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Perceptions of Discrimination Among Atheists: Consequences for Atheist Identification, Psychological and Physical Well-Being
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CITATION
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Atheists are one of the most stigmatized groups of people in the United States. Many people hold negative stereotypes of atheists, believing them to be judgmental, cynical, and hedonistic (Harper, 2007). People also harbor negative feelings toward atheists, including distrust (Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011), disgust (Ritter & Preston, 2011), and fear (Franks & Scherr, in press). Such negative feelings may translate into discriminatory behaviors, such as slander and ostracism (Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2012). Although recent research has documented prejudice (Gervais, 2013; Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2012) and discrimination (Gervais et al., 2011; Hammer et al., 2012) targeting atheists, the consequences of such social rejection for atheists themselves remain unclear. For example, is discrimination associated with lower well-being among atheists? If so, how might atheists protect themselves against the harmful effects of discrimination? The purpose of this study was to address these two research questions. Drawing on research among other marginalized social groups, we expected that atheists’ perceptions of discrimination would be associated with poor well-being, both psychologically and physical. We also anticipated that atheists would identify more strongly with their stigmatized status in the face of discrimination, a coping strategy that has the potential to reduce the costs of discrimination for well-being (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999).

Who Are Atheists?

Atheists are people who lack any belief in god(s) or explicitly believe in the nonexistence of god(s) (Cliteur, 2009). Many atheists find religious beliefs and practices to be meaningless in their lives and inconsistent with their secular worldviews (Zuckerman, 2009). A hallmark of contemporary or “new” atheism is that atheists are hostile toward organized religion (e.g., Streib & Klein, 2013), yet not all atheists report antireligious sentiments (Cimino & Smith, 2011). In recent years, atheists have become more active and visible in the United States (Guenther, Mulligan, & Papp, 2013). For example, several prominent atheists have authored books challenging religion and promoting atheism (e.g., Dawkins, 2006; Hitchens, 2007). There has also been an increase in both informal and formal atheist organizations, some of which are politically active at the local and national levels (Guenther et al., 2013; Smith & Cimino, 2012).

Researchers have generally defined atheists in one of two ways: (a) theological atheists, people who do not believe in god(s), and (b) self-identifying atheists, people who identify as atheist from among other nonreligious categories. Theological and self-identifying atheism frequently co-occur, but not always. For example, some theological atheists choose to identify with other nonreligious categories (e.g., humanist or secularist; Sherkat, 2008). In addition, some self-identifying atheists report varied beliefs in god(s) (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, & Nielsen, 2012). This distinction between endorsement of in-group beliefs and self-identification with the in-group applies to many other social groups, such as the difference between religious beliefs and identity among Jews (Dubow, Pargament, Boxer, & Tarakeshwar,
We defined atheists for this study as people who satisfy both theological and self-identifying atheism, meaning that they explicitly state that they do not believe in god(s) and identify themselves using the label “atheist.”

Large-scale surveys show that atheists tend to be male (Keysar, 2007) and relatively young in age (Pew Research Center, 2008). Nonreligious people in general tend to be educated (Kosmin & Keysar, 2006), politically liberal (Hout & Fischer, 2002), and less likely to live in Southern states or rural areas (Sherkat, 2008). Although the number of people identifying as atheist—and nonreligious, more broadly—is on the rise (Pew Research Center, 2012), these people represent a relatively small portion of the United States population. Based on nationally representative samples, estimates place self-identified atheists between 0.7% (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009) and 2.4% (Pew Research Center, 2012) of the total United States population. These estimates are similar to those for many minority religious groups, including Mormons (1.7%) and Jews (1.7%; Pew Research Center, 2008). Figures for atheists may actually be conservative, as some people who privately identify as atheist do not publically identify as such for fear of ramifications (i.e., private vs. public self-identifications; Cragun et al., 2012). Even so, it is clear that self-identified atheists are a numerical minority in the United States today.

The Marginalization of Atheism

Beyond being a numerical minority, atheists are also a marginalized group of people living in the United States (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2013). Several nationally representative surveys highlight the negative views that Americans express toward atheists. A 2007 Gallup poll, for example, assessed people’s willingness to vote for hypothetical political candidates from different racial and religious backgrounds. Although many potential candidates would earn the majority of people’s votes, including an African American (94%), a woman (88%), and a homosexual (55%), the only candidate that would not receive a majority vote was an atheist (45%; Jones, 2007). In a related survey, a majority of people (53%) stated that they would be less likely to support a presidential candidate who was an atheist (Pew Research Center, 2014). This figure representing lack of support was larger than for all other characteristics, including a gay or lesbian candidate (27%) and a candidate who had an extramarital affair (35%). As one more example of people’s negative views toward atheists, 48% of people would disapprove of their children marrying an atheist (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006). This disapproval rating was higher than ratings for all other minority groups included in the survey, such as Muslims (34%) and African Americans (19%). Edgell et al. (2006) concluded that “atheists are less likely to be accepted, publicly and privately, than any others from a long list of ethnic, religious, and other minority groups” (p. 211).

