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Hidden in Plain Sight: Working Class and Low-Income Atheists

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Abstract

The current study sought to qualitatively examine the role of social class in the development of atheist identity, the experience of atheism-related minority stress, and relationships between atheists. Using a critical phenomenological design, we captured the experiences of 15 working-class and the low-income U.S. American atheists and identified five themes: Early Doubts and Establishment of Atheist Values; Diverse Experiences of Antiatheist and Class-Based Stigma; Expecting Indifference, Exercising Caution; Strategies of Concealment and Disclosure; and Atheism as an Individual, Rather Than Collective, Experience. Results suggested working-class and low-income atheists engaged in strategic outness to manage risk, and their atheist identities developed similarly to studies including primarily class-privileged atheists. However, working-class and low-income atheists diverged from extant atheism scholarship in their relatively low atheist identity centrality and limited engagement with and perceived connection to other atheists. We conclude with implications for our findings and directions for future research.

Public significance statement – The study suggests that working-class and low-income atheists, compared to atheists with more class privilege, perceive their atheism as less central to their identity and are less likely to engage with other atheists. They employ strategies to manage disclosure and concealment of their atheism in line with unique risks to job security and relationships, given the religiousness of their families and communities.

Keywords: atheism, working-class, intersectionality, qualitative research

Most self-identified atheists are White, male, and class-privileged, as indicated by high levels of educational attainment and income commensurate with advanced degrees (Pew Research Center, 2015). Working-class and low-income atheists have been largely absent from extant atheist scholarship. In the United States (U.S.) people who identify as atheists are stigmatized, or devalued by society (Goffman, 1963), and experience adversity related to minority stress and antiatheist discrimination (Brewster et al., 2016) rooted in the institutionalization of Christianity (Blumenfeld, 2020). However, atheist identification is also associated with benefits, including authenticity and belonging (Abbott, Mollen, et al., 2020; LeDrew, 2013; Smith, 2011). To date, studies of atheism have predominantly included atheists identifying as middle to upper-middle and more privileged classes; therefore, the impact of social class on living with an atheist identity, if any, is unknown. The confluence of structural oppression and privilege, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), is an understudied facet of the lived experiences of atheists; similarly, social class has less frequently been a component of intersectional analysis (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Minoritized atheists may face different tensions than other atheists (Smith, 2013), and we sought to begin addressing this gap in the literature by qualitatively examining the experiences of working-class and low-income atheists.

Atheists in the United States

Though definitions of atheism vary, Bullivant (2013) described atheists broadly as individuals without belief in the existence of a god or gods. Although the religious landscape of the U.S. is shifting such that more people are religiously unaffiliated than ever before, and Christianity is decreasing across racial, gender, social class, and geographic demographic groups, these religious “nones” include agnostics (5% of U.S. Americans), and predominantly, individuals who describe their religion as “nothing in particular” (17% of U.S. Americans). Atheists, specifically, remain a distinct minority, representing 4% of the U.S. population (Pew Research Center, 2019b), and the majority are White (78%), under 50 years of age (77%), male (68%), and politically liberal (56%; Pew Research Center, 2015). However, Gervais and Najle (2018) suggested atheists may comprise as much as 26% of the U.S. population with some avoiding using the term atheist to identify due to antiatheist stigma, particularly among members of other historically marginalized groups (e.g., women and people of color; Scheitle et al., 2018). The strength of nonreligiousness (Cragun et al., 2015) and the nature of atheism (Cliteur, 2009) can vary, as well, such that some atheists are private in their nonbelief whereas others may be public and/or political, advocating for atheist people and values.

Atheism and Minority Stress

In the U.S., Christianity is often conflated with patriotism, and Christian dominance subordinates members of other faith groups and nonbelievers (Blumenfeld, 2020). Accordingly, antiatheist stigma is well documented and pervasive (Smith & Cragun, 2019) with atheists often perceived as immoral (Gervais, 2014), untrustworthy (Gervais et al., 2011), and angry (Meier et al., 2015). As a result, atheists experience covert (Cheng et al., 2018) and overt (Brewster et al., 2016) discrimination, including slander, ostracism, and hate crimes (Hammer et al., 2012) that negatively impacts their well-being. Similar to research results regarding other historically marginalized groups in the U.S. (e.g., Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), minoritized sexualities and genders; Calabrese et al., 2015; Hatzenbuehler, 2009), emerging research suggests atheists experience *minority stress* (Abbott, Mollen, et al., 2020; Brewster et al., 2016), distress occurring as a result of conflict between the values of minoritized people and the dominant culture and associated stigmatization (Meyer, 1995).

Studies of atheists have found the anticipation (Abbott & Mollen, 2018) and experience of (Brewster et al., 2016) antiatheist stigma is associated with loneliness, decreased psychological well-being, and physical illness symptoms. Similarly, the experience of nonreligious microaggressions, most common among atheists compared to other nonreligious people, is associated with depressive symptoms (Cheng et al., 2018). Relatedly, atheists make strategic determinations about outness (Abbott, Mollen, et al., 2020), the degree to which a hidden identity is made known to others (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). Generally, outness is positively associated with well-being among atheists (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Smith, 2011); however, the relationship may differ based on atheists' other historically marginalized identities and associated intersections of power and marginalization. For example, in a small sample of atheists of color, disclosure and concealment were associated with more experienced discrimination as well as higher rates of psychological distress (Abbott, Ternes, et al., 2020).

Atheist identification (Doane & Elliott, 2015; Galen & Kloet, 2011) and identification with an atheist community (Abbott & Mollen, 2018) have been positively correlated with mental and physical health. Studies of the development of an atheist identity revealed benefits of strong identification as an atheist, including belonging, authenticity, and activism (LeDrew, 2013; Smith, 2011). Among a sample of atheists of color predominantly from Judeo-Christian backgrounds, participants described feelings of connection to other atheists and the development of "good without god" as a personal value (Abbott, Mollen, et al., 2020). Therefore, though strongly identified atheists are more likely to report perceived discrimination (Hammer et al., 2012), strong identification as an atheist may protect against minority stress (Doane & Elliott, 2015) and offer other benefits that contribute to psychological well-being.

To date, studies of atheists have been relatively homogenous, including few working-class and low-income participants and with little intersectional analysis. Intersectionality theorists (Crenshaw, 1989) suggest interlocking systems of oppression, particularly race, gender, and class, occurring at the individual, social, and systemic levels are more descriptive of lived experiences and consideration of such systems is necessary for empowerment (Collins, 1990). Thus, it is informative to examine *intersectional stress* (Ching et al., 2018),

minority stress related to multiple systems of domination, in this case antiatheist stigma and discrimination as well as classism and social class-related economic disadvantages.

Social Class and Classism

Most societies are stratified, resulting in distributions of power that create inequity (Smith & Mao, 2012). Social class is one such stratification reflecting social relationships between and among groups (Krieger et al., 1997), often measured by education, income, and other socioeconomic positions; alone, these data points fail to capture adequately the construct of class. Other class determinants include experiences, access to resources, type of work, societal income inequality, prestige, and power or lack thereof (Lott, 2012; Smith, 2008). Classism, specifically, refers to institutional and interpersonal oppression experienced by those with marginalized social classes, typically working-class and low-income backgrounds (Lott, 2012). Thus, social class is a complex construct with significant implications for individuals' financial security, physical health, and psychological well-being (Smith, 2015).

