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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Familial Relationship Outcomes of Coming Out as an Atheist

Kevin J. Zimmerman*, Jesse M. Smith†, Kevin Simonson‡ and Benjamin W. Myers§

How do families react when a member "comes out" as an atheist? As one of America's most stigmatized groups, atheists often find members of their own families reacting with anger and rejection, an inability to communicate effectively, and distrust. Many atheists, however, feel continued support and acceptance from family members, experience greater authenticity in their communication, and enjoy relationships with family members who manage to adapt to the atheist's disclosure of nonbelief. This qualitative study reports the experiences of 80 atheists when they tell family members that they do not believe in God. Participant comments were coded as either unsupportive or supportive of the relationship, and lend support to the Circumplex Model of family functioning.

A growing segment of the U.S. population appears to reject religion (Zuckerman, 2010, 2011). According to a 2012 Pew Research Study, 20% of a nationally representative U.S. sample are religiously unaffiliated, and one third of adults under 30 are not affiliated with any religion. The number of young adults in the U.S. with no religion has doubled over the past 30 years (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009). According to a 2003 study (Astin, Astin, Lindholm, Bryant, Szelényi, & Calderone, 2005) 17% of college student respondents chose "none" as their religious preference, and 15% stated that they had no interest in "spiritual/religious matters" (p. 6), while more recent available data show that 22% of U.S. respondents age 18 to 29 claim not to believe in God (Kosmin, Keysar, Cragun, & Navarro-Rivera, 2009). Despite the growth of nonbelievers, negative attitudes toward atheists and other nonbelievers continue (Goodman & Mueller, 2009). Two of many factors that likely account for the apparent decrease in theism over the last several decades are socioeconomic development (Cragun & Lawson, 2010) and expanded access to information online (Smith, 2013).

Many in the U.S. believe that people without a belief in God are less likely to be moral, or that atheists have no moral compass (Barker, 2008; Bramlett, 2012; Keene & Handrich, 2010; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2009). Consider Firth's (2010) book *Atheists are Idiots*, in which he claims that only atheists are capable of the worst atrocities since they have no fear of God.[1] A widely cited 2006 survey (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann, 2006) suggests nearly 40% of U.S. respondents believe that atheists do not at all agree with their vision of society. Further, nearly half of respondents would disapprove if their child were to marry an atheist. Nash (2003) attributes the stigmatization of nonbelievers to what he calls atheophobia, or "the fear and loathing of atheists that permeate American culture" (p. 4). Atheists are often further subjugated by Christian privilege, which is an ideology characterized by the belief that everyone is or should be Christian, and grants privileges to those who are Christians while marginalizing non-Christians (Blumenfeld, Joshi, & Fairchild, 2009). Christian privilege can pervade U.S. families (Adams, Blumenfeld, Castñeda, Hackman, Peters, & Zúñiga, 2010; Seifert, 2007), and often one of the largest challenges for nontheists is social stigma and misinformation about them (Liddell & Stedman, 2011).

Many U.S. atheists report experiencing discrimination not only within society generally, but also within their own families. In Hunsberger and Altemeyer's (2006) study of U.S. atheists, many participants reported being ostracized by their families or having conflict with their relatives because of their nonbelief. Nearly 13% of 1,106 atheist or agnostic individuals in the nationally representative American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) reported experiencing discrimination from their family within the previous five years (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, & Nielsen, 2012). Among 796 U.S. atheists, nearly 25% reported "being rejected, avoided, isolated, or ignored by family because of [their] Atheism," almost 30% reported "being asked by [their] family or friends to pretend that [they are] not an atheist," and nearly 38%

* Department of Health and Human Sciences, Bridgewater College, Bridgewater, VA
kzimmerman@bridgewater.edu

† Department of Sociology, Sangren Hall, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI
jesse.smith@wmich.edu

‡ Counseling and Psychological Services, Frostburg State University, Frostburg, MD
krsimonson@frostburg.edu

§ Department of Fine Arts and Communication Studies, University of South Carolina, Upstate, Spartanburg, SC
bmyers@uscupstate.edu

reported "being advised by family or friends to keep [their] atheism a secret" (Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2012, p. 54).

When individuals come out to their religiously observant parents or caregivers about their nonbelief, it can be an uncomfortable or even painful experience (Smith, 2011). Society often marginalizes atheists when conversations related to politics, the media, or education fail to include nonreligious perspectives (Goodman & Mueller, 2009). Marginalization can lead to stress and suboptimal performance at work or at school (Tatum, 2007). Moreover, atheists who had grown up in devoutly religious families report greater levels of discrimination than those who were raised in less religious families (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997), and adolescents report poorer relations with their parents when the parents are more religious than the adolescents (Kim-Spoon, Longo, & McCullough, 2012). Thus, coming out can be a complicated process, and at times can be quite painful for atheists due to family members' negative reactions (Alidoosti, 2009; Myers, 2012).

Even so, public atheism in popular culture over the last decade, especially the prominence of the "new atheists," indicates that U.S. society may be edging toward greater tolerance and even acceptance of atheists. This is consistent with the steady rise in the same decade regarding the numbers of people – especially young adults – who claim no religion and are generally more skeptical about its central claims. Further, many atheists do not report negative reactions from their families. Cragun and his colleagues (2012), for example, reported that 13% of their respondents experienced discrimination from family members within the past five years, suggesting that 87% did *not* experience such discrimination.

