Seeking a Framework: The Benefits and Challenges of Using Existing Research on LGBT Students to Examine Identity Development of Nontheistic Students

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Abstract

Although nonbelievers are routinely marginalized in the United States, little research exists regarding the effects of marginalization on the identity development of nontheistic college students. Through examination of current research on nonbelievers and an interview with a member of University of Illinois’ secular student group, this paper explores the benefits and challenges of using existing research on LGBT student identity development as a starting point for further study of nontheistic college students. I conclude that, although we can see many similarities in the experiences of LGBT and nontheistic college students, research on identity development of LGBT individuals might be useful as a framework for further study of nontheistic students, but research on LGBT individuals is not an adequate substitution for research which specifically addresses nontheistic student identity development.
Introduction

The number of Americans who identify as having no religious affiliation is growing (Hout et al., 2013; “Nones,” 2012). Perhaps the number of nonbelievers has indeed increased in recent years, or perhaps Americans feel more comfortable being vocal about their nonbelief as being openly nontheistic slowly becomes more acceptable in our culture. Americans have access to communities of fellow nonbelievers online, atheist and humanist groups abound, and atheist writers such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris have gained significant attention. Even so, nonbelievers are often stereotyped and ostracized for their worldview (Edgell et al., 2006). This prejudice extends to nonbelieving college students as well.

Although there are numerous studies on marginalized groups on college campuses, little research exists on how nontheistic students deal with social exclusion. Numbers of nontheistic college students are rising alongside nationwide numbers (Don, 2013). Without significant research and thus some type of theoretical guidance, university professionals may have difficulty addressing the specific needs of students who may be struggling with developing a nonreligious identity. Because no definitive theory exists for nontheistic college students, we must draw from other research to better understand the identity development of nonbelieving students. One type of research that might inform our work with nontheistic students is research related to LGBT identity development.

Drawing comparisons between LGBT identity development and nontheistic identity development could be useful for university professionals working with students who are experiencing some of the tensions associated with identifying as a nonbeliever. On the surface, many similarities exist between the patterns of nontheistic identity development and identity development of LGBT individuals. In a 1997 study, Robert Rhoads explored some of challenges
of gay and bisexual male college students, such as stereotyping, self-identifying (as gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.), coming out to family, and finding acceptance in a community of other gay students. Based on my personal experiences and anecdotal evidence from friends, I recognize many of the challenges and points of conflict that Rhoads discussed as being similar to those of individuals as they come to identify as nonbelievers. If we collect more empirical evidence (rather than using my anecdotal evidence) to examine students who identify as nonbelievers and compare their development to that of gay and bisexual students in Rhoads’ study, will we see undeniable similarities between these two groups? How might the answer to this question inform our work with nontheistic college students?

**Terminology**

For this paper, I use the terms *nontheist* and *nonbeliever* interchangeably to describe people who do not believe in the existence of a supernatural god. Some students in Rhoads’ study found often-used terms such as *homosexual, gay, lesbian, or queer* to be problematic, each for his own reason and often relative to his phase of identity development (Rhoads, 1997). As Rhoads suggests, we must be aware of this diversity among LGBT persons in order to better meet their individual needs (Rhoads, 1997). Because nonbelievers also find some labels problematic or may prefer certain terms to others, it is important to explain why I have chosen to use *nontheist* and *nonbeliever* in lieu of other terms associated with nonbelievers, such as *atheist, Humanist, secularist, freethinker, skeptic, or rationalist.*

Lately, *atheist* has become a controversial and divisive term, even among nonbelievers (Harris, 2007). *Humanist* is also problematic; Humanists are nonbelievers by definition (“About Humanism”), but not all nonbelievers identify as Humanist. *Secular* is a valid term for individuals who do not affiliate themselves with a religious worldview but is typically used to
describe a cultural or political perspective rather than individual identity (“What is Secularism”).

*Freethinker, skeptic, and rationalist* are often used to describe (and often used by) nonbelievers, but the focus of these terms is typically on how an individual approaches knowledge and meaning making (“Atheism and non-religious”). Because I am interested in how individuals self-identify, I will use *nontheist* and *nonbeliever* because they are more open to individual interpretation than the other terms listed here.

