

THE EXPERIENCE OF IDENTITY TRANSITION AMONG AMERICAN MILLENNIALS
WHO DISAFFILIATE FROM RELIGION

A Dissertation

By

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ABSTRACT

Disaffiliating from religion has become more commonplace in recent years, particularly among the generational cohort known as millennials. The literature on the process of disaffiliation for this cohort has been minimal. Furthermore, the impact on the individual and on their relationships has heretofore not been addressed holistically.

This study used a constructivist grounded theory approach by conducting and analyzing semi-structured interviews with 12 millennials about their process of disaffiliating from religion and identifying as atheists. Initial coding of the transcribed interviews found 75 codes, while further focused coding resulted in four categories that formed the grounded theory concepts. The four categories are Dissatisfaction with Religious Beliefs; Containment of Damage to Relationships; Acceptance of Agency in Meaning-Making; and Self-Exploration and Self-Actualization. These results highlight the importance of social support as well as the potential utility of talk therapy for those who are disaffiliating from the religious identity that is shared by their family and community.

CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

Contributors

This work was supervised by a dissertation committee consisting of Professor Charles Ridely and Professor Laura Stough of the Department of Educational Psychology, Professor Idethia Harvey of the Department of Health & Kinesiology, and Professor Donnalee Dox of the Department of Performance Studies.

Transcriptions of the interviews were conducted by Lynn Riedesel.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	ii
CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES	vi
1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Purpose Statement.....	2
1.3 Research Questions.....	3
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	4
2.1 Nature of Literature Review in a Grounded Theory Methodology	4
2.2 Centrality of Religion to American Identity	6
2.3 Definition of Identity	7
2.4 Identity Loss.....	8
2.5 Anti-Atheist Sentiment	8
3. METHOD	11
3.1 Philosophical Assumptions and Positionality.....	11
3.2 Participants.....	14
3.3 Recruitment.....	15
3.4 Data Collection	17
3.5 Data Analysis.....	20
4. RESULTS	29
4.1 Category Descriptions.....	29
4.2 Category I – Dissatisfaction with Religious Beliefs	29
4.3 Category II- Containment of Damage to Relationships.....	38
4.4 Category III – Acceptance of Agency in Meaning-Making	45
4.5 Category IV – Self-Exploration and Self-Actualization.....	52

	Page
5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	57
5.1 Reflections of the Researcher	58
5.2 Discussion of Findings.....	61
5.3 Recommendations for Future Inquiry	66
5.4 Limitations	68
REFERENCES	70

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE		Page
1	Interview Protocol.....	18
2	Participant Demographics.....	25
3	Initial Categories and Codes.....	26
4	Refined Categories and Codes.....	27

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In spite of a significant shift in the demographics of the broader American culture, there is still limited research about varieties of meanings, beliefs, and practices of people that have increasingly disconnected them from mainstream religions (Blanes et al., 2015). According to Fenelon and Danielson (2016), the increasing disconnect is prevalent is particularly relevant to the age cohort referred to as "millennials", which for the purpose of this study comprises people born between 1981 and 1996. Millennials are the least religious generation in American history—often breaking tradition with the beliefs and values of parents, greater family, and communities of faith. Being a member of a religion confers multiple benefits to believers, both intrapersonal and interpersonal (Beyerlin, 2017; Stavrova et al., 2013). Conversely, atheism is associated with several challenges, including less social connection (Hastings, 2016) and lower well-being (Fenelon & Danielson, 2016).

The multicultural literature for psychotherapists on issues of religious identity is generally sparse (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008) and there is limited literature on therapy to support individuals who are moving away from religion (Schlosser et al., 2010). Religious clients are able to benefit from talking with therapists about religious issues, including secular therapists (Mayers et al., 2007). However, Fenelon and Danielson (2016) suggested that individuals who leave a religion do not have comparable professional support. Other fields such as sociology have explored the difficulties associated with religious disaffiliation in specific traditions (Hookway and Habibis, 2013). Conversely, within applied psychology, there have only been models of integration of

faith (Worthington, 1989) and stages of faith development (Fowler, 1981). According to Schiavone and Gervais (2017), "little is known about how atheists born in religious families might come to leave...or how people might shift from belief to a stage of doubt or agnosticism, to full-fledged disbelief" (p. 9). By exploring these questions, I aim to provide clinicians with context to serve atheist clients more fully.

1.2 Purpose Statement

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the lived experience of American millennials disaffiliated from a mainstream Christian denomination of their family of origin and their change in identity as atheists. For the purpose of this dissertation, atheists are people who have no affirmative theistic beliefs (Bullivant, 2013). Although there are many labels for those without affirmative theistic beliefs (including agnostic, "none", "spiritual but not religious", freethinker), an important component of the inquiry is the participants self-identifying with the term 'atheist'. Specifically, the study seeks to chronicle their journey out of religious beliefs and adoption of the atheist identity. The examination includes the challenges, hardships, and decision-making as well as the benefits and positive aspects of the disaffiliation. Because religious affiliation is a major component of American identity, not fitting into the dominant group is typically associated with negative consequences, such as stigmatization and discrimination (Everett et al., 2016). By conducting the dissertation, the investigator aims to provide information that will help clinicians in serving clients who have or are currently struggling with losing their belief in a god.

There is a well-documented prejudice against non-believers in America (Simpson et al., 2017). Exploring and understanding the marginalization of non-believers may support the process of humanizing this population. A constructivist grounded theory approach will serve as

the research method. The purpose of using a grounded theory is to generate a "well-codified set of propositions or a running theoretical discussion, using conceptual categories and their properties" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Because there is a gap in the research, a grounded theory would most suitable for the study. Of the methodologies in grounded theory research, the one that resonated most with me was Kathy Charmaz's *Constructing Grounded Theory, 2nd Edition* (2014). The methods of Charmaz as laid out in that book are well tested and appropriate for the scope of the dissertation as it is based on constructivism. Charmaz (2014) assumes that the constructivist, who is the researcher, co-creates knowledge with participants and that there can be no literature until data is collected.

1. 3 Research Questions

This study will address the following research questions:

Research Question #1: How do millennials experience religious identity disaffiliation?

Research Question #2: What do atheistic millennials turn to for meaning in their lives?

Research Question #3: What support and resistance do millennials find when coming out to others as atheists?

Research Question #4: What factors lead to millennials' decision to disaffiliate?

Research Question #5: What factors do millennials consider in their decision making to disaffiliate?

Research Question #6: What benefits do millennials derive from disaffiliating from their religion?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Nature of Literature Review in Grounded Theory Methodology

The constructivist grounded theory that was developed by Charmaz (2014) is based on the assumption that knowledge is generated from the shared experiences that researchers have with participants, this means that there can be no knowledge on a given phenomenon absent interactions between participants and researchers. Charmaz (2014) also underscored that fact that a grounded theory approach helps the researcher to discover patterns from the analysis they had with participants. During data analysis, Charmaz's (2014) approach is helpful as it provides researchers with the opportunity to explore how the selected participants' experiences are embedded in the broader context of cultural, structural, and social relationships. Moreover, Charmaz adds that the investigator's viewpoint is to supplement the data collocated from participants by integrating it when theorizing a phenomenon, which includes "stopping, pondering, and rethinking anew ... establishing connections, and asking questions When you theorize, you reach down to fundamentals, up to abstractions, and probe into experience," and avoid importing and imposing presupposed images and ideas onto the data (Charmaz, 2014, p. 323).

In conducting a literature review adhering to Charmaz (2014), there is the expectation that there shall be no already existing knowledge on the topic, but such knowledge will be discovered through an ongoing process that involves the interaction of the researcher with participants. The above thoughts are supported by Charmaz (2017), who noted that in the grounded theory approach, there is no literature review before the data collection because knowledge is created based on the evidence that is collocated and analysed by the researcher

using participants' experiences. According to Birks and Mills (2015), the constructivist approach to the literature review in grounded theory research makes the methodology dynamic— directly integrating the views and perceptions of participants, as opposed to a rigid system of using the previously published methodology to provide literature on a given topic.

Dunne (2011) supported the above with respect to methodological assumptions when writing the literature review in grounded theory research by asserting that there is no need for researchers to base their analysis on existing literature review because new knowledge is likely to emerge from the data collected, which might be different from what was previously documented. Therefore the implication is that while it is important to ground a study on previously published literature (Charmaz, 2003; Charmaz Henwood, 2008), it is equally important to consider the possibility of a new stream of knowledge emerging different from what was previously thought by researchers (Dunne, 2011). Charmaz (2017) also noted that it is important to avoid focusing on past literature because in constructivist grounded theory's methodological underpinnings, the investigator's focus is on the extent to which participants construct new meaning concerning a given topic or an area of study. Therefore, as a constructivist, Charmaz's (2014) approach is appropriate for the current inquiry because I will co-construct the experience and meaning for individuals who disaffiliated from Christianity to atheism.

2.2 Centrality of Religion in America

America is uniquely religious among western nations (Jacobs & Theiss-Morse, 2013). Every U.S. president has been a Christian. The Pledge of Allegiance says that America is "one nation, under God." All U.S. currency has had "In God We Trust" written on it since it became the nation's motto under President Eisenhower in 1956. When testifying in court it is common for individuals to place their hand on the Bible to affirm the truthfulness of their oath (Jacobs & Theiss-Morse, 2013). Taken separately, none of these statements are necessarily microaggressive or pernicious, but they form a composite that speaks to the degree that theism pervades the public consciousness. Each of these examples are common identifiers of how ubiquitous religion has been and continues to be to the larger American culture (Jacobs & Theiss-Morse, 2013).

When asked how important it is "to be a Christian" to being considered truly American, a majority of respondents said it was either fairly important or very important which, according to Jacobs and Theiss-Morse (2013), meant "Americans make an explicit American=Christian association and readily self-report that connection" (p.13). Given that most Americans associate being fully American with being Christian, the idea of America being a Christian nation that was founded on Judeo-Christian values remains salient and pervasive even with an increasingly non-Christian population (Straughn & Feld, 2010). Regardless of one's religious background, Americans are familiar with religious traditions and immersed in a theistic culture wherein businesses and schools close for Christian holidays in particular. This points to the topic of "Christian privilege", which is manifested in a multitude of ways including that "non-Christian college students report more negative interactions with peers from different worldviews and experience more coercion on campus than Christian college students do" (Edwards, 2017, p.19).

In this regard, it is expected that the centrality of religion in America will emerge as an important theme in the data.

3.3 Definition of Identity

The inquiry is fundamentally concerned with people who were immersed in a religion and assigned an identity that was later rejected. More specifically, they have abandoned a mainstream and accepted—even expected—religious identity in favor of an identity that is objectionable (Edgell et al., 2006). According to Stryker (1967), "Identities...exist insofar as persons are participants in structured social relationships. They require that positional designations be attributed to and accepted by participants in the relationships" (p.559). Every individual is a composite of multiple distinct, intersecting identities that have varying levels of salience based on the person's context (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). Identity serves several purposes including as a means to define people by what they are as well as what they are not (Edgell et al., 2006). Identity can be taxonomic (variables like age, gender, religion, and ethnicity that have shared understandings within a culture) or can be in relation to others (for instance a woman who may be a wife to spouse, a mother to a child, a physician to a patient, and a client to a lawyer) (Stryker, 1967).

It is often expedient to make assumptions about individuals based on aspects of their identity and this is something that fields of social and behavioral sciences have arguably taken for granted. According to Sommers (1994), "There is no reason to assume a priori that people with similar attributes will share common experiences of social life...unless they share similar narrative identities and relational settings"(p. 610). In obtaining the narratives of American millennials in Texas who have adopted the atheist identity it is expected that it will be possible to

understand their truth and how this identity has affected them on the path to taking ownership of the label.

