# A Theory of Atheist Student Identity Development

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*This paper proposes a theory of identity development for the atheist college student. Through examining the parallels between atheist college students and lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) college students as members of a salient, marginalized, and invisible minority group, this paper applies Small's (1998) theory of atheist student faith development to Fassinger's (1998) theory of LGB student identity development. Using this conceptual framework, this paper aims to explain how atheist students develop their individual and group identities.*

Faith is important to many college students, affecting how they see themselves and how they interact with others (Seifert, 2007). The dominant faith in the United States is Christianity, and students who identify as Christian have *Christian privilege*, which is the "conscious and subconscious advantages often afforded the Christian faith" (Seifert, 2007, p. 11). Examples of Christian privilege include the university break around Christmas time (but not around the holidays of other faiths), school off on Sunday, chapels prominently placed on college campuses, and ignorance of customs, traditions, and needs of non-Christian students (e.g. not offering kosher food options for Jewish students). As a result of Christian privilege, non-Christian students can feel marginalized, oppressed, and ignored (Seifert, 2007). Since marginalization can lead to suboptimal learning outcomes (Tatum, 2007), the experiences of non-Christian college students must be addressed.

The experiences of certain faith minorities in higher education have been explored in the literature, including Jewish students (Fejgin, 1995; Kushner, 2009; Vilchinsky & Kravetz, 2005) and Muslim students (Asmar, 2005; Speck, 1997). However, the experiences of atheist students have not been widely studied (Goodman & Mueller, 2009a). In brief, atheism refers to a "lack of belief in the existence of a God or

Gods" (Nash, 2003, p. 7). Although the literature on these students is sparse, students with atheist beliefs are a significant population on college campuses. A major national study, *The Spiritual Life of College Students* (HERI, 2004), found that 21% of entering college students do not believe in God. However, atheist students are "invisible, stigmatized, and marginalized" (Goodman & Mueller, 2009a, p. 57), largely because they do not share traditional values of faith. Atheists are often described by other students as "bitter," "mean-spirited," "Satanic," "immoral," "empty," or "ignorant" (Nash, 2003, p. 6). Due to this, many atheist students choose not to publicly share their beliefs. As a result, atheist students can be considered an invisible and oppressed population on campuses (Goodman & Mueller, 2009b).

Since students enter college with unique sets of beliefs, goals, identities, and needs, and since universities aim to help all students succeed, it is important for student affairs professionals to work toward a greater understanding of student populations that are not well understood (American Council on Education, 1949). It is particularly important to work toward a greater understanding of student populations that are oppressed. *Oppression* is "those attitudes, behaviors, and pervasive and systematic social arrangements by which

members of one group are exploited and subordinated while members of another group are granted privileges" (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991, p. 155). If students feel that they are put down, ignored, or denied privileges because of their membership in a particular identity group – if they feel that an important aspect of their identity is not being affirmed – then they are less likely to feel comfortable in their living surroundings and learning environments (Tatum, 2007).

To help educators learn how to work effectively with atheist students, a theory of atheist student identity development is needed. This paper will review the current literature on social identity and faith development, draw parallels between atheist and lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) identities, and use this framework to apply Small's (2008) theory of atheist college student faith development to Fassinger's (1998) theory of LGB identity development. Ultimately, this paper will propose a new theory of atheist student identity development.

## Literature Review

### Social Identities and Salience

According to Ashforth & Mael (1989), people place themselves and others into social categories, or *social identities*, such as race, gender, faith, and sexual orientation. Social identities, or self-perceptions of belonging to certain groups, help individuals to create order in their social environment and to define themselves in relation to other people (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). For each identity category, an individual may identify with the majority or the minority. For example, for race in the United States, a White person would be in the racial majority while a Black person would be in the racial minority (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991). Individuals identifying with a minority identity status may face issues of oppression (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991).