Coming Out as an Atheist

The term "coming out" was introduced into the academic literature by Evelyn Hooker (1956) with reference to publicly acknowledging one's homosexuality. American Atheists president Dave Silverman later adopted the term (Corbin, 2011), and the atheist activist Richard Dawkins began his Out Campaign (www.outcampaign.org), intended to encourage other atheists to come out as atheists. The idea of coming out with reference to atheism has since made its way into the academic literature (Cimino & Smith, 2007; Krueger, 2013; Saeed & Grant, 2004; Smith, 2011). In this study, coming out as an atheist refers to disclosing to family members one's lack of belief in a god.

In a model of atheist identity development, the fourth and last stage of "coming out" involves revealing one's atheist identity to others, which serves to solidify the identity (Smith, 2011). In addition to the social-interactional importance of coming out for one's personal identity, there can also be a political facet to coming out. Cimino and Smith (2007) have observed that the act of coming out and atheists' use of the term reflects an appropriation of minority discourse as atheists strive to protect their civil rights and to find their place in American society. The parallels between the gay rights movement for social equality and the Brights movement, made up of those who hold a naturalistic worldview, is particularly evident, as Brights make frequent use of discourse of the closet (Linneman & Clendenen, 2009). The Internet seems to have facilitated many atheists' ability to find community and to come out (Smith & Cimino, 2009), sometimes to no one in particular, as with The Blasphemy Challenge (2006) on YouTube for people to come out by denying the Holy Spirit, or to all of one's family, friends, and acquaintances connected to a particular Facebook user.

What is clear from the literature is that (a) the prevalence of atheism in the U.S. is increasing, (b) society generally marginalizes and distrusts atheists, and (c) atheists often go through a coming out process. What the research has *not* adequately examined, however, is how family members react when a person comes out as an atheist. Families are central to our everyday lives, and the quality of familial relationships can have a profound impact on the quality of peoples' lives (Lamanna, Riedmann, & Stewart, 2014). The extant research related to coming out as an atheist tends to focus on the negative consequences of disclosure, but there is little understanding of how family members can also be supportive when atheists come out. Thus, we believe that there is real value in evaluating atheists' coming-out experiences from a familial relational perspective.

The Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems

The Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems (Olson, 2000; Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979) provides the theoretical framework for the current study. Grounded in general systems theory, the model is often used by family therapists for assessment and intervention (Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 2014), but it is additionally one of the most widely used models for theorizing about family systems within the field of family studies. A graphic representation of the model portrays cohesion on the x-axis, and adaptability on the y-axis. In addition to cohesion and adaptability, communication plays a crucial role in facilitating the ways that families cohere and adapt across the life course.

Olson, Russell, and Sprenkle, (2014: 117) define cohesion as "how close a family sticks together." Families low in cohesion are labeled as disengaged, and family members lack closeness or loyalty to the family and are highly independent. On the other end of the cohesion spectrum are enmeshed families, in which members are very close, highly loyal, and highly dependent on one another. According to Olson and his colleagues, families at either end of the cohesion spectrum—disengaged on the one end or enmeshed on the other—are thought to be imbalanced, unhealthy, or dysfunctional, whereas moderate levels of cohesion, with moderate levels of closeness, some loyalty, and interdependence, are considered to be supportive, balanced, healthy, and functional.

Adaptability is "the amount of change that occurs in leadership, role relationships, and flexibility rules" (Olson, Defrain, and Skogrand, 2007, p. 87), and likewise ranges from low to high. At the low end are rigid families, in which parents exercise strict discipline and control. At the high end are chaotic families, in which discipline is erratic

and there is a lack of leadership. Moderately adaptable families, however, are characterized by clear and stable roles, acceptance of role changes, democratic discipline, and shared leadership.

The Circumplex Model has been used in previous research focused on religion. For example, in a study of religious dysfunctional perfectionism within families, the Circumplex Model provided the framework for understanding highly inflexible parental control (Caddock, Church, Harrison, & Sands, 2010). Another study (Henry, Plunkett, Robinson, Huey, & McMichael, 2009) used the Circumplex Model to evaluate how family function, coupled with ones motivation to participate in religious practices, relates to adolescents' ability to empathize with others. Further, the Circumplex Model has been used to understand parental acceptance after LGB youth disclose their sexual identities (Bregman, 2013). Bregman found that the parents in families that were rigid (low adaptability) or chaotic (high adaptability) showed low acceptance of their child's sexual identity, whereas parents in structured or flexible (balanced adaptability) families were more accepting of their child's sexual identity.

That the Circumplex Model can accommodate religious considerations within the family, as well as predict parental acceptance or rejection of children with a marginalized identity, only strengthens the rationale that the Circumplex Model may fruitfully be employed to understand atheists' familial relationships. The Circumplex Model can be useful for understanding familial relationships generally, and atheists are embedded within families. Additionally, whereas previous studies tend to focus on discrimination of atheists, the Circumplex Model accounts for both the dysfunctional and functional ways that family members may react when they learn of a family member's atheism. We determined that the basic relationship skills outlined in this framework—relationship cohesion, adaptability, and communication—would be useful for understanding the relationship behaviors of atheists and their families post-disclosure. In addition to this being the first application of the Circumplex Model of family functioning to atheists, the present study adds to the literature by discussing the dynamics of supportive reactions, in addition to the unsupportive reactions, of family members to individuals who disclose they are atheists. This is needed as the research on the experience of atheists who disclose their nonbelief to family members is still relatively sparse (Nash, 2003).