Equating low-income relative to household size with qualifying for public assistance programs does not sufficiently account for this complexity (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2019). Lott (2012) described low-income workers as those who are underpaid, not covered by worker protection laws, and experience challenges such as job instability, food insecurity, and environmental dangers (e.g., toxic pollutants); examples of low-income work include food service, hotel maid service, healthcare aide, and warehouse jobs. The term *working class* is sometimes inclusive of low-income individuals (Crumb et al., 2020), but generally refers to skilled workers who may have some benefits (e.g., unions and healthcare) and relatively stable employment but experience economic disadvantages relative to middle and high-income people (Lott, 2012). Subjective interpretations of social class may differ from objective measures but are generally reliable and similarly predictive of psychological outcomes (American Psychological Association, 2007).

Importantly, social class and resulting economic inequalities are structural, created, and maintained by institutions (Bullock & Lott, 2019), as are oppressions with which social class intersects including racism and sexism. For example, women of color, particularly Black and Latinx single mother heads of household, are exponentially more likely to be poor (Mantsios, 2019) compared to White women. Importantly, though, some multiply marginalized people develop adaptive coping strategies that can attenuate the impact of intersecting systems of oppression. For example, working-class virtues like self-efficacy and resiliency can support Black women navigating predominantly White systems (Crumb et al., 2020). In other cases, marginalized educational attainment may be protective, as in one study in which Black adults with a college education reported experiencing more discrimination than those with a high school education (Pew Research Center, 2019a), which researchers speculated may be the result of college-educated Blacks more likely working in predominantly White environments.

Social Class and Classism among Atheists

Pew Research Center's (2015) Religious Landscape Survey reported 58% of atheists earned \$50,000 or more annually, compared to 44% of Christians in the same survey; 18% earned between \$30,000 and \$49,999, compared to 21% of Christians; and 24% earned less than \$30,000 compared to 36% of Christians. More atheists (30%) than Christians (17%) reported earnings in the highest income bracket (\$100,000 annually or more); in fact, this income bracket was the most frequently reported among atheists, whereas the lowest income bracket (under \$30,000 annually) was the most commonly reported income among Christians (36%). Regarding education, 42% of atheists earned a college or postgraduate degree whereas 31% attended some college without earning a degree, and 26% earned a high school diploma or less. For comparison, 25% of Christians in the same survey (Pew Research Center, 2015) and, in 2017, 34.2% of the general population age 25 and over in the U.S., earned a bachelor's degree or higher (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Therefore, on common, rudimentary dimensions of class, atheists represent higher income and educational attainment compared to the dominant faith group in the U.S., Christians, and the general population.

Although Kosmin et al. (2009) found religious "nones" did not differ from the general population with regard to education or income, atheists were surveyed along with agnostics, humanists, and secularists. Consistently, studies of atheists are predominantly comprised of well-educated and middle-class or more class-privileged participants, often holding other privileged cultural positionalities (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Brewster et al., 2016; Doane & Elliott, 2015; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Therefore, although research samples of atheists are roughly proportionate to national estimates of atheist demographics regarding age, gender, and race, there appear to be more low-income, working-class atheists than are generally captured in atheist-related scholarship.

Social class marginalization may influence the development of atheist identity. For example, in a compilation of atheists' personal essays, Hoelscher (2014), an atheist who was economically disadvantaged as a child, noted "poverty . . . prevented [his] blossoming as a student and thinker" and, in turn, precluded his identification as an atheist until later in life when he was able to access advanced education. Hutchinson (2011) described Christian churches as the "social, spiritual, and cultural lifeblood" of working-class Black and Latinx communities experiencing social and economic injustice. Thus, identification with Christianity, the dominant faith in U.S. culture, provides a form of social capital (Aldrich & Meyer, 2014), facilitating access to resources and connections, that may make questioning or rejecting it difficult. Due to the absence of belief in god(s), atheists are disadvantaged compared to Christians and other theists with regard to social class. Some atheists find a connection in secular groups and communities, and organized nonbelief has similar social capital benefits, including prosociality and well-being as well as meeting needs for belonging and community, to engagement in religious congregations (Galen, 2015). However, strongly identified atheists are more likely to engage in such organizations, and class-privileged atheists who hold other privileged identities (e.g., White men) are more likely to self-identify as atheists (McCaffree, 2019). Therefore, atheists with less class privilege may be less likely to identify strongly as atheists and, in turn, less likely to participate in secular groups. To date, researchers have not examined the relationship between social class and

atheist identity beyond gathering demographic data; however, it is possible that atheists from marginalized social classes experience their atheist identity differently from atheists with more class privilege.

The Present Study

Atheists are an understudied group, and studies of atheists generally include participants from dominant groups in the U.S. with little focus on intersectionality. Class and classism, in particular, are often omitted in intersectional analyses (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). We sought to examine the experiences of working-class and low-income atheists in the context of their salient identities and cultural positionalities. Critical phenomenology asserts that systems of power, such as classism and Christian privilege, are not merely constructs to be observed but ways of seeing and understanding the world that often go unnoticed (Guenther, 2019); as such, it is particularly well suited to examinations of the reciprocally constructing phenomena that comprise intersectionality (Davis, 2019). Therefore, using a critical phenomenological approach and extant social class and atheist scholarship to guide our inquiry, we posed two research questions: (a) How, if at all, do social class and classism influence atheist identification and, relatedly, disclosure and concealment of atheist identity among low-income and working-class atheists? and (b) How, if at all, do class and classism influence low-income and working-class atheists' relationships with other atheists?

Method

We employed a critical theoretical paradigm, acknowledging the social and historical systems of power and oppression that influence individual and shared realities (Ponterotto, 2005). Critical theorists attend to the role and maintenance of capitalist production; the interconnectedness of oppression is a particularly cogent fit given our study's focus on the relationship between social class and atheism (Kincheloe et al., 2018). Using a phenomenological design, we examined the lived experiences of participants, while bracketing our assumptions about the constructs in question in the quest to extract meaning (Davis, 2019). Paired together, we used the critical phenomenological approach to identify common meaning across participants' stories resulting in the emergence of a shared phenomenon and, simultaneously, honoring the ways in which structural privilege and marginalization serve as the lens through which individuals experience the world (Guenther, 2019).

The first, second, and fourth authors previously explored atheists' experiences in the U.S. via qualitative and quantitative methods, and the present study's research questions were derived, in part, by these experiences, as well as the extant atheist literature. Authors included White and Latina, cisgender women; their religious orientations comprised atheism, agnosticism, and spiritual-nonreligious. A variety of social class backgrounds were represented including upper-middle class, middle class, and working class. Given authors' personal experiences and the foci of their scholarship, each member cultivated awareness of and bracketed a variety of assumptions and biases to the extent possible. Particular attention was paid to bracketing expectations about atheists' experiences of discrimination, low-income and working-class atheists' experiences with people with class privilege, and intersections between social class, atheism, and other marginalization and/or privileges.