Each person has multiple identities that exist at the same time, and each may have a majority or minority status. For example, a person might be White, Christian, and male (majority statuses in the U.S.) but also lower-class and gay (minority statuses in the United States) (Jones & McEwen, 2000). In addition, certain identities are more *salient* to an individual, or important to that individual's core sense of being, while other identities are more peripheral (Jones & McEwen, 2000). According to Jones & McEwen (2000), "lack of salience seemed prevalent among those more privileged identity dimensions" (p. 410), implying that oppressed, marginalized, and minority identity statuses tend to be more salient to an individual. For example, if an individual identifies as Black and male, then the Black (oppressed) identity is likely to be salient while the male (privileged) identity is likely to be less salient.

Just as any minority identity is likely to be more salient, faith identity "may be particularly salient to those students from minority religions that are not valued in the Christian-dominated culture of the United States" (Small, 2008, p. 10). Atheism, therefore, can be considered to be a salient minority faith identity. It is considered part of the minority because it is not Christian, related to faith because it is defined in terms of a belief (or lack of a belief) in God, and an identity because it is part of an overall "life philosophy that provides moral direction" (Goodman & Mueller, 2009a).

### Faith Development Theories

Even though atheists comprise 21% of college students (HERI, 2004), specific theories about their identity development are almost non-existent. Despite this deficiency, there are several theories of overall general faith development. One influential scholar in this area was Fowler (1981), who interviewed hundreds of individuals (mostly White, but of many different faiths) to

develop a comprehensive theory of faith development. According to Fowler, *faith* is "an active mode of being and committing, a way of moving into and giving shape to our experiences of life" (p. 16). The theory states that faith development occurs through a series of stages:

1. Intuitive-projective faith (one fixed perception of God).
2. Mythic-literal faith (multiple literal perspectives of God).
3. Synthetic-conventional faith (externally-validated abstract perspectives of God).
4. Individuative-reflective faith (choosing one's own perspectives of God).
5. Conjunctive faith (increased commitment to one's perspectives of God and acceptance of other perspectives).
6. Universalizing faith (a deeper, more global conception of God).

Overall, Fowler described an individual's progression from accepting blind faith in God, to choosing one's own view of God, to committing to one's chosen faith viewpoint and accepting others' faith viewpoints. Parks (as cited in Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006) applied Fowler's theory of faith development to college students specifically, concentrating on the college student moving from the acceptance of an external definition of faith to the construction of a meaningful internal definition. According to Parks' theory (as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010), students move from trusting outside authorities, to losing trust in authorities altogether, to engaging in a mature, critical search for knowledge. Along the way, students gain a sense of *inner dependence* as they develop a mature faith identity. Eventually they become *interdependent*,

accepting others of a different faith while remaining true to their own faith. Unlike Fowler, Parks (as cited in Evans et al., 2010) describes not only the developmental trajectory of students' internal faith development but also the sequence of groups that students choose to identify with during this process. Students progress from identifying with face-to-face communities based on other peoples' spiritual views, to identifying with diffuse communities while they explore new views, to identifying with distinct mentoring communities that can help them develop their own unique spiritual views. Essentially, college students undergo two simultaneous challenges: figuring out how to define their own faith and figuring out how to identify with a particular faith group.

Thus, as a faith identity, it is reasonable to conclude that atheism can be defined both internally (in a personal context) and externally (in a social context). In addition, atheism can be conceptualized as a salient, marginalized, invisible, minority social identity. It is salient because, as previously shown, it is a marginalized minority identity (Goodman & Mueller, 2009a; Jones & McEwen, 2000). It is invisible because many atheist students choose not to make their atheist identity public, despite the fact that they make up a significant minority of the overall college student population (Goodman & Mueller, 2009b; Higher Education Research Institute, 2004).

## Parallels Between Faith and Sexual Orientation

According to Nash (2003) and *The Out Campaign* website (http://outcampaign.org) atheist students often have to 'be in the closet' with their beliefs for fear of being tormented or proselytized by other students. However, to 'be in the closet' is a phrase more commonly used to describe the psychosocial and cultural experience of LGB individuals). This is not just a lexical comparison; faith and

sexual orientation as identities have several important conceptual parallels as well. Like faith, but unlike race or gender, sexual orientation is "not visible to oneself or others" (Fassinger, 1998, p. 15). Also, individuals identifying with the minority statuses of either faith (non-Christian) or sexual orientation (LGB) are oppressed in U.S. society (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Seifert, 2007). Therefore, just like atheist students, LGB students have a salient, marginalized, invisible, minority social identity. In addition, like atheist students, LGB students develop their identity in both an individual and a group context (Fassinger, 1998).

