major theme for any of the individual participants, but as I re-analyzed my data, it was evident that there were several related codes regarding religious diversity across participants and was worth including as a subtheme within this final finding. For most participants, it was the absence of attention toward religious diversity that was consistent.

Some of those employed at the mid-sized and small institutions commented that their campus does little to address religious diversity. Angela did not feel that her campus addressed religious diversity in any way and noted that a recent decline in international students is likely contributing to that. Sherlock felt that her campus' attention to diversity overall was lacking. The campus sponsors a diversity commission which largely focuses on race. Sherlock felt this was insufficient, commenting, "We do need a strong LGBT component. We do need a strong religious minority component. We need a strong gender minority component whether we talk about women or trans people. We need both."

William commented that he did not believe that his campus put a lot of thought into their diversity programming because it is reflective of the lack of diversity in the campus demographics:

> I mean, most of the people that go here and work here, live here. Ninety percent of our student body is White. I'd say ninety percent of the people that work here are White and live within a few miles. So, I mean, I think it's not a melting pot exactly.

He further commented about the lack of religious diversity programming on campus:

"Hey, let's have a panel of atheists and Muslims and Buddhists." That never comes up. I

think there's just kind of this general middle-of-the-road Indiana Christianity, and

everybody kind of . . . that's kind of their deal, you know?

For the smaller campuses, which are primarily White and Christian, diversity

programming overall is a low institutional priority so religious diversity programming is even

less of a priority. This lack of attention toward religious diversity serves to support the

indication that Christian privilege is present on these campuses.

Christian privilege. The final aspect of my analysis and theme development focused on

the extent to which my participants' experiences in the workplace reflect the presence of

Christian privilege on campus. I divided the codes and themes related to Christian privilege into

three levels: individual, departmental, and campus. Similar to the subtheme of religious

diversity, this did not emerge as a strong theme, but it does provide some understanding for the

religious environment of the campuses and how the atheists in this study experience their identity

in the workplace.

Individual level. Most of the participants noted that they have seen colleagues wear

symbols of Christianity, such as necklaces, or have some type of symbolic décor on their desk.

However, none of the participants had a concern with this expression of faith. William, the most

closeted of the participants, commented about how his colleagues express their Christian

identities in the workplace:

Things on their desks, signs, things they say to you, that they're going to pray for you, or

things like that, blessing you, those kind of things, which I understand it better now and

don't feel bad if somebody says, "Oh, I'm praying for you." I don't say, "Well, I'd rather

you not do that," but I understand for the most part what those people, what they really

mean by that.

While these expressions were not problematic to William, he recalled a time when one of his

colleagues requested permission to get access to a highly-restricted facility on campus to host the

newly-formed Christian athletic association. He found that he had to be diplomatic in the way he

approached the conversation because of her Christian faith, but he knew any other student group

on campus would not be granted that same access for meetings. He went on to state that he

needed to be careful around this particular staff member because of her conservative Christian

beliefs. William described his campus as having a lot of religiously conservative people, which

when considered in mass, creates a culture that favors Christianity, even though the institution

itself does not.

Sherlock recalled a story in which she was part of a hiring search committee and another

committee member favored a candidate who was a member of her church:

We interviewed for a position here and I was part of the interview committee. I wanted

one person, who got the job, and I said, "Yeah, this person is great. Part of the university

culture already. Knows what's going on. Seems to have a really good rapport with

young people. I think this is the right person for the job." Another committee member

says, "Well, I really like this other person. He goes to my church. I know he's a good

guy." I don't care that he goes to your church. This isn't your church. He doesn't have

the skills.

This type of individual level Christian privilege was troubling to Sherlock. In this instance the

person who was being favored for his Christian religious beliefs was not offered the position;

however, it is possible that a bias toward favoring Christian individuals does occur within the

hiring process at this institution.

As mentioned previously, the participants at the large research institution felt that

Christianity was marginalized on their campus. Although the institution may favor Christianity

through practices such as the academic calendar or campus dining offerings, there was nothing in

their personal experiences at the individual level that indicated that Christian privilege was

problematic. Like Samantha, they were more concerned with how outwardly religious

individuals in their departments felt about being in the minority on her campus.

Departmental level. The use of Christian prayer in a mandatory ceremony in the nursing

department as described by both Carl and Erin, is an indicator of the presence of Christian

privilege at the departmental level. Because several of the participants mentioned that the

healthcare-related programs are perceived to favor Christianity, this could be problematic for

atheists and other religious minorities who work in those departments. Similarly, having several

outwardly Christian colleagues within his department, including the department head, William

feels that this creates a departmental culture that favors Christianity and establishes it as the

norm.

Angela recalled a policy change in her department that clearly indicated her supervisor's

preference for Christianity when he first started in his position:

> The first change that was a policy change was that our lost and found materials would no
>
> longer be given to a charitable organization . . . it was going to go to [town name]
>
> Mission, which is a Christian organization that serves only men. I thought well, you
>
> know, yeah there's a [institution] rule about lost and found, there's a state rule about lost
>
> and found.

Although the rest of the campus utilizes a secular policy for their lost and found items, her supervisor's preference for a Christian organization to be the recipient of unclaimed items was an indication to Angela that her department might start favoring Christianity in other ways as well.

Campus level. Nearly all the participants mentioned that either their campus decorates for Christmas or hosts a "holiday party." They noted that these parties are Christmas parties that have been secularized in title for the sake of inclusion but do not represent all faiths. Gwen did mention that her campus also includes blue décor around campus in December to be inclusive of the large Jewish student population on campus.

While these campus-level examples of Christian privilege are benign, Angela recalled a more controversial incident which favored Christianity on campus. The incident occurred within a department in the natural sciences but soon became a campus-wide controversy. A faculty member was consistently using his classroom to proselytize Christianity to students and teaching intelligent design, a form of creationism which is used to counter arguments for evolution. Multiple students had complained to the department and the university, but it took a blogger to bring it to the attention of the public before anything was done about it. Angela recalled that the department head did not have a problem with it, and while the Freedom from Religion Foundation filed a complaint when notified by a student, the university eventually resolved it as a human resource matter rather than a religious freedom matter. Angela went on to explain that the institution continued to condone this type of Christian privilege when it approved the hiring of another controversial faculty member who also taught intelligent design within the natural sciences.

Sherlock recalled an event on campus where members of the campus and local

community came together to celebrate Martin Luther King. She attended the event with her

Jewish supervisor and a Muslim faculty member:

> Jew, Muslim, and an atheist sit down the table at the pancake breakfast where they're
>
> serving sausage. There's two people at the table that can't eat it. They can't eat the food
>
> that's being served because pork is against both of their religions . . . It was so ridiculous.
>
> This is my first week on the job that I see this, and I'm like, "What did I walk into?" If
>
> they're that tone deaf to not respond to the needs of their own faculty members on
>
> campus…

While the story had the beginnings of a joke, Sherlock did not find the humor in it. She is

frequently frustrated by the lack of attention to issues of religious diversity on campus and this

incident clearly indicates the presence of Christian privilege by neglecting to consider the dietary

needs of religious minorities.

The data in this study did not reveal a strong influence of Christian privilege as perceived

by the participants; however, it does indicate that it is present in some forms on most campuses.

The findings suggest that Christian privilege does have an influence on the religious environment

of the campuses in which my participants are employed and the smaller campuses in highly

Christian communities could do a better job of addressing this power.

