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Adopting a Stigmatized Label: Social Determinants of Identifying as an Atheist beyond Disbelief

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Identifying as Atheist

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An individual's identity may not appear to correspond to his or her beliefs and behaviors. Such incongruence may be particularly likely when an identity is stigmatized. We examine this dynamic in the context of atheists. Being an atheist has often been equated with stating a disbelief in God, but this ignores the distinct phenomenon of identifying as an atheist. This study asks what influences the likelihood that an individual will identify as an atheist beyond saying that he or she does not believe in God. Drawing upon research examining the social dynamics of stigma and identity, we hypothesize that having close friends who are atheists will support an individual's own adoption of the atheist label. On the other hand, we hypothesize that the presence of other stigmatized or at least competing identities, beliefs, and behaviors will serve as a barrier to an individual's adoption of the atheist label. These expectations are largely supported in an analysis of unique survey data offering separate measures of atheist self-identification and belief in God. This study provides a framework for future research to examine these dynamics in the context of other identities, particularly those that are stigmatized.

At any point in an individual's life, he or she will claim a number of identities: parent, physician, Christian, Democrat, and so on. It may seem reasonable to expect that these identities will be congruent with the individual's beliefs and behaviors. That is, we often assume that the identities a person claims extend from or "fit" his or her attitudes and actions. This assumed congruence, however, is frequently not supported (Chaves 2010; DiMaggio 1997; Vaisey 2009).

Individuals often hold identities that appear opposed to their behaviors or beliefs or, to phrase this alternatively, individuals may not identify in ways that would seem natural given their beliefs and behaviors. For example, an individual may engage in behaviors that would seem to make them likely to identify as liberal, such as voting Democrat, but he or she still may not identify as such (Schiffer 2000). Or, an individual might express attitudes that would seem to

make them likely to identify as "a feminist," but he or she may still not identify as such (McCabe 2005).

Identities that are stigmatized and voluntary to adopt may be especially likely to generate incongruence, as individuals may opt not to adopt a stigmatized identity because of the social or psychological costs associated with such identification. The costs of adopting a stigmatized identity are not equal for every individual, however. The costs will vary in part as a function of an individual's other beliefs and behaviors. Even if one belief or behavior would seem to lead to a particular identity, the individual may avoid adopting the identity if doing so would create dissonance with another of the individual's beliefs or behaviors.

The costs of adopting a stigmatized identity are also a function of the other identities an individual holds—both ascribed and achieved. If another identity held by the individual would produce high costs for adopting the stigmatized identity, he or she may resist such adoption. In particular, when someone already holds one or more subordinate, undervalued, or stigmatized identities, it may be more costly for them to adopt a stigmatized identity even if it is a natural extension of their beliefs (Miller 2013).

Atheism is a stigmatized identity in many nations, including the United States (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Heiner 1992; Smith 2011). Atheists face prejudice, discrimination, and ostracism as a result of their identification (Cragun et al. 2012; Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Heiner 1992). Research on atheists, though, tends to treat disbelief in God as equivalent to identifying as an atheist (Baker and Smith 2009a; Cragun et al. 2012; Hunter 2010; Sherkat 2008). Similarly, studies claiming to identify correlates of atheism typically use survey questions asking the respondent about their theological beliefs in God (Sherkat 2008) or identification as an atheist without controlling for disbelief in God (Hunter 2010).

But *disbelief* in God and *identifying* as an atheist are not same thing. Atheism is a chosen identity that is connected to a variety of negative sentiments, including "immorality," "criminality," and "anarchy" (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Heiner 1992). Given the negative implications of identifying as an atheist, someone may not believe in God and still choose to not identify as an atheist. In fact, Cragun et al. (2012) showed that the percentage of people identifying as atheist was roughly half the percentage of those stating that there is no God.

Since past research has used belief and identity interchangeably, we do not know what factors influence adopting the atheist label as either supports or barriers. We argue that individuals will be less likely to identify as an atheist regardless of their disbelief in God if they hold other beliefs or engage in other behaviors that would make such identification particularly costly. Similarly, we argue that people who hold competing identities, particularly other subordinate or stigmatized identities, will be less likely to adopt an atheist identity regardless of their disbelief in God. In addition to these barriers to atheist identification, we argue that some individuals may be more likely to identify as an atheist because their social ties to other atheists serve as supports to identification.

To assess these arguments, we utilize data from a survey that included "atheist" as an explicit response to an initial religious identity question along with a

separate belief in God question that did not conflate saying "I do not believe in God" with identifying as an atheist. This allows us to examine identification as an atheist as an outcome distinct from disbelief in God. By addressing these issues this study will contribute to larger questions about the congruence between religious identity and belief and the processes underlying individuals' adoption of stigmatized identities.

Belief and Identity Congruence

Identity "define[s] and describe[s] an individuals' sense of self, group affiliations, structural positions, and ascribed and achieved statuses" (Peek 2005, 216–18). Identities are social; they are constructed through social interactions, which attach social roles to them (Stryker and Burke 2000). Individuals have multiple identities, and these identities reflect "distinct networks of relationships in which they occupy positions and play roles" (Stryker and Burke 2000, 286). Identity is not merely a matter of "being," as a stable, definitive state, but of "becoming" (Dillon 1999). Identities are dynamic and fluid, shaped by interactions and environments. Individuals can adopt new identities and discard old ones or come to view some identities as more or less salient (Vryan, Alder, and Alder 2003). One's beliefs and attitudes certainly matter in this process, as conflicting identities may create dissonance (Festinger 1957).

And yet, beliefs, attitudes, identities, and behaviors are not always consistent with each other (Chaves 2010; DiMaggio 1997; Vaisey 2009). Individuals may hold beliefs that are inconsistent with their identities, and vice versa. Several studies have shown a tension between holding conservative Christian beliefs regarding sexuality (e.g., that homosexuality is a sin) and identifying as gay or lesbian (Anderton, Pender, and Asner-Self 2011; Mahaffy 1996; Thumma 1991). While individuals may alter their beliefs to match their identities, others live with the dissonance or find a way to reconcile their identities with their beliefs (Mahaffy 1996). For example, in a study on same-sex-attracted Mormons, Beckstead and Morrow (2004) found that these individuals generally refused to identify as lesbian, gay, or homosexual, and instead identified as heterosexuals with "a homosexual problem" or "same-sex attractions" (657).