Although these surveys indicate that Americans tend to hold negative attitudes toward atheists, such studies do not speak to whether atheists recognize their marginalized status. A few recent studies, however, demonstrate that atheists do perceive themselves as targets of social rejection. For example, Cragun et al. (2012) found that approximately 41% of atheists experienced some form of discrimination during the five years before their study participation. A related study found that discrimination toward atheists is pervasive, stemming from various sources (e.g., family members, friends, and coworkers) and involving such acts as ostracism (e.g., being avoided or isolated), coercion (e.g., pressured to engage in religious activities), and slander (e.g., being told that one is sinful and immoral; Hammer et al., 2012). Anecdotal evidence also suggests that social rejection is a common experience among atheists (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Further, even if atheists have never personally experienced discrimination, they likely recognize their marginalized position in the United States (Cimino & Smith, 2011).

Although discrimination is a particularly harmful social stressor for members of many marginalized groups (Weber, Pargament, Kunik, Lomax, & Stanley, 2012), it is unclear whether experiences of rejection undermine well-being for atheists. The broader literature indicates that belonging to a marginalized group comes with psychological and even physical costs (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). For example, perceptions of discrimination are associated with increased symptoms of anxiety and depression among African Americans (Banks, Kohn-Wood, & Spencer, 2006), lower life satisfaction among people of multiracial backgrounds (Giamo, Schmitt, & Outten, 2012), and reduced self-esteem among homosexual and bisexual men (Huebner, Rebchook, & Kegeles, 2004). Perceptions of discrimination are also associated with lower physical well-being among African Americans (Borrell, Kiefe, Williams, Diez-Roux, & Gordon-Larsen, 2006) and Mexican Americans (Finch, Hummer, Kolody, & Vega, 2001). In terms of the causal effect of perceived discrimination on well-being, Schmitt, Branscombe, and Postmes (2003) found that manipulations of pervasive discrimination lowered self-esteem among women. In addition, Merritt, Bennett, Williams, Edwards, and Sollers (2006) found that manipulating discrimination among African American men led to heightened cardiovascular responses, which may negatively affect physical well-being over time. In light of this research, we expected that atheists’ perceptions of discrimination would be negatively associated with their psychological and physical well-being.

The Rejection–Identification Model

Beyond documenting the relationship between discrimination and well-being, we also sought to test a process by which atheists may protect themselves from the anticipated negative effects of discrimination. As Allport (1954) argued, “misery finds balm through the closer association of people who are miserable for the same reason. Threats drive them to seek protective unity within their common membership” (p. 148). Identification with a devalued group may be one of many ways that individuals respond to stigma (Goffman, 1963). Similar to other marginalized groups, atheists may cope with discrimination by finding increased importance in their stigmatized identity—a process of rejection and identification (Branscombe, Fernández, Gómez, & Cronin, 2011; Branscombe et al., 1999). The Rejection–Identification Model (i.e., RIM; Branscombe et al., 1999) posits that perceiving discrimination based on one’s group membership may increase identification with that devalued group. Identification, in turn, reduces the deleterious effects of discrimination on well-being (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). Rooted in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), identification may provide people with a sense of belonging and perception of having supportive relationships with like-minded people, providing ben-
efits for well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Haslam et al., 2009). For example, people who strongly identify with atheism may seek relationships with other atheists by means of becoming involved in secular organizations (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010).

Although the RIM focuses on social benefits of group identity, cognitive processes may also be protective. For example, identification is associated with rejecting minority group stereotypes and resisting group-related stigma (Crabtree, Haslam, Postmes, & Haslam, 2010). To the extent that discrimination threatens atheists’ sense of certainty about their selves, their secular attitudes may strengthen (McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001), their group identification may increase (Grant & Hogg, 2012), and they may further advocate for their beliefs (Gal & Rucker, 2010). As an example, Farias, Newheiser, Kahane, and de Toledo (2013) found that relatively secular individuals reported greater conviction in science when under stress and anxiety. In this way, identifying with one’s minority group and endorsing one’s minority beliefs in the face of uncertainty (e.g., when being a target of discrimination) may be a mechanism to help bolster one’s sense of self.

