

**The Process and Experience of Deciding to Live Openly Atheist in a Christian  
Family: A Qualitative Study**

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**ABSTRACT**

Existing literature reveals that atheists are among the least accepted groups in America. This study examined the process atheists go through when disclosing their atheism to their religious family members. It is hoped that the information gained may benefit therapists who work with this population as they go through this potentially difficult time and adds to the currently insufficient body of research on atheism and atheists. Using the guided frameworks of grounded theory and social exchange and choice theory, a focus group was conducted with seven atheists and coded for themes. The data revealed the disclosure process as happening in three main stages which cover how the atheists arrived at the belief system, how it was disclosed and its reception, and how relationships have been impacted since the disclosure. The clinical implications of the findings and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### *The Problem and its Setting*

Atheists are regarded as one of the most “vilified” and least accepted minority groups in America (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartman, 2006; Silverman, 2006). For someone to disclose their lack of faith would put them at high risk for being labeled “wicked, desparate, and hopeless” (Narciso, 2004, p. 1). Research indicates that the few individuals who do decide to openly declare their atheism often times grow up in secular households “with little or no religious training” or at least one atheist or agnostic parent (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006, p. 42). But what about those atheists who grew up in households where faith was present and played an integral part of their upbringing and family life? From what can be deduced from studies, surveys, and polls, the task of coming out to such a family could be a very painful and stressful experience, to say the least. This study hopes to uncover the process these atheists go through as they declare their beliefs, or lack there of, to their faithful family members.

Depending on which survey or study results one is looking at, only 0.4 to 3 percent of Americans describe themselves as atheist (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartman, 2006; Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar, 2001). However, it is worth noting that if one lumps together those who describe themselves as atheist, agnostic, non-religious, humanist, or secular, 14.1% of the American population is represented (Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar, 2001). This is important to consider because it might be an indication that there are significantly more atheists in America who, for fear of discrimination, simply choose to take on a

more acceptable label. After all, there is a host of data suggesting that atheists are quite detested in the United States.

Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartman (2006) used national survey data to analyze the acceptance of atheists in America. In a recent USA Today/Gallup poll, individuals were asked, “if your party nominated a generally well-qualified person for president who happened to be (INSERT HERE), would you vote for that person?” (p. 215). When the word ‘atheist’ was applied to the blank in the question, the majority of those surveyed said they would not vote for that person. Atheists were the only group that rendered such results, in a list that also included, among others, Muslims, homosexuals, and Mormons. In findings from yet another survey that explored the acceptance of several ethnic and cultural minority groups, it is revealed that “Americans are less willing to accept intermarriage with atheists than any other group, and less likely to imagine that atheists share their vision of American society” (p. 216).

The point is that there may be many more American atheists than the numbers suggest at first glance. If such individuals ever decide to openly adopt the label of atheist, as a significant portion of individuals in other western nations have, there may be a lot of displeased American families. If the abovementioned survey and study results illustrate what Americans think of a hypothetical individual, how would they respond to a loved one declaring atheism?

### *Significance*

Research on atheism and atheists is, in general, sparse. A review of the literature revealed that research specifically focusing on the disclosure process of atheists who



grew up in families of faith is non-existent. It is important to learn more about these individuals who make up one of the most hated minority groups in America.

Furthermore, this study should be of interest to therapists and, perhaps more particularly, family therapists, who are often interested in the family system and family interactions. By learning more about how atheists choose to disclose their lack of faith to their faithful family members and its ramifications, therapists may be able to help these individuals through what may conceivably be a very traumatic experience. Furthermore, therapists may be enlightened enough by the results to be able to help the family members on the receiving end of the disclosure, as they too will more than likely be struggling with the situation.

#### *Rationale*

In order to understand the disclosure process of American atheists, the qualitative procedure of focus groups is employed. Focused groups have worked well in assessing the process of coming out for homosexuals (Gramling, Carr, & McCain, 2000). The experiences of homosexuals and atheists are very similar with respect to disclosure and coming out (Anspach, Coe, & Thurlow, 2007; Silverman 2006). Both groups are faced with the task of declaring and defending a lifestyle that, according to some faithful individuals, runs counter to certain religious ideals and perspectives. Because of this similarity, perhaps looking to similar studies done with the GLBT community would be beneficial. A study by Gramling, et al. (2000) of family responses to lesbians' disclosure provides rationale for the use of focus groups in the present study. The authors of the study on lesbian disclosure explained that focus groups worked very well, as the "group interaction proved a valuable tool in facilitating the telling of difficult stories and

provided normalization and support” and “generate[d] data not discovered in individual interviews” (p. 656).

### *Theoretical Framework*

Guiding the study will be grounded theory and social exchange and choice framework. Grounded theory will provide the framework for analyzing the study since a process, namely the disclosure process of atheists to their faithful family members, is being explored. The grounded theory concept of constant comparison, as explained by Echevarria-Doan and Tubbs (2005), will be utilized for the study. This way of analyzing data involves “a continual process of categorization, sorting and resorting, and coding recoding of data for emergent categories of meaning” (p. 49). The process of coding data when using grounded theory calls for open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding is the initial part of the analysis in which the researcher(s) identify, name, and categorize information and basically “begin making meaning of the data” (p. 49). Next, axial coding is used to differentiate and identify relationships between the categories and subcategories found during open coding. Finally, selective coding is used to incorporate categories and subcategories in way that gives that data a story, which can help researchers in forming conclusions about the process.

While grounded theory has been described above solely as a method for how the data will be interpreted once obtained, it is also guides the study itself in how it is theoretically organized. Grounded theory will be employed not just to analyze the results, but also during the collection of data. By doing so, the researcher hopes to be able to actively form theories based on what unfolds throughout the data collection process. This in turn enables him to ask more probing questions that will lead to a richer

understanding of the process being examined in real time. As such, what results will be a comprehensive story of the phenomenon being explored, rather than simply data, which does little by itself to cohesively explain the process of the phenomenon being studied.

Echevarria-Doan and Tubbs (2005) further explain the compatibility of ground theory and family therapy research as follows:

The inductive nature of therapists' inquiry, their process with clients, and the hypothesis-driven conclusions they develop are very similar to steps taken by grounded theorists... Because the methodology requires skills paralleling those required of therapists, clinicians are more likely to turn to grounded theory methodology as a way to bridge clinical practice with areas of interest that they would like to investigate further. Therefore, when grounded theory methodology is applied in family therapy research, the kinship that exists between both processes is a definite strength. (p. 55)

It is also important to mention that in grounded theory, the researcher becomes the "primary instrument for data collection and analysis, and the researcher's theoretical sensitivity is what allows him or her to develop theory grounded in the data" (p. 45). As a result, the researcher must take great care when analyzing data to insure that they are making sense of what is significant. By using grounded theory to analyze the transcribed focus group sessions, it is hoped that a comprehensible story of the process atheists go through as they choose to live openly as non-believers in a family of faith will emerge.

In thinking about how an atheist comes to the decision that disclosure is necessary, or perhaps even beneficial, social exchange and choice theory is employed.

This framework is ideal since its central focus is on the individual and their motivation to act based on self-interests (White & Klein, 2002). Furthermore, social exchange and choice theory proposes that these self-interests are based on the assumption that individuals are rational and that they have the ability to assess, using a cost/reward analysis, the choices that they make (White & Klein, 2002). The individual will choose whatever behavior maximizes profit or reward for them (White & Klein, 2002). It can be hypothesized that all atheists do this cost/reward analysis as they determine whether or not to disclose to faithful family members. Most, it might be assumed, decide that disclosure is not beneficial to them since the various risks of living openly as an atheist outweigh the rewards. For the minority that does decide to disclose their atheism to their families, it could be said that they too make this cost/reward analysis and, for them, the rewards outweigh the costs. Keeping this framework in mind during analysis, may clarify if this in fact takes place. If it is found that a cost/reward analysis such as this takes place, determining what factors or rewards are valued most may become a significant focus or finding of the study.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The goal of this study, as mentioned above, is to gain an in-depth understanding of the process atheists go through when disclosing their lack of belief to their family members of faith. By doing so, it is hoped that the information gained may benefit therapists who work with this population as they go through this potentially difficult time. Also, the author is simply hoping to add to the currently insufficient body of research on atheism and atheists. To reiterate, the main research question in this study is: What is the

process of disclosure for atheists who decide to reveal their atheism to family members of faith?



inferred from the label and how incongruent this population appears to be outside of calling themselves “atheist.”

It is important to realize that “atheists share no common sub-cultural heritage as, for example did the members of the early civil rights movement. Also, being the disparate group they are, atheists share no ready means of identification (as did most of the early feminists)” (Hart, 1978). According to research by Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006), atheists seem to be quite a heterogeneous group of individuals with a range of political affiliations, ages, social views, and levels of education. However, it seems as though males make up a consistently greater percentage of those who take on the atheist label (62 and 69 percent in two studies). It is extremely difficult to lump together atheists and/or their beliefs because they are so wide-ranging. Each atheist seems to have their own story of how and why they came to their conclusion and what it means to be an atheist. It appears that not much can be assumed or concluded about an atheist aside from their belief that there is no god(s) or their disbelief in god(s).

According to the *Handbook of Spirituality and Worldview in Clinical Practice*, a text aimed at familiarizing clinicians with the worldviews and religious beliefs of clients in a clinical context, even though atheists hold no specific or fundamental belief system, their attitudes generally “rest on a materialistic, philosophical foundation” and, “unlike religious creeds, the scientific method provides [atheists] with a constantly growing body of knowledge about the universe” (Saeed & Grant, 2004).

As noted earlier, surveys and study results indicate that only 0.4 to 3 percent of Americans currently describe themselves as atheist (Edgell, et al., 2006; Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar, 2001). Research also indicates that the few individuals who do decide to

openly declare their atheism often times grow up in secular households “with little or no religious training” or at least one atheist or agnostic parent (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006).

The findings of a 1999 survey conducted by The Barna Group which looked at divorce rates and views regarding divorce, provided data which showed that “atheist and agnostic groups exhibited strong ‘family values’ and had some of the lowest (if not the lowest) divorce rates, compared to any other religious group” (Saeed & Grant, 2004). The survey of 3,854 Americans across the US found that atheists/agnostics, along with Catholics and Lutherans, had the lowest divorce rate (21%) compared to Presbyterians (23%), Methodists (26%), Pentecostals (28%), Episcopalians (28%), Baptists (29%), and Non-denominational Christians (34%) (Wicker, 2000). The divorce rate for the general population was 25%. This is perhaps significant to note, considering the view most Americans hold of atheists.

#### *View of Atheists in America*

In research studies, surveys, and polls, Americans consistently “draw symbolic boundaries that clearly and sharply exclude atheists in both private and public life” (Edgell, et al., 2006, p. 212). In a study that compared American views towards several minority groups which included “Muslims, recent immigrants, and homosexuals, Americans named atheists as those least likely to share their vision of American society” and were “more likely to disapprove of their children marrying atheists” (Edgell, et al., 2006, p. 212). Simply put, many Americans would likely agree with the sentiment that “to be irreligious... [is] to be unAmerican” (Hart, 1978, p. 35).



Even American presidents, who usually do not miss an opportunity to promote diversity, civil rights, and religious freedom, do not hold back their disdain for atheists. Richard Nixon “asserted that anyone except an atheist should be eligible for the presidency,” while George Bush, Sr. stated “No, I don’t know that Atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God” (Hart, 1978, p. 34; Narciso, 2004, p. 29).

It is interesting to note that atheists in America have not enjoyed the same level of acceptance other minority groups have gained over the decades. Research suggests that “atheists are less accepted than other marginalized groups but also that attitudes toward them have not exhibited the marked increase in acceptance that has characterized views of other racial and religious minorities over the past forty years” (Edgell, et al., 2006, p. 212). In fact, according to some researchers, anti-atheist prejudice is increasing (Gervais, 2008). In looking at who tends to be most intolerant versus tolerant of atheists, research reveals that “women, African Americans, and older people are more likely to reject atheists while those with more education, and whose fathers had more education, are more accepting of them” (Edgell, et al., 2006, p. 223).

In analyzing why such intolerance towards atheists exists, it appears as though some tend to see individuals with these beliefs “as problematic because they associate [atheists] with illegality, such as drug use and prostitution – that is, with immoral people who threaten respectable community from the lower end of the status hierarchy” (Edgell, et al., 2006, p. 225-227).

