St. Catherine University

SOPHIA

5-2018

Navigating Perceptions and Stereotypes of Leaders who Identify as Non-Religious in the U.S.: A Qualitative Thesis Examining How Individuals who Identify as Non-Religious Navigate Stereotypes and Perceptions of their Identity to Establish Themselves as Credible Leaders

Sarah Kruger Hilger
St. Catherine University

Recommended Citation

Navigating Perceptions and Stereotypes of Leaders who Identify as Non-Religious in the U.S.

A Qualitative Thesis Examining How Individuals who Identify as Non-Religious Navigate Stereotypes and Perceptions of their Identity to Establish Themselves as Credible Leaders

By

Sarah Kruger Hilger

A Thesis Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Degree of

Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership

St. Catherine University

St. Paul, Minnesota

May 2018

Research Advisor: Amy Ihlan, Ph.D.

Research Reading Committee:

Martha Hardesty, Ph.D.

Suzanne Otte Allen, Ed.D.

_____ Date

Signature of Advisor

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables and Figures

Abstract

The religious landscape of the U.S. is changing drastically with an increasing number of individuals identifying as non-religious (Pew Research Center, 2014). While these individuals do not associate with a particular religion, they may be spiritual, have some religious based beliefs, or identify as atheist, agnostic, or yet another category (Baker & Smith, 2009; Cragun et al., 2012; Edgell et al., 2016). These individuals are our neighbors, friends, and family members. They are also leaders in our communities. However, U.S. society tends to have a negative perception of individuals who identify as non-religious as a person's religious affiliation often serves as a public marker of their personal morals (Smith, 2017). With regard to leadership, this perception is important as morals play a significant role in establishing a leader as ethical and credible (Zhu et al., 2015). This study examined how individuals who identify as non-religious navigate others' stereotypes and perceptions of their identity to establish themselves as credible leaders by reviewing the existing literature, analyzing relevant theoretical frameworks, and highlighting the experiences of individuals who identify as both non-religious and as leaders through semi-structured interviews and a focus group.

Navigating Perceptions and Stereotypes of Leaders Who Identify as Non-Religious in the U.S.

A Qualitative Thesis Examining How Individuals who Identify as Non-Religious Navigate

Stereotypes and Perceptions of their Identity to Establish Themselves as Credible Leaders

The percentage of individuals in the U.S. who self-identify as non-religious is steadily increasing with 22.8% of Americans identifying as non-religious in 2014, a six percentage point increase over the previous seven years (Pew Research Center, 2014). Although individuals who identify as non-religious make up a significant portion of the U.S. population, they remain a fairly understudied and, to some extent, marginalized group. Edgell et al. (2016) explain that there is a strong belief in the U.S. that "religiosity is central for civic virtue, that societal standards of right and wrong should be rooted in historic religious traditions, and that Christianity underpins American identity" (p. 629). This association between religion and morals can be a dilemma for individuals who identify as both non-religious and as leaders since demonstrating oneself to be ethical and moral is essential to establishing one's credibility as a leader (Zhu et al., 2015, pp. 81-82). This study examined how U.S.-based individuals who identify as non-religious navigate others' perceptions and stereotypes of their identity in order to establish themselves as credible leaders.

As a U.S.-based individual who identifies as non-religious and is studying leadership and ethics, this dilemma led me to question how other individuals who identify as non-religious navigate society's perceptions and stereotypes of this aspect of their identity in order to establish themselves as credible leaders. My intent in completing this research was to raise awareness of the prevalence of individuals who identify as non-religious in the U.S. and their capacity to be ethical and credible leaders whether they choose to openly embrace their identity as non-religious in their professional field or not.

Statement of the Problem

By demonstrating oneself as ethical and moral, leaders are able to establish credibility and gain follower buy-in (Zhu et al., 2015). Establishing credibility is important as observed by Kouzes and Posner (2012), "*Credibility is the foundation of leadership*" (p. 37) and is needed to encourage others to join together in pursuit of a shared vision. However, establishing credibility can be a dilemma for individuals who identify as both non-religious and as leaders because morality, as perceived by U.S. culture, is often tied to one's religious affiliation. According to a 2017 report from the Pew Research Center, 44% of adults in the U.S. agree that one must believe in God to be moral and have good values (Smith). Therefore, individuals who identify as non-religious may maintain a religious identity due to societal and familial pressures in addition to a variety of perceived "social costs" associated with openly identifying as non-religious (Baker & Smith, 2009, p. 721). Current scholarly literature does not adequately address how the credibility of a leader intersects with their religious identity if the leader identifies as non-religious. The experience of individuals who identify as non-religious in the U.S. is also often overlooked. Instead, much of the existing literature focuses on the experiences of atheists or mainstream U.S. society's perceptions of the non-religious as a vague demographic rather than with regard to their day to day interactions with individuals who identify as non-religious. The intention of my study was to address these gaps in the existing research.

Literature Review

In this section, I will provide insights into the existing literature on leadership, definitions of religion in a multi-cultural context, the non-religious population in the U.S., and the perception of individuals who identify as non-religious in the U.S. as both the unknown and the familiar. Discrimination against individuals who identify as non-religious in the U.S. will briefly be explored. The intersection of morality and its relationship with establishing the credibility of a leader will also be examined to provide background into how identifying as non-religious may impact a person's ability to establish themselves as a credible leader. Authentic leadership, situational approach leadership, stigma theory, and covering will serve as theoretical frameworks through which I will justify the importance of my study. I will also highlight areas that existing literature does not adequately address and provide recommendations for further research.

Defining Leadership and Leaders

Leadership is a complex subject with many contexts and theories. However, for the purpose of this study, I examined leadership and leaders in both formal and informal contexts with emphasis on the idea that anyone can be a leader. In order to provide scope for this study, I focused my exploration of the defining factors of leadership and leaders on Kouzes and Posner's 2012 book titled *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations.* Kouzes and Posner (2012) explain that leadership "…is everyone's business" as it can be found everywhere in the world from the workplace to the community (pp. 6-7). They define leadership as "…an *observable pattern of practices and behaviors* and a definable set of skills and abilities" (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 335). The authors also challenge the assumption that leadership is based on one's formal role and instead argue that leadership is more about how one acts rather than the title they hold (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 332). Additionally, Kouzes

and Posner (2012) emphasize that leaders are made, not born, and that leadership is learnable if one is committed to continuous learning (pp. 334-335).

Defining Religion

While this study focuses on the experiences of individuals who identify as non-religious, it is important to examine definitions of religion in order to better understand the complexity of this dichotomy. With a vast array of traditions, cultural affiliations, and practitioners, religion is a challenging concept to define when viewed through a multi-cultural lens and in the context of its role in U.S. society. As highlighted in Harrison's (2006) article on "The pragmatics of defining religion in a multi-cultural world", definitions of religion tend to fall under three general categories: intellectual, affective and functional (p. 133). Although rich in history and study, each of these categories have their own pitfalls and fail to encompass all religious traditions. While each of these definitions of religion are insufficient, it is worthwhile to review them in order to get a sense of the complexity of religion and its role in a multi-cultural society.

Harrison (2006) explains that intellectual definitions of religion "stipulate that the defining, or essential, feature of religion is belief about a particular sort of object" (p. 133). While intellectual definitions highlight the role of beliefs, they fail to capture how faith and other aspects such as religious traditions and community serve as foundational components of religion. This type of definition also suggests that a framework of beliefs is paramount to defining religion. Based on this component, certain religions such as Theravada Buddhism would fail to qualify.

In comparison, Harrison (2006) describes how affective definitions of religion emphasize how faith and its associated emotions are the defining characteristics of religion. While this definition highlights the significance of practitioners' dependence on religion, it does not

adequately address the role of religious texts, ceremony, and/or community. Therefore, this definition of religion would not adequately encompass religions such as Buddhism or Taoism.

Functional definitions of religion highlight the role religion plays in the lives of its practitioners. While this definition of religion is quite broad, each religion does not serve the same role for its practitioners as other religions. Therefore, this type of definition is rendered somewhat meaningless as its fails to classify the purpose of religion and how that purpose manifests within the religion.

Ultimately, Harrison's (2006) article argues that traditional definitions of religion tend to best capture Christian faiths while leaving out other major religious traditions. Harrison (2006) summarizes this dilemma stating:

> [Due to their biases,] theories of religion would seem to rival religions in the diversity they exhibit, and the prevailing definitions of religion they have generated seem to have shed little light on what – if anything – all and only religions have in common (p. 139).

Despite religion being difficult to define due to the diversity of practices and beliefs held by religious practitioners in multi-cultural contexts, there are themes that connect its various forms. Therefore, Harrison (2006) argues that instead of working towards establishing one definition of religion, which is described as futile, religions should be viewed using a "family resemblance approach" (p. 142). The family resemblance approach explains how religions can be grouped together due to shared characteristics; however, every characteristic does not need to be present to be classified as a religion.

Defining Non-Religious

While religion has a myriad of definitions, scholarly literature has more consensus surrounding the categorization of non-religious. Individuals who identify as non-religious, frequently classified as religious "nones," include individuals who identify as atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular" (Baker & Smith, 2009; Cragun et al., 2012; Edgell et al., 2016). According to the Pew Research Center's 2014 report titled America's Changing Religious Landscape, 22.8% of respondents reported being religiously unaffiliated with 3.1% of those identifying as atheist, 4% as agnostic, and 15.8% as nothing in particular. Although individuals who identify as non-religious do not affiliate themselves with any particular organized religion, the group is not homogenous. Some individuals who identify as non-religious hold religious-based beliefs or have spiritual practices, while others maintain a completely non-theistic lifestyle (Baker & Smith, 2009; Cragun et al., 2012; Edgell et al., 2016). Although a growing proportion of individuals who identify as non-religious were raised without religion, others have come to identify as non-religious later on in life (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017, p. 66). According to Hayes (1995), if an individual changes their religious identification, the change is likely to be permanent (p. 179). Despite being rather difficult to categorize, as the group is defined by what they are not, individuals who identify as non-religious often have demographic commonalities. Individuals who identify as non-religious and their experiences in our society are increasingly important to examine as the percentage of individuals identifying as non-religious is on the rise in both the U.S., as well as throughout much of the Western world (Edgell et al., 2016; Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017).

Demographics.

Individuals who identify as non-religious in the U.S. on average are quite young. In 2015, the average age of religiously unaffiliated adults was recorded as 36 years old while the median adult age in the U.S. was 46 years old (Pew Research Center). This fact is significant as the percentage of the U.S. population that identifies as non-religious is likely to rise as our population ages. Individuals who identify as non-religious also tend to be male, unmarried, and college educated (Baker & Smith, 2009; Hayes 1995, Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017). Geographically, individuals who identify as non-religious are more likely to be found in urban areas and in the Western U.S. (Baker & Smith, 2009). In Minnesota, where this study took place, the percentage of adults that identified as non-religious in 2014 was 20%, 2.8% less than the national average (Pew Research Center).