Summary

In this chapter I have presented my findings as I interpreted them through the

methodology of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). I explained the three primary findings – comfort in

identity, context of workplace environment, and influence of campus leadership in the religious

environment – and the subthemes which emerged from the data. The participants experience

their atheist identity differently depending on a combination of their own personal comfort in the

atheist identity, the nature of the department, institution, and local community, and the ways in

which department supervisors and campus leaders address religion on campus. I found that

stigma management was critical to the primary finding of comfort in identity and that each of the

participants utilize stigma management techniques in various ways. I also found that Christian

privilege did have an influence on the religious environment of the institution at the individual,

departmental, and institutional levels.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I will summarize and discuss the significance of my findings in relation to my primary and secondary research questions: How do professional staff members in higher education who identify as atheists experience that identity in the workplace? What strategies do they employ to manage the stigmatization of the atheist identity? What role does the religious environment of the institution play in the navigation of this identity? I will incorporate a comparison of the findings to the extant literature about atheist identity development, atheist stigma and discrimination, and the experiences of atheist college students. I will discuss implications for practice, the limitations of this study, and suggestions for future research.

Discussion of Findings

Through interpretation, I have developed three primary themes which form my findings: comfort in identity, context of workplace environment, and influence of campus leadership in the religious environment. Each of the primary themes is composed of subthemes which provide the context for understanding the lived experiences of my participants. I will discuss each theme individually, referring to the extant literature when applicable. First, I will provide a summary of my interpretation of the findings, which serves to answer my primary research question: How do professional staff members in higher education who identify as atheists experience that identity in the workplace?

Summary of Findings

The participants in this study are homogeneous in their atheist identity and workplace setting; however, my findings reveal that the participants' comfort in their atheist identity, the context of their workplace environment, and the influence of campus leadership in the religious environment of the institution all converge to create unique experiences for each individual.

Several participants were very comfortable in their atheist identities, chose to work at an institution which reflects their values, and live in a community which also is composed of like-minded individuals. For these participants, they view their atheist identity as part of the cultural norm in their daily lives and they do not experience this identity negatively in the workplace. In fact, these participants felt that it is the Christians in their departments and communities that are likely to feel marginalized because of the secular, liberal nature of their institution and town. These participants were likely to disclose fully their atheist identity to dispel the stigma of atheism.

Another group of participants were also comfortable in their atheist identity, and, for them, the contexts of their departments or institutions tended to be more liberal and respectful of religious difference, including non-belief. Although these participants work at institutions that are located in conservative Christian communities and they may work with a number of Christian students and colleagues, these factors do not cause any concerns for how they experience their atheist identity in the workplace. They may be cautious about disclosing this information at times but typically do not feel that they need to be protective of this identity on a regular basis, and they use full disclosure to reduce atheist stigma.

The final group of participants are much less comfortable in their atheist identity at work. The context of their workplace environment along with the influence of campus leadership in the religious environment of the institution creates a situation where they feel the need to be protective of their atheist identity to avoid stigmatization and discrimination. Although at one time they felt comfortable in disclosing this aspect of their identity, experiences with Christian colleagues at previous institutions led them to feel that they could not be open at their current institution. They also work in an environment that favors Christianity and work with outwardly

Christian colleagues who they feel would either be uncomfortable in knowing about their

atheism or could potentially use their atheism to subtly discriminate against them. As such, they

unconsciously utilize stigma management techniques to mitigate the risks associated with this

identity.

Comfort in Identity

This theme emerged through interpretations of how the participants' religious

upbringings, their atheist identity development, the extent to which they were out in their atheist

identity, and the ways that they manage their identity converged. How these aspects of their

atheist experience interacted created a unique perspective for each participant and set the

foundation for their workplace experiences in regard to this aspect of their identity.

Religious upbringing. The participants varied in their experiences with religion when

growing up. Some came from devout Christian backgrounds, others came from families that

participated in religion but seemed to go through the motions to be seen as good people. A small

portion of the sample grew up in non-religious families. Both professional and personal

experiences influenced how the participants felt about disclosing their atheist identity, resulting

in individuals from similar backgrounds feeling more or less comfortable in their atheist

identities in the workplace. For example, Gwen and William both grew up in non-religious

households. Gwen is confident in her atheist identity both personally and professionally, while

William is protective of this identity in all professional interactions and some social situations.

Gwen's experiences regarding her atheism have been largely positive while William had one

negative experience which subsequently changed his ability to feel comfortable in his atheist

identity in the workplace.

Atheist identity development. Of the 10 participants in this study, all but three were

believers at one time and their experiences closely mirrored Smith's (2011) process of identity

development. They participated in religion growing up as part of the societal norm. Some began

questioning their beliefs in high school, while others began in college or later in their twenties.

Many of the participants began to doubt their belief when they either explored religion more

deeply or met people from different backgrounds, including non-believers. All eventually

rejected religion and, to various extents, claimed their atheism. And, those who are out and are

able to find a community of other atheists are most comfortable in this identity.

LeDrew (2013) offered an explanation of the atheist identity for those who grew up in

non-religious households. He referred to Smith's (2011) theory of development as the "standard

trajectory" (p. 435) as it begins with the assumption that the individual believes in God at some

point. Although this does capture the lived experiences of most atheists, it does not reflect the

experiences of those who were not indoctrinated into religion as a child, like several of my

participants. LeDrew instead divides atheist identity development into two categories, secular

socialization and religious socialization, which are further broken down into five nuanced paths.

Most of those in the secular socialization category take a path that progresses directly to atheism,

but a second path allows for some exploration of and even conversion to religion, but then

individuals eventually revert back to atheism. The religious socialization category begins with a

path similar to Smith's (2011) development theory but offers multiple paths for those who

oscillate between belief and disbelief. One of those paths accounts for those who were raised

religious but were skeptical as children and never believed in God or the teachings of their

religion. This religious socialization path and the first secular socialization path helps us to

understand the identity development of Sherlock, who claimed to have never believed in God but

participated in religion, as well as Gwen and William, who both grew up in atheist families.

Out, closeted, and in between. Both Smith (2011) and LeDrew (2013) acknowledge that individuals will disclose their atheist identity differently. Smith's final stage, coming out atheist, may not be fully realized by all atheists. Compared to this stage, half of the participants are fully out as atheists (Angela, Carl, Erin, Gwen, and Sherlock), while the other half (Daniel, Patrick, Samantha, Sarah, and William) are closeted to at least some groups or individuals in their lives. LeDrew (2013) breaks the coming out stage into three separate stages: coming out (private), coming out (public), and atheist activist. When comparing my participants to these stages, they range from out to closeted to somewhere in between. Angela, Carl, and Erin can be considered atheist activists, as they engage in atheist organizations and educational opportunities regarding non-belief. Gwen and Sherlock are out publicly and have no concerns sharing this identity with colleagues but do not have a reason to do so with students in their roles. Daniel and Sarah are out publicly, though they may not disclose to certain individuals. And, William and Samantha are more selective about who they disclose to, wavering between out privately and out publicly. This nuanced approach to identifying the final stage of coming out atheist is most influenced by the participants' fear of discrimination and the need to manage this stigmatized identity.

Stigma management. Similar to the students in Mueller's (2012) study, the participants found a need to balance reducing stigmatization and protecting themselves against potential discrimination based on their atheist identity. All the participants used stigma management techniques for various purposes. Some used complete disclosure (Fitzgerald, 2003) to educate others and dispel stigma. Others passed as Christians if necessary or told half-truths (Fitzgerald, 2003) to avoid disclosing their atheist identity to colleagues or in other social situations. Although none of the participants experienced any direct discrimination because of their atheism,

it was evident that the potential for discrimination weighed on several of their minds. William

was not able to properly reprimand an employee who was missing a significant amount of work

because that employee's knowledge of his atheism made him fear that it would be used against

him. This experience directly influenced his approach to navigating this identity in his current

institution, along with the fact that his direct supervisor and several other colleagues are

outspoken Christians. William does not fear outward discrimination at his institution but does

fear subtle forms of discrimination such the loss of opportunities in the workplace. Erin and

Carl, who are both out in their atheist identities in the workplace, reported that they feared the

loss of opportunity as well; however, they feared this form of discrimination from the students

that they work with, rather than their colleagues or supervisors.