Research by Gervais (2008) suggests that distrust is also a major factor in the negative views held by the public regarding atheists. Another factor that appears to be

linked with anti-atheist prejudice and distrust is the notion that atheists are perhaps a fringe group that is not interacted with very often. In the study, where participants completed a seven item measure designed to assess negative attitudes towards atheists and an Implicit Association Test (IAT), “participants no longer showed evidence of implicit distrust for atheists after reading a short passage about the number of atheists there are in America” (p. 33). The researchers suggest that these findings show that people may be unaware of how many potential atheists they may be productively interacting with each and every day, since there are, quite obviously, no easily identifiable attributes that set atheists apart from the rest of the population. Once this possibility is brought to light, distrust of atheists decreases. This finding appears to give some credence to the saying, “we fear most that which is unknown to us.” The researchers thought this finding could also be used as an argument for more atheists to come out to friends and family so negative, unfounded stereotypes such as the ones described could be dispelled, thus increasing overall acceptance of atheists. Not surprisingly, the single best predictor of distrust toward atheists was found to be “belief in God.”

In a study that looked at how atheists come to realize their atheism, respondents reported sacrificing much by way of friendships and family relationships (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Samples of atheists from three parts of America (San Francisco, Alabama, and Idaho) were used. In terms of demographics, 69 percent of the San Francisco sample was male with a median age of 60 compared to 62 percent of the Alabama and Idaho samples who averaged 56.5 years of age. Among the San Francisco sample, which drew from one of the “most tolerant parts of the United States,” more than half of the 253 participants (53 percent) reported that their atheism posed some issues

with friends and family members (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). In the not-as-tolerant areas of Alabama and Idaho, two-thirds of 28 respondents reported having difficulties with friends and relatives after becoming atheist. What may be even more surprising about these figures is that they include data from individuals who may not have even come out publicly to friends and/or relatives as atheists. As a result, the percentage of atheists who pay a price for their atheism in both populations is more than the numbers suggest if one was to focus solely on those who have fully disclosed their non-belief to friends and family.

*The Impact of Religiosity on Attitudes towards Atheists*

Research suggests that “religious involvement, being conservative Protestant, biblical literalism, and a belief that God determines the course of our lives all predict a lack of public acceptance of atheists” (Edgell, et al., 2006, p. 223). There have been a host of studies that repeatedly and consistently show that religiosity is directly correlated to one’s attitudes towards atheists (Karpov, 2002; Gervais, 2008).

George H. Smith (1980) asserts that people of faith may come to these conclusions by simply following their religious texts:

The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none that does good. (Psalms 14. 1)

This frequently quoted passage captures the essence of how the average religious person views atheism. Atheism is probably the least popular—and least understood—philosophical position in America today. It is often approached with fear and mistrust, as if one were about to investigate a

doctrine that advocates a wide assortment of evils—from immorality, pessimism and communism to outright nihilism. (p. 7)

Compared to many western nations, “one finds far more conservatives in the United states,” with 30% of the population calling themselves “fundamentalists” in 2004 (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006, p. 15). Many times, fundamentalist conservatism is linked with high religiosity (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006).

Given the fact that high religiosity is such a major predictor of holding negative attitudes towards atheists and the fact that America has such a high religious population, relative to other western nations, it is perhaps more clear why the United States is so intolerant of atheists.

#### *Family Transmission of Religion*

This study aims to analyze individuals who openly declare themselves as atheists despite growing up in families that deemed religion and faith as significant. As such, it is important to review the existing research on the transmission of religion between generations and the role family plays in the formation of one’s religious identity. As mentioned before, we know that atheists tend to grow up in secular households “with little or no religious training” or at least one atheist or agnostic parent (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006, p. 42). A finding that seems consistent throughout the literature is that parents’ religiosity and their relationship with their children is very significant when looking at the transmission of religion. For instance, Hayes and Pittelkow (1993) found in their review of past research that agreement between parents on religious issues and a family life with minimal conflict were consistently correlated with successful intergenerational religious transmission. In their own research on Australians, Hayes and

Pittelkow (1993) analyzed these relationships closer. The study examined a nationally representative sample of 1,084 adults (16 years and older) and their parents to identify how different sociodemographic factors impact the religious beliefs of Australians. The results indicate that mothers appear to be the significant, primary influence in religious transmission for both men and women. In particular, mothers who openly share their beliefs with their children and who are stricter are more likely to have children who maintain the family religion. Fathers were also found to be significant in the transmission of religion but in a different way for sons and daughters. In essence, fathers' religious beliefs are deemed important for sons in that they directly shape their religious beliefs as they grow up. Whereas with daughters, the fathers' "general moral supervision" is significantly related to daughters' level of supervision as they develop (p. 765).

Bao, Whitbeck, Hoyt, and Conger (1999) also looked at the role parents play in religious transmission in adolescents while simultaneously looking at the perceived level of acceptance the adolescent felt from parents using a sample of 407 families living in rural areas of North Central Iowa. For cross-sex parent-child relationships, the level of perceived acceptance was vital for religious transmission from mothers to sons. When adolescent boys felt a moderate to high level of acceptance, mothers' church attendance and religious beliefs and practices affected all aspects of the boys' maintaining religiosity. When looking at the father-daughter relationship, fathers were found to have a significant impact on girls' concept of God when girls did not perceive acceptance from their fathers. The authors suggest that, when daughters feel less accepted by their fathers, which one might correctly assume should lower religiosity, this may be "compensated by high religiosity on the part of the father in predicting girls' concept of God." (p. 371).

This supports the researchers' review of past literature which indicated that girls' concept of God was more closely tied to parents' "attributes and parenting styles" than it was for boys' concept of God (p. 371). When looking at same-sex parent-child relationships, the same conclusions that were drawn for mothers and sons can be applied to the mother-daughter relationship. Simply put, the perceived level of acceptance and religiosity of mothers has a significant impact in shaping daughters' religiosity, just as it does for sons. Both mothers and fathers were found to have a significant influence on religious transmission to children but this influence, when mothers were perceived to be accepting, was found to be especially stronger for mothers, particularly in religious transmission to sons.

Understanding the impact parent-child relationships and family dynamics have on religious transmission, Lawton and Bures (2001) studied the significance of parental divorce on children's religious identity. The authors hypothesized the following:

Parental divorce can produce discontinuities in social structures that lead to a weakening of bonds to both one's family and religious community. Because of this weakening of ties, it is likely that children of divorced parents will experience weakened ties to their childhood religious identification. When that happens, crossing the boundary out of one religious community and into another may be both more feasible and desirable. (p.99)

In their sample of 11,372 participants, 3,461 reported that they were raised Catholic while 7,911 were raised as mainline Protestant (4,129 liberal or moderate Protestants and 3,782 conservative Protestants). The researchers found that there was a clear relationship

between switching religious affiliation for Protestants and Catholics and parental divorce, although this association was stronger for Catholics. Furthermore, experiencing parental divorce in childhood has significant effects on the likelihood of religious disaffiliation, which is commonly referred to as apostasy. The authors make sense of this by explaining socialization as requiring “integration into a community but [that] divorce disintegrates some or all of those community ties, hence the switch to another religious community, or complete exit” (p.109). For conservative Protestants and Catholics, the impact of parental divorce is also evident if the children are adults when the divorce takes place. There was no significant impact on moderate Protestants who experienced parental divorce in adulthood. Catholics who experience parental divorce in adulthood are more likely to become conservative Protestants or disaffiliate entirely from a religion, while Conservative Protestants who experience adulthood parental divorce were more likely to “reject any religion entirely” (p. 109). The significance on religious switching or disaffiliation is clear, particularly for conservative Protestants and Catholics. However, when individuals go through a change in religion or disaffiliate the norm is “not necessarily a search for surrogate family; rather the strongest reaction [is] apostasy” (p. 109). This tendency to move towards apostasy is explained by acknowledging the difficulty individuals have reconciling divorce in a religious context given that divorce is often challenged within their religious community or culture. Given that apostasy is perhaps a step closer to atheism, if not the main step in between faith and complete lack of faith, these findings on apostates seem especially of interest.

In summary, existing research informs us that a very small percentage of the American population (0.4 to 3 percent) openly describes itself as atheist. One potential reason for this may partly be explained by looking at research examining Americans' views of individuals who take on the label. Studies show that atheists are not well accepted by the majority of Americans and regarded by many as un-American, even by past United States presidents. Research on atheists also indicates that the decision to be openly atheist can negatively impact relationships with friends and family. These findings may explain why it may be difficult for individuals to disclose their lack of faith to anyone in this country, let alone family members. Studies also indicate that one's level of religiosity correlates to one's attitude towards atheists. High religiosity is a major predictor of holding a negative attitude towards atheists. This is why deciding to reveal one's atheism to faithful family members in particular might increase the stress associated with disclosure. Furthermore, existing research on the transmission of religion between generations highlights the important role both parents play in the formation of one's religious identity. Children who grow up in homes where there is less conflict, more religious uniformity between parents and remain, intact experience greater retention of religious identification across generations. A review of the literature revealed that research explicitly focusing on the specific disclosure process of atheists who grew up in families of faith is non-existent. This study attempts to fill this void.





(Patton, 2002). So that the focus group could be reviewed, transcribed, and coded, the session was audio recorded.

### *Study Participants*

The study had several criteria for selecting participants. First, participants had to label themselves as atheists. The researcher was not interested in those who labeled themselves as agnostic, humanist, secular, or non-religious. In some cases, one can be more than one of these labels, such as a secular humanist atheist. Participants such as this were be able to part-take in the study as long as the label ‘atheist’ had been adopted and they fit the remaining criteria. Individual definitions of atheism were not be assessed because the researcher was more interested in the experience and process of taking on the label, rather than how they define their atheism. Next, participants needed to be at least 18 years old. Additionally, and most importantly, it was a requirement for participants to have disclosed their atheism to family members prior to recruitment (as opposed to mulling over the idea or currently in the process of disclosure). It should be noted here that by ‘family,’ here and throughout the paper, the author is referring to family-of-origin (parents and siblings). Finally, interested participants were required to take the Religious Emphasis Scale (RES), which was used to measure the extent to which the participants’ parents emphasized religion as they were growing up. The RES was administered over the phone. More details on the RES will be given in the ‘Instruments’ section but the measure was given in order to screen for those who grew up as members of a religious household (desired) versus those raised in a more secular family (undesired). Only individuals who were determined to have come from religious families as determined by the RES were allowed to participate.

Participants were recruited from several atheist or ‘freethinking’ organizations within the Washington, DC metropolitan area as well as an online community/forum, which included mostly Washington, DC residents. Several organizations were selected as good prospects for participants, including Beltway Atheists, The Center for Inquiry of Washington, DC, The Secular Coalition for America, and The Freethought Forum (online). The researcher explained the study to each of these organizations to gain access to their listservs and/or forums in order to peak interest and recruit for the study. Getting the desired number of participants is not a problem. On the day of the focus group, a sufficiently sized room was allocated at the Virginia Tech Northern Virginia Graduate Center in which the focus group session will take place.

Individuals interested in participating in the study were given the option to call or e-mail the researcher directly to do an over-the-phone screening. The researcher’s contact information was provided on the listserv and forum recruitment postings. During the over-the-phone screening interview, the researcher made sure that the interested participant (1) was over 18 years of age, (2) had disclosed his/her atheism to his/her family of origin (parents and/or siblings) explicitly using the term “atheist”, and (3) scored at least an 18 on the Religious Emphasis Scale, which was administered during the screening. The reasoning for the cut-off score of 18 on the RES is explained in the instruments section. The individuals that met all of the study requirements were asked to provide contact information, which was collected in order to inform them when a time and date for the focus group had been established. The potential participants were also asked the religion they associated with prior to declaring their atheism. Below is a chart

of the participants screened and used in the study, along with their corresponding ages, prior religions, and RES totals:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Prior Religion</b>	<b>RES Total</b>
"Dan"	45	Catholic	49
"Stan"	22	Catholic	26
"Evan"	44	Protestant (Lutheran)	28
"Aaron"	31	Protestant	44
"Julian"	20	Catholic	28
"Matt"	58	Catholic	42
"Melvin"	44	Catholic	43

### *Procedures*

After the participants were successfully screened and accepted participation in the study, the researcher set a time and date for the focus group convenient for all the participants. On the day of the focus group, the chairs were set up in a circle prior to the participant's arrival, as this arrangement is conducive in producing optimal focus group discussion. Upon everyone's arrival, the interviewer of the focus group passed out informed consent forms. The informed consent form can be found in Appendix B. The interviewer reviewed the informed consent form, asked if there are any questions or concerns, addressed those questions or concerns, and then requested that the signed form be handed in. Upon receiving the consent forms, audio recording was started. The interviewer began asking the focus group the predetermined questions and probed when necessary. The focus group lasted close to two hours. After asking all of the predetermined question and getting all of the participants' answers, the focus group discussion was concluded and the audio recorder was stopped. Throughout the session, participants were offered and enjoyed complimentary snacks and drinks. After the focus

group was complete, the participants were free to talk amongst themselves and the interviewer off the record.