The process of rejection and identification has received empirical support among many groups, including African Americans (Branscombe et al., 1999), Mexican Americans (Romero & Roberts, 2003), international students (Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003), and older adults (Garstka, Schmitt, Branscombe, & Hummert, 2004). This process has also been documented in cross-sectional (Mossakowski, 2003), longitudinal (Ramos, Cassidy, Reicher, & Haslam, 2012), and experimental research (Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001). For example, Jetten et al. (2001) manipulated perceptions of discrimination among people with body piercings. Participants in a high-discrimination condition reported stronger identification with other people who had body piercings compared with participants in a low-discrimination condition. Higher levels of identification further predicted greater self-esteem. Thus, there is evidence for a causal relationship of discrimination on identification, and for identification’s benefits for well-being. Based on this previous research, we expected that perceiving discrimination would be associated with a higher degree of identification among atheists. In turn, identification as an atheist should reduce the negative effects of discrimination on well-being. There are alternative models, however, that describe the relationship between discrimination and well-being. For example, the discounting model (Crocker & Major, 1989) predicts that discrimination should predict better well-being under certain conditions. That is, being able to discount negative treatment resulting from external causes (e.g., prejudice) may be self-protective for some minority group members. The maladjustment model, as second alternative account, predicts that poor well-being may cause people to attribute negative treatment to discrimination (Branscombe et al., 1999). We test for the plausibility of these alternative models in the present study, comparing results with the RIM.

Rejection–Identification Model and Atheists

We expect that the rejection–identification process is applicable to atheists for at least two reasons. First, members of a marginalized group tend to increase their group identification when discrimination is pervasive rather than infrequent (Branscombe et al., 2011). The conditions that atheists experience in the United States best reflect pervasive discrimination. The United States is a relatively religious country where nearly 90% of people are fairly or absolutely certain in the existence of god(s) and more than 80% of people affiliate with some religious group (Pew Research Center, 2008). The religious context of this country is relevant as religion can act as a catalyst for intergroup hostility and intolerance (Sillberman, 2005), especially toward groups of people who are in violation of a given religion’s values (Shen, Yelder, Haggard, & Rowatt, 2013; Whitley, 2009). This is important because atheists have been found to be especially threatening to people’s values (Cook, Cottrell, & Webster, 2014). Atheists also experience discrimination across many contexts, including slander by popular media (e.g., TV and newspapers) and social condemnation by family members, friends, and coworkers (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Hammer et al., 2012). Because the marginalization of atheism is widespread (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2013), cutting across personal and public domains of life (Edgell et al., 2006; Hammer et al., 2012), atheists do appear to experience pervasive rather than infrequent discrimination in the United States.

Second, members of marginalized groups tend to increase their group identification when they perceive group differences as illegitimate and when they believe that they can improve their status by competing with the more dominant group (Branscombe et al., 2011; Ellemers, 1993; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This second condition is also satisfied for many atheists because they tend to perceive very distinct group boundaries between themselves and religious individuals (Smith, 2011), and believe that the difference in social power across these two groups is illegitimate. The difference in social power may cause some atheists to challenge and compete with religion (Smith, 2013). By so doing, atheists maintain distinct group boundaries, thus staying closer to, rather than moving away from, their marginalized identity (Branscombe et al., 2011). The new atheist movement is an indication that some atheists join organizations of similar others to respond to perceived injustices against them by religious individuals and institutions (Guenther et al., 2013).

Although atheists share experiences that are similar to those of other marginalized groups included in previous RIM research, there are at least two features of atheism that make the current study a departure from most previous work: atheism is a concealable identity, and atheism is belief-based. Previous studies testing the RIM have largely examined groups of people who have visible stigmatized identities, such as group membership based on race, sex, and age. Atheists, however, have the option to “hide” their identity from other people. Identification as an atheist is similar to other identities that people can often keep concealed, including sexual orientation (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Pachankis, 2007; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). A recent study examined the rejection–identification process for gay men and found that behavioral identification in the form of involvement in the gay community mediated the relationship between discrimination and self-esteem (Doyle & Molix, 2014). Behavioral identification implies a degree of external visibility of one’s identity, such as endorsing magazines or TV shows directed toward the gay community. The definition of identification for the present study, however, focuses on an internal evaluation of the importance and centrality of being an atheist. In addition to being a concealable identity, people actively choose to be an atheist by rejecting the notion of a god(s).
through a complex process of identity formation (Smith, 2011). Atheism is a voluntary or chosen identity to the extent that people can decide their beliefs about religious matters. This type of identification is different from identities based on ascribed characteristics including race, sex, or other characteristics assigned from birth. In sum, the atheist identity differs from many other identities examined with the RIM model because it is both concealable and chosen.

Despite the uniqueness of the atheist identity vis-à-vis other groups for whom the RIM model applies, we argue that the process of rejection and identification would occur for atheists because their experiences in the United States meet two of the RIM’s conditions highlighted earlier: the experience of pervasive discrimination and the perception of group boundaries as being illegitimate. Thus, there is reason to expect the concealable and voluntary identity of being an atheist to function similarly to a visible and ascribed identity in the context of the rejection–identification process. Identification as an atheist should become important in defining the self in the face of discrimination.

