Creating a Godless Community: The Collective Identity Work of Contemporary American Atheists

JESSE M. SMITH
Department of Sociology
University of Colorado at Boulder

Based on 45 in-depth interviews, textual analysis, and participant observation with seven different atheist organizations, this article investigates the collective identity work of atheists in the United States. It explores the social psychological and interactional dynamics of atheist organizations as well as how they contribute to the construction and maintenance of atheist identities. I discuss the various strategies atheists employ as they collectively manage a stigmatized identity and negotiate the meaning of their atheism with one another and with the nonatheist public. This is accomplished in part through an analysis of the identity politics and minority discourse contemporary atheists currently engage. In addition, and more broadly, this study explores the relationship between collective identity and social action through an analysis and description of contemporary atheist activism.

Keywords: atheists, collective identity, collective action, interactionism, qualitative methods.

INTRODUCTION

There have been atheists in this country since its inception, but an expressed atheist presence in U.S. society has never been anything other than a very small minority. And despite the pervasiveness of theism, and the historical importance of religion in America, there have for some time existed organizations that instead proffer a secular and/or godless worldview. For instance, secular/humanist groups such as the American Humanist Association have existed since the early 1940s. But with the exception of the American Atheists, founded by Madalyn Murray O’Hair in 1963, only within the last decade have explicitly atheist groups all across the country proliferated and become conspicuous. These groups have become increasingly interconnected, and an expanding network—an American atheist community—is developing a more recognizable place in American culture. The Internet and new social media have facilitated much of this expansion. But the new atheist community is not merely an online or virtual one. Granted, much of the atheist conversation indeed takes place online (Smith and Cimino 2012), but like other groups and movements, the Internet and social media have also mobilized individuals and created active “concrete” communities. Indeed, the 2012 “Woodstock for Atheists,” where tens of thousands of atheists (the largest gathering in U.S. history) descended on the National Mall, underscores this reality. Increasing numbers of people joining atheist groups and engaging in atheist activism suggests a grassroots atheist mobilization.

This research examines the development of a community—via the organizing principles of identity and meaning—that stands outside the American symbolic and moral structures traditionally suffused with theism. It examines the relationship between collective identity and social action. Thus, investigating the collective identity work of atheists will add to the broader...
understanding of the processes of formation, negotiation, and maintenance of contemporary social groups at the margins. Atheists in the United States constitute an especially salient example, particularly useful toward this end, because unlike other minority groups, atheists are viewed as not only differing in some way from the rest of society, but as having rejected what many Americans consider the very foundation of a moral and functioning society: belief in God. And as scholars have only recently begun to respond, in a focused way, to the admonition put forth by Campbell (1972) over 40 years ago that the study of irreligion should be of sociological concern, and that doing so will yield analytical fruit, the present study is intended to meaningfully contribute to this response.

**BACKGROUND**

Surveys vary on their estimates of adult atheists in the United States. The American Religious Identification Survey (2009) reports less than 1 percent, whereas the World Values Survey (2005) reports over 4 percent. According to these surveys, there are anywhere from 1.6 million to nearly 13 million atheists. Either way, this represents noticeable growth considering only a few decades ago the number of self-identified atheists was in the low hundreds-of-thousands nationwide. But the discrepancy in the estimates reflects deeper difficulties in tallying the number of actual atheists. In part, this stems from an inconsistency between the technical meaning of atheism—the absence of belief in a god—and other identities (freethinker, agnostic, naturalist, nontheist, etc.) that may not carry the same connotations. Difficulties also arise in assessing whether growth in the number of atheists reflects more willingness on the part of the already unbelieving public to use the label, or actual growth in the numbers of those who do not believe in God. It also seems plausible that surveys are not capturing the actual numbers of atheists, as there may be more adults in the general population who hold no belief in a god (technically atheist), but do not self-identify, or report, their atheism.

Irrespective of the “true” current number, atheists have become increasingly visible in the media, and have gained influence—if only incremental—in the public and political sphere. Though still a marginalized and dismissed group in many ways, the atheist community enjoys an emerging sense of broader legitimacy and collective solidarity that did not previously exist. “New atheist movement” has been in use since at least 2007, when Wired magazine ran an article using the phrase. Although part of my analysis is framed within the social movement literature, whether or not the growing atheist community constitutes a veritable social movement is not the central concern of this article. Rather, this study is concerned with the construction of collective identity and meaning, and their relationship with collective action. However, there is little reason to doubt that organized atheism in the United States today has more saliently defined social and symbolic boundaries and social/political goals, and there is strong evidence that it has developed a more distinct politicized group identity—both at least elements of the concept of social movements. As the mission statement of the Atheist Alliance of America puts it: “[Our] vision is to transform society into one that understands and respects atheism; that supports and respects a worldview based on the values of reason, empiricism and naturalism; and that respects and protects the separation of religion and government and the constitutional and human rights of atheists as members of society in free, democratic and open nations” (2011). This statement is characteristic of many atheist organizations, and almost without exception, organized atheism in America today is oriented toward these sociopolitical ends.

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1See Bullivant and Ruse (2013) for a discussion of the usefulness of this versus other definitions of atheism with regards to conducting social scientific research.

2I use the social movement literature because the concept of collective identity is employed most often in this literature.
Various definitions of collective identity have been proffered over the years (see Melucci 1995; Snow 2001; Taylor and Whittier 1992). The concept has found itself useful in cohering disparate theoretical frameworks such as structuralist accounts of social action and rational choice theories of group participation (Friedman and McAdam 1992); it is of strong import in the constructivist paradigm (Melucci 1995); and as mentioned, the usefulness of collective identity as a conceptual tool in the analysis of social movements has become well established. Beyond this, the concept of collective identity is studied in its own right, and it represents an important part of the analytical repertoire for understanding social meaning and action more broadly. As scholars have shifted focus from the structural and material dimensions of social action and movements toward more thorough treatment of the issues surrounding identity generally, our scholarly understanding of the micro, social psychological, and interpretive processes underlying social action has deepened. Scholars generally agree that collective identity is essential for understanding these processes, and that at base, the concept refers to “the shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests, experience, and solidarity” (Taylor and Whittier 1992:105), as well as “a shared and interactive sense of “we-ness” and “collective agency” (Snow 2001:1). Even more simply, collective identity is “a public pronouncement of status” (Friedman and McAdam 1992)—a way of indicating to self and others some meaningful identity. But it is also important not to overly abstract the concept. As Polletta and Jasper offer: “collective identity [is] an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution” (2001:285). Collective identity is thus a concept with empirical grounding.

The scholarship on collective identity most recently has highlighted its socially constructed nature. Taking from this my analytical point of departure, I employ the constructionist approach in analyzing the collective identity work of atheists. In this view, collective identity is not something a priori to collective action. Nor is it something that by itself explains collective action. Rather, collective identity, like other forms of identity, is constructed in and through the ongoing dynamics of social action as it is played out, in real time, in the social arena. As Snow notes: “collective identity is a process, rather than a property of social actors” (2001:4). It highlights the importance of meaning, consciousness, and the subjective in the discussion of what propels collective action and how it operates in the course of every day social life.