Consistent with Garneau (2012) and Pond (2015), I found that the atheists in this study

were most likely to use nondisclosure decisions (Fitzgerald, 2003) if they felt that their jobs

would be in jeopardy, if they wanted to avoid uncomfortable interactions with coworkers, or if

they wanted to avoid being judged unfairly in the workplace. However, in contrast to Hammer et

al. (2012), which found a relationship between the extent to which an individual is out in his or

her atheist identity and perceived discrimination, I found that the participants in this study who

are the most out in their atheist identity fear discrimination the least. Several factors may

contribute to this sense of security. First, the participants seem to understand their rights as

atheists, with several participating in forms of atheist education and activism. These participants

have found a network of other atheists through which they gain a sense of comfort and a

sounding board for their experiences. Second, because the participants are nearly all White,

middle class, and highly educated, their privilege from these dominant identities also serves as a

protection for their marginalized identity. Finally, atheism is not stigmatized in the geographic

region of the participants who worked at the large, public research institution and most of the

participants who are out in their atheist identity also work at institutions or in departments that

are perceived to be secular in nature, making the probability of discrimination less likely. This

relates to the next theme, context of workplace environment, as stigmas are known to vary by

time, place, and culture (Stangor & Crandall, 2000).

Context of Workplace Environment

Stangor and Crandall (2000) explained that "characteristics that appear to be universally

stigmatizing are in fact determined by the local culture" (p. 65). What is stigmatized in one

place at a particular time may not be stigmatized in another. I found this to be true for the

participants in this study who experienced their atheist identity differently depending on the

departmental, institutional, and community cultural contexts of their workplaces.

Departmental. The participants' immediate work environment, their individual

department, was the most significant in considering the context of their workplace. The

composition of religious and secular identities of their colleagues contributed to how the

participants experienced their own identities. For those housed in departments that did not

discuss religion or where the staff members were not especially religious, it was not a concern.

Several participants mentioned that religion never comes up in conversation and those who work

in distinctively secular departments tend to be mindful of their Christian and other religious

colleagues to not make them feel marginalized.

The participants who worked with outwardly Christian colleagues felt more compelled to

hide their atheist identity. They frequently linked the religious natures of their colleagues with

their political affiliations, which, considering the contentious political environment in which I

conducted this study, was difficult for them to separate. One participant in particular, William,

spoke frequently about his conservative colleagues and how that creates a strain among the more liberally-minded staff members in the department. The participants in these situations commented that they are sure to avoid conversations which involve religion or politics to avoid conflict with their colleagues.

Several participants also made comparisons between their departments and others on campus which they described as more religious. They specifically mentioned nursing and health sciences as departments that are conservative and religious in nature. Although they did not have any direct experience in regard to their atheist identity with these departments, several told anecdotal stories they had heard from other colleagues about their experiences in those departments. The common message was that the participants would never choose to work in a department that was known to be conservative and religious in nature.

The participants in this study represented four different fields within higher education. In comparing their experiences by field, the information technology participant, the librarians, and the student services professionals were the most comfortable in the workplace. Four of the participants worked in the field of advancement; two were comfortable in their atheist identity while two others were not. However, at one time both of these participants did feel comfortable in this identity at other institutions, which speaks to the importance of the context of the particular department and institution in which the participants are employed.

Institutional. The participants are all employed at public, four-year institutions, yet the context of each campus was important for understanding how the participants experienced their atheist identity. The participants perceived the large research institution to be secular in nature, even though students of varying faiths attend the institution. Participants perceive the majority of colleagues they interact with from across campus to be non-believers, and several mentioned

that they are often surprised to find out that a colleague attends church. They did note that these

colleagues tend to be affiliated with denominations that are more liberal, such as Unitarian

Universalist and Episcopalian. They acknowledged that students who attended the campus who

are from Indiana tend to be more religious while the out-of-state students tend to be less

religious.

The participants at the other campuses all felt that their campuses presented themselves

as secular institutions, but the religious composition of the individuals who work at the

institution can have an influence on how atheists perceive the religious culture. In other words, a

critical mass of outwardly Christian employees can make the environment feel religious, even if

that is not the institution's official stance. This was especially true for William who noted that

he is very conscious of Christian colleagues from around campus and is careful in his

interactions with them.

Community. The final contextual aspect of how the participants experience their atheist

identity depended on the communities surrounding their campus. For those employed at the

large research institution, their community reflects the liberal nature of the institution and is

perceived to be secular in nature. The community is home to several progressive churches, such

as Episcopalian and Unitarian Universalist, which provide a more welcoming environment for

those who are in the LGBT community or who hold liberal values but still have a belief in a

higher power.

With the exception of Samantha's current institution, the other participants are employed

at campuses located in cities with populations that range from 36,000 to 70,0000 people. The

campuses themselves are situated within the city limits but the surrounding communities are

rural with much smaller populations. Therefore, many of the staff and students who are

employed by and work at the institutions are commuting from the smaller, more conservative and more Christian communities. The campus culture then reflects the values of the critical mass of individuals from the community and creates the cultural norm. When out in the community, it was common for the participants to be asked questions about their place of worship, which creates a situation in which they may need to manage their stigmatized identity. Participants from these campuses also noted that many of the support staff on campus tend to be more conservative and religious than professional staff and faculty, and that they tend to be more cautious about expressing their thoughts about religion or politics around these individuals.

The context of the workplace, whether it was the department, institution, or local community, was important to understanding how my participants experienced their atheist identity. Some participants worked in secular departments within secular institutions and communities. Others worked in departments and institutions that were secular in nature but are located within a culturally Christian community. Both of these groups of participants were more open about their atheist identities in the workplace. Finally, a small number of participants worked in departments and institutions that were culturally Christian because of the religious composition of their colleagues and the community in which the institution was located. These participants were not able to be open about this aspect of their identity in the workplace.

Influence of Campus Leadership in the Religious Environment

Three aspects of leadership came together to form my last finding, the influence of campus leadership in the religious environment. The role of the supervisor was most influential, while other campus leaders and the way that the participants' campuses addressed religious diversity had a small effect on how they experienced their atheist identity. Christian privilege was present to various extents on each campus at the individual, department, and campus levels,

which contributed to the participants' perceptions of the religious climate for non-believers.

Supervisor's role. Gilford (2009) examined the effects of stigma in the workplace and found that "individuals who experience negative interpersonal behaviors believe organizational policies do not provide adequate protection and/or experience internalized negative feelings about himself or herself will have a lower quality relationship with the supervisor" (p. 100). The role of the supervisor was significant in the way that the participants in this study experience their atheist identity in the workplace. The participants who perceived their supervisors to be secular or whose supervisors expressed acceptance of atheism felt much more secure in their atheist identity than those whose supervisors were outwardly Christian and those who participants perceived to be not accepting. Some participants commented that they had no idea what their supervisor's religious beliefs were and that helped to set the tone for how their departments addressed religion. Others commented that even though their supervisors were religious, they were accepting of all faiths, including non-belief, which helped them to feel secure in the workplace.

One participant, however, felt that his supervisor's religious beliefs were problematic in his ability to feel comfortable in the workplace and did appear to have a lower quality relationship with his supervisor as a result. He felt that if his supervisor were aware of his beliefs, he could potentially discriminate against him by denying him opportunities. Conversely, as a supervisor, Samantha was more concerned with the relationship that she has with her employees who are outwardly Christian and goes out of her way to keep her atheist identity a secret as not to cause discomfort with them.