Even when an identity is consistent with one's beliefs, to the extent that it is an achieved status, an individual may choose not to adopt it. This could be because the individual has not thought of it or has not been in social situations that would suggest the adoption of such an identity. But it could also be because the identity is stigmatized.

Adopting Stigmatized Identities

Stigmatized identities are devalued and denigrated by society. Stigmatized identities can be discrediting—visible and not concealable—or discreditable—concealable unless the person identifies as such (Goffman 1963). Stigmatized identities that are discrediting and public discreditable identities typically result in psychological and social costs, such as prejudice, discrimination, and ostracism. Hidden

discreditable identities also entail costs, but these are typically psychological (Smart and Wegner 1999), emotional (Barreto, Ellemers, and Banal 2006), and interpersonal (Newheiser and Barreto 2014). Hiding one's stigmatized identity can lead to psychological and emotional stress and can also make individuals feel like they do not belong (Newheiser and Barreto 2014). Because of this, someone may choose not to adopt a stigmatized identity even when it is an expression of their beliefs. For example, many US women do not identify as feminist even though they hold feminist attitudes (McCabe 2005). McCabe (2005, 481) describes how the identity of "feminist" has been connected to a variety of negative labels, including "feminazi" and "man hating," and has also been associated with being "radical" or "militant." Similarly, Schiffer (2000) argues that the reason some Democrats still claim to be ideologically conservative is because the term "liberal" has become stigmatized, making some Democrats less likely to identify as such.

Yet stigmatized identities do not affect everyone in the same way. Stigmatized identities may be more costly for individuals who already hold other stigmatized or subordinate identities (Hancock 2007). The combination or interaction of these identities may increase the prejudice and discrimination the individual already faces (Almquist 1975; Settles 2006). Additionally, as identities and stigma are socially constructed, the costliness of an identity may vary in different communities. While the identity "feminist" may popularly be stigmatized, within certain circles, such as academia, among Democrats, and in urban areas, the identification would likely be less costly, as there are a higher number of people identifying as feminist in those communities (McCabe 2005). Thus, the likelihood of adopting a stigmatized identity, regardless of beliefs/attitudes, will be affected by the extent to which an individual holds other stigmatized or subordinate identities and by the perception of the social circles in which one interacts. We investigate this in the context of an atheist identity.

Atheist is a stigmatized identity in the United States (Smith 2011). The culture of the United States is in many ways infused with a religious ethos and an underlying belief in God (Roof 1999). Popularly, atheists are viewed as moral outsiders and are associated with immorality, anarchy, illegality, elitism, and materialism (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Heiner 1992). In this way, "Americans construct the atheist as the symbolic representation of one who rejects the basis for moral solidarity and cultural membership in American society altogether" (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006, 230). In the United States, atheists are more rejected than other stigmatized groups, including racial and ethnic minorities, recent immigrants, homosexuals, and Muslims (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). In addition to experiencing prejudice (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Heiner 1992), atheists also report experiencing discrimination (Cragun et al. 2012).

Atheists: Disbelief versus Identity

The sharp rise in the percentage of US adults stating that they have no religion has understandably garnered increasing interest among social scientists (Baker

and Smith 2009a, 2009b; Hunter 2010; Sherkat 2008; Smith 2011). Studies that have subcategorized the approximately 22 percent of US adults identifying as a "none" have concluded that many of the nones are individuals who are "religiously nonbelieving or nonbelonging" or "unchurched believers." In short, it would be a mistake to say that 22 percent of US adults unequivocally reject religion or religious belief.

Indeed, these subcategorizations tend to argue that atheists represent a tiny slice of the larger unaffiliated group. One problem in estimating the percentage of atheists, however, rests in how being an atheist is conceptualized and, in turn, operationalized. Conceptually, atheism has been separated into negative atheism—not believing in a God or Gods—and positive atheism—denying the existence of a God or Gods (Bullivant 2013).[1] The latter requires the former, but not the reverse. Both definitions use theology (i.e., disbelief or belief that there is no God) to define atheism. Baker and Smith (2009a) also address the issue of defining atheism and argue that being an atheist is distinct from saying that one does not identify with a religion. As they write (720, emphasis added), "The need for subcategories [of nones] arises out of the fact that claiming no religion is an *identity question* that essentially determines whether an individual claims to be part of an established religious group. Atheism and agnosticism, on the other hand, are a *matter of belief*."[2] In their analysis, the authors utilize the Baylor Religion Survey (BRS). In accordance with Baker and Smith's "matter of belief" argument, the BRS did not offer "atheist" as a response to its religious identity question but did offer the response of "I am an atheist" to its belief in God question. Notably, this belief in God question did not offer an "I do not believe in God" response distinct from this atheist response. The study presented here is in part motivated by the question of whether Baker and Smith's "atheist as belief and not identity" proposition is as tidy as it may appear. To put it concretely, we ask whether saying "I am an atheist" is actually equivalent to saying "I do not believe in God."

Research has found evidence that atheist identification often does not equate with disbelief in God. Lee (2013, 591) states that while "the number of people for whom a personal belief in God is not a forceful feature of daily life is quite large, this contrasts with the small number of people who self-identify as 'atheist.'" She goes on to describe qualitative research showing that respondents who were atheist by belief were often hesitant to call themselves atheist because it might connote that they are "out for themselves," "aggressive," or that they are more engaged with atheism than they really are.

Quantitative research has often found a gap between the population who do not believe in God and the population who identify as atheist. Cragun et al. (2012) find that 9.6 percent of their sample stated that "there is no such thing" as God when asked about their beliefs, yet only 4.1 percent of their sample identified as atheist. Similarly, Kosmin et al. (2009) find that 5 percent of nones identify as atheist, whereas 7 percent of nones are atheist if classified by their lack of belief in God. These data suggest that disbelief in God is not equivalent to identifying as atheist. As Pasquale and Kosmin (2013, 458) note, "as an active self-

description, 'atheism' is more than the mere absence or rejection of theistic belief. It is an ideological and identity construct."