Although qualitative work on atheists remains in the beginning stages, the last few years have produced several studies in pursuit of understanding the sociodemographic correlates of atheism (Baker and Smith 2009; Cragun, Hammer, and Smith Forthcoming); the social and moral boundaries between atheists and theists (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006); the personal identity development of atheists (Smith 2011); how atheists negotiate their identities (Fitzgerald 2003); and how atheists relate to religious family and communities (Ecklund and Lee 2011). Some sociological analyses examine the organizational strategies of atheists (Cimino and Smith 2007). But no extant qualitative study describes the collective identity processes of atheists—that is, how they go about constructing a shared understanding of themselves and how this relates to the collective action(s) of the growing atheist community.

Closely connected to collective identity conceptually, and empirically connected by way of formation and process, is the notion of identity work. In a now classic statement, Snow and Anderson define identity work as a generic process that refers to “the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept (1987:1348). Although they focused on personal identity, I add to this literature by discussing how identity work functions within collective identity. Taking insights from each of these concepts, combined with the broader conceptual framework of the socially constructed nature of collective identity and action, is the basis of the following analysis. I explore the processes of collective identity construction and how contemporary American atheists are building an active community. I begin with a discussion of the methods used in the study before offering an analysis of the collective identity work of atheists by way
of two generic conceptual categories, “seeking community” and “seeking change.” Within these, I describe and discuss how atheists collectively define themselves, offer support to one another, challenge and compete with religion through identity politics, and engage in social activism.

**METHODS**

This article draws on data collected as part of a broader project on atheist identity. I employ a combination of qualitative methods including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and interpretive and textual analysis of various kinds of documentation. During multiyear fieldwork with seven different atheist groups in Colorado and Texas, I participated in dozens of atheist functions including small local group meetings, larger conferences and workshops, volunteer work activities, sites of atheist activism, formal debates, informal socials, and a national atheist convention. The interview sample consists of 22 males and 23 females between the ages of 18 and 74. The majority of respondents were white (n = 42) and highly educated (38 had a bachelor’s degree or beyond; see the Appendix for further demographic information). Interviews lasted between one and two hours. All participants self-identified as atheists, most were recruited by solicitation at atheist functions, and several were recruited in a snowball sampling fashion. Thus, this study is based on—and can only make an argument about—atheists who organize.

Semi-structured, yet open and conversational-style, interviews allowed participants to speak freely about the issues important to them while still addressing the basic concerns of the research. I digitally recorded and transcribed all interviews. I disclosed my role as a researcher to everyone I interviewed, and left them with contact information so they could follow up with me later if they chose. After transcribing all interviews, I used a combination of line-by-line and focused coding to begin the analysis (Emerson 2001). I also kept detailed field notes throughout the research. I identified patterns in both the interview and field note data, made and elaborated on conceptual connections, and sorted the data by dominant themes.

Finally, a substantial aspect of the data collection for this article comes from other document sources. From 2008 on, after connecting with several atheist groups, joining e-mail lists, visiting dozens of atheist websites, subscribing to popular atheist/secular magazines, and engaging with various social media, I collected a large body of relevant textual data. These data include 700+ e-mail, blog, and message board communications between atheists from six different atheist organizations. I also followed news and the general discourse regarding atheism from various online and print newspapers, magazines, and social media sources. I printed, reviewed, and coded all of the relevant documentation for analysis. I constructed my argument after carefully sifting through all the textual data and comparing them with the interview and participant observation data I had obtained in the field.

Consistent with much qualitative research of this kind, I took an inductive and grounded theory approach in analyzing the data (Charmaz 2001). I developed the concepts and arguments below out of the empirical data collected throughout the research process. Rather than narrowing in only on the data that supported what was becoming salient in the analysis, I also scrutinized any countervailing evidence or other kinds of information that did not seem to “fit” properly within the developing analysis. As qualitative, interview-based research, this study has limited generalizability. However, given the depth of the data collected, the national representation of atheists in parts of the research setting, and the analysis of documentation that extends well beyond the regional setting of the fieldwork, the forthcoming analysis is nevertheless suggestive of the broader collective identity processes of the organized atheist community at large.
Although millions of Americans do not believe in the existence of a god, this nonbelief itself does not imply a need to join a community of nonbelievers, or even to identify with one of the many terms associated with nonbelief. Nevertheless, evidence suggests the atheist community is becoming more member-based. Despite oft repeated sentiments (often by atheists themselves) along the lines of “organizing atheists is like herding cats,” accumulating evidence suggests atheists can, and are, organizing themselves—and doing so with some measure of success. The diffusion and disorganization that has characterized atheists appears increasingly to be something of the past. This means the theoretical import of collective identity work is now more significant and meaningful in terms of the need for better conceptualization and broader understanding of the atheist community.

Seeking Community: Identity and Group Consciousness

Social media have played an important role in the growth and development of the atheist community over the last decade. Local groups can now connect and work more effectively toward growing their membership. Much of the effort in creating a more vibrant atheist community, both online and off, has revolved around appealing to the perceived scores of atheists who are already out there, but who are not yet “out” or involved in the community. The phrase “seeking community” is particularly apt in the case of atheists because activists have focused on drawing out and mobilizing nonbelievers already present in society. Atheists, sometimes lamenting the organizational strengths of their religious counterparts, invest work in building an active community by rallying and organizing an already extant constituency by encouraging closeted atheists to come out.

But there are reasons for a nonbeliever to avoid referring to himself or herself as an atheist, let alone join official groups. Avoiding identification with atheism primarily has to do with its deviant and stigmatized status in American culture. Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartman (2006) discuss how atheists in the United States are viewed as an essential other—an undesirable or even evil threat to the basic moral order. It is not surprising then, as Cragun, Hammer, and Smith (forthcoming) recently observed, that this attitude sometimes results in discrimination against atheists. Given that the public’s distrust of atheists is even more salient than their distrust of almost any other minority group, it is not surprising that a nonbeliever would resist the label “atheist.” But these are the people who the organizing atheist community is attempting to bring into their ranks. This often involves organizers declaring that there is indeed a community of atheists out there and that they are poised to offer a supportive social structure to those that desire it.

Atheist Awareness and Identity Support

The American chapter of the “Out Campaign,”3 sponsored by the Richard Dawkins Foundation, is a notable example of these kinds of efforts. An appeal to the public as outlined on the Foundation’s website reads: “Come Out: Atheists are far more numerous than most people realize. COME OUT of the closet! You’ll feel liberated, and your example will encourage others to COME OUT too . . . Reach Out: . . . let others know they are not alone” (Richard Dawkins Foundation 2011). Such pronouncements are not put forward only by high-profile public atheists. One local organizer of a small Colorado group remarks plainly: “For people who are closeted nonbelievers, we just want them to know there are other people out there who think the same way they do.” Comments from ordinary atheists often reflect the implication made by the Out Campaign that there are many more atheists out there than is realized—they just need to become

3 Other examples include the “We Are Atheism,” and the “Good without God” campaign.
more aware of each other. As one blogger remarked: “There are more of us out there than there are of many other minority groups that get specific recognition, yet people often seem to think we are practically nonexistent.” Likewise, the recent atheist billboard and bus campaigns made similar appeals to closeted atheists. One leader remarked on the purpose of a project he was involved in: “The single major goal of this billboard project is to reach out to the 450,000 citizens of Colorado (10 percent of the total population) who don’t believe in god and are feeling isolated and marginalized.”