2.4 Identity Loss

The effects of identity loss are well documented in sociological and psychological literature with respect to several domains including change in ability status or acquiring a disability (Perrier et al., 2014), loss of social status (Ertugrul, 2016), and loss of a parent role for a parent whose child dies (Rogers et al. 2008). With respect to literature relating to people who have religiously disaffiliated, there is a gap in the research directly related to the experiences of losing a mainstream religious identity when American millennials adopt an atheist identity. During data collection and analysis it will be critical to examine literature on identity loss to see whether there are parallels that unite different domains of identity loss.

2.5 Anti-Atheist Sentiment

Although there has been increased tolerance towards religious minority groups in America over the past several decades, Swan and Heesacker (2012) suggested the tolerance has not been extended as fully to atheists. According to Edgell et al. (2006), "atheists are at the top of the list of groups that Americans find problematic in both public and private life, and the gap between acceptance of atheists and of other racial and religious minorities is large and persistent" (p.224). There are many important differences among the multitude of Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist sects, however Americans have come to believe that their shared values are still compatible insofar as "the best" for America is contextualized (Somers, 1994). Conversely, Americans hold that atheists are "the least likely to share their vision of American society" even among groups that have historically been stigmatized such as Muslims and LGBTQ+ persons

(Edgell et al., 2006). Furthermore, Americans are "more likely to disapprove of their children marrying atheists" (Edgell et al., 2006, p. 222) compared to any other group which suggests that Americans believe that atheists hold values that are incompatible with their own (Graham & Haidt, 2013).

Americans stereotype atheists as immoral and untrustworthy (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2018) and these stereotypes are difficult to overcome. Religiosity on the other hand automatically confers assumptions of trustworthiness and goodness to an individual (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2018). Anti-atheist sentiment has been acceptable and common for thousands of years and across all cultures—sometimes with the threat of capital punishment even in the modern day. Among the benefits that Abrahamic religions confer is the balm of life after death and the diminishment of existential dread attendant to it (Somers, 1994). That atheists do not affirm an afterlife may make them viewed as threatening to believers (Schiavone & Gervais, 2017) as challenging such beliefs is uncomfortable and casts doubt on believers. Religion is also thought commonly to be necessary for a moral life across cultures and so diverging from belief in God means to abdicate a moral compass (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2018).

Edgell et al. (2016) conducted further analysis a decade after their initial study of Americans' attitudes toward atheists to examine whether anti-atheist sentiment persisted and found "that anti-atheist sentiment in the United States is persistent, durable, and anchored in moral concern" and a "substantial percentage of Americans see atheists as immoral." While the socio-political landscape has changed dramatically for other oppressed groups in America over the past decade such as LGBT Americans, the widespread antipathy for atheists in particular has remained strong (Edgell et al., 2016). In discussing the experience of religious disaffiliation with

American millennials, it is expected that themes relating to anti-atheist sentiment will emerge from the data.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

3.1 Philosophical Assumptions and Positionality

Because I want to explore the topic through the lens of a relativist position, which assumes multiple and equally valid realities, it is useful to operate from a constructivist paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). In addition is based by inquiry based on the induction approach that centers on personality which is supported by Charmaz (2014) who stated that

“type of reasoning that begins with the researcher examining inductive data and observing a surprising or puzzling finding that cannot be explained with conventional theoretical accounts. After scrutinizing these data, the researcher entertains all possible theoretical explanations for the observed data, and then forms hypotheses and tests them to confirm or disconfirm each explanation until he or she arrives at the most plausible theoretical interpretation of the observed data’ (p. 341).

My positionality is based on key assumptions highlighted by Charmaz (2014), who postulated that investigators are considered part of the research process, and their positions, opinions, privileges, interactions and perspective may affect the study process. I believe that the knowledge in this arena is not going to be gained from objective positivistic measurements but rather through making meaning out of the lived experiences of the participants (Charmaz, 2014). Identity itself is about not only an individual’s conception of self but also their self in relation to their place in society as enculturated beings. In this context, their relationship to the universe and/or god(s) will be examined. The use of constructivist methodology will enable the generation

of a theory in an area where none exists currently using participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2014). I expect it to be an impossibility to quantify a continuum of change in identity as identity tends to be dynamic rather than discrete, and so the subtleties need to be expressed in an open-ended manner (Charmaz, 2014).

To discuss about the experiences of religious identity loss, it is important for me to reveal my personal biases and assumptions. I am a 34-year-old White gender-neutral masculine-bodied person born into a devout Roman Catholic family. While growing up, I attended public schools, but went to Catholic Mass at least once a week, and also attended Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) classes from first grade through senior year of high school. In addition, I attended a private Catholic college for my undergraduate education. A portion of my time in the U.S. Army following my undergraduate education was spent in a seminary work that explored my experience being a member of the Chaplain Corps. My youngest brother was in the 7th year of his studies to become a Catholic priest prior to his death by suicide in March 2016. The majority of my family remains devoutly religious.

However, I left the Catholic Church after losing my faith rapidly in 2010 at the age of 23. Two of my friends in the Army had challenged me on inconsistencies in my dogma that I could not adequately address, and gave me documentaries and books on the evolution of religion that I found so cogent that my faith was shattered within a two-day period. I felt scared and alone in the universe and as though the Catholic Church misled me for my entire life. It made me angry and resentful at that time that I could have believed in something so strongly that was fraught with corruption and deceit. I was unsure what direction to take my existential angst in those initial weeks and months that followed, but I knew I would never be aligned with the Catholic

Church again. My oldest brother was receptive and supportive of my decision, while I felt rejected by everyone else in my family as well as by the vast majority of my friends.

Given that my own shift from theism to atheism was marked by psychological and emotional turmoil including both difficulty with reintegrating a key piece of my identity; and permanently damaged relationships with key people in my life, I certainly have strong affective reactions to the material and to the content of the interviews. My own experiences will affect my interpretation (Charmaz, 2014), but in being reflexive and using the participants' responses, I hope to give an accurate encapsulation of their perspectives (Charmaz, 2014). While I have a firm understanding of Christianity in general and Catholicism specifically, I have studied theology broadly for most of my life, therefore I have an appreciation for many other belief systems, including Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Taoism, Mormonism, and Hinduism, yet I do not subscribe to any of them.

At this point in my life, I am firm in my identity as an atheist and that seems immutable. While I am uncertain about the similar experiences that others have, I do think that this is an area of inquiry within my field that deserves more attention than it has been given before. My intention is to describe the phenomenon as closely as possible to the experiences of those who have gone through religious identity loss to benefit clients in therapy, and to offer better information than what we have right now to clinicians.

With respect to religion and atheism, I do not believe that it is possible for me as a researcher to be unbiased, nor do I believe that a lack of bias is necessarily something to be desired. I have thoughts and judgments that will invariably influence the way that I approach the interviews, the interviewees, and how the data is interpreted. Conversely, I believe that my own experiences in navigating the change in identity from a devoutly religious Roman Catholic

gradually to an atheist identity in my mid-20s provides me with greater empathy, deeper insight, and a willingness to hear and explore what the participants have to say. My hope is to reduce the degree to which I misrepresent the thoughts and feelings of the participants, but it seems unrealistic that the results would be utterly free of my own subjective interpretations.

The context in which knowledge is gathered and the research questions are the two chief factors influencing how one holds the knowledge is generated in a study. When it comes to issues of identity and experiences though, I believe these are constructs that humans as individuals who live within many intersecting cultures get to define themselves and their own subjective opinion is more informative of reality than anything that can conventionally be measured. We have to ask the right questions and trust in the experiences and reflections of the individuals interviewed. Given the positions I hold regarding the nature of reality and how knowledge is interpreted, I presume that a constructivist paradigm is most suitable for this project.

3.2 Participants

Purposive sampling was used for recruitment in this study. Purposive sampling is valuable within qualitative research because the purpose of the study was to seek individuals who will "provide the greatest opportunity to gather the most relevant data about the phenomenon under investigation" (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). This is an appropriate choice for a grounded theory study as the aim is to explain a phenomenon rather than to generalize. Several criteria were used to evaluate the eligibility of participants. Firstly, it is important that participants are millennials, born between 1981 and 1996. Growing up in the same generation is more likely to provide a shared cultural context. Considering the fact that the millennial generation is most likely to grapple with issues of religious identity loss, the findings may be

relevant to this population. Of those, I will focus primarily on recruiting those born in the 1980s because they are further removed from the developmental period of late adolescence. Secondly, the participants will be self-identified atheists. While there are a variety of labels that connote irreligiosity ("none", agnostic, non-believer, skeptic, "spiritual but not religious"), the term *atheist* is particularly charged and is a label that draws considerable negativity (Edgell et al., 2016). Each of the labels could include atheism, however the self-identification with the term *atheist* connotes a higher degree of salience with the identity of not having an affirmative belief in a god or gods. Thirdly, participants need to have been raised in a Christian faith tradition, including Catholic, Protestant, and non-denominational, before subsequently discarding their religious identity to atheism. An individual who was not immersed in religion by having it as a part of their home life would not be able to offer a first-hand experience of what it is to lose faith in God, and how that affected them intrapersonally and interpersonally. I expect the number of participants to range from 15 to 25. However, additional interviews will continue until no new themes or concepts emerge from the data. According to Charmaz (2014), "12 interviews suffice for most researchers when they aim to discern themes concerning common views and experiences among relatively homogeneous people" (p.521).

3.3 Recruitment

The target population for the study included American Millennials who had disaffiliated from religion in United States. From the target population, a sample of 12 participants were recruited to the study. Purposive sampling was used to recruit the participants. Yin (2015) stated that purposive sampling is effective when the researcher seeks to recruit participants who share common feature and experiences toward a given phenomenon, as well as when the participants are well known to the researcher or are easily accessible (Merriam, 2020). Specifically, criterion

sampling (Patton, 2002) was employed to gather only “cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (p. 238). Therefore, criterion sampling was effective in this study because the researcher targeted to recruit American Millennials who had disaffiliated from religion. This made it possible to recruit participants that shared a common factor, and which was of direct concern to the study.

To be included in the study, the participants had to have certain characteristics. Therefore, the following inclusion and exclusion criteria was used in the study: (a) participants were to be in the Millennials category, (b) resided in Texas when the study was conducted, (c) participants had disaffiliate religion(s) and participants had to be 18 years and older. The inclusion criteria was important for the study because it helped the researcher to screen participants and only recruit those participants who were knowledgeable about the topic of study. In particular, the inclusion criteria allowed the researcher to recruit participants who had changed their religion identities to atheism and had experienced various encounters as result of their religion change identity, making it possible for them to describe such experiences clearly.

To be effective in recruitment, moderators were used in the study. Moderators of atheist pages on social media websites Facebook and Reddit were contacted via direct message to request assistance with recruitment for the study. Moderators for these forums were notified about the nature of the study and, once they agreed to assist, were provided with a brief message to post on their forum to draw participants for recruitment. The message posted by moderators included my contact information for members to reach out to via email if they were interested in participating and believed they met the inclusion criteria. Participants were informed of the nature of the study, including privacy and confidentiality of their information through an email response. To uphold ethical principles, participants’ identities were concealed by the use of

pseudonyms and their real identities were known only to the researcher. This was important in promoting the confidentiality of the participants to avoid harm that could be attached to their responses. Interviews were conducted in-person and in private locations in Texas. The purpose was to promote the privacy of the participants and provide them with an ample time to offer well thought responses without fear of victimization or punishment based on their participation in the study. On the interview day, participants were briefed again on the nature of the study, and given a consent form that included more information about the study and their rights as participants.