Fassinger (1998) lays out a well-developed and empirically tested theory on LGB student identity development. This theory has two dimensions – *individual sexual identity* and *group membership identity*. Students develop along both dimensions, separately and not necessarily simultaneously, in four stages. The first stage, *awareness*, is when the student first feels different from other people and realizes that other sexual orientations exist. The second stage*, exploration,* is when the student discovers that he or she has erotic feelings about a person or people of the same sex and tries to figure out how he or she feels about lesbian, gay, and bisexual people as a group. The third stage, *deepening /commitment*, is when the student determines that he or she is certain in the choice of a minority sexual identity and involves himself or herself in the LGB community. The final stage, *internalization/synthesis*, is when the student incorporates his or her minority sexual identity into their overall identity and feels comfortable identifying as LGB in a number of different contexts.

Since atheist students and LGB students have similar and unique identity

characteristics, it is reasonable to hypothesize that these students undergo similar developmental processes. As previously mentioned, there are no theories about how atheist students develop their social identity. However, Small (2008) did create and validate a theory of atheist student *faith* development. Small (2008) proposed the following developmental progression:

1 & 2. Unexamined or no belief in a faith, depending on how the student is raised.

3. The process of giving up theistic beliefs and exploring a new belief system.

4. Committing to a new system of atheistic beliefs and finding an atheist community.

5. Lack of egotism.

6. Worldview of synthesis with other human beings not based on faith.

Although Small's (2008) theory explains the development of atheist students' faith rather than their identity, it contains both individual and group development dimensions. It also generally describes a progression of awareness, exploration, commitment, and synthesis. Because of these theoretical parallels and the uniquely similar characteristics of the atheist and LGB identities, Small's (2008) theory can be applied to Fassinger's (1998) theory to address a gap in the literature and create a new theory of atheist student identity development.

## Atheist Student Identity Development (ASID) Theory

Operating on the belief that LGB students develop their identities in a similar manner as atheist students, ASID theory replaces aspects of sexual orientation with aspects of faith as illustrated by the literature. Fassinger's (1998) theory and
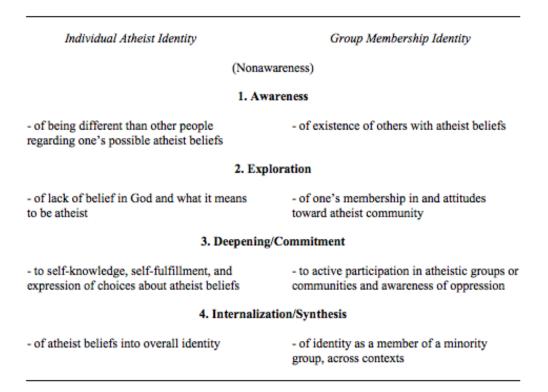
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| Individual Atheist Identity | Group Membership Identity |
|---|---|
| | (Nonawareness) |
| | **1. Awareness** |
| - of being different than other people regarding one's possible atheist beliefs | - of existence of others with atheist beliefs |
| | **2. Exploration** |
| - of lack of belief in God and what it means to be atheist | - of one's membership in and attitudes toward atheist community |
| | **3. Deepening/Commitment** |
| - to self-knowledge, self-fulfillment, and expression of choices about atheist beliefs | - to active participation in atheistic groups or communities and awareness of oppression |
| | **4. Internalization/Synthesis** |
| - of atheist beliefs into overall identity | - of identity as a member of a minority group, across contexts |

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**Figure 1. Proposed model of Atheist Student Identity Development (ASID)**

Small's (2008) theory will be used as a framework, as well as Nash's (2003) treatise on atheist students. Similar to Fassinger's (1998) theory, ASID theory (Figure 1) has two dimensions – *individual atheist identity* and *group membership identity*.