Prevalence in the U.S.

As previously discussed, the number of individuals identifying as non-religious is steadily rising in the U.S (Pew Research Center, 2014). Theissen and Wilkins-Laflamme (2017) categorize religious nones as the "fastest growing 'religious' group in much of the modern Western world" (p.64). According to the Pew Research Center (2014), the percentage of Americans who identify as non-religious is 22.8%, a six point increase over the last seven years. Theissen and Wilkins-Laflamme (2017) suggest that this growth is likely to have a "snowball effect" (p. 66) with not only the number of people identifying as non-religious increasing, but also the acceptance of this group by U.S. society. They also attribute the growth of this demographic to a "gradual shift over time and across generations" (p. 65) rather than a sudden increase in religious individuals shunning their religion of upbringing.

U.S. Society's Perceptions of Individuals who Identify as Non-Religious

Despite their growing presence, individuals who identify as non-religious are still often looked upon unfavorably by U.S. society with atheists getting the brunt of this negativity and distrust (Edgell et al., 2016, p. 607). According to Edgell et al. (2016), "Religious belief and commitment have historically been understood as proxies for the private virtues – integrity, trustworthiness, and concern for others – that underpin public life" (p. 610). Religiousness is also strongly attributed to morality (Edgell et al., 2006). Without a religious identity, U.S. society is often unsure how to determine a group's ethical standards which in turn breeds misgiving (Edgell et al. 2016, p. 612). Much of the literature available on U.S. society's perceptions and stereotypes of individuals who identify as non-religious examines the non-religious population as a vague demographic category without any personal association, which likely plays into these negative perceptions and stereotypes. Additionally, much of the literature focuses on the atheist subgroup of the non-religious population in the U.S. despite atheists making up less than 14% of the non-religious population (Pew Research Center, 2014).

As the unknown.

As previously touched on, much of the literature on the perception of individuals who identify as non-religious in the U.S. is from the viewpoint of the non-religious population as the "other". This literature depicts individuals who identify as non-religious as an unknown group instead of as our neighbors, relatives, co-workers, and friends. When categorized as the "other", people are often less trusting of individuals who identify as non-religious. Edgell et al. (2016) summarized findings from a Public Agenda survey stating that, "If more Americans were more religious, people believe that crime would go down, families would do a better job raising their children and people would be more likely to help each other" (p. 213). U.S. society is also less

willing to vote for individuals who openly identify as not believing in a God in comparison to an individual who identifies with other historically marginalized groups including women, Jews, African Americans, or members of the LGBTQ+ community (p. 215). The same survey found respondents to be more hesitant to support their children marrying atheists in comparison to all other groups included in the sample (p. 216). According to Edgell et al. (2016), "Americans construct the atheist as the symbolic representation of one who rejects the basis for moral solidarity and cultural membership in American society altogether" (p. 230).

In comparison, Berggre and Bjørnskov (2011) theorize that people are more trusting of religious individuals as religion discourages "socially destructive behavior" (p. 462), and therefore, those who abide by religious teachings are more likely to promote social wellbeing. Franks and Scherr (2014) concur with this sentiment adding that religious traditions act as a "social glue" and that distrust of individuals who identify as non-religious historically made sense as failing to partake in religious rituals and beliefs could be taken as "cues that someone is not a committed member of one's in-group" (p. 682). Edgell et al. (2016) add that there is a strong belief in the U.S. that "religiosity is central for civic virtue, that societal standards of right and wrong should be rooted in historic religious traditions, and that Christianity underpins American identify" (p. 629).

On a personal level.

While much of the current literature examines the non-religious population in the U.S. from a distance, Vargas and Loveland (2011) are one exception. These two authors focus their study on the relationships and friendships between the religious and non-religious. While they reiterate that most Americans hold unfavorable views of individuals who identify as non-religious, particularly of atheists, Vargas and Loveland (2011) also report that friendships

between the two populations are quite common. According to their study, 68% of self-identified

religious individuals report having a friend whom they do not believe to be religious (p. 714).

According to Vargas and Loveland (2011), "there is far greater tendency to befriend individuals

who are not religious *at all* than to proclaim trust and tolerance towards largely unorganized and

fragmented groups of non-religious people on social surveys" (p. 726).

Impact of negative perceptions and stereotypes.

While society appears to be more accepting of individuals who identify as non-religious

when they are better acquainted with them on a personal level, individuals who identify as non-

religious still face significant stigma, which impacts their day-to-day lives. According to Baker

and Smith (2009), individuals who identify as non-religious may maintain a religious identity

due to societal and familial pressures because of the potential "social costs" associated with

openly identifying as non-religious (p. 721). Additionally, they may be more likely to portray

themselves as affiliated with a religion after having children in effort to be seen as positive role

models as U.S. society deems religious individuals to be morally preferable. While individuals

who identify as non-religious often cover their identity to avoid negative stereotypes, it is

important to note the studies examined do not demonstrate that these prejudices lead individuals

who identify as non-religious to actually convert to an organized religion.

Individuals that are more "out" about their non-religious identity are also more likely to

face discrimination. According to Hammer et al. (2012), self-identified atheists reported facing

discrimination in the forms of "slander; coercion; social ostracism; denial of opportunities,

goods, and services; and hate crimes" at the rate of 41% over a five year period (p. 43). Hammer

et al. (2012) depict this discrimination as ranging from being ostracized by family and friends to

negatively impacting the outcome of custody battles, and one's ability to get quality medical care

(p. 45). Despite the prevalence of discrimination against atheists, atheists are not often viewed or classified as a marginalized group in the U.S.; therefore, not much is known about how this discrimination affects them and their long-term well-being (Hammer et al, 2012, p. 44).

Edgell et al. (2006) portray a bleak outlook for individuals who identify as non-religious, reporting that negative attitudes towards atheists have demonstrated little improvement in the last 40 years in comparison to other religiously and racially marginalized groups (p. 212). However, more recently, Smith (2017) reporting for the Pew Research Center accounts a significant rise in the percentage of Americans who report belief in God is not necessary for having good values or being moral. According to the 2017 survey, 56% of respondents reported that religion is not necessary to be moral, up 7% from 2011. Smith (2017) attributes this increase to the growing percentage of individuals identifying as non-religious in the U.S. It is particularly curious to note that even among individuals who identify as non-religious, 15% responded that believing in God is a necessary component of morality. This may be explained by the inclusive nature of the definition of non-religious, as non-religious excludes only individuals who subscribe to a particular religion rather than those who believe in a deity or other higher power.

Overview of Literature on Morality and its Intersection with Leadership and Credibility

According to White-Newman (2003), in order to be a successful leader one must be ethical, effective, and enduring. Being an ethical leader is also frequently tied to having a moral foundation and while the two concepts are distinct, there is significant overlap (Gentile 2010, p. 27). According to Gentile (2010), ethics "…suggests a system of rules or standards with which one is expected to comply" (p. 25). In comparison, "…'morals' emphasize the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of a particular behavior" (p. 27). Zhu et al. (2015) explain that in order for leaders to be moral and ethical, they must be "…objective and fair decision makers, hold a solid set of

ethical values and principles, show extensive social concerns about the society and community, and commit to their ethical decision rules" (p. 82). By demonstrating oneself as ethical and abiding to one's moral code, leaders are able to establish credibility and gain follower buy in (Zhu et al., 2015, pp. 81-82). This is important, as highlighted by Kouzes and Posner (2012) "*Credibility is the foundation of leadership*" (p. 37).

Theoretical Frameworks

In order to make apparent the need for this study, I will shed light on four theoretical frameworks. Two of the frameworks relate to leadership while the other two provide insights on the importance of understanding the experience of unfavored groups. The four theoretical frameworks I will examine include authentic leadership, situational approach leadership, stigma theory, and covering. While none of these theoretical frameworks focus explicitly on the experience of individuals who identify as non-religious, I still believe them to be applicable to their experiences as part of an unfavored group. In the discussion section of this thesis, I will relate the frameworks specifically to the experiences study participants to determine the extent of their relevance.

Authentic leadership.

Northouse (2016) presents a variety of definitions of authentic leadership. For the purpose of this study, I examined authentic leadership from a theoretical standpoint. According to Northouse (2016) authentic leadership can be summarized as:

…a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development (p. 201).

At the foundation of authentic leadership are four primary components including: self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency (Northouse, 2016, p. 202). Self-awareness refers to an individual's ability to self-reflect on their core values and identity; it also includes having an awareness of what they stand for and trust in these key aspects of their identity (p. 202). Internalized moral perspective, which relates to a leader's ability to use their own morality to guide their actions and behaviors instead of outside forces, boosts a leader's authenticity as "their actions are consistent with their expressed beliefs and morals" (Northouse, 2016, p. 203). When an individual analyzes all aspects of a situation objectively and solicits others' feedback, they are doing balanced processing (p. 203). These actions help to minimize favoritism and boost authenticity as the individual is perceived as acting in an objective manner. Lastly, relational transparency boosts authenticity as it relates to an individual's willingness to be transparent with others in an appropriate manner even when the aspect they are sharing about themselves has the potential to be viewed negatively (p. 203).

Situational approach leadership.

Situational approach leadership is a fairly simplistic and straighforward lens through which to view leadership. It refers to the concept that "different situations demand different kinds of leadership" and that to be an effective leader one must "adapt his or her style to the demands of different situations" (Northouse, 2016, p. 93). According to Northouse (2016), the situational approach to leadership is comprised of directive and supportive dimensions, which are applied to a given situation. These dimensions are consistently gauged and re-evaluated by the leader as followers' actions, behaviors, and experiences evolve. Dependent on the leader's perceptions regarding the present needs of their followers, the leader then adapts their leadership style based on "the competence and commitment of the followers" (Northouse, 2016, p. 94).

Stigma theory.

Stigma theory is largely attributed to Erving Goffman. In his 1963 book titled *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman reports a person who is stigmatized for one reason or another is viewed by mainstream society as "not quite human" (p. 5). Therefore, these individuals have "special reasons" for feeling anxious and out of place in social settings where they do not conform to the setting's norm (p. 18). It is important to note that certain stigmas are easier to conceal than others. For example, mental illness and religious identity are often significantly easier to disguise than a physical characteristic that is atypical. Therefore, individuals can often strategically choose if and when to unveil their stigmatized attributes to others. Goffman also acknowledges that the category of those that have been stigmatized is broad and all-encompassing and that instead of classifying individuals as stigmatized and non-stigmatized, it makes more sense to identify specific ways in which an individual has been stigmatized in some manner at some point in their life (p. 129).

Goffman (1963) reports that once a person has been identified as having a stigma, mainstream society is more likely to attribute additional negative characteristics to the person despite little to no reason for these associations (p. 5). This stereotyping of stigmatized sections of society breeds distrust between groups. Additionally, the stereotyping of stigmatized individuals may extend past themselves and negatively impact their close connections (p. 30). This further gives stigmatized individuals reason to attempt to conceal certain aspects of their being and for others to maintain their distance from such persons.