3.4 Data Collection

A semi-structured interview protocol was used for data collection. Semi-structured interviews afforded flexibility to the interviewer by allowing for further inquiry if an area of unexpected richness emerged during the typical questioning process. The degree of flexibility is especially important when conducting a grounded theory study as rigidity in interviewing could constrain the flow of data, thereby limiting the accuracy of the phenomenon under investigation.

According to Charmaz (2014), “grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theory from the data themselves” (p. 511). The interview questions were developed and aligned using Krueger and Casey’s (2014) approach. The main four phases that were used to align the interviews included: Phase 1: Ensuring interview questions align with research questions; Phase 2: constructing an inquiry-based conversation; Phase 3: receiving feedback on interview protocols; Phase 4: piloting the interview protocol (Krueger & Casey, 2014). The interview protocol as used is shown below. Questions were asked in the same order as presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Interview Question	Question Type	Research Question Addressed
Take a moment now and tell me what are the first thoughts that come to your mind when I say the word "religion"?	Grand Tour	RQ#1
What influenced you to stop identifying as religious or as a member of a religion?	Key	RQ#4, RQ#5
Think back to how you felt when you stopped believing in a god or religion. What emotions are coming up?	Key	RQ#1
Who did you find to be supportive when you decided to leave?	Key	RQ#3
Did you encounter any resistance from family, friends, or community when you spoke about your loss of faith?	Key	RQ#3

How do you find meaning in life?	Key	RQ#2
How do you see yourself now as compared to when you were religious?	Key	RQ#1, RQ#6
What, if anything, was the most difficult part of leaving your faith?	Key	RQ#1, RQ#3, RQ#5
What is it like to be an atheist in a majority Christian nation?	Key	RQ#1, RQ#5, RQ#6
Do you see yourself returning to a church or religion at some point?	Key	RQ#1
Is there anything I didn't ask you about your experience of losing religion that you would like to share with me now?	Concluding	RQ#1

Though these questions were written to be open-ended and open to the interpretation of the interviewee, they may require clarification. It is also possible at other times that something a participant said demanded further inquiry because of its importance to their experience.

Prompting was also used to facilitate the interviewing process and included the following types of questions:

- Probing (e.g. "Tell me more about that")
- Informal prompt (repeating a word used by the interviewee)
- Paraphrase followed by a check-in (e.g. "Did I understand you correctly?")
- Observation of interviewee (e.g. "I noticed your fists clench when you mentioned your father.")
- Request for an example (e.g. "Would you give me an example of that?")

Interviews were conducted in-person and interviewees were compensated for their time with their choice of \$25 digital gift card. The interviews were recorded digitally and saved on an SD card that was stored in the principal investigator's locked office. Following each interview, a typed transcription of the data was produced. Transcription and analysis occurred parallel to interviews.

III. 5 DATA ANALYSIS

According to the principles laid out in Strauss and Corbin's seminal work *Basics of Qualitative Research* (1990), the analytic procedures of grounded theory serve four key functions:

1. To build rather than only test theory.
2. To give the research process the rigor necessary to make the theory "good" science.
3. To help analysts break through biases and assumptions that were brought to, and that can develop during, the research process.

4. To provide the grounding, build the density, and develop the sensitivity and integration needed to generate a rich, tightly woven, explanatory theory that closely approximates the reality it represents.

Although Corbin and Straus's *Basics of Qualitative Research* provides a strong foundation for grounded theory inquiries, the nature of this particular study beckons the use of Kathy Charmaz's *Constructing Grounded Theory (2nd Edition)* as her work is particular to using a constructivist lens. Charmaz (2014) noted that Corbin and Strauss's 1990 version of grounded theory supports "applying additional technical procedures rather than emphasizing emergent theoretical categories and the comparative methods that distinguished earlier grounded theory strategies" (p. 519). Within constructivist grounded theory the data was analyzed in multiple stages: initial coding, focused coding, memo writing, and sorting (Charmaz, 2003). The different stages were allowed to overlap, as they are not necessarily done in a clean-cut linear fashion. While it is typical for initial coding and focused coding to be done in earlier stages of analysis they can also be done near the end since some concepts may not be wholly developed (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) additionally suggested that the constructivist grounded theory serves more as a framework than a set of mandates that are meant to be dogmatically adhered to since imagination and interpretation are necessary in the process.

The first part of analysis is conceptualizing the data in initial coding using bits of data—the "words, lines, segments, and incidents" (Charmaz, 2014). Data was conceptualized using the "constant comparative method of analysis" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which specific concepts are categorized together when they appear to relate to the same phenomenon. The categories must be given abstract names (that are subject to change as needed) and it is recommended to have specific "analytic handles" that avoid the problem of having broad associations and could

muddle the clarity of the code (Charmaz & Henwood, 2008). Using precise language is critical for high quality data analysis. The initial codes are grounded in the data and emphasize *actions* (gerunds) rather than types of people (Charmaz, 2014). While there are multiple ways of conducting initial coding, line-by-line analysis was used for this study to foment orientation to detail and intimacy with the data.

Focused coding is the second part of analysis that typically follows initial coding but may also happen concurrent with it. According to Charmaz (2014), focused coding involves taking the most salient of the initial codes and determining the degree to which they are adequate against the data. Similar to initial coding, focused coding involves the constant comparative method and asking questions (Birks & Mills, 2015). Focused codes are obtained from taking the initial codes and, in comparing them to larger swaths of data, recognizing which of those may be raised as categories to develop as the theory. The relationships between focused codes was arrived at through extensive memoing (see section **Memos** below) in which evidence was given to support the linkages.

Following exhaustive data analysis, the aforementioned focused codes became the categories that form the concepts of the grounded theory. In the process of focused coding, Charmaz (2014) suggested that the researcher could produce a theory by demonstrating the relationships between the concepts or by developing a single concept. Focused coding was sufficient to develop the concept or concepts that provided grounding to the emergent theory (Birks & Mills, 2015). The theory was grounded after it was validated against the data. In order to confirm the categories that comprised the theory, member checks were conducted to take the ideas back to the interviewees for substantiation (Charmaz & Henwood, 2008).

Memos

Memos were also be used throughout the process of this study. Memos in the context of grounded theory were written records that are related to forming the theory and included any relevant notes or observations made by the investigator to demonstrate the flow of data and its organization to conceptual schematic (Charmaz, 2003; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Each memo included a date and time as well as what it is in reference to (be it a transcription, journal article, or other documents).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the action by investigators “to make their influence on the research explicit—to themselves, and often to their audience...[as] as key requirement in quality appraisal” (Gentles, Jack, Nicholas, & McKibbin, 2014, p. 1). In the grounded theory methodology, by staying reflexive, an investigator seeks to minimize presumptions and suspend the personal own biases or temptations into imposing data into indented concepts. To be reflective, Charmaz (2014) suggested that investigators must acknowledge previous literature or knowledge that has been published on the topic to create new knowledge. Such knowledge, according to Douglas (2013), may be our own scholarly or even personal experiences that relate to the topic of study. Charmaz (2014) recommended that, instead of “don[ning] a cloak of objectivity,” researchers must readily acknowledge and account for their preconceptions as these are “inherently ideological activities” (p. 305). Therefore, to remain objective to the study during data collection, I acknowledged previous literature on the topic, including seminal literature on methodological approach and assumptions. Second, I did not influence how participants responded to specific questions, but I left it to them to provide responses based on

their personal experiences. Third, to remain reflexive about the topic and avoid the researcher's bias, I declared all personal interest, prejudice and bias relating to the study (Charmaz, 2017). This was important future researchers who wish to replicate the study in future on how my interests in the study could have influenced the study findings.

During data analysis, it is recommended that the researcher maintain theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity is a key component in ground theory research as it depicts the investigator ability to utilize personal as well professional experience or knowledge to see the collected data differently and abstractly think about it when constructing a theory. Moreover, theoretical sensitivity could be defined as the process through which an investigator manipulates results to explain why it explain or describe a given phenomenon in a particular manner. In this study, I adopted theoretical sensitivity in data analysis as it provided me with the opportunity to utilize both personal experiences, professional experiences, and literature as the researcher to view the topic being explored in new ways to inform the developing of theory.

Initial coding resulted in the identification of 75 initial codes that clustered into 12 initial categories. Focused coding of the initial results yielded four refined categories, three of which included two subcategories. Section 1 of this chapter indicates participants' individual demographic characteristics, and Section 2 is a description of the data analysis process. The third section is a description of the categories and subcategories identified during data analysis.

Description of Participants

Table 2 indicates participants' individual demographic characteristics.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant Code	Gender	Ethnicity	Birth Year
P1	Female	White	1994
P2	Male	White	1982
P3	Non-binary	Black	1989
P4	Male	White	1981
P5	Male	White	1995
P6	Female	Latino	1992
P7	Female	Latino	1987
P8	Male	White	1989
P9	Male	White	1993
P10	Female	White	1991
P11	Male	White	1983
P12	Female	White	1993

Six of the 12 participants identified their gender as male, five as female, and one as non-binary. Nine of the 12 participants identified their ethnicity as White, two as Latino, and one as Black. Participants' average (mean) age at time of study was 31 years.

Preliminary Data Analysis

In the first step of the analysis, initial coding, the data was broken down into excerpts, each of which indicated a key point made by an interviewee. Similar excerpts were then clustered into initial codes, with the result that 75 initial codes were formed. Grouping similar initial codes resulted in the formation of 12 initial categories. Table 3 indicates the initial codes and categories identified in this step.

Table 3

Initial Categories and Codes

<i>Agency:</i> General Values, Specific Evaluations, Questioning, Leaving Absolutes
<i>Concealment:</i> Fear, Avoidance, Dread, Guilt, Hurt, Rejection
<i>Cultural Exposure:</i> Travel, Meeting People, Expanding Perspective
<i>Emotional Inadequacy:</i> Abuse, Hypocrisy, Fear and Shame, Neglect, Value Conflicts
<i>Fulfillments:</i> Helping, Here and Now, Focus Within Reach, Altruism, Commitment, Prosocial Conduct, Relationships
<i>Intellectual Inadequacy:</i> Unfounded Beliefs, Internal Contradictions, Conflicting Evidence, Persuasive Opposition
<i>Openness contracting:</i> Conflict, Strain, Distancing, Condemnation, Silencing
<i>Openness expanding:</i> Fallibility, Tolerance, Forbearance, Empathy
<i>Reason:</i> Deference to Evidence, Sharing Knowledge, Skepticism, Proof, Research
<i>Reflection:</i> Explaining, Justifying, Feeling Uninformed
<i>Spontaneity:</i> Curiosity, Internal Locus, Autonomy, Exploration, Self-expression, Freedom, Relief
<i>Value Determinants:</i> Respect, Impact, Prioritizing, Brevity of Life, Pragmatism, Responsibility, Being Consistent, Ethic of Care, Conscience

The second step of the data analysis was focused coding. This step involved comparing the initial codes to the original data to decide which could be raised to the level of categories.

Table 4 is a list of the refined codes and categories. The categories represent the grounded theory concepts.

