Atheist Identity and Lifestyle Among Activists in Edmonton

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation joins a vibrant conversation about atheism in Canada. Although the sociology of non-religion has exploded in the last decade, Canada remains an understudied component of atheism research. Consequently, the focus of this research is secularist activists in a major Canadian city, and how they negotiate differences and intra-movement conflict while pursuing highly individualistic activist identities. Drawing on qualitative data from participant observation and interviews, I make an empirical contribution to the study of Canadian atheism.

Additionally, this dissertation contributes to lifestyle movement theory, a framework that undergirds much of the empirical work in the following pages. I found that many atheists saw themselves as activists despite their reticence to engage in organizationally oriented collective action. Despite their lack of conventional participation, they saw themselves as principled actors with morally coherent projects based on Enlightenment values, and that those private, individualized actions potentially could change the world for the better. Even in the absence of such optimism, many of my participants pursued a reason-driven life in any capacity that allowed them to maintain their individuality. Given the emergence of new atheism and more specific currents within the atheist movement, many secularists felt compelled towards intellectual homogeneity for the sake of mobilization and the movement's continuing health. In response to these pressures, my participants deliberately

adopted a contrarian lifestyle that preserved their quest for authenticity as well as

other ideals such as scientific skepticism and critical thinking.

PREFACE

This dissertation follows the journal-article format (sometimes called a "paper-based" thesis or dissertation by article) as specified by the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Alberta. In other words, each empirical chapter is in publication or under review.

The dissertation is composed of four articles along with contextual sections that include the introduction, a more detailed methods section, my theoretical framework, and a discussion and conclusion. Each article is a self-contained discussion of some different aspects of secularist activism in Edmonton, Alberta, and though each provides unique analysis, they are connected by a similar concern with the individual lifestyles and identities. Chapters four and five are currently in review. Chapters six and seven appear as the following publications (respectively),

> Simmons, Jonathan. "'Not that kind of atheist,' scepticism as a lifestyle movement." *Social Movement Studies* (2018), 1-13.

> Simmons, Jonathan. "Atheism Plus What? Social Justice and Lifestyle Politics Among Edmonton Atheists." *Canadian Journal of Sociology (Online)* 42, no. 4 (2017), 425-446.

This thesis is an original work by Jonathan Simmons. The research project, of which this dissertation is a part, received research ethics approval from the University

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s, the emergence of a more strident form of atheist activism has captivated the public imagination. The media has struggled to make sense of both growth of the religiously unaffiliated as well as the much smaller number of convinced atheists who make it their business to critique religion publicly. Early "atheist celebrities" such as Richard Dawkins (b. 1941), Daniel Dennett (b. 1942), Sam Harris (b. 1967), and Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011) have added to their ranks a host of other public intellectuals in recent years, raising further questions about the persistence of so-called "new atheism," a controversial label for the activist brand of atheism as well as the intellectual content of those who have chosen to take a more conscious approach to their atheist identity development.

This dissertation contributes to the area of scholarship situated in the sociology of religion that is primarily concerned with non-religious individuals. Scholars describe this area as the sociology of non-religion, irreligion, or secularity. Before the 1980s, few scholars took atheists seriously as a focus of study, and only in the past decade has a coherent body of scholarship coalesced around an interest in atheists and atheism. In part, the scholarly conversation about atheists draws from public interest in atheism as well as ongoing concerns about the role of religion in modern society. One may regard any discussion of atheism as an implicit commentary on belief or lack

thereof, but more importantly, the growth of atheism is positioned against a backdrop of broader sociological concerns, including the role of science in the 21st century and its apparent frictions with religion; varieties of religious extremism such as Islamic terrorism (especially relevant given that public atheism expanded in the wake of 9/11); and the political implications of non-belief. Regarding this latter discourse, many political figures, human rights activists, and concerned scholars have serious questions about how non-Western societies will address the growth of apostasy in their communities. Furthermore, given the association of Western industrialized nations and expanding atheism, questions about non-religious privilege threaten older notions of atheists as an embattled minority threatened by religious oppression.

Given the backdrop of modern atheism and new forms of related activism, atheism is a social issue of vital importance, and the sociology of non-religion has flourished in recent years, a welcome change from the overemphasis on religion in sociology. Researchers have examined a range of topics, such as atheists' collective identity formation (Guenther and Mulligan 2013; LeDrew 2013; Smith 2013), how atheists deal with stigma (Guenther 2014; Mann 2013), internal controversies specific to the movement (especially controversies related to gender and ethnicity [Schnabel et al. 2016]), and accounts of atheist politics (Laughlin 2016). Despite this growing body of research, contemporary atheism scholarship focuses on the United States and England. By contrast, empirical research on atheists in Canada is limited.

Additionally, the individual identities and lifestyles of atheist activists have received limited attention in the literature. Consequently, this dissertation focuses on the thoughts and feelings of activists and how they negotiate their identities, often which includes placing themselves in conflict with other secularists[1]. Beyond making an empirical contribution to non-religion scholarship in Canada, my primary goal is to understand how individual atheists and skeptics adopt lifestyles as their primary means of social change, and how those lifestyles sometimes lead them into contentious relationships with organizations as well as the imagined community of secularists.

In many ways, secularist activism in Edmonton resembled a conventional social movement, with protests, an identifiable membership base, multiple organizations (often working in collaboration with one another), and a shared sense of community and meaning around changing some aspects of the social structure. Discussing his role in a demonstration in solidarity after the Charlie Hebdo Paris massacre, Chris (age 24) talked about how the Edmonton atheist community had come together in protest. He felt that a spirit of activism remained within the community, "I think if something really bad happened [like the Hebdo terrorist attack] we would be in the streets. I don't think it would take much to mobilize us. The appetite is there." Evidence of this

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[1] I use the term secularist in this dissertation to refer to refer to atheists, agnostics, and anyone else that that takes either a non-religious or anti-supernatural stance (e.g., skeptics).

appetite was floating just below the surface, often overshadowed by more intellectual discussions, such as about a scientific article or how best to approach raising children as critical thinkers and atheists.

Drawing from thirty-five interviews with Edmonton-area secularists, as well as participant observation, my findings show that my participants were clearly *against* something even if it was not always obvious what that something was from a conversational standpoint. Confusion and disagreement about what they were supposed to *do* and how often they should do it dominated the local discourse, with many atheists either tuning out or throwing their hands up in frustration over the inability of local organizations (and those who peopled them) to facilitate resistance against religious privilege in the province. Because of these disagreements and rejections, pessimism permeated the debate surrounding the direction of atheist activism. Many secularists turned inward, viewing atheist organizations as social hubs rather than activism centers. They took it upon themselves to do their activism, free from what they saw as the petty squabbles of the atheist community.

Although (as I have suggested), Edmonton secularist activism may have many of the features of a social movement, my participants were often critical of the community, were loosely networked, and they tended to view formal organizations as little more than the stomping grounds for like-minded people. What looked like apathy, however, was not an absence of interest. Instead, secularists found joy in

"doing their own thing," with an emphasis on individual, private, and everyday actions targeted at social change. Those actions included: challenging and providing counterarguments to unsupported, nonsensical claims in everyday conversation; supporting atheist celebrities and their work (e.g., amassing individual libraries consisting of works of atheist philosophy and social criticism); and purchasing products related to atheism, such as Etsy stores catering to the community. (Etsy is an online marketplace that allows people to make, sell, and buy unique goods.) Outside of these actions, which one may find in subcultures or fandoms, my participants emphasized their small daily efforts to better themselves, and by doing so, make the world more hospitable to rational thought, the value of expertise, and basic science.

Development of Subject Matter

My Master's thesis introduced me to the work of psychologists concerned about the impact of pseudoscience on Clinical Psychology. The work of Scott Lilienfeld (2001, 2008, 2010) is especially influential in shaping my understanding of questionable therapeutic, assessment, and diagnostic techniques within psychology. Because of his research, I began to take an interest in pseudoscience and the relative dearth of sociological accounts of those members of the academic community who attempted to challenge fads and fallacies. While I was completing my thesis, New Atheism appeared to be maturing as a movement. The familiar faces of Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens started to blur with

other, slightly less recognizable personalities who sometimes preferred to describe themselves as "skeptics," as opposed to garden-variety atheists. Examples included Michael Shermer (b. 1954), James Randi (b. 1928), Paul Kurtz (1925-2012), Penn Jillette (b. 1955), Bill Nye (b. 1955), and many others who have taken in interest over the years in promoting science and combatting pseudoscience.

Previously, I had heard of skeptical journals such as *Skeptical Inquirer* and *Skeptic* magazine, but I had more-or-less dismissed skepticism as a club of science-enthusiasts with a hobby-like interest in pseudoscience and the paranormal. By the end of my Master's thesis, however, I started to notice a considerable overlap between my interest in how fads developed in relatively stable scientific climates and the apparent popularity of new atheism. Dawkins, like others associated with new atheism, took a hard line on pseudoscience, and seemed to be encouraging the same mind-set suggested in the work of famous debunkers, a worldview based on Enlightenment values such as reason, liberty, and individualism.

Initially, I had the idea of doing my dissertation in the same broad area as my Master's Thesis, that is, sociology of intellectuals, focusing primarily on those scholars who resolved to "clean up" their disciplines. I might have continued along that path had I not stumbled across a brewing debate among secularists about the varieties of atheist identities (and their essential differences). The content of these commentaries

suggested that secularist activism was more complicated than I had initially assumed

and more fruitful as a research topic than a continuation of my Master's work.

When I began my Ph.D. in 2012, I wanted to untangle the atheism vs.

skepticism puzzle, which eventually led me to link some forms of secularist activism to

a broader worldview. During the beginning months of my research, I was fortunate to

happen upon self-described atheist activists who quickly distinguished their non-belief

from their skepticism, with the latter being far more critical to their identities than

leaving religion. My time in the field additionally corresponded with the aftershocks

following several controversies within the online secularist community. These disputes

provided a slightly heightened political environment, e.g., the emergence and

eventual decline of Atheism Plus (also written as Atheism+), a social-justice-oriented

faction that split loyalties on issues such as sexism and racism within secularist spaces.

Before seeking ethics approval, I took stock of secularist organizations within

Edmonton, discovering that the University of Alberta has an atheist club appropriately

named the University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics. With the intent of introducing

myself, I went out to one of their "pub events," which primarily consisted of all

members sitting around several long tables and discussing science news, the latest

celebrity fads, role-playing games, and what one participant described as the "Geeky

pursuits." The then-president of the University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics gave

me a brief history of the organization and warned me that he soon would be vacating

his role in the executive. Nevertheless, he was welcoming to the idea of me doing participant observation. By the time I was able to start my fieldwork, the University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics executive had changed entirely, but this bump in the road proved fortuitous because the next executive was more plugged into the broader secularist community, and I was able to follow them through their transition phase.

While I began my participant observation with the University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics, I reached out to the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society, which maintained a robust presence on Facebook. The president of the University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics was also a member of the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society, which eased introductions. I conducted most of my fieldwork, however, with the Society of Edmonton Atheists, then the largest and most active secularist organization in Edmonton. My time with the Society of Edmonton Atheists had a significant impact on the future of my dissertation research, primarily because it defied my expectations of a secularist organization, which were primarily informed by US atheism scholarship. My overriding concern about how secularist activists construct their identities in Canada shifted to address the lifestyles of my participants, which were uncompromising and political.

Scope

The purpose of this dissertation is to add to the existing qualitative case studies of atheist activists, with the intention of shedding light on some unique aspects of secularist activism in a major Canadian city. Atheism in Canada is different from that in the United States. Canadian atheists are less embattled than American atheists, like because Canada lacks the politicization of evangelical religion. Consequently, religious hegemony is a less relevant concern in the Canadian political arena. Given these differences, among others, it behooves scholars to recognize critical regional differences. This dissertation is a contribution to such efforts by highlighting some of these differences.

In addition to furthering Canadian scholarship on atheism, this dissertation takes as its central premise that studying atheism is essential. In addition to the broader societal backdrop, which I mentioned earlier, atheism is of interest to sociologists of religion, who are deeply concerned about whether secularization is a long-term trend. Although I do not address the secularization thesis in any detail in the chapters that follow, it is worth noting that the secularization thesis[2] is one of the most important paradigms in sociology, and it continues to perform well in sociology of religion, either as an ongoing modernization process, or as a foil for critics who wish to

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[2] The secularization theory generally refers to a modernization process of religious change, usually involving some form of religious decline.

highlight competing paradigms. The slow and steady growth of atheism, as well as the expansion of non-religious organizations, contrasts with the slow and steady decline of religion (at least in some parts of the world). For some scholars, secularism is an unstoppable process, the evidence for which may be found, at least in part, in the growth of atheism. Other scholars, however, point to the stubbornness of conservative religious traditions and the fragility of secular impulses.

In addition to providing a Canadian perspective regarding atheist activism and all that entails for the study of non-religion, I seek to expand current theoretical approaches to understanding atheist activists. Drawing from lifestyle movement theory (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012), I describe how self-described activists engage in social change without necessarily engaging in conventional social movement behavior, such as protests or other forms of organized collective action. Atheists involve themselves in a variety of behaviors and practices that are associated with cognitive efforts, on their part, to improve themselves as critical thinkers. Specifically, I analyze those activists who seek to change society by nurturing skepticism as a way of achieving "the good life." Consequently, my analysis of secularist activists who identify as "skeptics" contributes to our understanding of different ideological strains in the atheist movement, and how their trust in Enlightenment values contributes to a personalized politics.

Additionally, I seek to contribute to lifestyle approaches to studying activism, which all too often focuses on consumer forms of political participation. By contrast, I highlight the cognitive work of my participants in crafting an authentic lifestyle. Cognitive work refers to the performance of cognitive processes. More generally, it refers to information processing and decision making, but I use the phrase to refer to the intellectual repertoires that activists may employ in the crafting of their identities.

By employing everyday lifestyle as my conceptual starting point, my final goal with this project is to highlight some of the differences between secularists based on how they conceive of their personal identities. I emphasize the role of the "skeptic" in this study. Although one of the defining features of new atheism is the promotion of rationality and science (Kettell 2013), skepticism more accurately captures many of my participants' intentional cognitive efforts to live a rational life in an irrational society. In other words, although skeptics constitute a kind of secularist with their own beliefs, practices, and attendant organizations, I also employ the term in its more general sense of applying critical thinking skills and scientific methods to empirical claims in daily life. For example, Richie (age 38) had been active in the Edmonton atheist community for close to a decade, serving on more than one executive for local organizations. He grew increasingly frustrated with the state of secularist activism in Canada, as well as the atheist movement. During my fieldwork, he slowly withdrew from the Edmonton-area atheism community, only attending a social event here and

there. Despite his distance from in-person groups, he was active online, and still considered himself an activist. Rather than giving up on atheist activism, Richie described the value he placed on living a rational life grounded in skepticism. He regularly blogged about issues important to him, including the growth of what he saw as anti-science trends in Canada. Additionally, he devoted considerable time to bettering himself, taking the occasional religious course as an undergraduate elective, reading popular science books, and developing a better understanding of argumentation and other critical thinking skills that he associated with a well-reasoned life.

I encountered many people like Richie, to the point that I felt it necessary to shift my project from its initial focus on atheist organizations to individual atheists and how they conceptualized their identities as well as their responsibilities as self-professed activists. Out of thirty-five formal interviews and dozens of informal ones, my participants told me about the importance of developing themselves as critical thinkers, often downplaying their roles in organized secularist activism. They talked about living by scientific principles, becoming more rational over the course of their exposure to the community of atheists, and hoping that their daily choices may lead to lasting social changes.

Terminology

In the last decade, scholars have made considerable progress in understanding atheism and atheist activism, but a variety of terms proliferate, including non-religion, irreligion, atheism, non-theism, secular, secularity, and secularism. For some, this inconsistency in terminology presents a problem for the field, leading Lois Lee (2012) to argue for using "non-religion" as the primary concept, consequently removing atheism from its current centrality. Non-religion is "anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion" or "any position, perspective or practice which is primarily defined by or in relation to religion, but which is nevertheless considered to be other than religious" (Lee 2012). As a broad and inclusive term, non-religion consequently embraces a variety of positions from the most strident form of anti-theism to the calm indifference of a self-professed agnostic. Although Lee's attempt to construct an inclusive term is deserving of attention, in this dissertation, I am also partial to the term "secularist" as defined by Smith and Cimino (2012) as an umbrella term for all non-religious identities.

Like Phil Zuckerman, Luke Galen, and Frank Pasquale, I agree that atheism is too narrow a term for the field, and it also runs the risk of subsuming all other identity markers, e.g., anti-theist, agnostic, secular humanist, skeptic, etc., without properly attending to their differences. But when it comes the terms "secular," "secularist," "secularity," and "secularization," they do as much work, if not more, than non-

religion. My participants described themselves negatively, that is, they positioned themselves against religion, and they took on the label atheist as a positive affirmation. Given that I share Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale's interest in "overt antipathy toward religion," as a subject matter, throughout the dissertation I will often use the term secularity (and its derivatives) and non-religion interchangeably to refer to the personal secularity of my participants, that is, their "rejection of supernatural or substantively religious ideas" (Zuckerman and Pasquale 2016, 23). I will use the term "secularist" to refer to those individuals to embody their religious non-affiliation as a core component of their identities.

It is worth noting that few of my participants used the term "secularist" in their self-descriptions. Words like "secular," "secularist," "secularity," and "secularization" are analytical categories that researchers use to understand their subject matter. By contrast, my participants preferred the following terms, "atheist," "agnostic atheist," "gnostic atheist," "anti-theist," "apatheist," "rationalist," "freethinker," "secular humanist," and "skeptic." Atheist and skeptic, however, were the most commonly used terms, and of most relevance to this dissertation.

"Atheism" is derived from the Ancient Greek word *atheos,* which combines *a-* (not or without) and *theos* (god). The term is relatively straightforward today, at least among self-described atheists, but historically, sometimes the word served many confusing purposes. As Stephen Bullivant (2013) points out, however, no consensus

exists about how we should use the term in scholarship, with various scholars defining

it as the assertion that either there are no God or gods or that one lacks a lack of

belief in God or gods. Despite some general similarities, he argues that the word is

"used and understood in a wide variety of different ways" and often with positive or

negative overtones (12).

My data reflects the wide range of meanings of atheism, though the most

common definition I encountered is what one participant described as weak or soft

atheism, now most commonly referred to as negative atheism. Negative atheism is the

absence of belief in God or gods, as opposed to the positive atheism (strong or hard)

or the explicit assertion that God or gods do not exist. Although the range of atheist

identities I encountered suggests that the term is incomplete as an adequate analytical

category, I am primarily concerned with how my participants chose to identify

themselves and what meanings they attached to their identities.

My participants were less beholden to the atheist identity marker than the

American literature on secularist activism would suggest. A minority of scholars,

however, have noticed that atheists often come to secularist activism with a pre-

existing appreciation for Enlightenment values (Smith 2013), suggesting that atheism

is merely one component of secularists' identities. Additionally, atheists do not agree

about what form secularist activism should take outside of common ideological

characteristics, e.g., their emphasis on critical thinking and individualism (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Smith 2013).

The distinctions that individual secularists appear to make often seems like a footnote in the literature, primarily because they may not have any analytic utility. For example, Chris Cotter (2011) argues that terms such as "freethinker," "rationalist," and "skeptic," may apply to both religious and irreligious people. Consequently, he argues that we need "qualifying elaborations" to determine if a self-described "freethinker" or "skeptic" is non-religious. This ambiguity similarly applies to variations of "atheism." One of Cotter's (2011) most important conclusions is that multiple self-representation primarily causes a problem for scholars rather than secularists themselves, who often are much less concerned with perceived inconsistencies than the external observer (Cotter 2011, 51).

Despite multiple self-representations, secularists place significant emphasis on science, the scientific method, and the pursuit of knowledge. In his typology of non-religion, Cotter (2011) describes this dominant theme as "The Naturalistic Type," referring to those secularists who have an aversion to faith, share a "materialistic" outlook," and emphasize a lack of evidence when it comes to the possible existence of God or gods. Skepticism is central to the Naturalistic Type in the sense that secularists have a high degree of "doubtfulness," hence Johannes Quack's (2011) observation about organized rationalism in India,

The notion 'ideology of doubt' captures, therefore, what the rationalists aim at

evoking within their fellow Indians. Yet, it refers also to a rhetorical element

within their self-perception that stresses the openness of rationalism and those

who try to spread it against the dogmas of religions and the stubbornness of

their representativeness (Quack 2011, 274)

Given the parallels between my participants' skepticism and the Naturalistic Type, I

considered using Cotter's typology, but my participants' naturalism and ideology of

doubt extended beyond merely a scientific disposition regarding religion or other

spiritual realities.

Another term of note in the literature is secular humanism, which initially found

use as a pejorative term to refer to those forces allied against Christianity. The

Religious Right in the US often has maintained that secular humanism is a religion.

Early on, prominent secularist activists defined secular humanism as a "method of

critical inquiry," (Kurtz 2014, 16). As secularists adopted the label in the 1970s and

1980s, the parameters of secular humanism expanded to include naturalism as

opposed to supernaturalism, an outlook informed by science, and a consequentialist

ethical system that prioritizes the autonomy of the individual.

Like skepticism, secular humanism traces its intellectual pedigree to the Age of

Reason and the Enlightenment. Some secular humanists, however, draw a direct line

from the Renaissance humanists to today's secular humanists. Renaissance humanists

described humanism as a literary and philosophical movement that represented a kind of return to form concerning "classical pagan virtues" and an effort to "secularize morality," without the overbearing pressures of Christianity (Robichaud 2013).

The development of secular humanism is essential to the history of secularist activism, but it was less relevant to my participants than skepticism. Although several subjects described themselves as secular humanists, most had a dim view of secular humanism for a variety of reasons. The most relevant of these critiques was that my participants felt that secular humanism represented the "accommodationist" end of the secularist spectrum, referring to their perception that secular humanists believed that they could find some "common ground" with religion. Whether this characterization of secular humanism is accurate is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but Edmonton secular humanists' reputation for not being "critical enough" informed my participants' hesitancy to self-describe as secular humanists.

The "New" in New Atheism

Although none of my participants referred to themselves as "new atheists," the idea that something might be new about contemporary atheist activism was a frequent subject of discussion and debate. Stephen LeDrew (2015) argues that new atheism is a response to three trends, the political salience of Young-Earth creationism and intelligent design in the US; the aftermath of September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States and the subsequent American war against terrorism; and the influence

of postmodernism (epistemic and cultural relativism). LeDrew's most innovative argument is that the third trend, postmodernism, presents a threat to New Atheism's ideology, which has a goal of legitimating scientific authority.

LeDrew's (2015) argument that new atheism is in part a response to postmodernism is compelling, given that he directly links the work of people like Richard Dawkins to hostility towards the social sciences. Although my participants expressed some concerns about some sub-disciplines such as gender studies, they did not show a general hostility towards the social sciences in general. Also, of note is that critiques of postmodernism are not a new feature of secularist activism. Prominent figures in atheist, secular humanist, and skeptic organizations have long been committed to Enlightenment values and consequently opposed to theories and movements like postmodernism and poststructuralism (Kurtz 1994).

The notion that new atheism represents a "new" turn towards scientific-advocacy does not stand up to scrutiny. The new atheists are the latest incarnation of an intellectual tradition that stretches back at least as far as the Enlightenment, if not earlier. One can easily read the work of Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron D'Holbach (1723-1789) and see parallels between his anonymous work and present-day secularist activists (Silver 2000). Nevertheless, some scholars maintain that something is genuinely unique about the movement. For example, Kettell (2016) argues that one of the distinctions we can make between old and new atheism is the latter's political activism, which

involves normalizing non-religious beliefs through various campaigns, e.g., encouraging atheists to "come out" of the closet. In other words, new atheism has borrowed from previous identity-based forms of activism such as the civil rights and LGBT movements.

Although this dissertation examines Edmonton-area secularist activism as an identity-based or lifestyle movement, it is not so clear to me that that the newness of new atheism rests on its adoption of a minority identity discourse. Madalyn Murray O'Hair (1919-1995), the founder of American Atheists, took a similar approach in the early 1960s (Smith 2013). One thing, however, can be said for certain regarding new atheism, secularist groups now proliferate and their activism is more public and visible than at any other point in history (Langston, Hammer, and Cragun 2015). Given that this dissertation is not a history of new atheism as such, I will put aside the uncertainty around new atheism's rise, instead focusing on a small community of secularist activists who, rightly or wrongly, saw themselves as the inheritors of a tradition going back to the eighteenth century.

Skepticism

The term "skeptic" describes what some adherents view as a distinct social movement concerned with "debunking" popular beliefs in conspiracy theories, magic, the supernatural, and scientifically impossible phenomena. Although skepticism has a long history in philosophy, most prominent skeptics associate modern skepticism with

Martin Gardner's (1914-2010) book, *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*.

Gardner surveyed a variety of pseudoscience including case studies of flat and hollow

earth theories, UFO cults, dowsing, Atlantis, and various forms of complementary and

alternative medicine such as homeopathy, osteopathy, and chiropractic. Today,

Gardner's skepticism is also known as scientific skepticism or skeptical inquiry.

According to philosopher Paul Kurtz, scientific skepticism is positive and

constructive, selective, and contextual, and is vital in ordinary life (rather than being

restricted to the domains of science and philosophy [Kurtz 2010]). For many

secularists, skepticism constitutes a rational way of life, based on the practice of

wisdom. The term *eupraxsophy* is relevant to this outlook, as it is derived from the

Greek roots *eu* (good), *praxis* (practice), and *sophia* (wisdom), meaning a life lived by

logic, observation, and science.

For skeptics like Gardner and other prominent figures of modern skepticism, to

be a skeptic involves living a well-reasoned life, and scientific skepticism constitutes a

specific way of thinking and acting. This view of skepticism as a lifestyle may seem odd

to modern readers, given that questioning the validity of claims and assessing whether

evidence is reliable, relevant, and of enough quantity, is a regular part of modern

critical thinking (Fisher 2011). Throughout history, however, skepticism has been

associated with a way of life. Although little else connects contemporary skepticism to

ancient forms of skepticism (e.g., Pyrrhonism[3]), non-dogmatic rational "rules of living"

hold true for today's skeptics, who attempt to employ the scientific method to pursue

knowledge for its own sake and achieve greater happiness because of their rationality

(Laursen 2005; Kurtz 2001).

Chapter Outline

As I noted earlier, this dissertation examines the lifestyles of secularist activists.

Following Bennett's (2012) concept of ''personalized politics,'' and Haenfler, Johnson,

and Jones's (2012) attempt to bridge the gap between lifestyles and social

movements, my primary interest is in examining how skepticism (and a scientific

worldview) is a political choice for secularist activists. Although they had only a

tenuous relationship with secularist organizations, my participants individually sought

to usher in a second Enlightenment—a cultural revolution that would solidify scientific

empirical inquiry and humanism as societal ideals. Consequently, my primary concern

with this dissertation is to present, analyze, and understand how secularist activists

navigate their identities and negotiate those identities with other highly individualistic

atheists.

My general finding is that the subset of activists that make up this study

attempt to embody what others have described as Enlightenment values such as

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[3] Pyrrhonism refers to a dogmatic form of skepticism that discredits reason as unreliable.

rationality, truth, progress, individualism, and other universalizable modern values like

technological advances and scientific rationalism. I argue that secularist activists

engage in private and ongoing individualized activism and that this activism is

characterized by a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos involving self-learning and a skeptical

attitude to what some participants described as "group think" and "tribalism." I also

argue that this lifestyle approach activism leads to fragmentation and diversification

within the community, generating conflict within groups and among individual

activists. In what follows, I briefly describe the chapters of this dissertation, several of

which are either published or in review. Although each substantive chapter tackles a

specific theme, they contribute to an overarching narrative that contemplates how my

participants' lifestyles affected ongoing identity negotiations within the community of

activists.

In chapter two, I discuss my theoretical framework, which relies primarily on

lifestyle movement theory, a recent contribution to social movement studies that is

concerned with forms of activism that rely on individual, private action, usually against

cultural targets. In addition to describing the theory and personalized politics more

generally, I contextualize lifestyle activism within the social movement literature and

discuss relevant concepts such as collective identity.

The purpose of chapter three is to discuss the case study research methodology used in this study and to offer reflections and practical information on my data gathering and analysis, which relied on interviews and participant observation.

In chapter four, I introduce a typology of secularist activists in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Not only was it evident to me that participation styles among activists varied, but this variation was patterned, the two main categories of activists were Firebrands and Diplomats. The former category of activists took an assertive and strident approach to their activism and valued what scholars typically describe as new atheism or a non-closeted type of atheism that emphasizes critique and awareness raising. Firebrands were dissatisfied with the state of secularist activism and desired a more "radical" approach to challenging religious privilege in public the sphere. The latter category of Diplomats was much more focused on issues internal the community of atheists, including providing a more welcome environment for marginalized groups, as well as addressing women's issues and causes relevant to their social justice orientation. Additionally, Diplomats were much less concerned with religion, often desiring a more accommodationist approach to religion that included bridge-building and less contentious outreach efforts (i.e., "friendly" atheism).