Participants

After receiving institutional review board approval, participants were recruited via Reddit, an online discussion platform; specifically, invitations to participate in our study were posted on subreddits, or forums, dedicated to atheist content. Participants accessed an informed consent document followed by a brief demographics survey via a link to Qualtrics, an online survey platform. Participants who consented and reported their social class as a working class were asked if they could identify with one or more of several working-class experiences, including performing physical work, working for an hourly rate, and having few assets (e.g., owning a home and retirement savings; Lott, 2012); if they could identify with any of these examples, they were invited to provide contact information to schedule an interview about their experience of their atheist identity. Additionally, participants reported their household size and income; those whose answers were below the federal poverty threshold based on the 2019 Poverty Guidelines (DHHS, 2019) were invited to provide contact information to schedule an interview. A total of 88 individuals identifying or qualifying as low-income or working-class indicated they were willing to be interviewed. Some participants who met criteria for participation based on the federal poverty guidelines but did not self-identify as low-income or working class ($n = 5$) or identified as full-time students ($n = 10$) were not extended an invitation to interview, as we were cautious about misquating income with social class or roles. Invitations to interview were ultimately sent to 61 individuals who met the criteria for participation in the order participant responses were received. Interviews were conducted with participants who were responsive to our invitations until saturation in the form of the redundancy of data was reached (Morrow, 2007). Participants who engaged in an interview were compensated with a \$15.00 electronic gift card. Pseudonyms and demographic characteristics of participants are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics

Name	Gender	Age	Race	Region of U.S.	Sexual orientation	Social class ^a	Disability	Highest level of education	Employment status	Household income ^b
Ryan	Man	25	Latinx	Northeast	Straight	Working class	Mental health	H. S. diploma	Full-time	\$33,000–\$60,000
Cameron	Man	35	White	Northeast	Straight	Working class	Mental health	Associate/ Trade degree	Full-time	\$20,000–\$23,000
Blair	Man	65	White	Southern	Straight	Working class	None	Bachelor’s degree	Full-time	\$20,000–\$23,000
Jaden	Trans man	28	Black	Western	Gay	Low-income	Mental health/ Physical	Bachelor’s degree	Unable to work	\$19,000 and below
Devon	Man	30	White	Northeast	Straight	Working class	None	Bachelor’s degree	Self-employed	\$24,000–\$32,000
Skyler	Woman	52	Multiracial	Western	Straight	Working class	Mental health/ Physical	Associate/ Trade degree	Unable to work	\$19,000 and below
Quinn	Woman	27	White	Southern	Bisexual	Working class	None	Master’s degree	Full-time	\$61,000–\$100,000
Morgan	Man	42	White	Southern	Bisexual	Low-income	Other	Bachelor’s degree	Unable to work	\$20,000–\$23,000
Peyton	Man	49	White	Midwest	Straight	Working class	None	Bachelor’s degree	Full-time	\$33,000–\$60,000
Taylor	Man	56	White	Western	Straight	Working class	None	Some college	Part-time	\$33,000–\$60,000
Aubrey	Man	32	White	Southern	Straight	Working class	None	Bachelor’s degree	Part-time	\$61,000–\$100,000
Avery	Woman	27	White	Southern	Straight	Working class	None	Bachelor’s degree	Full-time	\$24,000–\$32,000
Kennedy	Man	40	White	Northeast	Straight	Working class	None	Some college	Full-time	\$33,000–\$60,000
Logan	Woman	39	White	Western	Straight	Working class	Other	Some college	Full-time	\$33,000–\$60,000
Dakota	Man	31	Latinx	Southern	Straight	Working class	None	Bachelor’s degree	Employed full-time	\$33,000–\$60,000

^aSocial class is self-reported. Four of six self-identified working-class participants qualified as low-income based on the 2019 Federal Poverty Guidelines.

^bIncome reported is total household income.

Procedure

Participants engaged in interviews with the first or second author via Zoom videoconferencing or telephone; interviews lasted approximately 45 min. Based on extant atheism and social class scholarship, we developed a semistructured interview guide. After the initial development of the interview protocol, questions were reviewed for clarity by two working-class individuals external to the research team. Revisions were made based on external reviewers' feedback resulting in the final semistructured interview (see Appendix). Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the third and fourth authors. The interviewers took notes during and immediately following interviews and transcription to document emerging commonalities, unique and powerful insights from participants, questions, and personal biases and assumptions as they arose.

Data Analysis

Transcriptions were uploaded to and analyzed using NVivo V. 11, a qualitative data analysis software. The first author initially read all transcripts and then began coding each interview by units of meaning, consistent with the critical phenomenological design (Hycner, 1985). Using transcripts and a codebook identifying each code and its description, the frequency of the code, and the number of participants for whom the code was noted, the first, third, and fourth authors independently grouped these units of meaning into broad groups of similar meaning. They eliminated redundancies and low-frequency codes and retained only those relevant to the research questions. The authors' initial groups of meaning were generally consistent, including several similar groupings of units of meaning as well as some discrepancies. The first author merged all authors' congruent findings, narrowing the codebook further, after which the team met together on two occasions to finalize the codebook. During the first meeting, the authors discussed their rationale for retaining or excluding codes and grouping codes together and collaboratively revised the codebook until all authors reached agreement regarding the organization of units of meaning. During the second meeting, the authors discussed their perceptions of and proposed themes from the remaining clusters of meaning, evaluated disconfirming evidence, and made revisions until the group agreed upon the final themes (Hycner, 1985). The second author then reviewed the final codebook and preliminary description of the themes and provided feedback related to the flow and clarity of the themes to further refine the results.

Results

Rigorous data analysis resulted in the emergence of five themes: (a) Early Doubts and Establishment of Atheist Values, (b) Diverse Experiences of Antiatheist and Class-Based Stigma, (c) Expecting Indifference, Exercising Caution, (d) Strategies of Concealment and Disclosure, and (e) Atheism as an Individual, Rather Than Collective, Experience. Descriptions of each theme are provided in the following sections. Pseudonyms are used in place of participants' names.

Early Doubts and Establishment of Atheist Values

Though five participants described at least one family member with low levels of religiousness or no religion, most ($n = 11$) reported being raised Christian in religious families, frequenting church, and, in some cases ($n = 6$), being “forced” to attend religious services. Despite the ubiquitous experience with Christianity, 13 out of 15 participants described skepticism about religion from an early age. In adolescence, participants reported questioning and “looking into other religions”; several ($n = 5$) noted they “never believed” in god(s). Nine participants discussed an “unwinding,” “unraveling,” or “deprogramming” process that varied in terms of duration. Skyler noted that religion did not “make sense to [her],” but she vacillated between atheism and religion until her 40s, at which time she “had to let [religion] go” because it “[felt] right.” Thus, participants identified a lifelong orientation toward nonbelief despite early immersion in faith, though the pace at which their atheist identity became more stable was variable. In some cases, this deconversion process was associated with economic consequences; Quinn shared:

It was definitely really scary. One of the hardest parts of it was that my vision for my life was always to go to college and get married and be a mom. I wasn’t really worried about a career, and I was never worried about making money . . . because I never was going to have to worry about money. All of a sudden, after college, I don’t believe in god anymore and I have no social safety net or community to fall back on and I have to figure out how to support myself in ways that I didn’t think I was going to have to.

For Quinn, atheism meant a reimagining of her future, including the loss of a church community, living independently, and supporting herself financially.