Table 4

Refined Categories and Codes

Category 1 – Dissatisfaction with Religious Beliefs

Subcategory A: Intellectual Dissatisfaction

- Exposure to atheistic ideas
- Exposure to different cultures and ideas
- Studying religion and beliefs

Subcategory B: Emotional Dissatisfaction

- Abuse experiences
- Aversion to condemnatory teachings
- Aversion to hypocrisy
- Emotional needs not met
- Political frustration

Category 2 – Containment of Damage to Relationships

Subcategory A: Avoidance

- Constraints on communication
- Denial
- Fear of conflict and judgment
- Keeping the peace

Subcategory B: Conflict

- Arguments
- Family strain
- Guilt
- Rejection

Category 3 – Acceptance of Agency in Meaning-Making

Subcategory A: The Touchstone of Conscience

- Meaning in present life rather than afterlife
 - Responsibility to act
 - Working for betterment of self
 - Working to build better community-society
-

Subcategory B: The Touchstone of Reasoning from Evidence

Importance of basing decisions on logic and science

Valuing critical thinking

Willingness to change based on evidence

Category 4 – Self-exploration and Self-actualization

Confidence

Empowering autonomy

Freedom of thought

Identity exploration and development

Openness to experience

Release from constraints

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter is a presentation of the study findings. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 members of the millennial generation, which is defined as the age cohort born between 1981 and 1996. All 12 participants had disaffiliated from Christianity and self-identified as atheists. The semi-structured interview protocol enabled participants to provide rich descriptions regarding their experiences of disaffiliating in their own words. Participants described the experiences that led to their decision to disaffiliate from their childhood religion, the effects of their decision on their relationships, their new freedom to determine meanings and values according to their own reasoning and conscience, and the self-actualization they experienced through their autonomy.

4.1 Category Descriptions

Four major categories emerged during focused coding as grounded theory concepts. The following subsections are descriptions of the categories. Quotations from the interview transcripts are included as evidence of the grounded theory concepts.

4.2 Category I – Dissatisfaction with Religious Beliefs

Participants indicated that their disaffiliation began with experiences that influenced them to perceive their religious beliefs as inadequate in one of two ways. First, all 12 participants reported that they had experienced their religious beliefs as intellectually inadequate when they were unable to reconcile the tenets of their faith with their reason- and evidence-based understandings. Second, most participants experienced their religious beliefs as emotionally inadequate when their faith itself or participation in a faith community either failed to meet their

urgent emotional needs or caused them emotional harm. The following two subsections are descriptions of the subcategories *intellectual dissatisfaction* and *emotional dissatisfaction*.

Subcategory A: Intellectual Dissatisfaction

All 12 participants reported that their intellectual dissatisfaction with their religious beliefs began when they first perceived their belief system as only one among many competing ones. When participants subsequently lost their certainty that their beliefs were inherently privileged, they began to perceive their faith as needing the support of evidence and reason. They sought that support through reflection and research. P9 gave a representative response in describing the progress of intellectual dissatisfaction as occurring in three steps. After the initial, triggering encounter with conflicting beliefs, the process continued through reflection and research, until it culminated in the perception that previously unquestioned religious beliefs were untenable. Notable in P9's account was his characterization of this process as one of increasing awareness and insight, a perception that the other 11 participants shared:

[P9] When you grow up, you have a very narrow perspective, really narrow lens as a child. You only know one religion, and so if there's only one religion, then it makes that the right one. But as I got older, and I could step back, and I started traveling, and I started studying history, and I started studying culture, I realized that there's hundreds, thousands, millions of religions over time. And each one has been equally convincing to millions of people. And I just thought, there's no way that any of these are correct, because there's just so many, they can't all be right. And what are the odds that any particular one is right? They contradict one another. In some cases, in my opinion, they contradict themselves.

No participant reported that they had spontaneously subjected their religious beliefs to rational verification. Instead, participants stated that they had understood their religious beliefs to be privileged and exempt from rational scrutiny. P7 recalled this former understanding in stating, *“When I was a Christian, I didn’t feel like I had to question myself . . . because my beliefs were of the dominant beliefs.”* P2 expressed this key idea in saying, *“It never occurred to me before that [religion] was a thing you could be skeptical about. That one was always reserved, like you’re not supposed to use logic on that.”* P9, in the response quoted previously, expressed his perception that religious beliefs are sustained by intellectual monopoly: *“If there’s only one religion, then it makes that the right one.”*

The dependence of some participants’ religious beliefs on the assumption that they were the only viable ones was complete enough that ideologically neutral encounters with adherents to different beliefs could initiate the progression of doubt. P7, for example, reported that she began to question her Christian beliefs when she traveled in countries where the dominant religions were polytheistic. Similarly, P10 began to doubt Christianity while traveling among Muslims. These idea was reinforced by memo **December 17 @ 15:55** *“Seeing more common aspects pick up like culture, learning from others. Participants are not coming to many of these realizations in isolation—rather it appears to be a combination of predisposition to asking questions and having cross-cultural experiences.”* P1 provided a representative response in describing the process through which intellectual dissatisfaction resulted from being in physical proximity to people with different beliefs:

[P1] I think I definitely had doubts begin when I went into college. I think I realized that I’m not special, there’s no reason why I have to have this religion thing right, or why my little sect is the right one. And I think I was struck by the diversity. I went to a big state

school, so I was struck by the diversity of all the different beliefs there that I encountered. It wasn't like anyone there really challenged me a whole lot. It was just kind of being in awe of that [diversity]. It gave me reason to doubt.

Some participants also encountered more active triggers of intellectual dissatisfaction in the form of overt challenges from skeptics of religion. P7 reported that the conversational probing of her beliefs by an atheist of her acquaintance caused her growing doubts to culminate in the decision that her Christian beliefs were not credible. P11 first began to question his religious beliefs after a friendly discussion with an agnostic. P11's perception that he could not offer an informed defense of his beliefs prompted him to reflect that he had no rational basis for them. This experience influenced him to seek such a basis, which he was unable to find. P11 said of the experience:

[P11] [The agnostic] got me questioning where the bible came from, which I thought I knew very clearly, that the Torah was written by, first of all, Moses, and then the scribes and prophets and stuff. And then obviously Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote the gospels, Luke wrote the book of Acts, and then all the letters, you know, were written by who they say they were. Duh, of course I know who wrote the bible. And so when he was asking me about more specifics of who wrote it all and who compiled it and the whole history of it, that's when I kind of had a click in my brain, like I don't know enough about this to really speak on it to other people. And I thought I knew a lot more than I did, so I started delving into some of my bigger questions about the faith, the bible, and the scriptures.

Encounters with skeptics did not need to be direct to trigger intellectual dissatisfaction. P2 and P6 were exposed to skepticism about their religious beliefs through online media. The

entertaining way in which some content developers presented their arguments against religion caused P2 to increase his consumption of their YouTube videos and podcasts. The resulting exposure caused him to reflect on their message, question his beliefs, and seek information more intentionally:

[P2] There were a lot of podcasts I was listening to . . . and there were a bunch of atheist ones that I started listening to, and not identifying as one, but just sort of like, these are funny and entertaining. But the more I listened to them, I'm like, "They have a lot of good points, it sounds like, that's true," and kind of like, "I seem to agree with everything you're saying, which is weird," but not really identifying that way yet. And then I started with a lot of YouTube stuff, and I watched a lot of Richard Dawkins and a lot of Christopher Hitchens.

The experience of trying to explain previously unquestioned beliefs was a powerful trigger of intellectual dissatisfaction for some participants, as when P11 found that he could not engage in an informed debate with a skeptic. A spontaneous desire to be understood could also prompt an unsuccessful attempt to synthesize religious feelings into a coherent, rational statement. P5 reported that he disaffiliated as a result of one such experience, which influenced him to decide that his religious beliefs had no rational support:

[P5] I was dating a girl who I knew wasn't Christian . . . I knew that if she's going to ask me about Christianity, I'm going to have to tell her why I'm a Christian, why I think this. I think it hit me that I just had no reason to think this [Christian belief system] was true. One Sunday morning, I went to church . . . and I was walking up to the door, and I sat down for a few minutes before the service started, and I ended up walking right out, and I

never went back . . . that was the moment it hit me that I shouldn't believe this, I don't have a reason to believe this.

Subcategory B: Emotional Dissatisfaction

Participants experienced their religious beliefs as emotionally inadequate when their faith itself or their participation in a faith community either caused them emotional harm or failed to meet their emotional needs. All 12 participants attested that they perceived their former faith communities as using religious doctrine to justify bigotry against outsiders and emotional manipulation of insiders. Those experiences are discussed under the emotional dissatisfaction subcategory because the distress they caused participants were not associated with an intellectual rejection of bigotry and manipulation, but rather with a visceral revulsion against those patterns and practices that sprang from participants' own negative experiences of them. The progress of emotional dissatisfaction with participants' former religious beliefs and faith communities therefore occurred in three steps. First, participants experienced an unmet need for acceptance by their families and faith communities, often associated with a traumatic experience of rejection or invalidation. Second, the emotional suffering that participants experienced because of their unmet need for acceptance sensitized them to the plight of other groups and individuals whom their faith community and its doctrine rejected. Third, participants experienced an emotional revulsion against their religious beliefs and faith communities that contributed strongly to disaffiliation.

One form of invalidation that participants experienced was religious authorities' selective use of religious doctrine to coerce or manipulate them into conformity. Participants described these experiences as causing them long-term psychological harm. As an example, P12 recalled growing up in a household and church that placed great importance on female chastity,

particularly in relation to premarital abstinence. P12's sense that she was acceptable to her family and community became intertwined with her forbearance from premarital sex. The stress of growing up with her acceptance by family and church dependent on her preservation of her chastity continued to affect her after her disaffiliation, P12 reported:

[P12] My idea of hell and fear and punishment, the idea of sex before marriage was a really big thing in my household . . . And so there was this innate, visceral fear in me of if I have sex before I get married, it's like I'm bringing this shame upon my household . . . Like it would be this awful black mark . . . [So] I came to college horrified of sex . . . but at the point that I did have sex, I afterward had this very emotional reaction of I've broken everything . . . [Now] there is still this very emotional reaction that I can't control, and . . . I can't emotionally fathom how I can shut this off in my brain. So I had to do a lot of rewiring about love and sex and relationships . . . which was a really long, hard process that I am really resentful about.

Other participants also reported negative psychological effects of shame- and fear-based religious instruction that continued after their disaffiliation. The implicit or overt rejection of participants' spontaneous expressions and authentic identities left their need for acceptance unmet, causing chronic stress and feelings of inadequacy. In the following response, P6 gave one example of this type of experience:

[P6] When I was 13 years old, and I was an emo/goth kid, my grandma just said straight-up to me, "If you keep going down the path that you're on, you're going to end up going to hell." And that was damaging because it's like holy fuck, if that's true, then I don't want to go to hell. And it makes you scared of everything, and so I have a lot of anxiety because of that.

P6 experienced rejection and traumatic condemnation of a voluntary identity with which she was experimenting. Other participants reported condemnation of domains of activity as a traumatic form of developmental suppression. P11 described this kind of experience in relation to strict religious prohibitions on developmentally normal activities for children and adolescents:

[P11] To be conservatively brought up, and not being able to do things like go to public school dances and certain types of parties, certain types of events, I wasn't allowed to play certain sports, and do certain things that took me away from different nights of the week. So a lot of kind of made my life a little bit of a hell growing up as a young person.

Participants' experiences of rejection and invalidation sensitized them to other forms of prejudice and discrimination that they perceived as inseparable from the religious beliefs in which they had been raised. Perceptions of faith-rationalized bigotry as arbitrary and malignant prompted participants to use the word "hypocrisy" frequently in their responses. P8 referred to hypocrisy in expressing that the condemnation of his sexual orientation by his childhood church influenced him to form a more general conception of prohibitions against homosexuality as arbitrary and self-serving:

[P8] When I got to college and started to realize that I'm gay, I started to have a much more like oh, it's not just this doesn't make sense, it's that [religious authorities are] hurting me, they're hurting members of my community, they're causing damage . . . I'd almost go as far as saying it's hypocritical. It's like, "Oh, so we're going to shun you for being gay, but I committed adultery, and that's okay because divorce is normal now." And so it's like it doesn't seem to be in a place of good faith, it seems to be a cudgel with which to impart what you believe on others to shield yourself from things that are different from you.