Most of my participants identified with either a Firebrand or Diplomat orientation, but others saw themselves in a different light, as I describe with the final two categories, Skeptics and Builders. Skeptics highlight an internal divide within the

community, which I explore in greater detail in chapter six. My participants were often split between wanting to be "good" atheists and wanting to tackle broader issues tied to their general anti-supernaturalism, including pseudoscience and the paranormal. Skeptics were more likely to avoid conventional atheist politics, describing religion is as just one form of "woo-woo" (irrational ideas founded on weak evidence) among many others. Builders emphasized making themselves useful to the community and tended to stay out of internal disputes. Most builders had a long history in the community and placed more importance on creating a stable launching pad for activism than being on the frontlines of activism. I argue that the differences between Firebrands and Diplomats generated many of the fragmentation and consequent infighting among groups, with both types of activists settling into a low-level resentment towards the other and consequently generating ambivalence towards local groups as well as organized secularist activism.

In chapter five, I describe the political values of Edmonton secularists, focusing on how activists negotiate their political identities within the community. Most of my participants saw themselves as left-wing or liberal, and they were concerned about the emergence and growth of right-wing or conservative politics within the movement. Some participants discussed what they saw as a "libertarian menace," referring to highly individualistic atheists who prioritized free expression over other values and for whom economic conservatism contrasted with their otherwise socially liberal views.

Despite concerns about libertarian rationalism within the movement, most of my participants shared a similar set of values, including an emphasis on personal liberty, free expression, and individualism. Their emphasis on individualism is consistent with my other findings as well as the literature on lifestyle movements. Despite secularists' political affiliations, they did not break down easily into a conventional political typology even if they made noises that suggested party affiliation. For example, my participants overwhelmingly gravitated towards the New Democratic Party, a social democratic party on the left-wing of the Canadian political spectrum with a long history of association with organized labor. Their underlying individualism, however, and embrace of a DIY ethos meant that they often embraced the values they criticized in others, such as an emphasis on difference concerning identity construction, a suspicion of collectivism, and activism made up of everyday lifestyle choices.

In chapter six, I provide my main theoretical contribution, examining secularist activists from a lifestyle movement perspective. Although the lifestyle movement framework undergirds each chapter (even if not always explicitly mentioned in contexts, this chapter focuses on the Skeptic subset of typology, which I treat as a distinct identity marker mainly because my participants thought the differences between skeptics and other atheists significant. In contrast to previous social movement approaches that emphasize conventional social movement theories like resource mobilization theory or New Social Movement (NSM) perspectives that

highlighting collective identity, I focus on skeptics' personal identity as the site of social change. I argue that being a skeptic is a personally meaningful identity in the context of a relatively weak secularist collective identity. In addition to highlighting the role of lifestyle in the Edmonton secularist community, I also examine some of the identity labels that atheists employ to describe themselves, suggesting that there is far more heterogeneity among secularists than scholars in this area typically recognize (even with their usual caveats). This chapter consequently expands our understanding of varied secularist lifestyles. Although the focus of this chapter is on skeptics, the conceptual framework bleeds into the other identities I described, once again highlighting the role of individualized and privatized social change within the community.

Chapter seven is a case study of internal conflict within the Edmonton secularist community, highlighting various themes that run throughout this project including individualism and other features of libertarian rationalism, and the impact of lifestyle activism on attempts to transform diffuse organizations into more conventional social movement organizations (as well as the associated practices of such organizations). The case study concerns the emergence of Atheism Plus, a social justice-oriented faction concerned with the need to transform social, political, and economic systems, starting with the atheist movement and its reputation for being male-dominated and hostile towards women and ethnic minorities. The purpose of this chapter is to

highlight how my participants responded to the primarily feminist orientation of Atheism Plus, and how the factions' emergence caused deep divisions within the community, exposing fractures in the imagined community of secularist activists. My findings show that many of my participants were resistant to social progress, not necessarily because they opposed social justice, but because they were suspicious of attempts to "organizes" and "collectivize" members around a political ideology. As with other chapters, this case study highlights how lifestyle activism can impact the internal politics of secularist groups, and how some atheists respond to conventional social movement behavior with ambivalence and even hostility (if they see such attempts as threat to their individual activism projects).

Conclusion

This dissertation contributes to a growing number of studies concerned with non-religion in Canada. My approach emphasizes secularist activist, highlighting forms of social movement behavior that stems from questions about lifestyle and the impact of individualized and privatized forms of social change on communities of activists. Like other scholars who have employed a lifestyle movement perspective, I focus on a subset of the atheist population that identifies as activists, but for whom organized collective action is less of an ideal than in conventional social movements. My participants were highly individualistic, anti-tribal, and focused on internalizing and acting on Enlightenment values.

Consequently, this dissertation is an attempt to come to terms with an apparent conflict between secularists positioning themselves as activists while engaging in highly personal forms of social change in the context of a weak collective identity. Because of secularists' ambivalent and sometimes hostile relationship to conventional forms of social movement behavior, including organized collective action, it was sometimes difficult for outsiders to see their activist commitments. Internally, this absence of visible public social change sometimes led my participants to have a "crisis of faith" regarding the existence of an atheist social movement and ongoing anxiety about the direction of secularist activism locally and nationally. Alongside this uncertainty regarding the contours of secularist activism, my participants had strong notions about their own activist identities and their DIY projects for social change. In this context, my theoretical insight is that lifestyle is an essential component of contemporary activism. Although this insight is hardly original, most lifestyle approaches to activism emphasize conscious consumption as it is the most readily available empirical example of how individuals engage in lifestyle activism. This dissertation goes beyond conscious consumption to look more closely at the intellectual building blocks of lifestyle activism and how highly individualistic identities can generate conflict with a movement, potentially illuminating underexplored territory regarding this theoretical innovation. In summary, by studying secularist activism as a lifestyle movement, I can emphasize certain features of atheist identity

politics, adding nuance to ongoing discussions in the literature regarding the identity

work that atheists engage in to establish and destabilize essential boundaries within

the movement.

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CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

When I began this dissertation, I had a vague idea that Canadian secularists took a different approach to their activism than American activists (who appeared to be more organized). For example, I found fewer examples of Canadian organized public collective action by interest groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Consequently, the new atheist movement did not appear to have the same foothold in Canada as in the United States, and Canadian versions of US and UK atheist celebrities were slow to appear. Consequently, I decided to explore the meaning-making and identity-work of small-group secularist activists. Over the course of my fieldwork, I became increasingly interested in the relationship between individual atheists and organizations, as well as how atheists deal with intra-movement conflict.

I found that secularists' attempts to live authentic lives in line with their values as rational thinkers closely resembled the case studies I encountered in lifestyle movement scholarship. In my analysis, therefore, I engage with literature that primarily emphasizes the importance of everyday activism to individuals in movements with relatively weak collective identities. One might say that the personal was political for my participants. Consistent with this emerging strain of scholarship and its focus on everyday politics, activists (secularist activists in this case) "may work alone or in *ad hoc* networks organized outside the formal system of politics and across traditional,

political ideological boundaries" (Micheletti 2003, 31). Although increasingly scholars have embraced the role of culture and identity in shaping social movements, much of contemporary non-religion scholarship focuses on public collective action and the work of organized activists. Collective action is essential to our understanding of atheist activism, but such efforts for social change are only the "visible" elements of social movement behavior. Everyday activists sustain social movements, often from outside of organized groups. Those activists, however, do interact with one another and with others through "subtle processes of mutual influence that are synergistic, interdependent, and far more than just the sum of individual actions" (Mansbridge and Flaster 2007, 631). With these subtle processes in mind, I provide an overview of the social movement literature, focusing primarily on new social movements before discussing lifestyle movements and their relevance to the current work.

Social Movements

After more than fifty years of research, scholars still debate what constitutes a social movement. Although there are inconsistencies in the literature, most definitions of social movements concern some form of collective activity (Olzak and Uhrig 2001). For example, Sidney Tarrow (2011), concluded that what constitutes a social movement is "those sequences of contentious politics that are based on underlying social networks," and he places collective action at the heart of social movement behavior (Tarrow 2011, 7). Similarly, Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian defined a social

movement as "a collectivity acting with some continuity to promote or resist a change in society or organization" (Turner and Killian 1957, 308). By contrast, Mario Diani described a social movement as "consisting in networks of informal interaction between a plurality of individuals, groups, and/or organizations, engaged in a political and/or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity" (Diani 1992, 2). Diani's focus on shared collective identity slightly distinguishes his approach from the others. As one can see from a small sample of definitions, various scholars define a social movement as some form of collective behavior engaged in the promotion of or resistance to social change.

Scholars have adopted many different theoretical approaches to studying social movements, but the dominant approach is the contentious politics paradigm (Neves 2017). On one level, contentious politics just refers to collective political struggle, but on another, it speaks to political process and resource mobilization theories, both of which emphasize public collective action (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012; McAdam, Tarrow. and Tilly 2003). Alternative approaches to understanding social movements are housed under the catchall "new social movement" label. Although there is no single approach to new social movements, the "new" in the label emerged from scholars' attempts to understand why traditional social movements based on class delineations were in decline. Unlike previous movements, new social movements are concerned with "issues of personal autonomy and identity (i.e., gender relations,

ethnic identity, sexual preferences, etc.)" (Kelly 2001, 29). For many scholars, new social movements are products of the transition from industrial to post-industrial societies and the consequential challenges posed by the growth of consumer culture. Social movements transformed in late modernity as part of a broader shift in cultural values associated with post-modernization. These changes involved an emphasis on relativism, pluralism, and subjective experience (Ray and Sayer 1999; Rebughini 2010).

New Social Movements

The analysis of social movement regarding contentious politics fails to address forms of behavior that are less state-centered, but it also presents a narrow view of collective action. New social movement (NSM) theory argues that some forms of collective behavior do not possess the same tactics of resistance identified with the class-based movements of the past, often relying on alternative forms of participation. Also, an emerging social movement may increasingly focus on collective identity social movement communities. As Alberto Melucci (1980) argued "[W]hat individuals are claiming collectively is the right to realize their own identity, the possibility of disposing of their personal creativity, their affective life, and their biological and interpersonal existence" (Melucci 1980, 218). For Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier (1992), collective identity in new social movements means that participants engage in the "politicization of the self and daily life" (Taylor and Whittier 1992, 117). In other words, as a repetition of my earlier statement, the personal is political.

Suzanne Staggenborg and Verta Taylor (2005) examined the apparent decline

of the women's movement[4] in previous decades. While concluding that the women's

movement continues to thrive, they argue that the contentious politics approach to

collective action focuses on public tactics, consequently ignoring cultural and

discursive tactics. The women's movement stopped engaging in sustained public

actions, but it was still active, with robust cultural activities and individualistic forms of

resistance such as "consciousness raising, empowerment, and woman-to-woman

support" (Staggenborg and Taylor 2005, 46). Contemporary NSM scholarship

attempts to explain this "new politics," and it is undoubtedly broader and more

attentive to culture and identity than political process approaches (Tranter 1996).

Nevertheless, NSM approaches primarily focus on organizations (even if they are

diffuse and decentralized) and mobilization to public action.

NSM theories question past approaches to explaining social movement

behavior (e.g., the contentious politics paradigm), going beyond class-based forms of

collective action to understanding the role of culture and ideology in movements, as

well as issues related to autonomy and identity. Some scholars who are sympathetic to

new social movement concerns like human rights, environmentalism, and so on, have

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[4] The women's movement has changed considerably since Staggenborg and Taylor's discussion
of movement abeyance. For example, social media platforms have revolutionized feminist
activism, particularly concerning the hashtag #metoo and the unprecedented attention to
sexual harassment in the workplace.

taken to looking at the everyday activities of activists, how they make meaning, and construct new cultural codes. This "everyday politics" literature has gained steam in the past thirty years, with most of the increase occurring in the last decade (see, for example, Auyero 2004; Boyte 2010; Haenfler 2004; Scott 1987; Tuğal 2009). The recent literature highlights the personal choices of individuals who may not engage in collective action and share a weak collective with other members of their networks.

The implications of prefigurative politics literature is that movements manifest first through individual actions (Epstein 1991). For example, scholars cannot understand environmental movement through the lens of collective action alone. The visible face of the movement sometimes overshadows the fact that most activists find their way through "simple human interaction with one another, against a background of tension and argument with the prevailing social ethos" (Milton 2013, 23). Of course, it is necessary to analyze the visible components of movements, but it is not enough— hence scholars' recent theoretical turn towards the everyday and lifestyle politics to accommodate those social movements that do not fit the organizational/political theories available.

Lifestyle Movements

I am interested in the everyday practices that individual atheists undertake to accomplish social change. The lens that I have chosen to use to explore these attempts at social change is "lifestyle." In this context, lifestyle refers to "the routines

incorporated into habits of dress, eating, modes of acting and favored milieu for

encountering others" (Giddens 1991, 81). More than the material, however, lifestyle

also includes distinctive values, beliefs, and ways of engaging with the world. Haenfler,

Johnson, and Jones (2012) are at the center of current debates about the importance

of everyday politics and lifestyle to social movement behavior. Their attempt to bridge

the gap between subcultures and social movements by emphasizing activism that sits

outside of the contentious politics model has generated significant interest in the

literature, particularly concerning conscious consumption and other forms of

consumer-driven activism (see, for example, Cherry 2006; Wahlen and Laamanen

2015; Yates 2015).

The main argument of lifestyle movement approaches to activism is that certain

types of social movements do not fit easily into current collective social action

categories. Lifestyle-centered or identity-based movements focus their efforts on

cultivating a "morally coherent, personally gratifying lifestyle and identity rather than

issuing direct challenges to the state/social structure" (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones

2012, 3). Although lifestyles may have the appearance of being "selfish" or on a

continuum with various forms of self-help, what distinguishes lifestyle movements from

mere leisure activities or personal development is that participants are consciously

engaged in a form of social change. In addition to their own narratives about *being*

activists, lifestyle activists will use different forms of media to spread their messages,

including social media (blogging, podcasting, social networking, message boards and wikis), symbols (e.g., t-shirt slogans, tattoos, pins, and buttons), and events (conferences, workshops, and self-organized groups). Although many activists in lifestyle movements are passive regarding public action, they adopt more assertive styles depending on context. Often, there is a tension between these more passive and active styles, generating much of the movement's primary discourses.

The voluntary simplicity movement is a paradigmatic example of a lifestyle movement. Voluntary simplifiers choose to reduce their level of consumption and challenge the capitalist ethos, but they do so at an individual level. To be sure, a visible movement exists with all the elements that one might associate with public collective action, but most voluntary simplifiers seek social change outside of organizations and formal politics (Alexander and Ussher 2012). Voluntary simplifiers are political activists, even if they fall outside the boundaries of what we conventionally think of as collective action. The movement is diffuse and diverse, but individuals are aware nevertheless of a broader movement, and they participate in movement discourse and share a political worldview (Zamwel et al. 2014).

Individual choices and values take the focus in lifestyle movement scholarship. In fact, "identities motivate adherents to action" (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012, 9) as opposed to a strong collective identity. Scholars' emphasis on "we-ness" often has failed to come to terms with individual lifestyle and everyday activism, justifying

this turn in the scholarship towards a focus on loosely-bound social networks. Haenfler, John, and Jones (2012) expand upon their description of lifestyles as a tactic of social change with a detailed analysis of the following characteristics of lifestyle movements (LMs),

> LMs promote individual (vs. collective) action; participation occurs primarily at the individual level, with the subjective understanding that others are taking similar action, collectively adding up to social change.
>
> LMs engage in private (vs. public), and ongoing (vs. episodic) action; adherents interweave action into daily life.
>
> LM adherents subjectively understand their individual, private actions as efforts toward social change (vs. exclusively self-help, religious exploration, or personal transformation).
>
> LM adherents engage in identity work, focusing particularly on cultivating a morally coherent, personally meaningful identity in the context of a collective identity. Personal identity is a site of social change (Haenfler, John, and Jones 2012, 5).

These characteristics distinguish lifestyle movements from more political process-oriented theories that emphasize public collective action. Although parallels exist between lifestyle movement theory and new social movements, new social movements still maintain an organizational bias while lifestyle movements do not. Also, lifestyle

movement scholarship has a unique approach to understanding the relationship

between collective and personal identity that is particularly relevant to his project.

Collective Identity

Collective identity is the shared definition of a group, in which an individual's

connection is with a broader category that builds solidarity among members (Polletta

and Jasper 2001, 285; Taylor and Whittier 1992, 105). New social movement research

places emphasis on collective identity's role in recruitment, maintaining group

consciousness, and mobilizing adherents to collective action. In lifestyle movements,

however, collective identity serves several functions. At the most basic level, collective

identity still creates and maintains a sense of "we-ness," but its primary purpose is to

provide an additional layer of meaning to individual action and be "imagined rather

than experienced directly" (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 285). Consequently, collective

identities often are weak in lifestyle movements, and individuals may not have many

personal connections with other members of the movement. Given that activists may

have only a superficial relationship to the imagined community, the lifestyle movement

literature tends to emphasize a sense of "mission and moral purpose" (Taylor 1989,

762) over mobilizing participation towards an end. Consequently, collective identity in

lifestyle movements may be relatively weak and even contested among activists.

In the chapters that follow, I wrestle with Canadian atheists' collective identity

and the difficulty of readily distinguishing collective identity from personal identity.

This conundrum is typical in the lifestyle movement literature, where scholars regularly struggle with locating and defining the collective identities of activists who avoid conventional social movement behavior (see, for example, Kahl 2012; Radke 2016). Early on, I realized that my participants were transposing political considerations to their lifestyles. Not only were many secularists content to focus on everyday politics, but also, they saw their focus on individual-level change as complementary to collective action, albeit without defining "success" regarding legislative changes. Instead, they saw their success as manifesting in potential future cultural and lifestyle changes (Cherry 2006). Additionally, they tended to focus on identity-building and boundary setting outside of their participation in diffuse organizations. Consequently, each chapter is thematic and focuses on specific areas of interest to my participants, highlighting how individual secularists categorically distinguish themselves from others in the community.

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CHAPTER THREE: DATA AND METHODS

Secularists use a variety of terms to describe themselves, reflecting individual variance in religiosity. The term "atheist," therefore, is sufficiently ambiguous to warrant further consideration. Scholars of atheism and non-religion are aware of the varieties of self-labelling (e.g., ranging from hard-core atheists to agnostics), but some tend to ignore those differences, much to the detriment of a nuanced understanding of secularist identities. The purpose of this descriptive and exploratory qualitative case study was to illuminate different aspects of secularist activism. I draw on a set of thirty-five interviews and participant observation with members of three secularist groups whose self-proclaimed Enlightenment values inform unique lifestyles and experiences. To understand how secularist activism constitutes a lifestyle movement for my participants, I use a "case study logic," as identified by Yin (2003), as an approach that seeks generalizability to theoretical propositions as opposed to populations. In other words, I do not seek representativeness across a population. Rather than pursuing generalization, I tried to accomplish a deeper understanding of the issues under inquiry. In this chapter, I discuss my research methodology and the methods by which I collected and analyzed my data. I conclude by reviewing the methodological limitations of my study.

When I began my fieldwork, my overarching research question was "How do secularist activists differ in their politics, world-views, and interactions with other secularists?" I additionally derived other questions from this starting point,

How do secularists develop critical and creative strategies for change?

What constitutes a favorable outcome of atheist activism?

What is the relationship between secularist activism and skepticism as an Enlightenment ideology?

Although these research questions are a somewhat accurate reflection of my initial goals, they changed during fieldwork. My participants' priorities shaped my original focus, and my research questions evolved inductively through the course of my participation in the community. They transformed into a broad examination both the lifestyles of Edmonton-area atheists and of variations between activists who have a clear preference for engaging in lifestyle politics over protest repertoires from conventional social movement action. Additionally, competition within and among groups began to take up more space in my daily notations, reflecting intra-movement conflict over identities and the claims that atheists make based on them

Research Approach

Before beginning my research, I expected to find a wealth of information about Canadian atheists. I was surprised to discover that the empirical work on atheists was lacking. This discovery mirrored Jesse M. Smith's (2013) expectations when he set out

to study American atheism, which, at the time that he completed his dissertation, consisted of survey research. Thanks to Smith, I had his work and the contributions of several other early-career scholars to guide my approach to this project. As I mentioned earlier in the dissertation, I had a pre-existing interest in the role of skepticism in secularist activism as well as the differences between various terms that I found secularists using in public discourse (e.g., anti-theist, agnostic, secular humanist, skeptic, etc.).

In addition to contributing to the understanding of secularist activism in Canada, I set out to look at how scholars conceptualized the atheist movement (primarily encompassing new atheism). In general, I found that most approaches to studying American secularist activism had positioned atheism primarily as "a social movement of sorts" (Amarasingam and Brewster 2016, 118) as if the question itself were in dispute. Those scholars who took atheism seriously as a social movement emphasized the uniqueness of the American context, where secularist activism was most vital alongside religion (Cimino and Smith 2014). I knew that I could contribute to this discussion, given recent theoretical attempts to bridge the gap between lifestyles and social movements, which I discuss in greater detail in the theoretical framework section of this chapter.

The Selection of Methodology

Definitions of case studies range from the simple to the exhaustive, with the nature of case study usage varying with scholars (Baxter and Jack 2008). Robert Yin (2009) presents one of the standard definitions of the case study, which, in summary, is a distinctive form of empirical research that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth, relies on multiple sources of evidence, and benefits from theoretical propositions. If a case study sounds like an ethnography, then it is because the two are confused with one another, and for understandable reasons. According to Creswell (2017), the goal in ethnography is to contextualize individuals' narratives in their culture.

Consequently, ethnographies are broader than case studies and involve prolonged interactions with and observations of a group of people. Both ethnographies and case studies rely on multiple sources of evidence, but the latter tends to have a stronger relationship to theory, in the sense that researchers either use case studies to build theory or theoretical propositions drive the research (Lazar, Feng, and Hochheiser 2017). Nevertheless, the distinction between the two is blurry because much of what we call ethnography applies to case study research (De Costa 2016). For my purposes, I chose a case study approach because I was less interested in understanding how atheists come to form and maintain a culture, and more interested in capturing a bounded context in which atheist groups operate (Gerring 2006).

Both single case and multiple case study designs are common in social movement studies (Snow and Trom 2002). In both approaches, researchers typically focus on a smaller group, such as a unique social movement organization or organizations, and their analysis usually relates the case or cases to a larger movement (Snow and Trom 2002, 160). One justification for doing a multi-case study is that it allows the researcher to examine the similarities and differences across organizations. Given, however, the nature of secularist activism in Edmonton, I could not justify a multi-case design because each organization shared a similar membership base with overlapping interests.

Although a comparative (or contrasting) case would have made my study more robust, I chose the single case study because I wanted to explain, in depth, the individual identities and lifestyles of secularist activists in the province rather than giving primacy to local organizations. The single case study approach is ideally suited to this task, because it allows the researcher to construct a "richly detailed and 'thick' elaboration" of a phenomenon (Snow and Trom 2002). The case study also allowed me to combine two goals, the first being to describe a lifestyle approach to secularist activism. The second, closely related goal, was to illustrate lifestyle approaches to activism.

To what extent all studies in social movements are case studies is worth considering, but as Snow and Trom (2002) argue, an emphasis on holism defines case

studies, which involves the use of multiple research sites and levels of analysis. Given

that I wanted to examine the opinions, orientations, activities, and lifestyles of my

participants (while also attending to the role of organizations in their lives), the case

study's emphasis on an embedded understanding of a system allowed me to move

seamlessly between levels of analysis.

In addition to producing a holistic and embedded understanding of secularist

activism, the case study approach is additionally useful because it encourages multiple

methods. The justification for using multiple methods is "rooted in the complexity of

social reality," and the consequent need to combine multiple strategies (Snow and

Anderson 1991). Since the case study emphasizes multiple methods, it is not itself a

method, but rather a research strategy that may include ethnographic methods. To

illustrate case study as a research strategy, consider that scholars have conducted

"ethnographic" case studies of homeless shelters (Hill 1991); social movement

unionism in a workplace (Von Hold 2002); animal activists' promotion of shelter reform

(Guenther 2017); and liminal "nones" at a 2015 Bonnaroo music and arts festival held

in Manchester, Tennessee, USA (Pratt 2016). By emphasizing that the case study is a

research strategy, we can distinguish the case study from ethnographic methods or

any other approaches to data-gathering.

Site and Participant Selection

　　Before seeking ethics approval, I conducted an online search for secularist groups in Alberta, focusing on the terms "atheist," "skeptic," and "secular humanist." I was pleased to find that the University of Alberta had an undergraduate student atheist group, and Edmonton had several other groups with varying levels of participation (e.g., The Secular Humanist Group of Alberta and MacEwan Heathens and Friends). Most were Edmonton Meetups (Meetup is a Web tool for forming community groups) and seemed to cater to atheists seeking offline group meetings and socialization. Given that I was interested primarily in secularists who thought of themselves as activists, I narrowed my list to three established and active groups with reputations for generating or supporting various forms of activism, that is, they did not have community-building as a primary goal.

　　I drew potential participants from three secularist organizations (I describe recruitment later), The Society of Edmonton Atheists, The University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics, and the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society. I prioritized these three organizations because of the frequency of their meetings and events, their active social media presence, and their reasonable proximity to one another. I defined their reasonable proximity as accessible through public transportation from the University of Alberta. I contacted each organization after either locating an organization's e-mail or from their social media portals (usually Facebook). Each organization quickly granted

me access, although one required more preparation because my contact needed to run the project by the executive before I could proceed with my research.

Early in my fieldwork, I disclosed that I was an atheist, which seemed to be enough for building trust among my participants. In general, I found that the members of each group were as interested in my background as I was in theirs. To fully integrate myself into the community, I paid membership dues, event fees, and when necessary, assisted secularists in organizing events such as a sponsored debate. On the rare occasions that my participants engaged in organized protest, I also played a role, designing and wielding signs.

During my fieldwork, I thought myself primarily as a qualitative case study researcher rather than an ethnographer. Although researchers link participant observation and ethnography), all qualitative approaches to research involve some aspect of participant observation as a method of data collection. By contrast, ethnography is a distinct form of qualitative research, as well as a model of inquiry and representation (Wolcott 1994). Regardless, a researcher employing participant observation should consider many of the same issues as the ethnographer, especially regarding the level of immersion involved, as well as the insider/outsider dichotomy. Finally, the criticisms of participant observation are worth considering. For example, some scholars point to the subjective nature of participant observation, and that one's

full participation may influence the data. I discuss my role as a participant and these other issues later in the chapter.

Recruitment of Participants

To qualify as a participant in the project, each potential interviewee needed to be involved with one or more of the three organizations that I had selected as sub-units of the single case study. Initially, I contacted the then-president of the University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics over Facebook and attended the club's regular event, Liquid Rationalism, which primarily involved group socials at local pubs and bars. My regular appearances quickly put me in touch with the wider secularist community in Edmonton.

The second group I contacted was the Greater Edmonton Skeptics' Society after asking to join the Public Group on Facebook. Members of both the University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics and the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society suggested that I prioritize the Society of Edmonton Atheists because it was the largest and most active organization in the city. I "liked" the Society of Edmonton Atheists' page on Facebook, and quickly found out the president's identity. I sent the page admin a Facebook message, who then responded that I should send a more formal request to the group's official e-mail address. The president invited me to the Society of Edmonton Atheists' monthly round table and pub night events, which frequently took

place at the downtown Edmonton library. After introducing myself at one such panel discussion event, the president granted me access to participants.

After contacting the three major secularist organizations in Edmonton, I began observing my participants at their regular events. During my fieldwork, I also attended and participated in other activities as they came up and as my participants became more comfortable with my presence. During my initial meetings with the groups, I reminded members of my role as a researcher, which led to proactive requests from members to help in any way that they could. Their enthusiasm was surprising at first, but later I learned that they had experienced similar interactions in the past with both graduate students and journalists. As I began scheduling interviews, my participants often suggested that I speak to certain people who had lengthy and involved histories with both the three organizations and the broader community of Alberta activists.

Data Collection

I collected data from the founding members of each organization, past and present executives, but the bulk of my interviewees (twenty-nine), were non-elite members of multiple organizations (at one time or another), and with varying degrees of participation in the community. I used a purposive self-selecting sampling method with snowballing to recruit participants (Atkinson and Flint 2001; Heckathorn 2011). Purposive sampling refers to the non-random selection of participants because they

fulfil certain needs related to the researcher's objective. In other words, I selected

certain participants because they were atheists and involved in secularist activism.

Although most of my participants belonged to multiple organizations, many felt

that the Society of Edmonton Atheists was the better organized of the three, with a

greater sense of community than the other organizations. As a participant, I can attest

to the Society of Edmonton Atheists having a stronger organizational culture even

though it emphasized the importance of individual lifestyle choices among members.

Below, I briefly describe each organization and its relations to one another.

1. The Society of Edmonton Atheists served to bring people from other groups

   together, and--in comparison to the other organizations—had broader concerns

   than atheist activism alone, including the promotion of science and reason. One

   member of the executive spoke about how, originally, she had been an atheist,

   but her involvement in the group helped her transition to being a skeptic and

   promoter of a broader evidence-based worldview. Although the Society of

   Edmonton Atheists focused primarily on atheism, it provided a forum for

   skepticism. Additionally, the organization's events included a combination of

   atheist and skeptical activism. For example, alongside bus ads encouraging

   more people to "come out" as atheists, the Society of Edmonton Atheists

   organized a protest of a famous television psychic when she visited Edmonton.

2. According to the University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics Facebook group, the organization's founders wanted to "provide a community for atheists, agnostics, skeptics, humanists, naturalists and all other freethinkers" and to "further the acceptance of atheists" in the community (University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics, 2016). Despite the group's emphasis on inclusivity, of the three groups I studied, it was the most "atheistic," in that participants spent more time discussing and critiquing religion than engaging in other discourses.