The implication that atheism is accompanied by isolation and social marginalization is also apparent in the comments of “everyday” atheists; as Amy remarks in an online posting: “Many atheists are alone, like flying a glider solo. We take responsibility for our actions and stand on our own two feet . . . we do not have the support of religion [or] the promise of life after death.” The suggestion that atheists, lacking the social benefits, inclusion, and the ready-made answers to existential questions that religion provides, and who are thus compelled to “make it on their own,” signifies the sentiments of many of the atheists I encountered. The rhetoric of isolation and the feelings of “flying solo” are important for both incentivizing the building of an atheist community, and for sharing a distinct sense of collective experience.

Groups across the country have advertised on billboards and the sides of buses with statements such as “Don’t Believe in God: You are Not Alone” and “No God, No Problem: Be Good for Goodness Sake.” These visible public space messages, in addition to attracting media attention and rousing controversy, appear to have had some intended effect. Cynthia’s comments to a local organizer reflect the sentiments of some reached by the campaign: “I saw your billboard just down the street from where I currently live. It really encouraged me, I have been alone for so long surrounded by my Christian family.” How many responded to the awareness campaign by joining groups is difficult to assess. One California group reported that the billboard effort gained them 60 new members in just one month. But regardless of actual member growth, these efforts had the effect of heightening the collective awareness of the atheist community. Although some simply joined after learning about the existence of a local group, most were drawn in not merely by dint of learning there were “like-minded” individuals getting together in their communities, but after being persuaded by the strategies of organizers. These strategies, discussed below, are characteristic of social movements, and promote collective identity. But as Friedman and McAdam (1992) note, collective identities and movements are not created from scratch or because isolated individuals simply choose to identify with and join them. Rather, they typically come embedded in existing social arrangements that incorporate other valued identities and orientations. This means atheist groups have had to employ a variety of identity incentives in order to grow. Indeed, I found organizers rarely incentivize participation in the community by appealing only to the shared attribute of absence of belief in God. Instead, the positive social values of freethinking, scientific progress, social justice and equality, charity, and issues of citizenship appear in the rhetoric of recruiters. Websites typically make statements similar to this one from a Colorado group: “We value and promote science, reason, and critical thinking . . . We hold that beliefs must be formed on the basis of science and logic instead of emotion, authority, tradition or dogma.” Naturalistic and scientific worldviews and humanistic values are either made explicit, or strongly implied, in much atheist discourse. This is also apparent in the conversations atheists have with one another. In some cases, atheism is even viewed as incidental to—although most compatible with—science and humanist values. As Steve, a 27-year-old I met at a group social tellingly remarked when asked about his views on religion: “I really consider myself more pro-science than I do antireligious. It’s only when religion tries to influence or block scientific progress that I become angry about it.” From our conversation, it became clear that the atheist group was for

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4 All names used throughout are pseudonyms. Quotes from interviews are noted; otherwise, they reflect the online communications discussed in the “Methods.”
Steve primarily a venue for advocating science and reason, and only partly about joining others in their nonbelief. Thus, organized atheism is not merely the coalescence of individuals around a single issue: their lack of belief in a god. Rather, it tends to involve and imply a host of other social and political issues, and other goal/value-oriented activities. These social goods, and the individual benefits offered by atheist groups, are readily apparent in the language of both the public campaigns, and in the conversations of atheists.

Although atheists cannot employ any clear institutional structure or set of “preexisting solidarities” (Polletta and Jasper 2001) to motivate participation, a focus on science, education, rationality, evidence-based thinking, and other basic Enlightenment values clearly form part of the rhetorical repertoire through which they make their appeals—appeals that figure heavily in the “identity framing” strategies discussed by social movement scholars. People distill these values by referring to individuals of historical/cultural import whom they think embody or represent them. For instance, many local meetings include presentations that highlight prominent scientists, authors, philanthropists, and other cultural elite (past or present) who are atheists, and who are generally viewed by the public as having positively contributed to society. The point here is that when an individual joins an atheist group, he or she is often affirming other pro-social, normative, and socially desirable identities and values that are consistent with that of the broader culture. This represents one way that the collective efforts of atheists focus on influencing the public’s view of them. The affirmation of pro-social and mainstream values is part of the identity “framing” processes (Snow and McAdam 2000) of social groups. That is, organizations must effectively link with the personal meaning structures and value orientations of individuals in order to survive and succeed. As atheists collectivize and coordinate, the values, motives, and goals they share come to reflexively “act back” on the growing collectivity, eventually providing an organizational and interpretive framework that will help to set the parameters for future participants.

Structural and network explanations of why people join particular groups or movements ultimately locate the causes as being outside the individual (Friedman and McAdam 1992). Regional, structural, and status positions are important influences in the identity groups with which people come to affiliate. These explanations are relevant to atheists given the fact that where one lives, what social positions one comes to occupy (e.g., vocational and educational statuses), and what a person’s social background was like generally will play a role in one’s group affiliations. These factors, along with the social and demographic correlates of atheism, are discussed at length elsewhere (see Cragun, Hammer, and Smith 2012). However, the micro and personal meaning structures, and the desire of individuals to carve out meaningful self-concepts from the expanding alternative identity options available to them, are at least equally important for explaining movement participation and group belonging as are the structural factors. Although the appeals to the atheist public, and the specific strategies of recruitment used to bring in new members are clearly relevant, these do not by themselves explain the basic social psychological processes or reasons for the emergence of—and individual participation in—an atheist community. Development of this community has less to do with people being convinced by organizers that they should join “the fight for reason” than with the processes involved in individuals’ value orientations, self-concepts, motivations, and need for group solidarity and meaning. Here, the spoiled identity thesis and the identity verification argument provide useful insights (see Snow and McAdam 2000). The spoiled identity thesis holds that personal identities that correspond to stigmatized categories encourage people to seek out and participate in social groups that challenge the mainstream’s negative view of the group. An integral part of this process is what the verification thesis underscores: that these social groups in turn become an important source of identity validation; a supportive structure and identity resource from which individuals can rework their stigmatized personal identities (or potentially stigmatized for those who are not

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5In the same way that civil rights activists drew on preexisting church networks and specific Christian theologies.
out”) into something that becomes more stable, concrete, and improves the self-concept through the legitimizing forces of group participation.

Sean, a man in his 60s, in talking about the negative views toward unbelievers, discussed in an interview why he joined a group several years ago. His comments illustrate the importance of belonging: “[I needed] a group that supported rational thought. It’s a social outlet, a church for people who don’t go to church [laughs]. I wanted to be with those who think the way I do. It’s more comfortable . . . it’s kind of like a support group.” Similarly, Tim, a man in his early 20s who had moved to a very conservative town in Colorado after serving in the military remarked: “Before the group, I was pretty lonely out here. I needed a freethinking community. . . . I moved here and realized that I needed some support and some new friends. I was feeling uncomfortable in this very theist community.” Many echoed the idea that they received encouragement and felt more comfortable with their atheism after joining a group.