### *Instruments*

Family religiosity. To measure the extent to which the participants' parents emphasized religion as they were growing up, the Religious Emphasis Scale (RES) will be administered. According to Hill and Hood (1999), the RES was first created by Altemeyer in 1981 and revised in 1988 (Altemeyer, 1981; Altemeyer, 1988; Hunsberger, 1999). The 10 item measure asks subjects to specify, using a 6-point response format, how much their parents stressed religion while they were growing up (Hunsberger, 1999). The six response choices range from 0 (no emphasis was placed on the behavior) to 5 (a very strong emphasis was placed on the behavior) (Altemeyer, 1988). A sum of the subject's response to each of the 10 items is computed to give a total score. Because it is a paper-and-pencil measure with only ten items and pre-defined responses, the RES is simple to administer, score, and interpret (Hunsberger, 1999). Also, knowing that the measure has been successfully administered to 513 university students in introductory psychology courses in prior research helps to assure that the sample for this study will be able to complete it without much confusion (Hunsberger, 1999). In that sample of university students, the average score on the RES was 17.7. As such, this study required individuals to score at least 18 on the RES to be able to participate in the study. This was to insure that the individuals examined had been brought up in average to above-average religious households.

In examining the reliability and validity of the RES, further support for the measure's use in the study is discovered. The RES has been reported to have internal

consistency, as evidenced by a Cronbach's Alpha index of .92, which demonstrates that the items are consistent with one another in that they represent parental emphasis on religion whilst growing up (Hunsberger, 1999). The RES is also reported to possess content and criterion validity. To help ensure content validity, the RES was also administered to subjects' parents, whose scores were then compared to that of the subjects in two separate studies. In the two studies, the subject and parent accounts of the amount of religious emphasis in the home correlated at .70 and .73 (Hunsberger, 1999). Great strides have been taken to confirm the scale's criterion reliability as it has been correlated to many other measures of religiosity such as Altemeyer's own Religious Pressures Scale and Religious Doubts Scale, as well as Fullerton and Hunsberger's (1982) Christian Orthodoxy Scale and Allport and Ross' (1967) Intrinsic Religious Orientation and Extrinsic Religious Orientation Scales (Hunsberger, 1999).

As explained above, the Religious Emphasis Scale contains 10 items which can be answered using a 6-point response format to specify "how much their parents emphasized practicing the family religion while they were growing up" (Altemeyer, 1988, p. 205). The subjects' response choices range from 0 (no emphasis) to 5 (very strong emphasis). The 10 items are as follows:

1. Going to church; attending religious services.
2. Attending "Sunday school"; getting systematic religious instruction regularly.
3. Reviewing the teachings of the religion at home.
4. Praying before meals.
5. Reading scripture or other religious material.
6. Praying before bedtime.

7. Discussing moral “do’s” and “don’ts” in religious terms.
8. Observing religious holidays; celebrating events like Christmas in a religious way.
9. Being a good representative of faith; acting the way a devout member of your religion would be expected to act.
10. Taking part in religious youth groups.

Process of disclosure to family of faith. The following qualitative questions were author-generated for use during the focus group. They were created with the goal of uncovering the disclosure process atheists go through with their faithful family members:

1. What made you first begin to doubt your religion?
2. How and when did you determine that you were an atheist?
3. How long did it take for you to tell anyone (not necessarily your family)?
4. Prior to disclosing your lack of faith, did you consider the costs and/or benefits of doing so? If so, explain this process.
5. Who did you disclose your atheism to first?
6. How did you disclose your atheism to your family?
7. What motivated you to declare your atheism?
8. What was your family’s reaction when you disclosed your atheism?
9. What was the cost of disclosing your atheism to your family, if any?
10. What was the benefit of disclosing your atheism to your family, if any?
11. How has your relationship with your family members changed as a result of you living openly as an atheist, if at all?

12. How satisfied are you with your decision to disclose your atheism to your family?
13. What would be your advice to others who are considering disclosing their atheism to their faithful family members?

The transcription was read and re-read several times so that it could be coded to the best of the researcher's ability. Cross-coding was also done with one other researcher to ensure that the coding was appropriate.

### *Analysis*

As mentioned above, analysis of the study was carried out using grounded theory. Grounded theory provided the framework for analyzing the study since a process, namely the disclosure process of atheists to faithful family members, was the main focus of the research. The concept of constant comparison was employed, which involves “a continual process of categorization, sorting and resorting, and coding recoding of data for emergent categories of meaning” (Echevarria-Doan & Tubbs, 2005). The process of coding data when using grounded theory calls for open, axial, and selective coding. Each of these was covered slightly more extensively above. It is, once again, imperative to mention that in grounded theory, the researcher is the “primary instrument for data collection and analysis, and the researcher's theoretical sensitivity is what allows him or her to develop theory grounded in the data” (Echevarria-Doan & Tubbs, 2005, p. 45). As such, it is the researcher's responsibility to take great caution when interpreting information to insure that they are making sense of what is important. By using grounded theory to analyze the transcribed focus group sessions, it is hoped that a comprehensible story of the process atheists go through as they choose to live openly as non-believers in a family of faith emerged.



Also as described earlier, social exchange and choice theory was utilized to try and understand how the atheist comes to the decision that disclosure is necessary and/or perhaps even beneficial. This framework was ideal since its central focus, as White and Klein (2002) make clear, is on the individual and their motivation to act based on self-interest. Furthermore, social exchange and choice theory proposes that these self-interests are based on the assumption that individuals are rational and that they have the ability to assess, using a cost/reward analysis, the choices that they make. The individual will choose whatever behavior maximizes profit or reward for them. Applying this to atheists trying to determine whether or not to come out to faithful family members, it can be hypothesized that all atheists do this cost/reward analysis. Most, it might be assumed, decide that disclosure is not beneficial to them since the various risks of revealing their atheism outweigh the rewards. For the minority that does decide to disclose their atheism to their families, it could be said that they too make this cost/reward analysis and, for them, the rewards outweigh the costs. Keeping this framework in mind during analysis helped illuminate whether this in fact takes place. Determining what factors or rewards are valued most was also a focus of the study.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

### *Introduction*

This study explores the experience and process atheists go through as they declare their beliefs, or lack thereof, to their faithful family members. To do this, a two-hour focus group comprised of seven atheists was carried out. Using the measures outlined in Chapter III, all of the participants qualified as having grown up in above-average religious households and explained that they had disclosed their atheism to members of their family of origin. However, one of the participants explained during the focus group that he had disclosed his atheism to his siblings but not yet to his parents. All of the participants were male. Of the seven, five had grown up in Catholic households and two in Protestant households. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 58. Their narratives of how they came to openly take on the label of ‘atheist’ varied as much as the participants’ ages, while still exhibiting some very significant and salient parallels. As the data was coded and analyzed using the theoretical frameworks of grounded theory and social exchange and change theory, the researcher was able to notice and pull together emerging themes that should help explain these individuals’ experience and process of disclosure.

Also, it is of great importance to note that the researcher himself is an atheist. Though he was not raised in a religious household and thus never experienced the disclosure process being examined in the study, it is important to be transparent about this fact. This is particularly significant being that this is a qualitative study in which the researcher is the main tool through which data has been collected and analyzed. The researcher constantly kept in mind his personal beliefs throughout the study to curtail any

biases from impacting the interpretation of the data. However, as is the case with any qualitative study where the researcher is the means by which data is collected and analyzed, one must always consider the experiences the researcher brings to research.

Additionally, it should be noted that the participants became aware of the fact that the researcher was an atheist just before the start of the focus group. The researcher had not originally planned to inform the participants of this. However, just before the recording of the focus group, one of the participants asked the researcher if he was a “believer” or “non-believer.” The researcher indicated that he was, in fact, a “non-believer.” Though this was not expected or planned, the researcher believes it enabled the participants to relax and not be as guarded. It is believed that once it was certain that everyone in the focus group was an atheist, the participants were much more open and perhaps less anxious about how their words and stories might be used or interpreted.

#### *Grounded Theory & Social Exchange and Choice Theory*

As explained in earlier sections, grounded theory is utilized in hopes of making sense of data by using open, axial, and selective coding, which help paint a cohesive story out of the variety of themes that emerge. This story in turn enables the researcher to form hypotheses about the process being studied. In the case of this study, the researcher saw the participants’ collective story in three somewhat distinct, yet interrelated, chapters:

*The Journey to Atheism, The Disclosure and Its Reception, and Living Openly Atheist in a Family of Faith.* Organizing the themes in this way enables the “story” of the process to unfold in a step-by-step manner, which serves to illuminate the different steps or parts of the disclosure process, all of which are imperative to understanding the context in which the process unfolds.

Social exchange and choice theory is also utilized as a lens with which to analyze the data. The reason for doing so was that the researcher hypothesized that these atheists came to the decision that disclosure was necessary, or perhaps even beneficial, using some sort of cost/reward analysis, as social exchange and choice theory postulates. The researcher believes that all atheists do some variation of cost/reward analysis as they determine whether or not to come out to faithful family members and that for those who decide to disclose, like those in this focus group, the potential rewards must outweigh the potential costs.

It is easy to find at least some support for this by using social exchange and choice theory as a lens when examining the data. This was most salient in a quote from Evan when asked what his advice would be to atheists who are trying to determine whether or not to disclose their atheism to their religious family members:

...you have to weigh the costs and benefits of it, you know. You have to -- the person coming out with their atheism to their parents has to know what their relationship is to their parents and how, how they'll react...

Evan's advice to "weigh the costs and the benefits", which is essentially a reflection of what Evan himself did, is precisely what social exchange and choice theory would suggest atheists in such a position would naturally do. As such, the costs and rewards the group members cited as significant to their eventual decision to disclose will be highlighted here. However, as the topic of costs and rewards became the focus of the discussion, the participants spent a lot of time discussing the *actual* costs and rewards that came about post-disclosure, rather than simply discussing the *expected* cost/reward analysis of pre-disclosure. These will also be highlighted throughout this chapter.

### *I. The Journey to Atheism*

Before disclosure takes place, there appears to be an important period of introspection and self-exploration in which these individuals come to the conclusion or realization that they are in fact “atheist.” This stage is essential when attempting to understand the process of disclosure to its fullest extent as it creates context and reveals how and why disclosure is significant to the individual.

#### *Being Analytical and Questioning*

One of the most common qualities that this group of atheists alluded to as a major factor in their eventual decision to leave faith behind was the capacity to “ask tough questions” and be especially analytical. According to the participants, it is this skeptical and questioning nature that planted the very first seeds of religious doubt.

Mark, who at 58 was the oldest member of the focus group, recalled being skeptical about the facts of his family’s religion as early as grade school:

I can remember having -- of course I didn’t think of it as skepticism at this age but in fifth grade, I raised a question about timing of various events surrounding Christ’s birth and the dates that we celebrated various events, and they were contradictory. And I brought it up in class and was just absolutely nailed by the nun. And it was the worst year of my life, when I was 11. But I wasn’t questioning it for any reason that had to do with testing my own philosophy. It just didn’t make sense. So it was more like a skeptical question.

This quote above is important in that it captures the fact that Mark describes this skepticism and questioning as preceding any sort of personal philosophical or religious

debate. For this group of participants, atheism seemed a natural conclusion for their inherent questioning and skeptical personalities. It is exactly these attributes that prevent Stan, 22, from being able to take the “leap of faith” others in his family have taken:

I mean, I think I always was questioning it. I always asked tough questions...My mom...she’s like, “Well, it comes down to faith. It comes down to,” you know, “you’ve got to make that leap.” That’s what they call it, a leap of faith, and I didn’t really like that because I was fairly analytical.

This connection is so natural for the group that they are shocked when one participant inquires about Stan’s parents’ occupations and he reveals that they are both engineers. This serves as an example of just how central the participants feel these analytical attributes are to their eventual decision to reject the religion they were brought up in and instead take on the label of atheist.

#### *Media as a Resource*

The internet was repeatedly noted as an important resource for participants as they began to reflect on their doubts and research faith, lack of faith, and atheism.

YouTube.com seemed to be especially important for several of the focus group members.

Dan, a 45 year old who self-identified as an atheist at 42, describes how significant YouTube was to his “de-conversion”:

I went and made the mistake of going on Youtube and I typed “atheist,” kind of scared and I get Christopher -- Richard Dawkins. A little blurb of two minutes, with some guy interviewing him, saying “Why do you hate religion?” and putting a microphone in his face, and he was very cool and

gave perfect answers and sounded very relaxed and everything. And to me that was, that was the total conversion -- de-conversion there.

The “Christopher” he refers to is Christopher Hitchens, author of such novels as *God is Not Great* and *The Portable Atheist*, two best-selling books that rail against religion and advocate for atheism. Richard Dawkins is a notable British evolutionary biologist and professor at Oxford University who has also written books about evolution (*The Selfish Gene* and *The Blind Watchmaker*) and the case for atheism (*The God Delusion*). The recognition and concurrence on the group members faces when these names were mentioned seemed to indicate that they were familiar with these prominent atheists’ work to at least some degree. This seems to signify the impact that the recent appearance of atheism in mainstream media has potentially had, as people grappling with faith, like the group members describe having gone through, search for resources to explore their questions about of faith and atheism.