Leadership's role. Campus leaders outside of the participants' immediate supervisors had an influence on how several of the participants experienced their atheist identity in the

workplace. Some noted that they were not aware of their division head's religion and assumed that was an indicator that he was secular in nature. Others noted that their division head was of another religious minority which helped to establish how religious diversity would be accepted within that division. Two of the participants worked at an institution which employed a Muslim director who was responsible for campus diversity programming. They stated that the presence of this individual on campus forced faculty, staff, and students to be more conscious of how they interacted with people from diverse religious backgrounds. They also commented that the person in this leadership position introduced interfaith programming on campus. In this way, she contributed to the structural diversity, the psychological climate, and the behavioral dimensions (Hurtado et al., 1999) of the campus which the participants perceived to have improved the campus climate toward religious differences.

Religious diversity on campus. The absence of attention toward religious diversity on the participants' campuses was notable. Only two of the participants, who work at the same institution, commented that their campus has made some effort toward interfaith programming which they felt was influential in helping non-believers feel welcome on their campus. Although it is possible that the participants at the large research institution are not aware of the religious programming that takes place, they did not feel that it was a priority of their campus. Several other participants noted that their institutions' diversity efforts overall were lacking and attributed that to the predominately White, Christian student demographics. The lack of structural diversity (Hurtado et al., 1999) in the composition of the students, faculty, and staff served to perpetuate the absence of religious diversity programming on campus. This, in turn, reduces the opportunities to improve the psychological climate and behavioral dimensions that contribute to a positive campus climate toward religious diversity and acceptance of atheists.

Christian privilege. Several of the participants described interactions with colleagues

and institutional practices that are consistent with the presence of Christian privilege. They

described colleagues who feel free to talk about their religion without worrying about how others

are receiving them; their colleagues can expect to be among other members of their religious

group in the workplace and likely do not feel that their personal safety is in jeopardy because of

their religious beliefs; and, their public institutions include a Christian prayer at convocation and

address Christian holidays in ways that are perceived to be secular and do not appear to violate

church-state separation (Clark et al., 2002).

Most of the participants acknowledged that their campus or department hosts some type

of party or gathering in December, typically called a "holiday party" as a way of appearing

inclusive. Accapadi (2009) notes that by secularizing Christmas in this way, it further privileges

Christianity by making it the central holiday of the season and this practice communicates to

non-Christians that "your holiday will be 'Christmas-like' in nature in order to carry some

validity" (p. 117). This practice did not impact the participants in this study in a negative way,

but it does provide us with an example of one way that some of the college campuses in Indiana

perpetuate Christian privilege.

Many of the participants noted a lack of religious diversity programming on campus.

While Goodman and Mueller (2009) attribute interfaith programming and a focus on spirituality

to the isolation of atheist students on campus, it is possible that a lack of religious diversity

programming on a campus can serve to perpetuate Christian privilege on the campuses discussed

in this study. Because of this lack of attention toward religious diversity, along with individual

forms of Christian privilege, departments that favor Christianity, and campus practices, such as

catering selections at campus events, it is possible that non-Christians feel othered throughout their workplace experiences at some of the campuses.

Implications for Practice

This was a study about how a particular minority group, atheists, experience this aspect of their identity as employees in the higher education workplace. The findings indicate that their comfort in identity, the context of the workplace environment, and the influence of campus leaders in the religious environment are influential in how the participants experience their atheist identity in the workplace. It is necessary to look at the implications of the findings from three perspectives: from atheists who seek out opportunities for employment in higher education; from higher education leaders who create diverse place of learning and working; and from human resources professionals who have a duty to provide training to create safe spaces for their employees. I have developed suggestions based on how institutions can better support atheists from these perspectives and framed them within the framework for racial and ethnic climate developed by Hurtado et al. (1999).

Atheists who work in higher education must first consider how comfortable they feel in their atheist identity when determining if an institution is a good fit for them. The atheists in this study indicated that they would not seek out employment opportunities at religiously affiliated institutions; however, they were all employed at *public* institutions and their comfort in their identities in this environment differed from one institution to another. Choosing to work at a public institution may seem like a logical choice to an atheist, but it may not be enough to ensure the acceptance of non-religious identities in the workplace.

Assessing campus climate during a job search may not be easy, but there are steps an individual can take to research the environment before applying to an institution and during the

interview process to determine if their comfort level matches the institution. During the job

search process, an atheist may scan an institution's website to look for evidence of acceptance of

diverse worldviews. This may be apparent through the institution's mission statement, through

information about campus life and multicultural affairs, or through student clubs and

organizations. If a campus includes religious worldviews in their mission statement, hosts

interfaith events or speakers from diverse worldviews, or houses a chapter of the Secular Student

Alliance or similar organization, it may be a signal that the campus supports religious diversity

and non-religious worldviews.

During the interview process, an atheist could look for evidence of Christian privilege or

support for religious diversity by looking for visual cues on campus. Does the campus have a

chapel or multi-faith center? Do offices or desks display religious symbols? Do individuals in

the interview process use faith-based language? Are there individuals on campus who wear

religious apparel from non-Christian faiths? An atheist could also use the opportunity to ask

interviewers questions to assess the religious landscape. While it may not be appropriate to ask

questions about religion or atheism specifically, it is appropriate to ask questions such as, "How

does the campus prioritize diversity in its educational programming?" or "Tell me about the

campus climate toward diversity." It would be wise to ask these questions of different groups or

individuals to see if potential supervisors, colleagues, or campus leaders respond differently and

provide a sense of Christian privilege at the institutional, departmental, and institutional levels.

After taking all of this into consideration, an atheist who is considering employment at a

particular institution can determine if their comfort in their atheist identity is in alignment with

the institution's climate toward religious diversity and non-religious worldviews.

Institutions of higher education are uniquely different from many other types of workplace settings in that our purpose is to educate, and higher education leaders need to be cognizant of creating diverse learning environments. We employ individuals from a wide range of academic and cultural backgrounds to educate our students, but the environment we create as a place of learning affects faculty and staff as well. Although many campuses in the country are increasing their interfaith educational programming in an effort in achieve religious pluralism (Goodman & Mueller, 2009), most participants in this study did not see evidence of this at their institutions. Two participants did note that their campus had made some efforts, which they felt improved the environment for all religious minorities. As such, I find that the public, four-year institutions in Indiana could improve their efforts toward creating environments that are inclusive to atheists. This can be accomplished by incorporating religious diversity, including atheism and other non-religious worldviews, into the campus diversity mission and by developing programming to support religious minorities.

Structural diversity, psychological climate, and behavioral dimensions of the campus climate (Hurtado et al., 1999) can be achieved by increasing the visibility of religious minorities on campus. Campus leaders should encourage atheist and other non-religious faculty and staff to share their worldviews through campus programming events. Interfaith dialogues can be an effective tool to bring awareness of the power and privilege of Christianity on college campuses (Larson & Shady, 2012) and to reduce the stigma of marginalized religious minorities. It is important, however, to provide programming opportunities about atheism separately from interfaith programming so that atheists have a place to feel safe and in which they can bring atheist guest speakers to campus to share their experiences and perspectives (Goodman & Mueller, 2009).