Sometimes, joining a group involves a more dramatic experience. Darren, a man in his 50s, and a former Catholic who experienced abuse by his religious leaders, shared his experience with me: “one day, I came across a copy of Freethought Today. It had an article about ‘Black Collar Crime’ and it talked about the abuse of children in the Catholic Church. And it was the first time . . . that I’d ever heard honest discussion about the problem.” After this experience, he immediately sought out atheist and secular groups. Several others discussed how they sought out groups, in part, as a means of escaping the religious organizations they grew up with. In this light, the notion of an atheist group as a “support group” for “ex-believers” or as a place where, as one atheist remarked, one could “recover from religion” seems to carry some weight. Many meetings involve people sharing their stories of how they came to identify as an atheist. Group members draw intellectual and emotional support from one another, validate each other’s nonbelief, and encourage one another to be more assertive about their views.

**Defining “We” and Shared Expressive Atheism**

Much like the self-described heathens Snook (2008) studied in her examination of the identity work and community dynamics of neopaganism, atheists put significant work into discussing, defining, and negotiating just what it means to be an atheist. In fact, I discovered a substantial amount of time both in online conversations, and group gatherings, is consumed by a (sometimes contentious) back-and-forth on the meaning of atheism itself. Consider the following from online exchanges between members of several different groups, “I think most people think atheism is the belief that there is no god. That is incorrect. Atheism is simply the lack of belief in god(s). Atheism is not a belief. Atheism is not a religion or a philosophy. It’s just the absence of a belief in theism.” Contrast with this: “People think that atheism is a lack of belief. They are wrong. Atheism is a belief. It is belief in philosophy and science as opposed to religion. . . . It seeks to define right from wrong through philosophy (ethics) rather than vague notions and unfounded rules.” Having sifted through extensive correspondence, I found these comments represent reasonably well an important identity conversation that is taking place in the atheist community.

Thus, even atheists themselves do not uniformly agree on the meaning of atheism. The collective work of defining atheism constitutes an important part of the active and ongoing negotiation of not just the meaning of the word, but also the meaning of what and who atheists are collectively. This raises the question of how collective identity becomes possible without consensus even on the meaning of atheism itself. Ironically, the underscoring of difference can result in this sense of “we.” As Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) found, atheists tend to place high value on autonomous critical thought. But this is not just an abstract value for many atheists; it is a product of biography, narrative, and interaction. As Smith (2011) found, atheists tend to perceive their atheism as the result of critical assessment and independence of thought. This is especially the case for atheists who have undergone a deconversion process and who had to struggle with their own religions of origin and former faiths. Indeed, as the Pew Forum’s recent “U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey” (2010) shows, atheists ranked highest in terms of general
knowledge of religion—suggesting that those who come to identify as atheists have spent more time than others in learning about religion and analyzing its claims. This individual penchant for the narrative of critical free thought becomes a valued collective end. One participant sums up the views of many, “I’m a member of many atheist organizations. It has been increasingly obvious that atheists are not of like minds. Sure they may feel that they want to be around people who don’t have a belief in a god, but that is such a small part of what makes a relationship. . . . Atheists come from all walks of life.” These atheists consider themselves autonomous, freethinking, and independent-minded. But scholars have recently examined the values, beliefs, attitudes, and social characteristics of atheists and other secularists and we know from such research that atheists in the United States do share many sociodemographic and ideological characteristics (see Pasquale 2012 for an informative account of the sociodemographic similarities, as well as the diversity found within secular and atheist groups). For instance, Baker and Smith (2009) show that atheists are more likely to be young, educated, single, and politically liberal. Variables such as living in a city versus rural areas can be important predictors as well (Hunter 2010). But these atheists tended to overlook such social patterns and instead focused on difference. It is in part this shared focus on difference itself that somewhat counterintuitively acts as a means of uniting and organizing atheists. The common narrative of individualism and difference lends itself to a shared sense of experience and identity.

It is not only the perception of uniqueness and individual difference—consistent with what social psychologists refer to as personal identity—that atheists have in common. In addition to the collective narrative of difference, broad consensus exists among these atheists regarding their overall naturalistic worldview. When asked by a national secular group what “fundamentals” atheists share, one atheist responded, “I’d definitely say that the phrase ‘Love of Life’ is a standard thing among atheists, which is ironically contrary to what many believers think about us. Also, [we have] ‘knowledge,’ ‘understanding’ and a strong sense of innate ethics.” Though other answers to this question were more or less elaborate, each tended to coalesce around this basic idea; that atheists are life-affirming, informed citizens, with a strong sense of morality. But if this quotation seems more sentiment than statement of verified fact (as we can no more say with certainty that these qualities are “a standard thing” among theists), this is not coincidental. The necessity of shared positive affect for the collective identity construction of any social group has been observed. As Polletta and Jasper (2001) argue, collective identity is not only an individual’s cognitive connection and shared sense of identity with a group or community; it involves both moral and emotional connections as well. In fact, as Snow (2001) states, only when a social group is activated or “infused” with a shared sense of affectivity and morality can it properly be termed a collective identity.

The everyday interactions and communications of atheists with one other reveal their development of affective bonds. Facilitated especially by social media and networking, more atheists are getting together in their communities. No longer is it the case as it was just under two decades ago that small groups met with each other once a month in a public library or other rented space. Today, the atheist community landscape of activity includes both formal and informal weekly socials, atheist camping excursions, “godless drinking” at local bars, science museum field trips, atheist parenting workshops, debates, winter solstice parties, kids’ “skeptic retreats,” atheist concert events, atheist blood drives, book clubs, science education events, flying spaghetti monster socials, and even “atheist skydiving.” Such activities of course go well beyond the “topic” of atheism. These gatherings are more about creating community and enjoying solidarity through social activity. Atheists are increasingly constructing the affective bonds so central to collective identities and forming the “emotional communities” (Hetherington 1998) that foster solidarity and facilitate collective action. This is revealed in the somewhat jocund practice of sharing pithy quotes online with one another that poke fun at religion or in some way imply the virtues of atheism: “Give a man a fish, and you’ll feed him for a day; give him a religion, and he’ll starve to death while praying for a fish!” Or, “Good luck and God Less!” This relatively low-cost form of
emotive expression has the immediate “microvalidation” effect of tightening the social and affective bonds between atheists and encouraging further on and offline interaction, as well as the less immediately apparent result of facilitating atheist solidarity at the community and organizational level over time.