Methods

A phenomenological approach was used to answer the primary research question, which was, "What effect does coming out as an atheist have on familial relationships generally, from the perspective of the atheists?" Phenomenology seeks to understand people's experience through their own perspectives (Husserl, 2012), and is appropriate for seeking to understand individuals' thoughts and feelings about the topic under investigation. Previous studies have used qualitative research to understand people's experiences of atheism (Magaldi-Dopman, Park-Taylor, & Ponterotto, 2011; Ritchey, 2009; Simonson, 2011; Smith, 2011; Zuckerman, 2010, 2011), and phenomenology has been used to understand people's experiences related to religion (Cox, 2006) and atheism (Mueller, 2012).

Three interviewers conducted open-ended interviews with atheists about coming out. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained, and participants were not compensated. Each researcher identified as atheist, although this was not a requirement for being an interviewer. The participants also self-identified as atheists, which means they did not believe in a god or gods. Data regarding participants' religious upbringing were not gathered, other than what they disclosed during the interviews. The total number of participants was 80, (46 males and 34 females). Ages ranged from 18 to 92, with an average age of 37. The national distribution of participants by region was as follows: 48 West, 17 South, 6 Northeast, 5 Midwest, with 4 unreported. Forty participants were interviewed within the state of Colorado, primarily among attendees at atheist functions, and were interviewed in person. The remaining forty participants within the U.S. learned about the research online and through snowball sampling, and the interviews were conducted by Skype or by phone. Interviews ranged from approximately 20 minutes to one hour and 45 minutes. Participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. We focused on participants' experiences disclosing their nonbelief specifically to immediate family members.

We used six *a priori* codes as a framework for further coding. The six codes reflect the Circumplex Model of family functioning. The Circumplex Model has three key elements: cohesion, communication, and adaptability. Each of these three themes has two dimensions: unsupportive and supportive. Thus, the six codes are (1.a) cohesion and (1.b) lack of cohesion, (2.a) adaptability and (2.b) rigidity, and (3.a) healthy communication and (3.b) poor communication. Statements and behaviors were classified as supportive if participant comments indicated positive reactions, and unsupportive if they exhibited evidence of a lack of support. The use of *a priori* codes based on the Circumplex Model was justified by a close initial reading of the interview transcripts, in which participants spontaneously discussed both the supportive and unsupportive reactions to their coming out, as well as the extensive support for the Circumplex Model in explaining familial relationship dynamics generally (Kreppner & Lerner, 2013), although we remained open to other possible coding categories presented by the data while coding.

Trustworthiness, which is analogous to the concepts of validity and reliability in quantitative research, was established in several ways. First, triangulation—which includes, but is not limited to, combining multiple perspectives in one dataset (Flick, 2014)—was naturally embedded during the data collection phase as three researchers conducted the interviews independently of one another. Additionally, after coding the data, each of the authors took opportunities to provide feedback on the coding reported in the manuscript. Finally, we attempt to provide the reader with thick description (Randles, 2012) by giving priority to the participants' own words and interpretations.

Qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 9, was used to facilitate coding the transcripts. With these six *a priori* codes in place in NVivo, the coder carefully read each transcript, highlighting and placing passages under appropriate codes, resulting in many different categories per code. For considerations of space and relevance, only the most frequent categories within each code are presented here. For example, the most frequent concepts related to family members' cohesion are (a) support from parents, (b) support from spouse, and (c) religion as a non-issue. Throughout the results section, we offer representative samples of the categories.

Results

Familial Reactions to Coming Out

Participant comments about coming out as an atheist to their family members consistently lent themselves to the *a priori* codes based on the Circumplex Model of family functioning. Supportive behaviors included (a) cohesion, (b) adaptability, and (c) healthy communication. Unsupportive behaviors included (a) lack of cohesion, (b) rigidity, and (c) poor communication. **Table 1** displays these coding categories and the subcategories that were developed based on participant comments from the transcripts. Each concept is discussed below using illustrative comments from the interviews.

Coding Category
1.b. Cohesion
a. Support from parents
b. Support from spouse
c. Religion as a non-issue
1.a. Lack of Cohesion
a. Anger
b. Rejection
c. Despair
d. Lack of connection
2.b. Adaptability
a. Acceptance
b. Unconditional love
c. Time
2.a. Rigidity
a. Denial
b. "Just a phase"
c. Keep silent
d. Attempts to convince
e. Increased religious fervor
f. Pressure to participate in religious ceremonies
3.b. Healthy Communication
a. Authenticity in communication
b. Limited communication
c. Absent communication
3.a. Poor Communication
a. Lying
b. Tension

Table 1: Coding Categories of Statements and Behaviors that were Supportive of and Unsupportive to Familial Relationships after Coming out as an Atheist.

Supportive: Cohesion

Most participants described comments and behaviors that were supportive of the familial relationship. Reported behaviors were coded as exhibiting cohesion, or a feeling of emotional closeness with other family members, when they seemed to be supportive of participants' atheistic perspective. Three subcategories of cohesion were (a) support from parents, (b) support from spouse, and (c) religion being regarded as a non-issue.

(a) Support from parents. The first subcategory of cohesion that participants described was a feeling that their parents were supportive of their atheistic perspective. Participants reported that believing parents who were less doctrinaire about their beliefs tended to be supportive of their child's atheism. Diane, for example, for whose parents religion was "a personal, private thing," said, "My parents believed in god, they just never had to be part of a group or organization or discuss it with anyone else." Matt expressed his relationship with his parents as being characterized by acceptance, love, and respect:

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

Matt's statement suggests that families whose relationships exhibit many positive attributes, such as kindness and high regard, can maintain those qualities if a family member comes out as atheist.

(b) Support from spouse. Some religious spouses were accepting of their partner's atheism. This was especially true when spouses were not religiously dogmatic. Louis, for example, reported that his atheism was not a source of conflict in his relationship with his partner, even though she was not atheist herself. "She still wants, I think, there to be something. But she wasn't incredibly religious when we met."