Research on the correlates of atheism generally conflates lack of belief in God with atheist identification. Baker and Smith (2009a, 2015) and Sherkat (2008) both use measures of belief or certainty in God to measure atheism. These studies found that atheists are less likely than agnostics to affiliate with a specific religion (Baker and Smith 2009a; Sherkat 2008). Sherkat (2008) finds that atheists attend church services more than agnostics and those believing in an undefined higher power, and it follows that those with certain belief in God attend church more than those with some doubt in God's existence. Older individuals, women, African Americans and other nonwhites, and married or widowed individuals are more likely to have certain belief in God than men and whites. Those with lifelong residence in the South or other rural areas also have higher belief in God than those in the North and urban areas. Having no religious affiliation reduced the likelihood of having more certain beliefs in the existence of God or a higher power (Sherkat 2008). Notably, Hunter (2010) investigates correlates of atheist identification, rather than belief. Similar to Sherkat (2008), she finds that females are less likely to identify as atheist than males and whites are more likely to identify as atheist compared to African Americans and Latinos/Hispanics. Age is negatively associated with atheist identification, as is having one child compared to having no children. However, Hunter (2010) does not control for belief, and thus the results may be due to atheist identification being correlated with disbelief in God.

Because past research has tended to equate atheist identification with disbelief in God, we do not know what factors affect identifying as an atheist, net of disbelief. Drawing on the stigma and identity literature presented above, we hypothesize these factors based on atheism as a stigmatized identity.

Expectations: Supports and Barriers to Atheist Identification

Because 'atheist' is a stigmatized identity, adopting it, whether it is kept hidden or not, comes with the potential to experience psychological, social, emotional, and interpersonal costs (Barreto, Ellemers, and Banal 2006; Newheiser and Barreto 2014; Smart and Wegner 1999). The extent of these costs will vary by person and social context. Some individuals have factors that might support their identification as an atheist by lowering the costs of adopting the identity, while others face barriers to such identification that increase the costs of adopting the identity.

Supports to Identification

Religious beliefs and worldviews are experienced in social contexts that provide individuals with a basis for evaluating their perceived veracity (Bankston 2002; Sherkat 1997). Individuals' confidence and certainty in their religious beliefs and worldviews is influenced by the confidence of their positive reference groups (Bankston 2002; Corcoran 2013; Iannaccone 1995; Kelley 1972; Sherkat 1997;

Stark and Finke 2000). While much of this research focuses on religious beliefs, rather than disbelief, Smith (2011) identified how making friends with atheists or those questioning God was an important part of developing an atheist identity. Similarly, Baker and Smith (2009b) found that individuals with more non-religious friends are more likely to not be religiously affiliated. Because an atheist identity is not stigmatized among atheists, having close atheist friends should support adopting an atheist identity, net of disbelief in God, by lowering the costs of identification.

> Hypothesis 1: Having close friends who are atheist will be positively associated with an individual identifying as an atheist, net of disbelief in God.

Barriers to Identification

There are also identities and contexts that should serve as barriers to atheist identification. Adopting an atheist identity is likely more costly for individuals who already have devalued or stigmatized identities (Hancock 2007). As Miller (2013) notes, "there is a social cost to being an atheist that is more easily borne by those with privilege than by those who are already minorities" (215). Women and racial minorities have subordinate and devalued identities in society, which makes the costs of adopting an atheist identity greater than for white men (Miller 2013). Atheism is also connected to perceptions of masculinity, and thus women who adopt an atheist identity may experience more costs for violating gender norms (Schnabel et al. 2016). Religion can also contribute to maintaining valued identities, while contributing a variety of social services (Miller 2013). These characteristics of religion may be particularly beneficial for those with devalued or stigmatized identities. Additionally, in black communities, for example, churches are often tied to perceptions of racial identity and civil rights, such that black atheists may be viewed as "race traitors" (Hutchinson 2011, 20; Miller 2013). Given this, we expect that controlling for disbelief in God, women and racial minorities will be less likely to identify as atheist.

> Hypothesis 2: Being a woman will be negatively associated with an individual identifying as an atheist, net of disbelief in God.

> Hypothesis 3: Being a racial minority will be negatively associated with an individual identifying as an atheist, net of disbelief in God.

Religiosity and political conservatism are often intertwined (Malka et al. 2012), and political conservatism tends to be associated with less tolerance toward individuals or groups seen as nonconformist, such as atheists (Bobo and Licari 1989; Ellison and Musick 1993). Identifying as a political conservative, then, could represent a barrier to identifying as an atheist even if an individual's religious beliefs would seem to indicate that such identification would be natural. That is, there may be a perception that a "good" political conservative would not identify as an atheist even if he or she does not believe in God.

Hypothesis 4: Political conservatism will be negatively associated with an individual identifying as an atheist, net of disbelief in God.

Religious service attendance has also been found to be negatively associated with tolerance of stigmatized or unpopular groups (Moore and Ovadia 2006; Smidt and Penning 1982). Ellison and Musick (1993) suggest that this is because religious services may expose individuals to in-group norms, which stress the moral superiority of the group. Because religious groups are typically tied, to varying degrees, to some belief in a God or Gods, an atheist identity would likely carry higher social and/or psychological costs for frequent service attenders, net of their belief in God.

Hypothesis 5: Religious service attendance will be negatively associated with an individual identifying as an atheist, net of disbelief in God.

Certain contexts likely also increase the costs of identifying as an atheist. The South is dominated by evangelical Protestantism and religiosity (Silk and Walsh 2008). In many parts of this region, the Southern Baptist church is "an almost de facto religious establishment" (Leonard 2005, 36; Lindsey 2005), which makes it inhospitable to other religious groups and atheists (Libby 2005). Moore and Ovadia (2006) found that people who live in the South are more intolerant than individuals from other regions. It is not surprising, then, that atheists are more likely to report experiencing workplace religious discrimination in the South (Scheitle and Corcoran 2018). We predict that individuals living in the South will be less likely to identify as atheist net of their disbelief in God, due to the increased costs of doing so.

Hypothesis 6: Residing in the South will be negatively associated with an individual identifying as an atheist, net of disbelief in God.