However, it is not only atheism in the mainstream media that helped spur the participant’s doubts. Evan, 44, explains how media that had no direct link to atheism encouraged him to question religion:

Several things, you know. One, Star Trek was a big motivator because they sort of put another world view that wasn’t -- was fairly secular. Bill Cosby. When I was going through my Lutheran confirmation classes they actually had a CD of the Bill Cosby Noah’s Ark thing. And this was when I was like, “Yeah, Flood doesn’t really make much sense if you think about it.”

Increased access to a potentially new world of ideas and resources by way of the internet and mainstream books directly encouraging religious doubt seem to have had a major impact on these participants' journey towards atheism. Surprisingly, the participants also recall other forms of media as having continued and created further doubts about religion. It is as though once the seeds of doubt had been planted, the media as a whole became fair game from which to draw support for their skepticism or they simply became more aware of positions that were more in line with their belief system.

### *Fear & Reluctance*

As the participants reported coming to grips with their rejection of faith, several of them reported feelings of fear and reluctance as they considered the label of 'atheist' and what that implied. To be an atheist meant that these participants not only had to reject the central belief system of their friends and family, but actually assert the polar opposite of that belief system. According to participants' responses, becoming an atheist brings about feelings of isolation and disconnection. Understandably, these feelings are scary and create reluctance to taking on the label. Twenty year-old Julian, the youngest participant in the focus group, explains how developing a different belief system from those around him led him to question his mental health:

I was about 12 or 13 and I did not take the label [of atheist] too well. I hadn't told anyone at that point. I wouldn't tell anybody for quite some time after that, mostly because I was still -- that's when I started researching and making sure that, you know, this is really where I'm supposed to end up. But, I mean, I was, I was just scared from the fact that it felt like I was the only person who believed this and, you know, when



you're the only person -- or when you feel like you're the only person who believes something, it start to cross your mind, you know, is there something psychologically wrong with me. You know, it's -- you know, you know, you know, is there something wrong with me that I don't get what everyone else gets?

Julian's reluctance to accept his atheism was clearly a result of his feeling alone in what he believed. However, this fear and reluctance seem to serve as something that strengthens atheism as it forces one to investigate their differing and new found beliefs more critically.

However, the fear and reluctance associated with taking on the atheist label comes about for different reasons for other participants. For Aaron, a 31 year-old who fully accepted the label of atheist just 8 months ago, the fear and reluctance came about when considering what being an atheist meant existentially. Aaron explains that he gave the idea of a God existing as much time and consideration as possible because he wanted to be proven wrong:

I was actually very reluctant to take on the label of atheist because I found that grappling with the idea of the universe without a God would be very depressing and I really wanted to hold on to it as long as I could, you know. So for a long time what I did was say, "I just -- I'm not exactly sure what I am," and, and I, and I gave it as much time as I could for, for my friends to come up with their best arguments and -- but, you know, after a few months of that I eventually just had to resign myself to saying [it].

Regardless of the reasons why, of which there appears to be a variety, the process of leaving the belief system one has grown up around tends to be a daunting experience. As stated above though, it seems that going through this initial fear and reluctance serves to validate and strengthen the decision to self-identify as atheist.

*Feeling “Stupid”*

Another fairly common feeling, especially among those participants who became atheist later in their life cycle, was that of having been duped. Several of the participants reported feeling “stupid” for not having seen what they now consider to be true of religion. Interestingly, this theme links to an abovementioned theme of the participants feeling as though they are analytical and questioning. They are shocked that it took them as long as it did to leave the family religion despite this questioning and analytical nature. With hints of shame and regret in his voice and body language, Dan explains:

I always considered myself rational. You know, I was a pre-med student, engineering background, you know, logical thinking. A lot of playing chess, you know, and yet it took me 41 years to see this and wasted so much time and, and effort and resources and all of that...

Many of the other participants nodded in agreement and said they knew where Dan was coming from. Similarly, Aaron described feeling like a “moron” about his dedication to church and religion throughout his lifetime:

I feel like such a moron, you know? I added up roughly like how much money that I probably have given over my lifetime. It’s easily over like \$1000 to the churches and other Christian organizations. I would love to have that money, man. I would love to put that money to a much better

use, you know. And all of the time, you know, time praying, time studying Scripture and other Christian writings, time going to church, on retreats and stuff, it's just -- It's time I'll never get back.

All of the time, energy, and money spent on religious activities are difficult to justify for the participants, as they look back and feel remorse for those valued resources that they will never be able to reclaim. These feelings seem to bring about and are perhaps directly related to the next theme: anger.

### *Anger*

As many of the participants became more comfortable with atheism being a new aspect of their identity, they describe noticing feelings of anger that, for some, resonate to this day. The anger was multifaceted. As mentioned above, many felt "stupid" or resentful of themselves for having been misled about religion. Additionally, there appears to be a layer of anger that develops towards those around them who helped perpetuate the role religion played throughout their lives. Dan captures the overall sentiment of the room when he explained:

I was very pissed off at myself, a little bit to the Church and, and, and family traditions and all of it...and so I was very mad at that. That I wasted all this time when I could have been doing more productive stuff.

Dan sees the church and family traditions as being at least partially responsible for keeping him from utilizing his life in more useful ways. However, it sounds as though the anger is still directed at himself more than anyone else. On the other hand, others are less reluctant to call out family members as being the main perpetrators in their religious upbringing, for which they held, and in a few cases still hold, some animosity.

Stan reflected on his views towards his parents as he came to reject his family's religion and how that affected his view of his mother and father:

I think - you know, there's definitely the moment of, like, "Wow, I can't believe, you know, almost I can't believe my parents, you know, lied to me" was the first thing. It's that same feeling you have when you figure out Santa Claus isn't real. You're like, "Well, what else are they lying to me about?"

Stan's anger and mistrust stemmed from the idea that his parents may have intentionally lied to him about religion. Melvin, a 44 year-old who grew up in a Catholic household with a father who was a deacon, echoed what Stan said when he explained just how at fault he sees not just his parents, but any parents who proselytize to their children:

I was upset, you know, that, you know, my parents, you know -- I consider it a form of child abuse. I think that, you know, they're actually deceiving children. I mean, most children identify with the religion of their parents and then the reason being is, you know, they indoctrinate them so, you know, I'm pretty upset...

For Melvin, transmission of the family religion is not simply something that conjures up anger, but something that should be regarded as morally wrong. So while anger seemed to be a common theme for participants, it appeared to be on a spectrum both in terms of whom they were angry at and the severity of the anger.

#### *Concern over Disclosure*

Once the participants felt comfortable acknowledging to themselves that they were indeed atheists, the issue of whether they should disclose and how to go about doing

so became an anxiety provoking issue. This concern around telling others about their lack of faith, while universal, varied in what it stemmed from. For Julian, this concern stemmed from his doubts about how introspective and informed he was about what atheism meant to him and being able to give sound answers when people inevitably asked him about his new found belief system:

...the process that I started I felt like was a long one coming and so I didn't, I didn't really want to show anybody a moving target. And early on I kept on, you know, kept on seeing and wanted to make sure and then it became a matter of, "Well, how do I do this?" How do I, you know, how do I break it to everyone?

All of the participants reported feeling at least some level of anxiety about disclosure, especially to their family members. Some feared how they would be perceived but it seemed the bigger concern was how family members would react. Aaron describes his hesitation to disclose because of his anxiety surrounding how his family might react:

I put it off as long as possible to talk to my birth family about it because I have seven siblings. All of them are religious. Well, one I'm not sure but six of them are definitely very religious and both my parents are super-religious. The whole family is super -- religious. I knew that it was going to really upset my parents. I knew it was really going to upset my sisters.

Though one of the requirements for participation in this study was that there had to have been disclosure to one's family of origin, the requirements failed to specify whether disclosure had to be to all or some family members. As a result, it was discovered during the focus group that, while he had disclosed to his siblings, Dan had

yet to tell his parents about his atheism. He explained that he was planning on disclosing during an upcoming family camping trip. This presented the opportunity to see first hand the concern the participants were describing. Dan openly mulled over how to go about telling them and strategized with the rest of the group about the best way to disclose to them. It was also evident that, much like Aaron, his greatest concern was for his aging parents and how they would take the news and perhaps see it as a reflection of their parenting. To see one of the participants go through this anxiety and the other group members identify with and attempt to support and normalize his feelings of anxiety made it clear to the researcher that the anxiety or concern was a very significant and prevalent theme in this disclosure process.

In trying to better understand the factors that may have led to the anxiety and then the factors that eventually led the participants to overcome the anxiety and disclose, one may look to the cost/reward analysis proposed in social exchange and choice theory.

#### *Potential Costs*

Prior to arriving at their decision to disclose, the participants alluded to a few costs that they remembered mulling over. Though there were only a few potential costs described, they appeared to be fairly universal. These potential costs can be captured under two main categories: being judged negatively and impacting family relationships adversely.

##### *Being Judged Negatively*

One of the most common potential costs that the participants reported considering in their decision to disclose their atheism, which was a potential cost, was being judged negatively or misunderstood by family and friends. They understood how central

religion was to their families, so explaining to them that they no longer held their core belief system was a daunting task to undertake. It was daunting in large part because they were unsure if and how the new label of atheist would change their family's opinion of who they were. For most, the fear was that they would be judged negatively by their family for having turned their back on the family faith. Julian explained how this was a major cost that he had worried about and one that kept him from exposing his atheism for some time:

I grossly overestimated what the cost would be and I thought people's reactions would be a lot more negative because I still kind of harbored this feeling of, you know, I was weird or strange or something like that...

Julian felt people would react adversely towards him for the same reason he himself initially felt "weird or strange" about his atheism: because his new beliefs ran directly counter to the beliefs he was raised around or any faith-based beliefs for that matter.

Evan explained why the cost of being judged negatively made him think twice about whether he wanted to be open about his lack of faith and be known as an 'atheist':

... you know, if someone asked me what my religion is, should I say atheist, which is not religious or -- and, and each of those have their own, like, emotional -- it was like, you don't want to offend people or -- you know, you don't want to be, you know, labeled or anything...

Evan alludes to the fact that the label of atheist, like many labels, carries a lot of baggage. It was feared that many people, family or otherwise, would be so bogged down by the word and their preconceived notions about atheism, which were thought to be generally negative, that they would be unable to consider his new belief system favorably or at least without bias.

The idea that they might be judged negatively by those around them upon disclosure was viewed as a potential cost by many of the focus group participants. Clearly, this potential cost was not enough to keep any of them from disclosing their atheism to those closest to them but the discussion illustrates that a cost/reward analysis of some sort was utilized.

#### *Damaging Family Relationships*

The other commonly expressed potential cost in the focus group was that, by disclosing their atheism, they might fracture or adversely impact family relationships. This potential cost is a natural follow-up to the abovementioned potential cost of being judged negatively, where the potential cost of being judged negatively is the *reaction* to the disclosure and the potential cost of damaging family relationships is the *impact* of the disclosure. The potential cost of adversely effecting family relationships, particularly at such a transitional period in terms family dynamics, weighed heavily on Stan as he considered disclosure to his parents:

I wasn't really looking forward to that conversation because I -- having just graduated, it's -- now I've set the tone for what kind of relationship I want with my parents post-school and that was interesting, I guess, to think about because I had to factor that in.

For Stan, the cost appeared to be quite large in that he thought disclosure might possibly "set the tone" for what his relationship with his mother and father would become as he transitioned into adulthood. This is probably something that would not have been a concern had he not felt that the disclosure would in some way be detrimental. Dan struggles with a similar dilemma as he considers how he can best go about disclosing his atheism to his parents. However, he explains that his potential cost as possibly damaging to family



relationships in a somewhat different way. Dan explained how his disclosure might be costly in that it might tarnish what his parents think of the job they did raising him and how that potential cost has kept him from disclosing:

...that's what turns me around, that it may -- it's a selfish way for me to want to tell them because it would make me feel good, you know, saying, "Here I am," which at the same time, at the expense of their misery, possible misery for 20 years...

Again, with Dan we get to see someone actively going through the disclosure process. He worries that, as great as he feels they have been, his parents will blame themselves for his loss of faith and live out the rest of their lives thinking that they have failed in some way as care givers. Until now, this potential cost has helped keep Dan from being open with his parents about his atheism. However, he explained that he fully intendeds to disclose the next time he sees them. Why it may be easier for Dan to do so now may have a lot to do with him recognizing the potential rewards associated with disclosure.