While Goffman does not portray stigmas as avoidable, he addresses the idea that stigmatized individuals may become accepted. According to Goffman (1963), while interactions between strangers are prone to stereotypes, as familiarity between parties increases, so does

understanding and an ultimately "a realistic assessment of personal qualities" (p. 51). However, he also cautions that an increase in familiarity does not necessarily mean there will be a decrease in contempt within society as an individual's stigma may still be looked upon unfavorably (p. 53).

Covering.

Kenji Yoshino developed the theory of covering which is highly informed by Goffman's studies on stigma. According to Yoshino (2002), covering is a form of assimilation in which an individual modulates their identity in order to allow others to ignore certain aspects of their identity they might find disagreeable. Yoshino (2002), whose work often centers on the experiences of gays and lesbians, cites the example that a lesbian might purposefully refrain from public displays of affection with her partner, not engage in "gender-atypical activity", or partake in gay activism in order to keep potentially harmful stigmas at bay (p. 772). He reports that while marginalized groups have more reasons to cover, everyone is likely to have covered some aspect of their identity at some point in their life.

Key to Yoshino's theory is the concept that assimilation is highly dependent on the relationship between the individual and their audience (p. 773). The nature of this relationship determines whether some acts are considered covering or downplaying a stigma versus passing part of one's identify off as the norm. Therefore, it is important to take context into account when examining stigmas and the actions or inactions of stigmatized individuals.

Yoshino also cautions that not all pressures to assimilate are bad, citing the criminal justice system and education system as positive pressures which encourage society to be law abiding and literate (p. 930). Instead, Yoshino encourages assimilation to be carefully viewed on a case-by-case basis to determine if such action is beneficial. For example, Yoshino argues that

actions that could be labelled as covering should be viewed as benign if one is doing so as an option versus if society is insisting that a certain aspect of a person's identity be covered (p. 936).

Gaps in Literature

There remain many gaps in the literature regarding the non-religious population of the U.S., as well as the experiences of individuals who identify as non-religious and as leaders. For one, much of the existing literature on the non-religious population focuses on society's perceptions of atheists and their experiences despite atheists making up only 13.6% of all individuals that identify as non-religious in the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2014). As previously stated, individuals who identify as non-religious are also often portrayed in surveys as a faceless demographic instead of people we are likely to interact with on a daily basis. Very few studies focus specifically on the experiences of the individuals who identify as non-religious, instead emphasizing how our larger society relates to this group. This tactic of portraying the non-religious population as different from mainstream U.S. society likely has a negative influence on society's perceptions and stereotypes of individuals who identify as non-religious. Additionally, none of the scholarly literature examined touched on the intersection between an individual's identity as non-religious and their credibility as a leader. Through the use of a focus group and interviews, my intent was to give a platform to individuals who identify as non-religious in efforts to learn more about how they have navigate society's perceptions and stereotypes of their identity and how their identity impacts their credibility as leaders.

Method

The research question my study aimed to address was "How do individuals who identify as non-religious navigate others' stereotypes and perceptions of their identity to establish

themselves as credible leaders?" The question was the central focus of my research design and informed my data analysis. My data source was U.S.-based individuals who self-identified as both non-religious and as leaders.

Research Design

To understand how individuals who identify as non-religious establish themselves as credible leaders, I conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with nine individuals who self-identified as leaders and as non-religious. The interviews took place in late December 2017 and early January 2018. After completing the interviews, I then conducted a semi-structured focus group with five additional individuals in February 2018. The questions posed to the focus group were informed by the themes and insights brought to light during the interviews. Individuals included in the interviews were not included as part of the focus group in effort to broaden the pool of knowledge.

Interviews.

Religious identity can be a very private aspect of someone's life. By completing one-on-one interviews with individuals who self-identified as non-religious and as leaders my intent was to engage participants in a way that allowed them to provide their frank insights on the matter without the pressure of being in a group setting. According to Creswell (2016), this method is beneficial as it not only allows for follow up questions, but also for the interviewee to take on the role of expert and the interviewer to become the learner (p. 126).

Upon scheduling each interview, I provided participants with an electronic copy of the consent form and introduction to the consent form (Appendix A). I met with six participants in person and conducted Skype interviews with an additional three participants. Participants who completed in person interviews were provided with the same consent form that was previously

sent to them electronically to review and sign in person prior to the interview. The consent form was also reviewed over Skype for individuals who could not meet in person. In person interviews were completed in a safe public setting selected by the participant that also afforded participants adequate privacy. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed using Rev.com. I also took notes during the interview and added additional observations to my notes immediately post-interview. A pseudonym was assigned to each interviewee to conceal and protect their identity.

Focus group.

My intent in completing a focus group with individuals who self-identified as non-religious and as leaders was to gain further information and feedback on the themes I uncovered through the interview process. By completing this second stage of original research as a focus group, participants were able to build upon each other and answer questions that I might not have thought to ask giving greater insights in the process. As described by O'Leary (2017), focus groups not only allow for greater depth in comparison to other methods such as interviews, they are also more efficient as focus groups provide more information in a shorter amount of time (p.240).

As with the interviews, I provided participants with an electronic copy of the consent form and introduction to the consent form (Appendix A) upon scheduling the focus group. Participants were also provided with a paper version of the same consent form to review and sign in person prior to the start of the focus group. Each individual was assigned a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. The session was recorded and transcribed using Rev.com.

Participant Selection

As already touched on, my original research stemmed from one-on-one interviews and a focus group with individuals who self-identified as non-religious and as leaders. Holding a

formal leadership title was not a requirement of this study. Instead, participants had to consider themselves to be a leader based on their professional, volunteer, or personal experiences. I recruited participants for both the interviews and the focus group through LinkedIn posts using my personal LinkedIn account and by partnering with Humanists of Minnesota, a group whose vision is, "To lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment and contribute to the greater good of humanity and the planet through science, reason, compassion and creativity" (Humanists of Minnesota, n.d.). With permission from the president of the Humanists of Minnesota, I connected with members of the group by being featured in their monthly newsletter and posting on their private Facebook page. I also attended several Humanists of Minnesota meetings to gain familiarity with the group and in attempt to garner interest in this study. Several individuals were also selected to participate after gaining interest in the project through word of mouth.

Ensuring Participant Confidentiality

Confidentiality was of utmost priority in this project. To ensure confidentiality, individuals received a digital copy of the consent form and introduction to the consent form prior to participating (Appendix A). The consent form and introduction to the consent form were reviewed with each participant prior to the interview and as a group prior to the focus group. While participants in the focus group were urged to uphold confidentiality, it was noted in the consent form that confidentiality could not be guaranteed due to the nature of the interaction. To protect identity, pseudonyms were used, data and notes were de-identified, and records were only accessible to myself and my advisor. Skype interviews were completed using a password-protected device on a secured network while interview participants were able to pick a public setting to meet in that allowed for adequate privacy such as a library or café. The focus group took place in a private study room at St. Catherine University's library. Electronic recordings of

the interviews and focus group along with transcriptions were kept on my personal password-protected device. A key which identified participants and their assigned pseudonyms was kept in my personal safe when not in use.

Research Participants

   I selected nine individuals to participate in the interviews portion of my research and five individuals to participate in the focus group. Individuals who participated in the interviews were unable to partake in the focus group to increase the number of perspectives and depth of information gathered. Demographics information was gathered either through an optional survey, which was included as part of the consent form or self-disclosed during the focus group or interviews. Three participants self-identified as male and nine as female. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 75 with a mean age of 52.5 years. All participants self-identified as Caucasian. Twelve of the participants resided in Minnesota while one resided in Kansas and another in New York. Thirteen participants reported living in urban/suburban settings and one reported living in a rural setting. With regard to highest level of education obtained, one participant reported an associate's degree, four reported bachelor's degrees, four reported master's degrees, and five reported doctoral degrees. Participants worked or volunteered in a variety of fields including the restaurant industry, construction, the secular community, journalism, information technology, higher education, marketing, law, and public policy. When asked about leadership experience, six individuals reported 4-6 years of experience, four reported 10-12 years, one reported 13-15 years, two reported 16+ years, and one abstained from answering. All participants reported growing up with varying levels of formal religious instruction or practice. Participants disclosed prior religious affiliations as Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, and Unitarian. None of the participants reported that they were seeking out affiliation with a religious group at this time.

To assist with clarity, the following two tables lay out the individuals' pseudonym, area of leadership, and non-religious identity. Table 1 shows data from the interviews and Table 2 shows data from the focus group.

Table 1

Interviewee Pseudonym, Area of Leadership and Non-Religious Identity

Interviewee Pseudonym	Area of Leadership	Non-Religious Identity
Amy	Construction	Nothing in Particular
Dave	Secular Community	Secular Jew
Elaine	Journalism	Humanist
Eliza	IT	Atheist
Helen	Higher Education	Atheist
Molly	Higher Education	Atheist
Steven	Public Policy	Agnostic
Vivian	Social Services	Nothing in Particular
Yvonne	Secular Community	Humanist

Table 2

Focus Group Participant Pseudonym, Area of Leadership, and Non-Religious Identity

Focus Group Participant Pseudonym	Area of Leadership	Non-Religious Identity
Diane	Law	Humanist
Hannah	Social Services	Agnostic
Ned	Marketing	Agnostic
Rose	Restaurant Industry	Nothing in Particular
Tiffany	Higher Education	Atheist

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data gathered during the interviews and focus groups in three segments. First, I analyzed the information gleaned from the interviews. Second, I analyzed the data gathered during the focus group. Lastly, I completed a comparative analysis of the two methods in order to establish my findings. As informed by O'Leary (2017), I worked to identify my own biases and keep diligent notes during the interviews and focus group in addition to jotting down my impressions after the meetings. I then worked to organize this information by examining the raw data line by line in order to reduce the information to meaningful themes and categories. I did this by highlighting transcripts, creating memos and visual maps, and replaying audio. Through comparison of the different data sets, I categorized commonalities and points of dissent. This method allowed me to identify patterns, build themes, verify theories, and draw conclusions (O'Leary, 2017).

Validity

   To improve the validity of this study, I incorporated a number of measures to check researcher bias. First, I practiced reflexivity by engaging in a self-examination of how my background shapes the lens through which I view this subject (Creswell, 2016). As an individual who identifies as non-religious and as a leader, I am biased in my belief that individuals who identify as non-religious are just as capable as their religious peers in being credible leaders. Additionally, I am biased as I believe individuals who identify as non-religious must navigate negative stereotypes and perceptions in the workplace that relate to their ability to be moral. I am also biased in my belief that individuals who identify as non-religious face additional stereotypes and perceptions about their general character. To promote validity, I incorporated a number of strategies to test my conclusions. First, I took notes both during and after the interviews and focus group. Doing this allowed me to check my initial conclusions against the audio-recordings and transcripts. Second, I completed "member checking" (p. 192) by summarizing my interpretations during the interviews and focus group which allowed participants to provide feedback and clarify inconsistencies (Creswell, 2016). Lastly, I compared my findings to the existing scholarly literature in efforts to identify any contrasting evidence.