Participants' emotional dissatisfaction with their religious beliefs and faith communities increased when they began to experience the associated practices and principles as condemnable. P10 provided a response in which she described her childhood faith's invalidating focus on regular moral cleansing as "dirty," suggesting a pre-rational revulsion rather than an intellectual objection. P10's response was also an example of parlaying an experience of personal invalidation into a more general emotional dissatisfaction with arbitrary injustice in religious doctrine:

[P10] I remember when I told my parents I lost my virginity, they were just like, "Oh my god, you betrayed God." And I was like I don't know, I had been dating that guy for four years, and I was 18. How is that a bad thing? It just seemed so arbitrary, like who made these rules? . . . [Religious instruction is] very guilt-driven, I feel. It's always about repenting, or you have to be washed of your sins, like you do your first communion, you do your baptism, you do your confirmation. And it's like all of these are just like you have to reaffirm that you are a good person, that you are clean. I think as my sense of morality developed, I started not really thinking of things in terms of good or bad. It just all felt so dirty to me to think that there's these strict rules, and if you don't follow them, you rack up this tally of sins.

Perceptions of moral incongruencies in their faith communities' doctrines and practices also led participants to question the motives of religious institutions and authorities. The response from P8 quoted above suggested that religion-based bigotry was an expression of an unconscious fear of the unfamiliar. P3 described an arbitrary rejection of a family member that they came to associate with a more general perception of venality as the dominant motive of some church leaders:

[P3] *A member of my family died, and because they weren't tithing enough, they were denied a funeral at that church . . . I guess one thing that I started to notice throughout a lot of my experiences with churches was, the larger they get, the more greedy and corrupt they tend to be, especially if we're talking about megachurches, which feel like the for-profit version of a church, which is kind of ridiculous.*

4.3 Category II – Containment of Damage to Relationships

All participants reported that they grew up in families and faith communities where adherence to the prevailing religious beliefs was assumed and where there was strong social pressure to reject or punish deviations from those beliefs. When participants had disaffiliated internally by deciding for themselves that they no longer held their former religious beliefs, they faced a dilemma, particularly in relation to whether and how they should inform their immediate childhood family. One option was to conceal their atheistic beliefs, but this choice caused participants to feel hypocritical when they participated in religious observances, and to experience a sense their acceptance by the people they loved was conditional on their concealment of a part of their identity. The other option was to inform their family and community of their disaffiliation, but this option involved a risk of intense conflict, emotional harm to self and family, and permanent damage to relationships. The two subcategories identified in this category were therefore *avoidance* and *conflict*.

Subcategory A: Avoidance

All 12 participants reported that they had chosen to conceal their atheism from at least some friends or family to avoid conflict and damage to the relationship. Some participants

decided to conceal their disaffiliation from some close family and friends because they had observed what they perceived as foreshadowing of emphatic condemnation and rejection. P8 decided to conceal his disaffiliation from his immediate childhood family because at the time when he was questioning his faith, he attempted to discuss his doubts with his brother. His brother's harsh reaction to doubt persuaded P8 not to risk the more serious provocation of admitting an unacceptable conviction, he said:

[P8] When I started thinking maybe I don't believe, because these theological questions are so hard, I mentioned that to my brother late one night, and his reaction was so stern, that I was like alright, we're leaving that alone, that is an internal problem.

Participants expressed that in all of their relationships and interactions with childhood family and friends who remained religious, they were sensitive to indications that a declaration of disaffiliation would not be tolerated. When participants sensed a threat of intolerance, they typically avoided the subject of religion, especially with more peripheral acquaintanceships where the desire for openness was not urgent. This tendency was noted in the memo **November 17 @ 13:44** "Seeing theme emerging regarding silence around families. The idea of holding onto this part of identity and not trusting family to be understanding. Ongoing strains, especially with parents taking toll on health of family relationships." P6 described a stance of vigilance toward signals of intolerance in acquaintances and her practice of retreating from discussions of religion as soon as she sensed resistance:

[P6] If I notice somebody getting angry, I'm going to back away, like I'm just not going to bring it up because I'm like no, not going there. And I can usually deescalate situations pretty easily because I am more on the timid side, people are like "okay, well,

I'll just let it go." Or I'll tell them, can we just like not talk about this anymore? I don't want us to get upset or anything like that. Because I don't like to be amped up.

Avoidant practices ranged from selective silence to openly lying. Some participants believed that their family members strongly suspected their atheism but believed that silence around the topic would allow them to indefinitely postpone any reckoning that might damage their bonds. P12, for example, had never raised the subject of her atheism with her highly religious parents. She believed they were aware of her atheism, however, and were treating the topic as taboo to avoid overt conflict:

[P12] I have not actually had this conversation with my parents . . . [but] I think that they know. And I think it's just this unspoken thing between us, of we're just not going to have the conversation, because if I actually say it, then you actually have to deal with it. But we can just keep going and leave it unsaid, and everything will be fine.

Avoiding discussions of disaffiliation could also involve participants in lying to loved ones. Participants reported that they felt pressured to refrain from an announcement that they expected would cause an upheaval in their families. Motives associated with this restraint included dread of disapproval and rejection or concern for family members' feelings. In either case, if participants' family members asked them directly about their beliefs before they had announced their disaffiliation, they would lie. P1 reported an experience of being probed by relatives who wanted her to make a clear declaration of acceptable beliefs and of lying to placate them and postpone the confrontations she feared:

[P1] My family, my extended family, they would just kind of prod toward it. And so I'd just be like yeah, I'm Christian, or like yeah, I believe in God, because I didn't want to

hear the judgment and the questions and the why or like, “What happened that made you like that?” I just didn’t want to deal with it.

Participants reported that they were not able to postpone and avoid the announcement of their disaffiliation with impunity, however. Their avoidance had either or both of two consequences. Some participants felt dishonest or like an impostor in their relationships with their loved ones, a feeling that became intolerable to their conscience over time. P9, for example, described the gradual accumulation of guilt so intense he perceived himself as an impostor and trespasser when he was with loved ones:

[P9] Christianity is such a part of how my family identifies and how my family relates to one another and how they spend time together. I felt guilty as an imposter, guilty like I was sneaking in places I don’t belong, by continuing to go to church on Christmas and Easter.

The perceived necessity of remaining silent about disaffiliation could also be experienced as a principled refusal to pretend to be religious, rather than as implicit dishonesty about being an atheist. P9 reported this experience as part of accompanying his family during their religious observances:

[P9] My family, they pray before every meal, they always talk about God and being blessed in the context of the things going on in their life. And I don’t, and I feel like it’s obvious that I don’t, but I play along as much as I can . . . It makes me feel uncomfortable that I’m not participating. Because I’m not going to lie to them, I’m not going to pretend that I’m really religious, but I’m also not going to bring up that I’m not. I’m just going to try and be as neutral as possible, and even being neutral creates tension, and that’s

unfortunate. Obviously in a perfect world, I could be more authentic, but I'm not confrontational, so I'm just going to just let them do their thing.

Even when the opportunity for a full disclosure to family presented itself, participants experienced the moment as tense, charged, and close to intense confrontation, while also perceiving that the relative's question or challenge was not motivated by a desire to remove a possible constraint from the relationship, but rather to elicit reassurance for themselves. P8 had an experience of this kind when his mother asked him directly if he was an atheist. Notable in his description was the density and intensity of his emotional experience, which incorporated fear of wounding his mother, fear of rejection, and aversion to conflict with loved ones:

[P8] My mom once asked me if I was an atheist, and I almost said yes, and she looked so scared and sad and just horrified that I straight-up . . . I pivoted and said I only disagree with the church, not necessarily [agree with] atheism. So the dread of sharing it with my family and the inevitable confrontations that that would be followed up by was the immediate second thing that I felt. So there was the existential crisis, the dread.

Subcategory B: Conflict

When participants eventually disclosed their disaffiliation to loved ones, the outcomes indicated that their expectations of conflict, strain, and rejection had been accurate. No participants reported that their disclosure elicited a supportive or even neutral reaction from family members. The negative reactions participants encountered included grief, anger, condemnation, and long-term damage to relationships, all of which needed to be contained in order to preserve as much of the bond as possible.

Some participants described the reactions their disclosure of disaffiliation provoked from loved ones as expressions of intense grief. This reaction occurred when participants disclosed to

caregivers, particularly mothers, who felt personally responsible for raising their child to be loyal to family and community beliefs. The caregiver's sense that the participant's disaffiliation signified a catastrophic personal failing on their part could cause displays such as violent outbreaks of crying, which, in turn, caused the participants to feel intense guilt. P5 described an experience of this kind, with reference to the pain and guilt of feeling responsible for causing his mother to feel intense grief:

[P5] The emotionally most difficult part was telling my mom and watching her cry sitting here in the living room. Her feeling like she'd failed in life, and her being worried that I was going to go to hell someday. That was pretty hard.

When loved ones did not thrust all of the responsibility for disaffiliation onto the participant, accusations and blame could begin to disrupt family relationships, further increasing the participant's guilt. P10 recounted the experience of telling her mother she was an atheist, adding that witnessing her mother's immediate grief was painful for her, and that her guilt was compounded by the subsequent conflict within the family:

[P10] My mom was like crying so hard when I said [I was an atheist], because I don't think she wanted that for me, but I think she thought "Oh my god, like I messed up, and my daughter is going to suffer forever [in hell] because I messed up." And now there's just like guilt all around and a lot of blaming, and it still doesn't feel good.

Another potential family reaction to the disclosure of atheism was denial. P3 reported that confessing their atheism to their parents changed nothing, except that their parents implicitly rejected the disclosure by never acknowledging it, remaining silent about it, and acting as though it was a transient anomaly:

[P3] I've tried to tell my parents, they kind of just don't accept it. They pretty much act like I am just a questioning Christian who's going to come around.

When family members accepted the disclosure, they could respond with tacit or overt rejection of the participant. When P6 disclosed her atheism, her family tacitly rejected her, both by implicitly assigning her the status of an outsider (“black sheep”), and by overtly disrespecting her beliefs through ongoing attempts to convert her back to theirs:

[P6] The most difficult part about leaving my faith, just feeling like I disappointed my family. That was a big one. And I know to some extent I have, you know, people have told me as much, so that kind of hurts. I'm definitely the black sheep of the family, like people have told me this . . . They do that whole scared-for-your-soul part too, and then it's like they're guilt-tripping you into something. Or you feel like you have to be on the defensive, and it's just not the situation you always want to be in.

When family members rejected disclosures of atheism, either overtly or implicitly, the result was long-term damage to the relationship. In the response from P6 quoted above, she indicated the long-term damage her disclosure caused in her relationships with her extended family. P6 contained this damage by enduring its manifestations in continual tension, implicit rejection, and disrespectful criticism instead of refusing to tolerate them. Other participants reported that long-term damage to relationships could include the potentially permanent termination of contentious but important discussions. P10 had an experience of this kind with her parents after she disappointed them by not returning to Christianity when she had an opportunity:

[P10] I told them no, I still don't believe in [God], it's just something that might be comforting. They like flipped a shit, and they were all mad again. I haven't talked to them since then about that.