Despite their deconversion, most participants continued living as adult atheists in very religious communities ($n = 10$), primarily composed of Christians who were also low income or working class. Avery described her urban neighborhood in a large city: “It’s low-income, which I think correlates with higher levels of like theism.” One-third of participants ($n = 5$) spoke explicitly to this notion of higher religiousness among low-income and working-class people as compared to other social classes, noting you “don’t hear a lot about very religious people in the 1%” and that religion was not discussed as frequently among the “upper-middle class.” Others noted the presence of religion within their neighborhoods was obvious, comparing it to people wearing “sandwich boards” boasting about religion. Cameron explained:

I can’t go a block and a half without a Jesus saves bumper sticker being slapped on a light pole somewhere. There is a church on every block rivaled only by the number of bars . . . it is a heavily religious area, especially for being in a Northern region.

Similar to this participant, others associated their geography with the religiousness of their community, identifying a link between conservative political states and/or rural areas and religiousness or the perceived high prevalence of Catholics in the Northeast U.S.

Some posited theories for religiousness among low-income and working-class people, connecting the prevalence of religiousness in low-income and working-class communities to opportunities for “charity and giving.” Quinn and Jaden attributed religiousness to the search for a sense of purpose, specifically among people with few opportunities and resources. Jaden added that religion was a means to avoid getting “involved in crime or . . . wrapped up in the prison system.” Despite these theories and immersion in religious communities, participants rejected faith. Eleven participants expressed negative perceptions of or experiences with faith, typically Christianity, that influenced the development of an atheist identity. Nine described religion as “silly,” “weird,” or otherwise nonsensical. Morgan came to the realization that faith was “completely arbitrary and if [he] had grown up in India [he] would have been Hindu or Muslim, and [he] would believe that just as fervently as people [in the U.S.] believe” in Christianity. Eleven noted the dangers religion posed, including deception, “hypocrisy,” oppression, and conflict, indicating humans would be “better off without it.”

On the other hand, many participants ($n = 9$) referenced the open-minded nature of atheists, contrasting this openness with perceived rigidity in their religious counterparts. Logan reported offering to work on religious holidays so that her coworkers could “spend time with their family” and “worship if they would like.” Participants conveyed that, generally, atheists were “more accepting of everybody” and “genuinely want[ed] to help each other” without “trying to one up each other.” Most ($n = 11$) participants identified similar atheism-related values, often linking them to “left-leaning” or progressive values. Aubrey “credited losing [his faith] with . . . having [a] political awakening.” Others tied their atheism to a desire for “things to be equal for people,” including atheists. Notably, though participants engaged in individual charitable acts and generally moral behavior; only one identified involvement in atheist organizations or activism specifically related to advancing secular causes.

Most atheists in the current study deconverted from faith and, after a period of evaluating their personal beliefs and questioning faith typically beginning in adolescence, felt certain in their nonbelief. Even participants raised with low levels of or no religion described a similar process of determining what they believed or did not believe. Further, they characterized atheism as congruent with their personal values, which they frequently perceived as morally superior to people of faith. For example, Logan said, “I don’t need a book to tell me what’s right and wrong. I don’t need a book to tell me to be helpful, be kind, be generous.”

Diverse Experiences of Antiatheist and Class-Based Stigmas

Low-income and working-class atheists described awareness of antiatheist stigma in U.S. culture as well as experiences of antiatheist discrimination (e.g., from family, coworkers, neighbors, and people in the community). Most ($n = 13$) described the perception that the general public, most of whom are theists, negatively viewed atheists. They worried about others’ being “judgey” [*sic*] or “look[ing] down” on them and being seen as “depressed” and “smarmy.” Kennedy described an encounter with a coworker:

She mentioned religion first. I mentioned I was an atheist and then she didn't talk to me for like two weeks—just total silent treatment. We went from being total friends at work and asking each other how we were doing to I didn't exist for a few weeks.

Avery recalled being teased by family members after disclosing her atheist identity, and others noted antiatheist stigma “impacted [their] confidence” and described needing time to learn to cope with the stigma.

One manifestation of antiatheist stigma was the erasure or invalidation of participants' nonreligious identity. Nearly half ($n = 6$) of participants described situations in which they were assumed to be religious by others, due to living in the Southern U.S. or being Hispanic, for example. Conversely, Quinn stated others assumed she did not have faith due to “the fact that [she was] gay.” Jaden spoke of receiving cards from his grandmother with messages like, “Jesus died for your sins. Happy Easter” despite this sentiment being inconsistent with his personal nonbelief. It was common for participants to be asked what church they attended:

[Skyler and her son] volunteered at a place that would have this big shindig for homeless people or people in need. This lady came up one time . . . and she goes, ‘Hey, son, what church do you go to?’ Just automatically assuming we went to church and that's why we were volunteering.

Here, behavior rather than identity led to assumptions of religiousness, and morality appeared conflated with faith such that engagement in unpaid public service was a behavior perceived as indicative of a belief in god. Relatedly, assumptions of immorality were another form of stigmatization endured by participants. Quinn noted:

My parents literally think that I have no concept of what love really means because I don't believe in god. There is no way I can be selfless or loving because . . . I'm not coming at it from the perspective of understanding that within god, so that bothers me.

Others ($n = 4$), too, described awareness of this perception of atheists as having “moral decay” or “moral failing[s].”

Several ($n = 6$) atheists described situations in which they were worried about others being “offended” or insulted by their atheism. In some cases, participants perceived others' nonverbal behavior as indicative of their disapproval, such as receiving “ashamed” looks or “frowns” when they “[drove] by and wave[d]” at neighbors who were aware of their atheism. These negative perceptions of atheists were also associated with harmful and unwanted feedback from others ($n = 10$), particularly theists, including invitations to church, nonconsensual prayer, being consistently told, “God bless you,” and efforts to convert participants to Christianity. “Insensitive” comments from family members were reported as well as forceful recommendations, including “you should [believe in God]” and to stop reading books critiquing religion. In a particularly frightening story, Aubrey recalled:

I was walking home from the library with *The God Delusion* [well-known atheist text by Richard Dawkins], and I wasn't like trying to show it off, but I wasn't trying to hide it, and a pickup truck, it was already pulled over for some other reason . . . a very stereotypical Southern redneck . . . dude saw the book and got mad at me. He never pulled it out, to be fair, but he kind of wanted me to see that he had a shotgun in the bed of his pickup truck. Luckily a cop did come over, just to see what was wrong . . . I [hadn't] read the book, so I was still a believer in God, and I was trying to explain that to the [cop] he's just mad at the book . . . the guy that with the truck finally left, and the cop also said that that book was not a good book for me to be reading.

The sort of unsolicited unwelcome feedback captured by the preceding quote, though not often as dangerous, was common. Participants also reported being told things such as, "it all works out" (in reference to God's will), "that's not what God wants," and "you'll find him; you'll find Jesus." Dakota described asking his father, in reference to a difficult period of the participant's life, "are you telling me that you know because I don't believe that this is . . . punishment?," which his father confirmed was his belief. Resistance to these forceful, futile efforts to place religiosity on atheists can lead to harsh negative judgments from others.

Some ($n = 3$) participants described being labeled as "devil/Satan worshipers" or "an agent of the enemy" by other people misunderstanding that atheism is the absence of belief in god(s) as well as a devil. These respondents also disclosed being distrusted by other people after disclosing their atheist identity and a few ($n = 3$) participants discussed other people telling them directly or indirectly they would "go to hell" due to the absence of belief in God or not attending church. Although insolent comments by theists were reported, the influence of such comments on working-class atheists varied. Many ($n = 10$) participants explained caring minimally or not at all about others' thoughts and opinions of their atheism and described not paying attention to others, not letting others "dictate" their beliefs or lack thereof, and focusing on themselves. Morgan related his lack of concern to his disability status:

I was poked and prodded by so many doctors that my give-a-damn just broke. I really don't care who knows what or anything about me. I really don't anymore. Maybe that's a part of getting older and also having to put up with so much.