Ethical Considerations

   Upholding ethical standards was of utmost priority. A number of measures were taken to ensure this study met ethical standards including pre-approval through St. Catherine University's Institutional Review Board and regular input and feedback from my instructor, advisor, and reading committee. Throughout this study, I made sure to uphold my ethical obligations. As outlined by O'Leary (2017) these obligations included: ensuring respondents have given informed consent, ensuring no harm comes to respondents, and ensuring confidentiality and if

appropriate, anonymity (p. 70). I made sure that individuals were aware participating in the interviews and focus group was voluntary. The consent form, which was given to participants in advance and reviewed at time of the interview or focus group, highlighted participants' rights including the right to withdraw without consequence. As previously outlined, a number of precautions including, but not limited to, the use of pseudonyms, de-identifying data, and using password protected devices to store data were used to promote confidentiality. Participants were also encouraged to reach out to either myself or my advisor with any questions or concerns.

Findings

Analysis of the interviews and focus group revealed three key themes in my findings that depict how individuals who identify as non-religious navigate society's perceptions and stereotypes of their identity. These themes include *Embrace Identity as Non-Religious, Minimize Identity as Non-Religious,* and *Separate from Identity as Non-Religious*. While several of these categories have significant parallels to Yoshino's (2002) theory of covering and his categorization of actions as covering, passing, or assimilating, I chose different phrases that I felt better aligned with participants' experiences in this study. For example, both covering and minimizing refer to when an individual downplays an aspect of their identity in the presence of an audience that is aware of this aspect of the individual's identity. However, the connotations surrounding the term "covering" often portray this act as one of hiding which did not align with participants' intentions or actions. Similarly, passing and separating describe when an individual hides an aspect of their identity from their audience. However, the term "separating" captures this action as deliberate, whereas passing has a passive association. Subcategories also emerged from each theme.

In this section, I will also break down my findings regarding the interaction between an individual's identity as non-religious and their identity as a leader. Specifically, I will discuss the impact of an individual's identity as non-religious on their leadership style. I will also explore the fields where individuals who identify as non-religious are perceived as having the greatest difficulty establishing credibility. Lastly, I will discuss participant suggestions for how individuals who identify as non-religious can best establish themselves as credible leaders. Here, I will detail each theme and its subcategories, providing supporting information gathered from my interviews and the focus group.

Embrace Identity as Non-Religious

I defined embracing one's identity as non-religious as the act of openly identifying and engaging with others as non-religious in a particular setting. Despite the word "embrace" having a positive connotation, individuals who openly identify as non-religious may have positive and/or negative reactions from others with whom they share their identity as depicted by my participants. In this section, I will discuss the contexts in which individuals openly identified as non-religious and their experiences. While an individual may embrace their identity as non-religious in one aspect of their life, they may choose to minimize or separate from their identity as non-religious in other facets of their life which will be discussed in the following sections.

Adding value to a relationship.

Participants in the interviews and in the focus group discussed embracing their identity as non-religious in settings in which they believed disclosing such information would either add value to the relationship or, at minimum, would not have any negative impact. The decision to embrace one's identity as non-religious was described by participants as being done with great deliberation. Several participants used the metaphor of doing a complex math equation to

describe their process of weighing the pros and cons of sharing their identity as non-religious with others. According to Helen, "I share it with people I think it would either not change the relationship or it would somehow like add to the relationship". Helen specified she hasn't had any negative feedback from openly identifying as non-religious and attributed this to her careful investigations of relationship dynamics prior to opening up about her identity:

> I haven't shared it with those people that I would imagine would have the most negative responses. So I think it's just honestly avoidance like I haven't encountered that because I know I have a pretty good radar of who could handle it and who can't.

While Helen and most other participants reported positive or neutral reactions from individuals in whom they confided, others were not as fortunate. Vivian, who self-identified as subscribing to nothing in particular, spoke about receiving mixed, and somewhat hostile, reactions. She explained that she openly identifies as non-religious with some people due to her empathetic nature and desire to relate to others. Vivian depicted some of her experiences with confiding in others about her identity:

> I have some Catholic friends, I've dated a Catholic man, and they thought I was going straight to hell because I didn't go to Church every Sunday. Then I have other people in my life who are like, 'Oh it's no big deal. You're fine. You're a good person; you're going to heaven.'

According to Vivian, she mostly shrugged off these reactions and focused on being true to herself, "honestly I don't care what they think of me when it comes to my religious views because they can say what they want, but I try to lead a good life and a life where I impact others in a joyful, pleasant, genuine way."

Prioritizing honesty.

While embracing one's identity as non-religious in efforts to add value to a relationship was the preferred reason participants openly identified as non-religious, several participants emphasized the need to be honest with others when questioned about their identity. When asked about how openly he shares his identify as non-religious Steven replied, "If they ask me about it, I always do." Steven in part attributed his policy on honesty to the individuals he chooses to surround himself with. He explained that his friends tend to be like minded and share a number of similarities such as where they choose to live and their level of education, and that these similarities were more significant to their relationship than any differences in religious identity. Steven also discussed that while dealing with negative reactions from others, in particular from family members, typically annoy him, these reactions did not change his willingness to openly identify as non-religious when asked. According to Steven:

> Some people, that's how they deal with it. They try to be snarky or say something mean spirited or that kind of stuff…I think people who know me, know that I am pretty combative and if you come after me…I'm not going to walk away. I will let you know, and I like to argue. If you want to argue with me, okay, we'll go; but most people know better not to do that.

Others discussed the need to be honest about their identity as non-religious in settings in which they felt this information might change an outcome. For example, Helen described her reaction when she was asked to be a part of someone's Catholic wedding and to be a child's godparent:

I feel like I have to be a little bit more open about it. So yeah it kind of, not forces my

hand, but I feel like it's dishonest not to say well this is how I stand on this I wanna make

sure you know.

While Helen described confiding in these individuals about her identity as non-religious

as something she otherwise would not have done if she did not feel the need to be honest, she

reported both individuals had positive reactions. Helen explained that her honesty also led one of

the individuals to also identify as non-religious in turn. The individual confided in Helen that

they too were choosing to cover their identity as non-religious to avoid familial strife.

Societal shift towards acceptance.

Several of the older participants spoke about how they felt they were more willing to

embrace their identity as non-religious now in comparison to earlier on in their lives due to their

belief that U.S. society is becoming more accepting of non-religious people. Both Yvonne and

Elaine attributed their willingness to be more open about their identity as non-religious due to

this perception of society's increasing tolerance. Elaine spoke about this shift and the impact of

coming back to live in Minnesota after working in Europe for close to a decade:

Actually, when I first realized I was an atheist, it wasn't really something I told very

many people. The atmosphere has really changed in the last 10 years or so. 10, 20 years,

in terms of how open you can be about that. I was just an undercover atheist, so to speak

until I moved back to Minnesota.

Since moving back to Minnesota, Elaine reported she has further embraced her identity as

non-religious and that she would openly identity as atheist or humanist with most people. She

also discussed how her brother openly identifying as a humanist encouraged her to become more

forthright with her own identity in addition to becoming more involved with the humanist movement.

Like Elaine, Yvonne spoke about how she is more open with her identity as non-religious now than ever before. Yvonne attributed this to society changing and becoming more aware and accepting of individuals who identify as non-religious, particularly over the past ten years. She talked about how the publishing of several prominent atheist texts including *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (Harris, 2014) and *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Hitchens, 2009) helped to fuel this change.

Minimize Identity as Non-Religious

I categorized minimizing one's identity as non-religious as when an individual who openly identifies as non-religious chooses not to engage with this aspect of their identity in the presence of others. Minimizing is often done in effort to reduce tensions surrounding one's identity as non-religious. While in this context an individual abstains from engaging in aspects of their identity as non-religious, their audience is aware of their identity as non-religious. Minimizing demonstrates itself in a variety of forms. Examples cited in the interviews and in the focus group included deliberately not talking about one's identity as non-religious, redirecting conversations, and participating in religious rituals, although often in a passive manner.

Reducing risk of personal conflict.

A number of participants spoke about how they choose to minimize their identity as non-religious when with family in effort to maintain relationships. Rose explained that while she is no longer active in the Christian faith and has not been for some time, she still attends religious services for occasions such as weddings and funerals. She described the internal conflict surrounding these experiences stating:

I just sit in church and I go through the motions, but my head and my heart are not involved in this. I'm just sitting there…Then your guilt kind of comes through. It's like, is it even worse than…Should I just go stand outside, or am I going to get struck down? Cause there's guilt for not having a religious thought in your head, either, while you're sitting in church.

Similarly, Tiffany spoke about going to church with her family and going through the motions, but abstaining from participation in the songs or in prayer. She discussed how her dad picked up on this, "he'll say something like, 'I noticed you weren't singing today,' you know, and I've had an honest conversation with them, you know, 'I'm atheist,' but I think deep in their hearts they think, 'No." Tiffany further elaborated talking about how she feels her mom perceives her, "…my mom's like, 'no, Tiffany's Christian in her heart', because she thinks, 'She's volunteering, and she cares about things, and she's involved and very ethical'". While Tiffany clearly disagreed with her parents' assessment, she reported that it was not worth the fight to try to explain that her desire to help others and live an ethical life had nothing to do with subscribing to a religion.

In addition to minimizing one's identity as non-religious by partaking in religious rituals, participants also spoke about how they actively avoid conversations about religion and religious identity in efforts to minimize conflict. Dave discussed while he is openly non-religious, he chooses not to engage in conversations about religion with the elderly out of respect. Yvonne also expressed similar sentiments in regards to her parents. She reported that while her parents were aware she left the church after she finished seminary, they didn't speak about it as she said, "I knew that I was causing them great pain. So I tried to maintain a good relationship with them despite that".

Examples cited by participants depict how the act of minimizing one's identity as non-religious is done to avoid conflict and/or out of respect. While minimizing may cause some internal conflict as participants report a desire to stay true to their identity, ultimately it is often seen as causing less harm than openly embracing one's identity as non-religious.

Reducing risk of professional backlash.

