

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cohesiveness of Group Identity and Characterizations of the Out-Group among Atheist and Christian Student Clubs

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Do social groups that have a strong ideological basis tend to form a cohesive group identity among group members? This paper investigates how negatively defining an out-group is important, if not integral, for creating a shared identity among members of ideologically based social groups. To explore this connection, I interviewed undergraduate student members of a Christian club and an atheist club at a Midwestern research university. I examined the strength of group identification, how members revealed shared identity, and patterns regarding how participants characterize out-group members. My findings suggest that atheists characterized Christians as less rational and in need of external comfort more than themselves, whereas Christians described atheists as disturbed by suffering and the behavior of some self-identified Christians. Defining one's in-group and reaffirming the correctness and inherent social benefit of the in-group's views were essential components of out-group characterizations.

Introduction

When an individual embraces a group identity, this identity becomes a salient aspect of how he or she navigates and evaluates other individuals and groups in the social world (Brown, Tajfel & Turner 1980; Turner, Brown & Tajfel 1979). There is a large body of work on the construction of an identity as a Christian (Gebauer & Maio 2012; Ysseldyk, Matheson & Anisman 2010). One of the fastest growing social groups in the United States are those who claim no religious identity (Edgell et al. 2016; Smith & Cragun 2019). Despite their growing numbers, the irreligious are one of the more stigmatized social groups in the United States (Cragun et al. 2012; Gervais, Shariff & Norenzayan 2011; Smith 2013). An examination of how atheists and Christians develop and in-group identity by defining one another as out-groups has received less attention. Are negative characterizations of the out-group inherent in this process? Further, are there differences in how cohesive conceptions of both the in-group and out-group identities are for the two groups?

It is common for college campuses to host several religiously based student organizations. This reflects the tradition of the western liberal university, and traditional civic life in the United States overall, of fostering autonomous groups of association (Tocqueville [1835] 2000). In the past two decades, student groups aiming to provide an ideological community for students who are atheists, or who have no interest in religion or the supernatural, have become more common on college campuses. Using snowball sampling, I recruited participants for in-depth

interviews from two campus student clubs: an atheist and an interdenominational Christian club at a large Midwestern university. Whether Christian or atheist, the ideology of the group often becomes an overriding part of members' social identity and how they interpret and navigate the social world (Tajfel & Turner [1986] 2004). In this paper, I investigate how cohesive group identity earned through the embrace of a social identity grounded in an ideological position among its members affects how members characterize their ideological out-group (e.g. atheists for Christians and Christians for atheists). I use as a measure of cohesion consistency in responses of group members about social and political issues, moral judgments, and their view of the group itself.

My research reveals that both Christians and atheists went through a similar process in developing a shared group identity and in how they characterize one another.¹ There were three major themes that emerged in the interviews with both groups: *Ideological identity*, *Cohesiveness of group identity*, and *Characterization of the out-group*. Embedded in these themes were characterizations of one's own group and of their respective out-group. For the Christian club members, their characterization of atheists as not wanting to be responsible to a higher power and/or disturbed by the suffering in the world implied their conception of themselves as more faithful and trusting. The atheist club members characterized Christians as desirous of an existential crutch and closed-minded, implying a characterization of themselves as more open-minded and less in need of belief in the face of the world's problems. Given that the sample is unrepresentative, the findings should be viewed as suggestive of patterns that may exist in how atheists and Christians construct identity through views of one another.

Background

Construction and Importance of Group Identity

When people identify with a social group, they mold their behavior and attitudes to the expectations of that group (Farris 2012; Hopkins 2011; Oldmeadow et al. 2003; Saroglou, Yzerbyt, & Kaschten 2011; Turner, Brown & Tajfel 1979). This process is the construction of a social identity—a person's frame of reference for which attitudes and beliefs are appropriate for them to hold given the social groups they belong to (Oldmeadow et al. 2003). In addition to coming to an understanding of what it means to belong to the group, an important step in developing a sense of identity within the social group is to identify what it means to not belong to the group, that is to identify the “out-group” and establish social boundaries between groups (Brown, Tajfel & Turner 1980; Edgell et al. 2006; Erikson 1966; Hogg, Terry & White 1995; Hopkins & Reicher 1997; Lamont 1992; Lamont & Molnar 2002; Moss-Kanter 1972). There are a number of explanations for why people join social groups and how the process of incorporating and adapting one's identity to better fit the group works.