The affective bonds forged by atheists come about not just through the exchange of quips. Nor are they effective without a broader social context and “atheist experience” from which to draw upon. As Melucci (1995) has stressed, affective ties and collective emotive forces are only possible in the context of a broader interpretive field of social meaning, and the symbolic, cultural/material resources that are forged out of interaction itself. These resources then, in a reflexive manner, become available to their participants to draw from as they continue to collectively construct themselves and negotiate community. The “content” of an atheist collective identity is thus revealed by the employment of these resources. Polletta puts it plainly: “collective identities are expressed in cultural [and symbolic] materials—names, narratives, symbols, verbal styles, rituals, clothing and so on.” (2001:285).

Collective atheist identity is expressed through a variety of these cultural/symbolic materials. Not surprisingly, atheist writings, symbols, clothing, and other materials have grown in number and popularity commensurate with the growing community itself. On Richard Dawkins’s website alone, one can purchase almost any of the items typically offered to consumers by organizations and their “brands”—from atheist t-shirts, to jewelry, to coffee mugs and key chains. These materials are more than just things purchased for personal enjoyment; they become identity markers, or “badges” that announce a personally valued attribute, and make sometimes bold statements to others about who a person is (Gardner 1995:3). The popular “scarlet letter: ‘A’” for instance, printed on all kinds of products, is one of the more recognizable atheist symbols (the result of atheists across the nation submitting ideas for an international atheist symbol). Although consistent with the concerns of individualism discussed earlier, these atheist cultural/symbolic materials are not only expressions of personal identities, or idiosyncratic penchants. They are of collective concern and express collective identity in that, in addition to showing solidarity as a member of a broader atheist community (or seeking controversy with those outside the community), they can be used with the intention of accomplishing strategic and collective goals. John, a local organizer who was producing his own atheist merchandise, remarked: “The goal with my shirt and [atheist] design were not to scream atheism or bash religion, but instead to serve as a curious stimulus that could help start a simple dialogue with someone open to it. The shirts could also help increase outreach to other closet atheists who don’t know about our group.” And member Stephanie agrees that these symbolic identity markers can be useful tools for the atheist community in obtaining specified objectives: “We have to be conspicuous in public in a nonconfrontational way. This means to roam around in public acting like everyone else, but wearing something that identifies you as an atheist. The problem is that most believers don’t know any atheists in public so they don’t have any way of realizing that we aren’t any different from them.”

Of course, not every atheist would agree to “roam around” donning overt “atheist signifiers” or even agree in principle to the idea of distinguishing themselves in any way with atheist symbols. However, as members would like to see atheism become more socially acceptable, and demonstrate to the public that there is indeed a community of atheists in this country, and that this community is not a threat to American life, this is generally viewed as a goal worth collectively pursuing by a variety of means.

Another important aspect of collective identity production includes written materials that express and advocate an atheist perspective. In addition to local efforts, there have been recent forays into formal transnational declarations meant to represent entire nonbelieving segments of democratic nations. For example, the 2010 World Atheist Conference in Copenhagen sponsored by the Atheist Alliance International—whose recent merger with American Atheists was purposed in order to “strengthen both the United States and international atheist community”—produced the
“Copenhagen Declaration on Religion in Public Life,” which outlined about a dozen sociopolitical propositions that reveal an underlying concern with what it means to be a nonbeliever and/or part of the atheist community. In addition to affirming statements about democracy and equality, the document is explicitly inclusive of nonbelievers in all areas “of public life and their right to equality of treatment” in it. Specific criticisms of religion are offered, and the values of nonbelievers asserted: “We reject any special consideration for religion in politics and public life, and oppose charitable, tax-free status . . . for the promotion of any religion as inimical to the interests of non-believers . . . . We reject all blasphemy laws and restrictions on the right to criticize religion . . . . We support the right to secular education, and assert the need for education in critical thinking and the distinction between faith and reason as a guide to knowledge” (Copenhagen Declaration 2010).

But official declarations do not simply reflect the views of an already collectively defined will. Rather, it is constitutive of group consciousness itself. As Taylor and Whittier (1992) discuss, group consciousness is a key ingredient to the relationship between collective identity and collective action. This is because consciousness of membership in a collectivity itself imparts a larger social significance to that collectivity; and one primary way in which consciousness is constructed and imparted is through the development of “a formal body of writings, speeches, and documents” (Taylor and Whittier 1992:114). One should expect that as atheists continue to organize, the formal body of writings, speeches, and documents will likewise grow.

**Seeking Change: Atheist Activism and Identity Politics**

Establishing the elements of community that give rise to a sense of collective identity crystallizes more completely with purposeful sociopolitical activities designed to promote some collective end. Group support and internal validation for one’s identity is, by itself, not sufficient for many. Seeking to change the social meaning and status of atheism and advocating specific sociopolitical ideas become shared goals that orient and shape the collective and organizational actions of atheists.

**Challenging Theism and Competing with Religion**

An identity politics requires some type of perceived oppressive structure that becomes the object of resistance and the target for which change is sought. For many social groups engaged in activism, their collective actions are squared against concrete administrative, bureaucratic, economic, or other structural forces that apply inequitable treatment—thus providing cause for grievance. Organized atheism resists not only a long-standing and highly valued human institution—organized religion—but also challenges the culturally entrenched belief in the underlying and legitimizing force of this institution—belief in the supernatural. Rejecting this can present real problems for atheists, explaining in part the sometimes extreme distrust and prejudice leveled at them (see Zuckerman 2012 for a detailed analysis of the forms and processes of rejecting religion and theistic belief). Thus, constructing boundaries with relation to religion and theism are a central aspect of the collective identity work of atheists.

Social, moral, and symbolic boundaries are apparent in the communications and activities of atheists. Boundaries are central to collective identity “because they promote a heightened awareness of a group’s commonalities and frame interaction between members of the in-group and out-group” (Taylor and Whittier 1992:110). The major substantive source of creating boundaries for atheists is—not surprisingly—religion and theism. Often, this means atheists discussing their differences from theists. As Brad, a local organizer remarks:

> How are our lives different from that of believers? Are atheists happier than believers? . . . It stands to reason that atheists, who believe we have but a single life to live would have strong ideas on how to live that life. This touches on those fundamental questions that most atheists are asked by believers regarding morality, ethics . . .
These “exercises” have the effect of clarifying and strengthening collective identity. Of course, not all discussions are quite so abstract or neutral sounding. More combative statements also frequent discussions. In part of a long correspondence with fellow atheists in response to controversial public comments made by a Christian about the necessity of religion for Americans, Jason had this to say:

We need to get our noses out of that vial [sic] book (the bible) and put them instead into a scientific journal. . . . We need to spend less time praying and more time putting our hands to work. . . . Put your hands together for freedom by doing some work to earn it. This is battle. It is serious. . . . Our very freedom is at stake. We are now on the slippery slope back to horribly and violent oppression. God is the only one who can put us there. Reason is the only one who can keep us out!

But again, atheists differ on how best to interact and react to theist challenges from without. Arguments concerning lawsuits advanced by a prominent atheist demonstrate this. Many were on board, happy to sign petitions concerning a variety of legal issues such as prayer in schools, “God” on our currency, and a host of other issues. One respondent, who favored atheists as a group litigating, stated:

The propaganda put forth by the religious right and their political . . . maneuvers is geared to isolate reality from their flock so that they can get enough Supreme Court Justices on the bench to abolish any Amendment that protects nonreligious people. . . . We do need to litigate because much of the public doesn’t understand the reality of history. Many are convinced that “In God We Trust” has always been on our currency. . . . We are being attacked. We have no choice but to fight back to keep our constitution intact.