When relationships were more peripheral, the disclosure of atheism could result in the complete and permanent termination of contact. P11 reported that the most difficult part of his disaffiliation was the loss of a faith community in which he had enjoyed friendly, supportive relationships with other members of the congregation. The disclosure was unavoidable, P11 said, because he felt compelled to explain to friends and acquaintances why he no longer attended church:

[P11] You just lose a lot of connections with people that you've been really comfortable in asking for help and talking to and just seeing on a weekly, if not a daily basis. And I knew that I was going to lose that. I knew that eventually I was going to have to tell certain people that here's why I'm not going to church, here's why you're not seeing me as much, here's why I feel this way, and here's maybe what I think about what you think.

4.4 Category III – Acceptance of Agency in Meaning-Making

Participants indicated that their experiences of disaffiliation involved an acceptance of their agency in deciding what was meaningful and worthwhile. In describing how they exercised their agency as meaning-makers, participants referenced conscience and reasoning from evidence as the touchstones they used in deciding what they valued and believed. Two subcategories emerged in the data assigned to this category, including *the touchstone of conscience* and *the touchstone of reasoning from evidence*.

Subcategory A: The Touchstone of Conscience

Participants' disaffiliation involved a rejection of the meanings and evaluations they had previously derived from religious doctrines and authorities. For all 12 participants, their own conscience became one of the two most important touchstones for their decisions about what was

meaningful and valuable after disaffiliation. Participants reported that conscience influenced them to find meaning in activities that accorded with what they believed was objectively good, and what they subjectively experienced as right and fulfilling, including altruism, familial love, and friendship. P5 described the acceptance of agency in meaning-making in terms of personal relationships:

[P5] Meaning is kind of about building it myself, what things can I give meaning in my life. Can I invest in my relationship with my girlfriend, or my career? Friendships?

P5's idea of being free to choose how to invest oneself was referenced in some way by all participants. Participants described the investment of themselves in activities that had tangible, positive impacts on other people as the source of meaning that conscience influenced them to choose. P9 chose practical, altruistic action because he believed that in the absence of a benevolent, personal God, responsibility for helping people devolved to other people:

[P9] Given that there is no divine intervention that's going to save everybody and solve every problem, it makes it more incumbent on people to take active steps to do things to improve people's wellbeing.

P1 indicated that she chose to invest herself and find meaning in having a positive effect on others' lives, instead of in the more limited scope she associated with an orientation toward personal spiritual salvation. Notable in P1's response was her suggestion that preoccupation with one's own spiritual immortality was a form of dereliction, particularly when contrasted with pragmatic, altruistic action. P1's perception of helping others as a more fulfilling purpose than investing in a conjectural afterlife was representative of responses from all participants:

[P1] I work with people experiencing homelessness, with severe mental illness and substance abuse issues, and I feel like I honestly make a difference every day. And there

are some people of faith who can't say that . . . It's kind of wild to me that people think like that life after death drives them in life. And I'm like you have all these years on this earth to make a difference and to do things, and instead you're worried about what might happen when you die. Well, how are you treating people while you're here? What are you doing while you're here?

P2 discussed conscience-based meaning-making through altruism from a perspective similar to P1's, and he also provided a specific example of the contrast he experienced between the religious version of altruism and the forms his own conscience prompted. Helping the homeless in practical ways was more aligned with his felt obligation to aid and comfort them, P2 suggested, than the religious alternative of praying for divine intercession:

[P2] I'm probably a better person now . . . Before, it was like you would just pray for those homeless people, right? And now I'm like hey, nobody is helping those homeless people, we should probably do something. Because that's it, nobody is coming for these people. And I feel like it's just too easy to say oh, just pray for it.

P12 also described the investment of the self in helping others as a source of meaning derived from her conscience. In the following response, P12 expressed the important idea of relinquishing a search for absolute meanings in favor of deriving fulfillment from the positive differences she made within the scope of her influence:

[P12] I just don't consider this much larger meaning and purpose idea. It's [my considerations are] a lot more about my sphere of influence and what is in front of me and how I interact on a day-to-day basis. Because I think the idea of trying to figure out existential ideas of why are we here and what are we doing—I think we just are, and we're just living and doing, and that is, strangely, enough for me, that's fine. We're just

here and doing, and the more good that we can do, and the more suffering of others that we can diminish, the better we're doing in the world . . . whatever good I'm able to put into the world like is my meaning and my purpose, and that is enough.

P12's statement that her choice of conscience-based altruism as a source of meaning was "enough" alluded to a key, recurrent idea in participants' experiences. P8 also used the word "enough" in expressing this idea of the sufficiency of conscience-based, pragmatic altruism as a freely chosen source of meaning. His response was representative of the reported perceptions of all participants in this study, in that he dismissed the idea that disaffiliation freed him from moral constraints. Instead, P8 stated, his conscience and preferences allowed him to find meaning in his voluntary adherence to prosocial norms:

[P8] When it comes down to it, my life philosophy is, the point of the human experience on a cosmic scale, there isn't one, so you have to derive a point from your life. And so for me, the point of living is to, just at the most bare-metal level, is to experience joy . . . Me helping someone at work, or going to volunteer with the big event, or adopting my cat, or not murdering people, or not doing all the things that are universally accepted as bad, I do all that because it feels good. It feels good to be a good person . . . and that's enough for me.

Participants emphasized that the alignment of conscience, preference, and prosocial norms was an important condition of their meaning-making. The alignment of what was believed to be objectively good, and what was subjectively experienced as meaningful and fulfilling, was particularly evident in participants' responses about finding meaning in their personal relationships. P10 stated in the following response that meaningful, positive interactions with

other individuals were a necessary and sufficient condition of her ability to find meaning in her life:

[P10] I know that I love people, and I love being around people, and I love talking to people, and I love my friends, and I love my family. And every day that I spend with them feels good, and that's really the kind of thing that holds me to this earth, is knowing that there are people out there that are so interesting, and I want to get to know all of them.

Subcategory B: The Touchstone of Reasoning from Evidence

As discussed under Category 1, subcategory A, one of the factors that influenced all 12 participants to disaffiliate was the experience of discordance between their religious doctrines and the conclusions of their evidence-based reasoning. After disaffiliation, participants' acceptance of agency as meaning-makers involved the willing adoption of evidence-based reasoning as the touchstone for meaning-making in deciding what was true. P1 expressed a perception, shared by all participants, that disaffiliation involved a renouncement of ideological rigidity and a corresponding receptivity to emerging evidence. In one response, P1 described this receptivity as a willingness to return to religious belief if sufficient evidence emerged to support it. P1 affirmed in the same response that she felt she would personally gain nothing by a return to religious belief, but that she would do so on principle:

[P1] I don't need something to help me be a good person. And to me, making decisions, and my beliefs being guided by logic and reason, it just makes me feel better. And so I find that I just need evidence. If evidence came out in the future that God is real, I would reconsider, because otherwise I'd be a hypocrite.

Consistency in following evidence-based reasoning was important to all participants. Some participants took pride in their principled willingness to return to previously rejected

religious beliefs if new evidence made doing so congruent with evidence-based reasoning. This bore out in the memo **August 25 @ 20:00** “A typical thing I’ve seen now is how atheists say they’d return to belief if they were presented w/ evidence for God and that they’d be hypocrites to do otherwise—that’s fascinating to me.” P8 expressed admiration for a television personality and avowed atheist who expressed this commitment during a debate about the truth of religious belief:

[P8] I love Bill Nye’s [the atheist’s] answer on this question . . . [The debate moderator] asked the religious person, “What could change your point of view?” and they said, “Nothing.” And they asked Bill Nye, “What could change your point of view?” and he said, “Evidence.” If I [P8] saw evidence of a higher power, I would definitely be open to it.

The preference for evidence- over faith-based reasoning could either be a cause or a product of participants’ disaffiliation. Participants such as P2 and P3 described themselves as temperamentally inclined toward scientific skepticism, and they reported that their religious beliefs had been an obstacle to the consistent expression of that predisposition. P2 described temperamental skepticism as a lifelong trait from which his religious beliefs had been artificially but unreflectively exempted. P2 described himself after disaffiliation as free to be consistent in using evidence-based reasoning as his touchstone for assessing truth:

[P2] Even when I was religious, it’s not that I would’ve ever bought homeopathic crap, right? It’s not like I suddenly was like no, I’m skeptical about everything. It was like I’m skeptical about everything, but it never occurred to me before that [religion] was a thing you could be skeptical about. That one was always reserved, like you’re not supposed to use logic on that, of course not. Let’s laugh at the people who used logic on that one,

right, like they don't understand. So now I feel like it's not that I've become more skeptical. It's just that I've become better at it, and become more aware that I should use it on everything.

Other participants reported that disaffiliation had freed them to adopt evidence-based reasoning as the touchstone for truth for the first time. P7 stated that when she was a Christian, she experienced her religious belief system as the default, from which any conflicting belief was a lapse. Using faith-based reasoning as the sole touchstone for value and truth freed P7 of self-doubt, she said:

[P7] I feel like when you are aware of a lot more—I think that's kind of one of the differences that I'm trying to explain—is that when I was a Christian, I didn't feel like I had to question myself, or I didn't feel like I needed to bend myself for anyone else, because my beliefs were of the dominant beliefs . . . now that I realize that oh, there's other beliefs, I shouldn't just assume that it's okay for me to push [my beliefs] out, I can be a little bit more cautious about stepping on any toes.

Participants perceived their commitment to evidence-based critical thinking as making them more flexible in their beliefs. The resulting willingness to respectfully consider perspectives that differed from their own facilitated empathy and communication. P7, in the response just quoted, indicated that disaffiliation enabled her to appreciate that beliefs in conflict with her own were potentially valid. P1 described the reason-based openness to perspectives other than her own that she experienced in her former job as a substance abuse counselor for incarcerated men. P1 reported that she had no first-hand experience of addiction to give her insight into what her clients experienced. She also observed that her clients often condemned themselves because their belief systems included an evaluation of addiction as a failing of moral

character. P1's acceptance of a scientific understanding of addiction not only helped her to empathize with her clients, but enabled her to validate their experiences in such a way that they could begin to forgive and accept themselves:

[P1] When I worked in prison with adult men, explaining the science behind addiction, explaining how it changes and alters the brain, and how long it takes your brain to recover, it's like a light-bulb moment for them. Nobody has ever told them that, like they just think they're a moral failing, and they're not strong enough, and they're a bad person. And then you explain well, you've been doing this for 15 years, this is what's happened to your brain. Your brain now categorizes that drug with food, water, and sleep. [Addiction is] not easy, I know it's not easy, I haven't been through it, but science tells me that's not easy.

4.5 Category IV – Self-exploration and Self-actualization

Participants reported that the effect of accepting agency in meaning-making was that they felt free to discover what they spontaneously felt, wanted, and believed, instead of feeling constrained by an obligation to accept a prefabricated set of understandings. Participants engaged in self-discovery by studying without feeling that they transgressed the boundaries of allowable curiosity in doing so, by forming understandings of the world that did not involve cognitive dissonance, by freely developing their identities in accordance with their own perceptions and wishes, and by engaging in the pursuits in which they chose to find meaning. I made note of this concept in memo **July 18 @ 20:25** “So many of the interviews have highlighted their own sense of growth. Although isolation during the process comes up frequently, so too does talk of greater confidence + self-determination.” Participants reported that they engaged in all of these forms of self-exploration and self-actualization at once, often through the same activities.

Participants spoke of the clarity of understanding they experienced when they no longer felt obligated to accept beliefs that conflicted with their evidence-based reasoning. In speaking of the resolution of cognitive dissonance, participants used terms that indicated profound relief and feelings of enlightenment. P7, for example, suggested that rejecting religious beliefs and freeing herself of cognitive dissonance was like discarding a physical burden: “

[P7] I just remember it feeling like a weight lifted off my shoulders, just like oh, I don't have to pretend anymore, like there were all these things that were so cloudy and just confusing. And I often wouldn't just think about them, I kind of just brushed it off, and things didn't make sense, but you were taught to believe them anyway, and so you'll just kind of keep going forward with this belief, even though you don't really understand why . . . I just remember feeling like, oh, this is what it feels like to not have as much cognitive dissonance, this is really amazing.