Research on those who join religious communities suggests that, for many, there is a need to escape the frustration of relying on oneself alone to construct a cohesive sense of identity and the religious group provides a means of easing this anxiety and frustration (Gebauer & Maio 2012; Ysseldyk, Matheson & Anisman 2010). Further, Saroglou, Yzerbyt & Kaschten reveal that conceiving oneself as a believer and part of a religious community involves creating a counterpart—an idea of what a non-believer is like to strengthen a sense of belonging and what it means to be a member of a religious community. They discuss how this process becomes complex when a group is based on ideological and moral grounds, such as the religious and non-religious subjects they studied:

Groups formed on the basis of different ideologies and belief systems may differ from these more traditional groups by including in the respective stereotypes and meta-stereotypes more moral and evaluative elements, a situation that may render intergroup relations even more difficult and complex (2011: 496).

Saroglou, Yzerbyt, and Kaschten describe the process of using symbolic boundaries to define where the social group begins and ends in order to differentiate itself from other groups. Further, Erikson in his work on the formation of community among Puritan settlers observed that “one of the surest ways to confirm an identity, for communities as well as for individuals, is to find some way of measuring what one is *not*” (1966: 64). To feel that they belong to the group, and to have a sense of identity from the social group, individuals have to differentiate themselves from other people. Symbolic boundaries are one of the tools that social groups use to achieve this (Erikson 1966; Lamont & Molnar 2002; Moss-Kanter 1972).

Edgell and colleagues (2006, 2010, 2016) find that in American society, people who do not believe in God have become an out-group against which believing Americans

have come to define themselves. Of the groups they included as “undesirable,” atheists were seen as the least trustworthy, least moral, and least desirable citizens than any other group in American society. Among the people they surveyed, 39.6% responded that atheists “do not at all agree with my vision of American society” and 47.6% said they would disapprove of their child marrying an atheist, making them the most “problematic” group in the survey and interviews (2006: 217, 218). They make the following observation:

We believe that in answering our questions about atheists, our survey respondents were not, on the whole, referring to actual atheists they had encountered, but were responding to “the atheist” as a boundary-making cultural category.... Durkheim argued that the formation of solidarity is always predicated on symbolic boundaries that designate insiders and outsiders, and that these boundaries are always to some extent about designating those who are worthy of membership as defined against those who are not (2006: 230).

The stigmatization of atheists seems to be rooted in perceptions that they are immoral and reject a traditional American life. Evidence suggests that the rejection of belief in God and identification with any religion are viewed as rejection of the idea of being responsible in general (Cragun et al. 2012). The perception that atheists' lack of belief in God is motivated by a desire to avoid responsibility to lead an immoral life, leads many to view them as untrustworthy (Gervais, Norenzayan & Shariff 2011). Despite being one of the fastest growing social groups, these perceptions of atheists underlie their being one of the most negatively viewed groups in the United States (Smith & Cragun 2019).

Negative stereotypes about atheists seem to suggest that negative characterizations of the out-group are an inherent aspect of developing a cohesive sense of the in-group's identity. Erikson suggests this in his work on deviance within Puritan communities: “deviant persons often supply an important service to society by patrolling the outer edges of group space and by providing a contrast which gives the rest of the community some sense of their own territorial identity” (1966: 196). This paper, informed by this prior work, asks whether this process works in reverse: if atheists as a minority group have developed a negative characterization of a majority group, Christians, to reinforce their own sense of group identity and symbolic boundaries.

Symbolic Interactionism and Self-Categorization Theory

Symbolic interactionism theory holds that people attach meanings to behaviors, objects, themselves, and others and that it is through interaction with other people, primarily through language, that these meanings are transmitted (Blumer 1969; Hogg, Terry & White 1995; Howard 2000; Stryker 1980). It is therefore important for groups—whether a religious group, devotees to a brand, or members of a social movement—to invest certain issues, objects

and people with meaning related to the social group. As people discuss their group's beliefs among in-group and out-group members, they reinforce what it means to hold the group's identity. The social aspect of the group is important because, without having others to talk about how their group feels about issues, the group will not be cohesive (Hogg, Terry & White 1995; Howard 2000). Thus, communication contributes to the members' ability to self-categorize and creates a cohesive, interchangeable identity (Oldmeadow et al. 2003).