Quinn spoke of others' jokes about atheism to have "a little bit of sting" while also saying, "you also know they are kidding, and you don't really care." While perceived judgments and experienced discrimination were commonly reported from participants, most participants expressed indifference.

Of note, some participants ($n = 4$) reported no to minimal personal experiences of discrimination based on their atheist identity. Aubrey reported feeling "privileged" by only being able to recall one incident of discrimination related to atheism in his life, whereas Kennedy explained feeling "worried" his answers would not be helpful due infrequently facing atheist-related stigma. Avery stated, "Where are these people who are having these

bad experiences like that's . . . something that I'm interested to know?" Of these four participants, three were White, two were ciswomen, two were cismen, and all were identified as straight. Some conspicuous and/or disclosed identities may cushion effects of antiatheist discrimination and stigma on working-class atheists, perhaps such that they are aware of discrimination against atheists but rarely experience it for themselves. For example, identities affording power (e.g., White, cisgender, and heterosexual) may reduce the likelihood of confrontation by others and/or the experience of intersectional stress, thus making anti-atheist discrimination less salient.

Similarly, although antiatheist discrimination was noted by most participants, nearly as many ($n = 8$) participants denied having dealt with any kind of explicit classism in their lives as those who endorsed experiences of classism ($n = 10$), in general or among atheists. Most of the references to experiences of classism occurred in participants' youth rather than more recently. Participants' other common privileged identities including Whiteness, male identification, and heterosexuality may have offered some protection against classism or masked its effects, though, notably, participants did not spontaneously discuss their relative privileged identities. Additionally, almost half ($n = 7$) of the participants were still identified with the social class in which they were raised, and six explicitly described primarily engaging with people in their social class. Thus, perhaps participants were rarely in contact with people of relatively higher social class and, therefore, less likely to experience classism. However, many described social class challenges that were systemic in nature, including unstable employment ($n = 11$) and financial challenges including low pay ($n = 13$), though they did not directly associate such challenges with classism. Dakota explained:

I don't have a lot of problems on that front. Everyone struggles, everyone tries to better themselves and such. I'm working toward getting my electrician's license and just get a better life for my family. Besides that, and the struggles everybody goes through, I can't say that I had anything . . . out of the ordinary because of my social status.

Therefore, participants appeared to be more aware of, and to more harshly evaluate, antiatheist stigma in their lives as compared to classism and rarely explicitly drew connections between the two oppressions.

Expecting Indifference, Exercising Caution

Although participants were aware of widespread antiatheist stigma in the U.S., and many identified personal experiences of antiatheist discrimination, most ($n = 14$) expressed an expectation that friends, family, peers, or neighbors, particularly those of faith, were likely to be indifferent to their atheist identification. They noted others "probably wouldn't care" and relationships "wouldn't change very much." Some participants referenced the "liberal" nature of their community based on geographic location as a protection against a judgment from neighbors. Aubrey, who was ethnically Jewish, noted the benefits of living in a Jewish community:

In Judaism there is a tradition of . . . wrestling with god. So, the concept of questioning faith isn't very foreign to Judaism as a religion . . . two of the best places to be are surrounded by atheists and surrounded by not-so-religious Jews . . . that helped me a lot, I think, in not experiencing the really terrible stuff that other people have.

Aubrey's point demonstrates that atheists may experience acceptance in religious communities, given the predominant religion embraces (non)religious diversity. Avery tied this indifference directly to the working-class nature of her neighborhood, noting "they're struggling to pay the bills, so I don't think that they have time to really care what I think."

Similarly, participants ($n = 9$) expected their coworkers "wouldn't care" that they were atheists. Dakota, an electrician, stated that on a scale of one to five, in which five was "scared beyond reason" to tell his employer he was an atheist, he was a two; he said he was not worried and "it would surprise [him] if he had a problem with it." Peyton, a firefighter, similarly described a work environment in which "everyone [had] their idiosyncrasies" and he thought "they would just say . . . 'that's just one of his weird things that he does.' . . ." Though this participant expected indifference from his colleagues, he characterized their indifference as negatively valenced, also describing their perception of his atheism as a "peculiarity." Cameron associated colleagues' indifference with the solitary nature of his work and the subsequent low likelihood of disclosure.

Despite these expectations of indifference from others in their lives, participants overwhelmingly ($n = 13$) reported exercising caution with regard to disclosing their atheist identity. In fact, these 13 participants combined made mention of this caution 120 total times over the course of their interviews, meaning each participant discussed it multiple times. Skyler described a "deep-seated fear" of disclosure, though she was uncertain of the consequences; she wondered if someone would "attack [her] house" or "hurt [her] kid." Others noted they were "careful" with regard to disclosure to avoid "mean" people or being "yelled at" by family. Several participants identified outness in their workplace as particularly risky and, further, a "risk [they] really can't afford to take." Devon worried it could "cost [them] a promotion," and Logan recalled an instance in which she "almost lost [her] job over [her atheist identity]." She stated her concern about revealing her atheist identity was rooted in an experience at work in which she responded to a coworker's inquiry about her religion:

I'm not religious. I'm an atheist . . . Two days later, he pins me up to a wall . . . and started preaching to me and trying to give me a Bible . . . the director of the site that I work at came in and said that I was being hostile and not receptive to his preaching advances, and I will just say I did not last very long there.

It seemed participants had enough awareness and experience of judgment related to their atheist identity to deem disclosure dangerous in spite of their presumption that most people were likely to be indifferent to their nonbelief. Further, they anticipated and/or experienced consequences of such great magnitude (e.g., violence and financial loss) that caution was necessary even if the consequence was rare or unlikely.

The strategies of caution participants described included “avoiding confrontation” and being “careful” in social discussions of religion. Some discussed not “advertising” their atheism and sharing only as it became “relevant” to a conversation. For example, Logan noted her atheism was “not something that [she] will scream to the mountains because that’s never been a particularly good thing to do, but . . . if somebody flat out asked it . . . I mean, I’m an atheist.” Quinn described attempts to ascertain whether disclosing her atheism to a person was safe by considering their views about her other salient identities: “If I don’t feel safe talking about my sexual identity with someone, then similarly I won’t feel safe talking about religion around them.” In general, participants told stories about discussing their atheism with others primarily when others initiated such conversations and with varying degrees of depth and honesty based on their assessment of safety.

Several participants illustrated their attempts to avoid denying their atheism while simultaneously hiding their atheism. Peyton noted that “where [he] live[d] and with other people [his] age, it’s not something you talk about; it’s not something you necessarily want to hide, but you’re definitely not going to bring it up and discuss it with anybody.” When asked what church he attended, Morgan frequently responded that he was “new” to town or “[had not] found [his] church.” Other participants described using terms publicly they perceived as less stigmatized than atheist, such as “not religious” or “secular”; Logan advised, “Avoid the atheist word.” This experience of not fully hiding, but not fully sharing, their atheist identity was a common thread across participants’ stories.