Other comparisons participants used in describing the experience of rejecting religious beliefs included similes and metaphors related to removing obstructions from vision. P11, for example, employed a biblical reference in describing the clarity that ensued after his cognitive dissonance resolved:

[P11] It felt like someone had pulled the wool from over my eyes—clarity, I felt like I had a lot of clarity and a lot of room to study other things without being afraid that I was doing something wrong, necessarily.

Other participants joined P11 in associating the rejection of religious beliefs with a liberating abolishment of unnecessary taboos. When participants perceived that they were no longer banned from exploring pursuits and other aspects of experience that their religion had placed off-limits, they felt free to explore themselves through their responses to novel

experiences. P6 spoke of religious constraints on her scope of activity as internalized restrictions and of their rejection as enabling:

[P6] I can allow myself to get involved in different things that I would not have allowed myself to get involved in, had I become just defaulted on religion . . . I'm going to be going back to school and become a physics teacher, and so I'm definitely going to be delving more into the universe itself and stuff like that. And I don't know if I'll stop there or not, because if I could become an astrophysicist, that would be awesome.

Participants often compared living according to their former religious beliefs to forms of compulsion and restraint, suggesting that they did not perceive themselves as autonomous decision-makers prior to their disaffiliation. P3 employed a simile that compared the experience of adhering to religious beliefs to being railroaded, or compelled to progress along a single, preset course. Rejecting religious beliefs, P3 stated, allowed them to take control. Notable in P3's response were their reports that achieving autonomy outside of religious constraints resulted in a feeling that their decisions were consequential and that they were free to self-actualize:

[P3] Being religious . . . it felt like mentally, emotionally, I was just on a track . . . It just felt like I was on a preset track, there was nothing I could change, things were just going to happen the way they were, and I was stuck. It didn't matter what I did, what my decisions were, the ending was going to be the same. And I guess now I just feel like I have more agency over my life. I feel like my decisions actually matter . . . I feel like I have more choices now, I feel like I have more freedom to just be the person I'm going to be, now that I don't have to worry or really even think about what this track of my life is.

The experience of atheism as freedom to self-actualize was closely associated with the feeling of discarding a burden that P7 expressed in the response quoted above. Constraints on

self-actualization grounded in religious doctrine were not only experienced as confining in the manner of a railroad track that could not be left, but as oppressive in the manner of a heavy weight. P9 combined optical (“focus”), epiphanic (“discover”), and kinesthetic (“shed the unnecessary things”) metaphors in describing the autonomous self-exploration and self-actualization he associated with his atheism:

[P9] I just feel more like I'm living who I feel I am. It made me feel like I'm discovering myself, and hey, this is a facet of myself that I've gone through the process of discovering. And now I can just shed the unnecessary things and focus on the things that I really find value and meaning in.

Participants also associated disburdening and liberation from artificial constraints with an enhanced ability to empathize with people who held differing beliefs. Increased flexibility in their own thinking allowed participants to understand and validate other's perspectives, as discussed through the example of P1's experience under Category 3. Increased ability to empathize and to value people over belief systems could also be a liberating form of self-actualization when it was experienced as the removal of the obligation to endorse bigoted beliefs and act on spontaneous sympathy:

[P8] The thing that I gained when I stopped being religious was it made me a much better person. When I was religious, I was very toe-the-line. I remember when I was a young kid talking about how gay people are going to hell, because that's what I was taught. I knew somewhere in my mind that I was [gay], but I couldn't even form the words in my mind. And I didn't question how that action [of condemning gay people] would hurt others. All that mattered was that it was our religion, it was our identity, it was part of who we are, and that's me being a team player. So I feel that I ask myself

those empathetic questions in more situations more often, which, from my moral standpoint, has made me a better person.

The freedom to self-actualize in accordance with individual conscience was salient among the experiences that participants associated with their disaffiliation. As discussed under Category 3, participants perceived themselves as free to decide and do what was meaningful according to their internal moral sense. Participants consistently reported that their most satisfying experiences of self-actualization occurred when their actions were expressions of their conscience, rather than expressions of submission to a doctrine that often conflicted with their conscience. P12 described this experience as follows:

[P12] A lot of who I am now is like, okay, I can be who I feel like I'm supposed to be, and I can make choices in life that don't have to be because a book told me that's what I'm supposed to be doing, or a higher being told me that I'm not supposed to do that. I'm doing things for the betterment of myself, my community, my life.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to elucidate the experience of disaffiliation from Christianity and subsequent self-identifying with atheism among American millennials and determine how therapists may be able to serve millennial atheists during their period of identity transition. This section will summarize the findings in a storyline as well as proffer the researcher's cogitations on the findings. Following that section, the relationship between the results and the impact on practice will be expanded on to illustrate the inferences of the study. The final section will review study limitations and recommendations for additional inquiry.

Storylining is a technique common in grounded theory research wherein the researcher offers their interpretation of the data as an abstraction in order to illustrate their conception of the theory in a way that is digestible (Birks et al., 2009). The storyline of the participants of this study opens with millennial Christians first finding *dissatisfaction with religious beliefs*. *Intellectual dissatisfaction* arises because of challenges to dogma as well as exposure to atheistic ideas while *emotional dissatisfaction* emerges due to factors including experiences of abuse or aversion to condemnatory teachings, particularly against marginalized groups such as the LGBTQ+ community. These two pathways have their distinctive features, but they are not mutually exclusive. While managing their disaffiliation internally, the formerly Christian millennial atheists considered the interpersonal consequences of voicing their atheist identity through *containment of damage to relationships*. Some millennial atheists chose to use an *avoidance* strategy with friends and family by denying or minimizing their atheism to keep peace and escape judgment. Other millennial atheists disclosed their atheist identity and were met with *conflict* including arguments, familial strain, and rejection. Alongside navigating interpersonal

challenges, millennial atheists turned inward and arrived at *acceptance of agency in meaning-making*. They had previously derived meaning from their religious dogma. Meaning arrived in two forms for participants. One is *the touchstone of conscience* denoting a moral code that emphasizes self-improvement as well as being active in building a healthier community and society. The other is *the touchstone of reasoning from evidence*, which stresses the importance of basing beliefs on science and logic. These forms of meaning-making ultimately led the millennial atheists to the concluding process of disaffiliation of Christianity and adoption of atheist identity. The associated *self-exploration and self-actualization* had positive outcomes, including confidence, empowering autonomy, openness to experience, and release from constraints.

5.1 Reflections of the Researcher

The aim of this study was to understand how American millennials experience disaffiliating from Christianity and adopting atheism. Due to the dearth of research on the process of disaffiliation from Christianity to atheism among millennials, a phenomenological method was selected. The researcher selected grounded theory as the phenomenological and constructivist method for this study. It demands researchers to be aware of the context within which they themselves enter the inquiry. Charmaz (2014) said, “the constructivist approach perspective shreds notions of a neutral observer and value-free expert.” Charmaz further stated “not only does that mean researchers must examine rather than erase how their privileges and preconceptions may shape the analysis, but it also means that their values shape the very facts that they can identify.” For these reasons, I maintained a methodological journal. Following each interview, I inscribed my cognitive and emotional reactions to substantiate the findings and my engagement in constructing the themes. I also regularly returned to the journal throughout the

entire data analysis to reflect on and develop ideas. Member checks were conducted during analysis to preserve the meanings of the participants. This was to reduce the possibility of over-identifying with interviewees and misrepresenting their experiences. These conversations aided in solidifying the categories and confirming the experiences of the interviewees.

Prior to the start of interviews, I was confident that my own experience of disaffiliating from Christianity (Catholicism specifically) and adoption of atheism would be echoed by most of the study participants. I knew that my experience doubtlessly contoured the study as a whole, the key questions and the interview protocol, and the expectations I had for what disaffiliation looks like for American millennials. My own disaffiliation was an emotional and spiritual whiplash. Over the course of a single weekend in April 2009, I felt my faith go from the most defining component of my identity to something that felt like something excised in an emergency surgery. Two of my friends in the military were adamant in confronting my rigid Roman Catholic dogma with books, documentaries, and spirited debate that led me to dissatisfaction with my religious beliefs. This dissatisfaction and disaffiliation left me feeling wounded and directionless, and it took months, years even, to feel fully recovered. A few friendships strengthened as a result, but many more were lost. A solitary family relationship was improved, but the relationships with other members of my family were damaged and a decade on have not healed.

I explored numerous ideas and ideologies to try to fill the hole that left in the wake of my disaffiliation, but nothing ever replaced what Catholicism was to me. Certainly, in that time I felt my disaffiliation as a loss to be grieved. I would say the death of the concept of God hit me just as hard as the deaths of friends and family members. I am quite sure that I would have benefited from having a therapist through this process who could understand and normalize what to me felt traumatic and overwhelming. Ultimately, I did have the experience of eventually deriving my

sense of meaning through recognition of my own agency like so many of my interviewees. I chose to put my energy into living my values of honesty, kindness, and social justice. My personal belief is that there is no inherent meaning to life, so we are free to direct our attention to what we find most fulfilling. Each of the participants arrived at this fundamental core belief, but the differences are found in where they assign meaning. I believe people often reveal their meaning through where they dedicate their time and energy. I hold that it is important to feel as though my life and experiences are meaningful while trying to minimize the dread that can arise from simultaneously believing that my life has no greater purpose in a deterministic universe.

Reviewing each of the transcriptions many times over was critical to ensuring that I was presenting the experiences of the interviewees as precisely as possible. All the while, I know that my own biases and the lens through which I interpret their words altered the findings. My training in clinical interviewing leant me the ability to restate and offer interpretations with some degree of frequency during each interview. In this way, I could ensure that I was receiving the participants' words in alignment with their intentions. The in vivo checks followed by post hoc conferring yielded results that I believe represent their experiences accurately. This is because the conferrals allowed participants to clarify any portion of the transcripts.

Reflecting on the data, it strikes me that I now have seemingly more questions than answers. Some of the more compelling questions are as follows. What personal factors lead to some millennial atheists deciding to disclose their identity to family members? What factors would have to be in place for those who chose not to disclose their atheism to do so? What cultural or personality factors are more protective to an individual's sense of self? Specifically, when a component of the identity is discarded versus what cultural or personality factors may

inhibit a healthy shift from belief to disbelief? I think it would be valuable to obtain answers to these questions. The answers potentially could shed further light on the findings of this study.

5.2 Discussion of Findings

This section is divided into two subsections: psychological interpretations and therapeutic implications. Each of these subsections aims to explicate the relationship between the findings of this study and the practice of counseling psychology.

A) Psychological Interpretations

Several of the most significant challenges that millennials face when disaffiliating from Christianity and endorsing atheism lies in the fact that atheism is a concealable stigmatized identity or “CSI” (Abbott & Mollen, 2018). Although the identity is salient to atheists and part of their self-concept, they would have to disclose their atheism in order to be stigmatized. Otherwise, it would remain unknown to others, bypassing the stigmatization and its aversive emotional consequences. For instance, if this person came to atheism from a Christian family nested in a Christian community, the person perceives disclosing this identity as fraught with numerous risks. Existing in this state of tenuousness puts the individual in a condition of vulnerability. This parlous scenario was the case for each of the participants in this study. Each of them felt it disconcerting to whom they disclosed their atheist identity and when they did so.