Participants also reported spouses being supportive when they explored ideas, through reading for example, together rather than separately. Alicia observed, "We've sort of gone through this together in terms of reading these books and expanding our own thinking." Kristian likewise referred to exploring books together:

> I think [my wife's] deconversion is being a little slower than mine. But I think over the years, she's kind of picked up the books I was reading and we've spoken about it enough times. Over the last three or four years, …her stand on religion is pretty close to where I am now.

Roger began his marriage as an atheist, avoiding the relational turmoil that can result if one becomes an atheist after establishing the relationship. He said, "My wife is a theist and we've been married 49 years and my being an

atheist has absolutely no influence on our relationship." Roger's comment suggests that an interfaith relationship in which the partners maintain their religious identity throughout the relationship may be more stable than a relationship in which a partner becomes nonreligious after the formation of the relationship.

(c) Religion as a non-issue. The third subcomponent of cohesion is found in participant comments that describe religious ideas as being external or irrelevant to the relationship. Vicky, for example, recalled that her parents "didn't care" that she was atheist. "They're completely like, 'Well, whatever.'" Diana likewise described religion as being a non-issue in her family. She said, "It [my atheism] was a complete non-issue in my family…. Religion was something that really was never discussed or brought up…. It was just a non-issue, a non-event kind of thing." Vicky and Diane's comments indicate that children who come to describe themselves as atheist do not necessarily have a coming-out event if other family members do not consider religion to be a significant aspect of their lives.

Unsupportive: Lack of Cohesion

Statements were coded as exhibiting a lack of cohesion, or the lack of feeling emotionally close, when differing religious perspectives were described as being divisive within the family. The most common negative reactions that participants reported family members demonstrating were (a) anger, (b) rejection, (c) despair, and (d) lack of connection.

(a) Anger. Many participants reported family members expressing anger in reaction to their nonbelief. For example, Eric had kept a private notebook with his questions about religion, and he recalled his wife's angry reaction to discovering the notes:

> She comes in and just steaming mad…. And she read that and it just freaked her out. She came in, she was hysterical and she's yelling and she's, you know, demanding, 'So what do you believe now? What do you believe now?' You know, 'Are you saved anymore?' you know, this whole bit…. It was horrifying, you know, it was like, I just—it was shocking and horrifying.

Eric's avoidance of openly discussing his theological questions, even with his own spouse, suggests a taboo regarding airing serious doubts about religion and God to religious family. He likely remained silent, putting his thoughts down only in a private notebook, because he anticipated and wished to avoid his wife's angry reaction.

Genevieve likewise recalled an angry response. "My sister and I got in fights. [My atheism] has been the big rift for us." When Genevieve expressed skepticism of a woman who claimed to be able to talk with the dead, her sister "was very offended. Very upset. And just pissy…. It was just ugly. And we've never, ever come back to the place we were before."

(b) Rejection. Rejection also eroded cohesion between participants and their religious family members. Like Eric, Doug kept his atheism private for years. When he disclosed his atheism to his parents, his mother exhibited rejecting behaviors by not speaking to him. Doug recalled, "My mother didn't speak to me for a long time, for about six months…. She took it pretty hard. She cried. I've never seen her like that. That was very difficult." Daniel likewise reported feeling rejected by his sister's family. "My youngest sister—her husband is a minister," he said. "They're… uncomfortable and their kids are totally uncomfortable and I think they think I'm evil…. I'm sure [they] frown on me.

(c) Despair. Despair was a third common reaction exhibiting a lack of cohesion. Oliver, for example, reported that his wife cried after he told her that he no longer believed in God. Kristian's comments further exemplify how family members can feel despair. He reported that his family members felt tremendous grief stemming from their belief that Kristian would be assigned to hell for his unbelief:

> They [my parents] didn't know what to say. But it was a combination of incredulity and quite a bit of despair actually, quite interestingly. I suppose [they] fear[ed] for [my] [im]mortal soul. Both two of my three younger sisters have come to basically the point of tears, apparently, about the fact that if I didn't believe in God, I was going to hell.

Believing that a loved one may go to a literal hell can often be similar to learning that the family member has been diagnosed with a terminal illness—or perhaps worse, since one's belief is often regarded as a matter of choice (Jakelić, 2010).

(d) Lack of Connection. A fourth subcategory of lack of cohesion resulting from disclosing one's atheism is a lack of connection, meaning that the participant reported feeling unable to relate mentally or emotionally to another family member. Curtis said, "[Religion] is all my mom talks about on the phone. Everything reverts back to God and religion and Jesus, or praying…. [My wife] feels like she can't ever develop a deep connection with either one of them [my parents]." Curtis's mother was unwilling or unable to avoid the topic of religion, perhaps because her religion was integral to her identity, which undoubtedly contrasted with Curtis's identity as an atheist. (See Smith (2013) for more discussion of how atheists construct and maintain their atheist identities. See also Peek (2005) and Small (2011) for more on religious identity, and Fitzgerald (2003), Siner (2011), and Smith (2011) for more on atheist identity.)