Although most participants reported that they are not open about their identity as non-religious in the workplace, Ned and Molly spoke about situations in which their identity as non-religious came to light and how they have since worked to minimize their identities as non-religious. Ned recalled one incident in which he felt he could not avoid informing a co-worker he is non-religious and that while the co-worker was "very polite about it", it still changed the dynamic of the relationship. While Ned felt as if he had no choice in informing his co-worker of his identity as non-religious, Molly openly discussed her identity as non-religious during the hiring process. Molly reported being upfront was necessary as she had previously worked for a very conservative and evangelical college and was seeking employment at a highly liberal institution and felt it was necessary to explain what led her to seek such a drastic change in employment setting. While Molly was open about her religious identity in the hiring process, she reports she has since found ways to minimize it in the workplace due to fears that her openness could be detrimental to her career advancement. Molly described these actions of minimizing stating:

> This year I intentionally scheduled donor meetings and a doctor's appointment the day of my divisions' holiday party so that I would have a legitimate reason not to be there because for me to just say 'I'm an atheist so I'm not gonna participate.' Would not be politically correct, would probably be detrimental but in scheduling other activities that

were related to my job or having a doctor's appointment, that's a legitimate reason to not attend.

While Molly and Ned were the only two participants to disclose their identity as non-religious in the workplace, it is important to note that several participants who identified as retired openly disclosed their identity as non-religious in their place of volunteering. However, these participants also specified that they had chosen to volunteer for organizations that promote secular values. Therefore, being non-religious was the norm in these settings.

Separate from Identity as Non-Religious

I define separating from one's identity as non-religious as the act of intentionally not identifying as non-religious in a particular context. Like minimizing, separating from one's identity as non-religious is often done in attempts to lessen the likelihood of discord. However, separating is distinct from minimizing as separating is done in a setting in which an individual has not shared their identity as non-religious with their audience. In comparison, minimizing occurs in a context where the audience is aware of the individual's identity as non-religious. Separating from one's identity as non-religious can be in the form of deliberately not identifying oneself as non-religious, choosing to allow others to make assumptions about one's religious identity that are in line with the status quo, or covering one's identity as non-religious by engaging in religious activities or actions. While my interviewees reported being at varying stages of embracing their identity as non-religious in at least one or more aspects of their lives, many spoke about how this has been a challenge using words to describe their lack of openness about their identity as non-religious such as "closeted", "covert", and "guarded". Participants specifically used these terms when describing actions of separating from their religious identity.

Reducing risk of personal conflict.

According to Diane, while she openly shares her identity as non-religious with her immediate family members and with friends, she chooses not to share it with her extended family. In the focus group she spoke about when she has extended family gatherings, "They talk about, 'Thank the Lord,' and blah, blah, blah all the time, and I just don't respond to them. I know that they think I am. They just assume that I'm one of them…" Diane explained that she chooses to pass as religious with extended family as when she has discussed her identity as non-religious with her immediate family it made them unhappy.

Eliza also struggled with the concern that her family would react negatively to her identity as non-religious. Therefore, she reported that she has yet to be open about this aspect of her life with them and instead she tries to focus on the beauty and community of church on the occasions that she attends. Eliza described that she is working on being more open about her identity depending on her audience and that she hopes with society becoming more accepting that she will feel more confident in identifying as non-religious. She expressed:

> It's crazy on one hand to think about that I have to be so guarded about it, but maybe in the coming days that won't be true, you know, over all our society, I think, hopefully, becoming more open to different viewpoints. And statistics are showing, I think that fewer people identify as religious.

Helen also discussed her reasons for separating from her identity as non-religious with her mother, citing that her identity as non-religious was less important to her than their relationship. According to Helen:

So, I think just the idea that I'm already just not practicing and I think the tipping it over

the edge of a non-believer overall, I just don't see the value in making that a fight really,

when it's not something I'm like I need to let her know that this is how I feel about

things.

Reducing risk of professional backlash.

The vast majority of participants spoke about how they do not discuss their identity as

non-religious in the workplace. While several individuals prefaced this choice by stating that

they felt it is inappropriate to discuss religion in the workplace, many later clarified that they

often choose to not identify as non-religious in the workplace not only because it is frowned

upon, but also because of how they fear this information will be received. Tiffany, who works in

public education, explained that her work specifically instructs its employees to keep religion out

of the workplace, yet one of her co-workers keeps a bible visibly placed at her desk. She

described the tension these mixed messages have caused:

> And so I find that, because the expectation is, for most people, they see me, white, native,
>
> English speaking, assume I'm Christian, that I am careful about responses, and I tend to
>
> just be noncommittal about things and hold those cards pretty close, because I expect this
>
> colleague with the Bible open, I suspect she would have…That it might alter her opinion
>
> of me, and so it's just better to keep quiet about it.

Hannah, who works in social services, also discussed her hesitancy to voice her identity

as non-religious for fear of professional repercussions, in her case due to concern that it could

sway potential donors whether or not to support her organization. Participating in the focus

group led Hannah to question the additional impacts of her decision to keep her religious identity

out of her workplace:

I've always chosen to not be vocal about the fact that I don't subscribe to any religion, and I wonder if that's detrimental. I know other co-workers that have chosen to also stay silent for the benefit of the work environment, but I also don't care for this assumption that people that are non-religious don't have the drive to serve their community.

In addition to separating from her identity as non-religious in her relationship with her mother, Helen also discussed how she was not open about her identity as non-religious in the workplace due to fears how this may impact her relationships with her co-workers. She spoke about how she separated from her identity as non-religious in the form of passing by simply not discussing her religious views. Helen was adamant however, that she would not go to as great of lengths to hide her identity by acting religious at work. Working for a religiously affiliated institution, Helen described how she could easily cover her identity by going to the offered services and how she does not feel like she has to go to those lengths to maintain respect in the workplace. While Helen mentioned that she does not pretend to be religious, she feels like "sometimes people might treat you a little bit differently" if you do choose to openly identify as atheist in the workplace.

Identity as Non-Religious and as a Leader

In this section of my findings, I will discuss the intersection between an individual's identity as non-religious and their identity as a leader. Specifically, I will highlight how, or if, participants felt their identity as non-religious impacted their leadership style. Professions in which participants felt it is detrimental, and potentially impossible, to openly identify as non-religious in will be explored. Lastly, I will examine how participants felt individuals who identify as non-religious can best establish credibility as leaders.

Impact of Non-Religious Identity on Leadership Style

When first asked how their identity as non-religious impacted their leadership style, most participants were hesitant to identify any direct correlation and many outright declared that this aspect of their identity had no impact on their leadership style or experience. Eliza responded:

I don't think that I don't believe in a god or practice a religion is relevant. I don't see that it's relevant, again kind of going back to the point that the principles that I have of respecting others, and being honest, etcetera, those are societal views, they don't come from a religion, and that's how I try to practice my interactions with other people relating to me.

Similarly, Vivian discussed how she focuses on being a good person and leading by example. According to Vivian, "To me, that's not a religious aspect. I think that's just who I am and where my heart is." Likewise, when Dave was asked about how his identity, views or experiences as an individual who identifies as non-religious come into play in his leadership style, he tried to picture himself as a religious individual. After dwelling on the question and envisioning himself as religious, Dave reported that he did not think he would do anything differently.

While a number of participants reported no correlation between their identity as non-religious and their leadership style, others spoke about how their journey in becoming non-religious and their disillusionment with their prior religious identity played a role in their leadership style. Molly reported:

Well, I think because of my own journey away from fundamentalism, let's just say Christian fundamentalism, I think that I have personally become a more compassionate, open-minded, nonjudgmental, I mean we all have judgements but I'm more

nonjudgmental now than I was when I was a Christian and I think because of that and because of the very discriminations I have faced over other aspects of my identity, I'm hyper aware to discriminations of all kinds.

Molly expressed that her experiences have led her to be more aware and respectful of others' differences, especially if they did not align with mainstream identities. She explained how she tries to accommodate everyone's identity by giving a specific example of not scheduling meetings on Jewish holidays in order to include one of her employees who is a devout Jew.

When asked about how her identity, views, or experiences as non-religious come into her leadership style, Helen spoke about how her experience growing up in the Catholic Church has influenced her as a leader:

> I think the biggest thing is I'm non-religious but I still feel like I'm very moral. A big reason I kind of turned away from the religion that I grew up with was I felt like there was a lot of injustice, it wasn't fair, didn't feel fair to me. The power structure and women in leadership there and just a lot of these other things I felt were really important are reasons why I steered away. So I think it's almost like the inverse that's important to me in my leadership style. So, seeing things that's fair or I guess more importantly that it's very equal but equitable. I think that really shows up in my leadership style.

Despite many participants struggling to see a clear connection between their identity as non-religious and their leadership style, others were able to pinpoint certain connections. Amy, like Helen, also identified being fair as one of her leadership attributes. Amy also citied that both prioritizing inclusion and acceptance were related to her identity as non-religious. Yvonne credited her emphasis on using "more of a scientific and evidence based approach" to her journey in becoming non-religious.

Credibility as non-religious and as a leader.

While none of the participants reported that they themselves had to work harder to establish credibility in the workplace as an individual who identifies as non-religious in comparison to their religious peers, it is important to highlight that only two of the fourteen participants reported contexts in which they had openly identified as non-religious in their workplace. Therefore, most participants did not have to demonstrate their credibility as a leader specifically in regards to their identity as non-religious. It is also significant to note that both individuals who did share their identity as non-religious in a particular context in their workplace described how they have since minimized their identity as non-religious. Many of the interviewees expressed that individuals who openly identify as non-religious may struggle to establish themselves as credible leaders due to society's perception that religion serves as an ethical and moral platform for its followers. Participants also spoke about how certain professions were less accepting of individuals who openly identify as non-religious.

When asked why individuals who openly identify as non-religious may have difficulty establishing credibility as leaders, participants discussed how U.S. society equates being religious with having a built-in moral and ethical platform. Molly described this concept as a "myth", but also validated the significant implications of this perception stating:

> I think stereotypically what I have seen is…Well, if you don't have faith then where do you get your morals from? How are you a good person? How can you be a good leader if you don't have morals that are based in faith?...You can be an anti-theist and be an amazing person and an amazing leader, those two things aren't correlated but I think because of that myth that you have to have some sort in order to root your morals.

Elaine reasoned that individuals who identify as non-religious are perceived as immoral due to "lack of critical thinking". She described that she perceives this notion to be taught and that it can largely be attributed to "tribal" thinking where anyone who challenges your views of the world are labelled as bad. Steven also spoke about this perception and how society often dismisses individuals who identify as non-religious because they "have no moral back-up". While Steven reports he has never had an issue with establishing credibility, he believes he could never be elected into public office due to his beliefs.

Participants repeatedly brought up the notion that it is more difficult to be elected into public office in the U.S. if a candidate publically identifies as non-religious. When asked about the perceptions and stereotypes he believes individuals who identify as non-religious face as leaders, Steven immediately responded:

> Well, I don't think they could ever be in an elected office. I don't know of any openly atheist person in the right now, and maybe I'm wrong, but there's certainly never been a president…in fact, if you try to bring up that Thomas Jefferson was just a deist, or something like that, people really push back on that. I think you can't be president of the United States.

Steven reported that he believes other marginalized groups in the U.S., such as Jews or Muslims, are more likely to be elected into public office in comparison to individuals who openly identify as non-religious. He attributed this belief to the non-religious population being perceived as lacking morals, whereas Jews and Muslims still have their religion to provide context for their moral and ethical frameworks even if their religions differ from mainstream U.S Christian society.