#### *Potential Rewards*

As we already know, the participants eventually decided to disclose. In keeping with social exchange and choice theory, it is easy to see how the participants also weighed the rewards of disclosure. As expected by the researcher and as was consistent with the theory, the potential rewards the participants noted were more fleshed out and easily expressed during the focus group than the potential costs.

The decision to eventually disclose their lack or loss of faith was easier for some of the participants than others. As mentioned above, telling loved ones that they no longer adhere to the family religion, or any religion, and instead reject it, was obviously a difficult task for these participants. So why did they decide to disclose their atheism as

opposed to placating their family members when around them or simply refraining from discussing religion or their adherence to it, especially when they perceived so much to be at stake? As the focus group unfolded, several themes became clear which answer why these participants thought it rewarding or beneficial to share their atheism with their religious family members.

### *Honesty*

The words 'honest' and 'honesty' came up quite often in the focus group. One of the most important reasons the participants cited for disclosing their atheism to faithful family members was being truthful about who they were, both for their own peace of mind, as well as being sincere with those they loved and cared about the most. Julian expressed his need to, first and foremost, be honest with himself and how this meant having his personal identity match the identity he presented to others, including his family:

I'd summarize it with honesty. You know, the whole process I started was being honest with myself. Saying to myself that I should be able to justify myself to other people and, you know, if someone were to ask me, I should be able to give them a very, you know, satisfactory response, and there was just a big gulf between where I was and the image I was putting out.

For many of the participants, being honest with family members about their atheism was a significant final step in solidifying this new facet of their identity. Stan articulated this sentiment well when he explained:

I think my biggest motivating factor was I want to be honest with myself. So I wanted to be able to say, “This is what I am,” to my parents because that was like the -- if I could take that step then, you know, I could take any -- I could tell anyone else. That’s the hardest one, at least for me, because they were a big part of, I guess, my life.

To be honest and disclose their atheism to family was difficult but necessary and viewed as ultimately rewarding for these participants. Perhaps it is because it is their family that instilled religion in their lives to begin with. Without that aspect of their identity being initially established, the label of ‘atheist’ would possibly hold much less weight.

*Being an Example*

Another rewarding and motivating factor for the participants to disclose their atheism to family was to prove to them and educate them that individuals could still be “good” while still rejecting the notion of a God, which ran counter to what they thought their family believed. It would appear, based on what the participants shared, that many of their family members and some of the participants themselves, prior to their atheism, believed that faith was correlated to morality or how “good” someone was. Being open about being an atheist provided an opportunity to dispel that notion. Aaron described how this was one of several motivating factors for him to be open with family members about his atheism:

I also wanted to be an example to them of a person who was an atheist...I wanted to be an example of someone who still, like, followed generally the same moral code that they follow. And so that they’ll, you know, be

educated about that and, and, and realize that it doesn't take, it doesn't take a belief in God to be a good person.

This desire to show family members that atheists can also be decent individuals appears to not be completely unselfish. Obviously, they are atheists and, perhaps more than anything, they hope to make the case that they themselves are still “good” or at least just “good” as they were when they were religious. Dan echoes what Aaron says above, while adding a more personal context when he said:

...part of it is to be able to say, “Look, I’m a good guy. I do what’s right. I give to charity. I volunteer in the community. I pick up garbage on the highway, you know, and I’m an atheist and I’m still okay.”...Advertising for atheism and for non-belief, that that’s good, you still have morals...

Again, several of the participants’ motivation to disclose revolved around being an example to show that atheists, as a whole, could lead moral lives. This was seen as rewarding to the participants in two ways. First, they saw their disclosure as an opportunity to educate their family and make them more accepting of individuals with a different belief system. And second, they would be able show their family that they themselves were still fundamentally the same moral, “good” individuals their family has always known.

#### *Getting Rid of the Elephant in the Room*

For some of the participants, another major motivator to disclose to family members was not intrinsic but instead came from the family itself. According to several of the participants, family members began to notice diminished religious activity or suspected something was amiss surrounding the participants’ spiritual habits. As a result,

their faith, or lack thereof, became an “elephant in the room.” Some of the participants saw being confronted by family members about these matters to be the appropriate time to disclose. The potential reward was seen as, by coming clean when confronted, they and their families would no longer have to treat it as taboo or speculation. Aaron discusses his experience:

I was talking to my mother on the telephone. I’m not particularly close to my parents but I do talk to them every now and then, and she asked me about -- some question about the church that we were going to, that we used to go to. And, and so I just had, you know, I had to tell her the truth, that I didn’t believe in God anymore.

The way Matt addressed the elephant in the room was to not wait for his family to come to him but instead lay it out there once and for all. He went about it quite matter-of-factly in order to “clear the air.” Matt explains:

For me [disclosing] was more like a chore, just to get something out of the way... I just wanted to kind of clear the air with my parents and again, I viewed it more like a chore than anything else.

In essence, this theme goes hand-in-hand with the earlier theme of ‘Honesty’ in that, while the disclosure came about as a result of direct and indirect questioning from family members, their ultimate disclosure appears rooted in the desire to be truthful to their loved ones and being able to have good communication without the cloud of speculation around their atheism getting in the way.

## *II. The Disclosure and Its Reception*

At this point in the process, a combination of intense introspection and consideration of costs versus rewards leads the participants to disclose. For many, this

was done by being very intentional about the timing and procedure of the disclosure, such as calling a family meeting. For others, the disclosure was much more spontaneous. However, all participants acknowledged that the disclosure brought about a range of immediate reactions from their family members, which was more or less expected. Below, several themes are highlighted that serve to outline the commonalities in the participants' disclosure experiences, especially with respect to how it was initially received by their religious families.

*Initially Difficult to Accept*

As many of the participants had expected, disclosing their atheism was met with some resistance, reluctance, and confusion. It appears, based on the participants' report of the experience, that it took some time before it sunk in for many family members. Many of the participants reported that they were met with some family members challenging their beliefs and how they arrived at atheism. Dan describes how his siblings initially reacted to the news:

I told my three siblings in email and, and so they -- the first reaction is they're trying to -- no, no, you're wrong, you know, you don't know what you're talking ... initially they wanted -- they, they don't believe when I, when I tell them this but they -- then it kind of sank in.

Dan's siblings felt the need to immediately rebut his declaration of atheism. However, after some time, it seems as though they became more willing to accept it, even if they strongly opposed it. This initial resistance that eventually recedes was reported by many of the participants. Stan explains how it took his mother quite a while to accept this new aspect of his identity:

I think I had the discussion with my mother probably four or five times in like, different ways...I just had to make positive claims to her before she realized, "Okay, he really does -- he really has thought this through," until she, I guess, accepted it, and she's been pretty good.

It seems that it was important for Stan's mother to feel as though the atheism was well thought out and not just decided on a whim. Once she felt as though proper time and energy had been spent by Stan coming to this conclusion, it became easier to accept. Similar experiences initial reluctance were reported throughout the focus group.

#### *Assumption of Depression*

Another common theme of the disclosure process and its reception by friends and family is the thought that the atheist lost faith because he was depressed or unhappy in some way. To the religious friends and family of the focus group participants, loss of faith is the result of unhappiness, or at least correlated. Dan described his experience of disclosing his atheism to a local organization he was a leader of, which in effect was also his resignation since the organization required religious affiliation. After his very public disclosure to the organization and its members, he reported hearing from several organization members concerned about his state of mind:

...when I left the [organization], at least a couple of people called me to say, "Are you okay? Some of us think that you might have been suicidal."  
... you know, because you must be really depressed that you no longer believe in God, you know.

Continuing to explain this seemingly common relationship between one's happiness and faith, Dan talked about a wheelchair-bound friend who also happens to be atheist:

[She]'s in a wheelchair and she got into an accident, I don't know, five years ago or something... she said she gets that reaction from a lot of people that bump into her and says, "Oh, well, you're an atheist because of your accident," and you know, she was an atheist well before the accident but, you know, a lot of people assume, like I said, that it's a traumatic experience that made you an atheist.

In one way or another, most of the group was able to identify with this view of atheism by religious friends and family members. Sometimes, friends and family are less obvious about this way of thinking but the focus group members nonetheless felt it in the questions they asked and in the way they interacted with them. Aaron recounted how his sister appeared concerned about his state of mind after he disclosed his atheism:

She was like, you know, "Are you doing okay?" You know, "I was just concerned about you." But you know, I knew what she was really asking.

It was clear from the participants' recollection of their disclosure that they went from having to defend their atheism to defending their happiness and mental welfare. The participants are also vehement that such a correlation between atheism and depression and unhappiness is nonexistent. If nothing else, this shows the great deal of concern from the friends and families of these participants that develops once it is disclosed that they are atheists. It is perhaps this concern that explains the next theme that emerged at this stage in the disclosure process: that they will "pray" for the atheists.



*“I’ll pray for you”*

According to the participants, it is a common response for religious family members to claim that they will pray for them upon hearing the disclosure. It is unclear from the focus group what the family members are praying for. Perhaps, that their atheist family member will experience a religious epiphany and become religious again or maybe that their atheist loved one will be forgiven. Whatever it is that they are praying for, the fact that they tell the atheist this shows that this is a significant spiritual issue for them. Mark explains his experience of disclosure and how this response was one of the first things out of his parents’ mouths:

They said something to the effect of, “We’re real sorry to hear that and we’re going to pray for you,” and they said, “You’re still going to go to church as long as you live in our house.”

Almost all of the participants identified similar instances or responses to their disclosure. In Aaron’s case, his atheism prompted a greater response than simply being prayed for by his family. Here he explains how his mother’s went beyond standard prayer:

The “I’ll pray for you” response is something I’ve heard a lot too. In fact, my mother put me on like, the prayer list or the prayer email chain at her church.

The participants spoke very little about what sort of an impact the “I’ll pray for you” response had on them. However, their expressions and tone as they described these types of responses seemed to indicate annoyance. Annoying or not, the participants family members felt it was important for atheist family member to hear that they would be praying for them, even if their motivation for doing so was unclear.

*Don't Talk to the Children*

The participants also noted that, after they had disclosed their atheism, they noticed how their family members seemed concerned about their possible influence on the younger members of the family. This showed up in various ways, such as being apprehensive about leaving children alone with the participants or being reluctant to debate religious issues in front of younger family members. Here, Dan recalled a time when his nieces and nephews came over to his house:

What I did notice though is, they don't leave their nieces and nephews alone with me...my nephews and nieces, they range in different ages but the older ones are 18, 17, 15 and so on, and a couple of weeks for the first time they allowed a couple of them to come to my house for one day because they were here on a field trip, and, and they called five times to see how things are going. "Is everything okay?" and, you know. And I told them, I said, "Look, relax man, I'm not going to talk about religion with your kids. You know, don't worry about it." But I think there's a little bit of fear.

This serves to show just how concerned Dan's family was about him having some sort of influence on their children's religious views. This concern over the atheist's possible influence on the children in the family was not restricted to Dan's experience. Stan also acknowledged that his father was similarly worried about Stan's potential influence on his younger brother:

[My family was] watching the ghost hunter show on Discovery Channel.

Oh, I hate this show. It's so terrible...And, and like my 14 year-old

brother is sitting there, and my dad says something like, “Well, you can’t see God but he’s real.” I’m like, “Well, that’s my point exactly.” He looked at me and gave me one of these -- and then my brother left the room and I was like, “Why did you, you know, tell me basically to be quiet?” And he was like, “I don’t want you influencing your little brother.”

Stan’s father’s reaction is a clear indication that he views Stan’s atheism as something he not only disagrees with but considers negative. Clearly, for these religious family members, atheism is not seen as a different perspective but rather something that is simply not up for discussion, especially where children are concerned.

#### *Sense of Failure*

Several of the participants expressed how their parents seemed to blame themselves for their children’s decision to choose atheism over the family religion. According to the focus group, some parents openly said that they felt as though they had failed. Others reported that their parents simply alluded to the fact that it must have been something they had done or not done. In either case, the feeling of guilt or sense of failure from parents was felt by many of the participants upon their disclosure, making it a common and significant theme. Stan expressed how his mother questioned him about her role in his becoming an atheist:

...I had the discussion with my mother probably four or five times in like, different ways...she kept asking me a lot of questions about, oh, you know, “Where did I go wrong?”

Again, this is another example of how the families have difficulty seeing the atheists’ disclosure as a different perspective and instead view it as simply “wrong.” For Dan, who has yet to disclose to his mother and father, the fear that his parents will take his atheism as a

reflection of where they fell short as parents has been one of the reasons he has been especially reluctant to disclose his atheism to them. Here he struggles with this notion in the focus group:

I've debated on doing it before because my parents -- knowing my parents very well and I love them and everything, they will take it as a personal failure on their part as parents that they have failed even though they are in their, you know, their late 60s. They will take it as a personal failure that they have failed and my guess is that they are going to go to the grave thinking that they've been failures as parents for not teaching me and not brainwashing me enough about this, even though I was a really good Catholic.