Contextual Concealment and Disclosure

Exercising caution and managing risk of disclosure led participants to contextually conceal and/or disclose their atheist identity based on the perceived safety and unique characteristics of their setting and the people around them. It was common for participants to report concealing their atheist identity from parents, grandparents, and other extended family members ($n = 11$), especially when those family members were older adults. They described feeling “worried,” “awkward,” and “frightened.” They expected family members to be “upset” and expressed concern about the potential loss of relationships.

However, notably, many ($n = 7$) described concealing their atheism to protect family, rather than to protect themselves. Jaden described his decision to hide his atheism from his grandmother:

I loved her. She’d been through a lot in her life . . . religion was a really big deal for her. She was one of those Black church ladies with big hats . . . and all her social activities were geared around other people in her church. She would have been very upset, I think, so I just never, I just thought it would be mean basically.

Others remarked they did not want to “offend” or cause others undue “stress.” On the other hand, all 15 participants were out as atheists in some context, most often friends, immediate family (e.g., partner and children), and parents. Consistent with the aforementioned descriptions of not advertising their atheism, in some cases outness was passive in nature. For example, some participants reported others “assume[d]” they were atheists and they simply allowed their assumption without addressing it directly. Cameron

reported his family was aware insomuch as he no longer participated in “holiday prayers,” and they, in turn, no longer “asked [him] to say grace.” But, more frequently, atheists in the present study described moments of bold outness, characterized by contextual circumstances in which they felt safe or compelled to disclose their atheist identity, rather than a pattern of widespread unconditional outness.

Some shared examples of brave disclosures of their atheist identity to family members and strangers. Dakota described stopping to help an older couple push their car to a gas station. The couple asked him where he went to church so they could “put in a good word for [him],” to which he asked if “they [had] ever met an atheist before.”

I could see their face completely slip and they said, ‘Oh, those people, I hope I never meet one.’ . . . and I just stuck out my hand and said, ‘I’m happy to help and, by the way, I’m an atheist.’ They just kind of shut up and I walked off . . . I’m happy that I hopefully planted the seed that [atheists] are not who they think they are.

Thus, sometimes the catalyst for disclosure was to, as Logan put it, “be able to show that [an atheist] can be a good person and a caring person and a fair person and not be afraid of heaven or hell.”

Several participants ($n = 10$) noted their likelihood to engage in the “intellectual challenge” of debating religion with theists. Often, relevant disclosure appeared to be defined as theists challenging atheism or initiating discussions of faith with atheists. In this way, participants described their outness as confrontational at times. Blair described challenging theists as “fun” and offered an example in which he pointed out the contradiction of a theist’s tattoos and Christian scripture. Devon noted he was “not afraid to offend people,” and Logan stated that given her “self-confidence in [her atheism]” and after “educat[ing] [her]self,” proselytizers “don’t have a chance.” Of note, the ability to engage in such debates despite the aforementioned risks, may constitute a privilege associated with these participants’ gender and/or Whiteness, although participants did not name these privileges.

Participants appeared to feel most inclined to disclose their atheism when presented opportunities to defend their nonbelief or challenge the rationality of faith. Indeed, in discussions of outness, six participants identified instances of facilitating others’ deconversion from faith, typically family members or partners. About his partner, Taylor said:

When we first got married, she was still a believer and, I think, kind of being around me and seeing that it was okay not to believe, that kind of made her more comfortable even when she wasn’t fully confident in those beliefs. But now she would identify as an atheist.

Atheists in the present study described a complex, contextual outness in which concealment was used to protect loved ones’ emotions. The disclosure of atheist identity was situational, often discussed out of what they deemed necessity rather than a global outness across settings and people. Though many expressed that they were “not hiding,”

sometimes sharing atheist content on social media accounts for example, most described strategically navigating disclosure and concealment such that they were hidden in plain sight.

Atheism as an Individual, Rather Than Collective, Experience

This strategic outness and disclosure only as relevant are congruent with the low centrality and salience of participants' atheist identity, as compared to their other roles and identities, and low levels of social connection with other atheists. When asked specifically about the importance of atheism to participants, in the context of their other important group memberships and experiences, 12 participants replied that their atheism was "not very important at all." Jaden reported atheism was "not a huge part of [his] identity" as indicated by the fact he was "willing to casually lie about it without worrying too much." He elaborated:

People I know who grew up very, very working-class and Christian, where you were expected to be Christian, and came to atheism on their own as a process of discovering their other identities and stuff, they very much do seem like the sort of people who would, you know, ruin a dinner party over being an atheist. That's very important to them and it's a big part of their identity. I don't have that same sort of, 'This is very, very much a part of me and what I believe, screw you,' kind of thing . . . it just seemed mostly normal and obvious to me growing up and it wasn't something that I felt would be heavily punished in most areas of my life.

Thus, Jaden drew a connection between the expectation of others' indifference and the low level of importance of his atheist identity. As he did not anticipate discrimination, atheism never became central to his sense of himself.

Others said, about their atheism, they "didn't wear it on [their] sleeve," did not think about it every day, and that "atheism [didn't] come into play" on a daily basis. Likewise, 7 out of the 15 participants denied that their atheism intersected with any other important identities or roles or in their lives. Though several acknowledged the privileged nature of some of their other identities (e.g., man, cisgender, and White), they indicated these privileged social locations were "not connected to [their] . . . nonbelief." In general, atheists in this study described a stable atheist identity that was personally important in terms of informing their values but was not among their most salient identities. Perhaps, in part, as a result of the low centrality of participants' atheist identity, they were generally not meaningfully connected with other atheists.

More than half of the participants ($n = 11$) remarked that they "[didn't] socialize all that much" in general. Peyton noted that he did not "really have any close friends," adding he married his partner "early" and had children; "all of our friends . . . kind of faded away as we focused on family more." Others identified the nature of their neighborhood, particularly a lack of relationships with neighbors, as an obstacle to connection, due to living in an "apartment complex" or a rural setting in which homes were "spread out" and neighbors were only "loose acquaintances." Roughly half of the participants ($n = 7$) identified having a disability, some of which made it difficult to leave their homes or influenced social

interactions, and one identified past trauma as a precursor to not enjoying “talking to people.” Therefore, participants’ lives were such that, for a variety of reasons, they had few social connections; however, they also indicated few relationships with other atheists.

Although 11 participants identified a relationship with at least one other atheist at some point in their lives, it was typically a family member, including partners and/or children, and sometimes an acquaintance or colleague. Seven participants indicated that there were few atheists “around” with whom to engage. Many participants ($n = 14$) identified following atheist content online; however, in most cases, this was reading articles and/or other atheists’ posted comments rather than communicating with other atheists. Cameron commented that online relationships, when they existed, were not “really relationships” and that there were not “meaningful dialogues to be had there.” In general, there appeared to be little interest in connecting with other atheists among participants. Taylor said he “[did not] feel like [he] need[ed] to validate [his] nonbelief by joining a nonbelievers club.” Describing some trepidation related to joining an atheist group, Kennedy also shared it was “not convenient to go to the meetings” and he was “afraid to join an already existing group of people.” Although no participants explicitly associated their social class with low frequency of social interactions, in general, or with atheists, in particular, they seemed to describe social class–related influences on their social connection. For example, Morgan identified the inability to work, one way people regularly connect with others, due to his disability, whereas Kennedy worked a full-time job followed by an “after-hours” part-time job, limiting the time available to engage in social connection. Logan relayed time limitations associated with working full-time and raising seven children. Though participants did not expressly connect these barriers to their level of involvement with other atheists, it appeared they had pressing responsibilities and needs that likely impeded their ability to and interest in organized atheism.