The initial disaffiliation itself foments existential anxiety as individuals discard previous psychological panaceas to manage the terror of mortality. This leaves the individual feeling isolated in both an existential sense as well as in relation to the Christian believers in their life. In some ways, it may be advantageous for atheists to conceal their identity, for it allows them to proceed with caution. However, it is also a psychological burden to believe that an aspect of this identity is unacceptable to others in society and more so to one’s own family and friends. Such a

scenario is the classic approach-avoidance conflict. To disclose their atheism or not disclose their atheism? That is the question. The new atheist, therefore, is torn between the “sling and arrows of outrageous emotional fortune” or a “sea of emotional troubles.” Neither is desirable. In seeking to manage the change in identity, a disaffiliated individual will want to feel reintegrated in their concept of self. As their self-concept previously included their identity as a Christian, the question of “Who am I now?” will arise in relation to the individual themselves, to others, and to the universe. However, since atheism is a CSI, there is significant trepidation surrounding who can be trusted to discuss one’s disaffiliation. The uncertainty of how disaffiliating from Christianity will be received by others (or perhaps even more grimly an expectation of rejection) is an additional barrier to reducing the incongruity. Actually, the incongruity cuts two ways: between the new atheist’s self-concept and real self and between the new atheist’s identity and actual presentation of themselves to others. Both are trepidatious.

The transition out of incongruity to a congruent, integrated identity aids in continuing the move towards self-actualization (Rogers, 1959). The use of congruent in the therapeutic context indicates an accurate vision of oneself and one’s experience while incongruent means a discrepancy between one’s self-concept and one’s lived experience (Kuba, 2013). The facilitation of this movement towards a congruent self-concept occurs through receiving unconditional positive regard from others, which is particularly crucial if one comes to see their security in interpersonal relationships as conditional due to the impact of disaffiliating from Christianity. However, this is precisely what they often do not experience. The recently disaffiliated atheist will need to experience this aspect of their identity as acceptable to others in order to advance through stages of greater identity salience and integration.

The Cass model (Shurts et al, 2020) for gay and lesbian identity development has elements that are useful for facilitating the identity development of atheists. As another segment of the population that has a CSI, therapists who counsel atheists might employ the following considerations in therapy. This could include identifying what level of acceptance the client has reached in their own atheist identity integration such as the “red zone” connoting maladaptive self-beliefs to more adaptive “yellow zone” and “green zone” levels (Shurts et al, 2020). It would be appropriate to assess for risk as well as identify support collaborators in the client’s life that would be safe to discuss their disaffiliation with if family members are perceived as riskier.

B) Therapeutic Implications

Each of the categories found in the present inquiry has attendant implications for therapists to be aware of and for which to consider appropriate interventions. The major category *dissatisfaction with religious beliefs* has two subcategories. The first of these subcategories, *intellectual dissatisfaction*, comprises themes of exposure to atheistic ideas, exposure to different cultures and ideas, and studying religion and beliefs. Knowledge of which of these factors were most influential for a client in psychotherapy could have implications on what they may rely on in their decision making more broadly. This has potential for being therapeutically relevant if for instance the client may benefit more from cognitively-based interventions that are based in distinguishing between rational and irrational thoughts and seeking evidence for beliefs (Stone & Strunk, 2020).

The second subcategory, *emotional dissatisfaction*, comprises several themes including abuse experiences, aversion to condemnatory teachings, aversion to hypocrisy, emotional needs

not met, and frustration. In the emotional dissatisfaction subcategory, the negative affective experiences influenced participants' decision to leave Christianity. This information can be telling about how the client's emotions influences their decision-making. Generally, it is helpful for clinicians to know the degree to which clients base their choices off their emotional reasoning and desire for equilibrium as this has implications about their motivations and potentially their locus of control (Mortensen et al., 2019).

The second major category to come out of the data, *containment of damage to relationships*, had two subcategories: avoidance and conflict. The subcategory of avoidance comprised themes of constraints in communication, denial, fear of conflict and judgment, and keeping the peace. Those who engage in these types of communication strategies could potentially benefit from psychological support in therapy and explore in a nonjudgmental environment how to notice avoidant, aversive patterns of behavior and gain confidence in communicating their authentic thoughts and feelings outside of the therapeutic space. It is essential under the circumstances that the client would receive unconditional positive regard from a therapist. Clients in the midst of the process of disaffiliation could also potentially derive benefits from group therapy to experience validation and redevelop the sense that they are capable of relating to others if they believe they are not acceptable within their social circle.

The second subcategory under *containment of damage to relationships*, conflict, displayed the substantial resistance that interviewees experienced including themes of arguments, family strain, guilt, and rejection. Whether clients disclosed their disaffiliation to their family, exploration of family dynamics and feelings of rejection or concealing an aspect of identity is therapeutically relevant. The impact on interpersonal relationships is debatably the most salient matter to attend to for a therapist in this context. Therapists would be advised to aid

clients in navigating their dynamics and anticipating potential outcomes of disclosing their atheist identity and if this authenticity risks damaging significant attachments. This could be done using role-playing techniques from Gestalt therapy to facilitate perspective taking or do reality testing around self-disclosure to loved ones (Pugh, 2017). This is one of many possible helpful interventions, but could be efficacious particularly in learning to communicate about atheism in a way that is assertive and non-defensive.

Another major category that arose from the data, *acceptance of agency in meaning-making*, revealed the existential landing place that religiously disaffiliated millennials came to after adopting atheism. This category illustrates that millennial atheists eventually assert that meaning is constructed, found in the present rather than in the afterlife, and the need for meaning can be satisfied via self-improvement and dedication to a community. Prior to this conclusion, existential therapy interventions would attend to many of the concerns that are at the core of the process of disaffiliation: mortality, finality, existential isolation, and the problem of meaninglessness. Exploration of both meaning and values can be clarifying to clients in therapy and can aid in refocusing aspects of a client's life to aid in behavioral change and to increase sense of congruence (Bonow & Follette, 2009). Existential therapy builds meaning by allowing the client to acknowledge the predicaments inherent to mortality with their therapist and feel less alone as a direct product of exploring and "being-in-the-world" (Robles, 2016) together. As disaffiliation was an isolating experience for the participants in this inquiry, a sense of unity and shared exploration could provide the recently disaffiliated client with comfort.

Lastly, *self-exploration and self-actualization* reflected the participants' insights on what assets were derived from their process. This final category displayed multiple themes including confidence, empowering autonomy, freedom of thought, identity exploration and development,

openness to experience, and release from constraints. The potential for being broadly more receptive to differences among other people like being more accepting and empathetic as opposed to their prior disposition of suspicion and intolerance bodes well psychologically. It maps onto the final two portions of the Rogers theory of change in which the client becomes more accepting of others and the client becomes more congruent in relationships with others. It may also mean that therapists could speak to the eventually resilient constitution of atheists who disaffiliated from Christianity and instill hope around this idea that there are documented benefits to disaffiliation. This is not to suggest that leaving Christianity is a remedy for all intrapersonal difficulties. However, therapists can potentially offer hope to clients who are currently experiencing distress as a result of their disaffiliation that there are a multitude of positive effects that could emerge on the other side of the tumult. Instillation of hope and speaking to the universality of the human experience are well documented as facilitating positive therapeutic outcomes (Jabreel et al., 2018).

5.3 Recommendations for Future Inquiry

Recommendations for future research are related to the multicultural components of this study that deserve further attention, longitudinal considerations, and other personal factors that may elucidate or expand upon the findings of this investigation. First, future studies could examine the experience of disaffiliation from Christianity among culturally diverse groups. Furthermore, other studies could be conducted that address experience of disaffiliation from other religions such as Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism in America. Much could potentially be gleaned from further inquiries that compare and contrast disaffiliation across a mixture of cultures and religions and identify the areas of overlap. The current inquiry represented men and women evenly as well as one person who identifies as non-binary. Only one participant was

African-American, and there were no Asian-American participants. There were also few Latino people interviewed for the study. It is possible that people of color have a different experience of disaffiliating from Christianity than do white American millennials. Only a quarter of participants in this study were married, and only one of the participants had children. Discovering how cultural differences intersect with disaffiliation may serve to broaden and deepen our understanding of this phenomenon.

Second, a new line of research could explore the phenomenon of individuals who disaffiliate from their religion and reaffiliate. All of the millennial participants doubted they would return to religion someday. However, there are individuals who eventually return to their original religious tradition or affiliate with a different religious tradition after becoming an atheist. Like the present student, discovering the nature of this process, along with its exigencies, potentially could open up new understandings about the nature of these multifaceted transitions. In addition, it could be advantageous to conduct longitudinal studies that identified whether people who disaffiliate from religion ever return to religious belief in any capacity as they age. According to Shulgin, Zinkina, and Korotayev (2019), it is possible that there will be a resurgence in religiosity by 2040 at which point millennials will be aged 45-60. Examining the influences that atheists could face (social pressures raise children with religious beliefs, a desire to find a community that is readily present in organized religion, innate fear of mortality in the face of aging, disease, death of loved ones) over a period of years or decades could be helpful in understanding the impact of disaffiliation. Furthermore, a longitudinal approach could help identify what challenges related to disaffiliation may be anticipated across the lifespan.

Third, another line of research could investigate the relationship of clergy abuse in the church and disaffiliation. None of the participants in this disclosed any kind of abuse

(psychological, physical, and sexual) by members of clergy that lead to their disaffiliation. However, this finding does not mean that clergy abuse is not implicated in the disaffiliation among some atheists. This finding simply indicates that abuse is not a prerequisite for deserting a faith tradition and adopting atheism. We have a plethora of research that religious faith is instrumental in adaptive coping, resilience, and forgiveness. If, however, the perception is that the church is responsible for the abuse and subsequent disaffiliation, several important research questions come to the forefront? How prominent is clergy abuse in disaffiliation? How do survivors who disaffiliate use other agents for healing? How do survivors who weigh disaffiliation but do not disaffiliate use their religious faith for healing?

Finally, this inquiry raises a host of questions that can be investigated through the use of quantitative methods. Do female atheists have better health outcomes than male atheists? Do white atheists have better health outcomes than atheists of color when controlling for other factors? Do marriages between atheists have similar levels of marital happiness to those of believers? Are there differences in marital satisfaction between couples in which there is a shared belief versus marriages in which only one partner is an atheist? These questions illustrate that both qualitative and quantitative research methods can contribute to our understanding of a complex phenomenon like disaffiliation.

5.4 Limitations

Several limitations surrounding the study could have influenced the results. Firstly, the study was regional. Each participant is from the state of Texas. Furthermore, the larger cultural context of the south may not be indicative of how millennials in less religious regions of the nation experience disaffiliation. For instance, what might be the results of a similar study

conducted in New England, a region of the country that is notably more secular than Texas? According to the majority of participants, only a handful of people they knew at their time of disaffiliation from Christianity identified as atheists. In places where atheism is more common, it is possible that those who were in the process of disaffiliation may have different experiences. Secondly, the study had a sample size of only twelve people. Charmaz stated, “12 interviews suffice for most researchers” but notes, “twelve interviews may generate themes but may not command respect” (2014). It would have been ideal to have many more participants and for the participants to be more representative of the nation as a whole. However, it proved challenging to get even twelve interviewees for several reasons—not the least of which being the potentially sensitive subject matter as most interviews elicited feelings of sadness and anger at different times. Thirdly, the period since the participants had undergone their disaffiliation varied considerably, ranging from only six months at the time interview to well over a decade. This variation could have been a factor in the findings. Finally, my own subjectivity as the researcher could be a limitation. We cannot discount the collecting and filtering of the data through my unique configuration of life experiences, contexts, and biases.

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