Omar similarly noted his father's lack of connection to him due to Omar's atheism. Omar's mother wrote in an email that she told her husband about Omar's atheism and that, "He [Omar's father] has no interest in discussing this with you." She wrote in an email, 'Well, I guess that puts even more distance between us.'" Whereas Omar would have liked to address his father's concerns, his father is "still totally not open to it at all. He seems angry about it. [He] seems, you know, disappointed… like he has no interest in moving forward with this at all." Another participant, Evan, described his father as feeling

a lack of connection with him due to his father's reluctance to talk with him about religion. "I do want to have a real conversation about [my atheism]... but the idea of talking face to face is just maybe too much for [my dad] to handle." Finally, Liz reported a complete lack of connection with her nephew coming out. "After I told my sister about my being an atheist, I noticed that my relationship with my nephew completely changed. I essentially hear nothing from him." She continued, "I very much regret losing that relationship with my nephew. We were very close."

Supportive: Adaptability

Comments were coded as "adaptability" when family members adjusted to the participants' disclosure of atheism. The three most common examples of adaptability were (a) acceptance, (b) unconditional love, and (c) time.

(a) Acceptance. Some participants reported family members' reactions to their disclosure of nonbelief as accepting. Art said, "I've been very fortunate that my parents have been very accepting. And I recognize that a lot of people don't have that, don't have an easy transition." Theo recalled being surprised at how accepting his mother was to his news that he held no religious beliefs. "[My mom] said..., 'Oh well, we've always thought... that it's up to you to decide what you want to believe. And I can't tell you what to believe.... And I was like, 'Great! This is going well.'" Ann was similarly surprised by her parents' complete acceptance. She said, "My parents were like, 'It's okay honey. We love you. We know you were always doing your own thing. We're glad you're just happy. It's okay.' I was like, 'Oh.' My parents were really good."

(b) Unconditional love. A second category of adaptability, unconditional love, was coded when family members' quickly adapted to the disclosure of atheism and continued showing love. Sheryl described her father's expression of unconditional love, saying, "He said, '...we love you and no matter what you decide to do, we'll always love you and support you.'" Larry described his religious grandmother's reaction of unconditional love when he told her that he was an atheist:

> She just looks at me and was like, 'You're so smart! I can't believe how much you've grown!' But that was her reaction. She didn't try to debate me. She didn't try to even comment, other than, 'Wow, I can't believe you're my grandson!'

Such reports of unconditional love provide evidence that coming out to some family members as an atheist can be a positive experience.

(c) Time. The third aspect of adaptability is that it often takes time for family members to adjust to the news. Trevor reported that his mother was initially resistant to his atheism, but that with time she was accepting. He said, "I wouldn't say that her concern has evaporated or that her belief has changed at all as a consequence of my decisions, but I think that she has largely accepted the idea." Oliver also noted that time has been an important factor in his wife's acceptance of his atheism. He said, "She's been remarkably adaptable and adaptive... and I think a lot of [it is] that I'm understanding and [I] know that I have to give her time and that I have to be respectful in the way that I talk to her about religion." Similarly, Carlos underscored the importance of giving his wife time to adjust to his atheism:

> I know it is important for my wife to have a transition time because I had a couple of years at least of, you know, learning explanations for where we come from and why we're here and where we go when we die, all the big questions.... She needs that time, and she may never come to believe the same way that I do..., but as long as there is an understanding about why I think the way that I do, then she will feel more comfortable.

Many participants' stories revealed the interconnections between cohesion, communication, and adaptability. For example, Oliver had not been communicating with his wife during his deconversion, and as a result, his wife was angry, threatening to leave Oliver and take their children when she learned that he no longer believed. Ann, on the other hand, said that she and her husband "had been feeling each other out" and "would drop little hints" about their evolving religious views, and they eventually acknowledged that neither of them believed in God at around the same time. Oliver's account reveals the connection between poor communication and a lack of cohesion because he had not talked to his wife about his changing views, so she felt blindsided by his disclosure.

Unsupportive: Rigidity

Rigidity is characterized by an inability to change relational patterns. Familial reactions to participants coming out as atheists were coded as rigid when family members became more entrenched in their religious stance as a result of disclosure. Namely, participants reported family members (a) being in a state of denial, (b) dismissing their disclosure of nonbelief being "just a phase," (c) requesting participants to keep silent about their atheism, (d) attempting to convince them that they were wrong and that they should be Christian, (e) exhibiting increased religious fervor, and (f) pressuring them to participate in religious ceremonies.

(a) Denial. The first subcomponent of rigidity is denial. For example, Molly recalled, "My mom was very adamant that... I couldn't possibly be an atheist." This denial can last a long time, as was the case for Tara. She recalled that she told her parents about her atheism five years previously, yet her parents still refused to believe that she was an atheist, "So I think that they are both in some pretty serious denial about it," she said. In contrast, her father seemed to acknowledge her atheism by sending her hurtful emails about atheists. She said, "There have been some rough periods, especially concerning this last election. My dad has been pretty cruel and has sent us some pretty cruel emails about liberals and atheists." Thus, denial need not be absolute, but rather can coexist with a constellation of other behaviors, such as

passive-aggressive communication, that can be unsupportive of the relationship.

(b) "Just a phase." A related example of rigidity is family members dismissing atheism as "just a phase." As Stephanie recalled:

> I said, 'Mom, I don't believe in God anymore. I don't want to go to church. Please, just believe me on this.' And she didn't. She thought it was a phase. And she thought that the more she dragged me to church, the more likely I was to sort of snap out of it.

Participants discussed family members regarding their atheism as just a phase as feeling dismissive and condescending. Alan said, "I was still in high school and [my dad] kind of played [my atheism] off as one of those... childhood rebellious phases." Rachel likewise noted that her parents considered her atheism as being part of a rebellious phase. "I was annoyed that they didn't take me seriously," she said.

(c) Keep silent. Another demonstration of rigidity is family members requesting participants not to talk about their atheistic views. John described his mother's explicit request not to share his views about the religious ideas that she was sharing with him.