Data and Measurement

The data for this study come from a survey administered to the GfK KnowledgePanel in late 2013 and early 2014. The KnowledgePanel is an online probability panel of over 50,000 US adults. Individuals are recruited into the panel through address-based sampling. Individuals who do not have a computer and/or an internet connection are provided one by the survey firm. Panel members complete surveys for incentive points that can then be converted into cash, gift cards, or merchandise. An overview of the KnowledgePanel's methods and assessments of its representativeness can be found in Dennis (2010). In short, the KnowledgePanel has been found to align closely with population (i.e., Census) benchmarks and has been shown to produce associations between variables that are similar to those found in data collected through phone and in-person modes (e.g., Heeren et al. 2008). Furthermore, internet surveys have been shown to provide advantages over those other data collection methods when it comes to reducing bias from socially desirable responses patterns (Yeager et al. 2011),

which could very well be relevant when it comes to measuring identification as an atheist.

This particular survey was largely focused on measuring individuals' attitudes toward science, religion, and the relationship between the two. Although the current study is not focused on religion and science issues, these data offer several advantages for the purpose of the research questions being considered here. First, the survey included a relatively large number of questions about religious identity, belief, and behavior. Particularly important is that in its primary religious identity question, the survey offered an explicit response of "atheist." This is noteworthy because many surveys do not offer a distinct atheist identity response at all or confound identification as an atheist with belief in God. For instance, the 2007 and 2010 Baylor Religion Surveys (Baylor University 2007, 2010) offer the option of "no religion" in their primary identification question but no "atheist" option. Later, a question asking about belief in God offers the response "I am an atheist." This response follows the response option of "I don't know and there is no way to find out." No other more definitive "I do not believe in God" option is offered. Note how this merges the issue of whether a person says that they do not believe in God and whether they identify as an atheist. That is, it is assumed that identifying as an atheist is equivalent to the response that one does not believe in God. As another example, the 2012 Portraits of American Life Survey included atheist as a response option to its religious identity question, but put next to this response the parenthetical statement that "You believe there is no God." Again, this assumes that everyone who says there is no God would identify as an atheist.

Another important advantage of this survey is that it was administered to a relatively large sample. An invitation to take the survey was extended to 16,746 KnowledgePanel members, with the goal of obtaining 10,000 responses. In the end, 10,241 panelists completed the survey. This provides us a larger number of individuals who identify as an atheist, which in turn provides us more power to assess the factors that are associated with such identification.[3]

Dependent Variable

Identifying as an atheist

The survey asked respondents the following initial question concerning their religious identity: "Religiously, do you consider yourself to be Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, not religious, or something else?" Sixteen responses were offered: (1) Protestant, (2) Catholic, (3) Just a Christian, (4) Jewish, (5) Mormon, (6) Muslim, (7) Eastern Orthodox, (8) Buddhist, (9) Hindu, (10) Sikh, (11) Baha'i, (12) Jain, (13) Not religious, (14) Agnostic, (15) Atheist, and (16) Something else.

For the current study we are most interested in whether an individual selects the atheist response. To this end, we created a dichotomous outcome where 0 equals any response other than atheist and 1 equals identifying explicitly as an atheist. It is worth highlighting that "not religious," "agnostic," and "something else" were offered as explicit responses alongside the atheist response, as these

options could provide an alternative for an individual who might say that he or she does not believe in God but does not want to identify as an atheist.

Independent Variables

Belief in God

Our goal in this study is to examine influences on individuals' identification as an atheist beyond (dis)belief in God. Given this, we must first account for individuals' belief or disbelief in God. The survey asked respondents, "Which one statement comes closest to your personal beliefs about God?" Offered responses were (1) I don't believe in God, (2) I don't know whether there is a God, and I don't believe there is any way to find out, (3) I don't believe in a personal God, but do believe in a Higher Power of some kind, (4) I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others, (5) While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God, and (6) I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it. Because the first response is the one that most clearly represents what we might think of as the "atheist response" (remember that some surveys have actually offered "I am an atheist" in place of this response), we focus on that response.[4] Specifically, we created a dichotomous indicator with (0) All other responses to belief in God and (1) I don't believe in God.

Supports to atheist identification

We include one measure to represent the amount of support an individual has in his or her social network for identifying as an atheist. This measure comes from a question asking, "Think about your five closest friends…how many would you say are…Atheists?" The responses offered were (1) None of them, (2) One or two of them, (3) Three or four of them, and (4) All of them. As stated in Hypothesis 1, we expect that, independent of other factors, the more close friends a person has who identify as atheist, or whom the individual at least perceives to be atheist, the greater the likelihood that he or she will identify as an atheist.

Barriers to atheist identification

Several measures are included to represent factors that might make an individual less likely to identify as an atheist net of stating that he or she does not believe in God. To account for Hypothesis 2's expectation that women will be less likely than men to identify as an atheist, we include a dichotomous indicator representing the sex of the respondent. Males serve as the reference category. Note that this measure was not asked on the survey being utilized here, but instead comes from GfK's background data on panelists acquired through an initial survey upon recruitment into the panel.[5]

Hypothesis 3 offers the expectation that nonwhite individuals will be less likely to identify as an atheist relative to white individuals. To examine this, we include a measure indicating respondents' racial-ethnic identity. The categories are (1) White, non-Hispanic, (2) Black, non-Hispanic, (3) Other, non-Hispanic,

(4) Hispanic, and (5) Multiracial, non-Hispanic. As with the sex measure, this comes from the initial survey that panelists completed when joining the KnowledgePanel.

To assess Hypothesis 4, we include a measure representing the respondent's political ideology. This measure comes from a question asking, "Would you describe your political views as…" (1) Extremely liberal, (2) Liberal, (3) Slightly liberal, (4) Moderate, (5) Slightly conservative, (6) Conservative, or (7) Extremely conservative. Corresponding to Hypothesis 5, we include a measure of the individual's frequency of religious service attendance. Although we would expect that individuals stating unequivocally that they do not believe in God would attend religious services relatively rarely, it is likely that some of these individuals do indeed attend religious services, possibly driven by familial or social ties to a congregation. We expect that participation in a religious congregation, even if infrequent, would lead an individual to be more hesitant to identify as an atheist, as such identification could provide a source of dissonance between his or her identity and behavior. The specific question asked, "How often do you attend religious services?" and offered responses ranging from (1) Never to (9) Several times a week.