### The Present Study

Although no known research has examined the intersection of perceived discrimination, identification, and well-being among atheists, the rejection–identification process offers a rich theoretical model to guide this study. In sum, we expected that (a) perceived discrimination would be negatively associated with well-being, (b) perceived discrimination would be positively associated with atheist identification, (c) atheist identification would be positively associated with well-being, and (d) perceived discrimination would be indirectly and positively associated with well-being through atheist identification.

The present study expands the net of previous RIM research in at least three ways. First, this study tests the RIM’s predictions among atheists, an understudied group of people who face especially negative attitudes from society at-large. Second, this study adds physical well-being as an independent outcome. Physical well-being is a key outcome in studies that have assessed the consequences of discrimination (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009), yet no known research has tested whether the rejection–identification process applies to both psychological and physical well-being. Third, this study tests the RIM using structural equation modeling (SEM). Benefits of SEM include the ability to model first- and second-order latent factors with confirmatory factor analysis, to account and correct for measurement error, and to model direct and indirect pathways (Henseler, 2012; Weston & Gore, 2006).

### Method

#### Participant Recruitment

Participants for this study included members of Atheist Alliance International (AAI), an organization that supports education and activism addressing secular issues. AAI has different types of members, including individual members (i.e., people who pay a nominal membership fee) and group members (i.e., a collection of secular organizations). There are also nonmember supporters, such as those who endorse AAI’s social media websites. For this study, AAI agreed to send e-mails inviting its members and supporters to participate. AAI also posted study information to its social media websites, and encouraged its group members, or other secular organizations, to distribute study information to their respective memberships. E-mails and social media posts contained information about this study along with a link to an online survey.

The survey was active for six weeks, and 1,007 self-identified atheists completed survey items. Of these participants, the majority (95%) indicated that they did not believe in the existence of god(s). The other five percent of participants reported beliefs in god(s) that did not align with theological atheism. For example, some self-identified atheists were not certain whether god(s) existed. We excluded this subset of participants from all analyses so that our sample included atheists as defined by both self-identifying and theological atheism. Demographic characteristics of the final sample (n = 960) are displayed in Table 1.

#### Measures

To test the RIM, we included measures of perceived discrimination, atheist identification, and well-being in the survey. Perceived discrimination consisted of two related measures, including personal discrimination (i.e., personal experiences of discrimination) and group discrimination (i.e., perceptions of atheists as a derogated group). Atheist identification comprised the importance, centrality, and commitment toward being an atheist. Well-being included measures of both psychological (i.e., self-esteem, life satisfaction, and negative affect) and physical well-being.

##### Personal discrimination.

Five items assessed personal experiences of discrimination. These items reflected common experiences of discrimination among atheists (see Hammer et al., 2012), and were modeled from existing measures (e.g., Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, 2002; Branscombe et al., 1999). An example item included I have felt isolated because I am an atheist. Participants rated their agreement on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

##### Group discrimination.

Six items assessed perceptions of atheists as a derogated group in the United States. Items were similar to Schmitt et al.’s (2002) measure of out-group privilege, and focused on how atheists fare compared with religious individuals (mirroring the contrast between males and females in Schmitt et al.’s work). An example item included Religious people have more opportunities than do atheists in my country. Participants rated their agreement on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

##### Atheist identification.

Three items assessed a related dimension of identification as an atheist, including importance (i.e., Being an atheist is an important part of who I am), centrality (i.e., Being an atheist is not a central aspect of my identity; reverse coded), and commitment (i.e., I am committed to being an atheist).

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1 Because of privacy concerns regarding AAI’s membership, no information is available to compute a response rate for this survey. Even if this information were publically available, participants included people who may not have been AAI members, but instead received information through various social media posts.

2 Excluding the 47 participants who endorsed a belief in god(s), from uncertainty to certainty in the existence of god(s), does not change the pattern or significance of results.
Table 1
Demographic Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic characteristic</th>
<th>Percentage or mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex (1 = female)</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>43.76 (16.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children (1 = yes)</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than secondary school</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed secondary school</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade qualification</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College/university degree</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate degree</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper middle class</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper class</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial minority (1 = racial minority)</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status (1 = married)</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment status (1 = employed)</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region of residence*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting of residence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular organization membership (1 = member)</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The structural model controls for the significant paths between factors and demographic characteristics. n = 960.

* Region of residence was dummy coded, with the Southern region serving as the reference category.