Integration of Themes

In sum, participants’ atheist identities were salient inasmuch as they had an acute awareness of antiatheist stigma, associated risks, and effective strategies to manage these risks. In this context and over time, they developed a personal, generally private, atheism including values informed by their nonbelief. However, they described their atheism as not central to their overall identity. Though not directly articulated, challenges related to their marginalized social class influenced their experience of their atheism, including rarely meaningfully engaging with informal or organized atheist groups. Likewise, privileges afforded by other identities intersected with both classism and antiatheist stigma such that participants found it difficult to identify current manifestations of classism in their lives, took calculated risks in disclosure of atheist identity, and did not draw explicit connections between social class and atheism (see Fig. 1).

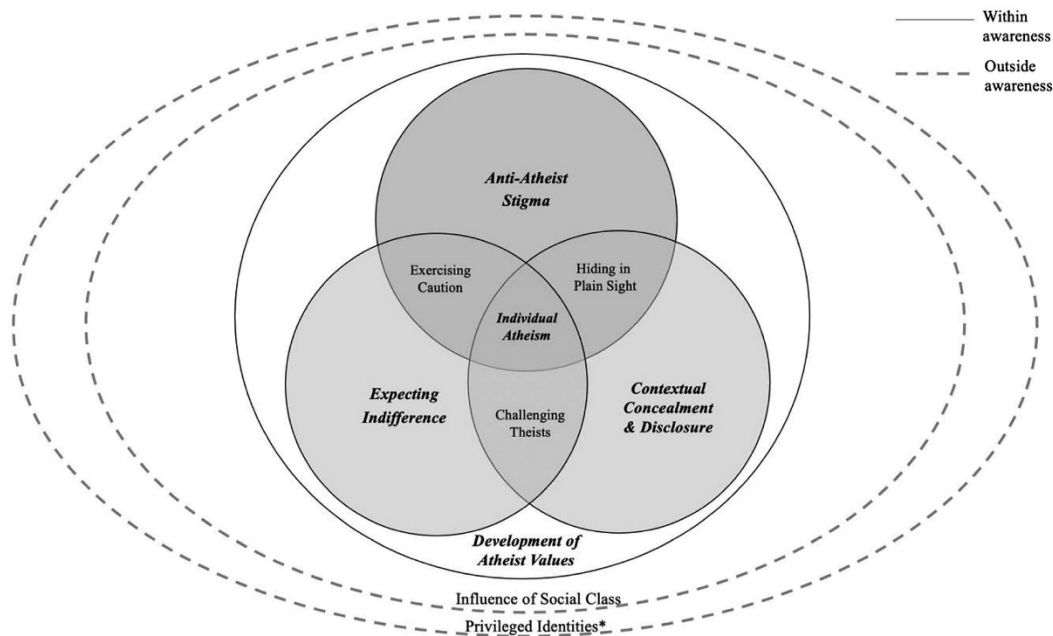


Figure 1. Low-Income and Working-Class Atheist Identity

Note: The figure depicts participants’ experience of their atheist identity as well as the influence of systems of power to which they alluded but did not explicitly tie to their atheist identity.

* Privileged identities included gender (e.g., cisgender and man), Whiteness, and heterosexuality.

Discussion

The current investigation contributes uniquely to the growing literature examining the experiences of atheists by capturing a subset of those from disadvantaged social class backgrounds whose voices have been largely absent from the discourse. Social class impacts nearly every facet of quality of life; as such, it is an important, though understudied, variable of interest for psychologists (Reimers & Stabb, 2015), particularly in consideration of intersectional minority stress. Among this group of 15 self-identified working-class and low-income atheists, we found both consistencies with previous findings in studies of atheists, such as the experience of navigating a marginalized identity within the framework of minority stress theory (Abbott, Mollen, et al., 2020; Brewster et al., 2016), and novel results, such as the lack of involvement in atheist organizations and relative lack of centrality of their atheist identity. As the U.S. becomes increasingly secular, the risks associated with publicly identifying as an atheist may be attenuated; we stress, however, that these risks may not be as tempered for people marginalized by their social class with less access to resources and social capital than class-privileged atheists.

Particularly noteworthy was the ubiquity with which the low-income and working-class atheists in our sample voiced their awareness of the importance of caution in

disclosing their atheist identity to others, experiences with stigma and discrimination, and understanding their identities as individual rather than collective experiences. These findings help answer our research questions such that participants' social class informed the degree to which they claimed their identities publicly and safely, connected meaningfully with other atheists, and were potentially denied wellness benefits similar to previous research that captured the experiences of more class-privileged atheists (Abbott, Mollen, et al., 2020; Doane & Elliott, 2015).

Integration With Previous Literature

Smith (2013) suggested current theories regarding the trajectory of atheist identity development, though largely homogeneous in samples of educated, White, male atheists, likely differ for atheists from marginalized groups. Atheists in the present study were predominantly White and male but not class-privileged. Consistent with Smith's (2011) standard trajectory of atheist identity development and the authors' previous work (Abbott, Mollen, et al., 2020), low-income and working-class atheists described personal or cultural theism, rejecting theism in favor of atheism, and, finally, coming out as an atheist in some contexts. Contrary, however, to LeDrew's (2013) atheist identity development model that acknowledges collective atheist identity and a final stage involving atheist activism, the present sample did not demonstrate a strong, collective identity and saw their atheism as a personal endeavor rather than part of a larger movement. Though it is possible our sample simply had not progressed to the later stages of their atheist identity development, this seems unlikely given their average age and the fact that most came to their nonbelief in adolescence. Their stories suggest, instead, that multiple pressing responsibilities (e.g., work, family), other marginalized identities (e.g., having a disability), in conjunction with an absence of resources (e.g., time, money), made their atheist identity less salient than other aspects of their lives and left little energy for atheist activism. Atheists in the present study, therefore, due to personal preference, stage of identity development, and/or limited time, voiced a strong certainty in their nonbelief but low levels of public or political atheism (Cliteur, 2009). Additionally, participants had limited access to atheist-identified others and spaces in which atheism was freely discussed, potentially contributing to low levels of collective identity and atheist group involvement. Though participants engaged with atheism-focused online forums and were recruited for this study from such virtual spaces, they described doing so as passive consumers of others' online posts, rarely interacting with other online atheists. This lack of a shared group identity, perhaps emblematic of the concomitant dearth of more sustained engagement in atheist organizations, may make the benefits of social capital and belonging (Galen, 2015) less available to our sample of low-income and working-class atheists.

Atheists in the present study reported awareness of antiatheist bias in the U.S., experiences of discrimination, and related fears. Past examinations of atheists suggest an atheist group identity (Abbott & Mollen, 2018) and a strong personal identification as an atheist (Doane & Elliott, 2015) offer some protection against psychological distress related to anti-atheist discrimination. However, participants comprising this sample demonstrated neither a strong personal nor a strong collective atheist identity; therefore, it is possible that low-income and working-class atheists' psychological well-being is more susceptible to

antiatheist discrimination. By contrast, most participants expressed indifference to others' perceptions of them, in general, or related to their atheism. Their concerns about the impact of their atheism on others, consistent with past research, were related to relationship loss, but also other practical concerns like financial repercussions due to loss of a job or opportunities for advancement. Further, their nonbelief system was quite firmly established. Galen and Kloet (2011) found (non)belief certainty was associated with well-being such that confident theists and atheists, compared to agnostics or those less certain in their (non)belief, reported higher levels of life satisfaction and emotional well-being. Thus, despite atheism not being among our participants' self-reported most important identities, the strength and certainty of their nonbelief likely offered some protection against anticipated and experienced antiatheist discrimination.