> She would basically try to evangelize or preach at me about various things, but she didn't want to hear what I had to say about it.... And I would respond to it and that would upset her and then I would get emails that said basically, okay, I want you to read this, but you're not allowed to respond to it.

Another participant, Rodney, expressed irritation at being expected to censor his views about religion, saying, "It's almost as if this is a hostage-type situation where... [I am risking] to seriously upset my family... if I dare tell them that I don't believe.... It's almost like a sort of blackmail-type scheme.... I do feel some resentment." Rodney clearly felt that he lacked the psychological or emotional safety to be honest with others about his nonbelief, and he feared that doing so would jeopardize his relationships with family members. His comment is likely illustrative of the kinds of experiences captured in the 38% of atheists who reported "being advised by family or friends to keep [their] atheism a secret" (Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2012, p. 54).

(d) Attempts to convince. Some participants reported family members attempting to convince them to believe in God. Alan said that his family members had communicated to him that, "for me to actually have a good afterlife, I have to believe in their God." Jacob recalled his uncle's attempts to convince him to pray about finding a job. "[My uncle] would say something like, 'Well, you need to work harder at it and get off your butt. And praying for a job may not be too bad either,'" Kelly said he recalled family members cornering him at a funeral. "When my mom passed away a couple of years ago,... [my cousins]... trapped me in a corner and tried to say that, you know, I needed to be saved." Kelly noted that the insensitivity of attempting to persuade him to be Christian was amplified by occurring at his mother's funeral.

(e) Increased religious fervor. Rigidity was also prevalent in many family members' increased religious behaviors after learning that their family member was atheist. Brandon described how his mother increased her religious fervor after he came out. "My mother... would constantly send me those God-awful forwarded emails that have... 'Because of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ,' yada yada yada.... I have an entire shelf of books that my parents have given me." Brandon regarded these books as "Christian propaganda." Another participant, Molly, described how her mother intensified her religious pressure after Molly came out as an atheist. "She would come into my room and wake me up on a Sunday morning." Her mother would tell Molly, "You are going to church.... You have to go to church.... You can't just not go to church.... You are going to go to hell."

Similarly, Oliver recalled that after he came out, his wife became more religiously fervent:

> She kind of amped up her own religion and became more zealous, and so she started playing the hymns, recording of the hymns. She made plans to attend the temple, which is like a three-hour trip one way, and she was insisting more on reverence and sincerity in our prayers.... She did say some inflammatory things.... So for example, she told the... president of the women's organization..., 'Bring me a gun, so I can shoot him now, so he can know there is an afterlife....' She said also that it would be easier for her if I was physically dead, rather than spiritually dead.'

Oliver's comments illustrate how relational dynamics can drastically change immediately following disclosure of one's atheism. Peter Boghossian (2013) has observed that the faithful often seem to become more entrenched in their beliefs in response to someone stating their nonbelief.

(f) Pressure to participate in religious ceremonies. Lastly, rigidity was expressed as pressure for the nonreligious to participate in religious ceremonies. For example, Omar recalled his mother pressuring him to christen his child to make other family members happy. Many participants described feeling pressure to attend church. Maryann said:

> When I am by myself, I know that I am an atheist. I know inside completely that I am 100 percent there. When I am around my family, I have to pretend that I am not, that I am religious, especially, like during Christmastime. We have a lot of things we do and it is very important to my family that everyone is there... With my family it's like I have to pretend I am something I am not.

Another participant, Carl, was pressured to sing a hymn at his grandmother's funeral.

> My grandmother passed away about a year ago and at her funeral, my mother and my family members wanted me to sing 'I am a child of God' at the funeral with the rest of the grandchildren. [My father] basically said, 'I know you don't like it, but just do it." ...I have to get up there and sing something that I completely disagree with.... It made me upset.

Perhaps to keep the peace, Carl succumbed to the pressure to sing the hymn. Goffman (1986) notes that one stigma management technique is to conceal the stigma. The price for Carl, however, was that he felt resentful and disrespected.

Supportive: Healthy Communication

Healthy communication is the third category of comments and behaviors that were supportive of familial relationships upon coming out as an atheist. Participant comments regarding communication about religion were coded as supportive of the relationship when the communication was (a) authentic, (b) limited, or (c) entirely absent.

(a) Authenticity in communication. Several participants alluded to the value of being authentic, or honest, about their nonbelief as an important element of communication with family members. Authenticity has been discussed extensively in the sociological literature (see for example Goffman, 1959; Turner, 1976), in addition with reference to religion (Alberts, 2008). Theo talked about his need to be authentic, saying: "I want the people close to me to really know who I am, and my beliefs or lack of belief in God is a fairly important part of who I am, especially when it comes to my family." Tom similarly felt that it was important for his family, particularly his parents, to know who he truly is. He said, "I felt like I need to be honest with myself and to be true to myself and not put forward a side of mostly going to church or still carrying on conversations as if I agree." A third participant, Paul, talked about how his coming out as an atheist prompted communication that led to a fuller understanding of his mother. When the interviewer asked how coming out as an atheist affected his relationship with his parents, Paul replied:

> When I was Christian and [my mom] was operating under the assumption that her family had to do all the right things to be a good person, we didn't really connect.... And in the course of all of these tracks of conversations we've had, it's like I learned a lot more about... how my mother operates.

These comments from Theo, Tom, and Paul illustrate that familial relationships are protected when individuals are welcomed to honestly express who they are.