Self-categorization theory explains that people identify social groups to which they feel they belong and then adapt their behavior to the attitudes, norms and beliefs they perceive the group to possess (Hopkins & Reicher 1997; Howard 2000; Lee et al. 2009). An important aspect of this development is the creation of a cognitive self-schema—an ordered reaction to questions of what it means to be a member of the group, which come into play whenever questions of identity arise (Howard 2000). Once identities become heavily influenced by the group they are a part of, that membership begins to take on an emotional significance for them and they can feel their sense of identity and emotional well-being threatened by those who would disagree with the values and beliefs of the groups they belong to (Edgell, Hartmann & Gerteis 2006; Lamont & Molnar 2002; Oldmeadow et al. 2003). Hogg, Terry, and White argue that the group identity provides a self-schema and a social identity that organizes their responses in social situations and questions they may confront (1995: 259–260). Self-categorization theorists argue that once a person sees themselves as part of a social group, they become interchangeable with other members in terms of their opinions and attributes (Hogg, Terry & White 1995; Hopkins & Reicher 1997; Howard 2000; Lee et al. 2009). I build on this previous work on group identity and investigate how similar structures for creating a cohesive identity and stereotyping for the out-group are created within both a Christian and an atheist-based student group. Based on the literature reviewed, I propose the following questions: Are negative characterizations of the out-group inherent in this process? Are there differences in how cohesive conceptions of both the in-group and out-group identities are for the two groups?

Methods

Participant Selection

To select participants, I emailed the directors of the atheist club and the Christian club to find out which meetings would be best to visit to solicit interviews. Both clubs hold regular meetings and schedule activities in the community. This is what we would expect given I fielded the study in the context of the Western, liberal university tradition, and Western civic society more generally, with a long tradition of fostering autonomous student groups (Tocqueville [1835] 2000). I visited the atheist club's weekly meeting where a topic of interest to the group was chosen in advance and the members would come to discuss it. The director of the atheist club was unable to provide me with any demographic data about the group since they do not collect this. The director of the club informed me that the meeting I attended was a typical

one, and from my observations, there were 22 in attendance, mostly male, and all were white. Outside of the weekly meeting, members of the club organized social events such as movie nights and field trips to visit museums. The director informed me that they also organized volunteer opportunities in the community. These activities are typical of activities documented by similar studies of atheist groups (Garcia & Blankholm 2016; Mann 2015).

I visited two meetings of the Christian club. The Christian club had one large group meeting of around 75 people each week and 15 smaller bible studies attended by around 100 people in total. Outside of the weekly meeting and small Bible studies, the Christian club organized social events such as movie nights and volunteer activities in the community, similar to the atheist club. The director of the Christian club informed me that there is some overlap in attendees between the smaller Bible studies and the weekly meetings, but they are not identical. The Christian club does not collect demographic data with any regularity, so the director was only able to provide me with rough demographic data: 50% freshmen, 30% sophomores, 10% juniors, 10% seniors, 55% men, and 45% women. They do not collect any race or ethnic data but based on my observations at the meetings I attended, all the members were white. The regular group meeting was too large for me to attend in order to effectively introduce myself and solicit interviews, so I attended smaller Bible study meetings which were comparable in size to the atheist meeting. I had to visit two of these Bible study groups because they were divided by gender and met at different times.

The Christian club defines itself as an interdenominational ministry intended to help students cultivate their relationship with God. Their statement of faith indicates that they are officially biblical literalists, stating that they believe the Bible is the infallible word of God and consider it to be without error and the supreme authority in all matters on which it speaks. The interviews with the Christian club members reflected this interdenominational character of the club with one interviewee identifying as Lutheran and the others either saying they consider themselves nondenominational or not placing any importance on identifying in any particular way.

At the meetings, I introduced myself and explained that I was visiting student clubs on campus to research why students join the clubs they do and how important these groups are to the members' construction of identity. I explained the voluntary nature of the study and that the interviews would be anonymous with pseudonyms assigned to each participant when the interviews were transcribed. I observed the meetings, and at their conclusion, invited the members to provide me with their email address if they were interested in participating. The first round of emails resulted in five participants for the atheist group and four for the Christian group. I recruited the remaining four participants through snowball sampling.

Demographics

I conducted six atheist interviews and seven Christian interviews. Every participant was white, from middle class backgrounds, and from the Midwest except for one atheist who was from a Southern state. Since my ques-

tion was about the process of incorporating out-groups in in-group identity formation, and not demographic variance in this process, attempting to control for demographic differences by sampling similar students was important. Since only the Christian club collected rough demographic data, I can only speak to how well my sample represents that club. Like the overall members of the Christian club, my sample was mostly freshmen, and underrepresented other classes. Unlike the overall group, which is mostly male, my sample of interviewees from the Christian club is mostly female. I conducted the interviews in an office on campus. The average time for the interviews was 26 minutes. I used a paid transcriptionist, and pseudonyms were assigned to the participants at the time of transcription. The demographic information for the participants is summarized in **Table 1**.