3. The only organization I was able to participate in that dealt specifically with skepticism was the Greater Edmonton Skeptics' Society. Of the three groups, it was the most informal and the least focused on activism. The main event for skeptics was the infrequently scheduled Drinking Skeptically. Most conversations at Drinking Skeptically events revolved around geek culture and politics. Occasionally, someone would bring up something going on in the broader secularist community, but most discussions were off-topic. Of the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society participants, all identified themselves as atheists, although the president did mention an interest in bringing in theistic skeptics.

Although each organization maintained an online presence, and my participants mentioned social media as being influential in their process of "coming out" as atheists and furthering their community involvement, I was primarily interested in

offline social movement actions. Offline social networks are vital for understanding

participation in lifestyle movements, and though the internet provides an extended

venue for interpersonal communication and interactions, only a small subset of the

Edmonton secularist community was actively engaged in online communities. Unlike

American secularists, however, online content was not central to my participants'

activism in the sense that they used online tools in much the same way as non-activists.

In other words, there was very little need for distinguishing between online and offline

participation in the community. It is also worth noting that during my research, the

executives of each organization raised their misgivings about the online secularist

community, viewing online discussions as often "toxic" and irrelevant to the

functioning of atheist organizations. Similarly, many of my participants were

ambivalent about discussing their atheism online or engaging more deeply with the

primarily US-centric atheism community. I mention the exceptions to this offline-

focused participation in the chapters that follow.

Interviews

I conducted interviews with men and women secularist activists including

members of each executive, active members of each organization, and those atheists

who showed only an occasional interest in mobilization (but, who nevertheless saw

themselves as activists). I sought out participants who self-labelled as "atheists," which

was the most common term I encountered during my fieldwork. When possible, I sent

potential interviewees a brief description of the questions I would be asking, as well as

information about the project and consent. I conducted a total of thirty-five semi-

structured interviews. My sample included sixteen women and nineteen men, with

ages ranging from nineteen to sixty-three. Interviews lasted between sixty and ninety

minutes. I did not seek to oversample women, but it is worth noting that two of the

three organizations had majority female executives and at least one organization had

almost reached gender parity regarding paid membership.

Most of my participants had some level of post-secondary education, or they

were in the process of pursuing higher education. Except for five of my participants, all

the members of the Society of Edmonton Atheists and the Greater Edmonton Skeptics

Society held bachelor degrees or greater. For obvious reasons, members of the

University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics were completing their undergraduate

degrees. Twenty-nine of my participants identified with a Christian cultural

background. Two participants had grown up in explicitly atheist or agnostic

households. Two participants had Muslim backgrounds, one had neopagan affiliations,

and another identified as culturally Jewish. Politically, most of my interviews identified

as left-wing or liberal.

My interviews focused on a range of topics, including secularists' religious

backgrounds and how they transitioned into both atheism and their eventual

participation in secularist groups. Also, I asked my participants about their level of

participation, opinions regarding the state of non-religion in Canada, and internal

disputes within the movement. The interview guide mostly remained relatively the

same from interviewee to interviewee, but I did tailor some questions to certain

participants given their experiences as members of the executive or influencers in the

community.

I used two main forms of interviewing during my research, face-to-face and

Skype (which is a free internet telephone service). Although I wanted to do all

interviews face-to-face, four of my participants either had inconvenient schedules or

were traveling during the period of my data collection. I conducted most of my

interviews (27) in public places such as coffee shops, pubs, and restaurants. I

conducted four face-to-face interviews in private spaces, such as participants' homes,

and on one occasion, in a participant's car. I interviewed eight participants twice, as I

had follow-up questions over the course of fieldwork or because they indicated that

they had changed their minds about certain issues. I recorded all interviews using the

audio application AudioMemos. I password-protected the recordings and chose to

disable the File server option, which would have allowed wireless file transfers

between an iPhone and other devices. I transcribed the interviews using NVivo, which

is a qualitative data storage and coding software.

Sampling

I borrowed heavily from Oliver Robinson's (2014) four-point approach to sampling in qualitative interview-based research. The steps are as follows, define a sample universe, choose a sample size, pick a sampling strategy, and source the sample. Most qualitative researchers likely follow some or all these steps unconsciously, but I was determined to be more systematic in my approach. Each step is self-explanatory except for the decision regarding sample size.

I had practical considerations in choosing my sample, not wanting to extend the duration of my data collection beyond what was reasonable for such a project. Initially, I intended to interview twenty participants, but I remained flexible throughout data collection and recruited an additional fifteen participants. Since I was not concerned about statistical generalizability (given my chosen case logic), other factors came into play, such as wanting to capture the diversity of voices within the three organizations.

Recruitment of participants led to more potential interviewees than expected, with several secularists volunteering for interviews without having heard my usual preamble about my research. Closely connected to this opportunity for more interviews, my interviews slightly changed as I noticed a lack of certain voices. As Robinson (2014) points out, sample sizes may be "increased if ongoing data analysis leads the researcher to realize that he/she had omitted an important group or type of person from the original sample universe" (Robinson 2014, 31). I had this experience

on more than one occasion and gradually increased the sample size to accommodate new participants.

Despite having justifications for increasing my sample size, I was concerned about the problem of saturation. Unfortunately, guidelines for non-probabilistic sample sizes are uncommon in sociology. For pragmatic reasons, I chose to adopt Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson's guidelines (2006). The authors operationalize the concept of data saturation as "the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change" (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006, 65). After approximately fourteen interviews, I suspect I reached saturation because I did not continue to create codes and enough commonality had appeared in themes to satisfy my expectations. New themes did emerge over the course of future interviews, but they were intermittent. One of the reasons I may have reached saturation so early is that my sample was relatively homogeneous regarding their identities and experiences.

Despite reaching saturation at fourteen participants, I continued doing interviews because I thought doing so would still provide me with richer data and I anticipated more surprises in the personal stories of my participants. Retrospectively, the other interviews were worth doing because I wanted to be thorough, and through them, I captured some subtle aspects of existing data, particularly in response to some issues, e.g., regarding political identity.

I standardized my interview questions with potential prompts depending on the nature of my participants' responses. I often modified questions and prompts on the fly, a decision that often provided more valuable data. Since I posed my research questions at the individual level of analysis, being flexible allowed me to unpack complex processes such as my participants' life histories. In semi-structured interviewing, analysis and interpretation are ongoing processes that allow the researcher to "alter the questions and topics raised in subsequent interviews to reflect the understandings garnered in early wave of interpretation interviews" (Klandermans and Staggenborg 2002, 110). Consequently, my interviews were more like a guided conversation, but with a purpose.

Participant Observation

Like other researchers employing participant observation, I wanted to explore the daily lives of my participants as activists. According to Yin (2009), a case study should take place in a natural setting. Consequently, I conducted participant-observation at regular group events or "hangouts," as well as more formal *regional* events including small local conferences, and events in other provinces (that involved my participants in some capacity). I attended twenty-three events in total, with sessions ranging from 1.5 hours to multiple consecutive days (in the case of conferences). For ethical reasons, I do not name the events.

Regular or semi-regular events usually took place in classrooms, library community spaces, and local pubs. On occasion, members would host events in private homes (typically potlucks and Solstice celebrations). Larger events included invited speakers, movie nights, documentary screenings, and field trips. Additionally, I socialized with members outside of formally organized events, such gatherings that were not explicitly associated with each organization, such as science-focused and "geeky" events, where I knew a subset of my participants would be gathering. Overall, my participants' activities varied regarding professionalism and levels of engagement (e.g., sometimes there were only a handful of participants; sometimes, professionals managed the events and attracted large audiences).

In addition to regional events, I attended four major conferences in Canada and the United States with participants. At such events, I conducted dozens of informal interviews. After each informal interview, I prepared field notes describing the conversation in as much detail as possible. As Karin Olson (2016) argues, informal interviews raise an ethical question about consent and I had difficulty negotiating my role as a participant as well as someone who was collecting data. Although I had consent, it is not clear how much my participants understood my role, even though I was open from the onset about the purpose of my involvement. Seeing no simple way around his issue, I followed Olson's suggestion of rechecking willingness to participate in data collection and reminding participants of my role as researcher.

During fieldwork I began as more of an observer than a participant, dutifully taking detailed notes in both paper and electronic field journals and included descriptions of locations and events as well as dialogue from conversations. For the first few sessions of each new event, I tried to represent as much detail as possible, but my exhaustive notes eventually gave way to more focused note-writing. Moreover, my participants requested my greater involvement as a volunteer (to "pull my weight," as one participant put it). My greater participations pushed my note-taking to the evenings. In addition to volunteering for some small events, I provided informal assistance to participants, such as staffing merchandise tables, guiding people to venues, and offering suggestions for outreach activities.

During my fieldwork, I settled on full participation as the most effective approach to engaging with local atheist activism. I chose this approach because it allowed for my incorporation into the secularist community and for my building a deep rapport with my participants. Integrating myself in the community allowed me greater access to the daily lives of secularist activists, and how they understood and interpreted the "situation," holistically, for which participant observation is especially suited (Corbin and Strauss 2008). In addition to building rapport, participant-observation is compelling because of provides opportunities for researchers to access situations that are routine to the participants and consequently easily forgotten during interviews.

Although participant observation can provide insights into the perspectives of participants, scholars have identified numerous challenges when conducting insider participant observation, including a researcher's own political bias,[5] depending on the degree of a scholar's *insiderness* (see, for example, Ergun and Erdemir 2010; Plows 2008). Scholars interested in social movements often employ participant observation as a research method, and the role of insider has long been privileged over an outsider who does not have affinities with a community or group of activists. In other disciplines, scholars have challenged the necessity of being an insider, either in terms of describing the relationship to participants as fluid (Duneier and Carter 1999,12) or by describing various risks associated with being an insider (Labaree 2002).

One alternative to the familiar insider/outsider dichotomy (or, more accurately, the extremes of the continuum) is the "trusted outsider" (Bucerius 2013), referring to an outsider who has insider knowledge. This position challenges one of the key assumptions of qualitative research—that one needs to be an insider to build rapport. Depending on the disparity between participants and researchers (e.g., gender, class, and socioeconomic status), being an outsider may be a boon to the researchers, given they are less likely to make unquestioned assumptions and may gain different points of access.

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[5] For example, identifying as a feminist when interviewing self-described anti-feminists.

Although I was aware of various points along the insider/outsider continuum before I began my fieldwork, I focused on social movement studies as a field and its attempt to combine engaged participation with critical distance (Uldam and McCurdy 2013). The history of social movement case studies is, at least in part, a history of tensions in the relations between insider/outsider and overt/covert roles. Although covert research is controversial, it has its supporters in social movement research (Calvey 2017). More importantly, even when scholars adopt a more overt role, they quickly seek out an experience of invisibility as researchers. Regarding insider versus outsider participant observation, which forms the content of most methodological debates, the strict outsider, and even the "trusted outsider" is often less desirable than the insider.

There are various reasons why social movement scholars (and to a slightly lesser extent, sociologists of religion) might prefer the insider role. One reason is that social movement scholars are often "fans," in that they study groups with which they already have some familiarity. Lifestyle movement theory is often employed in the study of do-it-yourself (DIY) communities where being an insider is necessary to understanding the community. For example, punks often conduct research on punk activists (Attfield 2011).

Even though insider positions may entail taken-for-granted observations, most scholars consider structural and identity-related aspects of their roles. In other words,

they are reflexive. Similarly, in the sociology of religion, researchers emphasize the critical insider stance. In fact, it is difficult to imagine sociology of religion as a field without insider-research, given that many new religious movements, for example, are secretive and inaccessible to outsiders (even outsiders with "insider" knowledge). Like social movement scholars, scholars of religion additionally critique the dualism of insider and outsider. For example, in his study of Quakers, Peter Collins (2002) views the insider/outsider dichotomy as epistemologically unhelpful and is an artifact of a "particular ontological position *vis-à-vis* self and society—one which seems less and less plausible" (Collins 2002, 78). More recently, and less confined to a postmodern view (i.e., Collins), David Lewin (2017) argues that we are all insiders and outsiders, and the notion that one can be one or the other is a comfortable fiction (Lewin 2017).

Whether the insider/outsider debate is a *useful* fiction is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but there is a benefit in explaining how I negotiated my role as a researcher in the field. I would not have called myself a secularist activist before beginning my research, but, I was a "fan" of atheism before beginning this project. I passively engaged with and supported the activities of others in the community. I purchased atheists' books, attended speaking events related to secularism, and I had long been interested in the relationship between religion and science. It is not surprising that my personal interest in atheism led me to study atheists, as this scenario appears to be common among sociologists engaged with this subject matter.

Given my subcultural familiarity with atheism, I wanted to extend what I already knew and build trust with my participants. Consequently, I chose to take an overt approach to fieldwork.

During the early stages of participant observation, I quickly came to be an insider despite the periodic reminders of my research role. I realized the benefits of being an insider early on my research, as my participants often assumed my knowledge regarding aspects of the community or words and phrases associated with atheist activism. In other words, we shared a common language. As others have noted, however, a danger exists with being an insider—namely a lost researcher identity. According to Patrick McCurdy and Julie Uldam (2014), participant observation within social movement research "presents a very real danger of getting caught up in the moment and losing track of one's research purpose" (McCurdy and Uldam 2014, 47). Outside of whether I was able to see clearly as an insider, I encountered some practical issues with my closeness to my participants, with some interviewees questioning me about the direction of my research and criticizing some of my preliminary findings. To overcome some of these issues, I made sure I frequently repeated my research aims and attempted to moderate the expectations of my participants.

I justified my insider role since it afforded me a deeper understanding of my participants' experiences. Given the demographics of secularist groups in Edmonton,

my participants were like me according to a host of identity markers, including race

and class, as well backgrounds (e.g., those who came to atheism later in life). Like me,

most atheists in Edmonton came from a place of privilege (white, educated, and above

average socioeconomic status). In this regard, I shared multiple identities with

participants.

Consequently, I would regard myself as having taken the "participant-as-

observer" role, which is often thought of as the most beneficial role because it gives

the researcher a "deeper understanding of the context under study" (Takyi 2015, 870).

I understand the criticisms of this level of immersion, which are primarily based on the

post-structuralist argument that insiders are "too close to their participants to analyze

them with impartiality" (Giazitzoglu 2018,705). To maintain rigor, a best practice is to

inquire into one's own positioning as a researcher.

As I mentioned earlier, I am atheist, which mostly benefited me during my

study. In addition to being an atheist, I had a facility with much of the cognitive

content that features in atheist discourse, including philosophical and scientific

themes. Early on, I established my identity as an atheist, which meant that I did not

have to work hard to achieve access to my participants. Given the diversity of

ideological positions among atheists, I also did not struggle with being honest about

my other views, beliefs, and tastes. Neither did I meet much resistance regarding

other aspects of my identity, such as being a white male. The atheist organizations I

interacted with were primarily white male dominant, at least regarding membership.

Two of the executives were majority female, but this did not affect my inclusion within

the group. Their emphasis on gender issues, however, may have subtly affected the

direction of my dissertation, if not in the way one might assume. Many of my female

participants were openly anti-feminist, which, if anything, challenged my reading of

feminist activism at the time and gender-related issues within the community.

As an insider, I have had access to some vulnerable individuals, particularly ex-

Muslims who were deeply concerned about their anonymity and frequently expressed

worries about being "exposed." Although atheists are far less stigmatized than in

some other parts of the world, some study participants nevertheless perceived

themselves as being under threat (or potentially so). Some of my interviewees

expressed concerns about their family members and work colleagues. To maintain my

participants' rapport and trust, I was candid with them about what I was doing with

their data and suggested that they review transcripts, providing opportunities for

them to correct or expand on previous statements.

Individuals who might have otherwise been hesitant to describe, for example,

religious sexual abuse, were frank about their personal stories and the impact of their

experiences on their world-views. One concern that my female participants discussed

regularly, even with their anti-feminist leanings, was their different experiences within

the community compared to men. I consequently felt the need to consider how atheist

women navigated their identities. For example, although many of my participants were wary of using "feminist" language to describe their experiences, several did admit to men using atheist groups as a "mating opportunity." Although being "hit on" did not make my participants uncomfortable, it was tiresome for many. Another women atheist experience worth noting was the social costs of being "out" as an atheist. My female participants felt that their social pool of friends had shrunk considerably since leaving religion or since being more strident with their atheism. For example, one participant discussed missing her ability to do "girly things" because her friends were mostly atheists and interested in science and "Geeky hobbies" rather than more conventionally feminine pursuits. Similarly, another participant discussed the fact that many women in the community shared masculine traits, which is not typically what she looked for from female friends.

Given the unique experiences of my female participants, it is essential for me to consider my gender, and what impact it had on participants. I suspect that my male participants were more open with me than my female participants, but in general all my participants ranked high for self-disclosure. In fact, some of the most detailed personal stories came from my female interviewees. My male participants, however, were more concerned about how they "came across" during interviews, making comments like "you can edit that out, right?" or "please delete that." Also, men were more likely to engage me in follow-up conversations about their interviews, writing me

emails or Facebook messages asking if they "did okay," and if I "needed anything

else."

Although masculinity was not the focus of this study, I did find some compelling

discourses around men and mental health within the community. Several of my female

participants described atheist groups as having their share of "aspies," referring to an

informal diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome. Although several participants admitted to

having received a formal diagnosis, the words "aspie" and "neurotypical" came up

regularly in informal and formal conversations as placeholders for "weird" and

"normal." Among the women in my sample, being an aspie correlated with being a

"beta male," that is being "passive aggressive" and "insecure." My male participants

similarly lamented the state of "men" within the atheist community, focusing on their

lack of athleticism or lack of interest in athletics, as well their "nice guy" traits

(referring to them as being "friend-zoned" by women in the community). In this latter

case, the men in my sample acknowledged that many of their atheist male colleagues

were poorly socialized and "awkward." Unfortunately, given the nature of my research

project and its goals, I was not able to dig deeper into perceptions of non-conforming

gender displays or atheists' commentaries regarding masculinity (e.g., how gender

performances map on to "types" within the community).

Although my insider status provided many advantages, it also introduced

several challenges. I was concerned about how certain participants represented

themselves as atheists, especially if their presentational strategies conflicted with my own. Additionally, I sometimes found myself silently at odds with atheists who did not take religion seriously as an ongoing force in people's lives. Not liking the behaviors of participants is a common problem for insiders, but it is essential for researchers to compartmentalize their own feelings to maintain an appropriate level of distance from such emotions. Over time, I verbally engaged more with my participants, questioning them in a variety of settings. Adopting a more conversational and at times assertive orientation further integrated me in the community, in the sense that I did not "come off as a researcher" (as one participant put it). Although I occasionally voiced my opinion when asked, I primarily avoided inserting myself into conversations about the efficacy of certain forms of activism or criticizing the politics of participants. Several participants joked about me not "taking a side," which made me reassess my role as a researcher. In most cases, I genuinely did not have an opinion on the issues under dispute (e.g., whether an organization should participate in a religious event), but when I did have an opinion, I carefully navigated the impact of my statements.

During both formal (interviews) and informal interactions, most of my participants asked me personal questions about myself and my research. They were interested in my findings and regularly asked me for updates. Additionally, they wanted to know my experiences as an atheist, sometimes conversationally repeating back my own questions to me. I was honest in my responses, which went a long way to

furthering rapport. My participants actively campaigned for me to interview them and were enthusiastic about recommending other people I should interview. They also often disclosed significant amounts of personal information, some of which was not relevant to my project. This level of disclosure was suggestive to me of their comfort level regarding my role in the community.

Data Analysis

The goal of data analysis is to answer research questions by describing, interpreting, and explaining the collected data (Merriam 2009). I collected, stored, and analyzed all data in an organized manner. I imported interview files into NVivo for transcription, coding, and analysis. I also entered memos into NVivo to form questions about codes, categories, and to track gaps in the analysis (Charmaz 2006). Although scholars often use memos when doing grounded theory, any qualitative researcher may use them for keeping track of the research process and they can be useful for later reflection (Ngulube 2015).

I identified themes from key transcripts that appeared to best represent the views of my participants. I then used this rough template of codes to guide my open coding process. Open coding entails the organization of data into a hierarchy of interrelated but distinct categories, or codes (Charmaz 2006). In other words, once I identified codes referring to the same content, I grouped them into categories. As much as possible, I attempted to maintain the language of my participants during the

process. This process worked particularly well with semi-structured interviews, as my participants often discussed similar topics but at different junctures in their interviews. My goal with this initial round of coding was to identify and categorize every relevant indicator to ensure I had a broad spectrum of codes. The hierarchy of the resulting codes included relatively broad categories ("parent" codes) and smaller, more specific ones ("child" codes) within them. After the initial phase of coding, I then categorized open codes into a more structured coding scheme, identifying relationships among categories. In the final round of coding, I used this more structured coding scheme to refine all the in-depth categories.

Limitations

As with any qualitative study, this dissertation has limitations. The primary limitation is my choice of the case study strategy. Some scholars suggest that case studies lack value because of their close relationship to context (Flyvbjerg 2006). For all its apparent limitations, however, the case study is effective for the in-depth exploration of a complex issue. My project also contains certain limitations that may impact the transferability of the project. I limited data to three organizations in Edmonton, and I selected these organizations based on their proximity to one another. Consequently, my findings may not be representative of Alberta's secularist activists or Canadian activists more generally.

Having worked closely with others in the Edmonton atheist community, my account of secularist activists is subject to interpretation. Generally, qualitative research is subjective, but the content of this dissertation reflects my concern for the individual lives of secularist activists, suggesting that I am bringing certain preconceptions into the field. These preconceptions no doubt had an influence on my interactions with participants. Nevertheless, my findings are at least consistent with the wide spectrum of other findings in studies of irreligious groups.

Ethical Assurances

I took several steps to ensure ethical behavior during research. Outside of making initial contact with the secularist community, I did not begin research and data collection until I received approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Office (REO) in 2014. After approval, I sent participants an Informed Consent Form via e-mail, which every participant signed. The consent form explained the nature of the study and protections placed on my participants' identities.

I maintained the anonymity of participants using pseudonyms and I have limited identifying contextual material throughout the dissertation. In many cases I provided participants with an opportunity to decide on their own pseudonyms, which I then used to name and identify audio files and transcripts (I kept a separate file of matching names, ages, and other relevant demographic content). Whilst not all my participants were concerned about their anonymity, some were and required extra assurances

before they would consent to an interview. Although I maintained the confidentiality of my interviewees, I did not employ pseudonyms for secularist groups or other publicly available information.

This research required the submission of a research ethics application, which I lodged with the University of Alberta Research Ethics Office (REO) where it gained approval (Pro00045141).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined my methodological framework, detailing the methods I employed in this dissertation and their relationship to the case study research strategy. Using a case study design and a qualitative approach, I collected data using participant observation and semi-structured interviews. This approach facilitated access to, and analysis of, the varied experiences of secularist activists in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Limitations of my study include my sample size of thirty-five interviews and three regional organizations, a problem that I attempted to resolve by choosing a variety of participants from the organizations' executives as well as the general membership. Although the findings may not be generalizable to other populations, the study does contribute to knowledge of a subset of regional secularists in Canada and may be transferable to other like contexts.

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CHAPTER FOUR: A TYPOLOGY OF ATHEIST ACTIVISTS

ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to develop a typology for evaluating different types of atheist activism. Although previous typologies have contributed to atheism research, they have limitations. For example, past typologies are useful for understanding individuals' approaches to (non)religion, but they are less applicable to atheists whose approaches to activism lead to intra-movement competition over tactical considerations. Atheists frequently diverge over how to achieve group objectives and social transformation even when they share a common ideological perspective. Drawing from thirty-five interviews with participants from three organizations, I propose a tentative typology of atheist activist identities. It divides atheist activists into categories depending on their preferred approaches to activism, namely "Firebrands," "Diplomats," "Skeptics," and "Builders." In addition to describing the typology, I discuss how the differences between Firebrands and Diplomats became particularly contentious because of the lack of consensus and fragmentation that exists within the Edmonton-atheist community. This typology will lead to further refinements in the classification of atheist activists and assist in developing a broad and common understanding of how some Canadian atheists negotiate across competing attitudes towards activism. The chapter concludes by discussing some consequences for future empirical research.

Introduction

In this chapter, I propose a typology of organized atheist activists in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, including their different approaches to (non)religion as well as various forms of participation. Typologies are important and powerful tools of narration, providing a systematic way of grouping content. Although some individuals do not fit neatly into the any of the categories I introduce in this chapter, they are nonetheless vital because of the variation in individual secularist identities. Given my emphasis on individual identities in this dissertation, and lifestyle choice as a product of individualization processes, it is necessary to describe the patterns that emerge during research. In other words, some atheists tend to have more in common than atheists of different categories. Additionally, my participants saw themselves as distinct, drawing from a shared discourse to give meaning to those differences.

The typology conveys how individual atheists negotiate their identities and how these identity positions influence their activism. Previous approaches to secularist activism share an implicit typology, that is, they engage with the variety of activist identities found within secularist organizations and other movement spaces. More explicit typologies of atheists, however, often are psychological, relating findings to various Inventories (see Schnell 2015; Silver et al. 2014). By comparison, sociological typologies are lacking with a few exceptions (see, for example, Smith 2013b). Additionally, much of the activism scholarship focuses on the United States, which is

understandable given that the US is a hotbed for the secularist movement (Kettell 2013). This emphasis on the US is nonetheless problematic given that atheism is a fluid and flexible category, and approaches to secularist identity and activism may vary considerably regionally. By focusing on Canadian atheists, this chapter forges a new path to examining secularist activism.

The conscious decision to self-identify as a type of atheist, particularly concerning fellow secularist activists, raises questions about the impact of such identity markers on the future of secularist activism. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to categorize Edmonton atheists based on their activist identities without imposing a rigid structure for ordering the diversity of secularists. Additionally, I identify the dynamics and behavioral attributes associated with each category and differentiate my participants' varied approaches to atheism. Consequently, this typology is essential because it provides a foundation for assessing the goals of some secularist activists considering their individualistic participation in local organizations as well as the broader movement space. Moreover, the typology can help studies of atheism challenge homogeneous models of the community by exposing internal differences and conflicts such as those I discuss in this chapter. Findings, therefore, will be relevant to scholars of non-religion as well as scholars of social movements.

This chapter reports a qualitative study based primarily on semi-structured interviews with thirty-five atheist activists. It analyses the participants' attitudes to

atheist activism, drawing out recurring themes that suggest a possible typology. I

explain four types of movement identifications/activist identities—"Firebrands,"

"Diplomats," "Skeptics," and "Builders." The types I have defined in this study are

likely to overlap, and atheists drifted between them during my fieldwork. Additionally,

it is essential to note that most of the atheists I interviewed shared a weak collective

identity and they did not identify strongly with the movement and often expressed

ambivalence towards local organizations. Consequently, many participants

emphasized a do-it-yourself (DIY)[6] approach to their atheism as well as their activism.

Methods

Between 2014 and 2016 I conducted thirty-five formal in-depth interviews with

individuals who self-identified as atheist activists. In each interview I attempted to

determine variation in styles of activism, focusing primarily on how participants

characterized the state of atheist activism both at the local level and more broadly. My

sample tended to be white European-Canadians (sixteen women and nineteen men),

ages nineteen to sixty-three. The educational level of my participants was above

average, with most having an undergraduate degree or higher. I analyzed interview

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[6] Although participants' personal identities were not linked to a specific organization's collective
identity, they used both formal and informal atheist movement resources to conceptualize
their atheism as well as the atheism of others, aiding in the creation of the typology.

transcripts via a combination of open and thematic coding in NVivo to generate overarching themes and sub-categories.

The fieldwork focused on three organizations with a combined offline and online membership of over 1500 people, The Society of Edmonton Atheists, The University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics, and the Greater Edmonton Skeptics' Society. The largest of the three groups was the Society of Edmonton Atheists. It had the most events, media attention, and had strong relationships with other atheist organizations in the province of Alberta. Given the group's size and comparatively higher activity level, I conducted most of my participant observation with the Society of Edmonton Atheists, which came to be a hub for the members of other organizations. The overlap between organizational membership was significant, and I frequently saw the same faces at the Society of Edmonton Atheists, University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics, and the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society events.

To gain access to each organization and its membership, I primarily relied on social media (mainly Facebook), informing the presidents of each group about my research and my desire to conduct interviews with both members of their respective executives as well as the general membership. After each executive granted me access, I conducted a small informal presentation for each group's core membership and began collecting information on potential participants. I sought out participants

who were currently engaged (at the time of my fieldwork) in offline as well as online participation in local groups.

Of the three groups that I chose to include in the sample, all typically held a monthly meeting or "roundtable" discussion, where they would either discuss an issue relevant to the community or host a speaker (usually an academic or someone prominent in the atheist community). Other events consisted of monthly meetings and included a variety of activities, such as potlucks, movie and game nights, debates and debate training, and book clubs. After the monthly meetings or more formal events, so-called "pub nights" usually followed at a local watering hole.

In addition to community building activities, each organization took its own approach to activism, depending on context. the Society of Edmonton Atheists considered "community outreach" part of the organization's activism repertoire and encouraged members to contribute to the local food bank, participate in a highway clean-up, and volunteer for Habitat for Humanity. In addition to volunteer work, the Society of Edmonton Atheists organized several protests specific to the Alberta context (such as concerns about prayer in local public schools). Aside from public protests, the Society of Edmonton Atheists encouraged members to sign and share petitions, write letters to the editor of local and national newspapers, be present for media inquiries regarding atheism, and produce content through various media channels (e.g., podcasts).