Participants rated their agreement on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) assessed personal self-esteem. This measure included 10 items (e.g., On the whole, I am satisfied with myself) rated on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Life satisfaction. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) assessed judgments of overall life satisfaction. This measure contained five items (e.g., In most ways, my life is close to my ideal) rated on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

Negative affect. The Negative Affect Scale of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule Short Version (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) assessed the degree to which participants experienced five negative emotions. Participants indicated how often they felt upset, afraid, hostile, ashamed, and nervous during the few weeks before their participation on a 5-point scale (1 = very slightly or not at all to 5 = extremely).

Physical well-being. One item assessed physical well-being (i.e., In general, would you say your physical health is . . . ) rated on a 5-point scale (1 = poor to 5 = excellent). The subjective assessment of physical well-being reliably predicts objective measures of health including mortality (Idler & Benyamini, 1997; Idler & Kasl, 1991).

Results

Data Analysis Strategy

We used Mplus 6 software (Muthén & Muthén, 2010) to test all measurement and structural models. Measurement models describe the associations between indicators (i.e., scale items) and their underlying constructs (i.e., latent factors). Structural models describe the associations among factors (Weston & Gore, 2006). We used multiple fit indices to assess the goodness of fit of both measurement and structural models, including the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR). Standards of good model fit are values at or above .90 for CFI, values at or below .06 for RMSEA, and values at or below .08 for SRMR (Hu & Bentler, 1995, 1999). We also report chi-square and relative chi-square values (χ²/df; Wheaton, Muthén, Alwin, & Summers, 1977). As chi-square values tend to inflate with large sample sizes (Schumacker & Lomax, 2004), relative chi-square values provide a better indicator of model fit. A liberal cutoff for a relative chi-square value is five or less (Wheaton et al., 1977), whereas a conservative cutoff is two or less (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Confirmatory Factor Analyses of Measurement Models

We first present confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) assessing model fit for first- and second-order latent factors. Table 2 presents standardized factor loadings for first-order factors (all loadings at p < .001). This second table also reports factor reliabilities that take into account the loadings and residual variances of their respective indicators (DeShon, 1998). Table 3 displays the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the first-order factors.

Perceived discrimination. We estimated first-order latent factors of personal and group discrimination. The first-order factor of personal discrimination fit the data well: χ²(5) = 16.60, p = .005; χ²/df = 3.32, CFI = .99; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .02. The first-order factor of group discrimination also fit the data well: χ²(9) = 34.49, p < .001; χ²/df = 3.83; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .03. These first-order factors had a strong and positive correlation, r = .63, p < .001. We treated these first-order factors as “indicators” of perceived discrimination, the underlying second-order factor. This second-order factor fit the data well: χ²(43) = 130.54, p < .001; χ²/df = 3.04; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .03. The standardized factor loadings were .72 (p < .001) for personal discrimination and .88 (p < .001) for group discrimination.

Atheist identification. We estimated the latent factor of atheist identification, which included the three indicators of centrality, importance, and commitment. Because this factor consisted of three indicators, no fit statistics for this CFA were calculated.

Psychological well-being. We estimated first-order latent factors of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and negative affect. All factors fit the data well, including life satisfaction, χ²(3) = 12.25, p = .007; χ²/df = 4.08; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .06; SRMR = .01, self-esteem, χ²(31) = 155.15, p < .001; χ²/df = 5; 4.08; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .07; SRMR = .03, and negative affect, χ²(3) = 7.33, p = .062;
Table 2

Standardized Factor Loadings of First-Order Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-order factor</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal discrimination (reliability = .74)*</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. People generally think I am immoral because I am an atheist</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I am treated no differently because I am an atheist</td>
<td>−.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I have felt isolated because I am an atheist</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Being an atheist has not deprived me of any opportunities in my life</td>
<td>−.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I have personally experienced anti-atheist prejudice</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group discrimination (reliability = .74)*</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The media portray religious people as superior to atheists in my country</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Anti-atheist prejudice is widespread in my country</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Atheists are treated no differently than religious people in my country</td>
<td>−.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Religious people have more opportunities than do atheists in my country</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Atheists are pressured to participate in religious activities in my country</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Atheists have been the victims of hate crimes in my country</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life satisfaction (reliability = .90)*</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. In most ways, my life is close to my ideal</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The conditions of my life are excellent</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I am satisfied with my life</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem (reliability = .90)*</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. I take a positive attitude toward myself</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. At times, I think I am no good at all</td>
<td>−.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I feel that I have a number of good qualities</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I am able to do things as well as most other people</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I feel I do not have much to proud of</td>
<td>−.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I certainly feel useless at times</td>
<td>−.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I wish I could have more respect for myself</td>
<td>−.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure</td>
<td>−.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative affect (reliability = .76)*</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Afraid</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Upset</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Hostile</td>
<td>.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Ashamed</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Nervous</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All standardized factor loadings at p < .001.