By the advice, words of understanding and encouragement, and the looks of familiarity with Dan's predicament, it seemed that the majority of the group had been in his position before. The sense of failure the parents feel, as reported by the participants, indicates that these parents believe transmitting the family religion to the next generation is central or significant to their role as caregivers. So when their children disclose their atheism, they feel they have fallen short in their duty as parents.

### *III. Living Openly Atheist in a Family of Faith*

The final stage in the disclosure process that came to light from the focus group was life after disclosure. In this stage, we see what themes are apparent for the participants post-disclosure and what living openly atheist is like for these individuals who grew up in religious households. This includes both their overall satisfaction and experience since disclosing their atheism as well as how the disclosure has impacted their relationships.

*Satisfaction with Disclosure*

Despite citing a myriad of positive and negative aspects when discussing their atheism and their disclosure of it to religious family members, the focus group was unanimous in their satisfaction in having done so. Julian summarized his disclosure experience here in the context of telling other atheists who have yet to disclose their atheism:

I know a couple of people who, who are, are in the same position that I was in ...And I, I always try to tell them my story to try -- as, as a way to show of how good things can turn out and how things can be not as bad as you thought it was because my, my, you know, my story in brief is I thought, I, you know -- my stomach was twisting in a knot over it and I was worrying, worrying, worrying and when I actually, you know, and then it was a big nothing and, you know, it was only up from, from when I told everyone so I, I look at it as a positive experience.

Julian acknowledges that disclosing his atheism to his religious family members has not been an easy or enjoyable experience throughout but that he is better off having done so and encourages others to do so as well. He, like many, also highlights a sentiment shared by many of the group members when he discusses how the experience was ultimately much easier than he had anticipated.

In fact, many of the group members seemed quite proud of their atheism and were quite pleased at not only having disclosed it but continuing to do so when appropriate. Evan sums up this feeling in the quote below:

I'm very happy throughout having had disclosed it, disclosing it and disclosing in the future.

Indeed, almost all the participants were fairly clear that they are happy to disclose their lack of faith where and when appropriate. Not only because they have already passed the hurdle of disclosing their atheism to those closest to them, but also because it presents an opportunity to be a good representative of someone who has no faith but is still essentially a good person. For them, this is a good way to dispel negative public perceptions of atheists. As will be discussed later, this is one of the main motivators for the participants' disclosure to begin with. However, it links into the post-disclosure discussion in that their desire to be open to more individuals grows after they've gotten past disclosure to their own family and having been satisfied with it.

#### *Social Situations*

Another phenomenon that the participants reported experiencing post-disclosure was their confusion about how to respond in certain social situations that involve some level of religious connotation. For instance, saying, "God bless you" or even simply, "bless you" is generally a common gesture upon hearing someone sneeze. Clearly, the saying has religious roots but has become, over the years, part of common English vernacular. This might sound like a relatively small issue but participants noted that they struggle with how to react in this and similar situations. Stan explains:

I was like, "Okay, now how do I react in these social situations?" And one of the ones I still haven't figured out what I say is when someone sneezes.

These sorts of issues seem to stem from the desire to be social appropriate while remaining genuine to themselves and in line with their personal beliefs, which becomes

difficult when the two are somewhat at odds with ones another. More of a concern appeared to be how to handle social situations involving family members and religious services. Here, Evan explains this conundrum while also highlighting the challenge of explaining one's beliefs when asked:

...it was like, okay, now that I'm an atheist if my parents ask me to go to church, should I or shouldn't I? You know... if someone asked me what my religion is, I should say atheist which is not religious or -- and, and each of those have their own, like, emotional -- it was like, you don't want to offend people...

This theme of struggling with how to handle social situations seems to be essentially the struggle with disclosure as a whole, but on a smaller scale. It serves to highlight the participants' concern around how and when to approach social situations which illuminate their atheism. It also shows how the disclosure process carries beyond simply disclosing their atheism to religious family members. The participants' second-guessing about how to best handle certain social situations also highlights their perceptions of how the majority of individuals will react to their atheism, which is clearly not well.

#### *Fractured Relationships*

As many of the participants had feared and perhaps expected, the decision to disclose their lack of faith and live openly as atheists was not without its costs. The toll the disclosure took on the participants' relationships varied throughout the group. Though most participants reported relatively mild damage to their relationships with friends and family, if any, it seems important to note the more costly experiences in order to capture a more complete picture of the disclosure process, as some lost a great deal.

For instance, Melvin explained how his disclosure was described by his wife as having played an integral part in her decision to separate from him:

The greatest cost is, just recently, the wife and I just separated and she states that, you know, that my atheism is a big, you know, is a big, is a big decision for the separation and, you know, the way that it affects her and her family. Her family is very religious and, you know, she thinks it's going to -- my atheism's going to impinge on her inheritance.

Melvin's wife was transparent about how his atheism was a sore subject, not just for her but for her family as a whole. Others saw strains in their relationships come about in less obvious ways. Dan discussed how his disclosure to an organization he was a leader of resulted in him having to leave since atheists were not allowed to be members according to the organization regulations. Here, Dan discusses how his relationship with a good friend and fellow member disintegrated for no other reason Dan could think of except for the fact that he had disclosed his atheism:

I've lost, for instance, the fraternity here with the [organization]...there was one guy, that we were very good friends and brothers in the lodge, who after -- I was in charge of the lodge and he was second in command -- and so when I left he was in charge and he basically, over a period of about two months, stopped talking to me for, for no reason except that, you know, he doesn't like that I'm not a, not a believer.

The participants' atheism was simply not well received by some friends and family. As a result, friendships, kinships, and marriages sometimes suffer or dissolve because of the disclosure. Unsurprisingly, loss of relationship quality or entire relationships appears to



be a significant part of the disclosure process, even if it seems it is more the exception than the rule for the focus group participants.

*Relationships Remain Intact*

The majority of the participants were happy to report that most of their relationships were not affected in any significant, negative way. Though the focus group reported various difficulties throughout the disclosure process with respect to how it was received, they overwhelmingly explained that most of their relationships remain intact with only minimal strain to note, if any. For example, Aaron explained how his family relationships have seen no noticeable change since his disclosure:

I mean, my family's mostly in Michigan so I don't see them a lot anyway.

I still go there for family things and they come down and visit me and stuff -- it's never really an issue. It never really is an issue there.

Most of the participants echoed Aaron's description of how his relationships have remained roughly the same as they were prior to his disclosure. Even Melvin, who had arguably suffered the greatest loss as a result of his disclosure in separating from his wife, noted that by and large his relationships remain unchanged. Here, he straightforwardly responds to the researcher's question about any potential changes in his family relationships that came about post-disclosure:

Just my wife but like, you know... my family, you know, everything's pretty much the same, you know.

The fact that the participants all reported general satisfaction with their disclosure, as outlined above, most probably has a lot to do with the fact that, on the whole, the participants did not experience an abundance of negative change with respect to their

relationships to friends and family. This was clearly important to the participants and seemed to propel them to continue to be open about their atheism outside of their family and encourage other atheists, who have yet to disclose, to do so.

#### *Post-Disclosure Costs and Rewards*

Analyzing the themes outlined above regarding the participants' lives and relationships since disclosure calls for us to once again consider social exchange and choice theory. Doing so illuminates what the *actual* costs and rewards of disclosure were according to the participants, which is presumably correlated to the participants overall satisfaction with their decision to disclose.

Virtually every participant claimed that the actual costs of having disclosed their atheism to religious family members were much less significant than they had originally anticipated. And even for the few who did suffer some major setbacks, the rewards associated with being openly atheist were far greater. As discussed earlier, one of the most common costs associated with disclosure was some, mostly minor, relationship strain among the participant and their faithful family members. Parents shouldering the blame for their child's loss of faith and periods of extensive questioning were the most widely reported symptoms of this relationship strain. Another cost, though a relatively minor one when compared to strain in familial relations, was the increase in socially awkward situations. A few of the participants acknowledged that there was a feeling of awkwardness in situations such as what to say when someone sneezes, a parent or friend asking them to go to a religious function, or struggling with how much and when to disclose to acquaintances who may not need to know. Furthermore, outside of the family sphere, some participants reported losing some close friends or, in some cases, the

opportunity to become friends with certain individuals as a result of their being openly atheist. For this reason, many of the focus group admitted to continuing to use some form of cost/reward analysis, which helps them consider when and where it is appropriate to share their generally unpopular belief system.

However, as mentioned, for these individuals the costs, big and small, are overshadowed by the rewards of their disclosure. Every one of the participants said they were satisfied with their decision to disclose their atheism to friends and family. Though Dan is the only participant who has yet to disclose to his parents, he is encouraged enough to forgo the potential negatives and tell them that he is an atheist the next time he sees them. This is the result of having experienced disclosure to his siblings and friends as more positive than negative in addition to hearing the other participants' satisfaction in doing so. In fact, it was Dan who acknowledged that for every friend he has lost up to this point due his openness about his atheism, he has gained many "better" friends:

But I've lost and gained both. I've lost, for instance, the [organization] here...but then I got to meet a lot of other people that are, when I compare them both, the new group is a lot better. It's smarter, it's, it's better thinkers, you know, better citizens, better people in my opinion than the other folks.

Similarly, Julian expressed how his relationship between him and his twin brother, who he described as a "fundamentalist Catholic", has actually been strengthened as the two have been able to fruitful and entertaining debates that have brought them closer, rather than divided them. It seems that for many of these individuals, being true to themselves,

their families, and others close to them, has brought along the reward of stronger and more satisfying relationships for the most part.

Melvin, who has experienced perhaps the largest actual cost due to disclosure in separating from his wife, expressed how he is completely satisfied with having done so:

...so [the separation]'s probably the biggest, most recent cost. But, I mean, as far as benefits, you know, you do have a better idea of how the world works and how to interpret things and you have a greater understanding of life...I mean, I wouldn't trade it for the world so – wouldn't go back.

The feeling that came along with espousing atheism and the worldview it provided, proved to be valuable in how it enabled Melvin to have a “greater understanding of life.” This feeling was echoed by almost all of the participants as one of the greatest rewards of fully disclosing and embracing atheism. Stan similarly explains how being open about atheism has bettered him:

So benefit-wise, I think it's just opened myself up a lot more intellectually. Seeing different sides. And I definitely noticed that once I was honest and took away that column of, you know, disbelief and suspension that you have to have to be religious, that it just -- it was easier to think about opposing views.

The final major way in which disclosure was commonly seen as rewarding was how it gave the participants the opportunity to dispel what they believed to be the many negative and false stereotypes held by much of the public. Julian shared his hopes of doing so by being the good person he always knew himself to be while fully and openly embracing his atheism to his family, namely his brother:

...if I can even get [my brother] for, you know, when he's in his group with his church friends and they say something about atheists, he says, "Actually my brother's an atheist and they're not like that at all," you know, I mean, if I can just get that from him...

As shared earlier, this drive to show that atheists can also be moral and decent individuals is something these participants find remarkably valuable and rewarding.

So whether it was done consciously or unconsciously, it appears that the majority of participants weighed or at least considered the costs and rewards of disclosure to their religious family members when deciding whether or not to do so. In fact, several report still doing so in given circumstances. And the fact that these individuals are also so aware of the costs and rewards post-disclosure gives further credence to the notion that these atheist consistently reflect on and notice the costs and rewards associated with living openly atheist at all its stages.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

### *Introduction*

This study attempted to uncover the process atheists go through as they declare their beliefs, or lack thereof, to their religious family members. In doing so, it was hoped that the findings could help build on the currently insufficient amount of literature on atheists and atheism. As highlighted in the previous chapter on the results of the study, various common themes were identified that tell the story of how the participants arrived at atheism, how and why they decided to disclose their atheism to their religious family members, and how it has been received by those family members and impacted those relationships. In this chapter, the significant findings of the study will be summarized and examined alongside some of the more relevant existing literature on atheists highlighted in earlier chapters. This chapter also serves to call attention to the limitations of the study, its clinical implications, and suggestions for future research.

### *Summary of Findings*

The study was fairly successful in capturing a general story of what it is like for those who have been brought up around family who see faith as a significant and important part of life to come to grips with their atheism, as well as why disclosure was important, and how the disclosure has impacted their lives and relationships. Utilizing grounded theory helped see bring to life the story of the participants disclosure process and the factors and attributes associated with. Like-wise, social exchange and choice theory was useful in illuminating the introspective decision-making process that led them to disclosure and how and why their satisfaction with doing so is as it is.