**Current Literature on Nontheists**

Nontheists, or individuals who reject the notion of a supernatural god, are often marginalized in the United States as a result of widespread misconceptions and stereotypes. Several researchers (Fitzgerald, 2003; Hunsberger and Altmeyer, 2006; Mueller, 2012; Smith, 2011) have explored the ways in which nontheists respond to misconceptions and stereotypes, and a handful have examined—often only secondary to a primary research question—how individuals come to identify as nonbelievers (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2003; Goodman and Mueller, 2009; Heiner, 1992; Hunsberger and Altmeyer, 2006; Kosheleva and Kazaryan, 2011; Mueller, 2012, Sherkat, 2008; Smith, 2011; Stinson, Birmingham, Goodman, and Ali, 2011; Zuckerman, 2007). Research on nontheists in general is somewhat scant and relatively new, but even less literature exists regarding nontheistic college students (Mueller, 2012).

Existing research suggests that college educators—professors and academic and student affairs professionals—often do not recognize nontheism as contributing to campus diversity and often are not aware of the challenges specific to nontheistic students (Goodman and Mueller, 2009; Mueller, 2012). Existing research offers suggestions for addressing the needs of nontheistic students such as providing programming and services that cater specifically to
nontheistic students and working to eliminate myths regarding nonbelievers (Goodman and Mueller, 2009; Mueller, 2012). While implementing campus programs and working to change attitudes could be beneficial for students, learning more about how students develop nontheistic identities is also necessary so that educators are better equipped to recognize when nontheistic students are struggling in their development. Existing research suggests that research on LGBT student identity development may provide a foundation for further study of nontheistic students (Mueller, 2012; Smith, 2011).

**Misconceptions Regarding Nontheists**

In a recent qualitative study, Mueller (2012) sought to understand the particular perspectives of nonbelieving college students. He found that, for the most part, and unless they attend a strongly affiliated religious institution, college students live in a secular world on campus (Mueller, 2012). A primarily secular environment makes blending in with religious peers easier for nontheistic students because they are rarely asked about their religious views, yet nontheistic students often hide their beliefs, even when asked directly, for fear of social rejection (Edgell et al., 2006; Kosheleva and Kazaryan, 2011; Mueller, 2012). Mueller (2012) found this reluctance to openly disclose one’s nontheism, which he referred to as “living on the margins” (p. 255), to be a common pattern among his participants. Research indicates that the hesitation of the students in Mueller’s study to openly identify as nonbelievers is a reflection of widespread attitudes regarding nonbelievers in the United States (Edgell et al., 2006; Goodman and Mueller, 2009; Hunsberger and Altmeyer, 2006; Zuckerman, 2009).

Aside from good, old-fashioned fear of the unknown, researchers have offered possible explanations for the marginalization of nonbelievers. Some have suggested that, although the United States professes religious diversity, adherence to religion of *some* kind is generally
expected; thus, nonbelievers may experience marginalization based on their rejection of this basic social norm (Edgell et al., 2006). The literature also suggests that nontheistic individuals’ reluctance to openly identify as nonbelievers may only contribute to their marginalization (Edgell et al., 2006; Hunsberger and Altmeyer, 2006; Zuckerman, 2007). If nonbelievers are unwilling to openly discuss their beliefs, values, and morals with the larger population, misconceptions and misinformation will persist.

Many misconceptions exist regarding nonbelievers in the United States (Edgell et al., 2006; Heiner, 1992; Hunsberger and Altmeyer, 2006; Zuckerman, 2009). One common misconception is that all nonbelievers self-identify as atheist (Heiner, 1992), a blanket term which is often used inappropriately or inaccurately to describe a person who does not affiliate himself with a particular religion. In fact, nonbelievers self-identify with various terms for various reasons, and some eschew labels altogether (Mueller, 2012). Misconceptions about nontheists fall across a wide spectrum, with innocent assumptions on one end (for example, that all nontheists are angry with God), and more negative assumptions (that nontheists are practicing Satanists) on the other (Edgell et al., 2006). Both of these assumptions, however, presume the existence of a supernatural deity and therefore would not logically apply to nontheists. Another misconception is that individuals become nonbelievers after a negative church experience; in fact, many nonbelievers fondly remember their church-going experiences (Edgell et al., 2006; Goodman and Mueller, 2009; Hunsberger and Altmeyer, 2006; Mueller, 2012; Stinson et al., 2011).