Finally, Hypothesis 6 states that we expect that individuals residing in the South will be less likely to identify as an atheist compared to individuals residing in other regions, net of disbelief in God. To assess this, we include a dichotomous indicator coded (0) Resides in any other regions and (1) Resides in South. As with the sex and race-ethnicity measures, this measure comes from GfK's background data.

Controls

To allow us to isolate the hypothesized associations, we include several additional control measures. We include a measure representing respondents' highest educational degree. This is coded (1) Less than high school degree, (2) High school degree, (3) Some college, and (4) Bachelor's degree or higher. The high school degree category serves as the comparison group in the analysis. We also control for respondents' marital and parental status. Marital status is coded as (1) Married, (2) Widowed, (3) Divorced, (4) Separated, (5) Never married, and (6) Living with partner. In the analysis, the married category is used as the reference group. Parental status is taken from a question asking, "How many children have you ever had?" We code this as (0) No children and (1) At least one child. Finally, we include a measure representing respondents' age, which is measured continuously.

Missing Data

As with most surveys, there are missing responses across many of the measures. Listwise deletion would reduce the number of cases by about 15 percent.[6] Rather than reduce our statistical power and/or introduce potential bias in the results, missing data is imputed using multiple chained equations ($m = 10$)

(White, Royston, and Wood 2011). This imputation method allows us to account for missing data on variables taking on specific values.

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all measures. All of the analyses presented in this study utilize weights that adjust for sample structure and non-response patterns based on population benchmarks from the October 2012 Current Population Survey. The use of these weights ensures that the estimates produced from the data match the target population (i.e., the US adult population). As seen in table 1, just over 4 percent of the respondents identified as an atheist. Just below this percentage we see, however, that 5.6 percent of respondents provided the "I don't believe in God" response on the belief in God question. Already this shows that there is not a precise overlap between the belief component of atheism and identifying as an atheist.

We can explore this belief-identity discordance further by looking at figure 1. This figure shows the percentage of respondents identifying as atheist based on whether they provide the "I don't believe in God" response or one of the other responses to the belief in God question. As seen in this figure, only 55.7 percent of respondents stating that they do not believe in God actually identify as an atheist. Only 1 percent of individuals providing some other response to the belief in God question identify as an atheist. We might summarize this figure by saying that an individual's statement that he or she does not believe in God is generally a necessary but by no means sufficient cause of him or her identifying as an atheist.

Figure 2 goes an additional step by examining the percentage of individuals identifying as an atheist among some subgroups of those saying they do not believe in God. The first bar in this figure represents the overall 55.7 percent of individuals identifying as an atheist among those who say they do not believe in God, as was seen in figure 1. The next two bars represent the percentage identifying as an atheist among those saying they do not believe in God based on how many of their close friends are atheists. For the sake of limiting the number of bars in the figure, we only compare the lowest and highest responses on the atheist friends question. We see a large gap between these two responses. Specifically, 83.5 percent of individuals who do not believe in God identify as an atheist if they report that all of their close friends are atheists. This compares to 25.2 percent of individuals who do not believe in God but who say they have no close friends who are an atheist. This provides initial support for Hypothesis 1.

We also see evidence of at least some difference between men and women in figure 2. Just under 60 percent of men who say they do not believe in God identify as an atheist compared to 49 percent of women who say they do not believe in God. This provides some initial support for Hypothesis 2.

Figure 2 also shows some partial support for Hypothesis 3, which stated that nonwhite individuals would be less likely to identify as an atheist net of disbelief in God. As seen in this figure, 59.1 percent of white individuals who do not believe in God identify as an atheist. This percentage is much lower among black

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	% or Mean	Std. error	Min.	Max.
Identifies as atheist				
Not atheist	95.92%	–	–	–
Atheist	4.08%	–	–	–
Belief in God		–	–	–
All other responses	94.36%	–	–	–
I don't believe in God	5.64%	–	–	–
Support for atheist identity		–	–	–
Close friends who are atheist	1.34	.008	1	4
Barriers to atheist identity				
Religious service attendance	4.16	.036	1	9
Political conservatism	4.12	.020	1	7
Sex				
Male	47.91%			
Female	52.09%	–	–	–
Race				
White, non-Hispanic	67.18%	–	–	–
Black, non-Hispanic	11.23%	–	–	–
Other, non-Hispanic	6.06%	–	–	–
Hispanic	14.22%	–	–	–
Multiple races, non-Hispanic	1.30%	–	–	–
Region of residence				
Non-South	63.06%	–	–	–
South	36.93%	–	–	–
Controls				
Education				
Less than high school degree	12.74%	–	–	–
High school degree	29.11%	–	–	–
Some college	28.94%	–	–	–
Bachelor's degree or higher	29.21%	–	–	–
Age	47.11	.226	18	93
Parental status				
Not a parent	34.85%			
Parent	65.15%	–	–	–
Marital status				
Not married	46.77%	–	–	–
Married	53.23%	–	–	–

Source: Religious Understandings of Science Survey, 2013; *N* = 10,241.

Figure 1. Percentage identifying as an atheist by belief in God
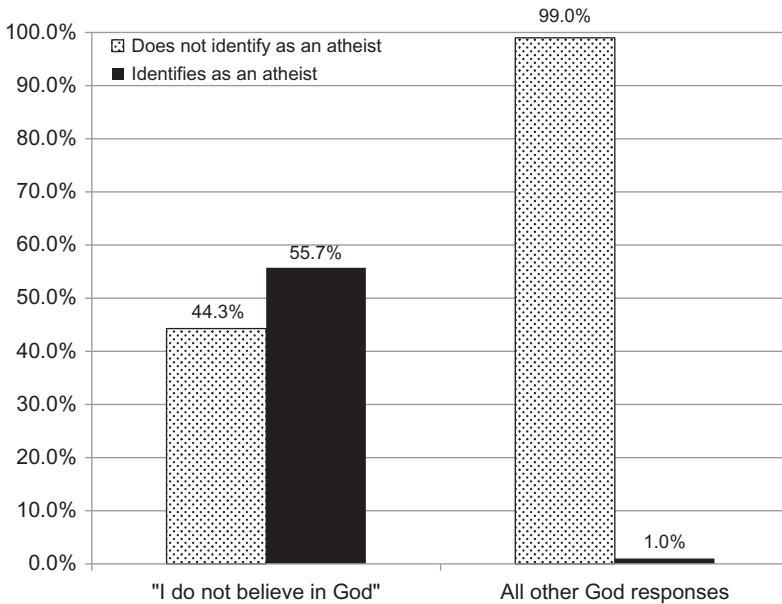
(26.1 percent) and other non-Hispanic (32.6 percent) individuals who do not believe in God, both of which are significantly different from the white percentage ($p < .01$). However, contrary to Hypothesis 3, Hispanic individuals who do not believe in God appear to be slightly more likely than white, non-Hispanic individuals (70.5 percent to 59.1 percent) who do not believe in God to identify as an atheist. Keep in mind that this does not mean that Hispanic individuals are overall more likely to identify as an atheist,[7] as this figure is limited to those who stated that they do not believe in God, which Hispanic individuals are significantly less likely to do (2.8 percent versus 5.6 percent among all respondents).[8] This does suggest that once a Hispanic individual takes the step of stating that there is no God, being Hispanic might not present the same barrier to atheist identification as it does for, say, black individuals. Although speculative, it is possible that a Hispanic individual who does not believe in God might be able to join or establish atheist-supportive networks more easily than a black individual who does not believe in God, particularly if the Hispanic individual can otherwise "pass" as white in those networks.