As mentioned, grounded theory helped the researcher to identify a cohesive story from the variety of unique, yet similar experiences shared in the focus group. In terms of the process, the researcher was able to distinguish, based on the collective group experience, a three-stage process to how disclosure to religious family members plays out from start to finish for atheists. The three stages identified had to do with how the atheist came to identify himself as an atheist, the disclosure to family members, and what it has been like for the atheist, in terms of satisfaction and relationships, since the disclosure of their atheism.

In the initial stage, individuals begin to recognize their lack of faith, grapple with the role religion has played in their life for as long as it has, become introspective about their new found beliefs by search for alternative answers, and by the end of the stage, self-identify as atheist. Several themes were found to be prevalent in this stage. First, the participants recognized their analytical and questioning personalities as a main contributor in their initial skepticism towards religion. The media was also seen as another resource that fueled their skepticism and provided them with answers that were in line with and advocated for atheism. Of these media resources, the internet proved to be especially utilized in the participants' journey towards atheism. Books that directly promoted atheism over religion as well as less direct sources, such as comedians who joked about religion, were cited as other forms of media that helped impact their lack of faith today. As they begin to veer towards religion, fear and reluctance begin to creep in as they begin to consider what the label may imply. There were different reasons for this apprehension in actually calling themselves atheist. For some, it was scary to consider that they were the only ones who felt and thought this way, being that everyone else

around them was religious. For others, the thought of a universe without a creator seemed too difficult to accept. However, this period of fear and reluctance only seemed to strengthen the atheism in that it made them more critical and curious about the new thoughts and misgivings they were having about losing faith. As the participants reported finally acknowledging that they might in fact be atheists, upset feelings over having been “stupid” or naïve for having been religious and having spent so much time, energy, and money on faith related activities were commonplace among the participants. This seemed to feed directly into feelings of anger; anger at themselves for having been religious but also at those around them who helped perpetuate the role religion played throughout their lives, like their families. Once the participants felt comfortable acknowledging to themselves that they were indeed atheists, the issue of whether they should disclose and how to go about doing so became an anxiety provoking issue. Their biggest concerns revolved around how their families would react to their disclosure as well as how the disclosure would impact their families’ impressions of them. However, as anxious as the participants might have been about disclosing their atheism to their religious family members, they all managed to eventually do so.

The second of the researcher’s three proposed stages of the disclosure process deals exclusively with the participants’ disclosure and its immediate reception by the religious family members. At this point in the process, the introspection and self-exploration of their personal beliefs leads the participants to disclose. For many, this was done by being very intentional about the timing and procedure of the disclosure, such as calling a family meeting, while for others the disclosure was much less planned out. However, all participants acknowledged that the disclosure brought about a range of



immediate reactions from their family members, which was more or less expected. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the participants' disclosure was met by healthy amount of resistance from the religious family members. For the most part, the family members needed some time and desired answers as to how the participants had arrived at atheism before they were able to acknowledge and, in their own way, accept it. However, before arriving at acceptance, the faithful family members exhibit several common reactions. Participants reported that their family members showed concern over their mental health. Apparently, several family members associated atheism with depression. Additionally, many participants were told by friends and family that they would be praying for them, presumably so that they would reclaim their faith and find God. The participants also noted that, after they had disclosed their atheism, they noticed how their family members seemed concerned about their possible influence on the younger members of the family. This became apparent in several ways, such as being apprehensive about leaving children alone with the participants or being reluctant to debate religious issues in front of younger family members. Furthermore, several of the focus group members expressed how their parents seemed to blame themselves for their children's atheism. The sense of failure the participants reported their parents feeling indicates that these parents believe transmitting the family religion to the next generation is central or significant to their role as caregivers so when their children disclose their atheism, it appears they feel they have fallen short in their duty as parents. As one can see, the families of these atheist participants exhibit a myriad of reactions to their disclosure, all of which show their initial struggle with coming to terms with it. One can perhaps look to social exchange and choice theory again with regard to how the family members handle the disclosure.

Without getting too involved in what the family members' process of disclosure is, since that is not the topic of this thesis, it seems important to discuss how the family also seems to do their own cost/reward analysis when thinking about how to react to the atheist upon disclosure and how much, if at all, it should change their acceptance of the newly discovered atheist. It seems that, similar to the atheists, the anxiety and disapproval the family members reportedly exhibit upon disclosure is couched in what they consider to be the cost(s) of their atheist family member's lack of faith. Over time, it seems family members begin to also consider the benefit(s) of their relationship with the atheist. The balance of these perceived costs and rewards will determine how the disclosure will impact their relationship with the atheist, if at all. Based on what the participants shared, it appears that for most family members the rewards of continuing to, to some degree, accept the atheist family member wins out over the costs. However, as may have been the case with Melvin's wife separating from him, it appears that sometimes the costs can outweigh the rewards. The significance of the cost and reward analysis proposed here is thought to have a major impact on the next stage of the atheists' disclosure process, which is why it was necessary to explore.

The final stage of the disclosure process that the researcher identified had to do with the participants' life post-disclosure in terms of their overall satisfaction and experience since disclosing their atheism as well as how the disclosure has impacted their relationships. Despite the fact that the pre-disclosure and disclosure itself had its ups and downs, the participants were all satisfied with having done so. The group members were also unanimous in feeling the experience was ultimately much easier than they had anticipated and encourage others who are currently in the pre-disclosure stage to do so as

well. However, the participants have not enjoyed the entire disclosure process as it does have a downside. For one, several of the participants reported some social awkwardness during certain situations, such as what to say upon a sneeze or whether they should go to religious functions when asked, so as not to offend people. Furthermore, while the overall, lasting impact of the disclosure was minimal for the majority of the participants, there were some who experienced a few fractured relationships with religious friends and family as a result. In fact, one participant even explained that his wife claimed that his atheism was a major reason for her separating from him. Some loss of relationship quality or entire relationships appears to be a noteworthy part of the disclosure process, even if it seems it is more the exception than the rule for the focus group participants. For the most part, most of the participants report that the disclosure has had no major, negative impact on their relationships. As explained above, all of the study participants reported general satisfaction with their disclosure. This probably has a lot to do with the fact that, overall, the participants did not experience an abundance of negative change with respect to their relationships to friends and family. This was undoubtedly important to the participants and seemed to drive them to continue to be open about their atheism within and outside of their families.

In analyzing the data gathered from the focus group using the lens of social exchange and change theory, the researcher was able to see how costs and rewards are considered, consciously and/or subconsciously, as atheists consider whether or not to disclose their atheism to religious family members. For those who decide to disclose, like those in this focus group, the potential rewards must outweigh the potential costs. It seems evident, based on the participants' experiences, that this is most likely the case.

The participants noted a few costs that they remembered considering when discussing how they arrived at their decision to disclose. These potential costs can be captured under two main categories: being judged negatively and impacting family relationships adversely. The first potential cost was that they might be judged negatively by those around them because of the preconceived notions that come attached to the label of atheist. The other potential cost the participants noted being concerned of was the disclosure possibly impacting their relationships in adverse ways. However, these two main costs, even though they weighed heavily on the participants, were not enough to keep them from disclosing their atheism. This is thought to be due to the greater amount of positive rewards they also considered when deciding whether to disclose or not. The potential rewards included: being honest to themselves and their families, proving to their family and educating them that individuals could still be “good” while still rejecting the notion of a God, and simply addressing the “elephant in the room” that many of their family had begun noticing and commenting on anyway. Being that these participants identified and expanded more on the potential rewards when talking about the journey to disclosure, it is unsurprising to the researcher that these individuals chose to disclose, as it makes sense in the context of social exchange and choice theory. Having gone through the disclosure, the participants are overwhelmingly satisfied and report that the actual rewards have, in fact, outweighed the costs. So whether it was done consciously or unconsciously, it seems that the majority of participants at least considered the costs and rewards of disclosure when deciding whether or not to do so. In fact, several report still doing so in certain social situations when considering how much or little needs to be disclosed regarding their lack of faith.

### *Links to Previous Research*

Though existing research on atheists is limited, as explained earlier, it is nonetheless important to attempt to link some of the findings of this study with existing literature. To do so, some of the research examined in the literature review section will be recalled and compared to what was found in this study.

#### *Family Difficulty with Accepting Atheists*

While the current study found that, in most cases, families come to accept their atheist family member's disclosure, but not after a period of reluctance and distress. The fear that such a response might follow their disclosure was a source of anxiety for many of the participants as they considered disclosure. Existing literature shows that, indeed, atheism is viewed negatively by a majority of Americans and the participants had a right to feel anxious about how their family would react to their disclosure. Dan, one of the study participants, shared how his friend's disclosure was met by mother:

I did have a friend that when they told his mother, his mother was very upset and, and the final comment was, "Why couldn't you just be gay? That would have been better."

In fact, research shows that Americans are more tolerant of homosexuals than atheists. In a study outlined in the literature review that compared American views towards several minority groups which included "Muslims, recent immigrants, and homosexuals, Americans named atheists as those least likely to share their vision of American society" and were "more likely to disapprove of their children marrying atheists" (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartman, 2006, p. 212).

Furthermore, that same research suggests that "atheists are less accepted than other marginalized groups but also that attitudes toward them have not exhibited

the marked increase in acceptance that has characterized views of other racial and religious minorities over the past forty years.” The participants seemed to understand that being an atheist was as extremely unpopular as the research suggests, which is why the decision to disclose was as difficult to arrive at as it was for most of the participants. At the same time, the research’s explanation of American views of atheists shows consistency with the religious family members’ initial reluctance and distress upon hearing the disclosure.

In other research that looked at how atheists come to realize their atheism, respondents reported sacrificing much by way of friendships and family relationships (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Among the one of the samples, more than half of the 253 participants (53 percent) reported that their atheism posed some issues with friends and family members. In another sample, two-thirds of 28 respondents reported having difficulties with friends and relatives after becoming atheist. To some degree this is consistent with the current studies findings, but perhaps more extreme than what was found in the current studies small sample size. Dan reported losing friends at an organization that he left do to the fact that it did not allow atheists, Melvin’s wife separated from him in large part because of his atheism, and Julian expressed how one of the students on his dormitory floor refused to get to know him once he found out he was atheist. So the research on the toll that one’s atheism takes on relationships is consistent with the current study’s findings. However, it should be noted that current study found the majority of relationships in its participant’s to remain intact or only minimal strain for some period of time.

### *Atheist Attributes*

Much of the research on atheists attempt to simply identify and explain atheists and atheism in an effort to better understand this unknown and often misunderstood minority. According to the *Handbook of Spirituality and Worldview in Clinical Practice*, a text aimed at familiarizing clinicians with the worldviews and religious beliefs of clients in a clinical context, even though atheists hold no specific or fundamental belief system, their attitudes generally “rest on a materialistic, philosophical foundation” and, “unlike religious creeds, the scientific method provides [atheists] with a constantly growing body of knowledge about the universe.” (Saeed & Grant, 2004). This is definitely consistent with what the study participants noted as one their most significant attributes regarding how they arrived at atheism: their analytical and questioning nature. In fact, several of the participants were surprised they had held on to religion for as long as they had before finally arriving at atheism because they always considered themselves as having these qualities, which they consider to be inconsistent with having faith.

Also, the participants consistently reported that a major motivator for them to live openly atheist was to show that one does not need faith to be a person of high morals and values. This seemed extremely important to the participants as they repeatedly noted how they were just as moral and “good” as religious individuals, a view that is inconsistent with what many Americans believe (Hart, 1978; (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartman, 2006). However, the participants’ contention of their high moral values is, in a very small way, backed by some research that some religious individuals might be surprised to see. The findings of a 1999 survey conducted by The Barna Group which looked at divorce rates and views regarding divorce, provided data which showed that

“atheist and agnostic groups exhibited strong ‘family values’ and had some of the lowest (if not the lowest) divorce rates, compared to any other religious group” (Saeed & Grant, 2004). The survey of 3,854 Americans across the US found that atheists/agnostics, along with Catholics and Lutherans, had the lowest divorce rate (21%) compared to Presbyterians (23%), Methodists (26%), Pentecostals (28%), Episcopalians (28%), Baptists (29%), and Non-denominational Christians (34%) (Wicker, 2000). While this is barely an indication of how “good” atheists are compared to the religious, the participants may wish to draw from this research as they continue to make a case about atheists’ morality and values to religious friends and families.