(b) Limited communication. In what we believe is a point of departure from the traditional understanding of communication as a supportive factor in relationships, there is evidence in the transcripts that, at least when it comes to religious differences, limiting conversation can help protect the relationship. One interviewer asked Kristian, "How about your wife or family? Is religion an off-limits topic?" Kristian responded, "I think we've just gotten to the point where we avoid it because we know it will cause conflict and unhappiness on their part." Although being unable to discuss religion may not be ideal, recognizing and avoiding the pitfalls of discussing religion with family members may be adaptive and the best available choice. Fitzgerald (2003) has written about atheists avoiding discussing their atheism with religious family members to avoid familial conflict.

(c) Absent communication. Again, in departure from the Circumplex Model's conception of healthy communication, avoiding discussing religion altogether may be the best choice for some families. For example, Stan commented:

> She [my wife] believes in God, but I don't think she knows really in what sense. I tried to talk with her about it, but I think she felt that I was attacking her a little bit, so we didn't really discuss it much after that.... It [me being an atheist] is not a problem simply because it's something that we don't discuss.

Likewise, Walter explained that he avoided discussing his atheism with his grandmother out of genuine love and concern for her feelings:

> My grandmother, my mom's mom, I'm sure she realizes that I'm non-religious, but she's the sweetest lady, and I know that deep down [it] would be very disappointing... and hurtful to her to hear me say I don't believe in Jesus. That would hurt her feelings.

Chase similarly reported that discussion about religion with his parents is absent, but this again was for the purpose of protecting the relationship. Chase explained that discussing his atheism would only hurt his parents and have no positive outcome. He said, "I hold [that] it [talking about my atheism] will just really distress them [my parents] and I can't see any benefit to it. I really can't see any benefit."

Open communication is traditionally viewed as being an essential component of quality familial relationships, but McCarthy (2007) notes that when it comes to the topic of religion, "the don't ask, don't tell quality of tolerance encourages us to look away from that which is different rather than to explore it, maintaining rather than challenging the social divisions it purports to reconcile" (p. 195).

Unsupportive: Poor communication

The third category of comments that were unsupportive of familial relationships was poor communication. Comments were coded as exhibiting poor communication if the quantity or quality of the communication regarding atheism was unsupportive of the familial relationship. Two subcategories of poor communication were (a) lying and (b) tension.

(a) Lying. One of the negative effects of society's discomfort with atheism is that some U. S. atheists feel compelled to lie to others about their religious views. When asked about taking her daughter to church, Elsie was initially caught off guard, and to avoid upsetting her in-laws, she answered that they were attending church. "We were kind of lying a lot so we were—it was just a bad situation where here we are lying to people with what's really going on [regarding our changing religious views]." Note that Elsie's lying stemmed from her in-laws' expectations about her family's church attendance. Feeling unable to speak honestly with them, Elsie coached her daughter how to reply to her grandmother.

Brandon recalls downplaying his lack of belief when his mother observed that he was interested in atheism. "My mom had looked at my Google Feed Reader and I have a section that follows atheist news," he said. "And she was like, 'Oh wow, is that something that you're flirting with?' And I just kind of waived it off. I was like, 'Yeah, you know, I like to keep up on things.'" Many of the participants made similar comments about refraining from being honest to avoid conflict.

(b) Tension. The second category of poor communication is a sense of tension in the relationship, characterized by disagreements or arguments. Paul recalled how he and his mother bickered about religion after he came out:

> And we got into lots and lots of fights, and... she's like, 'Well, if you do this, then you'll go to hell.' I was like, 'Mom, I don't believe in hell.... And it was just– for probably two years, it was just really tense and we couldn't really talk, and it was just constant fighting like that when we did talk.

Paul and his mother continued discussing religion, even though the conversations were tense. Carl similarly described the tension that arose between him and some of his religious family members. "I obviously don't want to create trouble.... I'm not always bringing up [religion during] the conversation. But when it does come up, yes, it can create some conflict." A third participant, Terrell, described tension arising from expressing his concern about how churches obtain and use their money. "She got very upset and angry about it," he recalled. In his discussion of stigma management techniques, Goffman (1986) suggests that one way to reduce tension is to shift attention away from the stigma—in this case, the atheistic worldview—to another topic. Haidt (2012) has noted that a conversation rarely, if ever, changes a person's mind regarding religion, and that often the best one can do is to seek to understand.

Discussion

In this study, we sought to understand how coming out as an atheist affects family relationships. We used the Circumplex Model of family functioning as a framework for analyzing interviews with 80 atheists about their coming out experiences. On the cohesion spectrum, familial relationship quality tended to be preserved during the coming-out process when families exhibited a moderate level of closeness, with a sense that the family can remain cohesive even when individual family members may hold varying theological opinions. In this study, family members exhibited cohesion when parents and spouses remained supportive and religion was considered to be inconsequential to the quality of the relationship. Relationship quality suffered, however, when family members exhibited disengagement, anger, rejection, despair, or an inability to relate to one another after a family member came out.

On the adaptability spectrum, participants described relationships as remaining strong when family members were flexible and respectful of one another's autonomy. Adaptability was manifested as acceptance, unconditional love, and taking one's time to adjust to the news. A lack of adaptability, or rigidity, was problematic for relationships, leading family members to regard the revelation of atheism with denial or dismissal, or to try to silence, convince, proselytize, or pressure the person into religious participation.