Finally, figure 2 also provides some initial support for Hypothesis 4. As seen in the last two bars in this figure, 71.5 percent of individuals who do not believe in God and say they are extremely liberal identify as an atheist. This compares to 38.8 percent of individuals who say they do not believe in God but are politically conservative.

To examine these patterns beyond this bivariate level of analysis, and to examine the other hypotheses not examined in figure 2, we turn to our

Figure 2. Percentage identifying as an atheist across subgroups saying "I do not believe in God"
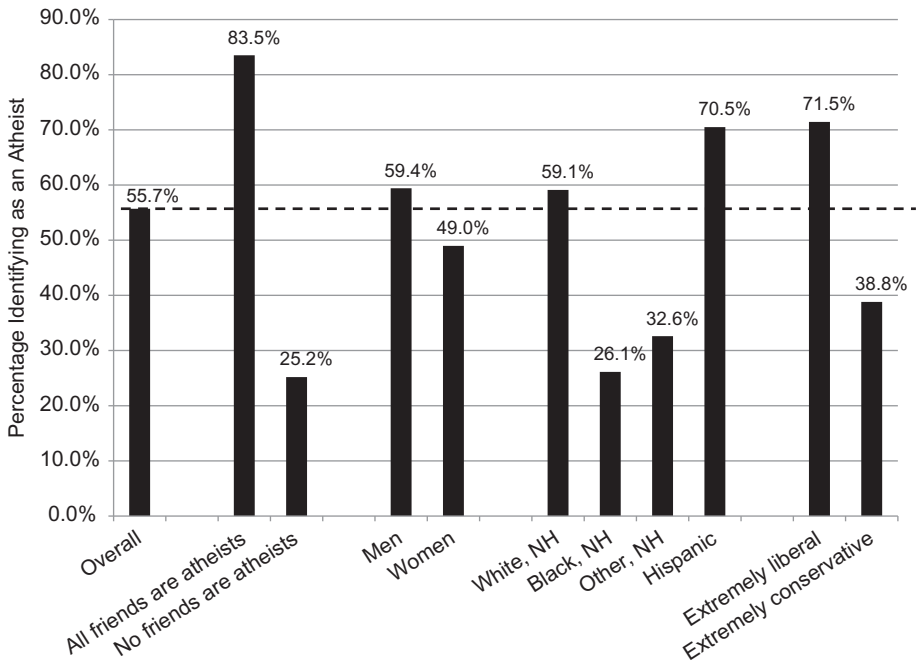
Source: Religious Understandings of Science Survey, 2013.

multivariate analysis. Given the binary nature of our outcome measure (i.e., 0 = does not identify as an atheist, 1 = identifies as an atheist), we utilize logistic regression models to evaluate the independent associations between our predictors and atheist identification. The results of these models are shown in table 2. This table presents effects in the form of odds ratios, so that values above one mean that the measure is associated with an increase in the odds of an individual identifying as an atheist, while values below one mean that the measure is associated with a decrease in the odds. The numbers in parentheses represent the *t*-value for each odds ratio.[9]

Model 1 begins simply by including the disbelief in God measure as the sole predictor of identifying as an atheist. Not surprisingly, we find that stating a disbelief in God is associated with a large increase in the odds of identifying as an atheist (*o.r.* = 125.23, *p* < .01). As already seen in figure 1, though, stating a disbelief in God does not perfectly overlap with identifying as an atheist. The question of interest, then, is what factors influence such identification above and beyond disbelief in God.

Model 2 begins to address this question by including the measure representing the number of the respondents' five closest friends that are, or at least are perceived by the respondent to be, atheist. As discussed in Hypothesis 1, we expect that friendships with other atheists will be associated with increased odds of atheist identification. Indeed, as seen in model 2, the number of close friends who are

Table 2. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Identification as an Atheist

	Odds ratios (*t*-values in parentheses) >1 = Increased odds of atheist identification <1 = Reduced odds of atheist identification			
	Model 1: Belief in God	Model 2: Supports to atheist identification	Model 3: Barriers to atheist identification	Model 4: Full model
Belief in God				
All other responses (ref.)	–	–	–	–
I don't believe in God	125.23** (26.59)	62.64** (20.83)	45.84** (18.67)	32.07** (16.41)
Support for atheist identification				
Close friends who are atheist	–	3.95** (11.13)	–	3.10** (8.80)
Barriers to atheist identification				
Religious service attendance	–	–	.59** (−6.18)	.59** (−5.28)
Political conservatism	–	–	.68** (−5.89)	.78** (−3.26)
Sex				
Male (ref.)	–	–	–	–
Female	–	–	.53** (−3.19)	.53** (−3.05)
Race				
White, non-Hispanic (ref.)	–	–	–	–
Black, non-Hispanic	–	–	.27** (−2.73)	.45 (−1.39)
Other, non-Hispanic	–	–	.43* (−2.14)	.36** (−2.59)
Hispanic	–	–	.95 (−.16)	1.12 (.36)
Multiple races, non-Hispanic	–	–	1.03 (.07)	1.01 (.03)
Region of residence				
Non-South (ref.)	–	–	–	–
South	–	–	.90 (−.46)	.97 (−.13)