The most common misconception regarding nonbelievers is that they are immoral (Edgell et al., 2006; Goodman and Mueller, 2009; Hunsberger and Altmeyer, 2006; Heiner, 1992; Stinson et al., 2011; Zuckerman, 2009). This assumption is based on the belief that only religious
doctrine can provide a sense of responsibility to oneself or others, and without an ordained set of values—The Ten Commandments, for example—a person has no ability to determine right from wrong (Edgell et al., 2006; Goodman and Mueller, 2009; Zuckerman, 2007). Research on moral development, however, indicates that adherence to religious doctrine is not an indicator of moral reasoning ability (King and Mayhew, 2005). Further research indicates that nonbelievers are generally more accepting of diversity, think more critically, are less likely to conform to prescribed gender roles, and may be more ethical overall (Fitzgerald, 2003; Hunsberger and Altmeyer, 2006; Mueller 2012; Stinson et al., 2011; Zuckerman, 2009).

Misconceptions regarding nonbelievers in the United States are so pervasive that, as research indicates, nontheists may be discriminated against in medical settings, child support and custody cases, academia, and government (Furnham, Meader, and McClelland, 1998; Goodman and Mueller, 2012; Heiner, 1992; Volokh, 2006; Zuckerman, 2009). For example, the Arkansas State Constitution is one of several state constitutions which forbids nonbelievers from holding government office (Ark. Const.; Heiner, 1992; Zuckerman, 2009). Although enforceability of such a law is highly questionable given that there is no accurate method of assessing something as subjective as faith, the law is representative of a general negative sentiment in the United States toward nonbelievers (Edgell et al., 2006; Hunsberger and Altmeyer, 2006; Heiner, 1992; Zuckerman, 2009). Such widespread negative attitudes lead some nontheists to compare their experiences with discrimination to those of LGBT individuals or ethnic minorities in the United States (Edgell et al., 2006; Hunsberger and Altmeyer, 2006; Zimmerman, 2009).¹

¹It should be noted that while discrimination against nontheists is pervasive in our culture, the United States is arguably secular and vastly more progressive regarding nonbelievers than other countries. For a sense of perspective, consider that being an open nonbeliever in countries which follow Sharia Law can—and often does—justify a death sentence (Freedom, 2012).
Working with Nontheistic College Students

Goodman and Mueller (2009) suggest that failing to recognize the marginalization of nontheistic students may not only have a detrimental effect on their overall development, but may also encourage the persistence of misconceptions regarding nonbelievers. The authors suggest several ways in which educators can work toward creating a better environment for nontheistic students. They quote Nash (2003) who claimed that “Atheophobia,” a fear or hatred for nonbelievers, “like all other phobias, thrives in a state of ignorance” (Goodman and Mueller, 2009, p. 59; Nash, 2003, p. 7), and advise educators to educate themselves on nonbelievers by asking questions and challenging the popular perceptions regarding the nonreligious. Other suggestions for improving the campus experience for nontheistic students include critically thinking about how the campus climate may be affecting nontheistic students and reducing marginalization of nontheistic students by creating programs and sponsoring events to “normalize the atheist perspective” (Goodman and Mueller, 2009, p. 59).

Goodman and Mueller (2009) also note the importance of connecting nontheistic students to each other through social media or secular student groups such as Secular Student Alliance (SSA), which may provide a much-needed sense of community for nontheistic students.2 In his study on nontheistic college students, Mueller (2012) also found that groups such as SSA provided a safe, welcoming space for some of his participants. Educators should be aware, however, of the diversity among nontheistic students; not all students find value in secular student groups, and some find the groups too reminiscent of organized religion and fear that they may encourage the rigid group-think often associated with conservative religious congregations (Mueller, 2012).

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2 Kathy Goodman currently serves as a board member for Secular Student Alliance (“Board”).
LGBT Identity Development Research and Nontheistic Students

Mueller (2012) noted that his participants used phrases typically associated with LGBT individuals, such as “being closeted” or “coming out” when referring to their reluctance or willingness to openly identify as nonbelievers (p. 261), which may be an indication of similarities between the identity processes of LGBT and nontheistic individuals (Mueller, 2012; Smith, 2011). Goodman and Mueller (2009) also noted a similarity between the marginalization of LGBT and nontheistic individuals and suggest that educators create ally networks for nontheistic students similar to LGBT ally programs already in place on college campuses across the United States. Where LGBT allies are heterosexual students and professionals who educate themselves about and advocate for LGBT individuals, nontheistic allies would be theistic students and professionals who educate themselves about and advocate for nontheistic students (Goodman and Mueller, 2009).