While Steven discussed the difficulty of electing individuals who identify as non-religious to office, Elaine spoke about her first-hand interactions with a politician who she believed to be non-religious during her time as a journalist in Washington, D.C.:

But I know there was a member of Congress in Washington when I lived there who was definitely a humanist/atheist, but he wouldn't…and he would support our issues, separation of church and state issues and that kind of thing. But he didn't really want us to identify him as one of us, because he thought that would hurt him politically, and I guess it still will. That's a challenge, just getting political support.

Tiffany emphasized if more people were willing to be open about their identity as non-religious, then there would be less stigma surrounding the non-religious population in U.S. society. This decrease in stigma in turn would increase the potential of individuals who identify as non-religious being elected to public office. The focus group reiterated this idea of critical mass several times even suggesting light-heartedly that there should be a non-religious marketing campaign that would highlight how individuals who identify as non-religious are just like everyone else.

In addition to speaking about elected officials, members of the focus group spoke about other occupations they believed individuals who openly identify as non-religious have greater difficulty establishing credibility. Based on their discussion, they identified teaching and professional sports as being the least supportive fields for the openly non-religious in addition to politics. Participants equated a teacher's refusal to recite the Pledge of Allegiance due to the phrase "under God" to NFL players taking a knee during the National Anthem and how such refusal to participate in these rituals would likely result in similar backlash although on different scales. In comparison, several participants spoke about how the technology industry in Silicon

Valley may be the first area in which a leader could be open about their identity as non-religious although no participants were aware of any leaders openly identifying as non-religious at this time. Participants reported that Silicon Valley made sense for being the first place where individuals may be able to openly identify as non-religious due to the seemingly more accepting atmosphere and its emphasis on money making and advancing technology. According to Diane, "To run a corporation, I think there's still a risk." However, "if you're wealthy enough, then you can get away with certain things."

Establishing credibility as non-religious and as a leader.

Participants were asked how individuals who identify as non-religious can best establish themselves as credible leaders. Responses varied, but most emphasized following good leadership practices in general from being honest and your authentic self to following the golden rule of treating others as you want to be treated. Tiffany emphasized going beyond religious identity and identifying core values that both parties share, while Ned spoke about focusing on the organization's mission instead of one's identity in order to find common ground. He reported "you can do that without having to have a religious moral code, and so that's common ground that everyone can find, and I think that helps demystify a lot of the heebie-jeebies people have about non-religious people." Amy also discussed the importance of listening in order to determine how she can best support her employees and letting her work ethic "speak for itself".

Summary of Findings

My study found that participants could be categorized as navigating society's perceptions and stereotypes of their identity as non-religious by embracing their identity as non-religious, minimizing their identity as non-religious, or separating from their identity as non-religious. The

state in which an individual might operate was determined to be scenario-based, depending heavily on the individual's audience and setting.

Based on participants' examples, individuals who identify as non-religious are most likely to embrace their identity as non-religious when with trusted friends, if they felt openly identifying as non-religious would either have a positive or neutral impact on the relationship or if they felt it would be dishonest to not confide in someone this aspect of the identity. Older and retired participants appeared most confident in their willingness to identify as non-religious and reported actively seeking out secular volunteer opportunities which gave them a welcoming setting in which to embrace their identity as non-religious. Participants were most likely to minimize their identity as non-religious in attempts to curtail personal or professional backlash. It is significant to note that the only two participants who spoke about being open about their identity as non-religious in the workplace highlighted how they have since minimized this aspect of their identity by not engaging in further discussion about their identity as non-religious and avoiding religiously associated work functions. Other examples shared by participants demonstrated how they most often chose to minimize their identity as non-religious around both immediate and extended family. Similar to minimizing, participants cited avoiding personal and professional backlash as reasons for separating from their identity as non-religious. Participants also suggested that they separated from their identity as non-religious in professional settings, as they believed outward displays one's identity as religious or non-religious were inappropriate or frowned upon in the workplace.

With regard to credibility and leadership in the context of one's identity as non-religious, most of my participants did not feel as if their identity as non-religious impacted their leadership experience as they separated themselves from this aspect of their identity in the workplace.

However, other participants did identify how either their identity as non-religious or their journey to becoming non-religious impacted their leadership style with emphasis on upholding equity, respect, and inclusivity.

There was general consensus among study participants that individuals who identify as non-religious are perceived in U.S. culture to be less ethical and/or moral. These perceptions were viewed to negatively impact individuals' abilities to openly share their identity as non-religious with others in certain professions such as elected officials, teachers, and professional athletes. To combat negative perceptions and stereotypes, participants recommended that individuals who identify as non-religious work to embody common leadership practices such as emphasizing common values, leading by example, and demonstrating oneself to be an authentic leader.

Limitations

While this study has a number of significant findings and implications, it is also important to recognize its limitations. First of all, this study is limited by its sample size of fourteen participants. With such a small sample size it is unwise to make sweeping generalizations about the experiences of all individuals that identify as non-religious and as leaders in the U.S. Second, the individuals that made up the sample were fairly homogenous. All participants identified as Caucasian, and only three of the fourteen were male. Twelve of the fourteen resided in Minnesota, and only one of the fourteen resided in a rural setting. Therefore, only a small part of the country and overall population was represented by participants. Although a variety of sectors were represented, it is important to note that none of the participants worked in fields that they perceived as being most hostile to openly non-religious individuals including elected office, professional sports, and teaching. Lastly, and possibly most significant, none of

the participants openly embraced their identity as non-religious on a day to day basis in their workplace. Therefore, none of the participants were able to express how they establish credibility as an openly non-religious leader in the workplace. This study was also limited in that it allowed individuals to self-identify as leaders. By implementing minimal parameters around leadership, potential participants voiced concern regarding whether or not they qualified as a leader. They also struggled to categorize how many years of leadership experience they had.

Discussion

In this section I will provide an analysis of my findings. Specifically, I will highlight, how my findings correlate or clash with existing literature, areas that expand upon current literature, and how my findings compare to the theoretical frameworks of covering and stigma theory. I will also examine how my findings can be viewed in relationship to the theories of authentic leadership and situational approach leadership. Lastly, I will discuss participants' hopes for the future for individuals who identify as non-religious.

Identity as Non-Religious

Similar to the populations highlighted in existing studies, participants held a spectrum of beliefs ranging from staunch atheism to having faith in a higher power. All of the participants spoke about how they were raised with religion to varying extents, came to identify as non-religious, and are not seeking affiliation with any religion at this time which follows Hayes' (1995) claim that most individuals who change their religious affiliation are unlikely to change their affiliation again. In the existing literature, individuals who identify as non-religious or religious "nones" are often categorized as atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular" (Baker & Smith, 2009: Gragun et al. 2012; Edgell et al., 2016); however, this study demonstrated that when individuals are given the opportunity to self-identify, more diverse labels are used. In

addition to atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular", participants also used the terms secular Jew and humanist to identify themselves. A number of participants also subscribed to several of these categories. While participants had to self-identify as non-religious in order to partake in this study, numerous individuals vocalized their hesitance in identifying with any particular label. This hesitance was attributed to a variety of reasons including concerns over society being unaccepting of individuals who identity as non-religious and individuals' prior experiences associating with an organized religion and distaste for formal labels. Rose and Ned did not hold back in their exchange about avoiding association with an organized non-religious group:

> Rose: "Cause right away, when you say group, I, like, 'Oh God, I hate groups.'"

> Ned: "I bristle at the 'organized' part."

Several individuals who self-identified as atheist expressed hesitance in labelling themselves as such either due to the perceived negative stereotypes held by U.S. society or the belief that the term atheist does not fully capture their belief system. According to Yvonne who self-identified as both atheist and humanist:

> I very intentionally use the word humanist, because I find it much more honest, and a better representation of how I see myself as a person. If I'm going to use any kind of identity, as opposed to atheist. Because I am so much more than someone who just doesn't believe in God. So my values and my commitments to civic responsibility and to social justice, lots of religious people are really concerned about those things. So to just self-define as an atheist, which says nothing about one's values, I prefer to identify myself as a part of my values, which I feel like humanism does.

Yvonne's statement highlights the importance of putting the power with the individual in letting them choose how they wish to self-identify. It also demonstrates the significance of using labels that capture what defines people instead of comparing them against the societal norm. This is important from a leadership context because when a leader endorses comparing a characteristic against a societal norm it allows for certain parties to be classified as privileged whereas others who do not share this norm are classified as abnormal and therefore are subject to prejudice. In the framing of my study, I struggled with this dilemma as the non-religious community is defined by what they are not, in this case not religious. However, due to their variety of beliefs and non-beliefs, I felt it was necessary to use the term non-religious as I wanted to capture the non-religious community—atheists, agnostics, nothing in particular, humanists, secular Jews, etc. as a whole and not just one segment of the community. While humanist, as explained by Yvonne, allows a non-religious individual to be defined by what they do believe in, I felt that the term was not well enough recognized by U.S. society at this time to use it for recruiting purposes.

Perception of Identity as Non-Religious

Participants clearly articulated that they felt individuals who identify as non-religious faced greatest stigma when viewed as a large faceless group. Amy described, "when you're face to face with somebody, it's different I think than saying, 'Hey, they're not in my group. I'm angry about something else and I need something to take it out on. You know? I'm going to do it to this faceless group'". Participants spoke about how being viewed as a faceless group made it easier for society to attribute negative characteristics to them. This sentiment was also discussed by Edgell et al. (2016) as they explored the findings of a variety of U.S.-based surveys which portrayed the non-religious population in the U.S. as a faceless demographic. These surveys

indicated public belief that an increase in religiosity would decrease society's problems such as crime and poor parenting and that atheists made least appealing spouses for your child and elected officials. Vargas and Loveland (2011) also support this concept that it is easier to attribute negative characteristics to faceless groups stating "negative attitudes towards status groups are often a result of misinformation, or a lack of information, about the groups being judged" (p. 716).

Media Influence

It was interesting to note that while participants believed U.S. society held an overall negative perception of individuals who identify as non-religious, they argued that these negative sentiments were often driven by the media. When asked "What perception or stereotypes do you believe individuals that identify as non-religious face specifically as leaders?" Amy replied:

> That they have less morals and I think that they have less pre-set boundaries is a big one. You hear the one a lot, if you're not religious, how do you know right from wrong, how do you know good from bad, or how do you know what morals are? I think that's a big one, but I also just think that's a big one because that idea's been vocalized and pushed through the media a lot.