The University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics focused on campus activism and raising awareness about atheists (e.g., Ask an Atheist Day), though it did participate in encouraging interfaith dialogue and having debates between theists and atheists. The Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society was much more "personality" focused than the other organizations. The president was re-elected unchallenged several times, became the face of the group and embodied members' values. He was also the primary organizer of LogiCon—a two-day event to celebrate science and critical thinking. The Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society primarily served to connect secularists with local events aimed at science appreciation.

Background

Before discussing the categories that make up the typology, a brief description of my participants' general approaches to activism may help situate the reader, as well as provide context for their individualistic approaches to activism. Most participants had a strong sense of types within the atheist community that went beyond conventional identity markers such as "freethinker," "rationalist," and so on. Consider, for example, Will's (age 29) response to a question about the varieties of active atheists, "I've heard so many terms over the years, but the ones that I see come up the most are 'accommodationists' and 'anti-accommodationists.'" I discuss the terms accommodationist/anti-accommodationist in greater detail later in the chapter, but briefly, my participants distinguished between those in the movement who sought to

appease (accommodate) religion and those who sought to undermine religion in

society. Many secularists had evidence of these local divisions within the community,

and they drew from online (primarily American) discourses to give a shape to what

they saw as competing factions. This turn towards the US frustrated members who

often felt that the local community should define a unique Canadian atheist identity.

The fragmentation of Edmonton atheism was of great concern to my

participants, but few of my interviewees thought that there was a credible alternative,

given the value most atheists placed on individualism. For example, Serena (age 25)

thought that Canadian atheist activism was moving more towards a "club" or

"meetup" model, "Once in a while, major organizations like the Centre for Inquiry

Canada[7] will do something public, but that's pretty rare. Most atheists just want to

hang out and drink if I'm being perfectly honest." Because of this hangout culture,

many secularists did not see an appetite for organized activism in the city or even

within the province of Alberta.

My interviewees were primarily concerned with developing a morally coherent

sense-of-self based on a scientific and secular worldview. Although being "good

atheists" (e.g., rational, and scientifically minded) colored the day-to-day experiences

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[7] The Centre for Inquiry is a not-for-profit educational institution that represents the interests
of secularists.

of my participants, they nonetheless shared a similar movement ideology that informed the typology that follows. They identified with a shared history that they mainly attributed to the emergence of new atheism. Also, they shared similar movement discourses (primarily online) and relied on similar cultural entrepreneurs.[8] Regarding their participation in organizations, they relied on members of the various executives to shape and structure their more community-oriented experiences, bringing people together who would not otherwise be inclined to mobilize for public events or maintain active social networks. Finally, my interviewees were passionate about spreading movement ideology through their informal social networks but differed in their approaches (and often in predictable ways).

Towards a Typology of Atheist Activists

Typologies are a common sociological preoccupation. Regarding sociology of religion (and to a slightly lesser extent, social movement studies), typologies provide the benefits of classification, linking archetypes to broader cultures. For example, in her study of the Tea Party, Stacy Keogh presents a typology of Tea Partiers, showing how "conservative Americans may inhabit particular aspects of conservative culture, while not inhabiting others" (Keogh 2013,17). Closer to home, in the sociology of

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[8] One example of a cultural entrepreneur would be Richard Dawkins, who is an evolutionary biologist and an outspoken atheist.

religion, typologies have a long history in the discipline to categorize religious groups,

but also a tool for prioritizing individual narratives (particularly within new religious

movements). For example, James A. Beckford designed a three-fold typology of family

responses to a new religious movement, highlighting the relationship between "types"

and prevailing social relationships, as well as the distinctive patterns of affiliation

among members (Beckford 1982). Other, more famous examples include the

Weberian/Troeltschian typology of ''churches'' and ''sects'' (Swatos 1976); David

Bromley's (1998) typology of exit characteristics (i.e., disaffiliation), and so on. In

summary, typologies are useful heuristic devices, though they are of course subject to

interpretation and the biases of authors. Despite this weakness, basic types play an

ongoing role in the sociology of religion, helping to categorize and order complex

social events.

    As other scholars have pointed out, individual atheists disagree on the

fundamentals of their activism and actively negotiate their identities, constructing

boundaries both with religion and amongst themselves (Cimino and Smith 2014; Smith

2013a). Although existing typologies of atheists are sensitive to this internal boundary

work, recent scholarship has focused primarily on the historical conflict between

humanist atheism and scientific atheism (Hashemi 2016; LeDrew 2012). Other

contributions include the attitudes of non-active atheists (e.g., the broader atheist

public [Silver et al. 2014]) or the types of non-belief articulated by atheist clubs such as

those found on university campuses (Cotter 2015; Tomlins 2015). Few attempts to categorize atheists discuss broad patterns in their preferences for activism and how those difference may be meaningful to atheists' identities.

Jesse M. Smith (2013b) presents one of the more useful typologies of atheists in the literature, describing three generic types of atheists which he calls the "silent atheist," the "temperate atheist," and the "outspoken atheist." Smith's approach maps onto my intellectual terrain, but his primary focus is on atheists' strategies of concealment. Christopher Cotter's (2015) typology more closely resembles my activist-focused approach, describing five types of atheists based on research that he conducted on undergraduate students at the University of Edinburgh. Cotter's typology included "naturalistic," "humanistic," "spiritual," "philosophical," and "familial types," with each category derived from individual self-representations. Cotter's typology is an important contribution to the literature, but its focus is on how students speak about non-religion and religion.

The purpose of the following typology is to highlight the differences my participants emphasized within the local community of activists as well as to shine a light on Canadian approaches to secularist activism. To arrive at this analysis, I drew from the individual narratives of participants. Guiding themes surfaced concerning how secularists co-constructed their identities with others in the Edmonton-area community, and, at times, resisted the approaches of their fellow atheists. The

significance of this typology lies in its differentiation of the identities and lifestyles of

atheists, as well as the associated forms of activist participation that I have associated

with each type. This typology will be useful for further theorizing and research in the

sociology of non-religion specifically and the sociology of religion more generally.

Firebrands

American Atheists president David Silverman (b. 1966) described "firebrands"

as the atheist movement's "awareness generator" (Silverman 2015, 81), and part of

raising awareness involves a proactive form of atheism that challenges religious

privilege. In others words, Firebrands are those atheists who are willing to vocalize the

perceived harms of religious belief without fear of offending theists. I use Silverman's

term because my participants agreed with most of Silverman's precepts of firebrand

atheism, which include vocally challenging religious privilege. Additionally, several

participants claimed Silverman was "grooming" an outspoken member of the

Edmonton community for a more significant leadership role. In other words,

Silverman's ideas played a significant role in Edmonton atheist discourse.

The Firebrands in my sample regularly spoke out against religion and religious

beliefs, and they saw their behavior as integral to their activism. In addition to taking a

more confrontational approach to criticizing religious beliefs, they were the most

explicitly activist-oriented of my participants. For example, Connor (age 27) described

his issues with atheists who tried to be diplomatic,

I'm a firebrand atheist, so I speak frankly and I challenge religion (or anything else that's stupid or dangerous) when I see it. People who try to be diplomatic think they're being nice, but really, they're just being cowards. They don't want to offend anyone, and they don't get anything done.

Firebrands placed little importance on working with religious communities. Instead, they saw themselves as engaged in an emancipatory project, both regarding religious privilege and expressing solidarity with atheists in countries with a history of human rights abuses towards religious (and non-religious) minorities, such as Saudi Arabia,

Many atheists are here because they want a club. They want to belong and they're into the touchy-feely stuff, community, family events, that sort of thing. I got into this because I was pissed off. I want religion to disappear—or it should be neutered anyway…. or domesticated (Chris, age 24).

Of all my participants, Firebrands were most critical of the state of atheist activism (both locally and nationally). They were frustrated with what they saw as petty disputes among their fellow atheists over trivial issues such as the "branding of atheism,"

We spend so much time worrying about how we come across to religious people, and criticizing each other for not being nice enough, that we're losing sight of why we need an atheist movement in the first place, to advocate for atheists and be the opposition when it comes to religion, you know? (Curtis, age 35)

Firebrands contrasted themselves with accommodationists, pejoratively referring to other members of the community who, as one participant claimed, "liked religion a little too much." Other scholars have discussed accommodationists, using the term to refer to atheists who value tolerance and a "greater focus on the positive" (Langston et al. 2015). My term for accommodationists is Diplomats, which I will discuss next, but it is worth noting that the Firebrands in my sample had different characterizations of accommodationists than what we see in the current literature,

> I can't remember how the whole accommodationist vs. anti-accommodationist thing started, but it's moved on from just people wanting [to] accommodate religion or work with religious people. It's now more about the left of the left-wing political spectrum. It's more of a political thing at this point.

Although Firebrands had a robust activist identity, linking their participation in atheism to their desires for activism, their attitudes towards science could also describe them. Of all my participants, the Firebrands had the most favorable opinions of new atheism and its emphasis on evolutionary biology and psychology. Firebrands seemed to adopt conventionally masculine roles, including adherence to norms such as risk-taking, aggression, self-reliance, and emotional control in their interactions with other atheists as well as religious believers. Most Firebrands were men and had long-term involvement in secularist activism, either starting atheist groups or a past on the executives of atheist and skeptic organizations. As one participant noted as an aside,

"I think of myself as an intellectual pugilist the Hitch [Christopher Hitchens]. I enjoy the conflict [referring to his exchanges with religious people]." The notion of intellectual pugilism, even when paired with a "Canadian politeness," was a major feature of Firebrands in my sample.

When asked to describe new atheism, many Firebrands initially expressed uncertainty about the phrase and some frustration about the supposed "newness" of the atheist movement. For example, Chris (age 24) said that there was "nothing new about new atheism," and that it's in "the Enlightenment tradition going back centuries," referring to the writings of Baron d'Holbach[9],

> There is nothing in [Richard] Dawkins's or [Sam] Harris's work that you can't find in d'Holbach. Now that I think about it, he was likely the [Christopher] Hitchens of his time. But, my point is this, 'new atheism' is a marketing category designed by its critics. If anything, it's a sign of a new apologetics, 'Oh, hey guys, let's find a new way to dismiss atheism.' If there is anything new about new atheism, it's probably political. Now we have some license to say 'Hey, the Emperor isn't wearing any clothes.'[10]

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[9] Baron d'Holbach was a philosopher and prominent social figure of the French Enlightenment.

[10] Contemporary atheist activism is associated with a genre of atheism literature including books written by biologist Richard Dawkins (2016), neuroscientist Sam Harris (2005), journalist Christopher Hitchens (2008), and others.

Like Chris, some scholars have found parallels between new atheism and the enlightenment. For example, Stephen LeDrew (2015) describes new atheism as the mere fusion of Enlightenment rationalism and Victorian Darwinism. For the Firebrands in my sample, however, their appreciation for the new atheist writings had little to do with scientism (see Pigliucci [2013] for a criticism of new atheist scientism). Instead, Firebrands placed much more emphasis on their moral indignation than clumsy notions of critical thinking (see Cotter [2017] for a critique of new atheism's critical thinking aspirations),

> Dawkins and people like that are often associated with science—a scientific worldview. I, of course, appreciate science and the method. But, I don't appreciate their writings because they're rational. I like them because of their moral clarity. For a long time, the voices of atheists, particularly in the Islamic world, have been silenced. The horrors that are done in the name of religion are too countless to mention (Raj, age 33)

This emphasis on moral disgust was one of my most surprising findings, given the emphasis American atheists appear to place on the importance of scientific skepticism (and a more general pro-science worldview) to atheist activism (e.g., Simmons 2018). Although most of my participants were science-friendly, Firebrands placed much greater emphasis on affective and reactive emotions as a component of their activism than epistemological positions regarding religion. Firebrands often expressed motives

that were more conducive to protest, such as anger and feelings of injustice, and they also tended to have the most conflict-oriented experiences leaving religion.

Some scholars have criticized media portrayals of "angry atheists" (see, for example, Meier et al. 2015), but at least to some extent the Firebrands fit with the stereotype. In fact, some participants embraced the stereotype as a badge of honor. For example, though Liam (age 33) did not see himself as a particularly angry person, he could not understand why other members of the atheist community were not more emotionally engaged,

> For a lot of atheists, [participation in the movement] is just an intellectual exercise. Maybe they want to change things, but it's an afterthought. For me, combatting religion is a full-time hobby for me, and yes, religion makes me angry.

Although Firebrands like Liam were interested in organized activism, their concerns were more interpersonal in that they wanted other atheists to care more about religious privilege as well the plight of atheists abroad. For example, Lisa (age 32) wanted to see more "passion from atheists," particularly regarding humanitarian causes directed at assisting refugees who are open atheists (and who face censure or worse in their own countries). Similarly, other Firebrands talked about the "laziness" of the atheist community in the face of injustice,

If you can get a potluck going you're lucky. Most atheists just aren't involved.

They can't see past their own noses. I know it's weird to talk about 'poseurs' in

the context of atheism, but a lot of atheists [involved in local organizations] are

poseurs (Greg, age 52).

Although Greg was the only participant to use the word "poseur" regarding other

secularists, some of my other participants did use variants that often related to issues

of authenticity in the community. In other words, many Firebrands were suspicious of

other atheists who claimed to be activists, but who did not conform to their

expectations (e.g., were not angry enough, did not care about the right issues, and so

on).

Diplomats

Ample disagreement existed among the Edmonton secularist community about

how best to approach religion. The conflict between Firebrands and Diplomats

generated much of the heat within local organizations. I use the Diplomat category as

a catch-all term for those activists who shared a more accommodationist leaning, as

well as those who placed greater emphasis on politicizing atheist activism towards

what they perceived as the "left" of the political spectrum.

Although most of my participants identified as left-leaning or liberal, the

Firebrands were highly individualistic and critical of "political correctness." These two

qualities made them appear more "conservative" to Diplomats, who more avowedly

identified as left-wing and accepting of recent trends in the atheism community such

as feminist activism and attempts to attract ethnic minorities to the movement. For

example, most Diplomats supported the aims of Atheism Plus, which is a social justice

faction that gained some prominence at the time I began my fieldwork,

> I know Atheism Plus isn't popular anymore, but it made a big impact on me.
>
> Here I was spending all this time talking about religion and how bad was for
>
> women and minorities when I didn't realize we had issues at home. Atheism can
>
> be just as patriarchal as religion.

Although many Diplomats took a strong position regarding their personal atheism,

they were much less interested in being outspoken activists, and instead preferred to

focus on other issues such LGBTQ rights and anti-racism. They additionally sought to

expand these issues into a broader vision for atheism, one that was sensitive to the

needs of minorities, particularly sexual minorities (though many Diplomats were

particularly concerned about the lack of indigeneity in approaches to atheism).

More so than Firebrands, a large proportion of Diplomats were "in the closet"

with family members or co-workers, and they often expressed concerns about their

anonymity during interviews. Consequently, Diplomats were the least interested in

public atheist activism of all my participants, and instead prioritized normalizing

atheism or as one participant put it, "Letting people know that atheists can be kind."

Perhaps because of their interest in conveying a more positive impression of atheism,

some Diplomats wanted to limit the impact of Firebrand atheism in local organizations,

as they felt the more outspoken atheists might alienate individuals who were just on

the verge of abandoning their religious beliefs,

> I'm not sure I would join an atheist organization now if I had just become an
>
> atheist. These days, atheists are so resentful, when I think we've won. Religion is
>
> subsiding. There are other more important issues to worry about. And that
>
> anger can be really toxic, especially when it manifests in personal attacks (Bill,
>
> age 43).

Diplomats like Bill were particularly concerned about atheism both as a brand and how

others saw the community. Consequently, they desired a friendlier atheism, speaking

both to their preferred approach when dealing with religious groups and their broader

concerns about creating an inclusive and welcoming community,

> There's a blog called the Friendly Atheist and the guy who runs it really tries to
>
> be empathetic. He's still an atheist, but he's also concerned about some of the
>
> problems in the movement, particularly when it comes to anti-Muslim bigotry.
>
> So, I guess I can try to model myself on him (Bonnie, age 39)

Given their distinct interests—particularly concerning tone—it is not surprising that

Diplomats often found themselves in conflict with Firebrands, who they often

described as angry, scornful, or strident,

> I used to love poking fun at religion, but you have to remember that these are
> people. When you undermine something valuable to them, you end up
> undermining who they are as people. Besides, we know God probably doesn't
> exist, and plenty of dead philosophers have tread that ground. We need to
> move on (Dennis, age 37).

Similar statements spoke to low-level fatigue among Diplomats regarding the familiar

territory of atheist activism (e.g., intellectual debate, openly criticizing religious beliefs,

and so on). Additionally, many of my participants who preferred a more compromising

approach to religion saw an uneasy relationship between Firebrand atheism and right-

of-center political views. For example, Igor (age 34) was concerned about Firebrands'

emphasis on Islam,

> Do they really want to be associated with right-wing neo-cons? Because that's
> what they sound like to me. They keep hammering at Islam as if it's the only
> religion in the world. It makes me think that there's something else going on
> there beyond Islam's tenets.

Many Diplomats pointed to the writings of Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens as a

primary impulse for the growth of anti-Islamic tendencies within the movement. For

example, Igor claimed that Harris advocated for torture and racial profiling in his

online writings. Similarly, Liz (age 44) criticized Christopher Hitchens for supporting the

Iraq war.

Although some participants associated Firebrands with a right-wing turn in the movement, others criticized them for ignoring more salient political issues because of their dogged attacks on religion,

> We have a lot of problems when it comes to making people feel comfortable—
> particularly women. How can we criticize Islam for being sexist when we keep
> having issues at conferences with sexual harassment? (AJ, age 29)

AJ's criticisms of more confrontational approaches to atheism rested on his concerns about the health of the atheism community, rather than atheism's target, namely religion. He felt that atheists had an obligation to prefigure a better society—one based on reason, but also with an awareness of how religion's sins such as sexism, misogyny, and racism can just as easily infect secular communities as religious communities.

Although Firebrands and Diplomats differed in their approaches to activism, both prioritized everyday choices, and decisions over organized, change-oriented collective action. In some ways, Diplomats were more concerned about encouraging individualistic approaches to activism than the Firebrands. For example, though Sasha (age 31) saw advantages to being more organized, she was concerned about how the local community would change consequently,

> What you typically see with organizing is that the culture becomes more
> homogeneous and that has a negative impact on people of color. I would rather

see a more egalitarian approach without formal leadership, but that's probably

a pipe dream.

In the absence of an ideal form of organization, Diplomats like Sasha focused primarily

on their own personal integrity and authenticity and "being the change" they wanted

in the world by expressing their ideals of anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-classist, and anti-

heterosexist politics.

Skeptics

Although all the self-described Skeptics I interviewed identified as atheists, they

deemphasized the role of atheism in their activism (and their lives more generally)

instead preferring to focus on critical thinking about supernatural claims writ large.

Skeptics were sufficiently distinct (and numerous) as to warrant inclusion in this

typology because the category speaks to the varied motivations that secularists have

for participating in the community, and their inclusion suggests nuance in the

formation of active atheist identities.

Of all my participants, the Skeptics were the most indifferent to atheist activism

(organized or otherwise), which makes sense given their preferred focus on anti-

supernaturalism. Nevertheless, many Skeptics attended secularist events, debated

issues with other atheists, and fully contributed to the community. Despite their

association with atheists and participation in the wider secularist community, Skeptics

often felt the need to distinguish themselves from other members of the community.

During interviews, several participants repeated the phrase "Not all skeptics are

atheists, and not all atheists are skeptics," to highlight the differences between

Skeptics and what Sam (age 31) referred to as "vanilla (or dictionary) atheists." Like

Diplomats, many Skeptics were concerned about the Firebrand tone, but they were

also concerned about excluding religious believers[11] from the community,

> I'm an atheist. Most skeptics are atheists. I would even argue that to be a good
>
> skeptic, you should be an atheist. But, there's something purely pragmatic
>
> about not cutting out theists—when they do feel comfortable enough to hang
>
> out with us, maybe they will give up on God. It's unlikely, but it happens (Sam,
>
> age 31)

Skeptics like Sam were the most generous towards religion in my sample, though they

would often wear different hats depending on their audience. Many Skeptics talked

about moderating their atheism at skeptic-only events and meetups out of concern for

offending potentially religious members. In addition to being concerned for the well-

being of their fellow Skeptics, they also felt it was important to be "on message,"

given that they prioritized a more general anti-supernaturalism,

> If we bring up atheism at skeptic meetings, we're going to get bogged down in
>
> that topic because it is so controversial. To give pseudoscience the focus it

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[11] Several participants thought atheist organizations should be open to anyone, including
religious people who might be interested in dialogue with atheists.

needs, we need to limit the amount of God and religion talk at our events

(Kelsey, age 24)

Not every Skeptic I interviewed agreed with this approach but given that they also participated in science-friendly atheist organizations they abided by the different expectations associated with the more niche skeptic group.

Many Diplomats also identified as Skeptics and tended to gravitate towards more science-themed events or educational activities rather than the conventional atheist activism. Neither Diplomats nor Skeptics understood or appreciated the Firebrand approach to atheist politics. Part of this lack of understanding came from their opposition to some atheists' more strident and aggressive tone, but a significant component of the division between secularists was a general ambivalence towards atheist issues and causes. For example, many Skeptics felt there was little need for atheist activism in the West due to secularization. Consequently, Skeptics criticized Firebrands for manufacturing controversies to justify their own dispositions, that is, to be confrontational and judgmental.

Builders

A smaller subset of my participants defined their activism as community-building instead of directly challenging religious privilege. Builders felt most at home organizing events and volunteering to participate in various atheist community initiatives, such as highway clean-up or compiling a donation for the food bank.

Additionally, they were interested in creating a robust secular community and growing

the memberships of atheist organizations. The Builders made local organizations and

their activities "work," even if they did not share an interest in explicitly challenging

religion,

> I want our community to be more visible and for it to be useful, you know? I
>
> would like people to see atheists as helpful, doing good. That's why I don't pay
>
> attention to all the bickering and whining that goes on [in a local atheist
>
> organization]. It's just childish, to be honest, and I've seen too much of that in
>
> other communities (Valerie, age 42)

Unlike Diplomats, who were often concerned with broader social justice issues as well

as the health of the atheist brand, Builders focused more on nurturing the positive

elements of the community. Consequently, the Builders adopted more conventionally

feminine roles, focusing on community empowerment and positivity, empathy, and

caretaking. Additionally, most builders focused on sustaining the health of

organizations over the long-term. For example, David (age 36) argued that there were

many kinds of activists and that helping to normalize atheism was an example of one

such type,

> That kind of confrontational 'I'm going to march' style of activism isn't really
>
> sustainable. I guess what I'm saying is that I'm more of an activist in some ways

than they are because those people burn out. I've been here a while, and I just

keep plugging away. Real activism is boring.

The Builders in my sample placed significant emphasis on taking the long-view

approach to activism and emphasized qualities such as their duty to the community

and exploiting their skills for organizing to ensure that the movement continues to

grow.

Builders expressed a range of attitudes regarding religion as well as community

controversies, but their approaches to activism differed considerably from the other

types. They were less interested than Firebrands in confrontation, and though they

cared deeply about the health of the community (e.g., inclusiveness and social justice),

they did not necessarily share Diplomats' accommodationism or their outside political

interests. Unlike Skeptics, the Builders were less concerned about pseudoscience and

the paranormal. When asked to describe the differences between how he approached

atheist activism and others in the community, Matt (age 44) emphasized fun,

You don't grow the atheist community by excluding people that have different

politics than you. You also don't grow it by ripping every cross off a wall

whenever you see one. What you do is make your events attractive. You bring

in interesting speakers, and you try to have fun.

Builders like Matt avoided intra-movement conflict as much as possible and often

described themselves as "laid back" when it came to religion. To outsiders, they may

have looked less engaged than other participants, but they just took an alternative approach to their activism, prioritizing enjoyment of the community and being useful to other members.

Some Builders had been in the atheist community for decades, preceding the emergence of new atheism. They talked about trends within the community as well as enduring issues. For example, regarding the issue of tone and how best to do atheist activism, Greg (age 52) said that there was "nothing new" about the intra-movement conflict between Firebrands and Diplomats,

When I first started in an atheist group—oh, it must have been in the early nineties, people were arguing about being nice and how to improve the reputations of atheists. I always stayed out of those discussions.

Tina (age 42) expressed a similar perspective, choosing to "stay out" of both the internal politics of the atheist movement as well as the kinds of activism encouraged by secularist organizations or prominent figures within the movement. She instead preferred to "do her own thing," go to conferences, and help when she could.

When asked if they thought of themselves as activists, the Builders were more ambivalent than some of my other participants, primarily because of how they saw others define activism, that is, as some form of organized collective action. When taking a more inclusive view, they acknowledged "feeling" like there were involved in some form of social change. For example, Matt described himself as trying to leave a

"positive imprint on the world" through his atheism and his ongoing participation in the community.

The notion of making a positive impact on the world by being involved with the community was not exclusive to the Builders in my sample. Nevertheless, given their emphasis on contributing to atheism through a kind of service and their general reticence to engage with internal conflicts left an indelible impression on me as well as the Edmonton-atheist community (which benefited greatly from the Builders' enthusiasm as well as their investment in the practicalities of running atheist events). Nevertheless, like the other categories in this typology, my participants disagreed about how best to characterize the kinds of atheists they encountered during their participation in organizations. For example, some Firebrands acknowledged the importance of Builders in the community, but they questioned their authenticity, arguing that some atheists had self-narratives that did not match their participation in the movement. In other words, some Builders behaved more like Firebrands than they were willing to admit to themselves.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced an exploratory typology of secularist activists in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Since this typology is qualitative, I make no claims to objectivity or generalizability. Despite limitations, the analysis presented in this chapter is conceptually useful because of its integration of participants' self-

conceptions of their atheist activism. The typology consequently provides a framework with which to study atheists' varied approaches to activism and how those approaches can lead to fragmentation within the community. Although I distinguish between types of activists (Firebrands, Diplomats, Skeptics, and Builders), it is essential to realize that the categories overlap and blend into each other.

Firebrands prioritize activism, adopt a more confrontational tone in dealing with religious believers, and display a lack of interest in expanding the remit of atheism beyond addressing religious privilege in the public sphere. By contrast, Diplomats attempt to manage atheism's contentious brand by projecting a friendly and inclusive atheism. Skeptics express the least interest in atheist activism, seeing atheism as a subset of a broader worldview focused on anti-supernaturalism. Although Skeptics have kindled their own identity separate from conventional atheist activists, they participate in the community and often shared Diplomats' preference for friendlier atheism. The final category is the Builder, a label best applied to those secularists who constitute a support structure for atheist organizations and events. Many Builders had a long history in organized atheism and tended to ignore internal squabbles over the direction of secularist activism.

Although all four types of secularist activists were well-represented in both my interviews and fieldwork, much of the local discourse was conflict-prone or had the potential for conflict lying just beneath the surface. Firebrands and Diplomats

appeared to be set against one another, with each organization fragmenting into preferential activism styles often based around the accommodationist/anti-accommodationist dichotomy. Secularists' battles over how to best criticize religion and communicate with religious believers backgrounded a significant amount of conversations both at the executive level among the various groups as well as within the more active general membership. Although my participants occasionally found the source of their disagreement in politics (e.g., Diplomats characterizing Firebrands as right-wing or conservatives), most acknowledged a long-lasting divide between those who pursued a more humanistic form of atheism that focused attention improving the local secularist community and those who were more outward-focused and assertive in their everyday activism.

Future research should aim to discover to what extent the other atheist communities replicate the categorizations I have described in this chapter. How do these patterns map on to American secularist activism? What is the stability of those patterns (i.e., types)? Although I have organized the typology into discrete categories to aid in the articulation of concepts, it represents highly interrelated and dynamic aspects of secularist activism. This complexity is worth keeping in mind for researchers interested in expanding upon these types of atheist activists. Additionally, this typology does not examine authenticity-claims and identity competition of participants in detail (outside of the Firebrand/Diplomat conflict). Researchers should consider

examining how different types of atheist activists negotiate their identities concerning competing activism styles. Finally, it is worth reiterating the limits of this typology due to the relatively small sample of secularists. Nevertheless, my findings are like other research, in that the patterns I have identified among secularist activists should not be surprising to scholars who have taken an interest in the politics of atheism.

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CHAPTER FIVE: THE POLITICAL IDENTITIES AND VALUES OF EDMONTON SECULARISTS

ABSTRACT

Given the growth of atheism in the Western world (including activist organizations), and atheists becoming more political, it is essential to understand the political views and opinions of atheist activists. Although the scholarship on atheist activists' politics is limited, some scholars have identified the apparent growth of right-wing sentiments within the atheist movement (LeDrew 2016). Others have identified a contentious relationship between prominent atheists' politics and egalitarian views (e.g., anti-sexism, anti-racism, etc.) (Amarasingam, Amarnath, and Brewster 2016). Although the politics of American atheism has received some scholarly attention, the political identities and affiliations of Canadian atheist activists have received relatively little attention from sociologists. Of those scholars who have commented on atheists' political identities, most emphasize the liberalism of the broader population of atheists. Consequently, this chapter provides a contribution to non-religion scholarship by discussing the political identities of secularists in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. I argue that secularist political identities are complex and fluid. Despite this complexity (and diversity), secularists draw from Enlightenment values such as liberty and the dignity of the individual, contributing to the view that libertarian rationalism characterizes new atheism.