Because evidence suggests a correlation between LGBT and nontheistic students, thus suggesting that similar campus programs may benefit both groups, researchers might also use studies related to LGBT student development to conduct further research on nontheistic student development (Mueller, 2012; Smith, 2011). One such study is that of Richard Rhoads (1997), whose goal was to examine the identity development of gay and bisexual college males. In a qualitative study of forty gay and bisexual college males, Rhoads identified several sources of tension and support for students as they explore and manage their sexual identities. Students in the study noted the continuing difficulty of the coming out process (particularly coming out to parents and family); choosing accurate and appropriate labels with which they self-identify; and deciding whether to be an LGBT activist (Rhoads, 1997).
Research on nontheistic individuals (Mueller, 2012; Smith, 2011) reveals that nonbelievers experience challenges similar to those of Rhoads’ participants. Challenges for nontheistic individuals involve deciding how, when, and if to reveal their nontheistic identities to others (particularly to devout family members); determining which label correctly describes their religious views (or, often, whether to use a label at all); and whether to be an activist for nontheistic causes, such as affiliating with groups such as SSA (Mueller, 2012; Smith, 2011). Although we should be cautious when drawing comparisons between two internally diverse groups of individuals with undeniably different sets of challenges, we may be able to use research such as Rhoads’ as a framework for further research on nontheistic students because so many developmental similarities seem to exist between the two groups.

In order to better address the needs of nontheistic college students, further research is needed to examine the challenges associated with being a nonbeliever, both in the larger context (what it means to be a nonbeliever in the United States) and in a smaller context (what it means to be a nonbeliever in college). Despite the growing number of nontheistic students on college campuses, few studies have examined these students in depth and the small body of existing research is relatively new. Existing literature provides some insight into the developmental processes of nontheistic students, and researchers may be able to use literature on LGBT student identity development, which is far more extensive, as a basis for further study on nontheistic students.

3 Although nontheistic individuals may experience some form of discrimination, they have an obvious social advantage over LGBT individuals: Nontheists can live their entire lives without disclosing their religious preference to others, and thus may avoid being openly discriminated against. Sexual identity, however, is generally more visible than religious identity, thus increasing LGBT individuals’ susceptibility for discrimination. Although we can draw comparisons between how LGBT and nontheistic individuals manage their respective identities, the two groups are distinct, and a great deal of diversity exists within each. This research project seeks to draw comparisons and offer suggestions for further research; making broad generalizations across the two groups is not the intent.
Study

The goal of this paper is to examine aspects of identity development among nontheistic college students at UIUC and compare the findings to the results of Rhoads’ (1997) study on gay and bisexual college males. I hope to determine whether studies on LGBT college students may provide a foundation for researchers who want to learn more about identity development of nontheistic students. Because a primary objective of the project is to develop a better understanding of how we can approach further research regarding nontheistic students, I use existing research on LGBT individuals—namely, Rhoads’ study—to inform my work rather than using theories regarding LGBT identity development. As Rhoads cautions, theories are often too narrow to address the range of diversity among a given group (Rhoads, 1997). I approach this project with a keen awareness that finding similarities between groups of students—LGBT and nontheistic students, for instance—does not imply that development among the students will match exactly. Thus, even if my research reveals a solid correlation between LGBT and nontheistic identity issues, more in-depth, specific research is needed regarding nontheistic students—with particular consideration given to diversity within this population—if we are to fully understand their identity development.

Methodology

I set out to interview two or three male UIUC students who are affiliated with ISSA (perhaps more, if my participants were able to refer me to other willing participants). Speaking with ISSA members would be advantageous for this project because they may be more willing to talk about issues related to nontheistic development as they are more likely to have reached a point of development in which they openly identify as nonbelievers. After sending several requests to ISSA’s webmaster and Facebook page, I received two responses from students who
were interested in participating in my study. Although both students agreed to participate and signed consent forms, only one completed my questionnaire (see Appendix). Several more attempts to find participants failed, leaving me with only one research participant. Fortunately, my participant, referred to here as “Alex,” thoughtfully answered my prompts. Alex’s responses may provide insight into how we can begin thinking about studying nontheistic student identity development, particularly if we consider Rhoads’ work (1997) on gay and bisexual college males as a starting point.