Whereas others expressed essentially the opposite view:

This is ridiculous; when will atheists realize that the way to convert people is not through nit-picky behavior or sophomoric lawsuits? What we don’t need is people fighting “under god” in the pledge, or “in god we trust” on money. . . . We also don’t need militancy—isn’t this the mode we are fighting? We will never win by sinking to their level.

This back-and-forth, however, ultimately does not undermine unity and a shared sense of identity and purpose. The reason for this is twofold. First, the narrative of independent-mindedness that atheists value finds expression in exchanges of this kind. Second, and more important in this case, is the shared sense of a common threat. Both statements suggest that atheists are ultimately “fighting” against ignorance, unreason, and the undesirable elements of religion. This itself provides enough collective purpose to override disagreement about what approach atheists should take in accomplishing their goals. Organized atheists appear united on the key principles of the separation of church and state, a secular value system, and the promotion of science and evidence-based reasoning. This is consistent with Snow’s observation that: ‘The shared perceptions and feelings of a common cause, threat, or fate that constitute the shared ‘sense of we’ motivate people to act together in the name of, or for the sake of, the interest of the collectivity’ (2001:4).

The boundaries atheists construct between themselves and nonatheist others are important for the consciousness of the in-group, but also might produce unintended effects. As Taylor and Whittier (1992) observe, it is usually the dominant group (in this case the “theist majority”) that erects the most salient boundaries between itself and the minority group it refers to. However, “paradoxically, for [minority] groups organizing to pursue collective ends, the process of asserting ‘who we are’ often involves a kind of reverse affirmation of the characteristics attributed to it
by the larger society” (Taylor and Whittier 1992:118). This can be the case with atheists, as often their minority views are seen as validating—for instance—the stereotype of the “angry atheist.”

Another implication of creating boundaries appears in the notion that the atheist group offers a “social outlet” for participants. Combined with the activities that organized atheists participate in, the group may be viewed on one level as an alternative for, or in some way competing with, the most salient social dimensions/benefits that organized religion offers. I do not claim that organized atheism is the “functional equivalent” of organized religion for reasons that cannot be elaborated here. However, at the level of group validation, and the fulfillment of particular social “needs,” the atheist group appears to facilitate the meeting of these. Recent developments are illustrative. For instance, instead of Bible camp or other religiously themed summer retreats for children, kids can attend “SkeptiCamp,” or Camp Quest, or parents can participate in Parenting Beyond Belief workshops where they can learn about “raising ethical caring kids without religion” as well as “handling family pressure to participate in religious activities, easing fears about death without an afterlife, and [teaching] children about religion without indoctrinating them.” Likewise, several atheist groups promoted the recognition and celebration of secular holidays—for instance, H. Res. 81 in the 112th Congress (2011), which sought to establish February 12 as Darwin Day. In addition, the celebration of winter solstice instead of the religious-themed celebrations during the holiday season has become more of a focus. One group in Colorado even published and disseminated an “atheist holiday calendar,” which features relevant secular events and commemorates significant atheists in history.

In addition to secular holidays and the veneration of atheist leaders, there have been efforts to develop practices around basic life transitions (that are usually suffused with and dominated by religious practice) such as birth, marriage, and funerals that are explicitly atheist and that highlight a nonreligious character. For example, one group organized a meeting to discuss death and funerals for atheists. The bulletin read:

It seems that when someone dies, everyone who gathers at a memorial service either recites prayers, plays religious music, invokes god, and the like. I want to have a discussion about how to create a non-religious death service, and what kind of things should go into a will or other legal document to carry out the wishes of the person who doesn’t want others’ religious beliefs introduced into a funeral.

Such discussions demonstrate the importance of symbolic boundaries for atheists. And as Smith (2011) observes, part of constructing an atheist identity involves articulating what it is one does not believe. Given the inextricable link between our personal and social identities—those things that make us unique and those things that give us a sense of sameness—I would suggest further that this “not-self” is also a formative process of collective identity.

**Key Issues for Activists**

Constructing boundaries and underscoring difference is not only accomplished through rhetoric and discourse, it is also a part of the social and political actions of organized atheists. As Hetherington (1998) observes, the identity politics of today at play within many social groups are as often about the politics of difference and the expanding alternative identity choices available to people, than they are about experiencing more obvious oppression due to marginal statuses. Put differently, the conditions of the contemporary social/political landscape are such that groups might engage in identity politics as a way of “choosing to be marginal” (Hetherington 1998:27). But why would one choose a stigmatized social status? Because choosing a marginalized identity—which often brings with it opposition and subsequent opportunity for resistance—can itself be an important source of meaningful activity. Adopting the label “atheist,” and affiliating with an atheist organization, is an important identity choice even if one does not properly choose their atheism.
As the literatures on protest and social movements show, the sources of activism are complex and varied. Here, I focus more narrowly on specific connections between activism and collective identity. Atheist activism is a means of constructing both personal and shared meaning. As Polletta states: “Activism for many people is a way to construct a desirable self” (2001:290). It involves work toward some goal, the effort of which is not merely what must be endured in order to achieve the goal; the work itself becomes the source of meaning and identity. When people collectively pursue desired goals (and selves) the process becomes more dynamic. Organized activism develops from a shared sense of grievance with some aspect of the broader society. There exists a shared felt need to respond to, and sometimes protest against, what is seen as unjust or untrue. To properly speak of “atheist activism” then, one must identify the set of grievances most common to groups of atheist actors. These can be distilled into two basic categories: (1) those that deal with the issue of separation of church and state and the perceived ubiquity and encroachment of religion/theism, and (2) those that deal with the marginal status of atheism itself.

One recent example of the first kind involved the coordinated effort of several groups in protesting the presence of a nativity scene displayed by a local sheriff on public property in a Colorado city in 2008. The lighting of the scene was to be accompanied by a public prayer meeting, and the local sheriff was selling sweatshirts that read: “Have a politically incorrect holiday, just say Merry Christmas!” After phone calls and meetings with the sheriff, the groups were ultimately unsuccessful at getting the display removed. The sheriff reportedly remarked that he would display the religious scene every year as long as he was sheriff. But the atheist groups persisted, bringing in an attorney and seeking help from national secular organizations. After continued negotiations they were allowed to create and place their own “atheist plaque” along with the rest of the Christmas display, which read: “During this Winter Solstice season, illuminate your mind with reason, let friends and family warm your heart, and celebrate that we all take part.” The atheists in attendance at the lighting wore name tags that read “Promoting the Separation of Church and State.” One of the leaders that coordinated the effort described its outcome this way, “this project was a three-point field goal success, but not a six-point touchdown success. A touchdown success would have been removal of the manger scene. [But] our field goal atheist display is a success that says we nonbelievers will not accept violations of church and state lying down.”