Controls				
Education				
Less than high school degree	–	–	–	1.14 (.27)
High school degree (ref.)	–	–	–	–
Some college	–	–	–	1.24 (.65)
Bachelor's degree or higher	–	–	–	1.66 (1.62)
Age	–	–	–	.98* (−2.92)
Parental status				
No children (ref.)	–	–	–	–
At least one child	–	–	–	1.14 (.57)
Marital status				
Not married (ref.)	–	–	–	–
Married	–	–	–	1.40 (1.57)
Log pseudolikelihood	−863	−729	−758	−650
Pseudo R^2	.46	.55	.53	.60

Source: Religious Understandings of Science Survey, 2013; $N = 10{,}241$.

atheist is associated with increased odds of atheist identification net of disbelief in God ($o.r. = 3.95$, $p < .01$). Of course, this finding is mirrored in figure 2.

In model 3 we focus on the hypothesized barriers to atheist identification. The results for this model show that, net of disbelief in God and the other identification barriers, religious service attendance is associated with reduced odds of atheist identification ($o.r. = .59$, $p < .01$). Similarly, political conservatism is associated with reduced odds of atheist identification ($o.r. = .78$, $p < .01$). Relative to men, women have lower odds of atheist identification ($o.r. = .53$, $p < .01$), and compared to white individuals, black ($o.r. = .27$, $p < .01$) and other non-Hispanic individuals ($o.r. = .43$, $p < .01$) have lower odds of atheist identification. Hispanic and multiracial individuals, however, do not significantly differ from white individuals in their odds of identifying as an atheist after accounting for other factors. Similarly, net of other variables included in the model, individuals residing in the South do not significantly differ from those residing outside the South in their odds of identifying as an atheist.

In the final model, model 4, we include all of our supports and barriers to atheist identification along with the other control measures. Most of the findings remain the same as what was seen in model 1 through model 3. Disbelief in God, of course, remains a significant positive predictor of atheist identification,

as does having close friends who are atheist. On the other hand, religious service attendance and political conservatism are negatively associated with identifying as an atheist. Similarly, women and other non-Hispanic individuals still have lower odds of identifying as an atheist relative to men and white non-Hispanic individuals, respectively.

The previously significant difference in the odds of atheist identification between white and black individuals, though, becomes non-significant in this final model. In additional analyses not shown here, it was found that this difference becomes non-significant specifically when the number of close friends who are atheist is included as a covariate. This suggests that the initial difference between white and black atheist identification is connected to black individuals being less likely to say they have close friends who are atheist. Indeed, looking at the means on this measure across the racial-ethnic categories shows that it is lowest among black individuals (mean = 1.13, compared to 1.37 for white non-Hispanic individuals).[10]

The only other significant finding in model 4 is for age. Specifically, we find that age is associated with reduced odds of atheist identification. That is, net of other factors, older individuals are less likely to identify as an atheist than younger individuals. We see no difference in the odds of atheist identification between married and non-married individuals, parents and non-parents, or between high school graduates and the other educational attainment categories.

Looking back at our hypotheses, we can summarize our results by saying that Hypotheses 1, 2, 4, and 5 received clear support. Having friends who are atheists or at least are perceived to be atheists serves as a support to an individual's own identification as an atheist. On the other hand, participation in a religious congregation, political conservatism, and being a woman represent barriers to identifying as an atheist. Hypothesis 3 received mixed support. There is evidence that being black and of another non-Hispanic race is a barrier to atheist identification, but contrary to our expectation, being Hispanic did not appear to be a barrier to atheist identification. Furthermore, the initial difference in atheist identification between white and black individuals appears to be mediated by the lower rate of atheist friendships among black individuals. Finally, Hypothesis 6 was not supported, as our analysis showed no evidence that residing in the South is a *direct* barrier to individuals identifying as an atheist. However, living in the South is significantly and negatively associated with an individual's likelihood of saying he or she does not believe in God (3.32 percent state this in the South compared to 6.99 percent outside the South). So, much of the South's effect is likely being channeled through its effect on stated disbelief in God. Indeed, individuals residing in the South are about half as likely overall to identify as atheist as compared to those outside the South (2.7 percent to 4.9 percent).

Discussion

This study used one of the few nationally representative surveys to include measures of belief in God that are distinct from measures of atheist identification.

These data allowed us to separate belief and identity and to treat them as two distinct concepts. Consequently, this study is the first to identify and test factors that affect the likelihood of adopting an atheist identity above and beyond their role in producing disbelief in God. It also shows that some factors identified by past research to be associated with disbelief in God are not associated with identifying as an atheist, controlling for disbelief.

The analysis showed that, controlling for disbelief in God, having close friends who are atheist, religious service attendance, political conservatism, sex, and race are significantly associated with identifying as an atheist. While past research finds that being married, having children, and living in the South increases faith in the existence of God, while education decreases it (Sherkat 2008), we find that none of these factors are significantly related to identifying as atheist net of disbelief. That is, they do not have direct effects on atheist identification. The factors and processes that influence whether someone does not believe in God may in some cases differ from those that predict whether someone identifies as atheist. Future research should thus control for disbelief in God when attempting to identify predictors of an atheist identity. This research also contributes to understanding why the atheist movement is "dominated by white men" (Miller 2013, 215) by clarifying how individuals with devalued identities are less likely to adopt another devalued identity—atheist. These findings suggest the need for nationally representative surveys to include questions that distinguish disbelief in God from atheist identification. With such measures, further research should explore what other identities may reduce one's likelihood of identifying as atheist.