Coding

After transcription, I examined interviews for background information: family’s level of religiosity and demographic information. Next, I coded the transcripts to see what patterns emerged in the responses of the atheists and Christians to the interview guide (the respective scripts for each group can be found in appendices A and B). I focused on three themes that were relevant to my research questions. The first theme, *Ideological Identification*, was the conception of their Christianity/atheism in their identity and how important it is to how they navigate their social relationships. The second, *Cohesiveness of Group Identity*, was how consistent a group identity had developed among the members. Specifically, I was interested in consistency of answers to questions about social and political issues, moral judgments, and their view of the group itself. The third theme, *Characterizations of the Out-Group*, focused on the formation of shared stereotypes and characterizations of the out-group between these seemingly polar social groups. I then compared each interview with the

corresponding script of questions to decide which questions gave rise to these themes for each participant. The codes are summarized in **Table 2**.

Results

Ideological Identification

Participants from both groups stated that they viewed their Christianity/atheism as an important part of their identity. However, subtle differences emerged between how identifying as an atheist affected a person’s beliefs as compared to identifying as a Christian.

All Christians stated that their beliefs were at the forefront of their identity while some atheists were reluctant to expand beyond saying an atheist identity simply involved a lack of belief in God. Some of the atheists expressed that an important aspect of atheist identity is that it simply means they do not believe in God, and that having a skeptical outlook is more important to their sense of self and how they navigate the social world. Most of the atheist participants thought of an atheist identity in a similar way to Rose who said, “Like, atheism itself is just lack of belief in a higher deity, power. The scientific mindset often goes along with that, but it’s not necessary. It’s not part of the definition.”

For the Christian participants, their Christianity was a focal part of their construction of self. All the Christian participants expressed similar feelings about their Christianity to Jonathan who said the following regarding the place of Christianity in his identity: “I would identify it as the number one thing that I view myself as, like in your introduction you introduce yourself sort of as what you are, and I would say, “Christian.” Hannah made a similar comment: “I would say it’s really important. Like if you don’t know who Christ is then I don’t feel like you really know who you are, ‘cause he was the one who created you. It’s like a conscious decision that I make with choices and stuff. Like I need to like keep that in mind.”

Table 1: Participant demographics.

Name	Club	Gender	Age	Class Standing	Major
Ethan	Atheist	M	22	Senior	Business
Jackie	Atheist	F	20	Junior	Communication and Culture
Brent	Atheist	M	21	Junior	Political Science
Peter	Atheist	M	19	Freshman	Undecided
Rose	Atheist	F	22	Senior	Linguistics
Mia	Atheist	F	21	Senior	Public Management
Kat	Christian	F	18	Freshman	Journalism
Kelly	Christian	F	21	Junior	Psychology, Political Science
Hannah	Christian	F	18	Freshman	Political Science
Allison	Christian	F	18	Freshman	Biology
Jonathan	Christian	M	18	Freshman	Biology
Daniel	Christian	M	20	Sophomore	Business
Isaac	Christian	M	22	Senior	Management

Table 2: Coding themes and their related questions.

Code	Questions
A: Ideological identity	<p>How active would you say you are in the club? Roughly how many hours a week do you spend involved in group activities?</p> <p>How important is your atheism/Christianity to how you see yourself?</p> <p>How much time do you spend with members outside of the club's activities?</p>
B: Cohesiveness of group identity	<p>How would you describe your political affiliation?</p> <p>Do you think either of the parties reflects your values more than another?</p> <p>Would you support a tax increase if it meant that more people would have a higher standard of living?</p> <p>Do you think that evolution alone should be taught in public schools or would it be worth it to teach an alternative to evolution like intelligent design?</p> <p>Do you think that evolution should be taught as fact in a science class in public schools?</p> <p>What is your stance on abortion?</p> <p>What is your stance on same-sex marriage?</p> <p>How would you describe the goal of the club?</p> <p>How important to you think it is to share the goal/mission of the club on campus?</p>
C: Characterization of the out-group	<p>How would you describe a Christian/atheist?</p> <p>How would you react if you were dating someone and they told you that they were a Christian/didn't believe in God?</p> <p>Would you try to convince them otherwise?</p> <p>How would our society be different if more people saw issues as you do?</p> <p>Do you think it's possible for someone to be a Christian/atheist and be a tolerant/moral person?</p> <p>Why do you/don't you think people believe in/don't believe in God?</p> <p>Would you vote for a Christian/atheist president?</p> <p>Do you ever have doubts about your atheism/Christianity? That is do you ever think there may be/may not be a God?</p> <p>Do you ever have doubts about your atheism/Christianity? That is do you ever think there may be/may not be a God?</p>

To some extent both groups expressed feeling that their ideological identity marginalized them socially in the community of the university and in the wider society. For the four Christians who mentioned this, the feeling of marginalization was very subtle. When I asked if they would ever describe themselves as Christians when they first met someone, these four said that they probably would not out of respect for social norms and not wanting to make the situation uncomfortable for themselves and others. They went on to indicate though they had no problem with this aspect of their identity coming up naturally in conversation. For atheists, the feeling of marginalization was much stronger. For example, Ethan mentioned his hesitation to tell someone he is an atheist due to negative stereotypes:

I probably wouldn't say that I was an atheist right off the bat because it does kind of have a negative label in this country. Almost everywhere, really,

'cause the term is really misunderstood, but I wouldn't hesitate to describe myself as "secular."