* Items rated on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

* Items rated on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). c Items rated on a 5-point scale (1 = very slightly or not at all to 5 = extremely).

χ²/df = 2.44; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .04; SRMR = .01. These factors were strongly correlated, including life satisfaction with self-esteem, r = .74, p < .001, and negative affect, r = −.51, p < .001, and self-esteem with negative affect, r = −.66, p < .001. We treated these first-order factors as “indicators” of psychological well-being, the underlying second-order factor. This second-order factor fit the data well: χ²(159) = 559.52, p < .001; χ²/df = 3.52; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .04; SRMR = .05. The standardized factor loadings were .75 (p < .001) for life satisfaction, .98 (p < .001) for self-esteem, and −.68 (p < .001) for negative affect.

Structural Model

After estimating and assessing model fit for first- and second-order latent factors, we estimated the final structural model to test the RIM. In this model, we specified paths from perceived discrimination to atheist identification, psychological well-being, and physical well-being. We also specified paths from atheist identification to both psychological and physical well-being. We allowed residual variances to covary between psychological and physical well-being. This final structural model fit the data well: χ²(778) = 1563.91, p < .001; χ²/df = 2.01; CFI = .93; RMSEA = .03;

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3 We allowed residual variances to covary for several sets of indicators within the first-order latent factors of psychological well-being, each of which was theoretically defensible (Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008). For example, the residual variances for the indicators At times, I think I am no good at all and I certainly feel useless at times of the first-order latent factor of self-esteem were allowed to correlate. These two indicators are very similar and may measure a unique concept beyond self-esteem. The correlated residual variances do not change the pattern or significance of results.
SMRR = .05. Figure 1 displays all standardized coefficients of the pathways in this model.

Findings were entirely consistent with the rejection–identification process. First, perceived discrimination predicted both psychological well-being (β = −.26, p < .001) and physical well-being (β = −.13, p = .002). Participants who tended to experience discrimination and perceive atheists as a derogated group reported lower psychological and physical well-being. Second, perceived discrimination predicted atheist identification (β = .29, p < .001). Aligning with the RIM, perceptions of discrimination may encourage stronger identification as an atheist. Third, atheist identification was a positive predictor of both psychological well-being (β = .15, p < .001) and physical well-being (β = .12, p = .002).

As expected, the two indirect pathways were also significant in this structural model. Perceived discrimination had indirect and positive effects via atheist identification on both psychological well-being (β = .04, p = .006) and physical well-being (β = .03, p = .012). According to the process of rejection and identification, perceived discrimination may encourage identification as an atheist, which in turn appears to convey benefits for well-being. Given that the direct effects of perceived discrimination on psychological and physical well-being were larger than their total effects (β = −.26 vs. β = −.21, and β = −.13 vs. β = −.10, respectively), and the total effects were statistically significant, atheist identification appears to be helpful in reducing, but not eliminating, discrimination’s ill effects on well-being. Findings are adjusted for significant effects of several demographic characteristics.

Alternative Models

In addition to testing the RIM, we tested alternative models. Most relevant to this study is Crocker and Major’s (1989) discounting model, which posit that perceptions of discrimination may be associated with better, rather than worse well-being under certain circumstances. According to this model, individuals who make an attribution to discrimination may protect overall well-being by shifting the cause of rejection from the self to external discriminatory practices (Crocker & Major, 1989). We tested a model in which discrimination predicted psychological and physical well-being (excluding atheist identification since the discounting model does not make any specific predictions for the role of identification). Counter to the predictions of the discounting model, perceived discrimination was a negative predictor of both psychological well-being (β = −.22, p < .001) and physical well-being (β = −.10, p = .010). An additional model excluding physical well-being revealed the same pattern: perceived discrimination is a negative predictor of psychological well-being (β = −.22, p < .001).

We also tested a maladjustment model, which predicts that people with relatively low well-being are more likely to perceive a hostile environment characterized by discrimination directed toward them. This alternative model included pathways from psychological and physical well-being to perceived discrimination. Only psychological well-being was negatively associated with perceived discrimination (β = −.12, p = .015). In contrast, physical well-being did not significantly predict perceived discrimination (β = −.05, p = .241). Relative to these alternative models, the RIM receives the most support in validating the predicted relationships among perceived discrimination, atheist identification, and psychological and physical well-being.