From a communications perspective, our finding that communication need not be fulsome or exhaustive to be considered "good" communication is uncommon in the family literature. Participants' description of communication seems to be relatively far removed from Olson, Defrain, and Skogrand's (2007) characterization of effective family communication as consisting of speaking skills, clarity, or staying on topic. Some participants reported being able to discuss their atheism with family members, but others noted that limiting or altogether avoiding theological discussions with their believing family members was the best approach for preserving positive family relationships. Communications scholars Afifi and Guerrero (2000) identified, based on numerous previous studies, that one of the primary reasons for topic avoidance is relationship protection. They note that social bonds and the need to belong are powerful drives in humans, and, although self-disclosure generally facilitates social bonding, people routinely avoid topics that are perceived to threaten the relationship. Further, topic avoidance appears not to be harmful to relationships when the avoided topic is not about the relationship (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2013).

Recent research confirms that people attempt to protect their social relationships by avoiding discussion of topics perceived to threaten the relationship. For example, people avoid political discussions with people who are known to hold differing political views (Morey, Eveland, & Hutchens, 2012), bisexuals avoid discussion of their sexual behavior with men (Schrimshaw, Downing, Cohn, & Siegel, 2014), and young adults in new romantic relationships avoid religious discussion (McCurry, Schrotdt, & Ledbetter, 2012). The varying dynamics and contexts within families preclude any prescriptive recommendations for families regarding discussing atheism, other than perhaps kindness and respect. That is, the frequency and depth with which atheists and their family members engage in theological discussion is at each family member's discretion, and as suggested earlier, if one's atheism does not affect the familial relationship, topic avoidance is not likely to be a problem (Guerroro, Andersen, & Afifi, 2013).

Which of these three characteristics—cohesion, adaptability, and communication—is most important? Each is important, but kind and respectful communication seems to facilitate movement within the healthier realms of the cohesion and adaptability spectrums. Additionally, communication is often the element that individuals seem to be most aware of and most able to control. This is prescriptively important because it implies that, even when families have a pattern of rigidity or disengagement, being intentional about how one communicates can potentially soften the impact of disclosure. Cohesion, adaptability, and good communication should not be regarded as three separate and discrete characteristics, but rather are interrelated. In fact, the Circumplex Model uses terms such as "flexibly connected" to indicate balanced levels of cohesion and adaptability, and "rigidly disengaged" to indicate a low level of both cohesion and adaptability. The third characteristic—communication—helps to reveal whether family relationships are cohesive and adaptable, with messages of acceptance, support, and love. Communication also reveals a lack of cohesion through messages of anger and rejection, or a lack of adaptability through messages of shaming or pressure to conform.

There are several limitations to this study worth noting. First, ours was not a random sample, so the reader is encouraged to use caution when transferring our findings to similar populations. Second, family members were not interviewed. It is hoped that future research into the effects of coming out as an atheist on family members would include family members' perspectives as well. Third, because the data draw on interviews about atheists' coming-out experiences generally, participants were not asked specifically to discuss family members' reactions. Future research might use specific interview questions designed to investigate the nature of family relationship dynamics during the coming-out process.

Despite these limitations, this study confirms what previous research on coming out as an atheist has found: that atheists are often subjected to statements and behaviors that are unsupportive of familial relationships. This study contributes to the literature regarding the specific behaviors that family members may display given their location within the Circumplex Model. This said, our findings can offer some tentative predictions about how family members may react to the disclosure of one's atheism depending on the family's location within the Circumplex Model. For example, the Circumplex Model would predict that when a family member comes out as an atheist, the family characterized as flexibly connected in most familial interactions is likely to be accepting and supportive, whereas family members who are rigidly disengaged in most of their interactions can likely expect some pressure to remain silent or to return to the fold. Ideally, further research into familial relationship outcomes of coming out as an atheist might make use of the Circumplex Assessment Packet (Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 2014) or a similar systematic assessment.

This study also informs and contributes to an understanding of how atheists manage their identities. Specifically, the process of achieving one's atheist identity often involves coming out to one's family. This study suggests that one of the reasons for the development of an atheist community in the U.S., manifested perhaps primarily online (Smith & Cimino, 2012) but also in growing membership in local and national atheist organizations, is that negative familial reactions to disclosure of nonbelief necessitates affiliation with others who have been similarly marginalized to achieve a stable identity as an atheist. Indeed, one of the functions of atheist organizations is to help members realize that they are not alone, and one of the primary interests of many atheist organizations, such as "The Out Campaign," is to promote acceptance of atheism in the U.S.

Finally, our findings suggest some implications for psychologists, therapists, and counselors. As with other aspects of identity that may differ between therapists and their clients, therapists should be aware of their own religious perspectives and take a nonjudgmental stance toward clients who identify as atheists. Further, therapists might wish to familiarize themselves with local atheist groups that might provide much-needed social support to those who might be feeling isolated or who could benefit from socializing with others to help solidify their atheist identity. Therapists who work with couples or families in which a family member has come out as atheist might underscore the respectful communication and adaptability that can help protect familial relationships, and that how they treat one another is more important than attempting to reconcile differing theological opinions.

It is hoped that our research will promote societal understanding of atheists' experiences coming out to their family members so that nonreligious individuals can feel physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe to disclose their nonreligious identity. It is further hoped that our research will encourage family life educators to provide support for assessments, programs, or formal ally groups for nonreligious individuals (Goodman & Mueller, 2009). Given that the data for this study were drawn from individuals rather than from families, additional research on the familial relationship outcomes of coming out as an atheist that gathers data from other family members would be enlightening. Additionally, further research from a family strengths-based perspective would provide insight into how family members maintain healthy functioning when family members may hold differing or even conflicting theological perspectives.

Notes

[1] This is not a new argument. Polemicists and theologians have long offered this argument in some form. Perhaps, most famously, is Dostoyevsky's suggestion that "without god anything is permissible."

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