Another way to improve the psychological climate and behavioral dimensions of the campus climate is through human resources managers who can provide diversity training for faculty and staff. The findings from this study stress the importance of the role of the supervisor in the ability for participants to feel comfortable in their atheist identity in the workplace. Supervisors can directly influence the dynamics of a department or their relationships with employees by remaining neutral toward religion, being supportive of religious differences, or creating an environment where religious differences make employees feel threatened; therefore, it is important for supervisors to be trained to identify their own biases. Workplace diversity training programs can bring awareness of racial, ethnic, cultural, and other types of differences. Best practices from workplace diversity training programs involve "visible upper-management and organizational support, requiring management participation, rewarding attempts to promote diversity, embracing a broad organizational definition of diversity, making training a part of a larger strategic diversity management initiative, and conducting long-term training evaluations to ensure training transfer" (King, Gulick, & Avery, 2010). Diversity trainings ideally change the behavior of the participants by helping to identify sources of marginalization. By ensuring that supervisors have training on issues related to religious diversity and are held accountable for promoting diversity within their departments, atheists will feel more secure in their workplace setting.

Campus leaders should also examine which contexts and dynamics are helping to improve the campus climate for atheists and which ones are furthering the sense of marginalization. A needs assessment or a campus climate survey can help to achieve this goal (King et al., 2010). Structural diversity can be achieved by hiring individuals from religious minorities to work in key areas such as campus life and other student affairs positions. The

psychological climate can be improved by educating faculty, staff, and administrators about atheism and by encouraging them to examine their own perceptions about atheists to ensure that they are not sources of marginalization. Finally, diversity training programs for employees should include information about religion and non-belief worldviews to improve the behavioral climate for atheists in higher education.

Limitations of Study and Future Research

Phenomenological research is limited by its nature as it is necessary to have a small sample size to examine a topic in depth. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009) suggests a sample size of eight for a study by a doctoral student. I was fortunate to interview 10 participants in this study but the experiences of 10 individuals is certainly not representative of all people who identify as atheists who are employed in higher education in Indiana. I also elected to limit the study to the state of Indiana to obtain a more homogeneous sample. The results of this study may not be applicable to atheists who work in higher education in other states or regions of the country. Like all qualitative research, because of these limitations, the findings from this study are not generalizable to the experiences of all atheists who are employed in higher education in professional roles.

I was also limited in my ability to recruit participants because of the nature of the research subject. I did not receive any response to several direct email messages to professional contacts which I interpreted to be because of the stigmatized nature of atheism. Although I did attempt to recruit widely through social media to attract individuals from diverse backgrounds, I obtained my participants solely through existing professional connections and snowball sampling. As such, my participant pool lacked diversity and only captured the experiences of atheists at five of the 14 public four-year institutions in the state of Indiana.

Finally, based on my experience from my first pilot study, I anticipated that my participants would be mostly closeted in their atheist identity in the workplace. However, the individuals who agreed to participate in this study were mostly out in their atheist identities in the workplace. Only one was completely closeted while another was highly selective about disclosing. Because of this, I was not able to capture as much information about the use of stigma management strategies as I had expected.

Future research of atheism in the higher education workplace should explore institutions in different geographic regions of the country. Individuals in the Bible Belt are likely to have very different experiences than my participants. It is also likely that participants from progressive regions of the country, such as the West Coast or Northeastern states, may have different experiences as well. Future research should also attempt to include participants from different racial and ethnic backgrounds because the intersection of these identities could have an effect on how someone may experience their atheism in the workplace. Finally, additional research may want to dive more deeply into the experiences of participants who are closeted in their atheist identity in the workplace and the stigma management techniques that are used within this context.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the significance of my findings in relation to my primary and secondary research questions. I have incorporated a comparison of the extant literature regarding atheist identity development, atheist discrimination, atheist stigma, and stigma management as they related to my findings. I have discussed the implications for practice from the perspectives of atheists who seek employment in higher education, campus leaders who create diverse learning environments, and from human resource managers who train faculty and

staff to be accepting of others. I have also identified the limitations of the study, along with

suggestions for future research. Finally, I will conclude this report with a reflection on the

process of conducting this research and the lessons I have learned as an insider researcher.

This project was guided by a research question, but it was initiated by a personal

question: Is this how other atheists experience their identity at work, or is it just me? When I

began research on this topic I had no expectations for what my findings would reveal or what I

would learn about my own experiences as an atheist who works in higher education. Until I

began speaking with individuals who share this identity, I was only an expert in my own

experiences. For many years I was very selective to whom I disclosed my atheist identity. Over

the course of three years, this research has created opportunities for me to disclose my atheist

identity to colleagues from my own campus, from other Indiana campuses, and to colleagues

from across the country. I have had to work though the discomfort of this disclosure, and risk

that the disclosure could have a negative impact on my professional relationships, but over time

this has allowed me to feel more comfortable in my own identity.

Throughout the research process, including my two pilot studies, I have learned that

atheism is not a monolith (Goodman, 2017); the atheist identity is complex and shaped by a

variety of experiences and contexts over the course of an individual's life. No two atheists

experience their identity in the same way. As an insider researcher, at times I found myself

envious of the participants who were able to live openly in their atheist identities; but I also

found that some participants were more protective of this identity than I have felt compelled to

be and genuinely fear for the safety of their employment. In an environment that espouses

diversity in matters both curricular and co-curricular, this is not how one should expect to feel in

the higher education workplace.

While stigmatization and discrimination may not be as threatening as the literature about atheists leads us to believe, it does appear that the universities in the state of Indiana could do better to educate students, faculty, and staff about diverse worldviews, including atheism and other forms of non-belief. As institutions of higher education, we are obligated to help the individuals in our campus communities to develop an understanding of the experiences of those who are different from ourselves. Institutional programming that addresses religious differences is critical to that mission and should be prioritized with other diversity initiatives.

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Appendix A

Statements of Christian Privilege

(Clark et al., 2002, pp. 54-55)

1. It is likely that state and federal holidays coincide with my religious practices, thereby having little to no impact on my job and/or education.

2. I can talk openly about my religious practices without concern for how it will be received by others.

3. I can be sure to hear music on the radio and watch specials on television that celebrate the holidays of my religion.

4. When told about the history of civilization, I can be sure that I am shown people of my religion made it what it is.

5. I can worry about religious privilege without being perceived as "self-interested" or "self-serving."

6. I can have a "Jesus is Lord" bumper sticker or Ichthus (Christian fish) on my car and not worry about someone vandalizing my car because of it.

7. I can share my holiday greetings without being fully conscious of how it may impact those who do not celebrate the same holidays. I can also be sure that people are knowledgeable about the holidays of my religion and will greet me with the appropriate holiday greeting (e.g., Merry Christmas, Happy Easter, etc.).

8. I can probably assume that there is a universality of religious experience.

9. I can deny Christian privilege by asserting that all religions are essentially the same.

10. I probably do not need to learn the religious or spiritual customs of others, and I am likely not penalized for not knowing them.

11. I am probably unencumbered by having to explain why I am or am not doing things related to my religious norms on a daily basis.

12. I am likely not judged by the improper actions of others in my religious group.

13. If I wish, usually I can be exclusively among those from my religious group most of the time (in work, school, or at home).

14. I can assume that the safety, or the safety of my family, will not be put in jeopardy by disclosing my religion to others at work or at school.

15. It is likely that mass media represents my religion widely AND positively.

16. It is likely that I can find items to buy that represent my religious norms and holidays with relative ease (e.g., food, decorations, greeting cards, etc.).

17. I can speak or write about my religion, and even critique other religion, and have these perspectives listened to, even published, with relative ease and without much fear of reprisal.

18. I could write an article on Christian privilege without putting my own religion on trial.

19. I can travel without others assuming that I put them at risk because of my religion.

20. It is likely that my religion will not put me at risk from others when I travel.

21. I can be financially successful without the assumption from others that this success is connected to my religion.

22. I can protect myself (and my children) from people who may not like me (or them) based on my religion.

23. Law enforcement officials will likely assume I am a non-threatening person if my religion is disclosed to them.

24. Disclosure of my religion may actually encourage or incline law enforcement officials to perceive me as being "in the right" or "unbiased."