Introduction

        This study provides insight into how atheists' activism draws from a shared set

of core values despite intra-movement tension over political identity. Given the

expansion of organized atheism and the potential emergence of an atheist politics, it

is essential to understand how activists conceptualize their political preferences.

Existing research on the religious "nones," that is, the segment of society not

professing a religious identity, suggests that atheists are socially liberal on matters like

gender roles and sexual orientation. Research looking at party affiliation, at least in the

United States, also suggests liberal political leanings toward the Democrats (Baker and

Smith 2009). Research on secular groups in British society parallel American findings.

For example, David Voas and Abby Day (2007, 1017) find that British atheists are more

likely to be liberal and to the left on the liberal/conservative or left/right scale

respectively. The literature, however, on the political leanings of secular groups in

Canada is comparatively limited. Consequently, the purpose of this primarily

descriptive chapter is to explore the political values and attitudes of secularist activists

in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. My findings show that although atheists lean left on

social issues, they manifest complex political identities that may go beyond

conventional measures of left-right ideology.

Existing Research

The religious character of the United States sometimes dominates discussions of secularist activism, especially given the emergence of new atheism, which is a relatively recent cultural phenomenon and social movement (Cotter et al. 2017). Although Canada may not come immediately to mind when thinking about self-conscious secularist activism, the second largest "religious" group in Canada consists of those who do not list a religious affiliation on surveys. Although self-identified atheists may constitute only a small minority of these religious nones, a plethora of provincial and municipal secularist organizations increasingly represent the interests of the non-religious. (Nationally, the Centre for Inquiry [CFI] is the most significant atheist organization in Canada with affiliates in most provinces [Tomlins 2015]).

The Canadian downtrend in religiosity should generate more interest among scholars than it does, especially given the tradition of debating US—Canada socio-political characteristics (Marger 2013). From a non-religion perspective, the parallels between Canadian and American forms of secularist activism are compelling, especially given Canadians' use of US atheist discourses (LeDrew 2013; Tomlins 2015). In addition to contributing to a rather small literature on the politics of atheism, this chapter provides a better understanding of Canadian secularists and may serve as a starting point for future research concerning their political identities and values.

Outside of Canada, scholars have overlooked the political dimensions of non-religion, with a few notable exceptions. Steven Kettell (2014) highlights several schisms within the atheist movement, most of which concern the identity and branding of new atheism and issues of ethnic, racial, and gender diversity. Although this work influences the current chapter, my primary interest is in the individual political identities of secularist activists rather than the specific divisions that characterize the movement. For more specific commentaries regarding the individual political identities of secularist activists, Stephen LeDrew's (2012, 2014, 2015) research is particularly relevant, because he has attempted to analyze the individual ideological divisions of atheists. He observes that the Centre for Inquiry (CFI) is influenced by "militantly atheistic, self-proclaimed libertarians who employ the rhetoric of reason and free inquiry to advance a radical individualism and opposition to the state" (LeDrew 2012, 83). He also suggests a relationship between "scientific atheism [i.e., Victorian discourse of an eternal conflict between religion and science] and libertarianism/laissez-faire liberalism" (LeDrew 2012, 84). Jack Laughlin (2017) adds to LeDrew's findings, arguing that a strong libertarian streak runs through secularist activism.

Other scholars have attempted to describe the political leanings of atheists, and they also highlight the right-wing character of some secularists. For example, Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith (2014) argue that while American atheists are typically

left-aligned and progressive, fiscally conservative libertarians play a role in the movement (Smith 2014, 178). They also say that the followers of Ayn Rand (1905-1982) always have had a "large atheist constituency" (156). Joseph Baker and Buster Smith (2015) echo these views but primarily emphasize the cost of libertarianism for the long-term organizational success of the atheist movement (Baker and Smith 2015, 216). Despite the apparent libertarian character of some atheists, the general atheist population, at least in the US, tends to be more progressive and liberal than religious individuals.

Methods

This chapter draws from my fieldwork and interviews in the city of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Using a qualitative case study research design, I investigated secularist activists using multiple methods of data collection. My primary data collection methods included participant observation and thirty-five semi-structured interviews. I fully transcribed data from all participants, which I then analyzed through open coding in NVivo, a data management software package for qualitative data analysis.

I conducted thirty-five semi-structured interviews with participants drawn from multiple atheist organizations with a combined offline and online membership of over 1500 people. I recruited members through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. I drew potential participants from three organizations, The Society

of Edmonton Atheists, The University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics, and the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society. I selected the above organizations based on the frequency of their meetings and events, their social media presence, and their reasonable proximity to one another.

My sample included sixteen women and nineteen men, ranging from ages nineteen to sixty-three. The interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. Roughly half of my participants primarily associated themselves with the Society of Edmonton Atheists, but most were involved with University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics and the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society as well. Except for five of my participants, all the members of the Society of Edmonton Atheists and the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society held a bachelor's degree or greater. Twenty-nine of the thirty-five participants identified with a Christian cultural background. Two participants had grown up in explicitly atheist or agnostic households. Two participants had Muslim backgrounds, one had Neopaganism affiliations, and another identified as culturally Jewish.

Secularist Activism in Edmonton

Edmonton is the capital and second largest city in the Canadian province of Alberta. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, 55.8% of Edmonton residents are Christian, and 31.1% have no religious affiliation. Although Alberta has a relatively large percentage of religious nones, the province has earned a

reputation for being a conservative Christian stronghold, given that until 2015, the

Alberta Progressive Conservative Party dominated provincial politics for forty-four

years.

Although the Alberta Progressive Conservative Party may be right-wing, some

consider it a centrist party (Bourgault and Dunn 2014). One may justify the latter

perspective given the party's general trend away from the hard-right-wing line over

the years. Nevertheless, a prevailing view among my participants and some scholars is

that Alberta's political culture is Conservative and populist (Stewart and Archer 2000,

13). Alberta's history is replete with examples of religious influence, particularly in the

political arena. Indeed, Evangelical Protestants have played a significant role in

shaping the province's landscape. For example, two Albertan Premiers were

fundamentalist Christians (Laycock 1990). Despite the conservative religious history of

the province, Alberta is not uniquely religious. Nevertheless, the province's political

relationship with religious conservatism has colored atheists' attitudes and their

approaches to secularist activism.

During my fieldwork, several issues influenced my participants' activism, and

they were primarily concerned with perceived or actual religious privilege. Most

interviewees were especially supportive of Alberta Parents for Unbiased Public

Inclusive Learning (A PUPIL), which is a community organization for Albertan parents

opposed to religious preference in the province's taxpayer-funded school system.

Also, many secularists expressed concerns about teachers' rights, especially given the parental opt-out clause in the Alberta Human Rights Act.[12] The clause required teachers to give prior written notice to parents when instruction dealt with religion. (For a thorough analysis of contested pedagogy under the Alberta Human Rights Act, see Gereluk et al. 2015). Overlapping with my participants' concerns about the chilling effect of such constraints on teachers, several secularists worried about a repeat of the American Intelligent Design or "teach the controversy" debate in Alberta.

Although parental and teacher rights dominated secularist discourse among my participants, they had more general concerns as well, including to what extent atheists faced stigma in the province. Many secularists downplayed the stigmatization of atheists in Canada, pointing out that American atheists faced a much greater struggle. Nevertheless, my participants did express concerns about losing their jobs, facing rejection from family and friends, and various forms of anti-atheist prejudice. Consequently, several interviewees were not "Out" as atheists, mainly because of their perception of religious conservatism in the province.

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[12] The NDP has since removed parental opt-in consent for subjects of a sexual or religious nature in classes.

On Terminology

Political labels often are opaque, and it is not always clear which attitudes and values correspond to which political identities. Nevertheless, scholars continue to rely on the left-right scale. Although the notion of "left" and "right" are abstractions, the scale does provide a framework that can allow a discussion of the political interests of individuals. In what follows, I emphasize the meanings that my participants attribute to their political identities and affiliations rather than any "objective" criteria of liberal/conservative or left/right. Similarly, I make no judgments about my participants' more fine-tuned categorizations such as "socialist," "Marxist," and so on. Nevertheless, I do take for granted the literature suggesting some correlational relationship between left/right descriptions and some traits and behaviors, e.g., the tendency for liberals to score higher for openness to experience (Haidt and Joseph 2009). To the extent that secularists understand their political identities, their use of labels suggests, at the very least, their preferences for programs such as their support for left-wing parties that tend to set more progressive taxes and be more motivated by collective incentives.

Over the course of both formal interviews and informal conversations, the question of the Enlightenment emerged somewhat organically from questions about my participants' political leanings. Many secularists were concerned about challenges to the Enlightenment, including values, such as free intellectual inquiry and individual

rights. This concern about attacks on the legacy of the Enlightenment was wrapped up

with secularist's conceptions of the political spectrum. Many identified as "liberals,"

but with caveats, often distinguishing themselves from "progressives" and "social

justice warriors" (or SJWs), whom they thought of as engaged in identity politics. For

example, Raj (age 33) lamented the rise of identity politics both within and without the

atheist movement,

> I think we should be making decisions based on reason rather than identity.
>
> Admittedly, sometimes there's an overlap, but this ongoing effort to put people
>
> into particular boxes is really divisive. That's what I think about when it comes to
>
> the left. It used to be the case that being a liberal meant upholding certain
>
> values that went beyond a person's group identity. Now, everything is emotive
>
> and tribal.

Although Raj was perhaps more articulate about his political views than some other

participants, secularists' responses to political questions are suggestive of a general

hostility towards identity politics.

Although my participants never provided a clear definition of identity politics,

their primary concern was with what they saw as its "evangelical" character, using the

term as a pejorative[13] label. For example, Sean (age 34) linked identity politics to

feminism, and feminism to religion,

> It's all kind of religious, you know? There's a concerted attempt, even within
>
> [local atheist organizations] of demanding what essentially amounts to a purity
>
> test. Are you an ally of this or that group? Have you thought seriously about
>
> your privilege? Everyone has original sin, especially if they're born white or
>
> able-bodied, or if they're a male. Why can't we just be atheists? I think that
>
> should be enough, but now, we all have to show our party membership card
>
> when we enter the room.

My participants' concerns about identity politics, a phrase equally as challenging as

any of the political terms my interviewees used, does not appear to be unusual.

Landon Schnabel et al. (2016) point out a contradiction at the heart of secularist

discourse: although atheists are typically more liberal than the religious on social

issues, they nonetheless express hostility towards some forms of social justice, perhaps

suggesting the existence of cultural beliefs that perpetuate inequality within the

movement. My findings show that one possible explanation of this contradiction, at

least among a small sample of Edmonton atheists, is that despite atheists' preferences

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[13] My participants often used "fundamentalist" as a pejorative as well, disconnecting both
words from their technical meanings and associations. This misuse of evangelical and
fundamentalist was often intentional.

for a "liberal politics," they prioritize the values of individualism, personal freedom, and independence, as well as individual goals that may or may not be consistent with group goals (e.g., social justice, equity, etc.).

Political Affiliations

Previous American research on the political affiliations of secular groups found that atheists were more likely to self-declare as independent with Democratic leanings (Baker and Smith 2015). More philosophically, Marcus Schulzke (2013) argues that new atheism itself is a liberal doctrine and that it follows a "well-established style of liberal political theory" (Schulzke 2013, 789). Even though most research points to atheists as being liberal and progressive (Cimino and Smith 2014), some scholars suggest that the new atheism movement is not progressive, and many atheists may, in fact, hold neoconservative positions. For example, Stephen LeDrew (2013, 2015) places emphasis on the role of libertarianism within the movement, that is, the normative political theory that prioritizes freedom of choice over other values

Consistent with findings that atheists tend towards left-wing political views, all my participants identified as "left," or "liberal," and most identified with traditionally left-of-center political parties, including the New Democratic Party (NDP), the Liberal Party of Alberta, the Alberta Party, and the Communist Party. I mention the political affiliations of my participants because those affiliations were important to them, especially given their view that left-wing parties were more pro-science than right-

wing parties. As one participant said, "Reality has a well-known liberal bias," highlighting some atheists' positions concerning the political spectrum. Below, I briefly describe each party.

The NDP is a social democratic party with historic ties to organized labor and the political left in Canada. In the May 5, 2015, provincial election, the Alberta NDP formed a majority government, defeating the incumbent Conservatives. Some secularists claimed to support the NDP because they wanted an alternative to the long-reigning center-right Conservatives. Most, however, supported the NDP because they saw it as a pro-science party, particularly when it came to climate change. Other reasons for their support included the party's history with social justice causes, including workers' rights, human rights, and income disparity.

Although NDP supporters were overrepresented in my interview sample (18) and among my informal participants, several secularists (5) supported the Liberal Party of Alberta, which they regarded as either a centrist or center-left party. The remaining interviewees expressed interest (without commitment) in some minority parties, including the centrist Alberta Party and the left-wing Communist Party. Some participants thought of the Alberta Party as occupying the space between the NDP and the conservatives. Early in its history, however, the Alberta Party expressed often intolerant right-wing views (Barsh et al. 1987). Its move towards the center appealed to secularists who could not stomach the major parties in the province. The

Communist Party is a provincial branch of the Communist Party of Canada and

positions itself against transnational corporations, promoting a platform based on

socialist ideas. Although some of the Marxists in my sample expressed solidarity with

the Communist Party, they thought the NDP would be more successful in

mainstreaming their views. Many of my remaining participants either gave no party

affiliation, planned a protest vote (e.g., against the provincial conservatives), chose not

to reveal their party affiliations, or were non-voters. Regardless of their party

affiliations, most of my participants identified with the left-wing of the political

spectrum.

Despite their use of labels such as "left" or "left-wing," six interviewees

explicitly expressed some sympathies towards what they called "small 'l'

libertarianism." One such participant, a self-described "socialist," claimed to have

"some things in common" with libertarians, given that he saw socialist and libertarian

thought as anti-authoritarian. Despite such comments, my participants' cautious

affinity for some forms of libertarianism did not play a significant role in determining

their party support. In other words, although some secularists may have had some

appreciation for libertarian arguments, they still voted for left-leaning parties like the

NDP. For example, Pat (age 34) described himself as having "classically liberal

tendencies," (using classical liberalism and libertarianism interchangeably) and yet, he

also self-identified as a long-time NDP supporter.

Some participants identified as socialists, Marxists, or communists. One secularist even described the NDP as an "essentially communist party." These kinds of declarations were not the norm. Rather, most secularists expressed ideological affinity with "social democracy," a kind of catch-all category for their general appreciation of Scandinavian welfare states. For example, Bonnie (age 39) described herself as a social democrat, praising Sweden for its education system and high levels of happiness,

> Scandinavian countries like Sweden seem to be happiest countries in the world. I understand that they invest a lot of money into health-care, education, and basically being kind to one another. I think we could use some of that here, not that Canada is bad or anything, but I still think Canadians are inherently conservative.

Despite some common-ground among self-described social democrats in my sample (their agreement about the apparent success of Scandinavian social democracy), most secularists had difficulty explaining their ideological inclinations. Nevertheless, there were some standard positions across interviewees.

Most of my participants were critical of contemporary forms of globalized, neo-liberal capitalism, and were supportive of redistributive taxation, and regulation of the economy. All my participants also held socially progressive positions, advocating for gun control, LGBTQ rights, reduction of race inequality, and access to abortion. Although I found significant overlap in political positions, many secularists were

hesitant to associate themselves with a political ideology, and they mainly emphasized the social dimensions of politics over fiscal issues, especially when discussing their differences with other atheists. For example, Connor (age 27) did not feel comfortable talking about economic issues with other members of the community,

> I don't really understand economics very well. Mostly, I just find it boring, but I would describe myself as left-wing. I know there's problems with the left-right spectrum, but [political quizzes] always put me somewhere on the libertarian left. I think it's because I'm pretty radical when it comes to stuff like abortion. Like, I think it should all be legal, prostitution, drug use […] as long as you're not hurting anyone.

Like Connor, several other participants emphasized the importance of social liberalism over any other distinguishing feature of their political leanings, and made frequent references to "equality of opportunity," and their commitment to "freedom of choice,"

> It all comes back to equality, doesn't it? Equality of opportunity. We don't have that. I know that I'm privileged and that impacts how I view the world. In practice, being on the left means being against discrimination and unfairness and being for individual human rights, freedom of choice, fairness, and helping each other out (Liz, age 44).

When I asked my interviewees how they saw themselves concerning other atheists,

they emphasized their worries about ideology, schisms, and fragmentation in the

community. They expressed an outsider-based, anti-system ideology consistent with

the "herding cats" analogy, that is, they expressed wariness about local and national

organizations and even the existence of an "atheist movement." For example, Sienna

(age 21) said that while she identified with the left, she was concerned about the

impact of ideological labels within atheism,

> Most atheists either want to keep their politics to themselves or they're run-of-
>
> the-mill centrists. Maybe we're center-left, but only slightly. But, our loudest
>
> people are SJWs. They want to control the conversation, and this is going to
>
> sound ridiculous, but they're in danger of turning atheism into a religion.
>
> They're not just concerned atheists or people who care about helping others.
>
> They want to spread a collectivist feminist ideology, and that's religion in my
>
> opinion.

Sienna's reflection on ideology and what she referred to as the "team sports" of

identity politics, is consistent with a general trend across participants, in the sense that

frequently they highlighted the importance of independence and autonomy in their

decision-making. The influence of feminists on local secularist politics also played a

major role in how my participants positioned themselves. Given some controversies

about the emergence of Atheism Plus (A+), they were perhaps aware of the

importance of distancing themselves from the faction as well as any form of feminist

atheism (Simmons 2017).

The term Atheism Plus refers to "'spaces, persons, and groups dedicated to

promoting social justice and countering misogyny, racism, homo/bi/transphobia,

ableism, and other such bigotry inside and outside of the atheist community'" (as cited

in Beaman and Tomlins 2014, 65). Although Atheism Plus no longer has much of a

presence within the atheist movement, many secularists affiliated with the faction

continue to argue that the secularist community has a "sexism problem" and that it is

an "old boys' club" (McCreight 2011; Smurthwaite 2016). Most of my participants

were hostile towards Atheism Plus and affirmed their individualism over the faction's

emphasis on identity politics.

In summary, this section provides an overview of the political affiliations of

secularists and some of their concerns about ideology. In the next section, I describe

several of the values important to secularists (i.e., they mentioned these values most

frequently in interviews). They include personal liberty, freedom of speech, and

individualism. After describing these values, I then reflect on the apparent emergence

of libertarian rationalism within the atheist movement.

Personal Liberty

All my participants valued liberty, which they variously described as "personal

freedom," the ability to act as individuals, without interference, and with emphasis on

holding and expressing views that others might deem controversial or offensive. Some

participants distinguished between positive and negative liberties, the former referring

to the opportunities that individuals have available for fulfilling their potentials. They

described negative liberty as freedom from external constraints. My participants

mainly saw negative liberty as more important than positive liberty, which they

associated with equality of outcome as opposed to equality of opportunity. For

example, Liam (age 33) distinguished between the two types of liberty as follows,

> Positive liberty is about entitlements. It's about handouts. It's never-ending.
>
> That's what SJWs want. They want everyone to be given what they want, and
>
> they have no problem taking from others who earned their keep to give it to
>
> them. Negative liberty means that no one is going to stop you from acting.
>
> That's as close as we get to freedom. Positive liberties are more intrusive.

Heady discussions of political philosophy aside, interviewees primarily reflected on

liberty as it related to their political lives outside of atheist activism, that is, they

expressed a desire to keep their broader beliefs and values separate from their atheist

activism or they desired a more politically neutral (or at least politically diverse)

movement,

> Being an atheist doesn't mean anything outside of 'I don't believe in God,' but
>
> I've seen some attempts to unite us under a political identity. I'm not interested
>
> in that. Who I vote for and my political viewpoints are my business. If I choose

to share them, cool, but I don't like it when [members of the executive] just

assume I'm on board with their values (Trevor, age 28).

Some participants saw local atheist organizations as biased political entities, and they

deliberately censored themselves given their perception that SJWs (particularly

feminists) were, as one participant suggested, "taking over the movement" by

demanding that members support social justice causes and engage in some form of

identity politics.

Freedom of Speech

Closely connected to the value of liberty, my participants overwhelmingly

supported freedom of speech, with many secularists describing themselves as "free

speech absolutists." Although some participants were hesitant to discuss their views

concerning liberty, they were not so timid when it came to advocating free expression.

They emphasized that free speech included the "freedom to offend" and, outside of

incitement to violence, most secularists were highly critical of attempts to curtail free

speech, even if such speech turned certain members off from participating in the

community.

Some participants made references to the expansion of "Orwellian speech

codes" and were concerned about the growth of political correctness in Canadian

society. Others talked about "left-wing authoritarianism" and the "regressive left," just

to name a few key phrases familiar to the online atheist community. Max (age 22)

expressed concern about the regressive left. The phrase regressive-left originates with

Maajid Nawaz' memoir, *Radical, My Journey out of Islamist Extremism* (Nawaz 2012

201) in which he applies the label to those on the left who seek to immunize Islam

against criticism. Max had the following to say about the phrase,

> The regressive left is basically in favor of censorship and shutting down free
>
> speech because they see themselves as politeness advocates. So, it's basically
>
> okay to stop people from speaking because they might offend someone. It's
>
> not that big of a deal in the atheist community, but [the regressive left] is having
>
> an impact here. You can't really criticize Islam, for example, or people will
>
> accuse you of being a racist. That has a chilling effect. We're only allowed to
>
> complain about Christianity, and that's it.

Although Nawaz had a specific usage in mind, several participants extended the

concept to refer to those on the left who valued postmodernism, cultural relativism,

and for whom freedom of speech had become just one value among many. For

example, Maisie (age 26) felt "betrayed by the left" because of its apparent turn away

from free expression. Similarly, Chris (age 24) argued that the left had once had an

"anti-authoritarian streak," but it had since abandoned that element of its politics in

favor of "postcolonial guilt." With these last two examples, my participants may be

indirectly expressing their hostility towards the social sciences and humanities. As

LeDrew (2015) argues, recent trends in atheist activism tend to equate the social

sciences with postmodernism and relativism (LeDrew 2015, 74).

Beyond concerns about the regressive left and politically correct movements, all

my participants felt that their atheism and the atheism of others depended on free

expression, which they saw as under threat because of a decreased tolerance for

offense-taking. For example, Richie (age 38) said that people don't have the "right to

not be offended," and he was particularly concerned about how religious groups

might co-opt political correctness movements to increase their privilege in public

spaces. Igor (age 34) had similar concerns, especially given what he saw as increasing

threats to free speech on campuses,

> *Maclean's* [a Canadian news magazine] had a piece on how most universities in
>
> Canada fail when it comes to free speech. Everyone wants safe spaces now, and
>
> they can't tolerate controversial ideas. If free speech isn't working on campuses,
>
> how is it going to work anywhere else?

Igor was not alone in his concerns, and many secularists felt that some members of

local atheist organizations were slowly giving ground to concerns about offense-

taking, such as inviting speakers who had a record of attempting to get members of

the community disinvited from secularist conferences.

Individualism and the Enlightenment

Often, philosophical discussions of atheism have emphasized the importance of the Enlightenment with its values of individualism and human reason. When asked to describe the Enlightenment, my participants overwhelmingly identified with these values as well as others, placing emphasis on reason and truth, privacy and individualism, free expression, and critical thinking.

In practice, my participants expressed their appreciation for Enlightenment values in several ways, the most potent being claims about the incompatibility of religion and reason, which other scholars have addressed in some detail (Lee 2017). More relevant to his chapter, secularists expressed a strong pro-science worldview, frequently mentioning the scientific method and skepticism. Marcus Schulzke (2013) argues that new atheists tacitly defend a political liberalism that emphasizes religion's threat to liberal values. My findings are consistent with this tacit liberalism in that my participants often discussed religion's threat to freedom of expression, but often they saw religion as an enemy of reason and all that entailed.

Many secularists saw the individual as the basic unit of social analysis, and often they focused on the importance of individual choices and responsibility. Paralleling this emphasis on individualism, many secularists expressed skepticism of collective plans and goals. Although they thought their actions had social significance, they emphasized the primarily private dimensions of their atheism. Consequently, they

often downplayed the importance of secularist organizations. For example, Sasha (age 31) claimed individualism was a strength of the secularist community,

> We don't really engage in groupthink. This is going to sound egotistical, but we're not followers. Many of us have really had to struggle to leave religion, to turn away from our families and friends, and leave our communities. It's pretty easy to do that in Canada, but I suspect that all atheists have a contrarian streak in them, and that makes them weary of groups.

Like Sasha, many participants mentioned atheists' contrarianism, often in positive terms. They saw their atheism as primarily a private affair, with organizations serving as social hubs rather than ideological authorities. Also, they expressed reticence to engage in activities that resembled religious activities, e.g., community-building events such as Sunday Assembly, which mimics the communal experiences of a church for the non-religious. For example, Connor (age 27) felt that some secularists wanted to make atheism a form of religion-lite,

> A lot of people leave religion and then as soon as they find an organization they go right back to their bad habits. They want to feel like they're part of something and that they can maybe find some comfort in the community. But, it's exactly that inclination that leads to all sorts of problems. It's like people who go from one relationship to another. They don't know how to be alone. I don't have a problem with people getting together to do something, but

there's something very dangerous and seductive about this emphasis on

community.

Despite their involvement in secularist organizations, many of my interviewees like

Connor and Sasha had reservations about what they variously described as "organized

atheism," the "atheist movement," or "New Atheism." For example, Raj (age 33)

thought secularists were "natural libertarians" because of their reticence to "join up"

due to their concerns about control or oppression from larger organizational bodies,

> Think about it, you grow up in a religious community that is designed from the
>
> ground up for coercion, to keep you in your place. When you escape from that,
>
> I think it's pretty natural to be skeptical of anything that resembles that. Maybe
>
> we take that too far, which is why we're not very organized, but it's a hard thing
>
> to get away from. Religion doesn't care about the individual. If you're the peg
>
> that sticks you get hammered down.

Not all of my participants shared Raj's views. Among secularists who identified as

socialists, a communitarian ethos played an important role in their lives, even as they

acknowledged that organizing other secularists was like "herding cats." They desired

more of secularist community, to both fulfill their desires for social change and to

replace what people lose when they leave religion,

> I think being an individual is an important component of being an atheist, but I
>
> don't think it's exclusive to atheists. A lot of geeks are individualistic. A lot of

programmers […] have that individualistic focus. But I still think we can have

some sense of community, as long as it's voluntary and accountable (Sean, age

34).

Regardless of how they conceptualized their individualism, most of my participants

preferred organic and informal social groupings and were skeptical of collectivism,

community, and organization, perhaps mirroring the "spiritual-but-not-religious"

discourse on privatized experience. For example, many of my participants associated

their individualism, at least in part, with freeing themselves from dogma and authority

structures. Sam (age 31) was adamant about "making a difference" on his own, free of

the "messiness of organizations." Trevor (age 28) talked about the do it yourself (DIY)

ethic of the atheist movement and avoiding "collectivist bullshit." Despite his strong

words on the matter, many shared Trevor's distastes for attempts to push the

movement in a direction.

Despite my participants' embrace of a radical individualism and their skepticism

of organizations, they were not apolitical or selfishly motivated. Rather, they practiced

a form of "lifestyle politics," living the ideals that they envisioned, such as pursuing a

rational life. This rational life included desires and passions, as well as an intellectual

repertoire grounded in the notion that that the methods of science should play a

significant role in daily life. In practice, this meant living consistently with the principles

of scientific skepticism, as well as a humanistic ethic that embraces the power of

human reason and rejects supernaturalism (Cimino and Smith 2007). Although anyone may embrace these beliefs and principles (i.e., the lifestyle), just as one may be a vegan without being a vegan activist, my participants embraced this lifestyle as their primary means of effecting social change.

On Libertarian Rationalism

Despite their claimed political affiliations (e.g., the NDP) and general left-wing orientations, my participants emphasized individual rights to the exclusion of almost everything else. They additionally adhered to what LeDrew (2015) describes as libertarian rationalism. Libertarian rationalism has several characteristics, including a confrontational stance towards religion, an emphasis on difference concerning identity construction, secularism, radical individualism, and economic libertarianism.

My participants met many of the characteristics LeDrew describes in his short typology. Most interviewees described themselves as "firebrand atheists," distinguishing themselves from "diplomatic" atheists. Firebrand atheism involves verbally expressing that religion is a lie and that belief does not warrant respect. Other important aspects of firebrand atheism include not accepting inequality (the idea that it has always been this way) and calling people out on their religious privilege. From a practical standpoint, what distinguishes firebrand atheists from other atheists is their unwillingness to entertain offense-taking. They feel respect should be earned, not

demanded, and in criticizing religion refuse to be silenced because of their criticisms

of religious beliefs.

Secularists used several pejorative terms to describe diplomatic atheists,

including "accommodationists" and "faitheists." In either case, many secularists were

critical of attempts to engage in bridge-building with religious communities. For

example, Tracy (age 21) felt that "Islam received a free pass" in local atheist groups

and that some members of the community were afraid of speaking out against

religion,

> A lot of atheists don't really want to be atheists. They want to go hang out at
>
> mosques and temples and have *Kum ba yah* [i.e., summer camp song]
>
> moments. [A president of a local group] is like that, despite calling herself a
>
> firebrand. She's not. She plays nice with all the local religious groups and won't
>
> criticize anything in front of anyone outside the group.