The general consensus of participants was the more that the non-religious population is able to control the dialogue about this aspect of their identity and the more others become acquainted with individuals who openly identify as non-religious the less stigma individuals who identify as non-religious would face. As Rose put it, by having a marketing campaign to shed light on the non-religious population in the U.S. the better individuals who identify as non-religious would be able to address the assumptions and "spin out there." Focusing on increasing familiarity between groups as a way to decrease stigma is supported by a number of studies

including Goffman (1963) and Vargas and Loveland (2011); however, both caution that boosting familiarity does not necessarily equate to gaining acceptance. Goffman (1963) describes that even if a person is familiar with a stigmatized individual or group, they may not really "accept" them and may not be "ready to make contact with [them] on 'equal grounds'" (p. 7) regardless of what the person without the stigma claims.

Morality and its Intersection with Leadership and Credibility

As highlighted in the literature review, leaders must establish themselves as moral and ethical in order to demonstrate themselves as credible leaders (Zhu et al., 2015, pp. 81-82). This issue of establishing oneself as moral and ethical most frequently came up in my study when interviewees were asked the question "What perceptions or stereotypes do you believe individuals that identify as non-religious face as leaders?" Participants spoke about how religion can give leaders the perception of having a moral framework to fall back on whereas individuals who identify as non-religious must demonstrate themselves to be credible by other means. According to Hannah, "It's easy to assign values and morals as Christianity. I feel like we sort of blurred the lines between what those two things are, a lot". While participants spoke about how religious affiliation can help individuals to explain how their ethical framework is grounded, Diane pointed out that much of religious teachings regarding ethics and morals does not come from religion specifically, but rather from its emphasis on the "golden rule", or to treat others as you wish to be treated. Participants explained how leaders who identify as non-religious can practice the golden rule and demonstrate how shared values do not require shared faith traditions.

Openness as Non-Religious in the Workplace

Scholarly literature touches on various reasons why individuals who identify as non-religious may want to downplay or hide this aspect of their identity, such as fear of

discrimination in the forms of "slander, coercion, ostracism, denial of opportunities, good, and services and hate crimes" (Hammer et al., 2012, p. 43). However, the prevalence of minimizing and separating from one's identity as non-religious has not been studied in depth. Therefore, the probability of individuals openly identifying as non-religious in the workplace has yet to be established. In the framing of this study I hypothesized that individuals who were willing to self-identify as non-religious and participate in a study about the intersection between one's identity as non-religious and their identity as a leader would be more likely than the general non-religious population to openly identify as non-religious in the workplace. However, as only two participants in the study reported situations in which they had identified as non-religious in the workplace, this hypothesis could neither be confirmed nor disproved, especially since these participants also explained that they had since chosen to minimize this aspect of their identity in the workplace. Participants discussed their decision to minimize or separate from their identity as non-religious in the workplace due to their perceived risk of backlash, concern that it would upset others, or belief that religious identity, regardless of affiliation type, is either considered to be an explicitly or implicitly inappropriate topic for the workplace. Molly, who openly identified as non-religious in the interviewing phase of her job expressed curiosity at the idea of others self-identifying as non-religious in the workplace if there was not a specific benefit of doing so:

> I would be curious to know how many people who identify as agnostic or atheist or as just someone with no faith, how many of them actually even talk about that in the workplace cause in order to face any kind of central discrimination or any challenges related to salvaging credibility as a leader, people have to know. I'm going to guess that probably a lot of people don't talk about it, especially because of the stigma that exists culturally and then to bring that into the workplace probably is even more enhanced.

Despite these perceptions, most individuals reported experiencing positive or neutral reactions when they shared their identity as non-religious with others outside of the workplace. None of the participants reported being discriminated against due to this aspect of their identity, although several reported negative of unsupportive reactions by their audience. It is important to note that this cannot be attributed to a lack of discrimination against individuals who identify as non-religious in general as participants frequently chose not to openly embrace this aspect of their identity in a public manner, and therefore, did not provide society with the opportunity to act either in support of or against them. This lack of openness in a public setting aligns with the findings of Hammer et al. (2011) which demonstrate that individuals who openly identify as atheist experience a higher rate of discrimination than their closeted peers (p. 43). As Helen shared in her experience, "I haven't gotten any super negative things but I think that's probably partly because I haven't shared it with those people that I would imagine would have the most negative responses".

Discord within the Non-Religious Community

While all participants identified as non-religious and had a number of commonalities with their experiences, it was of interest to note that there was some discord within the group. In particular, several individuals who identified as something aside from atheist voiced their dissent with the atheist faction of the non-religious community. According to Steven, "Atheists kind of turn me off, too, because they're so certain that they're right". Diane expressed similar views, stating that she does not want "anybody proselytize to me about atheism or Christianity". While this supports existing literature that portrays atheists as being the most poorly perceived faction of the non-religious community, minimal research exists exploring the perceptions and stereotypes certain groups may face within the non-religious community. However, it is

important to note that these sentiments were expressed not with regard to atheists' moral character, but rather the perception that they are most vocal about their identity and most persistent in explaining why others should convert to their belief system. The presence of discord within the non-religious community may help to explain in part why the non-religious community remains largely fragmented and unorganized.

Presence of Covering

As repeatedly touched on in the findings, although often using different terminology, participants spoke a great deal about the presence of covering and other forms of assimilation in their lives. Yoshino (2002) describes covering as when "the underlying identity is neither altered nor hidden, but is downplayed" and passing as when "the underlying identity is not altered, but hidden" (p. 772). These acts of assimilation are classified by not only the acts of the individual, but also the knowledge of their audience as Yoshino (2002) explains, "one must know not only the performance of the actor, but also the literacy of the audience, to make that distinction [between covering and passing]" (pp. 772-773). While the two participants who did share their identity as non-religious with others in their workplace later downplayed this aspect of their identity, others chose to pass by allowing their audience to make their own assumptions about their religious identity in efforts to avoid potential conflict. For example, Tiffany spoke about passing in the workplace by not confronting her coworker who kept an open bible at her desk and allowing her coworkers to make assumptions about her religious identity based on her presenting identity as a white, English-speaking female.

More commonly, individuals talked about the acts of covering and passing when with family. Based on their audience's familiarity with their identity as non-religious, individuals either covered or passed when attending religious services or partaking in other religious rituals

such as prayer before a meal. Participants also described covering or passing as non-religious when directly interacting with family members. While some of the participants reported feeling at odds with themselves when they chose to cover or pass when in the presence of family, others reported experiencing no qualms about their decision to not embrace their identity as non-religious in particular settings. As described by Helen:

> Where I'm probably the most closeted about it is like with my immediate family just because my mom is super religious still and I think it would just be something that would be really concerning for her and I think it's not so important to me and such a vital part of my identity to cause her distress about it.

These acts of assimilation were often explained as being done in efforts to minimize backlash and preserve relationships.

Relationship to Stigma Theory

In his 1963 book, Erving Goffman discussed how a stigma is "a special kind of relationship between an attribute and stereotype" (p. 4). His theory on stigma remains relevant today and helps to explains how all individuals face stigma and how stigmatized individuals interact with society. The findings of this study align with Goffman's stigma theory as it was evident that all individuals had faced some sort of stigma in their lives whether it was in relationship to their identity as non-religious or not. Amy, who self-identified as having a speech impediment and amblyopia, more commonly known as a lazy eye, reported that it was significantly easier to avoid stigma from her identity as non-religious in comparison to her physical characteristics as she was able to control who was made aware of this aspect of her identity. She also spoke about how she works harder due to her various stigmas to show through her actions that she is a credible leader. The findings also support Goffman's (1963) claim that

once someone has been identified as having a stigma, society is more likely to attribute additional negative attributes to them (p. 5). According to participants, individuals who identify as non-religious are more likely to be called "greedier" and be viewed as lacking empathy and morals simply based on their identity as non-religious. In order to break free from negative stigmas, which were described as being fueled by the media, members of the focus group discussed the need for increased visibility in a positive manner. Goffman (1963) described this as the process of normalization where individuals are no longer treated differently by society due to their stigma; however, he warned normalization does not necessarily mean acceptance (p. 52-53).

Desire to Embody Authentic Leadership

One theme from the findings was participants' emphasis on authenticity. Whether it was Steven advocating for leaders to be forthright when asked about their identity as non-religious to Helen and Molly championing authenticity as a general practice for establishing oneself as a credible leader. These calls for honesty and authenticity align with authentic leadership theory which focuses on a leader being "genuine and 'real'" (Northouse, 2016, p. 195). However, while a number of participants emphasized the importance of being an authentic leader, they did not necessarily embody their recommendations when it came down to their identity as non-religious. Whereas authentic leadership highlights "relational transparency" or "being open and honest in presenting one's true self to others" (Northouse, 2016, p. 203), participants spoke about how they intentionally did not share their identity as non-religious in the workplace. Although there was a disconnect between participants' actions and the pillars of authentic leadership, participants did not necessarily perceive this to be the case as many expressed that their identity as non-religious was not connected to their leadership style.

Connection to Situational Approach to Leadership

Although the actions of participants did not necessarily align with authentic leadership they can be explained by the situational approach to leadership. According to Northouse (2016), the situational approach to leadership is based on the concept that "different situations demand different kinds of leadership", and that in order establish oneself as an effective leader, one must "adapt his or her style to the demands of different situations" (p. 93). One explanation for participants not identifying as non-religious in the workplace is that they believed they would be viewed as a more effective leader by not sharing this aspect of their identity based on a perceived follower preference for religious affiliation or perceived preference for no religious discussion or display in the workplace. Additionally, for workplaces that discouraged or explicitly banned religious displays, participants could be viewed as taking a situational approach to leadership by determining that sharing their identity as non-religious would undermine their organization's culture and/or policies. Therefore, while participants did not embrace their identity as non-religious in the workplace, they can still be viewed as credible leaders under the situational leadership theory.

Hopes for the Future

A common sentiment expressed by participants was their hope for the future as individuals who identify as non-religious. Many spoke about how U.S. society has already become less hostile towards individuals who openly identify as atheist or agnostic a trend that was mirrored in a 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center's that demonstrated a shrinking number of American's believe that faith in god is necessary to have good values or to be moral (Smith). Participants expressed hope that this trend would move more towards acceptance and

that being open about one's identity as non-religious was key to gaining acceptance. According to Eliza:

> So whether it's religious beliefs, or sense of religion, or ethnic background, or whatever it is, once you get to know somebody on a human level and see that they are a respectful and open human being ... And maybe that even comes down to self, because once you're less scared about that interaction you learn somebody, it makes you less scared in the future of other people you haven't yet met, or other situations you haven't come into. I think being open and honest is the best thing we can do.

The focus group also discussed the idea of the non-religious community gaining acceptance in U.S. society. They narrowed in on the concept of critical mass in that a certain, unknown percentage of the U.S. population would have to openly identify as non-religious in order for the non-religious population to gain complete acceptance in society. Once critical mass was reached, individuals who identify as non-religious would be able to openly share this aspect of their identity with others without fear of repercussion. However, participants in the focus group shared that they would be unwilling to openly identify as non-religious both in professional and private contexts until critical mass was met due to fear of not only professional backlash, but also concern regarding acceptance with family members. Therefore, using Theissen and Wilkins-Laflamme's (2017) "snowball effect" (p.66) metaphor, while current trends demonstrate that the non-religious community will continue to gain acceptance in U.S. society, this shift will likely be gradual as the percentage of the population in the U.S. that identify as non-religious continues to grow and becomes more vocal about their beliefs.