Discussion

Perceiving discrimination based on one’s group membership is generally associated with less favorable psychological and physical well-being (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). Both early (e.g., Allport, 1954) and recent researchers (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999) have argued that perceptions of discrimination can increase identification with one’s marginalized group. Under certain circumstances, increased identification confers benefits for the individual. According to the rejection–identification process (Branscombe

4The only significant demographic characteristic that predicted perceived discrimination was age (β = −.18, p < .001). Significant predictors of atheist identification were age (β = .17, p < .001) and setting of residence (ranged from rural to urban; β = .09, p = .009). Significant predictors of psychological well-being were setting of residence (ranged from rural to urban; β = −.08, p = .010), having children (vs. not having children; β = .21, p < .001), being married (vs. not being married; β = .13, p = .001), and being a member of a secular organization (vs. being a supporter; β = .07, p = .028). Significant predictors of physical well-being were setting of residence (ranged from rural to urban; β = −.09, p = .004), education (β = .14, p < .001), and being employed (vs. not employed; β = .11, p < .001).
et al., 1999), identification weakens the negative effects of discrimination on well-being. This model has received empirical support among various marginalized groups, including African Americans (Branscombe et al., 1999), Mexican Americans (Romero & Roberts, 2003), and Filipino Americans (Mossakowski, 2003). The current study adds to this previous research by finding support of the RIM among a sample of atheists living in the United States. Atheists’ perceptions of discrimination (i.e., personal experiences of discrimination and perceptions of atheists as a derogated group) were associated with lower psychological and physical well-being. While having a direct negative effect on well-being, perceptions of discrimination also had an indirect and positive effect on well-being through increased identification as an atheist. In the face of social rejection, atheists may be resilient by drawing benefits from their identification as an atheist. To our knowledge, this is the first test of the rejection–identification process among atheists.

Although findings from this study add to current literature on the rejection–identification process, a few limitations warrant further discussion. First, the data are cross-sectional, so we cannot conclusively claim any causal links between the paths outlined in the RIM, including perceptions of discrimination affecting atheist identification and well-being. There are alternative accounts for the link between discrimination and identification. For example, Jetten et al. (2001) demonstrated that manipulating perceptions of discrimination led to increased identification among people with body piercings. Relevant to atheists, Ysseldyk, Haslam, Matheson, and Anisman (2012) found that manipulating feelings of threat increased atheists’ own positive feelings toward other atheists. In addition, Merritt et al. (2006) found that the manipulation of discrimination heightened cardiovascular responses among African American men. In light of these various findings, it is clear that the relationships among discrimination, identity, and well-being are complex. Though there is evidence of a causal link of perceived discrimination on identification, for example, their effects are likely reciprocal. As Cragun et al. (2012) suggest, highly identified atheists are likely to experience more discrimination because of the heightened attention an atheist identification yields from other people. Highly identified atheists are also likely to find themselves in situations in which they experience more discrimination, such as when protesting. To ensure that similar causal patterns emerge among atheists as posited by the RIM, future research should manipulate perceptions of discrimination to measure its causal effect on both atheist identification and well-being.

Second, this study examined the rejection–identification process among many “card-carrying atheists,” or people who both self-identify as atheist and join or support organizations catering to nonreligious people (Caldwell-Harris, Wilson, LoTempio, & Beit-Hallahmi, 2011). Atheists may join or subscribe to online organizations for various reasons, such as perceiving online spaces as places to “come out, speak out, and ‘meet up’” (Cimino & Smith, 2011, p. 31). Atheists who strongly identify as such are probably more likely to join organizations relative to their less identified counterparts. Descriptive analyses suggest that participants in our sample were indeed highly identified as being atheist, scoring an average of 4.20 (SD = 0.78) on a 5-point scale of atheist identification. Thus, our results can only speak to atheists who are (a) highly identified, and (b) seek organizational involvement. It is possible that atheists who are more isolated (i.e., without organi-

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**Figure 1.** Structural model of the rejection–identification process. $\chi^2(778) = 1563.91, p < .001; \chi^2/df = 2.01; CFI = .93; \text{RMSEA} = .03; \text{SRMR} = .05.$ This figure displays standardized regression coefficients. Total effects of perceived discrimination on well-being are in parentheses. $n = 960.$ * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001.$

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zational affiliation) might suffer more from their stigmatized status, and identification might do little, if anything, to offset stigma’s ill effects. That is, atheists who do not join organizations might lack the apparent benefits of an atheist identity as a result, at least in part, of not having a social network of like-minded others. Alternatively, some atheists who are less engaged in organized atheist activities might use more individualist coping strategies to deal with social rejection, including keeping their identification as an atheist concealed from others. Concealing this marginalized identity may reduce the direct experiences of discrimination among such isolated atheists. Because atheists are a hard-to-reach population of people, soliciting participants via online sources is convenient and an appropriate first step, yet future studies should aim to reach a broader selection of atheists when possible.