Despite strong words about diplomatic atheists in the community, most of my

participants were not interested in engaging in organized collective action or

promoting atheism more substantively. They instead placed significant emphasis on

privatized action, emphasizing everyday lifestyle choices. This focus on a personalized

politics explains their tenuous relationships with local organizations, and even for

those secularists who were more active in the community, building strong personal

connections with other atheists was not particularly important to their development as

atheists themselves. This hesitancy to engage with the community in conventional forms of activism is consistent with the findings of other Canadian scholars, who find that many Canadian atheists prefer to use atheist organizations as diffuse social hubs instead of the typical role assigned to social movement organizations (Tomlins 2015).

Despite possessing many of the traits LeDrew (2015) described, all my interviewees identified as socially liberal and placed significant emphasis on personal freedoms. They also expressed their distaste for what they variously described as conservatives' "heartlessness" and "selfishness." Sometimes this more general critique of political conservatism extended to libertarianism. As Bill (age 43) put it, "Not all assholes are libertarians, but all libertarians are certainly assholes." Bill explained his statement by referring to the fact that libertarians, like conservatives more generally, often opposed the welfare state and various social programs. Like Bill, my participants' opposition to conservatism most often rested on economic arguments, that is, most secularists opposed economic libertarianism.

Although many of my interviewees shared some values with libertarians, including an emphasis on individualism, liberty, and free speech absolutism, most expressed concerns about libertarianism (and conservatism more generally). They paid attention to the psychological dispositions of self-identified libertarians, including lack of empathy, low levels of agreeableness, and their general ambivalence towards

altruism and positive liberty (Iyer et al. 2012). For example, Max (age 22) described

libertarians as being aggressive,

> Libertarians are almost always the most vocal at group events. I honestly
>
> wonder if they're on the [Autism] spectrum because they just blurt out facts and
>
> information, and they always have something to say about 'liberty,' even when
>
> it's not relevant to the discussion.

The notion that libertarians generate conflict within secularist groups was a common

refrain among several participants, who also expressed their relief that libertarians

were unlikely to show up to atheist events on any regular basis because of their

"introversion" and inability to cope with different political views. For example, Sienna

(age 21) described libertarians as "political bullies",

> [Libertarians] are so definite about what they believe. It's almost like a religion
>
> for them. Taxation is theft! Taxation is theft! And you can't get them to even
>
> take into account your position. They just shout you down and then claim that
>
> they're the reasonable ones.

Sienna, like many of my participants, linked her criticisms of libertarians within the

atheist movement to either their economic positions (opposition to government

participation in the marketplace), or to personality characteristics that they attributed

to libertarianism, such as "social awkwardness" and lack of empathy.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to describe the complex political identities and values of Edmonton-area secularist activists. My findings show that some secularists celebrate the values of liberty, free speech, and individualism. Given these values, it is not surprising that some scholars have noticed a rightward turn in secularist activism. Indeed, many of my participants expressed sympathies with libertarianism, but their political values and identities were far more complex than conventional political categories, which may misrepresent the views of many atheists. To this point, most of my interviewees were conventionally left-wing, supporting left-of-center parties, or expressed broad support for left-wing positions, such as socialism or government control of the economy. Nevertheless, they expressed some support for right-wing "individualism," and held some conventionally libertarian positions, particularly regarding liberty and free expression.

With this chapter, I did not seek to create a political typology of secularists, but to describe the identities and viewpoints of some secularist activists in a Canadian municipality. Also, my intent was primarily descriptive and exploratory, rather than attempting to advance universal claims. Although my findings are not generalizable, they may help guide future research. Such research in this area could provide more understanding of secularists' political identities, moving beyond survey data. Gaining a deeper and more nuanced understanding of political behavior among atheists would

make significant contributions to atheism scholarship. Future research should also look more deeply into how American and Canadian atheists differ regarding their political identities and values.

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CHAPTER SIX: SKEPTICISM AS A LIFESTYLE MOVEMENT

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines atheist activists from a lifestyle movement perspective. I focus on how atheist activists adopt the term "skeptic" as a distinct identity marker to represent their growing interest in other types of activism beyond atheist community building and the criticism of religious beliefs. My data comes from thirty-five interviews with Canadian atheist activists and participant observation in the province of Alberta. In contrast to previous social movement approaches to atheist activism, I deemphasize the importance of collective identity in atheist activism and instead attend to personal identity as the site of social change. My findings show that being a skeptic is a personally meaningful identity in the context of a relatively weak secularist collective identity (Smith and Cimino 2012). Moreover, atheist activists who also identify as skeptics wish to expand the boundaries of the atheist movement to include individualistic projects of personal affirmation based on science and critical thinking. This work contributes to our understanding of the everyday activities of activists who engage in individual action in the absence of a strong collective identity. This chapter expands our understanding of lifestyle movements beyond the current focus on socially conscious consumption. Instead, I return to the roots of lifestyle movement theory, that is, how one's everyday choices serve as a form of protest. Finally, this work contributes

atheism scholarship, which has neglected the diversity of individual identities within atheist organizations and among atheist activists.

Introduction

Empirical studies of secularist or atheist activism in Canada are relatively uncommon and new, with only a handful of Canadian scholars studying atheists in general, let alone from a social movement perspective (e.g., Beaman 2014; Stahl 2015; Tomlins 2015, 2016). Drawing on the insights of recent social movement theory, particularly scholarship concerned with lifestyles and everyday actions, I contribute to this scant literature on Canadian atheism by describing how some secularists integrate Western secular and scientific values into a personalized politics focused on living a well-reasoned life. My central argument is that some secularists deemphasize the role of non-belief in their lives, prefer the identity marker "skeptic" to an "atheist," and eschew atheist pride for a broader worldview based on scientific principles.

This chapter's concern with skepticism derives in part from the emergence of a cultural movement known as "new atheism." New atheism is a vague umbrella term, but typically it describes a literary genre that began with the release of Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* (2004). Several other new atheist books followed, including Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* (2006), Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (2006), and Christopher Hitchens's *God is Not Great, How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007).

Scholarly interest in new atheism and the flourishing of more visible forms of non-religion have resulted in a flourishing literature about atheist identity and activism.

Within the context of secularist activism, and scholars' focus on atheists, the words "skeptic" and "skepticism" refer to what some adherents view as a distinct but related identity and philosophy concerned with scientific inquiry and the debunking of modern beliefs in conspiracies, magic, the supernatural, and scientifically impossible phenomena. Indeed, some prominent skeptics have exposed psychics, spiritualists, and mediums (Randi 1988). More recently, in early 2008, physicist Simon Singh wrote an article critical of chiropractic medicine for *The Guardian* (Singh 2016). The British Chiropractic Association (BCA) subsequently sued him for libel. Two years later, the organization withdrew its lawsuit due in part to the actions of skeptics (Nattrass 2013; Riesch and Mendel 2014). The Singh libel case is just one example of public secularist activism shaped by skepticism and more general current of anti-supernaturalism among atheists. Although skepticism is worth examining its own right, as a means of understanding the ideologies that undergird contemporary atheism, this chapter's primary concern is with how secularists experience their politics and values, integrating movement goals into multiple aspects of their daily lives.

Previous studies of atheism have investigated the social movement dynamics of secularist activism in several contexts, and a growing body of research focuses on the how atheists' collective identity manifests (Guenther and Mulligan 2013; Smith 2013).

Unfortunately, the literature remains limited when it comes to addressing variations in individual identities and how activists negotiate such identities within secularist organizations. Given that new forms of social movements are segmented and polycentric (Turner 2013), it is surprising that scholarly interest in intra-movement conflicts among secularists is mainly limited to discussions of political clashes (i.e., the de-platforming of bloggers, whether atheists should denigrate religion, and the role of social justice activism in the movement [Kettell 2013]). In response to this lack of research, this chapter highlights some internal divisions within the secularist community concerning individual identity differences, while additionally highlighting my participants' frustration with conventional atheism and their desire for a more robust movement.

Researchers have discussed the "conversion" process of becoming an atheist, coinciding with a greater appreciation of scientific and secular explanations of the world (Smith 2013). Nevertheless, the identity formation processes of "active" atheists are heterogeneous, and collective identity is a crucial element in these processes. Stephen LeDrew (2013) argues, however, that atheism may not follow "traditional structure-centered approaches" to collective action. Given that secularist activism is identity-based, most scholarship concerns the role that secularist organizations play in atheist collective identity construction. The literature's narrow focus on movement organizations is understandable given the relatively recent "awakening" among

atheists, as seen in the growth of non-believer organizations across the United States (Cimino and Smith 2014; Langston, Hammer, and Cragun 2015).

Although this chapter builds on past social movement approaches to atheism, the secularist organizations featured in this study were diffuse and segmented. Few of the secularists had engaged in organized activism, and most expressed limited identification with local groups or the broader community of secularists. For many of my participants, disagreement about identity, the definition of "atheism" itself, and how to do secularist activism was the norm. This independent-mindedness is consistent with the atheism literature, but American atheists make their independence part of their collective identity and engage in organized collective action (Smith 2013). Unlike their American counterparts, the Canadian secularists featured in this study embraced an approach to activism more typical of lifestyle movements.

In this theoretically informed and empirically based study, I rely on Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones's (2012) conceptualization of lifestyle movements as a "loosely bound [collectivity] in which participants advocate lifestyle change" as a primary means to social change (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones's 2012, 14). Although a sense of "we-ness" is essential to lifestyle movements, the collective identity may be relatively "weak" in comparison to conventional social movements.

In addition to providing a lifestyle movement approach to secularist activism, this chapter contributes to the limited but growing focus on atheists in Canada.

Qualitative research concerning atheists focuses on the American context for reasons that include the influence of the Christian Right and more general anti-atheist sentiment in some US states. Although research on atheism in Canada is limited, atheism does appear to be growing, which is consistent with other trends in first world countries (Cipriani and Garelli 2016; Tomlins 2015).

I do not intend to compare Canadian and American atheists, but some of my findings complement the work of other Canadian scholars who find allusions to "Canadian politeness"[14] and a more general interest in community-building rather than confrontational activism among some atheists (Tomlins 2015). Throughout the analysis, I show that in the absence of American "patriotic atheism," some Canadian secularists nevertheless make use of US atheist discourses, and express views comparable to what US scholars have identified as the growth of libertarian rationalism within the movement (e.g., LeDrew 2015). This "radical individualism" correlated with my participants' emphasis on personal identities as the primary site of social change (Lorenzen 2012; Portwood-Stacer 2012).

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[14] Although the Firebrands in my typology (chapter four) practised conversational intolerance and were more strident in their views, they were nevertheless polite in encounters with religious people.

Lifestyle Movements

The differences between the skeptics featured in this study and other secularist activists are primarily meaningful at the individual level. Most of my participants saw their activism as a personal and everyday project involving thinking like scientists, eliminating delusions and magical thinking, and taking responsibility for educating others about the dangers of scientific misinformation and pseudoscience. This emphasis on personalized politics is consistent with lifestyle movement scholarship that emphasizes the affective, intimate, and ethical elements of individualized activism such as green living, veganism, and boycotting.

Lifestyle movements are relatively diffuse, promoting a more ground-up form of activism that emphasizes everyday practices. Activists' individual actions create new opportunities for social change, and many social movements sustain themselves through the everyday choices of individuals submerged in informal networks (Yangzom 2016). Within these networks, activists interact with one another through mutual influence (Manbridge and Flaster 2007).

Lifestyles can and do lead to collective participation in the public sphere, even in the absence of contentious politics, but they more often result in personalized forms of social change. For example, recent social movement research has highlighted the importance of consumers acting individually and the consequent rise of socially conscious consumption (e.g., Cherry 2015). Similarly, lifestyle activists engage in a

personalized politics that emphasizes a "commitment to live consistently, according to certain principles within and across societal roles" (Micheletti and Stolle 2010).

Given that lifestyles assist in organizing self-identity and self-expression, recent lifestyle movement scholarship has understandably focused on consumption practices, that is, consumer goods and their relationship to identity (Lorenzen 2012). Although conscious consumption played a role in my participants' lives, this chapter focuses on their quests for integrity, attempts to differentiate themselves from other secularists, and their private, individualized, everyday activism.

Data and Methods

The material for this study comes from a broader, two-year project focused on Canadian secularist activism in the province of Alberta. I followed a qualitative case study research design to investigate the phenomenon of secularist activism in-depth, using multiple methods of data collection (Hancock and Algozzine 2015; Snow and Trom 2002). I used participant observation and semi-structured interviews as my primary data collection methods. I transcribed data from all participants, which I then analyzed through open coding in NVivo, a qualitative data storage and coding software. I then categorized open codes into a more structured coding scheme.

I drew my core participants from a larger sample of fifty secularists from several atheist organizations in Alberta with a combined offline and online membership of over 1500 people. I conducted a total of thirty-five semi-structured interviews,

focusing on secularists who were involved with at least one secularist organization. My

sample included sixteen women and nineteen men, ranging from ages nineteen to

sixty-three. Interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes and focused on

secularist identity and activism. Additionally, I asked about my participants' views

concerning science, their political leanings, stigma and the persecution of atheists, and

various secularist labels including skeptic, secular humanist, rationalist, and freethinker.

The largest Edmonton group was the Society of Edmonton Atheists, which is

where I conducted the bulk of my participant observation because it had the most

events, featured more prominently in the local media, and had established

relationships with other organizations in Canada. The Society of Edmonton Atheists

eventually came to dominate my thinking on secularist organizations in the area. I

conducted my earliest interviews with two other organizations, The University of

Alberta Atheists and Agnostics and the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society. I chose

the former because of its typicality as a University secularist club. I chose the latter

because of its exceptionality, given that its participants distinguished the group from

other secularist organizations in the region, even though overlap between groups was

common.

I began my study after receiving approval from the University of Alberta

Research Ethics Office (REO) in 2014. I contacted each organization through e-mail or

Facebook, informing each executive of my research and my desire to interview

participants. After some discussions with members of their respective executives, the three groups granted me access. Although half of my participants associated themselves with the Society of Edmonton Atheists as their primary organization, most had past and present involvement with other organizations. Given a significant amount of overlap between groups both regarding the issues and the activists involved, I found it difficult to impose classifications. For example, the members of the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society spent as much, if not more time, discussing religion than the members of the Society of Edmonton Atheists. Nevertheless, I categorized members according to their organizational affiliations even as I saw the same people at various events. Later, I de-emphasized such categorizations, as more members of my sample revealed that they did not place importance on their membership to organizations, even if they went to some length in distinguishing skeptic" groups from "atheist" groups.

Earlier in the project, I had planned to include secular humanists, mostly because secular humanism appeared to be a focal point of secularist activism in the region, at least from cursory glances at secularist websites and their social media presence. Consequently, I met with a local secular humanist group, but meetings were infrequent and attended by few people with no overlap with the other organizations. Also, as my project matured, I learned that many of my participants had a dim view of secular humanism in Edmonton, variously describing members as "not really atheists,"

or "woo-woo," the latter term signifying that they were not skeptical, e.g., they were in favor of pseudoscience. The few secular humanist group members I did encounter did not think of themselves as activists and had little interest in building a secularist community.

Most of my participants had some level of postsecondary education, with many possessing an undergraduate degree or higher. Since University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics was a university club, all my interviewees were pursuing undergraduate degrees, though (over the course of my research) several left the group to join other organizations. the Society of Edmonton Atheists' executive talked about making a University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics a satellite group, but this idea never manifested. Concerning religious traditions, most had a Christian background. Two participants had grown up in explicitly atheist or agnostic households. Two participants had Muslim backgrounds, one had Neopaganism affiliations, and another identified as culturally Jewish. Most of my participants identified as "left" or "liberal," although I noticed a developing consensus that local groups contained many libertarians.

Skepticism

Although skepticism has a long history in philosophy, most prominent self-described skeptics associate modern skepticism with Martin Gardner's In the *Name of Science, An Entertaining Survey of the High Priests and Cultists of Science, Past and*

Present (1952). Gardner surveyed a variety of pseudosciences, including Flat and Hollow Earth theories, UFO cults, dowsing, Atlantis, and various forms of what we now call complementary and alternative medicine, such as homeopathy, osteopathy, and chiropractic.

For most of my participants, skepticism encompassed a distinct form of individualistic activism primarily focused on what they regarded as "extraordinary claims," which has become an axiom of skepticism (Goertzel and Goertzel 2015). One can trace this emphasis on extraordinary claims back to the concerns of skeptical societies and other "rationalist" organizations that supported late-nineteenth and early twentieth century efforts to investigate and debunk paranormal claims (Hammer 2007).

According to the late philosopher Paul Kurtz (1925-2012), who remains an influential figure in secularist discourse, today's skepticism is "a method of doubt that demands evidence and reasons for hypotheses" (Kurtz 2010, 20), with inquiry being the primary goal. In addition to a method of doubt, Kurtz described skepticism as an essential part of scientific inquiry that should extend to "all areas of human endeavor, science, everyday life, law, religion and the paranormal, economics, politics, ethics, and society" (Kurtz 2010, 226). Consequently, "scientific skepticism" or skeptical inquiry is positive and constructive, selective, and contextual, and based on the everyday practice of wisdom. The term *eupraxsophy* is relevant to this outlook, which

derives from the Greek roots *eu* (good), *praxis* (practice), and *sophia* (wisdom) to refer

to a life lived by logic, observation, and science (Kurtz 2010).

As a lifestyle movement, skepticism has two layers (Hammer 2007, 388-389).

The first layer consists of a small number of activist researchers and science writers

who act as cultural entrepreneurs or movement authorities (Haenfler, Johnson, and

Jones 2012). Early examples included Kurtz, the magician James Randi (b. 1928),

psychologist Ray Hyman (b. 1928), and sociologist Marcello Truzzi (1935-2003). Today,

the most active professional skeptic is likely historian Michael Shermer (b. 1954), editor

of *Skeptic* magazine. The second layer of skepticism includes more passive secularists

who read skeptical literature and attempt to employ skepticism in their everyday lives.

My participants were of the second layer, sharing a hobby-like interest in

understanding and critiquing pseudoscience and the paranormal.

Several organizations support the work of professional skeptics and provide

community and ideological coherence for skeptics. They include the Committee for

the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (abbreviated CSICOP until a

rebranding in 2006 to the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry), which is a program within

the non-profit educational organization Center for Inquiry (CFI); The James Randi

Educational Foundation (JREF); and The Skeptic's Society. In addition to various

organizations and their products, e.g., journals like *Skeptical Inquirer* and *Skeptic*,

secularists who embrace a skeptical lifestyle engage in self-publishing, blogging,

podcasting, and remixing various media. YouTube is a favorite space for secularist

activists enthused about skepticism (Farley 2009).

In Canada, the largest secular organization that caters in some fashion to

skeptics is CFI Canada, which prioritizes human rights, education, and critical thinking,

as well as science through campaigns such as 10,23, which raises awareness about

homeopathy and includes "overdoses" on homeopathic pills to illustrate their

ineffectiveness. According to LeDrew (2012), the CFI is in the tradition of "scientific

atheism," which surmises that we can eradicate religion through scientific critique.

Outside of CFI Canada, several smaller organizations have catered to skeptic interests

over the years, but most exist primarily at the provincial or even municipal level. Few

of my participants had affiliations with CFI and their main entry-point into organized

skepticism consisted of Edmonton-area groups. Despite having limited national

representation, many of my participants made regular "pilgrimages" to The Amazing

Meeting (TAM), an annual skepticism conference in Las Vegas, Nevada, sponsored by

the James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF).

Although all the secularists I interviewed belonged to at least one secularist

organization and attended atheist and skeptic conferences in Western Canada when

possible, they only occasionally engaged in typical social movement behavior (e.g.,

marching, and protesting on behalf of various causes related to their interests [such as

protesting a TV psychic, challenging complementary and alternative medicine, and so

on]). They were reticent to organize, suspicious of group identifications, and wary of what one participant described as "tribalism" within the movement.

Being a Skeptic

My participants sometimes used the terms skepticism and atheism interchangeably, even if they acknowledged that skepticism had a distinct mission, organizational history, and "culture." Some secularists were more discriminating, viewing atheism as a position and skepticism as a way of life. To illustrate this distinction, one of the more common phrases I encountered during my fieldwork was, "Not all atheists are skeptics, not all skeptics are atheists," speaking to the perception among some secularists that skepticism is a distinct movement (e.g., Loxton 2013). Although my participants emphasized the importance of their skepticism and distinguished themselves from "naïve atheists" (one participant's term for secularists who lacked a broader and more skeptical worldview), they were loosely networked, and only occasionally engaged with formal organizations.

One explanation for my participants' limited valuing of organizations is that even though all the groups featured in my study embraced elements of scientific skepticism, only one made skepticism the group's primary focus, that is, the Greater Edmonton Skeptics' Society. In the absence of more skeptic-specific groups, my participants found community in other secularist organizations (e.g., the Society of Edmonton Atheists). As one participant explained, atheist activism in Edmonton

sufficiently resembles skeptical activism that the distinction between atheism and

skepticism is mainly semantic,

> I don't see a difference, to be honest, but I do remember when everyone
>
> started talking about new atheism. A lot of skeptics were pretty annoyed
>
> because Dawkins [and other prominent atheists] were treading on their turf,
>
> using scientific arguments to challenge religion. Today, we all basically do the
>
> same thing […] and challenge all forms of pseudoscience (Marco, age 26).

The notion that atheists and skeptics are the same finds some support in non-religion

scholarship, where the distinctions that secularists make between the two identity

markers seems incidental to literature's greater emphasis on collective identities.

Despite multiple self-representations, many secularists place significant

emphasis on science, the scientific method, and the pursuit of knowledge. In his

typology of non-religion, Cotter (2011) describes "The Naturalistic Type," referring to

those secularists who have an aversion to faith, share a "materialistic" outlook, and

emphasize a lack of evidence when it comes to the possible existence of God or gods.

Skepticism is central to the Naturalistic Type in the sense that secularists have a high

degree of "doubtfulness," hence Johannes Quack's (2011) observation about

organized rationalism in India,

> The notion 'ideology of doubt' captures, therefore, what the rationalists aim at
>
> evoking within their fellow Indians. Yet, it refers also to a rhetorical element

within their self-perception that stresses the openness of rationalism and those who try to spread it against the dogmas of religions and the stubbornness of their representativeness" (Quack 2011, 274).

Given the parallels between my participants' skepticism and the Naturalistic Type, I considered using Cotter's typology, but my participants' naturalism (and ideology of doubt) extended beyond conventional atheism and a scientific positionality regarding religion or other spiritual realities.

My participants thought their actions had social purposes, but they emphasized the individual, and mostly private, aspects of their skepticism, providing a second possible explanation for their casual relationships with Edmonton-area organizations. As Pat (age 34) explained, skeptics are not "team players." Will (age 29) put a more positive spin on skeptics' individualism, arguing that skepticism was a "private thing, and [organizations] are more like social hubs than anything else." In addition to downplaying the importance of local organizations, my participants shared an ambivalent and contested relationship with the broader movement, at times distancing themselves from American-style organized activism as well as prominent figures in the movement, (e.g., Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and Dennett). For example, Will questioned the "movementness" of secularist activism,

Mostly, we just do our own thing, you know? You could call us activists if you wanted, but really, what does that mean? I think it's super personal. When was

the last time you saw atheists or skeptics marching? I mean, it would be kind of fun, but we're so different. Like, what unites us? Not believing in God and thinking Bigfoot is silly?

Like participants in other lifestyle movements, the views of individual secularists varied considerably regarding how secularist activism should look at the macro level, leading to disagreements about the best approach to cultivating identities per their principles.

Although some secularists were satisfied with the direction of atheist activism and its scientific analysis of religion (e.g., scientific atheism [LeDrew, 2015]), many were not, and attempted to distance themselves from what they referred to as naïve or "dictionary atheists," referring to those atheists who lacked an interest in skepticism. Ryan (age 31) described dictionary atheists to me as part of his larger critique of local activism,

I'm a skeptic first and an atheist second, you know? I doubt you will find anyone who hates religion as much as me—I am more of an anti-theist than anything. But, it's not enough to just be an atheist. We don't live in a theocracy, right?

Ryan's frustrations with the perceived myopia of secularist activism in Edmonton was a frequent observation and complaint among my interviewees, who found their personal projects more engaging than the broader discourse of secularist activism, including the works of the new atheists.

Despite their involvement in secularist organizations and their attachment to an imagined community of like-minded individuals, many of my interviewees had reservations about what they variously described as "organized atheism," the "atheist movement," or "new atheism." Raj (age 33), for example, was critical of what he called a "cult of personality" regarding the "leaders" of the movement (e.g., Dawkins),

> [We] atheists can be very taken in by the cult of the personality. You know, so you have in atheist groups themselves, you have people completely taken by certain figures without even questioning them.

Raj was particularly concerned that atheists' lack of skepticism about claims outside of religion. Speaking of this desire for more critical thinking from atheists, Sean (age 34) thought anti-supernaturalism and an emphasis on critical thinking should take priority over atheism, broadening the vision of the movement,

> There are huge a number of atheists … that are incredibly dogmatic about their beliefs, that are incredibly unfair and unrealistic about what other people think, about treating the arguments for certain positions a certain way; who are great at straw-manning and all these sorts of things that just sort of prop up their own position without ever making sure their own position is the correct position.

Of note in some critiques of atheism, many interviewees felt that conventional atheist activism had run its course, especially given the growth of religious "nones," and what they saw as the decline of religion in the Western world.

In addition to distancing themselves from conventional atheists, many secularists emphasized the importance of individualism to skepticism, linking their Enlightenment ideology to lifestyle approaches to activism. For example, Terry (age 43) talked about skepticism's important role in avoiding tribalism, "To be a good skeptic, I think you have to kind of dislike organizing, groups, tribes. You have to take a libertarian approach." Similarly, Raj (age 33) thought skeptics were "natural libertarians." Although secularists share some ideological features that lend themselves to individualism (LeDrew, 2015), my participants' focus on individual change in aggregate is consistent with previous work on lifestyle movements, such as vegetarianism (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012).

Although many conventional atheists adopt a libertarian individualism, particularly in the United States (LeDrew 2015), my participants were concerned primarily with attempts to make atheism "into a religion," with events like Sunday Assembly, which mimic the communal experiences of a church for the non-religious. Despite being pleased with the growth of atheism, Connor (age 27) criticised his fellow secularists for attempting to provide secular alternatives to religious institutions and activities,

> We are not here to provide people with community or 'religion lite.' You can
>
> join the Unitarian Universalists if you want that. We're supposed to be about
>
> critical thinking and challenging dogma, but it seems like all anyone wants to do

is prove to everyone that atheists are just like everyone else. This attitude also

leaks into the politics of atheism.

Connor's reference to the "politics of atheism," highlighted a growing tension among

secularists over whether the movement should embrace social justice values. This

debate escalated with the rise of Atheism Plus (A+), its primary focus being the

advancement of a form of feminism within the movement (Amarasingam and Brewster

2016; Simmons 2017).

Not all my participants shared an individualistic or libertarian view of skepticism,

particularly some members of the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society who identified

as "Marxists" or "socialists," and who linked skepticism to a communitarian ethos,

even as they acknowledged that organizing other secularists was like "herding cats."

In this communitarian spirit, the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society members wanted

to create a space for both non-religious and religious skeptics to engage in critical

thinking. Ryan (age 31) underscored the fact that Martin Gardner, who was an early

founder of contemporary skepticism, believed in God,

> It's kind of a myth that you need to be an atheist to be a skeptic. Gardner
>
> believed in God, and I've definitely encountered religious people at skeptic
>
> events. They may not be evangelicals and Biblical literalists, but they definitely
>
> believe in something. Even though I'm an atheist, I think that what makes us
>
> different from garden-variety atheists is that we welcome everyone.

Although my participants discussed efforts to welcome theists into the Greater

Edmonton Skeptics Society, I did not encounter any religious skeptics during my

fieldwork, and most "leaders" and members of skeptic organizations are atheists, even

if some groups do not present themselves as explicitly atheistic (Hammer 2007;

Mendham 2011).

Although some secularists emphasized the importance of community, many

more (including members of the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society) were adamant

about the importance of private action, applying their skepticism in all areas (including

politics), and the immunizing properties of individualism concerning ideology. They

regularly spoke of autonomy, self-determinism, and being free from the influence of

"groupthink" and group conformity. In other words, they prioritized Enlightenment

values over what one participant described as "collectivism," suggesting a preference

for individual freedoms over communitarian values of diversity, justice, and solidarity

(LeDrew 2015).

Given my participants' ideological emphasis on personal freedoms, their

skepticism of ideologies, and their preference for privatized action, building strong

personal connections with other Edmonton-area secularists was not particularly

relevant to their lives. They mainly focused on sharing ideas through online forums or

blogs and social media websites like Facebook. This minimizing of organizations is like

other lifestyle movements, which are more likely to have an "imagined community,"

made up of those who share the same commitments (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012, 8). Despite my participants' individualism, they integrated secularist public discourses in their daily lives. As Laura Portwood-Stacer (2012) argues, individualistic activists who feel an affinity with an imagined community can "see themselves and their activities as part of a larger collective of individuals who are living in similar ways" (Portwood-Stacer 2012, 7), even if their identity-work manifests as an outsider-based, anti-system ideology.