25. I can safely assume that any authority figure will generally be someone of my religion.

26. I can talk about my religion, even proselytize, and be characterized as "sharing the word," instead of imposing my ideas on others or distributing "propaganda."

27. I can be gentle and affirming to people without being characterized as an exception to my religion.

28. I am never asked to speak on behalf of all Christians.

29. My citizenship and immigration status will likely not be questioned, and my background will likely not be investigated, because of my religion.

30. My place of worship is probably not targeted for violence because of sentiment against my religion.

31. I can be sure that my religion will not work against me when seeing medical or legal help.

32. My religion will not cause teachers to pigeonhole me into certain professions based on the assumed "prowess" of my religious group.

33. I will not have my children taken from me by governmental authorities who have been made aware of my religious affiliation.

34. Disclosure of my religion to an adoption agency will likely not prevent me from being able to adopt children.

35. If I wish to give my children a parochial religious education, I probably have a variety of options nearby.

36. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence and importance of my religion.

37. I can be sure that when someone in the media is referring to G-d, they are referring to my (Christian) G-d.

38. I can easily find academic courses and institutions that give attention only to people of my religion.

39. My religion and religious holidays are so completely "normal" that, in many ways, they may appear to no longer have any religious significance at all.

40. My religious holidays, having been constructed as "secular", can be openly practiced in public institutional settings without although given to the violation of the separation of religion and state.

41. The elected and appointed officials of my government are probably members of my religious group.

42. When swearing an oath in court or for employment, I am probably making this oath by placing my hand on the scripture of my religion.

43. I can openly display my religious symbol(s) on my person or property without fear of disapproval, violence, and/or vandalism.

44. The central figure of my religion is used as a major point of reference for my calendaring system (i.e., B.C. and A.D., as well as B.C.E and C.E.).

45. I can define the belief system of, and/or its practice by, another group as valid or invalid regardless of my level of knowledge of it.

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Messages

Email Message

Dear Colleagues [or recipient name if known to the researcher],

I am a doctoral student at Ball State University seeking participants in a research study of professional staff members in higher education who identify as atheists. I am interested in how these individuals experience this particular identity in the workplace environment. In order to participate, you must be over the age of 18, be employed as a professional staff member in an institution of higher education in the state of Indiana, and identify as an atheist. For the purpose of this study, an atheist is an individual who denies the existence of God or gods.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me via email at careisner@bsu.edu. An informed consent form is attached which will provide you with a greater understanding of your involvement should you chose to participate. If you choose to participate I will arrange a meeting to explain the study, answer any questions you may have, and collect your signed informed consent form.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this invitation. Please forward this message to anyone you think may be interested in participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Carrie Reisner

Social Media Message (i.e., Indiana Student Affairs Association Facebook group)

Participants are sought for a study of professional and support staff members in higher education who identify as atheists. The study will examine how atheists experience this particular identity in the higher education workplace and is being conducted by Carrie Reisner, doctoral student at Ball State University. In order to participate, you must be over the age of 18, be employed as a professional staff member in an institution of higher education in the state of Indiana, and identify as an atheist. For the purpose of this study, an atheist is an individual who denies the existence of God or gods.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact careisner@bsu.edu. An informed consent form will be sent to you which will provide you with a greater understanding of your involvement should you chose to participate. If you choose to participate I will arrange a meeting to explain the study, answer any questions you may have, and collect your signed informed consent form.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this invitation. Please forward this message to anyone you think may be interested in participating in this study.

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Welcome to participants

Thank you for participating in this research study. Your responses will provide valuable insight into the lived experiences of atheists in the higher education workplace. As a reminder, you may refuse to answer any question you are not comfortable with and you are fee to withdraw from this study at any time.

Interview Questions

Family and Religious Background
- Tell me about how your family background.
- What role does religion play in your family?
- How would you describe yourself as a person?

Philosophy and Experiences Related to Atheism
- How long have you been an atheist? How and why did you became an atheist?
- What does being an atheist mean to you?
- Which of your friends and family know you're an atheist?
- Are any of your friends or family atheists as well?
- How do you approach telling people or not telling people about your atheism?
- What do you believe are some common misperceptions about atheists? Do these influence your willingness to share this about yourself?

Professional Background
- Tell me about your work history and current position.
- Describe your work environment.

Religion and Atheism in the Workplace
- What role does religion play at your institution? How does it come up in your day-to-day work?
- How do you feel when is religion discussed in the workplace?
- Who in your workplace knows that you're an atheist? How do they know?
- What do you think is the perception of atheists at your institution?
- How does your department/university approach religious holidays?
- Can you recall a time when you've had either a positive or negative experience at work because of your atheism?
- Where have you lived before? What was your experience as an atheist there?
- Will your atheism be a factor when considering future positions?
- Is there anything that I have not asked that you would like to share with me regarding your experiences as an atheist who works in higher education?

Closing

Thank you for your participation. I have enjoyed talking with you. I may reach out to you if I need clarification on any of your statement. If there is anything that you think of that you would like to add, please feel free to contact me.

Appendix D

Informed Consent

Study Title   The Atheist Identity in the Higher Education Workplace

Study Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the lived experiences of professional staff in higher education who identify as atheists. Atheists are a marginalized minority group in the United States, and while institutions of higher education tend to be more accepting of diversity, atheists may feel that they cannot reveal this aspect of their identity to supervisors, co-workers, faculty, or students. I believe this study will address a gap in the research about atheists as well as diversity in higher education.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

In order to be eligible for this study, you must be over the age of 18, be classified as professional staff at an institution of higher education, and identify as an atheist. For this purpose of this study, an atheist is defined as an individual who denies the existence of God or gods.

Faculty, support staff, students, or individuals who do not work at an institution of higher education, those under the age of 18, and those who do believe in God or gods will be excluded from this study.

Participation Procedures and Duration

The procedure for this study includes one to three interviews during which you will be asked to answer questions regarding your experience as an atheist. The location of the interviews will take place either in person, at a location convenient to you, or by Skype or other web-based conference platform. Each interview will require 60-90 minutes of your time. You may be asked to share your thoughts about the emerging findings to make sure that they represent your experience and perspectives appropriately.

Audio or Video Tapes (if applicable)

For purposes of accuracy, with your permission, the interviews will be audio recorded using a digital recorder. Any names used on the audio recording will be changed to pseudonyms when the recordings are transcribed. The recordings will be transferred to a password protected USB flash drive then stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office for five years and will then be erased.

Data Confidentiality or Anonymity

All data will be maintained as confidential and no identifying information such as names will appear in any publication or presentation of the data. Your actual names will be changed to pseudonyms during transcription and in the written report. Institution and location names will

also be changed, for example Midwestern four-year college; Midwestern state, in the written report.

Storage of Data

Audio files will be transferred to a password protected USB flash drive then deleted from the recorder. Informed consent forms will be scanned and stored on a password protected USB flash drive which will be locked in a cabinet in the researcher's work office along with hard copies of data and other research documents. Hard copy data will be shredded after five years. The data will also be entered into a software program and stored on the researcher's password-protected computer for five years and then deleted. Only members of the research team will have access to the data.

Risks or Discomforts

There are no perceived risks from participating in this study. You may choose not to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable.

Benefits

There are no perceived benefits for participating in this study.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw your permission at any time for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing this form and at any time during the study.

IRB Contact Information

For questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Director, Office of Research Integrity, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5070 or at irb@bsu.edu.