**Findings**

Two themes emerged in Alex’s responses which relate to themes in Rhoads’s (1997) study: The Politics of Labeling and The Role of Support Networks. Interestingly, these two themes are directly related to combating prejudice. LGBT and nontheistic students seem to be using similar methods to reduce or eliminate marginalization. We can draw parallels between Alex’s experiences as a nontheistic student at UIUC and the experiences of the gay and bisexual students in Rhoads’ study, which indicates that using LGBT research as a framework for studying nontheistic students may be appropriate. However, due to inherent differences between the two groups, research on LGBT identity development is not an adequate substitution for research which specifically addresses nontheistic students.

**The Politics of Labeling**

When asked how he identifies with regard to religion and what factors contribute to his self-identification, Alex responded by saying:

I try to avoid labels, since they can be distracting, but I self-identify as a secular Humanist. I prefer this label over ‘atheist’ because it points out who I am, not who I’m not. In a culture where

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4 I have changed the participant’s name to protect his identity.
people assume atheists are only against things and not for anything, this label is a good reminder for them that I believe in morality too.

The reasons Alex offers for choosing to identify as *secular Humanist* are not uncommon among nonbelievers (Goodman and Mueller, 2009; Mueller, 2012). Particularly, what Alex describes as a reluctance to use the term *atheist* is often a point of debate among nontheists. For instance, writer Sam Harris adamantly opposes using certain terms, particularly *atheism* and *atheist*, because he claims that nonbelief itself is not a philosophy and therefore does not require a categorization:

> Attaching a label to something carries real liabilities, especially if the thing you are naming isn’t really a thing at all. And atheism, I would argue, is not a thing. It is not a philosophy, just as ‘non-racism’ is not one. Atheism is not a worldview—and yet most people imagine it to be one and attack it as such. We who do not believe in God are collaborating in this misunderstanding by consenting to be named and by even naming ourselves (Harris, 2007).

Further, Harris argues that nonbelievers should not use any labels to describe themselves; instead, he argues, nonbelievers should “go under the radar” and “be decent, responsible people who destroy bad ideas wherever we find them” (Harris, 2007). Harris’ suggestions regarding labels and Alex’s claim that we live “in a culture where people assume atheists are only against things and not for anything” reflects the need for nonbelievers to change the negative social perceptions regarding the nonreligious. Alex chooses to identify as *Humanist* rather than *atheist* because *Humanist* tends to connote a more positive worldview; in this way Alex is conforming to an established perception of nonbelievers and choosing to identify in a way that is more socially acceptable. Harris, on the other hand, insists that nonbelievers should simply live as good citizens rather than calling attention to their lack of religious beliefs, thus eliminating negative connotations by eliminating the labels which carry them. These two options for self-
identification—either choosing to identify in a particular way or choosing not to identify at all—both function as means for reducing marginalization of nonbelievers by changing society’s perceptions of the nonreligious.

Just as nonbelievers use (or choose not to use) labels to affect political or social change, LGBT individuals often use (or choose not to use) labels as a means of politicizing their sexual identities, thus working to reduce marginalization (Rhoads, 1997). Some students in Rhoads’ study choose not to self-identify at all. Rhoads suggests that these students eschew labels because identifying as *gay* or *bisexual* pigeonholes them into specific categories that may not adequately describe their sexual identity (Rhoads, 1997). One student claimed that he prefers not to identify as either *gay* or *bisexual*, stating that “once you start to attach labels to something it makes you want to get away from it that much more” (Rhoads, 1997, p. 467).

Some students in Rhoads’ (1997) study expressed frustration with being forced to choose a label based on society’s limited understanding of sexual orientation. Some choose to identify as *queer*, because unlike *gay* or *lesbian, queer* is not as easily defined (Rhoads, 1997). For these students, “identifying publicly”—and in a particular way—“is necessary to battle marginality” (Rhoads, 1997, p. 466). LGBT individuals may reject certain labels because of the negative connotations often associated with them, and by doing so, they are attempting to change the language society uses to describe people in the LGBT community.