Participants often discussed the impact of skepticism on their desire for independence and autonomy, linking critical thinking with their attempts to free themselves from dogma and authority structures. In this regard, skepticism is like other lifestyle movements such as the modern homesteading movement, in that skeptics "opt out of" what they see as immoral systems, and distance themselves from anything that resembles those systems (Radke 2016). At the same time, my participants were optimistic about their lifestyles. Many interviewees thought their individualistic approaches to activism could make the world a better place, by searching for truth throughout their lives and by being exemplars of rational living.

"Doing" Skepticism

Regardless of which identity marker my participants preferred, or how they viewed the state of secularist activism, all emphasized the process of adopting skepticism as a lifestyle concerned with the discovery of truth. Despite this

commonality, secularists did vary in how they came to skepticism and how their daily

activities contributed to their sense of self. For many, atheist groups were a "gateway

drug" to skepticism as a lifestyle,

> I'm an atheist, and I advocate for atheism, but after a while, I started noticing
>
> just how common nonsense is, whether it's belief in Bigfoot, alien abductions,
>
> or the Tarot. I think it's great that I can talk about those issues at atheist groups.
>
> But, the longer I do this, the more I realize that it's not about what you think,
>
> but how you think, and all of us have—we all have a long way to go (Serena,
>
> age 25).

Serena's description of atheism leading her to a path of thinking critically about a

wider variety of issues resonated with my other participants who also linked their

irreligiousness with an overall re-evaluation of their beliefs.

Although many secularists came to skepticism through a gradual process,

others had more catalytic experiences, or what Elizabeth Cherry (2015) describes as a

tipping point in the adoption of a lifestyle. For example, Liz (age 44) described

learning about her sister's use of complementary and alternative medicine as a cancer

treatment as the motivation behind her later interest in skepticism,

> Here I am complaining about prayer in public schools while my sister is going
>
> on a detox diet to 'cure' her breast cancer. Religion isn't going away, and my

concerns seemed so petty and pointless at the time. That's when I started

looking into cancer quackery, and one thing led to another.

Although not every story was quite as severe as Liz's experiences with pseudoscience,

my other participants did describe "lightbulb moments" that pushed them to look

more deeply into learning about science and critical thinking. As with Cherry's (2015)

findings regarding vegans, my participants reconstructed their identities around

"moral and ethical issues" (Cherry 2015, 61) that emerged because of their growing

concerns about the harms of pseudoscience. For example, Richie (age 38) described

how he became a skeptic after attending a lecture by alternative medicine advocate

Deepak Chopra (b. 1947),

> The girl I was dating at the time was deep into her Indian spirituality. Even
>
> though I was an atheist at that time, I didn't really think atheism was opposed to
>
> spirituality. I have a physics background, okay, and so … I am sitting there
>
> listening to this guy talk about quantum physics, and it suddenly hit me that this
>
> guy has no idea of what he was talking about. It was complete and utter
>
> nonsense, to the point that it made me wonder if he had ever taken a physics
>
> class before. After that, exposing people like Deepak took up way more space
>
> in my head than whether we should remove references to God [from the
>
> Canadian national anthem].

Through atheist groups, particularly the Society of Edmonton Atheists, Richie found an outlet for his desire to combat pseudoscience and consequently participated in a homeopathy overdose on his YouTube channel. At the time of the interview, he was considering going back to school to continue his science education with the hope of strengthening his commitment to a rational life.

Although most of my interviewees were atheists-turned-skeptics, a minority did not experience much in the way of identity change and lacked the light bulb moments that I described earlier. Rather, they had an early, hobby-like interest in pseudoscience and the paranormal. Unlike most of my participants, they were less concerned about the harms attributed to pseudoscience than improving their reasoning skills. Despite their arriving at skepticism through a different process than my other participants, the hobbyists were nonetheless interested in a prefigurative politics, that is, in manifesting a better more rational society in their daily choices and activities. In other words, they were not merely satisfied with being "cheerleaders for science," as Marco (age 26) elaborated,

> I think a lot of people see us as geeks, and that's it, but for me … it's more than just saying 'science is usually right.' It's a process for all of us, a process of refinement in our thinking and also … it's about how we see the world. You know? It's easy to dismiss that for some reason as if it's just a fun thing we do on the weekends.

Rather than just seeing his atheism as related to a scientific understanding of the universe, Marco saw himself as well as other secularists as having a responsibility to uphold a worldview that privileges a naturalistic view of reality.

Continuous with Marco's emphasis on personal responsibility, many of my participants emphasized the moral basis of their activism, whether it was a voice against pseudoscience because of their potential harms or reinforcing a rational worldview and asserting that truth or the wisdom of any course of action. According to Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones (2012), the primary tactic for many lifestyle movements, particularly those that are critical of consumption practices, includes a quest for personal integrity, and a transformation of their lives for the better. Sasha (age 31) said that following her journey as a skeptic made her happier,

> I know it's cheesy, but I see myself as a seeker of truth, and it's actually a lot of fun! A lot of people think skeptics are grouchy but being skeptical has really helped me with my depression … and dealing with life's up and downs.

Sasha described herself as a "born again" optimist due to her belief that reason could triumph over most problems. Similar expressions of optimism featured heavily in both my interviews and informal conversations. My participants often stressed that rather than leading to disenchantment, science's unveiling of the world opened their eyes to new forms of wonder, enriching their lives.

Although my participants acknowledged the positive impact skepticism had on their daily lives, they shaped their identities out of their desire for social change, with many secularists emphasizing the mundane aspects of living a rational life. For example, Sienna (age 21) believed the "personal is political" and that "individuals can change their world" simply by attempting to be a more rational person. Doing "skepticism" for many secularists consequently involved living a never-ending process of revision—particularly the review of their beliefs. On this account, many interviewees described themselves as "works in progress," working on "being more skeptical," or "trying to be more scientific." For example, Chris (age 24) described his activism as follows,

> It's a struggle to integrate skepticism in my life, but I start with simple things … I avoid organic food and stuff like that … I deliberately go for the GMO [genetically modified] stuff. When I'm in [a pharmacy], I always read the claims on the shampoo bottle, not because I'm worried about 'chemicals,' but because I don't want to spend money on silliness. More than anything, it's just me trying to get myself in order because if you slip up at all, skeptics will call you out!

Chris emphasized one-on-one interactions and "leading by example" when it came to thinking critically about certain issues. When asked about the relationship between his daily choices and activism, Chris admitted to having changed people's minds without necessarily intending to do so, "It's a slow thing for sure, but I've seen people change.

My sister used to believe in all that chakra, energy healing stuff, but now she doesn't."

Other secularists had similar stories about the impact of both passive and active

skeptical interventions on others.

Although my participants valued the roles they played in changing minds, much

of their enjoyment of skepticism involved cultivating a morally coherent sense of self

and supporting influencers who reflected the principles of the broader movement. The

notion that they could be positive exemplars of "good thinking," played a significant

role in this identity work, but as Bill (age 43) explained, skepticism was in many ways a

selfish pursuit,

> I think I started being more skeptical to fit in because I had already joined an
>
> atheist group and I didn't want people thinking I was dumb. I started looking
>
> more into skepticism and various authors … who represented the kind of life I
>
> wanted to live, like Carl Sagan. It's not just about reading popular science
>
> articles, not that there's anything wrong with that, but about making yourself
>
> happier through rational thinking.

Rather than just combatting pseudoscience and the paranormal, many secularists like

Bill preferred to invest in improving themselves as a kind of self-help, such as learning

about cognitive biases, filling gaps in scientific understanding, and developing

argumentation skills. Awareness of others who were doing the same in their social

networks aided in their continued "conversion" to skepticism. For example, Bill talked

about how his friends in "the movement" made him a better skeptic by teaching him about the nuances of critical thinking. Although recent scholarship has called into question the theme of critical thinking in new atheism (Cotter 2017), my participants at the very least valorized skepticism as a more productive vehicle to "truth."

Beyond living a well-reasoned life, many of my participants emphasized the importance of supporting grassroots skepticism. In practice, this support involved attending conferences, subscribing to skeptic magazines, buying books by well-known cultural entrepreneurs (e.g., Michael Shermer) and purchasing "merch" from skeptic websites. For example, Bonnie (age 39) describes how she supported skeptical publishing,

> It's hard for people with a skeptical mindset to get their work out there. I try, as much as possible, to purchase the books of people like [Michael Shermer]. These guys barely break even, so I think we all need to do our part in encouraging that kind of work. It might not seem like much, but I assume other people are doing the same, and that's why get so much content related to critical thinking. I can then take those books, auction them off, and help finance more local activism, especially if they're signed.

In addition to supporting authors and publishers, many of my participants kept an updated library on "woo-woo," so they could better understand what they were opposing. Greg (age 52) described what he referred to as his "Library of Nonsense",

When people walk into my house, all they see are books on faeries, alternative

medicine, conspiracy theories, and cults. It's pretty weird. I hate to give snake

oil salesmen my money, but this is the only way you can really get good at

skepticism. You have to know what you're fighting, so I think of it as my duty to

do the research. It's the small role I play in the community, 'Oh, you need to

know about dowsing? Yeah, I got that.'

Some secularists, like Greg, saw themselves as cultural warriors in the fight against

pseudoscience, and they worked hard to maintain a rigor in how they approached

their targets. Although this rigor helped them in online and offline discussions, their

primary interest was in the intellectual satisfaction of knowing they were doing their

part for the movement.

Other, more concrete forms of individualistic activism included editing

Wikipedia entries. At the time of our interview, Sasha has joined an online community

focused on improving skeptical content on Wikipedia. She described what she did,

which mainly involved supporting existing articles with citations,

I'll find something related to skepticism, like maybe acupuncture, and I'll look

through it, okay, particularly the stuff on the science of acupuncture (or lack

thereof), and I'll basically just add links to recent scholarship. I can still get

access to library subscriptions to journals, and I'll sometimes ask people to send

me links to PDFs so I can read them. It's not enough to grab the abstract.

Sometimes it leads to a fight, as there's a lot of people on Wikipedia that

vandalize—they make up stuff.

Sasha's form of activism kept her engaged with local conferences, where she

sometimes acted as a speaker if only to get the message out about alternative forms

of activism that did not require much organizations or resources.

In addition to cultivating a rational life, supporting influencers in the movement,

and engaging in improving skeptical content on the Internet, many of my participants

talked about avoiding certain products such as organic foods, boycotting pharmacies

that sold alternative medicine, and educating others about pseudoscience (e.g.,

criticizing chiropractic medicine). Much of the conscious consumption literature

overlaps with the concerns of lifestyle movement scholars, who are similarly interested

in consumption as a political statement (Wahlen and Laamanen 2015). Although many

secularists engaged in some form of targeted consumption or boycotting, their

primary focus was on education. For example, Marco (age 26) talked about how he

tried to maintain a list of local organizations that supported pseudoscience, including

the municipal police force,

They use polygraph for recruitment, but we know that polygraphs are

pseudoscientific. So, I posted a blog about how inaccurate polygraph testing is,

and soon enough I was getting calls from the media about the whole thing. I'm

not really comfortable with being a public figure but doing small things like

that—getting the info out there, that's something I can do.

Marcos's emphasis on education shows that consumption is just one type of "lifestyle

politics" that occurs in daily life (Bennett 1998). Regardless of how they went about

doing skepticism, my participants saw their individuality and self-expression as tactics

of social change.

Conclusion

This analysis provides a theoretically informed case study of secularist activism

that nuances the role of identity differences in lifestyle movements. I emphasize how

skeptics negotiate intra-movement divisions by highlighting difference and

accentuating uniqueness. Prior social movement approaches to secularist activism has

mainly focused on how secularist movements create and maintain collective identities.

By contrast, my findings show that some secularist activists prefer to cultivate

personally meaningful identities based on individualism, skepticism, and other

Enlightenment values. The individualism of self-described skeptics, while like what

others have described as "radical individualism" and "rational libertarianism," is

distinctive in that my participants preferred to do movement action privately.

Most secularists saw their activism as a personal and everyday project involving

thinking like scientists, eliminating delusions and magical thinking, and taking

responsibility for educating others about the dangers of scientific misinformation and

pseudoscience. More concretely, their lifestyle practices included boycotting and buycotting, consumer advocacy (particularly through educational initiatives), online grassroots activism, and supporting influencers in the movement. Additionally, given that much of lifestyle activism involves identity-work, many secularists were careful to distinguish themselves from naïve or dictionary atheists who did not share their respect for reason and science.

In conclusion, some secularist activists downplay the importance of their non-belief in favor of scientific skepticism, a broader worldview focused on critical thinking and living a well-reasoned life based on Enlightenment values. Given my focus on self-described skeptics' transformation of their daily lives, this chapter shows applications of lifestyle movement theory that go beyond conscious consumption, emphasizing the importance of contentious identities in motivating activists to action.

Additionally, this analysis sheds light on how different social movement approaches affect the development of identities and practices. As with other lifestyle movements, skeptics constructed their strong individual identities within the context of a relatively weak collective identity, impacting their everyday actions and practices in their attempts to live well-reasoned lives (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012). Some secularists sought out an alternative lifestyle at odds with organizationally coordinated activism and social movement structures that appeared to seek homogeneity through organizing and group consensus. As self-described critical thinkers, my participants set

themselves apart, both from notions of community and "movementness," as well as other secularists. Despite their contrariness, these same secularists also individually felt connected to a collective identity that emphasized reason and science. Future research should further consider the relationship between identity disputes and intra-movement conflict within lifestyles movements. Finally, non-religion scholars should seek to examine further how secularist activists justify individualized private action in other socio-political and geographic contexts.

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CHAPTER SEVEN: SOCIAL JUSTICE AND LIFESTYLE POLITICS AMONG EDMONTON ATHEISTS

ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses Edmonton atheists' responses to the emergence of a social justice faction known as Atheism Plus within the broader atheist movement. I show that some atheist activists express a "libertarian rationalism" consistent with Enlightenment values to maintain an atheist lifestyle free from collectivist ideologies that promote social justice, e.g., feminism. The data for this chapter comes from interviews and participant observation, focusing on three atheist organizations in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. I draw from literature focused on everyday lifestyle choices as a form of protest to argue that for some atheist activists, their individual intellectual development takes priority over building a strong collective identity. This emphasis on lifestyle or identity-based activism explains Canadians atheists' criticisms of attempts to move atheist activism in the direction of a stronger collective identity based on social justice values. Given that some scholars argue that atheism perpetuates gender inequality (Amarasingam and Brewster 2016; Miller 2013; Schnabel et al. 2016), this work additionally contributes to our understanding of how atheists conceptualize their activism as sub- and micro-political activities free from collectivist ideologies.

Introduction

Although research on atheism in Canada is limited, irreligion is common in many provinces, with many Canadians ending up as "nones," that is, people who have no religious affiliation. Statistics Canada data reveals that 23.9% of Canadians self-identify as nones when asked to identify their religion (Statistics Canada 2013). The nones are, however, are not a homogeneous group, with a presumably smaller percentage identifying as atheists and agnostics (Wilkins-Laflamme 2015). Nevertheless, atheism in Canada appears to be growing, which is consistent with other trends in other developed/first world countries (Cipriani and Garelli 2016; Tomlins 2015). The recent increase in scholarly focus on atheism suggests that the social context of organized nonbelief has (sociological) merit, particularly regarding the implications of the atheist movements' potential social, political, and cultural salience. In this chapter, I am primarily interested in examining the politics of atheist activism in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, particularly the current view that atheists fall somewhere left of center on social issues (Cimino and Smith 2014). My contribution is to examine Edmonton atheist activists' responses to an intra-movement and intra-community tension around whether atheists should strive to achieve equity and fight for social and economic relations, focusing on the emergence of a faction known as Atheism Plus.

Atheism Plus is a group dedicated to promoting social justice inside and outside of the atheist community (as cited in Beaman and Tomlins 2014, 65). To set the stage

for Atheism Plus's emergence, my starting point for this chapter is what came to be

known as "elevatorgate," after atheist and skeptic blogger Rebecca Watson uploaded

a YouTube video called "About Mythbusters, Robot Eyes, Feminism, and Jokes." In

the video, Watson recounts her experiences at a World Atheist Convention in Dublin,

Ireland (Watson 2011). She describes her discomfort with an unnamed man who

allegedly propositioned her in a hotel elevator (hence the term elevatorgate) following

her talk about sexism within the atheist community. Since Watson's video, the atheist

community has suffered from infighting over the direction of atheist activism--that is,

whether atheism should be social justice oriented. Informed by the mainly online

controversy, this chapter examines Canadian atheist activists' offline responses to so-

called "social justice warriors" (SJWs), like Watson, who want a more robust atheist

movement that reflects communitarian progressive values (Anne 2012; Laughlin 2017;

Nixon 2014). I nuance the idea that atheists are politically left-of-center, arguing that

some atheist activists express a "libertarian rationalism," that privileges individual

identity over collective identity, primarily as an attempt to promote an atheist lifestyle

free from ideologies that appear incompatible with Enlightenment values.

Although Atheism Plus appears to be declining as a faction, many of its

supporters continue to argue that New Atheism has a "sexism problem" (Facciani

2015) and that it is an "old boys' club" (Jones 2012; McCreight 2011; Smurthwaite

2016). If true, then this characterization of atheist activists runs counter to the view

that atheists are left-wing, especially when it comes to social issues. Given that most

research points to atheists as being liberal and progressive (Cimino and Smith 2014),

my findings show that some atheist activists manifest complex political identities that

may go beyond conventional political affiliation sympathies. The atheist activists

featured in this study shared a dim view of feminism generally, and Atheism Plus

specifically, supporting their aversion to social justice activism by emphasizing their

individualism.

In what follows, I assess atheism's libertarian character, especially when it comes

to affirming individualism over communitarian values of diversity, justice, and solidarity

(Bennett 2012, 22; LeDrew 2015b). This focus on lifestyle departs from previous

approaches to atheist activism, deemphasizing the importance of atheist collective

identity, and instead highlighting personal identity as the primary site of social change

(Lorenzen 2012; Portwood-Stacer 2012). I use Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones's (2012)

work on lifestyle movements to argue that Canadian atheist activists promote a

"lifestyle, or way of life, as their primary means to foster social change" (Haenfler,

Johnson, and Jones 2012, 2). Through this framework, I can highlight the

individualistic and contrarian character of some forms of atheist activism, the purpose

being to show how atheist activists see their avoidance of mainstream "identity

politics" as a fulfilment of their personal politics, which often connects scientism to

radical individualism, consequently limiting activists' ability to advance human equality (LeDrew 2015b; Laughlin 2017).

Background

Over the past decade, sociologists have contributed to a sound understanding of New Atheism and the growth of atheist social movement organizations (Langston et al. 2015; Lee, et al. 2015; Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale 2016). Much of this work focuses on collective identity construction and collective performances of practices (see Cimino and Smith 2011; Kettell 2014; LeDrew 2015a; Smith 2013; Smith and Cimino 2012). Some exceptions include recent attempts to investigate the politics of atheism, often highlighting the individualistic (and libertarian) character of atheist activism (Kettell 2013; Laughlin 2016; LeDrew 2013). Of more relevance to this chapter, some scholars have attempted to highlight the diversity of atheist identities (Amarasingam and Brewster 2016; LeDrew 2013; Taira 2012; Tomlins 2016). Nevertheless, much of this previous work retains an understandable bias towards atheism as a collective identity. In this chapter, I seek to examine how atheist activists individually negotiate their political identities and lifestyles within the context of (broader) social/socio-political categories, such as sex and gender.

Most atheism scholarship focuses on the American context. Comparatively, the study of atheist activism in Canada is limited. It is far more common to find a broader discussion of the religiously unaffiliated or religious "nones" in Canada than atheist

activism (Voas 2015; Wilkins-Laflamme 2015). Some exceptions include an examination

of a university atheist community and the heterogeneity in trajectories to atheism and

atheist activism in Canada (LeDrew 2013; Tomlins 2015). Although significant

differences may exist between American and Canadian atheist activism, I draw most

from American atheism scholarship, in part because of the lack of a robust equivalent

in Canada and partly because my participants often commented on the US context. As

one participant put it, the Canadian atheist movement follows US trends,

> I do think that we try to imitate the Americans. Like, [our president] is tight with
>
> David Silverman [president of American Atheists]. He basically showed her how
>
> to run everything, how to bring in members, that sort of thing (Sam, age 31).

Like Sam, my other participants primarily read US-based atheist authors, websites,

blogs, podcasts, and social media to keep themselves apprised of what was

happening in the movement.

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to compare Canadian and

American atheists, my broader findings are consistent with what Tomlins refers to as

"Canadianized Atheism." This term refers to Edmonton atheists' preferences for

politeness and likeability (even while expressing strident opinions), merging with "the

desire to engage in discussions with like-minded individuals on topics pertaining to

religion that are often controversial" (Tomlins 2015). Many of my participants were

personally antagonistic towards religion (even going as far as to say that they hated

religion), but they felt that the need for confrontational activism was less necessary in Canada than in the US, which they described as more religious, both regarding private devotion and public religion.

Lifestyle Movements

With the "cultural turn" in social movement studies, scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of collective identity and action as central to understanding newer social movements (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012; Marx and McAdam 1994). Despite this shift, some recent studies have claimed that individualized prosocial choices among activists are important forms of political behavior (Dobernig and Stagl 2015; Yangzm 2016; Yates 2015).

Scholars of lifestyle movements argue that lifestyle choices as tactics for social change hinge on personal identity work and a commitment to living consistently, according to various principles (Micheletti and Stolle 2010). These principles may be moral repertoires or combinations of principles tied to the tenets of a movement or a more personalized ethical compass (Kahl 2012). Lifestyle movements consequently blur the line between public and private and individual identity and collective action (Bennett 2012; Cherry 2015; Lorenzen 2012; Willis and Schor 2012). Informed by these lifestyle-focused approaches, I draw attention to how atheist activists pride themselves on their individualism, see everyday life as politically significant, and use this emphasis on personal politics to shield themselves against ideology-based politics.

Personalized politics represents not only my participants' preferred approach to activism but also a defensive bulwark against the excesses of ideology (which some atheists perceive to be inherent to religion). Despite this emphasis on individualism, as others have noted, the conceptual category "atheism" includes a significant set of assumptions closely resembling what LeDrew (2015b) refers to as scientific atheism (as opposed to humanistic atheism) and the notion that "society advances in lockstep with science" (LeDrew 2015b, 34). Consistent with these findings, my participants shared an attachment to an Enlightenment ideology of reason, science, and autonomy. The conflict between my participants' embrace of an individualistic ideology and their ambivalence towards ideologies that seek to change structural inequalities is a theme in my interview data. To make sense of this apparent contradiction it is essential to examine my participants' desire for societal change through individualized action, that is, daily choices to improve the world through reason and science.

Methods

This chapter draws from a broader two-year project focused on Canadian atheism in the province of Alberta. What follows draws from my fieldwork and interviews in the city of Edmonton. Using a qualitative case study research design, I investigated self-described atheist activists using multiple methods of data collection (Hancock and Algozzine 2015; Snow and Trom 2002). A case study is a research strategy based on the in-depth empirical investigation of a case. Along with focusing

on a context in real time, doing case study research leads to an embedded understanding of a phenomenon.

Critics of the case study point out that the one cannot generalize from a single case and that the case study approach lacks rigor. Responses to this criticism are varied and well-established in the literature (Flyvbjerg 2006). For my purposes, however, I make no claims about the generalizability of the current study. Despite the perceived or actual limitations of the case study method, the approach allowed me to gather holistic information about my participants' lived experiences and consider "the context and other complex conditions related to the case being studied" (Yin 2011, 4). I used participant observation and semi-structured interviews as my primary data collection methods. I also analyzed organizational documents and social media content related to atheists' community building and activism. I fully transcribed data from all participants, which I then analyzed for recurring themes through open coding in NVivo. I drew from analytical devices from the relevant literature on lifestyle movements to guide categorizing open codes into a more structured coding scheme. Finally, I conducted a second round of coding using this more structured coding scheme.

My research participants included self-described atheists from multiple atheist organizations (with a combined offline and online membership of over 1500 people). I conducted thirty-five semi-structured interviews with my core participants, focusing on

those atheists who continued to live in the Edmonton-area and were active members of one or more local organizations. I recruited members through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. My sample included sixteen women and nineteen men, ranging from ages nineteen to sixty-three. The interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. We discussed a range of issues including stigma against atheists, secularism, bridge-building with religious groups, the meaning of various identity markers (i.e., skeptic, secular humanist, freethinker, etc.), and political issues within local organizations and the broader movement.

I drew potential participants from three organizations, The Society of Edmonton Atheists, The University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics, and the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society. I selected the above organizations based on the frequency of their meetings and events, their social media presence, and their reasonable proximity to one another. I met with a local secular humanist group, but meetings were infrequent and attended by a comparatively small number of people. Also, there overlap existed between the humanist group and the other organizations featured in my study, primarily because the secular humanists I encountered had little interest in building an atheist community or engaging in organized activism. I commenced my study upon approval of the University of Alberta Research Ethics Office (REO) in 2014. After approval, I contacted each organization after either locating an organization's e-mail

or from their social media presence (usually Facebook). The presidents of the three

organizations quickly granted me access.

Of my thirty-five interviewees, roughly half primarily associated themselves with

the Society of Edmonton Atheists, but most were involved with University of Alberta

Atheists and Agnostics and the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society as well. Most of

my participants had some level of post-secondary education, or they were in the

process of pursuing higher education. Except for five of my participants, all the

members of the Society of Edmonton Atheists and the Greater Edmonton Skeptics

Society held a bachelor degree or greater. For obvious reasons, members of the

University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics were pursuing undergraduate degrees.

Twenty-nine of thirty-five of my participants identified with a Christian cultural

background. Two participants had grown up in explicitly atheist or agnostic

households. Two participants had Muslim backgrounds, one had Neopaganism

affiliations, and another identified as culturally Jewish. Politically, most of my

interviews identified as "left," "liberal" or "libertarian."

Libertarianism or Social Justice?

Describing the fallout from Watson's YouTube video, Cimino and Smith (2014)

argue that the "blogosphere went ablaze with a blog war between those siding with

Watson and those critical of her, including other female atheists" (Cimino and Smith

2014, 97). Spurred on by the support of some members of the atheist community and

personal stories of sexism and misogyny at atheist events, some self-described

feminist atheists called for a third wave of atheism, its purpose being to challenge

status quo atheism and guide the movement in a more social justice-oriented direction

(Myers 2011).

In keeping with Atheism Plus's critiques, some scholars have pointed out that

prominent figures in New Atheism see multiculturalism and gender equality as a threat

to the "hegemonic white, male atheist community" (Amarasingam and Brewster 2016).

My participants presented a different view that often highlighted their individualism

over collective struggles against systems of power and oppression (e.g., racism,

classism, ageism, and heterosexism),

> I'm not into identity politics. I'm not jumping on any bandwagons. I don't
>
> believe in institutionalized sexism or any of that stuff or at least not how most
>
> people talk about it. Even if I did, we can't be all things to all people, and it's
>
> not my job to hold the flag for all these other causes. I guess I'm pretty
>
> libertarian when it comes to that sort of thing. You do you, and I'll do me
>
> (Maisie, age 26).

Like Maisie, most of my participants saw the emergence of Atheism Plus as a challenge

to the individualism of atheist activism. Many of my interviewees felt that no one

person or organization should be able to speak as a representative of others within the

movement. For example, Serena (age 25) expressed her dissatisfaction with the "idea

of a feminist group steering the movement away from its roots." Similarly, Tracy (age

21) said "I remember when we used to get together and learn about logical fallacies,

cognitive biases all that stuff. I don't want them [atheist organizations] becoming

political parties. If that happens, I'm out."

My participants' concerns about maintaining the individualism of atheist

activism are like the attitudes one finds in other lifestyle movement members, e.g.,

individualistic vegans who have little interest in unifying and are wary of organized

vegans (Cherry 2015; Larsson et al. 2003). Although my participants did not

disassociate themselves from other atheists, they did not conform to traditional social

movement behavior (e.g., organized, goal-oriented, collective action [Marx and

McAdam 1994]). My participants went further than just criticizing Atheism Plus, also

emphasizing the personalization of atheist activism. For example, AJ (age 29)

discussed the "herding cats" metaphor as an ideal model for atheist activism,

> Atheism's strength is that it doesn't have an ideology. That's why it's so hard to
>
> bring us together. We've all heard that organizing atheists are like herding cats.
>
> Well, that's true! And it's a good thing because it means we can be ourselves
>
> and we're not beholden to any particular hierarchy, manifesto, or whatever.

AJ's reticence to build a "conventional" movement suggests that in some movements,

individuals' narratives can eclipse collective identity frames, and this eclipse is

consistent with other lifestyle movements that emphasize commitment to a strong personal identity (Haenfler 2004).

Sometimes, my participants' emphasis on atheism as an individualistic project manifested in what LeDrew (2015b) regards as a "libertarian defense of individualism and denial of structural barriers to social mobility" (LeDrew 2015b 203). For example, Maisie (age 26), who I mentioned earlier, denied institutionalized sexism. Similarly, Max (age 22) argued that Atheism Plus ran counter to both his view of atheism and how he wanted to approach activism,

> First of all, name one right that men have that women don't have? That's my first question to Atheism Plus. Second, most of our executives are women. I don't want a group of bloggers telling me that I need to believe X or Y in order to be a good person…. [A]theism should be about atheism at the end of the day. It should be about science and reason, not left-wing politics.

Although most of my participants identified as politically left-leaning, sometimes expressing their strong left-wing bonafides (e.g., support for the New Democratic Party [NDP], which is a left-leaning social democratic party), they nevertheless expressed their preferences for individualism when it came to their atheist activism.