This “field goal success” seemed to provide some impetus for further activism. A variety of other church/state separation issues ensued over the next few years that groups became involved in. In addition to the billboard campaigns, these included protesting the Westboro Baptist Church’s antihomosexual picketing in Colorado, signing local petitions for the filing of lawsuits challenging “the intrusion of monotheism into the inauguration of U.S. Presidents,” petitioning a school district’s adoption of an official document titled “Forty Developmental Assents,” which includes the need for “a religious community for all children,” challenging Hobby Lobby’s “Christian Nation” advertisements, and protesting faith-based initiatives and the tax-exempt status of churches.

Increasing numbers of atheists became involved in these activities, in part persuaded by the impassioned appeals made from organizers; as one announced in a mass e-mail: “[We are] members of a disenfranchised minority . . . we need each and every one of you right now!” The implication that these local efforts are ultimately about achieving national significance and cultural change was always present. At a large state convention in Colorado, for instance, where atheists were protesting a faith-based initiative embraced by the local government, many expressed their feelings about their activism along these lines: “This protest is to note the nearly 15% of Americans who claim no religion . . . this [state political convention] is a chance to speak to the [national] issue of separation of church and state in front of the whole country.” Local efforts across the country helped to set the conditions for activities of broader national significance. For instance, in 2010 groups celebrated the Secular Coalition of America’s official policy briefing with presidential administration at the White House—the first time in history a
explicitly nontheist organization had met with officials to focus on issues important to them. A representative of the SCA commented:

The [SCA] is poised to make history with an official meeting with White House officials. [We are] encouraging non-theists to take a poll indicating what issues are of greatest importance to you. The SCA exists to ensure that [atheists and secularists] have a voice in Washington; to oppose injustices resulting from theocratic encroachments on government [and to] to win Americas respect and recognition befitting our community.

Other national organizations such as the American Humanist Association seemed to increase their efforts as well, as evidenced by their recent national multimedia advertising campaign, which they claimed was “the largest, most extensive ever by a godless organization.” During this period local groups became increasingly interconnected and coordinated, giving the community more influence on public discourse. From a new social movements perspective, it is not surprising that atheists have developed a tone consistent with the language of civil rights and minority discourse. One local organizer sums up the perspective of many activists: “Many of us think of secularism [and atheism] as being on the cusp of a wave to protect separation of church and state…. We think of ourselves as about the fourth or fifth wave of civil rights movements, after people of color, women, the homosexual/transgendered community and people with disabilities.”

With many invoking the phrase “new atheist movement” and remarking how they could even “become a political force” it is clear that, whether these statements are empirically accurate or not, the atheist community has gained a sense of unity that perceives itself—within a contemporary sociopolitical context—as a coordinated collectivity with clear values, goals, and a desire for a greater sense of social and political legitimacy.

Framing atheism as a civil rights issue is not accidental. If organized atheists are to implement the cultural shifts they desire and persuade the public to be more accepting of them, they must appeal to the culturally valued and embedded discourse of freedom of expression, and choice of worldview. Pluralism and religious freedom is something to which atheists can appeal when engaging the public. Thus, combined with the use of media and outreach, atheists on a basic level use existing institutional means of pursuing change: engaging in public discourse and identity politics. Important for these atheists, however, is the question of how to best pursue this engagement. As one organizer remarked, “we need to build a real community without being combative; we need to persuade [people] at an institutional level to achieve a cultural shift.” Discussion about whether atheists are better off aggressively pursuing this cultural shift, or whether they should take a more accommodating approach in accomplishing their goals frequented conversations. Gatherings that centered on this question had a way of energizing members and triggering what Snow and McAdam refer to as identity amplification, or “the embellishment and strengthening of an existing identity that is congruent with a movement’s collective identity” (2000:49). Though identity amplification does not guarantee activism on the part of members, it is nevertheless an important component toward that end.

**Good Works Without God**

The second category of collective grievance involves the marginal status of atheism. Challenging and/or competing with religion, and political atheist activism, either directly or indirectly connect with the collective desire to destigmatize atheism. This motivates work toward making atheism socially acceptable. Demonstrating through collective actions that they are “good without god” is a central concern of organized atheism. A sense of group legitimacy would not be possible absent the view that atheism can become an accepted social position. Therefore, a great deal of atheist activism is actually about publicly demonstrating the consistency of atheists’ morals and values with that of the mainstream. There are many examples in recent years of this work toward destigmatization. For instance, one group created what it called its “Ask an Atheist” project.
Members, one weekend afternoon each month, would set up booths in public parks to attract attention and start conversations with passersby. The stated intention on the announcement read “[we want] to show believers that as people we have more in common than not, and to show them we are, in fact, good people.” They even moved this to a perhaps more obvious venue, with “Ask an Atheist at Church” where a group convened at a local Baptist Church (with permission) to show believers “they are good, normal people.”

A more organizationally ambitious project involved the recent development of an intergroup collaborative charitable organization called Atheists for Humanity (2011) launched in Denver in 2011. The website’s homepage (which states: “Doing good for goodness sake”) allows people to donate to any of 23 well-known charities in the name of atheism. The effort to change public opinion of atheists is made explicit by the organization: “Our goals are simple: raise money and awareness for worthy charities and actively work to destigmatize atheists and atheism.” The creator of the nonprofit spoke enthusiastically in an online announcement about the project:

Each time we send money, food, or clothing to a charity, we’ll include a letter stating the donations came from Atheists for Humanity. Once we get a little momentum we’ll start sending out Press Releases to local papers and magazines . . . . We can do good for those in need while also polishing the perception of atheism and atheists. If you’re an atheist and are tired of the negative stigma that comes with it, come help us do something about it!

Likewise, the growing number of volunteer activities atheist groups are engaging, such as street cleanups, food drives, and benefit events, are instances not only of the stated goal of effecting positive change in the broader community, but effecting change in the way people view atheists and their organizations. The goal of destigmatization is also apparent in the atheist activism. As one participant remarked, in his proposing to other atheists that they counterprotest the WBC’s antigay demonstrations, “I would like to see a group stand up to these people—why not us? Even the religious tend to shy away from this radical group. If atheists stand up, perhaps society will think twice about what they believe we stand for.” This slightly ulterior motive shows how important destigmatization is for contemporary atheists.

The “Good without God” and “National Secular Service Day” campaigns illustrate at a broader level the current impulse of the secular/atheist community to become more accepted. As a leader of NSSD stated in a correspondence with many local groups: “Our mission [is to] unite secular groups across the country in the interest of public service, and to demonstrate our commitment to leading full and ethical lives . . . to raise the visibility and sense of unity among local groups in the community of reason, to create a national dialogue on the role of nontheists in American Society.” Suggesting competition with the role that religious organizations often play, the creation of NSSD, endorsed by many local atheist groups states further that: “We want our nonreligious community to be able to offer the same fantastic service opportunities that churches and religious groups are known for . . . we want to show the nation that we too are committed to charitable and ethical lives with or without religion.” Participants were encouraged to submit to the project organizers “specific examples about your god-free involvement in service to country or community.” The moral underpinnings in these comments suggest that imbuing atheism with positive moral meanings is important not just for the personal moral identities of atheists, but for the development of a collective atheist identity. As one member expressed: “What we need to do is work together, and show people that atheism doesn’t mean the death of morality; it actually means a stronger morality.” The emphasis on “we together” challenging the prevailing ideas about religion and morality, and as a group showing people that atheism is compatible with morality, is demonstrative of collective stigma management (Martin 2000). The organizational identities that define atheist groups parallel the activist organizational framework that Martin wrote about in his analysis of differential organizational approaches to managing social stigma. Atheists collectively aim, through their organizational frameworks, to educate the public about
who they are through various forms of self-advocacy and social/political activism in an attempt to acquire greater control over the social meaning of atheism—thereby creating greater consistency between their identity and the public’s perception of them.