Unlike atheists of color (Abbott, Mollen, et al., 2020), low-income and working-class atheists did not seek out or foster connection with similar atheists. Likewise, they did not directly draw connections between other group memberships (e.g., race and social class) and their atheism, despite stories that suggested such intersections. The omission of social class, specifically, from discourse regarding their atheism may, in part, be a function of the tendency for low-income and working-class White people, particularly men, to legitimize the status quo as a means to exercise control and reconcile dissonance related to the system's disregard for their welfare (Liu, 2017).

Implications for Training and Practice

Participants' stories in this study might suggest that low-income and working-class clients' atheist identities are less salient than other identities and warrant acknowledgment, but not necessarily more or equal attention in therapy as other identities, experiences, and roles. In fact, low-income and working-class atheists' certainty of their nonbelief, along with reported indifference to the judgment of others and low atheist identity centrality, may represent strengths offering protection against harm from antiatheist discrimination. On the other hand, we did not measure psychological well-being; therefore no conclusions can be drawn related to the relationship between atheist identity among low-income and working-class U.S. Americans and psychological well-being or distress.

As previously mentioned, studies suggest the strength of group identification may facilitate disclosure of identity and ameliorate discrimination's influence on well-being (Abbott & Mollen, 2018; Doane & Elliott, 2015). Additionally, Galen (2015) suggested organized nonbelief, engagement in socially supportive groups, was advantageous to nonreligious people's well-being. Thus, clinicians working with low-income and working-class atheists may wish to explore methods by which to facilitate clients' connection with other atheists or secular groups with shared values, keeping in mind these clients' responsibilities and demands on their time. That said, participants in the present study reported low levels of involvement with other atheists; it is unclear if such interactions and group involvement would ultimately prove beneficial. As atheists active in such groups are predominantly highly educated, and highly educated people demonstrate a preference for similarly educated others (Kuppens et al., 2018), perhaps low-income and working-class atheists would encounter classism.

Similarly, clinicians may be inclined to promote atheist identity disclosure as outness is perceived as beneficial generally (Corrigan et al., 2013) and among atheists (Smith, 2011; Zimmerman et al., 2015). However, disclosure can be context-dependent such that its benefits are associated with the supportiveness of the environment in which the disclosure occurs (Legate et al., 2012). Like atheists of color (Abbott, Mollen, et al., 2020), atheists in the present study reported engaging in strategic outness based on the perceived risks of disclosure and concealment in various settings. They described fears related to, in addition to interpersonal and emotional harm related to antiatheist discrimination, potential loss of income, resources, and opportunities. Clinicians working with low-income and working-class atheists should be especially attuned to the ways social class may be relevant to the disclosure of their atheist identity, including potential risks, and empower disclosure, when possible, and validate concealment, when necessary.

The present study adds to the growing literature establishing the presence and influence of antiatheist discrimination on the lives of atheists as well as unique manifestations of this discrimination and strategies employed to manage it in low-income and working-class communities and workplaces. Participants' accounts may serve to expand the awareness and knowledge of clinicians who will potentially work with atheist clients, particularly those identified as low income and working class. Further, there are ample opportunities for clinicians, as advocates, to foster empowerment on an individual level and advocate for structural changes, including debunking pervasive negative stereotypes of atheists, challenging assumptions of Christianity and the subsequent omission of atheists within and outside our discipline, and promoting the separation of Christianity and government (e.g., church and state) that contributes to the marginalization of atheists in the U.S.

Limitations and Future Directions

Class is a complex construct such that it is challenging to obtain a sample with a roughly identical class background. In this study, we chose to include atheists who currently identified as working class or whose income fell below the federal poverty threshold; however, participants had varied class backgrounds, often had periods of financial stability alternating with financial distress, and possessed differential access to opportunity resulting from proximity to others with more class privilege. Our choice to recruit participants from an online forum, particularly given the varied access to the internet that people of marginalized classes have, was a limitation and may have precluded our ability to capture the experiences of atheists from the most disadvantaged social class backgrounds. To accommodate our participants, we offered interviews via Zoom or phone; we recognize that phone interviews disallow the observation of important nonverbal communication, such as gestures, eye contact, and facial expressions.

Most participants in the current study were raised in religious families. Schwadel et al. (2021) found religious dones, people who deconvert from faith, were more similar to religiously affiliated participants than religious nones in their endorsement of some values. Therefore, the experiences of atheists who have never been religiously affiliated may differ and further exploration of these potential differences is needed. The role of classism as well as other oppressions (e.g., racism and sexism) among atheists, if any, may be better examined by intentionally recruiting and interviewing active members of an atheist

organization. Along similar lines, we note that while our study makes a unique contribution by capturing the experiences of working-class atheists, our sample was predominantly male, White, and heterosexual and is not representative of the diversity of working-class people in the U.S. Recruiting a more diverse sample may be aided by including participants who meet the definition of atheism but identify in other ways (e.g., nonreligious and humanist). Additionally, future studies of atheism and social class could quantitatively explore the relationships between atheist identity; atheist outness; experienced, internalized, and anticipated antiatheist discrimination; and psychological well-being among low-income and working-class atheists who represent other diverse identities.

Conclusion

On average, atheists hold several privileged identities, the majority of whom identify as White, male, and of privileged social classes. Examining the experiences of atheists who are also marginalized by virtue of their social class revealed both similarities to and differences from atheists with more relative class privilege. The realities of living as a low-income or working-class atheist may preclude the necessary resources (e.g., time and money) to explore and crystallize these identities, join atheist organizations, and connect with other atheists in meaningful ways, all of which ameliorate minority stress associated with anti-atheist stigma in the U.S. Accordingly, psychologists who work with low-income and working-class atheists can remain attentive to the importance of these intersecting marginalized identities and provide vital support that may prove invaluable for clients coping with class- and atheism-based oppression.

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Appendix: Sample Items from Semistructured Interviews

1. Tell me about the development of your atheist identity.
2. Who knows, if anyone, about your atheist identity? From whom, if anyone, do you hide your atheist identity?
3. What do people in your neighborhood think about your atheist identity, or what do you imagine they would think if they knew?
4. How have people at your workplace responded to you, if they know you're an atheist?
5. How have people in your family responded to you, if they know you're an atheist?
6. If you have experiences with other atheists, tell me about them.
7. If you're involved in atheist organizations, online or in person, tell me about your experiences with them.
8. How important is your atheist identity to your overall self-concept?

The next few questions I'd like to ask are about social class. In thinking about your own social class, I'd like you to consider personal factors like your income, your education, the neighborhood in which you live, the kind of work you do, and your access to opportunities.

1. Tell me about your social class growing up.
2. Tell me about your current social class.
3. What have been your experiences with people, if any, with more financial, educational, or opportunity advantages than you?
4. What are other important parts of who you are (e.g., your age, race, gender, sexual orientation, where you live) that influence your experience as an atheist?