The study is not without limitations. The data is cross-sectional. It is possible that those who identify as atheists are more likely to make atheist friends. However, past research suggests support for the causal specification of our models. Friendship ties often precede religious belief and identification (Bankston 2002; Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Phillips 1980; Stark and Finke 2000). Moreover, Smith's (2011) qualitative study finds that having atheist friends was a precursor to adopting an atheist identity. Reciprocal relationships are also possible between religious service attendance, political conservatism, and identifying as an atheist. Future research would benefit from longitudinal data that can better pinpoint the causal direction between these factors and adopting an atheist identity. Additionally, the data does not contain direct measures of atheist identity stigmatization. Rather, we ground our hypotheses in past research, which has found atheist identity to be stigmatized in the United States (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Heiner 1992; Smith 2011). Testing the hypotheses presented here using direct measures of atheist identity stigmatization represents a fruitful avenue for future research. We also only control for disbelief in God or negative atheism, not positive atheism. As positive atheism may be thought of as an even stronger or harder theological position (Bullivant 2013), additional research predicting atheist self-identification controlling for positive atheism would be useful. Finally, although our sample size is relatively large, data using an even larger sample of atheist identifiers and nonbelievers would have more

statistical power. We note, however, that many of our theoretically derived hypotheses were statistically significant.

Despite its limitations, the findings of this study have relevance to a number of theoretical and research literatures. First, most narrowly, this study contributes to the growing social scientific literature on atheism and secularity (Baker and Smith 2009a, 2009b; Hunter 2010; Sherkat 2008; Smith 2011). A core problem with past quantitative research is that it does not distinguish between disbelief in God and adopting an atheist identity. We show that disbelief in God and identifying as atheist are not the same thing. Moreover, although previous research has classified the demographics or belief characteristics of different subgroups within the larger non-religious population and then applied labels to these subgroups, little research has examined the social dynamics underlying the self-identification of non-religious individuals net of their disbelief in God. and most broadly, this study speaks to research on dissonant beliefs and identities. Past research suggests that individuals with dissonant beliefs and identities can change their beliefs to match their identities, live with the dissonance, or create new identities that reconcile the two (see Beckstead and Morrow 2004; Festinger 1957; Mahaffy 1996). Our study elucidates reasons why individuals may choose to live with dissonance. If one's belief is consistent with a particular identity but that identity is dissonant with other identities or behaviors, then an individual may choose not to adopt that identity.

More broadly, this study adds to our understanding of how different dimensions of religion, or in this case non-religion, do and do not overlap. While research often assumes congruence between these dimensions (Chaves 2010), our findings add to theoretical arguments and empirical findings demonstrating incongruence on these dimensions. Furthermore, the study presented here goes a step further by shedding light on the nature and patterns of that incongruence. The framework of this study could be extended to better understand the supports and barriers to the adoption of other identities, both religious and non-religious. Other religious identities, such as "evangelical," have also often been equated or confounded with particular beliefs (e.g., infallibility of the Bible) or behaviors (e.g., sharing faith with others) (Hackett and Lindsay 2008). Research, then, could examine evangelical identification net of such beliefs and behaviors.

Finally, and most broadly, this study also contributes to research on stigmatized identities and intersectionality. The findings suggest that individuals who already have devalued identities are less likely to adopt a stigmatized achieved identity because of the greater costs of doing so. In this way, the results point to a need to understand how identities intersect with each other, thereby making certain identities more or less costly to adopt than others. Additionally, this research contributes to the intersectionality literature, which tends to focus on gender, race, class, and sexuality to the neglect of (non-)religious identities (Schnabel et al. 2016). Going forward, this study provides a model for empirically examining the determinants of identities other than atheism above and beyond particular beliefs or behaviors.

Notes

1. The *Oxford Handbook of Atheism* defines atheism in terms of an absence of belief in a God or Gods, or negative atheism (Bullivant 2013, 13).
2. Baker and Smith (2015) further discuss this distinction in their book. They define atheists as "individuals who do not believe theistic claims" (15). When using the General Social Survey (GSS), they use the response "I don't believe in God" to measure atheist, and when using the Pew Religious Landscape Survey, they identify atheists based on their responses to both a religious identity question (responding that their religion is "nothing in particular") and a belief question (responding "no" to a belief in God question) (22). In this way, atheists are necessarily defined in whole or in part by their disbelief in God. They do, however, note the fuzziness of categories, as "21 percent of self-identified atheists answered 'yes' to the God question" (230). They state that there is a "disjoint between self-identification with secular labels and responses to theistic belief questions," but they do not directly explore this distinction (230).
3. Schnabel et al. (2016) note that representative online panels may help scholars studying secularists by providing large subsamples of such individuals. They suggest the GfK as an example of an online panel that may be useful for this purpose.
4. This is consistent with the negative definition of atheism as used by *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Bullivant 2013) and as commonly used by work on atheism (Baker and Smith 2015; Kosmin et al. 2009; Sherkat 2008).
5. GfK generally asks that surveys avoid asking questions for which data are already available from the initial panelist survey so that panelists are not providing the same information repeatedly.
6. About 0.7 percent ($N = 70$) are missing on the measure of atheist identification, 0.8 percent ($N = 89$) are missing on the measure of belief in God, 1.0 percent ($N = 105$) are missing on the religious service attendance measure, 1.7 percent ($N = 173$) are missing on the measure of number of children, and 3.1 percent ($N = 319$) are missing on the political ideology measure. The largest source of missing data comes from the question about close friends who are atheist (11.9 percent, $N = 1,223$). The entire series of questions asking about the religious identities of close friends had a relatively high amount of missing data, which we suspect could be a function of respondents leaving the answer blank as a faster alternative to selecting the "none of them" response.
7. Indeed, overall only 2.7 percent of Hispanic individuals identify as atheist, compared to 4.9 percent of white non-Hispanic individuals, 0.5 percent of black non-Hispanic individuals, 4.7 percent of other non-Hispanic individuals, and 5.1 percent of the multiple-race group.
8. The "no God" percentages for the other racial groups are 6.4 percent for white non-Hispanic, 1.1 percent for black non-Hispanic, 11.8 percent for other non-Hispanic, and 6.8 percent for the multiple-race group.
9. The coefficients in this table are from models utilizing the imputed data ($N = 10,241$) and Stata's complex survey command (svy) to account for weighting. Readers asked that we also include log-likelihoods and pseudo R^2 for each model, but these are not computed for such models, as they are based on different assumptions. However, the substantive results from non-imputed data ($N = 8,703$) without using the svy command were identical to those presented in this table. As a result, we include the log-likelihood and pseudo R^2 for each model as indicated from those models.

10. The other means are 1.45 for other non-Hispanic, 1.29 for Hispanic, and 1.45 for multiple races non-Hispanic.

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