And Jackie described how her Christian mother reacted when she told her that she was an atheist:

I guess like my mom didn't understand. She just asked me questions like—I mean, she just objected really strongly to the word "atheist" 'cause, you know, it has a strong connotation to it.

The sense of being a negatively viewed group could have an effect on how the participants reacted to the questions of whether they would intervene if they overheard a stranger in class say they think it is impossible to be moral without belief in God. The same could be said for Christians if they overheard someone in the same situation say they think there isn't a God because of the suffering in the world. Only one atheist, Ethan, said that he would

intervene and correct the stranger's view, and three others—Mia, Peter and Jackie—said they might if the circumstances were comfortable socially. Rose and Brent both said they did not think they would say anything in that situation. The atheists' mixed response was in contrast to the Christians who all said they would intervene in the conversation in some way. Isaac had this to say:

I would—I've had that situation. I've been like, "hey, would you wanna get lunch and talk about this?" I mean, I really just—not to like tell them what I think, but I just kind of want to pick their brains and see what they think and go a little deeper.

Similarly, Jonathan had this to say:

Without being in the situation, I can't really say, but I would like to say that I would at least offer my opinion on the issue ... but again, my personality tends to lean towards a little bit shier, so I can't really speak for the situation as a whole, but that is, that would be my goal in the situation.

Jonathan's response that it would be his "goal" in that situation may indicate that for Christians their identity as a Christian has more of an influence than for atheists upon how they interact with others in the wider social world.

The strength of the Christian identity to mold participants' social world also seems to be supported by who the participants said they spend their social time with. While four atheists said that they spend the majority of their social time with other atheist members of the club, all the Christians said they spend their social time with other Christian members of the club. Three of the Christian participants said they held leadership roles which involved spending 10–15 hours a week planning for and attending club activities and Jonathan said he was planning to take on such a role. These findings suggest that while both groups tend to favor spending time with others who are members of the group, for the Christian participants their identity as a Christian has a stronger role in navigating how and with whom they spend their social time.

Finally, the atheist participants had a strong conception of themselves as more open-minded than other people. Five out of the six atheist participants expressed that their atheism is due to being more open-minded and critical about evidence. This view was highlighted in the following excerpt from my interview with Ethan:

[Atheism] has become very, very important to me. I'm very passionate about it because I think there are a lot of fundamental things a lot of people see as harmful—or something that closes somebody off to other ideas. I personally don't think that many people realize that they have been closed off to other things. And whenever I went to atheism, I really felt liberated.

In summary, ideology emerged in the interviews as a strong part of both Christians' and atheists' identity but in dif-

ferent ways. For Christians, their identity as a Christian is more of an active part of their identity, molding how they interact with the wider social world as evidenced by greater willingness to intervene in ideological debates and to discuss their beliefs with others. This reflects the asymmetrical nature of faith and skepticism which are foundational to Christian and atheist identities. The atheist identity, based in skepticism *of* belief, is in many ways a negation of ideology. The Christian identity based in an embrace and enthusiasm *for* belief naturally lends itself to a more active manifestation of this identity in social life. Further, we would expect the Christian identity to manifest more in social life than the atheist identity given the Christian heritage of missionizing and proselytizing—the reinforcement of the Christian identity through behavior is likely more important for this group. Both groups felt somewhat marginalized socially, but this was stronger for the atheists. Another strong pattern among the atheist participants was to conceive of themselves as more open-minded than other people, believing that their open-mindedness to evidence is what led them to their disbelief in God.

Cohesiveness of Group Identity

I asked participants in both groups to tell me what the mission of their group was in the community of the university in order to gauge the cohesiveness of group identity related to how deeply and consistently this message had permeated the group. For both groups, providing a supportive community of like-minded people was a mission that was mentioned. Three atheists mentioned this as a mission of the atheist club and six Christians mentioned this same goal for the Christian group. In the atheist group, four members also mentioned that one of the goals of the atheist club was to dispel the negative stigma about atheists in the community. For Christians, all of them stated that one of goals of the club was to similarly provide an "authentic" example of Christianity and to reach out to those who are not Christians on campus:

I mean the ultimate goal is that everyone on campus hears the Gospel, but, as far as when people come to them, they want to meet you wherever you're at, whether you believe in God or not, and try and like show you what they believe, so that you can make your own decision. – Kat

I also asked a series of questions on political and social issues to determine how consistent members of each group were on views that don't directly relate to the basic ideological position of whether God exists. I found that the atheist participants were very cohesive in their answers to these questions and that the Christian participants were quite mixed. The responses of the two groups are summarized in **Tables 3** and **4** respectively.