#### *Familiarity Spawns Acceptance*

Many of the study participants thought it was important for them and other atheists to disclose their atheism and live openly for a variety of reasons. For one, Evan believes that if more atheists came forward, they would constitute a surprisingly significant percentage of the American population, which would help ensure that there would be more of an effort for the public and government to consider their opinions and needs for once. Furthermore, Evan and the other participants’ call for atheists to be more open is based on the belief that doing so would have a significant impact on the current, generally negative public opinion towards atheists. It is thought that public perception can change if people personally know the atheists that might be walking among them on a day-to-day basis. This thought is supported by existing research. Research suggests that distrust of atheists is a major factor in the negative views held by the public. Another factor that appears to be linked with anti-atheist prejudice and distrust is the notion that atheists are perhaps a fringe group that is not interacted with very often. In the study, where participants completed a seven item measure designed to assess negative attitudes towards



atheists and an Implicit Association Test (IAT), “participants no longer showed evidence of implicit distrust for atheists after reading a short passage about the number of atheists there are in America” (p. 33). The researchers suggest that these findings show that people may be unaware of how many potential atheists they may be productively interacting with each and every day, since there are, quite obviously, no easily identifiable attributes that set atheists apart from the rest of the population. Once this is brought to light, distrust of atheists decreases.

### *Study Limitations*

Though the researcher was generally pleased with the design of the study and the data obtained, there are few factors that limit the findings. The first limitation was the diversity of the participants. In qualitative research, one hopes to get the amount of participants necessary to reach saturation so that a complete and representative picture of the phenomenon or process being studied can be obtained. For several reasons, the researcher believes the data did not meet this level of saturation. First, all of the participants were male. Existing data suggests that a majority of individuals who self-identify as atheist are in fact male but females make up roughly a third of atheist population (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Unfortunately, the female atheist population is not represented at all in this study. More important to this study, based on the fact that it is heavily associated with religion, is the fact that all seven of the participants were brought up in either Catholic (5) or Protestant (2) households. This makes the study and its results potentially inapplicable to most other faiths because it is unknown whether the disclosure process for atheists who were raised in and have family members of other faiths, such as Judaism or Islam, experience disclosure in the same

way. The researcher did not initially set out to study atheists from Christian families specifically, as the title suggests, but was only able to obtain participants with this background. To accommodate this, the title of the study had to be revised in order to be more specific and signify that the results pertain only to atheists who come from Christian households.

Along the same lines, the study findings are not representative of a wide range of cultures and ethnicities. Though it is unknown how the atheist population is broken up according to race, it is important to note that almost all of the study participants (6 of 7) were Caucasian, with the one exception being Hispanic. As a result, there are a lot of unknowns regarding how the disclosure process is carried out, experienced, and received in cultures outside of that of Caucasian Americans. For instance, the disclosure process and experience of immigrants might be completely different, especially when one considers how central religion is in certain cultures around the world. With respect to race, it is also known that certain races tend to be more religious, such as the African American community. Consequently, since no African Americans or other races were represented in the study to an adequate degree, the study's findings are again limited.

#### *Clinical Relevance*

What has been discovered in this study is of considerable importance to clinicians who may be working with individuals grappling with the choice of whether to disclose their atheism to religious family members or not. The findings may also be helpful in family therapy cases with families who may still be reeling from the atheist's recent disclosure.

If working individually with an atheist struggling with whether or not he/she should disclose, it seems essential to get the client to consider the costs and rewards of disclosure. What do they stand to gain from the disclosure? What might the costs of disclosure be? What will it be like for them if they never disclose their lack of faith to their family? Will the gains and/or costs of disclosure be long term or temporary? These and similar questions will help the client consider the costs and rewards associated with their disclosure in order to ensure they make the best decision for their situation; one that is hopefully in line with the relationship dynamics between them and their family members as they see it.

It seems helpful, based on what was learned from the focus group participants, for sessions to also be a place where the atheist can think about *how* they would like to disclose to their family members in a way that best suits them and reduces the amount of anxiety associated with the potentially difficult task. It is thought that this may be beneficial based on several of the study participants explaining how they chose to disclose in pre-planned, structured ways, which helped make the experience as painless as possible for them. Role playing might be a useful therapeutic tool in helping the client practice and act out what he/she would like to say during the disclosure, while considering how family members might react. Likewise, individual therapy would be a good place for atheists to process the anger and feeling “stupid” many of the focus group members reported feeling, as well as any of the other themes that were highlighted in chapter four.

Therapy would also be ideal for those atheists who have already disclosed and have been met with the initial reluctance many of participants reported as being the

families' response to the disclosure. Also, it will be useful for clients who have lost relationships due to the disclosure, as a few of the participants experienced, to process the loss and discuss coping strategies. By being familiar with and sharing the relevant common themes that emerged in the focus group and discussed in chapter four, clinicians can help normalize the ups and downs found to be associated with the disclosure process.

While the idea of family therapy for the atheist and his/her religious family struggling with the disclosure sounds logical, one might be hard pressed to see a family so unsettled by the disclosure process that they attend therapy specifically for it, based on the generally mild family reactions described by the participants. However, with that said, it is completely plausible. Actually, family therapy would be ideal for families struggling with disclosure or for families who are in therapy for issues that extend beyond atheism. Family therapy would be valuable because the sessions and clinician could work to manage the initial difficulties and conflicts that might arise when disclosure first takes place. In fact, should the atheist feel comfortable doing so, disclosure within an actual family therapy session might be helpful in promoting healthy communication and managing conflicts that might arise initially, which would go a long way in helping to ensure that minimal damage is made to family relationships and limiting or attending to any relationship strain that arises within the session. Keeping in mind the multitude of ways disclosure might impact the family system, clinicians are encouraged to focus not just on the atheist disclosing but also attend to the family members on the receiving end of the disclosure and the relationships between them. In terms of what the clinician will want to highlight, obviously each case should be viewed and assessed independently. However, based on the findings of the study, it seems imperative to the atheist to be able

to have a space in which to communicate that he/she is still essentially the decent and moral person the family has always known and that atheism does not change that. Also, the family may need to process the sense of failure or guilt surrounding the atheist's loss of faith, as some family members were reported as feeling upon disclosure. Clinicians are positioned to be of great service to atheists and/or their families struggling with the disclosure process. It is hoped that this study and its findings will help provide them with some guidance as they consider how they can make therapy as beneficial to everyone in the family system as possible.

#### *Suggested Future Research*

Keeping in mind the research goals, the researcher feels the study was successful in what it set out to do. The study and its results help shed light on the process atheists go through as they disclose their atheism to religious family members and, in effect, add to the currently inadequate body of literature on atheists and atheism as a whole. It is the researcher's hope that this study will inspire and be used for further research on this research-neglected population. With that in mind, the researcher has some suggestion for related, future research.

First, it would be useful to expand on this research by collecting data from individuals who have been raised in religious households that practice religions not represented in this study. This is important because it may not be the case that all religions handle the disclosure of a family member's atheism in a similar manner to that described in this study's findings, which was only able to obtain Catholics and Protestants. For some religions the disclosure process may be less distressing while for others it may prove to be much more difficult. Furthermore, by looking at different

faiths, it may be uncovered that individuals' costs and rewards change when assessing whether disclosure is advantageous.

Another useful area of research that would be able to supplement or work in conjunction with the findings of this study, would involve looking at atheists who have self-identified as such but have chosen not to disclose to their religious family members or have simply not been able to. The results of such research would help expand on and further elucidate the extent to which the cost/reward analysis proposed by the social exchange and choice theory actually takes place for atheists who decide to disclose versus those who do not. Also, simply put, doing this research with atheists who choose not to be open about their beliefs would paint a richer picture of the complete atheist experience and add to the little that is known via research about this often misunderstood group. However, if one was to take on such a venture, they would need to be creative about ways to obtain participants. It is not too challenging to find individuals who are openly atheist because there are groups and organizations where one may be able to recruit from, where as it would be considerably harder to recruit atheists who are not living openly, much less get them to agree to participate.

As highlighted by the participants' account of the disclosure process, deciding to live openly atheist can have impacts on various relationships outside of the family of origin. As such, research dedicated to looking into specific relationships is necessary. For instance, looking into how disclosing one's atheism to friends and acquaintances and the process and experience associated with that would provide a much broader understanding of the complete disclosure process. Equally important, if not more so, would be specific research on the disclosure's impact on the atheist's partner and its

effect on the marital relationship. As was highlighted by one of the participants, one's atheism can have dramatic repercussions on a marriage. Studying the impact disclosure has on relationships outside the family of origin is essential to understanding the complete disclosure process.

Finally, research related to the disclosure process of atheists from the religious family members' perspectives would also be interesting and, without a doubt, useful in getting the families' perspectives on what the disclosure process was like on the receiving end, what it meant to them, and how they view the disclosure as having impacted their relationship to the atheist, if at all. It would also be fascinating to hear if they would prefer the atheist to have not told them versus being honest about their beliefs. Another benefit of such research would be that it would surely help with the clinical application of the findings, especially in conjunction with the findings of this study, as it would help flesh out the process from both perspectives and help family therapists better understand what everyone in the family system might be going through.

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APPENDIX A



**Office of Research Compliance**  
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FWA00000572( expires 1/20/2010)  
IRB # is IRB00000667

DATE: May 27, 2009

MEMORANDUM

TO: Angela J. Huebner  
Babak Alidoosti

Approval date: 5/27/2009  
Continuing Review Due Date:5/12/2010  
Expiration Date: 5/26/2010

FROM: David M. Moore 

SUBJECT: **IRB Expedited Approval:** “The Process and Experience of Deciding to Live Openly as an Atheist in a Family of Believers: A Qualitative Study” , IRB # 09-474

This memo is regarding the above-mentioned protocol. The proposed research is eligible for expedited review according to the specifications authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. As Chair of the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board, I have granted approval to the study for a period of 12 months, effective May 27, 2009.

As an investigator of human subjects, your responsibilities include the following:

1. Report promptly proposed changes in previously approved human subject research activities to the IRB, including changes to your study forms, procedures and investigators, regardless of how minor. The proposed changes must not be initiated without IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.
2. Report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.
3. Report promptly to the IRB of the study’s closing (i.e., data collecting and data analysis complete at Virginia Tech). If the study is to continue past the expiration date (listed above), investigators must submit a request for continuing review prior to the continuing review due date (listed above). It is the researcher’s responsibility to obtain re-approval from the IRB before the study’s expiration date.
4. If re-approval is not obtained (unless the study has been reported to the IRB as closed) prior to the expiration date, all activities involving human subjects and data analysis must cease immediately, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.

**Important:**

If you are conducting **federally funded non-exempt research**, please send the applicable OSP/grant proposal to the IRB office, once available. OSP funds may not be released until the IRB has compared and found consistent the proposal and related IRB applicaton.

cc: File

APPENDIX B

## **Informed Consent for Participants in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects**

### ***The Process and Experience of Deciding to Live Openly as an Atheist in a Family of Believers: A Qualitative Study***

Dr. Angela Huebner, Principal Investigator

#### **I. Purpose of the Research**

The goal of this study is to gain an understanding of the process atheists go through when disclosing their lack of belief to their religious family members. By doing so, it is hoped that the information gained may benefit therapists who work with this population as they go through this potentially difficult time. Additionally, the researcher believes that much of the information gained may also be valuable in helping faithful family members attempting to cope with an atheist family member's disclosure, as this may be an equally stressful time for them. Finally, the author is simply hoping to add to the currently insufficient body of research on atheism and atheists.

#### **II. Procedures**

As a participant in this study:

- You agree to participate in an audio-recorded focus group about the process/experience of disclosing your atheism with faithful family members.
- You can expect the focus group to last roughly 90 minutes.
- You will have the information you provide combined with other participants' responses into a report. The report will be about the participants' the process and experience of deciding to live openly as an atheist in a family of believers, as mentioned above.

#### **III. Risks**

- There is some risk of emotional distress or discomfort for study participants as you will be asked to recall potentially difficult events or interactions with family members and/or continued relational difficulties since having disclosed your atheism.
- The researcher has referral information for mental health services available should you wish to further process any difficult emotions, memories, etc. brought about during the focus group.

#### **IV. Benefits**

- It may be considered a benefit for you to hear personal stories from other atheists who have had similar experiences. Also, retelling your experiences of disclosing your beliefs to your family members and hearing others' experiences may prove to be empowering for you and other participants.
- You will be helping add to the currently insufficient body of research on atheism and atheists.

#### **V. Anonymity and Confidentiality**

- All of the information provided during the focus group and the over-the-phone screening is confidential.
- All identifying information provided during the audio-recorded focus group will be removed/replaced with aliases in the typed transcript and the study report.
- The only individuals with access to the audio recording and original transcript will be the Principal Investigator and Co-Investigator.
- The audio tape will be destroyed as soon as it has been transcribed and checked.

#### **VI. Compensation**

- There is no compensation for taking part in this focus group.

#### **VII. Freedom to Withdraw**

- You have the right to refuse to answer any question at any time.
- You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

#### **VIII. Participant Responsibilities and Permission**

- I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities: to sit and discuss, to the best of my ability, my experience/process of deciding to live openly as an atheist in a family of believers.
- I have read this consent form and have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Subject signature

If you have any questions about this research in any capacity, research subjects' rights, and/or whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury, you may contact:

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David M. Moore  
Chair, Virginia Tech Institutional Review  
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