Study Title   The Atheist Identity in the Higher Education Workplace

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

Consent

I, _____, agree to participate in this research project entitled, *The Atheist Identity in the Higher Education Workplace*. I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

To the best of my knowledge, I meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation (described on the previous page) in this study.

_____   _____

Participant's Signature   Date

Researcher Contact Information

Principal Investigator: Faculty Supervisor:

Carrie Reisner, Graduate Student   Dr. Thalia Mulvihill
Educational Studies   Educational Studies
Ball State University   Ball State University
Muncie, IN 47306   Muncie, IN 47306
Telephone: (765) 994-1084   Telephone: (765) 285-5463
Email: careisner@bsu.edu   Email: tmulvihi@bsu.edu

Appendix E

List of All Codes and Notes

"Angry" atheist phase
"Angry" atheists/feminists
"Got burned" when debating/discussing religion in the workplace
"Holiday" party -Christian privilege
"Long line of atheists"
"Othered" at young age
"Virtual identity" different from real identity - presents himself differently
"We-be's" create their own culture in an institution
30s before fully atheist
Able to represent atheism at work
Advisor for SSA
Advisors - some students avoid classes that challenge beliefs
Alignment of religious minorities on campus - non-Christians
All bosses have been conservative but to different degrees
Animal lover
Association with New Atheism
Assume people are liberal
Assumed Christianity
Assumes atheists have liberal political views
Assumes everyone's atheist
Atheism as an argumentative stance
Atheism important in identity
Atheism perceived worse than socialism
Atheism worse than being gay
Atheist coworkers
Atheist educator
Atheist faculty protected in workplace; staff aren't
Atheist podcast
Atheist politicians aren't trusted
Atheist sister
Atheist stigma
Atheists lack morals
Atheists more aware of Christian privilege
Atheists possessed by the devil
Atheists whisper in the halls to each other
Attends church at home

Avoid talking about religion and politics
Bad experience with Christian colleagues who claimed he created a hostile environment
Bad things would happen in the news - questioned God
Be a good person
Became curious about other religions
Becoming more outspoken on social media
Belief in community
Belonged to atheist organization
Boss asked about everyone's religion on first day - he shut down conversation
Boss Catholic but accepting of atheists in office
Boyfriend is closeted gay
Break stereotypes
Came out to boss
Came out twice - gay/atheist
Campus doesn't address religious diversity
Campus is conservative due to a critical mass of conservative individuals
Campus promotes religious diversity but not non-belief
Campus tries to be accepting of all religions
Can't "believe" in science but can believe in progressive values, intrinsic value of humans
Career reflects values
Careful around religious coworkers
Careful around highly-Christian staff
Careful in interactions with religious students
Cares about people
Casual mentions of church related activities at work
Cautious of talking about religion or atheism around some colleagues
Cautious on FB because of side business
Change in policy due to religious beliefs signaled that her safety could be in jeopardy
Change in time over Christmas décor
Chose higher education because of liberal values
Chose institution based on values
Christian minority
Christian privilege in Nursing department
Christianity may be waning on campus
Christmas décor
Christmas décor on campus
Church as social activity
Church as the norm
Church flyers on department bulletin boards - she takes down
Churchgoing brother

Claims atheism
Class distinction between faculty/staff and clerical
Clerical staff more "provincial"
Clerical staff tend to be local and more religious
Closeted at work at first
Closeted in current position
Closeted in former workplace
Closeted to family
Closeted to some family
Colleague used atheism against him
Colleagues discuss church activities
Colleague's FB post inspired him to be out as atheist on social media
Colleagues would be sad if they knew about atheist identity
College = science and culture
College experiences
College experiences increased questions
Comes from academic family
Comfort in debating religion
Comfort in identity
Comments by boss
Community is more religious than campus
Community oriented
Confident of atheism at young age
Confirmed in the Army
Conflict with religious staff when out as a manager
Conscious of how atheists make religious staff members feel
Conservative support staff
Contextuality of religion by time and place
Control own actions
Couldn't live up to religious dogma
Coworkers open about Christianity
Creative
Current political climate makes him fearful of potential future if out as an atheist
Dating a Christian
DC - Black colleagues not seeing Christian privilege in the workplace
DC very diverse and secular
Debates morals online
Democrat
Democrat/liberal
Department not religious

Departments split between religious and non-religious
Depth of knowledge about Christianity
Detects others beliefs - determines comfort
Didn't apply to perfect job because if religious affiliation of institution
Differences between two institutions
Differences in age/generations
Differences in Christian faiths
Direct reports are very religious
Disfellowshipped
Do good on earth
Does not know immediate colleagues religion
Does not want to offend
Doesn't share atheist identity with students
Dogma not pushed by family
Don't rock the boat
Don't talk about personal life at work
Don't talk about religion at work
Don't talk politics or religion
Duty in higher education to welcome people of different identities
Early skeptic
Educate others about atheism
Evangelical but not as dogmatic
Experiences with atheism vary by context
Explored other beliefs
Exposure to different people/courses
Extremism of any kind not welcome
Faculty vs. support staff religiosity
Family accepting but fears safety for being gay
Family is important
Fear of alienating people
Fear of repercussions
Feared repercussions from panel discussion
Feminist
Feminist - similar connotations
Find common ground in women's issues
Firm belief in nature/science
First amendment advocate
First amendment debater
Fit/comfort at current institution
Free from dogma

Free thinker
Free thinker as stigma management
Friends are non-religious
Friends through atheism
Gay church leaders
Gays in religious institutions
Gives off conservative vibe
Giving back
Goodness of humans
Goodness of people
Grandmother's influence
Gravitates toward liberal communities/people
Greatness of human kind
Grew up Catholic
Grew up Jehovah's Witness
Grew up mostly secular with some religious activity
Grew up poor
Grew up super religious
Grew up urban
High ability student
Highly religious/Christian staff are in the minority - may hide it from others
Hobbies attract non-believers
Holiday party
Humanist
Identified differences in Christian faiths
Impact on relationships with students
In NY worked in religiously diverse but separate community
Incident on Facebook with boss
Incident with Christian colleague
Indiana students more religious than out of state
Influence of supervisor
Institution does not prioritize religious diversity
Interactions with people with different degrees of faith
Involved in Free Thinkers group
Involved in SSA
Iowa first experience with Christian fundamentalists
Jewish supervisor
Joins family for breakfast now
Keeps side profession quiet for same reasons as atheism
Knowledgeable of all religions

Knowledge of the Bible
Lack of diversity in student population
Large Catholic family
Late career bloomer
LGBT supporter
LGBT ties - many nonbelievers
Liberal
Liberal bubble
Liberal colleagues
Liberal culture of campus
Liberal department - other atheists
Liberal office - will talk politics
Liberal people
Liberal socialist
Liberal university
Liberal; LGBT friendly
Long journey toward atheism
Marginalization of Christians in academia
Marginalization of Conservatives in higher education
May say "We don't go to church" in some situations
Meaning of atheism
Member of Freethinker group
Mental illness in family
Mid-20s fully converted to atheism
Mid-teens-28
Minimal Christmas celebration
Misrepresents religious identity as Catholic
Mix of belief and atheists in department
Mix of conservative and liberal friends - personal vs. professional
Mom hid atheism when in law school to pass as more conservative
Morals/values
More closeted early in career
More concerned about having atheist boyfriend
Most people avoid confrontation
Multifaith initiatives on campus
Multiple identities
Music connection to church
Natural world
Nature of large research institution
Nature of large university