Thus, the political and social implications of labeling are salient for both LGBT and nontheistic individuals. Because both groups are susceptible to stereotyping, individuals in both groups may choose to identify with certain terms as a way of attempting to combat further marginalization. Individuals in both groups may choose, instead, to avoid using labels which
may be inappropriate or incomplete. Individuals in both groups appear to be working toward the goal of reducing prejudice.

**The Role of Support Networks**

As Goodman and Mueller (2009) note, secular student groups can offer nontheistic students “an opportunity to develop their moral beliefs and discuss how they make meaning in their lives” (p. 58). Alex claims that UIUC’s Illini Secular Student Alliance (ISSA) has been “by far the biggest resource of support” as he develops and manages a nontheistic identity, saying that involvement with ISSA “put me around people who I could relate to and facilitated intellectually stimulating conversations. Thanks to ISSA, I probably feel a little more comfortable in my beliefs.” For Alex, ISSA provides a positive atmosphere where he can connect and engage with people who share his beliefs. For some students, however, secular student groups provide an avenue for working toward eliminating misconceptions regarding nonbelievers (Goodman and Mueller, 2009).

Many secular student groups host programs aimed at starting conversations regarding free speech and attempting to debunk myths regarding nonbelievers (Goodman and Mueller, 2009). ISSA, for instance, hosts events such as Blasphemy Day, which was created after Jyllands-Posten, a Danish newspaper, published cartoons depicting Islamic prophet Muhammad, inciting violent riots in several countries (Asser, 2010). On Blasphemy Day at UIUC, ISSA members encourage students to write a blasphemous comment on a billboard, draw the prophet Muhammad, or participate in activities such as “Stone a Heathen” or “Sell Your Soul for a Cookie” (Franklin, 2009; Tippins, 2010). During these events, ISSA members provide literature and information in order to promote science, philanthropy, and free speech, and to educate students on issues regarding separation of church and state. Although ISSA members are actively
seeking a framework

attempting to reduce the marginalization of nonbelievers by hosting such events and attempting to educate other students at UIUC, the comments from ISSA’s blog readers indicate that not all nonbelievers on campus support events which, some have suggested, mock religion unnecessarily, effectively creating a hostile environment for all religious students on campus (ISSA, 2010; Tippins, 2012).

Because diversity of opinion and perspective exists among any group of nontheistic students—not only those at UIUC—conflicts regarding levels of commitment to nontheistic activism within the group are not unexpected. Research suggests that a similar type of conflict exists among LGBT students as well (Rhoads, 1997). Rhoads (1997) discusses several points of tension for the gay and bisexual students in his study, one of which is gay politics, which he describes as a “range of commitment of gay and bisexual male students to the politics of gay identity” (p. 471). Commitment may manifest itself in a number of ways, from privately identifying as LGBT to being involved with LGBT activist groups on campus. Rhoads (1997) notes that tensions can arise between students who choose be open only to close friends and those who feel that fighting for LGBT equality is a necessary aspect of managing an LGBT identity (Rhoads, 1997). LGBT individuals may not want to participate in pride events or support LGBT activist groups out of fear of reinforcing a negative stereotype, yet other students may feel a responsibility to be active in such groups in order to combat the same stereotypes (Rhoads, 1997).

Just as LGBT and nontheistic individuals might use labels as a way of politicizing their respective identities, individuals may choose to (or choose not to) actively promote LGBT or nontheistic causes as a way of educating others in an effort to eliminate misconceptions and reduce marginalization.
Where the Correlation Stops: The Issue of Safety

As Goodman and Mueller (2009) and Alex’s interview responses indicate, secular student groups can be beneficial for students as they manage their nontheistic identities, and LGBT students also need an established community of LGBT individuals who are able to offer support and encouragement (Rhoads, 1997). The reasons for needing such communities, however, are very different for each group. For LGBT individuals, access to a supportive community is a matter of personal safety. LGBT individuals must be acutely aware of their surroundings, always checking to make sure that they are safe from the threat of physical harm. Ally programs allow college faculty and staff to advertise offices as “safe zones” (“Become”), and, usually, college classrooms are relatively safe places for LGBT students. However, other places on campus such as gyms, bars which cater primarily to heterosexual students, or social functions hosted by Greek organizations could pose potential risks for LGBT students (Rhoads, 1997). Supportive networks of LGBT students and LGBT allies on campus may provide necessary safety resources for students who may face real danger on or off campus.