Third, the present study assessed identification as a composite of importance, centrality, and commitment, yet identification includes other dimensions. For example, Giamo et al., (2012) tested the RIM with a comprehensive measure of multiracial identification based on Leach et al.’s (2008) five dimensions of group identification: in-group solidarity, identity centrality, self-stereotyping, identity satisfaction, and in-group homogeneity. By using this multidimensional approach, Giamo et al. (2012) examined the specific aspects of multiracial identification that uniquely mediated the effect of perceived discrimination on well-being. Among multiracial participants, self-stereotyping (i.e., extent to which people see themselves as similar to an average member of the in-group) was the only aspect of identification to emerge as a significant mediator within the context of the RIM. The measure of identification in the present study closely resembles that of identity centrality, or the importance of one’s identification as an atheist. It is unclear whether identity centrality alone explains our findings, or whether one or more aspects of identification (e.g., in-group solidarity or identity satisfaction) would prove useful in explaining the indirect path predicted by the RIM. Future research is necessary to determine the unique effects of different dimensions of identification on well-being among atheists specifically, and people of other marginalized groups more broadly.

Fourth, whereas the present study modeled a direct link between atheist identification and well-being, future avenues of research should explore the mechanisms through which identification conveys its benefits (see Crabtree et al., 2010). For example, identification may provide individuals with opportunities for developing social relationships and enhance perceptions of social support (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). Identification also provides people with a sense of purpose, belonging, and acceptance, which has the potential to promote well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Haslam et al., 2009). The benefits of identification work through cognitive routes as well, including the rejection of minority group stereotypes (Crabtree et al., 2010). The benefits of atheist identification on well-being are indirect, yet research needs to distinguish the mechanisms that explain social identification’s benefits for both psychological and physical well-being.

**Future Directions**

There are at least two broad research aims related to the present topic that should guide future research. First, although there has been substantial interest in studying the possible role of religion in promoting well-being, nonreligious people are rarely included in such studies. The general exclusion of the nonreligious has been a criticism of this line of research (see Hwang, Hammer, & Cragun, 2011). However, there are a few recent and notable examples of research that addresses such criticism, and these should provide a model for future studies to follow. For example, in a comparison across 64 countries, Stavrova,Fetchenhauer, and Schlösser (2013) found that the gap in happiness and life satisfaction between the religious and nonreligious is wider in countries where religiosity is more normative (Study 1). These researchers further demonstrated that religious individuals living in countries that are more religious perceive greater social respect and recognition relative to their nonreligious counterparts, partially accounting for their gap in well-being (Study 2). Similarly, Diener, Tay, and Myers (2011) found that social support, perceived social respect, and sense of purpose or meaning mediated the relationship between religiosity and indicators of subjective well-being (Study 2). Further, the gap in subjective well-being between the more and less religious was larger in relatively religious countries compared with less religious countries. Other studies have demonstrated a similar effect whereby the benefits of religion for well-being are context-dependent: religion is beneficial in countries that are more religious but not necessarily in countries that are less religious (see Gebauer, Sedikides, & Neberich, 2012; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2010). Researchers should aim to document other moderators of the link between religion and well-being, such as the degree of government restrictions on individual liberties (see Elliott & Hayward, 2009; Hayward & Elliott, 2014).

Second, because being an atheist is associated with stigma, an important social issue emerges regarding how the United States and other countries can actually reduce stigma toward atheists. A recent line of research points to the effects of atheist prevalence (Gervais, 2011) and secular authority (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012) on attenuating antitheist prejudice. For example, religious individuals in countries with larger numbers of atheists report less negative attitudes toward atheists compared with religious people in countries with fewer atheists, and people’s perceptions of the prevalence of atheists has a causal impact on reducing antitheist prejudice (Gervais, 2011). In addition, increasing people’s awareness of secular authority decreases distrust toward atheists (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012). Given that we have demonstrated that discrimination is associated with lower well-being among atheists, future research should continue to examine ways to reduce the negative attitudes that people harbor toward atheists.

**Conclusion**

There is very little research focusing on atheists, including examining the consequences of marginalization for these people (Brewster, Robinson, Sandil, Esposito, & Geiger, 2014). This is surprising as atheists continue to rank among the least accepted groups of people in the United States. Like people who belong to other marginalized groups, perceptions of discrimination predict poor psychological and physical well-being among atheists. One way that atheists may cope with such discrimination is by further believing that being an atheist is important and central to their identity. This rejection and identification process may ultimately protect well-being by reducing discrimination’s negative effects. It is our hope that this study will provide the impetus to document the potential consequences of social rejection for atheists. As research-
ers have noted (e.g., Norenzayan & Gervais, 2013), many nations around the world are experiencing a transition from religious fervor to religious disinterest and even disbelief. It is increasingly becoming important to understand further the atheist experience, from the development of atheist identification and its impact on well-being to intergroup relations between atheists and their religious counterparts.

References


DISCRIMINATION, ATHEIST IDENTIFICATION, & WELL-BEING


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