The first stage, *awareness*, is when the student first begins to recognize that he or she may not believe in a concept of God, that this doubt differentiates him or her from other students, and that other students exist with similar doubts. The individual identity aspect of this stage mirrors part of Small's (2008) third stage, where the student might still adhere to a low level of faith but is beginning to give up theistic beliefs. The group identity aspect is evidenced by Nash (2003), who described students who realize when they come to college that they cannot openly espouse their doubts about faith, but that there are others who may share these beliefs.

The second stage, *exploration*, is when the student discovers that he or she does not believe in God and tries to figure out what that means. This process is portrayed in the end of Small's (2008) third stage, where students give up belief in God and abandon faith. This is also when the student explores his or her membership in and attitudes toward the atheist community, perhaps by attending a meeting of a humanistic or free-thought association on campus (Reisberg, 1998) or by finding it "a meaningful, reassuring experience to converse with like-minded thinkers" (Small, 2008, p. 269).

The third stage, *deepening /commitment*, is when the student develops self-fulfillment and self-knowledge about atheism: a "personally crafted ideology around, including or supporting his/her atheism, likely featuring complex patterns of doubt" (Small, 2008, p. 94). The student is likely to have "active participation in some

sort of rational/non-emotional community" (Small, 2008, p. 94), such as a humanistic group on campus, understand oppression inherent in being a minority, and oppose privilege based on faith (Nash, 2003; Reisberg, 1998).

At this point, atheism can take many ideological forms (Nash, 2003), and the process of awareness, exploration, and commitment is likely to differ based on the form. *Secular humanists*, for example, often become aware of atheist beliefs because they see inconsistencies in teachings on faith or do not perceive the need for a God concept. They explore their beliefs sporadically, they may not value community as highly, and they ultimately come to the conclusion that "we, and we alone, are responsible for ourselves and others" (Nash, 2003, p. 11). *Scientific humanists*, by contrast, often become aware of atheistic beliefs because they find that science can explain natural concepts better than God. They explore their beliefs methodically through science, joining groups such as The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. They ultimately come to the conclusion that science and faith are either at odds, incompatible, or complementary (Nash, 2003).

The fourth and final stage, *internalization/synthesis*, is when the student incorporates the atheist identity into the rest of his or her overall identity. This is like Nash's (2003) description of students who "are not so much opposed to religions as they are determined to live their lives as non-believers… doing good in their own best ways" (p. 12). The student is fully ready to choose when to come out publicly as an atheist. In a group context, the student may embrace "complete, unselfish partnership with all other humans in order to reach a fully achieved life for all" (Small, 2008, p. 94) while consciously identifying as part of a minority atheist group.

## Limitations and Further Research

Fassinger's (1998) model of LGB identity development was empirically validated using samples of lesbians and gay men. Small's (2008) model of atheist faith development was also empirically validated using focus groups of atheist students. Thus, there is a strong foundation for the ASID theory as it attempts to address a gap in the literature, but the ASID theory itself ultimately deserves further consideration.

Perhaps atheist students differ from LGB students in ways not captured by the parallel identity characteristics previously analyzed. For instance, stereotypes of LGB students may differ from stereotypes of atheist students, meaning that these students may experience oppression in different ways, leading to different developmental trajectories. Also, perhaps the diversity of contexts within higher education mediates differences in atheist student identity development. For example, on campuses without a large population of atheist students, it may be difficult or impossible for atheist students to develop the group aspect of their identity. At religiously-based institutions, atheist students may take a different developmental route than the one proposed in this paper. In addition, the ASID theory does not attempt to address the role that meaning-making plays in the development of a student's atheist identity. Since the level of meaning-making may moderate the degree to which external influences affect a student's conception of his or her identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007), it could be useful for additional scholarship to integrate meaning-making into the ASID theory.

Researchers in the field of student affairs could investigate many of these topics, as well as assess the validity of the ASID theory by performing mixed-method

longitudinal or cross-sectional research. Regardless of the method, however, it is important that further research in this area occur. By using the proposed ASID model, universities may have a better understanding of atheist students.

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