**CONCLUSION**

This study examined the collective identity work of contemporary atheists in the United States. Little sociological scholarship has investigated the ways in which atheists collectively negotiate their identities in the context of atheist organizations, and with the nonatheist public. Consistent with Cimino and Smith's (2007) observations about the minority discourse of organized atheists, the current study finds that atheists indeed are engaged in identity politics, and avail the rhetoric of marginalization by framing atheism as a political issue. Cimino and Smith (2007) go further, however, arguing that atheists are responding to the “failure of secularism” by adopting the strategies of evangelicals. There is some evidence to support this. For instance, the rhetoric of the “dangers” of theism and activities such as “Ask an Atheist at Church” can reasonably be construed as examples of the “defensive competition” and “mimicry” of evangelicalism that Cimino and Smith (2007) discuss. However, in contrast, the present study finds that, far from adopting an inured posture regarding the supposed “failure” of secularism, or taking refuge in a subcultural niche, in fact, many organized atheists are actually closer to seeing themselves as part of the “secular vanguard,” something Cimino and Smith (2007) suggest they have had to abandon. Organized atheists perceive both the possibility, and necessity, of not just defending their views, but growing, increasing their influence, and becoming an accepted part of the mainstream. The comments of the president of American Atheists at the 2012 Reason Rally make this clear, “America is not far behind [secularism in Western Europe]. I believe in two decades we will be in a position where secularism is the norm” (National Public Radio 2012). Irrespective of the historical/empirical accuracy of this claim, the point is that organized atheists perceive the progression of secularism in America. Scholars should therefore resist accepting the premise that atheists no longer operate under this assumption until further research can bear this out.

I have argued the interplay between atheists seeking both a defined community and a meaningful change in how the public views that community is at the core of their collective identity. From seeking to bring others “out of the closet,” to employing the rhetoric of an identity politics, to engaging in social/political activism, contemporary atheists are constructing a shared sense of identity and community. Rather than internal differences undermining collective identity, a narrative of difference, combined with an acknowledgment of shared values, serves to strengthen group boundaries and self-understanding. The activity of atheists, which involves the (re)negotiation of the meaning of atheism vis-à-vis the American public, is an organizing principle of collective identity construction.

Social media and networking has played an important role in the development of the atheist community (Smith and Cimino 2012). There is no centralized leadership in this community, so atheists have relied on lateral, cooperative, local activities. Participants may come from a variety of backgrounds, and have differing views on specific issues, but cooperative action is possible to a significant degree because of the collective narratives atheists employ online. As Wuthnow (2011) reiterates, “talk” is an essential element in both the production and analysis of social life. Though he was referencing religious discourse, talk is no less critical in irreligious discourse. For atheists construct collective identity, in part, by the talk they engage in with one another and with the public.

Goal-oriented social action requires the aligning of personal and collective identity. From this view, when atheists engage in activism it is because their shared sense of “we” has animated
and mobilized them “cognitively, morally, and emotionally” for a common cause, and against a common threat (Snow 2001:4). The normative status of theism in United States, and the public and political nature of religious life provide plenty of opportunity and justification for atheists to organize. The notion of collective identity acts as a conceptual bridge between individual motivations/dispositions and collective action. As Friedman and McAdam write: “One of the most powerful motivators of individual action is the desire to confirm, through [collective] behavior, a cherished identity” (1992:166).

Organized atheism occupies an interesting space when viewed in the light of social movement theory. As Polletta and Jasper (2001) discuss, mobilization on the part of the civil rights movement was based on seeking full inclusion as equal citizens. This is in contrast to postcitizenship movements, which are “peopled by those who already enjoy most or all of the normal rights of citizens, including the ability to mobilize legally and to put pressure on political decision makers” (Polletta and Jasper 2001:287). Given their sociodemographic and educational characteristics (see Cragun, Hammer, and Smith 2012; Pasquale 2012), atheists as a group fit into this latter category. Yet, atheists perceive both stigma and marginalization. This perception is not unfounded, as research documents (Cragun, Hammer, and Smith 2012). Indeed, much of the American public does not include atheists as full citizens because they are believed to have rejected the moral foundations of American life (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). This helps to explain the minority discourse and the rhetoric of civil rights that organizing atheists have increasingly come to adopt. Related to this is my suggestion that organized atheism can be viewed as an example of the not-self at the collective level. And although there is currently much more evidence of “not-us” language and discourse being employed by atheists, if the contemporary patterns of atheist community and solidarity described earlier continue, it seems reasonable to expect these discursive narrative practices will begin to more frequently “translate” into actual explicit collective atheist behavioral practices (such as “atheist funerals”).

Bainbridge suggests that atheism results from weak social obligations; applying the “compensator” model, he claims that atheists “lack intimate, personal obligations of the kind that might benefit from secondary compensation” (2005:5). Compensator theory argues that in the absence of desired supernatural rewards (e.g., promise of an afterlife) compensators act in their stead as a kind of temporary “place-holder” for the promise of the reward in the future. Social relationships, and their attendant obligations, are themselves compensators (“secondary” because they are social, whereas primary compensators are personal and psychological). Thus, “someone who lacks strong social bonds of a kind to incur [social] obligations is more free to espouse atheism” (Bainbridge 2005:7).

The current study reveals potential problems with this reasoning. Most basically, Bainbridge tends to view atheists as isolated individuals. But the range of social relationships and activities described earlier, in which atheists increasingly engage, seems to contradict the premise of the “lone atheist” with few social connections or obligations. However, if future research confirms that atheists do in fact tend to have fewer social obligations than the religious, perhaps this is because, aware of their deviant status, they are less likely to pursue relationships with those who may not accept them. This is particularly the case in the context of family relationships (which are an important part of what Bainbridge refers to in speaking about social obligations). As Fitzgerald (2003) shows, many atheists use avoidance techniques (especially with religious family members) to reduce stress or conflict in relationships. In this case, lack of obligations would not be the source of atheism; it would be its outcome. I did not assess the “causes” of atheism in this study, but my general findings are more consistent with Hunter’s (2010) argument that greater consideration of social, demographic, and social psychological factors, such as exposure to an atheist viewpoint, gender and race, and whether or not one is likely to find social support for atheism is required for a more complete sociological picture of contemporary atheists.
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SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s web site:

Table S1: Demographic characteristics of sample