These findings imply that among the atheists, positions on political and social issues are more important to defining and maintaining the boundaries of the group's identity than they are for Christians. For example, a subtle intolerance emerged in the comments of atheists Rose and Jackie toward those who hold political opinions which deviated from the consistently left-leaning views

Table 3: Summary of atheist political/social views.

	Support higher taxes for higher standard of living	Would oppose intelligent design alongside evolution in public schools	Support legality of abortion	Support legality of same-sex marriage
Peter	X	X	X	X
Ethan	X	X	X	X
Mia	X	X	X	X
Brent	X	X	X	X
Rose	X	X	X	X
Jackie	X	X	X	X

Table 4: Summary of Christian political/social views.

	Support higher taxes for higher standard of living	Oppose evolution taught as fact in public schools	Support legality of abortion with qualifiers	Oppose legality of same-sex marriage
Kat	X	X	X	
Daniel				X
Kelly	X		X	
Allison	X	X		
Jonathan	X	X		X
Isaac	X	No Opinion		X
Hannah	X			

expressed by members of the group. Rose had the following to say about what happened when members with a different political persuasion attended group discussions: “we’ve had a few libertarians, but we weren’t very nice to them. Which was unfortunate, I think ...” When I asked her why she thought the group reacted to libertarians in this way, she elaborated:

Um, just because it’s sort of the economic policies that sort of libertarian views go towards sort of, aren’t very nice to like the poorer people and so, we’d make fun of them for that saying that, “they hate poor people” and things like that.

The variety of political and social positions among the Christian participants suggests that these issues are more important to the development of the atheist group identity than they are for a Christian identity.

In summary, providing members with a community of like-minded people was a message that strongly permeated the participants of each group. For Christians, a secondary purpose of the club that the participants expressed was to provide information about Christianity to others on campus, while for the atheists a second purpose was to dispel negatively held images of atheists. For atheists political/social opinions were consistent among all the participants and seem to be a stronger determinant of the boundaries of the group than they are for the Christians whose political opinions were more varied.

Characterizations of the Out-group

I asked both groups why they felt the other believed or did not believe in God to reveal patterns in how they

characterized their respective out-group. For all of the atheists, there was a conception of Christians as believing in God because they are closed-minded to evidence that would disprove their beliefs and in need of comfort in the face of the often harsh realities of human life:

At least with the people who I talk to who are atheists, there are very little mental barriers, or like, there’s very little filter between thoughts and speaking. And sometimes I feel like the people I talk to who identify with Christianity sometimes censor what they have to say or think or do, so that would play into it. – Peter

Some people use it as a crutch during times of sorrow, like if your father dies, you know, death as an atheist is not a fun thing. – Brent

Among Christian participants, there was also a pattern in their answers to why atheists do not believe in God. They believed atheists abandoned belief in God because they are disturbed by the suffering in the world and by hypocritical behavior among people “claiming” to be Christian:

I would say the number one and two reasons are hypocrisy in the church and general world suffering as a whole and to which I would say both are totally justified. It is hard, definitely to understand why suffering occurs, I mean, Christians question that as much as non-believers do, and I think the only difference is accepting that God has a plan for it. – Jonathan

In these views of why their out-groups believe the way they do are not only characterizations of out-groups but also implicit characterization of the participants' group identity. For atheists, the implication of Christians believing in God because they are closed-minded people in need of comfort in the face of distress is that they themselves do not believe in God because they are open-minded and are in some way strong enough to face the realities of life without the "crutch" of believing in God. The Christian participants' view of atheists as disturbed by the world's suffering and hypocrisy in the church implies that they themselves recognize those things, but they are people who are more trusting and faithful. As Jonathan said in the above quote, the Christian participants saw themselves as people who are able to accept that God has a plan rather than abandon their belief in, and relationship with, God. Both characterizations of the out-group imply a conception of themselves as, in some way, being a 'stronger' person than the other; atheists as more rational and fortified emotionally and Christians as more capable of faith and trust even when trust in one's beliefs becomes difficult.