Nature of profession is more liberal
Need to be welcoming to all on campus
Never believed in God
Never bought into it
New boss and many staff are very conservative and Christian
No Christian Colleges
No Christian institutions
No Christmas event
No group for atheist/humanist/freethinkers in area
No one asks about church
No religious diversity addressed on campus
No religious talk at work
No religious upbringing
Non-practicing Catholic family
Normalize atheism
Not afraid to use atheist
Not all atheists are the same
Not explicitly out to parents
Not knowledgeable about Bible
Not knowledgeable about Christianity
Nursing more religious
Openly atheist in college
Other forms of privilege on campus
Other labels don't offend the religious
Other religious minorities sympathize with atheists in workplace
Out at work and socially
Out atheist
Out atheist as child
Out but not overly outward
Outsider
Outward expression of non-belief
Parents insisted on church until graduated high school
Participated but didn't believe
Participated in panel as atheist
People are probably more religious than she things
People can't understand non-belief
People have responded positively to atheist identity
People have unfriended on FB - repercussions for being vocal about atheism/liberal views
Perceptions of atheists
Personal perceptions of atheists

Personal views don't come up with students
Physics department condoned Christian proselytization by professor - Christian Privilege
Political views as an indicator
Politically active
Politics as sign of religion
Posts about atheism on Facebook
Prayer at daughter's school
Prayer language by co-worker
Presence of Christian privilege
Presence of Christian Privilege in workplace
Presented on atheism - let other atheists empower her to the point that she may have offended Christians in the session
Presents a product of himself rather than real self
Presents more conservatively in order to have a social impact
Process of outing self at SSA events
Progressive
Progressive department
Public health more conservative
Questioned existence of God
Questioned superiority of Christianity
Raised Catholic
Raised to question
Raising daughter atheist
Raising kids to be questioners
Rather not work for a conservative
Recognition of minorities on campus - vegetarians
Recovering academic
Rejected dogma then God
Rejection of all beliefs
Religion and homosexuality
Religion as a way to identify self to others
Religion comes up with dealing with students sometimes
Religion doesn't come up at work
Religion doesn't come up often
Religion in hiring decisions
Religion not important at institution
Religion not part of work
Religious culture of the community
Religious diversity addressed on campus by Muslim director
Role as a supervisor

Role of campus leadership in religion
Role of supervisor
Says "My family is Catholic"
Scientific method
Second instance of department hiring professor with outward Christian beliefs
Secular Christmas
Secular Christmas on campus
Secular humanism
Secular humanist
Secular humanist - do good
Secular Student Alliance on campus
Sees colleagues at progressive church
Sense of religious colleagues
Sexism in religion
Siblings don't believe
Siblings mix of atheists and believers
Siblings mix of non-believers and believers
Signals of liberal identity through social media but not atheism or socialism
Skeptic father
Skeptical of New Age
Slow process toward atheism
Small symbols of values - liberal vs. conservative
Social aspect of church
Social group atheist or other non-Christian
Socioeconomic mix in church
Some cross necklaces
Some departments have to deal with student beliefs
Some departments more religious than others
Some departments more religious than others - public health
Some family belonged to UU church - possible mask of atheism
Some may think he's Catholic
Some religious staff in department but they do not talk about it
Some students quickly dismiss group
Spirituality as an atheist
Spirituality in nature
SSA events
SSA involvement
Staff wanted to use facilities for religious purposes
Started freethought society - connects with atheists in town
Started questioning and pullilng away in 20s

Stepbrother disfellowshipped
Stigma management - indirection, label substitution, passing
Stigma management - label substitution
Stigma of atheists
Stopped believing in high school
Stopped going after got out of service
Stopped going after high school
Strange interaction with coworker
Strong ethical and political beliefs
Student interest in group
Students interested in atheism
Students more conservative than staff
Subtle discrimination
Supervisor does not discuss religion
Supervisors religious role
Supervisor's role in setting tone
Support by non-Christian supervisor
Support staff - symbols of Christianity
Support staff more conservative
Symbols of Christianity on desks, in offices
Symbols of faith as an indicator
Take credit for our own abilities
Teaches a class with religious historical context but leaves her beliefs out - frustrated that physics department does not do the same
Texas - Religious mass emails - Christian privilege
That's what good families do
The norm
Town vs. gown
Tries to be inclusive of all beliefs but others don't - Christian Privilege
Unable to manage those colleagues effectively due to religious differences
Uncomfortable when staff member invited her to "cult" event
University open to religious diversity
Use of atheist as label
Use of labels
Use of prayer language
Use politics and other topics to feel out beliefs
Used non-theist label
Uses atheist label
Uses atheist label if necessary
Uses creative outlets for atheism promotion

Uses privilege to normalize
Using privilege to help others
Varies by department
Very closeted in workplace
Very religious upbringing
Vice Chancellor is Jewish
Visibility of religious minorities
Wanted a clean slate
Wanted fresh start at current institution - went into closet
Was not indoctrinated
Was out as atheist in previous institution
Weak diversity programming on campus
Went through the motions
Went to church with wife and kids but all have fallen away
Wife sees him as spiritual because he tries to do good
Would choose less religious area in future
Would like to be full time atheist activist
Would not work at religious institution
Wouldn't want conservative boss
Wrote letter to the editor - feared repercussions

Appendix F

IRB Exempt Letter

B A L L S T A T E
U N I V E R S I T Y

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
2000 University Avenue
Muncie, IN 47306-0155
Phone: 765-285-5070

DATE: January 16, 2018

TO: Carrie Reisner, MS

FROM: Ball State University IRB

RE: IRB protocol # 1163646-1
TITLE: The Atheist Identity in the Higher Education Workplace
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED
DECISION DATE: January 16, 2018
REVIEW TYPE: **EXEMPT**

The Institutional Review Board reviewed your protocol on January 16, 2018 and has determined the procedures you have proposed are appropriate for exemption under the federal regulations. As such, there will be no further review of your protocol, and you are cleared to proceed with the procedures outlined in your protocol. As an exempt study, there is no requirement for continuing review. Your protocol will remain on file with the IRB as a matter of record.

Exempt Categories:

	Category 1: Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educations practices, such as (i) research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.
X	**Category 2:** Research involving the use of educational test (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior
	Category 3: Research involving the use of educational test (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior that is not exempt under category 2, if: (i) the human subjects are elected or appointed officials or candidates for public office; or (ii) Federal statute(s) require(s) without exception that the confidentiality of the personally identifiable information will be maintained throughout the research and thereafter.
	Category 4: Research involving the collection of study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

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	Category 5: Research and demonstration projects which are conducted by or subject to the approval of Department or agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate or otherwise examine: (i) public benefit or service programs; (ii) procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs; (iii) possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under these programs.
	Category 6: Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed which contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Editorial Notes:

1. EXEMPT

While your project does not require continuing review, it is the responsibility of the P.I. (and, if applicable, faculty supervisor) to inform the IRB if the procedures presented in this protocol are to be modified or if problems related to human research participants arise in connection with this project. **Any procedural modifications must be evaluated by the IRB before being implemented, as some modifications may change the review status of this project.** Please contact (ORI Staff) if you are unsure whether your proposed modification requires review or have any questions. Proposed modifications should be addressed in writing and submitted electronically to the IRB (http://www.bsu.edu/irb) for review. Please reference the above IRB protocol number in any communication to the IRB regarding this project.

Reminder: Even though your study is exempt from the relevant federal regulations of the Common Rule (45 CFR 46, subpart A), you and your research team are not exempt from ethical research practices and should therefore employ all protections for your participants and their data which are appropriate to your project.

D. Clark Dickin, PhD/Chair
Institutional Review Board

Christopher Mangelli, JD, MS, MEd, CIP/
Director
Office of Research Integrity

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