A self-described libertarian, Serena (age 25) said that her issue with Atheism Plus had less to do with what it stood for than who was controlling the narrative regarding social justice,

I don't like other women claiming that they speak for me or that their issues are women's issues. I'm an individual. I happen to have female parts, but that's about the only thing I have in common with 'women.' Also, there's no one way to be a feminist.

The notion that someone was "speaking for them" particularly concerned many of my interviewees, revealing a tension in approaches to activism, given their participation in atheist organizations. Aware of the tension, some atheists spoke about the role of organizations as one of empowerment rather than speaking for members of the community.

Unlike traditional social movement organizations, lifestyle movement organizations (create an extra layer of meaning for members, but they do so in the service of individual action. Consequently, lifestyle movements may have a relatively weak collective identity compared to organizations that bear a remarkable resemblance to other goal-directed, hierarchical organizations (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012, 8). Lifestyle movement organizations target everyday life, allowing activists to exploit tactical repertoires according to their personal preferences. According to LeDrew, libertarians are the most important group of right-leaning atheists, their primary goal being the protection of individual freedoms. Although only four of my participants identified as politically libertarian, most of my participants saw

the "atheist lifestyle," as consisting of Enlightenment values like individualism,

rationality, and the use of science.

My findings show that some atheists activists choose a lifestyle consistent with

scientific atheism and the view that religion is the antithesis of science (LeDrew 2015b,

14), contrasting sharply with humanistic atheism and its emphasis on social justice. For

example, one of my politically libertarian respondents valorizing the autonomous

creative individual,

> I'd rather not be dependent on organizations. I've seen too many movements
>
> fail because of crappy organizations. I think one individual making a change in
>
> aggregate makes a bigger difference than getting together and organizing.

Many of my participants, however, went further than affirming the power of the

individual. Curtis (age 35) argued that any ideology was the antithesis of his scientific

worldview (and his approach to atheism),

> Okay. What is religion? It's an ideology, right? Beliefs not to be questioned.
>
> But, the real problem is ideology, right? Religion is just a subspecies of that.
>
> Science is anti-ideology. You know? It requires you to not accept things without
>
> proof. That's all atheism is at the end of the day. It's saying 'I don't believe you.'

Curtis's emphasis on proof, consistent with his self-described skepticism, highlights the

scientism that many critics associate with the movement, but it also illustrates my

participant's attempts to distance atheism from a specific organization's collective

identity or the imagined community (LeDrew 2015b; Pigliucci 2013).

Curtis was not alone in his commitments to individualism and scientism. For

example, Connor (age 27) described himself as a "science geek," and more interested

in atheist activism based on "critique," than community-building,

> The role of the atheist is that of a critic. Nothing more, nothing less. We're here
>
> to tell you that you're doing it all wrong. Others want to lump us in with this or
>
> that cause, but they can't. We're too diverse. We're too stubborn.

When I began my research, I observed what I saw of as a contradiction between my

participants' embrace of libertarian rationalism and their continued participation within

atheist organizations and the movement. After bringing this issue to the attention of

some my interviewees, many acknowledged a constant tension between their desire

for social change and their caution regarding organized activism,

> It would be nice if we had more of an impact, but I dare you to find another
>
> 'movement' that has as many different types of people in it. I don't think you
>
> get that with a manifesto and marches. You get conformity. There's something
>
> anarchic about atheism and that's why I love it (Connor, age 27)

Several other participants also described the "chaotic" quality of the atheist

movement in positive terms, pointing out the value of intellectual diversity. Their

ambivalence towards more conventional social movement protests, with organizations

leading the way under common collective identity frames is reflective of broader

trends towards fragmentation and individualization in contemporary society (Bennett

and Segerberg 2013; Gauja 2015).

According to Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones (2012), activists in lifestyle

movements politicize daily life while pursuing "morally coherent 'authentic' identities"

(14). Although other lifestyle movements have tended to focus on moral repertories as

a key component of identity-construction and activism, e.g., morally infused principles,

practices, and emotions (Kahl 2012), my participants drew from a range of intellectual

(and ideological) sources to build their individual identities and "do" their atheism in

the everyday,

> My lifestyle is focused on bettering myself through exposure to critical thinking
>
> skills, science, history, you know? We're all just figuring this out as we go, but
>
> everyone I know in the community is deeply curious and committed to being
>
> better thinkers (Marco, age 26)

Rather than just challenging theism and undermining religious privilege, my

participants emphasized a skeptical, naturalistic worldview as the central component

of their moral identity. This is consistent with other scholarship that highlights atheists'

broadly similar attitudes towards their activism based on the rejection of the

supernatural, reliance on science, and a critical attitude towards religion (Cimino and

Smith 2014).

Although atheism primarily refers to a skepticism towards God or gods, my participants associated their atheism with broader morally relevant principles informed by a scientific worldview (Hashemi 2016; Shook 2015). In other words, they did not just see themselves as atheists who happened to like science. Rather, they often espoused the virtues of an Enlightenment morality based on continuing triumph of reason, science, and secularism, perhaps explaining why they placed as much emphasis on critiquing paranormal and pseudoscientific claims (e.g., dowsing, ghosts, and cryptozoology, etc.) as they did religion. For example, during my research, one of the larger atheist organizations in Edmonton organized a protest of a television psychic and an opponent of both genetically modified food and vaccines.

My participants' personal projects to improve the world through reason and science often placed them at odds, not just with Atheism Plus, but also with other egalitarian-feminist perspectives,

> I don't care if you're a feminist or not. It's not what you think but how you think. And I don't see much evidence-based reasoning among feminists. It's all knee-jerk reactions and emotional appeals (Bonnie, age 39).

Bonnie's distinction between "correct thinking," and the perceived emotional content of social justice activism was a common theme in my interviews, particularly concerning feminism,

Being an atheist means that you're skeptical right? You're skeptical of religion,

sure, but not just religion. As far as I'm concerned, nothing is off the table. I

approach everything the same way, including political and economic

perspectives (Terry, age 43).

Terry associated her strained relationship with feminism with her skepticism, but not all

my participants shared her ambivalence towards feminism. Six of my participants

explicitly identified as feminists, even while qualifying their identities to embrace their

more libertarian viewpoint.

Feminist with Qualified Support

Although only a minority of my participants explicitly labelled themselves

feminists, and rarely without qualification, most of my participants saw non-religiosity

and atheism as gendered phenomena. Addressing the masculine tone of atheist

activism and related cultures, e.g., geek culture (Inness 2016), many of participants

observed a greater tendency among male atheists to be individualistic and

instrumental, suggesting the stereotype that women operate from a collectivist,

ensemble point of view. For example, Sasha (age 31) argued that men might be more

likely to engage in personal projects and hobbies that require significant time

investment (like atheism),

I think there's definitely something about atheism that reminds me of teenage

boys sitting in their basement learning magic tricks or something similarly

obscure. Maybe one of the reasons we're not good 'joiners' is because of that.

Most atheists I mean like to do things on their own. I feel like most women are

more community-oriented.

The relationship between this gendered individualism and dissent (especially against

Atheism Plus) was not always explicit in my participants' interviews, but many atheists

were critical of the idea of an atheist movement with leaders or a standard set of

principles beyond being pro-science.

Complementing the anti-ideology perspective, my participants emphasized the

importance of critiquing all ideas based on logic and evidence, even if that meant

alienating atheists who desired a more collectivist environment—one that placed a

premium on social obligations and group harmony. For example, Tracy later expressed

her concerns about SJWs trying to "hijack the movement," with its emphasis on a

feminized social justice, "Their emotional appeals don't sway me. It's all about pulling

on your heart strings and for that reason, I don't see any of their feminist ideas as

credible." Positing feminists as emotional, particularly angry, is a common strategy to

delegitimize their criticisms, but my participants felt that they had a more nuanced

view of feminism.

Sasha (age 31) identified as a feminist, but she made a point to distinguish

between the word feminism and the feminist movement, "I'm what Christina Hoff

Sommers calls an equity feminist. It's all ultimately about choice for me." Similarly, Serena (age 25) thought of herself as a feminist, but with qualifications,

> I'm not that kind of feminism. Atheism Plus is full of radical feminists and I'm not into that because it's anti-science. They think sex is socially constructed. Whichever feminism embraces science, that's the kind I am.

Despite Serena's association of Atheism Plus with science-denial and some of my participants' contrasting of libertarianism and social justice, LeDrew (2015b) observes that Atheism Plus embraced the same scientism of the broader movement, given its apparent appreciation of and reliance on scientific methodologies.

Sasha (age 31) argued that while Atheism Plus supporters claimed to support science, they only supported the science that confirmed their point of view, "Watson and her supporters cherry-pick…. [T]hey avoided [any science] having to do with gender—just dismissed out of hand." Although some of my participants' hostility towards Atheism Plus was ostensibly a reaction to perceived science-denial, even their emphasis on the epistemic authority of science emerged from a concern with ideology.

For many of my participants, their wariness about associating atheism with a political philosophy or belief system stemmed from their concerns about atheism turning into another religion. Of relevance to this chapter, several respondents argued that Atheism Plus was a "cult-like group," and that contemporary feminism was itself a

religion. The feminism as religion argument is like Sommers' (1995) suggestion that

"gender feminism" may be religion, because of its emphasis on patriarchy.

Sommers' association with anti-feminist groups and the men's rights movement

(MRA), may suggest that several people involved in the atheist movement are similarly

sympathetic to anti-feminism and other features suggestive of "backlash" (Jordan

2016). Assessing the gender politics of men's movements and men's rights groups and

their potential association with atheist activism is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Nevertheless, my data shows that some atheists have a pronounced disinterest in,

even hostility towards, feminism. It is not, however, clear if this hostility derives from

feminism's challenge to sexism and male power or if something even more complex is

at work. For example, Ryan (age 31) expressed his antipathy towards "isms" in the

community, "I'm strongly against 'isms' of any kind, nationalism, feminism…. [I]t

doesn't really matter. If I had a religion, it would be against 'isms'" When pressed,

Ryan acknowledged that "vanilla" atheism was not completely free from ideologies—

or "isms"—and that those ideologies might even help activists achieve collective

goals. But, he felt that to the extent that atheism had an ideology, it was consensual

and grassroots driven,

No one forces you to learn about critical thinking or cognitive biases or how to

argue. It just sort of happens. Some people want to turn it into a system like

they did with secular humanism,[15] but that's not for me.

Given that many of my participants emphasized the importance of science and

skepticism to their atheist lifestyles, it was not surprising that they approached

Atheism Plus with the same level of scrutiny that they did religion and pseudoscience.

Moreover, all my participants linked their atheism with a lifestyle based on scientific

skepticism and critique, resulting in atheists distancing themselves from Atheism Plus's

social justice ideology that placed issues of broader ethics and rights in the center of

atheist activism.

Underlying my participants' concerns with Atheism Plus, many were wary of

organizational influence on the direction of atheist activism. They were concerned

about the danger of ideology—one group purporting to hold the truth. Consequently,

none of my participants felt that they needed atheist organizations or the broader

movement to do their activism for them. Sean (age 34) said that, unlike the atheist

movement, most social movements tend to ignore difference and build walls between

people. He also emphasized that doubt should be the default position within atheism,

"It's a feature, not a bug." In keeping with this perspective, Haenfler, Johnson, and

---

[15] Secular Humanism is a comprehensive non-religious life stance based on a naturalistic philosophy.

Jones (2012) argue that since lifestyle action is individualistic and private instead of collective and public, "building strong personal connections between participants is not nearly as likely (nor possibly important) for [lifestyle movements]" (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012, 8). Given Atheism Plus's broader community goals, the conflict between my participants and what they perceived to be an ideological threat to their lifestyles is consistent with the dynamics of some forms of atheist activism in Edmonton.

Atheist Lifestyle and Activism

During my research, the extent to which local atheist organizations supported atheists' personal projects became the standard by which my participants judged the effectiveness of their activism and the movement. For example, Connor (age 27) argued that he only participated in atheist groups to the degree that they helped him "evolve",

> I'm pretty selfish about my atheism. I want to learn about science, philosophy, and how to be better at reasoning. I don't come out for the 'community' stuff. I think a lot of atheists are introverts or on the spectrum, so I don't think I'm the only one who gets a little embarrassed when someone proposes making signs or stamping our feet outside city hall.

Connor additionally described Atheism Plus and the broader social justice influence on the movement as being contradictory to the atheist lifestyle,

Yeah, I guess it's a way of life. The things that makes us atheists is that we want

to think for ourselves, right? And we suspect, you know, the herd mentality. At

least that's what the impetus is for a lot of this. A lot of the impetus for turning

into an atheist yourself is to say 'I'm myself.'

Some of my participants additionally worried about the future impact of "political

correctness" on the movement while others talked about "left-wing authoritarianism"

and the "regressive left," just to name a few key phrases familiar to the online atheist

community (Doolittle 2012; Xanthippa 2013).

In a Facebook discussion about Atheism Plus, continuing from an offline

argument, Liam (age 33) said, "My issue with Atheism Plus is that it adds both an

element of 'we believe in atheism/skepticism, plus this dogma that shall not be

questioned.'" The discussion that followed highlighted the reticence of some

community members to embrace a broader mandate for atheist activism and their

general distrust of left-wing progressivism, particularly in the form of political

correctness.

Although not explicit in interviews, my participants often associated the

perceived influence on political correctness with a feminine atheism, e.g., emphasis on

accommodationist politics, community-building, and stronger roles for atheist

organizations. For example, Trevor (age 28), associated the brief popularity of Atheism

Plus with attempts to make atheism more like a secular church,

I see a lot of emphasis being placed on community these days, potlucks, child-safe gatherings, atheist churches, charity work, board game nights, etc. I'm not saying I don't like those things, but they seem to appeal most to women and families. I preferred it when being part of an atheist group meant criticizing religion and learning cool stuff. Now it's more like a church.

Although Trevor was concerned about what he saw as the "slow advance of political correctness," he was mostly concerned about collectivism in atheist politics, which is consistent with the libertarianism of the movement.

Despite my participants' concerns about political correctness and their emphasis on individualized and personalized action, all my thirty-five interviewees associated with one or more atheist organizations. Some wanted the organizations to do more, e.g., organize protests, challenge the provincial government, etc., but nevertheless they preferred self-direction in their activism with the understanding that others were doing the same in a supportive environment (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012). Consequently, most of my participants did not engage in organized activism as an expression of their atheism.

Participants in lifestyle movements often prefer direct action and prefiguration rather than mobilization through formal political organizations. In other words, they focus on daily choices. For example, Tricia (age 30) described her atheism as a "process" rather than just a consequence of leaving religion,

I think a lot of people think of activism as standing out there with a sign, but it's ultimately about personal growth. It's about stripping away all the falsehoods and cobbling together something out of the remaining pieces. I don't think it ever stops for any atheist regardless of how accepted we might be now.

Tricia's personalization of her activism as a process does not preclude activism or solidarity, but my findings show that atheist collective identity promotes individual action over organizational forms of protest. Some of my participants went as far as contest the term "atheist," following Harris (2007) who argued the term should not exist. For example, Lisa (age 32) said that no one goes around "calling themselves 'aleprechaunists' [lack of belief in leprechauns], so why call ourselves atheists?" Given my participants' level of skepticism concerning even the term atheist, one of my most common follow-up questions was why they identified with an organization or movement at all. Some responded that there were few alternatives for expressing their atheism free of perceived or actual stigma. As with other lifestyle movements, however, most of my participants acknowledged their desire to feel connected to a broader collective identity, but not at the expense of the individual and private action.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to increase our understanding of why some atheist activists are resistant to the social progress of factions like Atheism Plus. I also aimed to show that some atheists engage in a methodological (and gendered) lifestyle

politics that is hostile towards ideology. To explain atheist activism as a lifestyle practice, I offered an in-depth case-study of Edmonton atheist activists and their responses to the emergence of Atheism Plus as a primarily online phenomenon, but with significant implications for the direction of atheist activism.

I found that most atheist activists in Edmonton became a member of an atheist organization to guide and shape their individualistic approaches to living an atheist lifestyle based on Enlightenment values. To the extent that my participants sought social change, they emphasized the importance of living a reasoned life imbued by science and skepticism. These findings are like other studies of atheist activists (LeDrew 2015; Smith 2013). In this study, I build on this previous work, but also add a new dimension by employing lifestyle movement theory to explain my participants' engagement with lifestyle politics. Although atheist activist and their views are not representative of all atheists, this contribution highlights the importance of individualized and private activism to atheists who are suspicious of ideology, attachment, and belief (Lorenzen 2012; Portwood-Stacer 2012).

Atheism Plus's failure to frame their interests successfully to the mainstream of the movement, that is, scientific atheists who value individualism and skepticism, emerged from an inherent conflict between feminist identity politics emphasizing the institutional underpinnings of power, e.g., patriarchy, and my participants' emphasis on a community of individuals with different socio-political inclinations and goals. The

conflict is historical, between "liberal individualism and a humanistic atheism rooted in social justice" (LeDrew 2015a, 65). Building on this argument, my data shows participants did not so much construct their identity based on negation or opposition to religion, but as critical thinkers engaged in a personal project of intellectual development and skepticism. To the criticism that atheist activists are ineffective due to activists' consistent focus on individualism and the movement's propensity to fragment (LeDrew 2015b), my research shows that many atheist activists are content to promote lifestyle change because it allows them to indulge in a shared ethos while maintaining their personal authenticity. Although this emphasis on personal identity may limit collective mobilization, for my participants it encouraged multiple perspectives free of ideology and dogma.

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CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

The context for my research is that atheists have developed a more distinct and politicized group identity. Increasingly, atheists are joining atheist organizations, many of which have an explicit goal of fostering social change. The central tension guiding my work is the fact that Canadian secularist activists think of themselves as activists. Nevertheless, they do not do much of what we think of conventional social movement behavior, that is, organized collective action. In addition to addressing this tension, I sought to map secularist activists' identities, and provide more detailed accounts of the diverse types of atheists. Moreover, I wanted to give some attention to the naturalistic worldviews that drive secularist activism. To this end, between 2014 and 2016 I conducted participant observation as well as thirty-five formal in-depth interviews with individuals from three organizations in Edmonton, Alberta.

My goal was to examine secularist activists' identities, how they negotiate those identities within a community, and to make a theoretical contribution to the literature that focuses on individualistic activism. My findings are as follows:

- Edmonton secularist activists share a broad naturalistic worldview based on Enlightenment values. Specifically, my participants were concerned about the supernatural writ large, which included pseudoscientific and paranormal claims.

- Secularist activists were on the whole ambivalent and conflicted regarding the atheist movement and the role of organizations in the local community. This

ambivalence generated substantial conflict over the direction of secularist

activism.

- Finally, many atheists thought of themselves as individually engaged in affecting

  social change through their daily efforts to craft a morally coherent identity and

  lifestyle.

These findings are significant for several reasons. First, my research shifts the focus to

less organized and more individualized forms of activism and downplays the role of

community among some secularists. Second, I show that secularists share a set of

values that allow them to feel like they are part of an imagined community. However,

these values also cause conflicts between activists, especially regarding the branding

of secularist activism, what types of activism they should do, and what other ideologies

secularists should embrace. Third, my research contributes to understanding lifestyle

movements, given that Edmonton-area secularist activists are primarily concerned with

individualistic approaches to social change.

Summaries and Contributions to Knowledge

My original goal when I set out to write this dissertation was that I would

complete a coherent monograph (as opposed to a collection of research papers), but

the project took on a life of its own and demanded a more thematic approach. In part,

this thematic approach is reflective of my experiences as a researcher in the field. I

expected to find more skeptical activism in Edmonton as well as more organizational

activity. These expectations were not entirely naïve, because members of the secularist community had assured me of the prevalence of atheist activism in the province, with Edmonton being a hub for innovation as well as community. As the reality of the situation became clearer to me, my goals shifted from an ethnographic investigation of pro-science movements to an investigation of individual atheists, their lifestyles, and what they thought about other secularists.

At the time that my fieldwork began, few studies had looked specifically at Canadian atheist activism, and the literature was generally bare when it came to addressing regional differences regarding social life of atheists. Since then, though Canada remains a minor focus, there is far more to draw from, and when possible, I have attempted to highlight these newer developments. Although one may find some overlap between this project and recent Canadian work (e.g., Tomlins 2016), my contribution is unique for its emphasis on intra-movement conflict, identity disputes, as well as my approach to individualized activism that draws from lifestyle movement scholarship.

In previous chapters, I described various "themes" that I encountered during my fieldwork. Although much of this work is self-explanatory, it is necessary to mention two through lines in this work, (1) an emphasis on how individual atheists construct their identities and (2) how these identities come into tension with one another. Backgrounding both these issues is the relationship between personal and

collective identity. I found that secularist activists challenge the conventional view of collective identity, particularly regarding collective identity as a community of meaning. Like others who have wrestled with lifestyle movement theory, I struggled to identify the collective identity of my participants given that personal identity was far more critical to their participation in the community. In fact, my participants themselves resisted the notion of collective identity, preferring to emphasize what they were doing as individuals, even as they participated in social movement organizations. In the following pages, I summarize each chapter's contribution and provide a commentary on how the disparate chapters fit together.

Chapter one introduced the topic, its development and scope, as well as relevant terminology, including new atheism and skepticism. Additionally, I describe the current state of the sociology of irreligion and some of the current Canadian contributions to the growing literature on atheism in Canada. It fits within the sociological research on atheism in the West generally and in Canada specifically. I concluded the introduction with an outline of the dissertation structure.

Chapter two described my theoretical framework and a review of the relevant social movement literature. Although only a few chapters have explicit theory sections, in later chapters I frequently engage with the social movement literature, paying attention to lifestyle movements. This dissertation consequently builds on and

contributes to our understanding of low-risk/cost forms of social movement behavior that emphasize politics of everyday life.

Chapter three described the data and methodology used in this study, including my reasoning for choosing the case study research strategy. It additionally explained the theoretical and methodological approaches for the chapters that followed. Given that the purpose of this dissertation was to examine the individual lives of secularist activists in Edmonton, my methodological approach consisted of semi-structured interviews and participant-observation to provide fine-grained details about atheists' day-to-day lives and situate their attitudes and values with a larger social context.

In chapter four, I introduce a typology of organized atheist activists, focusing on their varied approaches to activism. Although my participants were individualistic, prioritizing their lifestyle designs, they negotiate their identities as activists within an imagined community that reinforced the notion that there are different "types" of atheists. The decision to situated oneself within a community of atheist-styles has implications for how scholars talk about intra-movement politics, particularly infighting over how one should *do* atheism. Additionally, since explicit Canadian typologies are hard to come by in the literature, my approach provides a valuable contribution to emerging Canadian scholarship. I identified four types of movement identifications/activist identities—"Firebrands," "Diplomats," "Skeptics," and

"Builders." Although these approaches may overlap, my findings show a clear and almost binary trend in how my participants positioned themselves within the community. Disagreements among Firebrands and Diplomats generated much of the internal "heat" within regional atheist politics.

Chapter five examines the political identities of secularist activists, highlighting some of the key values that my participants embraced in their personal lives, including conventionally libertarian values such as personal freedom, freedom of speech, and individualism. I situated this analysis within a context of broader debates about the political values of atheists and the apparent link between new atheism and right-wing politics. My participants' values sometimes came into conflict with their political affiliations or how others perceived those affiliations, leading to conflict within the Edmonton atheist community. Given that some irreligion scholars have pointed to a strong libertarian current within atheist activism, this chapter provides an extra layer of complexity in that my participants valued several aspects of libertarianism while embracing left-wing political orientations.

Chapter six describes one of the major divisions between secularists that I encountered during my fieldwork. Although the distinction between atheists and skeptics has a long history in the internal literature of the community, scholars often lump the two identities together despite secularists' emphasis on difference. I show that self-described skeptics highlight difference and accentuate their uniqueness

within the wider secularist community. I show that though skeptics are ostensibly

identical to other atheist activists, they prefer to cultivate personally meaningful

identities based on individualism, skepticism, and other Enlightenment values.

Chapter seven compliments chapter four by providing a case study of intra-

movement conflict within the Edmonton atheist community. During my fieldwork, local

atheist groups experienced divisions over how best to approach recent calls for a

greater emphasis on social justice activism within the community. My participants

disagreed about how local organizations should include women and minorities and to

what extent atheist spaces like conferences were masculine spaces. I showed that the

libertarian streak of atheism manifested less in terms of explicit anti-feminism or a

reticence to engage in social justice, than a desire to individualize their activism.

My participants overwhelmingly pursued forms of activism that allowed them to

live out their lives in the pursuit of reason, connecting their private actions with social

change. In other words, they thought their private efforts to improve themselves as

intellectuals and engage in conversational intolerance could, in aggregate, change

society for their better. One consequence of secularists' emphasis on lifestyle was a

pessimism towards attempts to organize members of the community in support of an

ideology. Given their suspicion of religious-like beliefs and institutions, many of my

participants, perhaps unsurprisingly, rejected larger systems and attempts to import

outside activist interests into the movement (e.g., feminism).

Atheist Identity and Lifestyle, Final Thoughts

Lifestyle movements "consciously and actively promote a lifestyle, or way of life, as their primary means to foster social change" (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012). This dissertation argues that the behavior of some Canadian secularist activists is consistent with lifestyle movement theory. Although this approach to studying individualist social movements provides the "spine" of my analysis, I am more interested in the consequences of personal efforts to engage in social change than the phenomena of lifestyle-based activism itself. Put simply, my participants were individualists concerned about their personal integrity as rationalists. This drive for a life of reason had significant consequences for my participants as well as the Edmonton secularist community.

The people whom I interviewed saw themselves as activists, but they were only occasionally interested in collective success. Often, they were suspicious of attempts to solidify a coherent collective identity, and as an extension of that suspicion, to mobilize the community towards larger activism projects. Within an individualistic culture like the one I found during my fieldwork, the community of meaning is often threadbare, much to the pleasure of my participants who often emphasized that they were atheists and *nothing more*. In some respects, they saw their lack of community as a strength rather than a weakness for their movement, either because they cherished their contrariness or because they saw "movementness" as a failure of reason.

My participants' embrace of a contrarian and necessarily individualistic disposition did not stop them from committing themselves to values that shared a similar framework loosely influenced by Enlightenment values. Although each interviewee wanted to "do their own thing," they did share some common ground when it came to their personal values and dispositions. They frequently expressed a shared ideological belief in science, reason, and critical thinking. How those beliefs manifested in practice varied, and often they were difficult for my participants to articulate, but they were committed more certainly to changing themselves for what they saw as the better. In aggregate, they thought that these small changes would amount to a healthier society, one that would eventually be free from religious privilege and the excesses of unreason.

Directions for Future Research

My future research will continue my contributions to the study of non-religion, and, at least for the near future, will draw from data that I gathered for my dissertation. Although the work presented here represents the best use of my data, I intend to pursue the atheist versus skeptic division further. Although I described the differences between atheists and skeptics in chapter five, I did not provide a detailed account of the sympathy and affinity skeptics had for religion and how they consequently distanced themselves from the label "atheist," as well as atheist activism. I want to examine how secularist movements navigate definitional issues that reflect

differing and sometimes competing perspectives and modes of understanding, especially when determining which atheists best represent logic and reason. I think that sometimes this tension is productive and founded on rational arguments, and sometimes it becomes irreconcilable, leading to profound divisions within one or more groups over the relationship between atheism and other non-religious worldviews.

Second, I hope that my use of lifestyle movement theory to frame my study of secularist activism in Edmonton will provide value to scholars who struggle with conventional approaches to studying social movements, that is, the bias towards organized collective action. Although only a few non-religion scholars have explicitly taken up a social movement perspective, the general tenor of the literature is that secularist movements behave much the same as other social movements. Although this focus on organizations and collective identity make sense in an American context, which has arguably led the charge in public displays of collective action, activists in other geographic regions should provide insight into other ways of creating social change. One need not use lifestyle movement theory of course to achieve similar results, but a greater emphasis on personalized politics may pay dividends for researchers. Future research could look at the motivational mechanisms underlying atheists' participation in lifestyle-oriented activism as well as the framing strategies of diffuse atheist organizations and clubs. It also would be helpful if future research

looked at the factors influencing recruitment into atheist networks with comparatively

soft (or weak) collective identities.

Third, another direction may include how secularists negotiate human rights

issues. Although chapter four addresses some of the political concerns of atheists, a

more detailed examination of how atheists approach fighting for secularism, atheism,

and human rights as individuals would give nuance to contemporary discussions of

secularist activism. Although public displays of activism play an important role in

human rights advocacy, the personal nature of some forms of this advocacy call into

question the relationship between emancipation and institutionalized protest. My

participants often expressed pessimism towards engagement with the institutional

world and consequently promoted alternative human rights discourses.

Finally, future research may identify further the political identities and social

groupings of secularist activists. Although we have compelling research examining the

political implications of new atheism literature, little work examines the empirically

different components of the political identities of individual atheists, let alone the

implications of such identities for secularist movements. Although I provided a

description and analysis of the political identities of the people I interviewed, an

opportunity exists to examine how these identities lead to intra-movement conflicts.

For example, many of my participants were deeply concerned about Islam, but (given

widespread accusations of Islamophobia) they tended to avoid critiquing it and instead

focused on Christianity. Although this sense of caution did not emerge from political

disputes alone, many secularists did express concerns about how their primarily left-

wing peers would judge their statements about Muslims' beliefs.

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