Both Christian and atheist respondents, with one exception in each group, said they felt our society would be better if more people saw issues as they did. Isaac was the only Christian participant who said he felt human nature was such that even if more people were Christian conditions in our society would be much the same. The rest of the Christian participants indicated they believed if more people were Christians our society would be more communal, and people would care more about one another:

I just think there would be better community. I know America in particular has a very individualistic society, so I think there's a possibility we'd be more collectivistic and more communal. – Kelly

I feel like our society would be more focused on love and less so on just success, 'cause I feel like we're very like success-oriented whereas I like want to be more people-oriented and it's not about money per se. It'd be a lot less like money focused. – Allison

The atheist participants, except for Brent, said they believed there would be less prejudiced hatred and conflict in the world if more people were atheist—that religion fuels conflict by giving people a means of dividing themselves off from others:

Having different religions kind of gives people an excuse I think to basically hate each other. We don't see it as much in the U.S. between different religious sects, but in a lot of the world, it kind of gives you an excuse. But if you don't have that, you kind of have to look at other things, I don't know, look at individuals or look at people for what they really are rather than just what they sort of were born into. – Mia

Implicit in these viewpoints is the process of constructing their own group identity through stating how they are

different from the out-group. When the Christian participants said they think the world would be more caring if more people were Christians there is a reinforcement of their own view of themselves as being caring and community-oriented. When the atheist participants said they believe there would be less division in the world, they are reinforcing their own conception of their group identity as rational people who are less prone to hasty, divisive judgments.

All atheists said they believe that Christians can be tolerant people, but Christians were mixed on whether a person could be moral if they did not believe in God. Kelly, Kat, Daniel and Isaac said they think that a person can be moral without believing in God while Allison, Hannah and Jonathan did not. This quote by Allison illustrates their views:

I think people can have good morals, but that I don't think that people can be like good apart from God. Like that our hearts, like we're just naturally bad, I would say...and so, like we can do good acts and stuff—like I know a ton of people that are like moral and do good things for other people and stuff without believing in God, but I don't think that they're going to Heaven.

When asked if they ever doubted their atheism, no atheist participant said they ever have moments where they think God exists. Four Christian participants said they do not doubt whether there is a God, while three said they do at times. When I asked them if they think the other group had doubts about their belief/disbelief all the participants said they think the other group must have doubts. Two Christian participants made comments about how they believe both groups have to admit that, when it comes to their ideological positions, neither group should be too dogmatic:

Um, I think it's pretty much the same thing on either side. This is truly what I believe and atheism is truly what they believe, and, I mean, there's no way to prove a belief...and that's what makes it faith in either situation, faith that there is or isn't a god. Without the evidence I think we always tend to stick with what we already believe. I mean, it's a confirmation bias that's a part of human nature. – Kelly

I think both sides do that in terms of like atheists may push down questions about whether God exists and Christians might push down questions about whether God doesn't exist. – Jonathan

To summarize, the atheist participants characterized Christians as closed-minded and as people who believed in God because of the comfort it provides them. The Christian participants characterized atheists as people who were individualistic and unable to have faith in response to general world suffering and the behavior of some Christians. Involved in both groups' characterizations of the out-group is a reinforcement that their own worldview is better in some way than the other. The athe-

ist participants reinforced their own identity as open-minded and rational while the Christians reinforce their identity as people of faith who care about others.

Discussion

In this paper, I attempt to discern how identifying as a Christian or an atheist affected in-group cohesiveness and characterizations of the out-group—atheists for Christians, and Christians for atheists. The comments from atheists Rose and Jackie that when libertarians came to their meeting they were mocked, suggests that within that group there is a strong, cohesive group identity members are pressured to conform to. The variety of opinions within the Christian group of participants on political/social issues seems to suggest that conformity is less important among the Christians. This difference in the cohesiveness of the two groups may conform to the ‘church versus sect’ model from the religionist literature (Iannaccone 1988). Similar to the sect model, the atheists were stricter in policing the social and political boundaries of what it means to be a member of the group (Iannaccone 1994). Despite their characterization of Christians as less open-minded, some of the atheist participants acknowledge teasing more libertarian-minded people who were interested in the group, and there was virtually no ideological diversity compared to the Christians. The Christians had more ideological diversity and did not seem to consider policing these boundaries as important as the atheists did. Alternatively, the variety of opinions among the Christians could also be attributed to their group’s larger size. The Christians had a number of smaller discussion groups whereas the atheists only had one. The smaller the size of the social club might make it easier to forge a shared political and social identity among all the members.

Perception of being a stigmatized minority played an important role in how the atheists conceived of their identity and their relationship with the wider social world. This awareness of being negatively viewed helps explain their responses. The atheist participants all were willing to vote for a Christian president and to consider dating or marrying a Christian. This willingness at first glance seems to fit into their characterization of atheist identity as being open-minded, but my finding that the atheist participants were somewhat intolerant toward political/social opinions that differed from those dominant in the group seems to undermine this. Their willingness to consider a Christian as a partner or a president suggests accepting their limited choice given their minority status. Perhaps if atheists were the majority group they might respond as the Christian participants did and display more reluctance to consider the out-group members in these areas.