Alex describes a “range of responses” one can experience after coming out as a nonbeliever. As distressing as these responses may be, particularly those from family or close friends (Mueller, 2012), nontheistic students are rarely in any real danger based on their beliefs. As previously noted, discrimination against nonbelievers exists in various forms throughout the United States, but discrimination to the point of violence for LGBT individuals is much more pervasive. While secular student groups can be excellent sources of intellectual and emotional support for nontheistic students (Goodman and Mueller, 2009), they are arguably not as necessary as support programs for LGBT individuals.
Unlike issues regarding labeling and self-identifying, the emotional needs and safety concerns of LGBT and nontheistic students are very different. Although parallels do exist between the identity management of the two groups, LGBT individuals may face more challenges as a result of their LGBT identity than nonbelievers; thus, research on identity development of LGBT individuals may not be appropriate for the study of nontheistic students. Examining research on LGBT individuals may help educators gain a better understanding of nontheistic students’ struggles regarding coming out as nonbelievers, self-identifying, or nontheistic activism, but more research is needed to address the specific challenges of nontheistic students.

**Discussion and Suggestions for Further Research**

An obvious limitation of this paper is its lack of qualitative data. Because so much diversity exists among nonbelievers, we can only speculate as to how and why nontheistic students other than Alex self-identify. Alex’s responses indicate that he had some difficulty coming out as a nonbeliever in his “hometown in Alabama,” but his story only represents a portion of nonbelievers’ experiences. Some move from theistic families to nontheistic identities with little or no conflict; some nonbelievers grow up in nontheistic families and never experience any form of marginalization whatsoever. Further research should include more nontheistic voices, some of which may describe an entirely different experience than Alex’s. Perhaps interviewing theistic students at UIUC and examining how nontheistic students are perceived on campus, rather than only looking at issues of marginalization from the nontheistic student’s perspective, would give researchers a better understanding of both theistic and nontheistic students and how educators might be able to work to eliminate tension between the two groups.
Even given the limitations of this paper, we are able to see parallels between experiences of LGBT and nontheistic individuals, particularly in how they use labels and align themselves with support networks in an effort to reduce stereotypes and marginalization. Even though both groups experience discrimination to some degree, the potential safety concerns as a result of discrimination are more pronounced for LGBT individuals. Because concerns such as these are different for each group, research on identity development of LGBT and nontheistic individuals will address issues most salient to each group. Research on LGBT can function as a framework for nontheistic students to a certain point, but eventually the parallels between the two groups stop, and issues addressed through research for one group may not be appropriate for the other. Thus, directly applying research on LGBT students to nontheistic students may not be appropriate.

Although nontheistic students may not be subject to a dangerous degree of discrimination (as LGBT individuals continue to be, in some contexts), further research of nontheistic students is warranted. With the prevalence of prejudice toward nonbelievers in the United States, educators may be unable to effectively address nontheistic students’ needs without current research on this growing population. Further research should take a holistic approach to studying nontheistic students and should consider how factors such as race, class, sexual orientation, and cognitive ability may affect or be affected by a nontheistic identity, thus providing educators with a more complete picture of what students might be experiencing. Further research should also consider the diversity and complexity inherent among nontheists, thus exploring the multitude of challenges nonbelievers may experience. Using research on LGBT individuals might be appropriate for helping researchers and educators start a conversation on how best to study identity development in nontheistic students, but given the different needs and challenges
of both groups, LGBT research alone is not a proper substitution for research that focuses solely on nontheistic students.
References


SEEKING A FRAMEWORK


Appendix

Interview Questions

1. How do you identify yourself with regard to religion? What factors contributed to how you decided to identify?

2. Can you describe any points of tension you have experienced, either on or off campus, as you came to develop this identity? Can you describe any sources of support?

3. Do you feel that the campus climate at UIUC has had an influence, either positive or negative, on how you identify?

4. Do you believe that UIUC is an inclusive environment for all student groups?