Some of the participants expressed hope in better understanding one another and finding some middle ground. Mia explained that the atheist group had more “interfaith” events with Christian clubs where they participated in community-service projects, although she admitted they were not popular among the atheist group members. Also, the comments of Kelly and Jonathan recognizing the tendency of both groups to resist evidence contrary to their beliefs also seemed to me to indicate openness to gaining a better understanding of one

another. It is noteworthy that this openness to the idea of being biased to evidence that contradicts one’s worldview occurred among the Christians who were seen by the atheists as being more closed-minded than themselves.

The results from the interviews provide preliminary answers to the questions motivating this study. Negative characterizations of the out-group do seem to reinforce the in-group’s own group identity. Further, there were differences in how cohesive the two group identities are. The Christian participants were more ideologically diverse and less concerned with ideological strictness than the atheists in my sample were. However, my study was limited by the small number of participants that I based my results on and by the time frame I had to work with. I decided that 13 participants were the most that I could feasibly interview given the open-ended questions I was asking. Further, all of my participants were white, college-aged, from middleclass backgrounds and, with one exception, all grew up in the Midwest. This being the case, my findings cannot be generalized to all atheists or all Christians.

In the future, this work should be extended to students on other college campuses and to adult Christian and atheist groups. The Western liberal university has a strong tradition of fostering autonomous student groups. This may mean that groups centered on a social identity like the two I studied are more likely to emerge on campus than in the wider community. Having more participants beyond the two groups I interviewed would provide insight into whether my findings are true of the general population of atheists and Christians or if they should be confined to individuals who are passionate enough about their ideological beliefs to join a student group centered on them. I also restricted my coding to three major themes. While these were the major themes that arose in the interviews, this is partially due to the relatively small number of participants. More themes may have arisen in the participants discussion of their in- and out-groups if the sample were larger and the interview outline were more extensive.

The results of my study have implications for the role that ideological positions have in shaping the social world, however more – and more representative data – are necessary. Because of these limitations, this study should be viewed as preliminary to a larger project investigating patterns in these two groups’ views of one another and themselves. Reflective of the small sample size, none of the atheist participants were biology majors, surprising given Ecklund and Scheitle’s findings that there are more atheists among biologists than any other academic discipline (Ecklund & Scheidel 2007).

Despite its limitations, the results of my study have implications for literatures on symbolic boundaries and on cultural biases toward atheists and the non-religious in American society. Members of these seemingly opposite ideological groups have a similar pattern in how they create a characterization of an out-group and in how this characterization reinforces their own group identity by providing the group with an “opposite” to define themselves against. The members of both groups grounded much of their social life and their identity in either being Christian or atheist, so it becomes difficult for them to

depart from the social group that is essential to their sense of self. The symbolic boundaries drawn around what it means to be an atheist or Christian seem to necessitate an equally clear concept of what the boundaries are that define their respective out-group (Blumer 1969; Howard 2000; Stryker 1980). The social identity of being an atheist or Christian is likely the cultural mechanism that induces the formation of these boundaries (Lamont & Molnar 2002). I argue that in line with Edgell and colleagues' findings a necessary part of creating a group identity is having an out-group which the members of the group can compare themselves to reinforce who they see themselves to be and not to be. Further, the result of investing so much of one's social identity in an ideologically based group is stereotyping members of the out-group to reinforce that the tenets of the group are correct. Like other scholars investigating contemporary views of the non-religious in the United States, I find that some of the Christian interviewees responded that they think a reason someone would not believe in God is a desire to live a life free of commitment and responsibility. This lends more evidence to the growing body of work indicating that stigmatization of atheists is rooted in the view that they are untrustworthy and immoral (Cragun et al. 2012; Edgell, Gerteis & Hartmann 2006; Edgell et al. 2016; Gervais, Norenzayan & Shariff. 2011; Smith & Cragun 2019). I believe this is especially the case with the atheist and Christian clubs because their core belief, whether or not there is a God, is an "unfalsifiable" belief which the members are passionate about. To have another group doubt this basic tenet may lead to a reluctance to view members of the out-group as belonging to their respective groups because of strong conviction since this would threaten not only their intellectual identity, but their social identity.

Note

¹ Interview transcripts are not available to protect the identities of the research participants. However, transcripts with any information that could be used to identify participants redacted can be requested by contacting the author.

Additional File

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix.** Research Instruments. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.120.s1>

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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