Implications and Recommendations

This study has several implications and recommendations including for individuals who identify as non-religious and the wider non-religious community, as well as for the workplace. However, due to its limitations, recommendations are fairly general at this time.

Implications and Recommendations for the Non-Religious Community

The biggest implications for the individuals who identify as non-religious and the religious community as a whole are that the non-religious population in the U.S. is steadily growing and discrimination and misunderstanding as well as fear of discrimination and misunderstanding between the non-religious and religious remain common. Unless more individuals are willing to openly identify as non-religious, the stereotypes and perceptions U.S. society has about the non-religious are likely to persist. To address these issues, I recommend that the non-religious community establish a comprehensive strategy starting at the local level before advancing to statewide and nationwide as to how they can take charge of the dialogue in the U.S. surrounding this aspect of their identity. The LGBTQ+ social movements serve as a useful teaching tool in how the non-religious community can work together to sway public opinion surrounding their identity. Although a number of participants reported with conviction that they were uninterested in joining a non-religious group or organization, exploring how the non-religious community can become more organized both locally and nationally would assist in the group's ability to effectively strategize and campaign for acceptance. However, it must be acknowledged that taking these types of actions are not without risk whether it be backlash in the workplace or negatively impacting relationships. Therefore, individuals who identify as non-religious must continue to carefully weigh the pros and cons of disclosing this aspect of their identity to others.

Implications and Recommendations for the Workplace

First and foremost, my study suggests that the workplace does not feel like a safe place to openly identify as non-religious due to perceived risk of backlash and the implications it may have on one's relationships and standing within one's organization. This perception of risk is felt regardless of one's position and/or formal leadership standing. I recommend that further research be done to establish how workplaces can work towards promoting equity for all regardless of religious or non-religious affiliation so that they may better support their employees. Additionally, I recommend that organizations explore how they can ensure if a person's identity as non-religious is shared, freely or under other circumstances, that their position within the company is not harmed. Similar to my recommendations for the non-religious community, workplaces may benefit from studying the strategies used and lessons learned from the LGBTQ+ social movements regarding promoting acceptance and equity in the workplace.

<div align="center">

Suggestions for Future Research

</div>

In order to address the limitations of this study, I recommend a number of areas for further research. First, further research should be conducted using a greater sample size that more accurately reflects the overall demographics of the U.S. It would also be of particular interest to specifically engage individuals who identify as non-religious and who work in fields that were identified as being particularly unfriendly to individuals who identify as non-religious including teaching, professional sports, and politics. Additionally, providing participants with a more structured definition of leadership may help to decrease participant confusion and boost validity of the data. As addressed in the implications and recommendations section, future areas of research could also include examining how the non-religious community can take control of the dialogue in society surrounding this aspect of their identity, how the non-religious community

can become more organized in efforts to normalize their identity and if these efforts would be effective, and how workplaces can promote equity and decrease fears of backlash due to one's identity as non-religious. It would also be beneficial to conduct further research into how tactics and strategies used by other unfavored groups to gain acceptance in U.S. society may be applied by the non-religious population.

Conclusion

The percentage of individuals in the U.S. who identify as non-religious is on the rise. These individuals are people we interact with on a regular basis, whether we are made aware of it or not. However, for the most part, individuals who identify as non-religious have not been able to control the dialogue surrounding this aspect of their identity leading to false assumptions and distrust in U.S. society in addition to discrimination. Therefore, individuals who identify as non-religious face unique challenges in the workplace, including whether to openly disclose this aspect of their identity with others. Participant insights led me to categorize their actions as *Embrace Identity as Non-Religious, Minimize Identity as Non-Religious,* and *Separate from Identity as Non-Religious.* This study offered a number of implications and recommendations for individuals who identify as non-religious and the non-religious community as well as the workplace. Further research examining the intersection between an individual's identity as non-religious and their credibility as a leader is needed. It is my hope that additional research on the topic will validate why individuals who identify as non-religious can also establish themselves to be credible leaders and how they can benefit our workplaces.

References

Baker, J. O. & Smith, B. (2009). None too simple: Examining issues of religious nonbelief and nonbelonging in the United States. *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion, 48*(4), 719-733.

Baker, J. O. & Smith, B. (2009). The nones: Social characteristics of the religiously unaffiliated. *Social Forces, 87*(3), 1251-1263.

Berggren, N. & Bjørnskov, C. (2011). Is the importance of religion in daily life related to social trust? Cross-country and cross-state comparisons. *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization, 80*(3), 459-480. doi: 10.1016/j/jebo/2011.05.002

Cragun, R. T., Kosmin, B., Keysar, A., Hammer, J. H. & Nielsen, M. (2012). On the receiving end: Discrimination toward the non-religious in the United States. *Journal of Contemporary Religion, 27*(1), 105-127.

Creswell, J. W. (2016) *30 Essential skills for the qualitative researcher.* SAGE Publications, Inc.

Edgell, P., Hartmann, D., & Gerteis, J. (2006). Atheists as "other": Moral boundaries and cultural membership in American society. American Sociological Review, *71*(April), 211-234.

Edgell, P., Hartmann, D., Stewart, E. & Gerteis, J. (2016) Atheists and other cultural outsiders: Moral boundaries and the non-religious in the United States. *Social Forces, 95*(2), 607-638. doi: 10.1093/sf/sow063

Franks, A. S. & Scherr, K. (2014). A sociofunctional approach to prejudice at the polls: are atheists more politically disadvantaged than gays and blacks*? Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 44,* 681-691. doi: 10.111/jasp.12259.

Gentile, M. C. (2012). *Giving voice to values: How to speak your mind when you know what's right*. Yale University Press.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Hammer, J. H., Cragun, R. T., Hwang, K. & Smith, J. M. (2012). Forms, frequency and correlates of perceived anti-atheist discrimination. *Secularism and Nonreligion, 1,* 43-67.

Harris, S. (2004). *The end of faith: Religion, terror, and the future of reason.* W.W. Norton & Company.

Harrison, V. S. (2006). The pragmatics of defining religion in a multi-cultural world. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, *59*(3), 133-152. doi:10.1007/s11153-006-6961-z

Hayes, B. C. (1995). The impact of religious identification on political attitudes: An international comparison. *Sociology of Religion, 56*(2), 177-194.

Hitchens, C. (2009). *God is not great: How religion poisons everything.* Atlantic Book.

Humanists of Minnesota. n.d. Our vision Retrieved from https://humanistsofmn.org/mission-and-vision/

Kouzes J. & Posner, B. (2012). *The leadership challenge: How to make extraordinary things happen in organizations* (5th ed.) Wiley & Sons.

Northouse, P. G. (2016). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (7th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.

O'Leary, Z. (2017). *The essential guide to doing your research project* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.

Pew Research Center (2015). America's changing religious landscape. Retrieved from http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/

Pew Research Center. (2014) Religious landscape study: Religious composition of adults in

Minnesota. Retrieved from http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/minnesota/

Smith, G. A. (2017). A growing share of Americans say it's not necessary to believe in God to be moral. *Pew Research Center.* Retrieved from http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/16/a-growing-share-of-americans-say-its-not-necessary-to-believe-in-god-to-be-moral/

Thiessen, J. & Wilkins-Laflamme, S. (2017). Becoming a religious none: Irreligious socialization and disaffiliation. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 56*(1), 64-82.

Vargas, N. & Loveland, M. T. (2011). Befriending the "other": Patterns of social ties between the religious and non-religious. Sociological Perspectives. 54(4), 713-731.

White-Newman, J. B. (2003). The Three E's model of leadership: Being effective, ethical, and enduring. *Ethics & leadership anthology.* 1-30. SCU Printing.

Wilkins-Laflamme, S. (2016). Secularization and the wider gap in values and personal religiosity between the religious and nonreligious. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 55*(4), 717-736.

Yoshino, K. (2002). Covering. *The Yale Law Journal. 111*(4). 769-939.

Zhu, W., Zheng, X, Riggio, R. E., & Zhang, X. (2015). A critical review of theories and measures of ethics-related leadership. *New Directions for Student Leadership, 146*, 81-96. doi: 10.100/yd.20137

Appendix A

Introduction to the Consent Form

Date:

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my research study titled Navigating Perceptions and Stereotypes of Leaders Who Identify as Non-Religious in the U.S.

I am a graduate student at St. Catherine University under the supervision of Amy Ihlan, a faculty member in the Organizational Leadership Department. I am completing this study as a part of my qualitative research study in the Masters of Organizational Leadership program.

In order to make sure that this research is both ethical and credible, it is important that each participant be fully informed of the risks and benefits of the study, as well as of their rights as a participant. Please read the attached Informed Consent Form for this important information. I will review this information with you at the beginning of our interview or focus group and ask you to sign it then.

If you have any questions about the form or the study please do not hesitate to discuss them with me

Thank you for your support of my study,

Sarah Kruger Hilger

sekruger@stkate.edu

(cell) 402-672-3110

Consent Form

Informed Consent for a Research Study

Study Title: Navigating Perceptions and Stereotypes of Leaders Who Identify as Non-Religious in the U.S.

Researcher(s): Sarah Kruger Hilger, MAOL student

You are invited to participate in a research study. This study is called Navigating Perceptions and Stereotypes of Leaders Who Identify as Non-Religious in the U.S. The study is being done by Sarah Kruger Hilger, a Masters' candidate at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, MN. The faculty advisor for this study is Amy Ihlan, PhD, Associate Professor, Organizational Leadership Department at St. Catherine University.

The purpose of this study is to determine how individual that identify as non-religious navigate others' stereotypes and perceptions of their identity to establish themselves as credible leaders. This study is important as my findings will help to inform others how individuals that identify as non-religious navigate others' stereotypes and perceptions of their identity to establish themselves as credible leaders. Approximately 10-20 people are expected to participate in this research. Below, you will find answers to the most commonly asked questions about participating in a research study. Please read this entire document and ask questions you have before you agree to be in the study.

Why have I been asked to be in this study?

You have been asked to partake in this study as you responded to an ad for this study (email, flyer or online post) and have self-identified as both non-religious and a leader.

If I decide to participate, what will I be asked to do?

If you meet the criteria and agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do one of these things:

- Complete a 60-90 minute semi-structured interview

OR

- Participate in a 60-90 minute semi-structured focus group

In total, this study will take approximately an hour to an hour and a half over one session. Individuals that partake in the interview will not partake in the following focus group.

What if I decide I don't want to be in this study?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide you do not want to participate in this study, please feel free to say so, and do not sign this form. If you decide to participate in this study, but later change your mind and want to withdraw, simply notify me and you will be removed immediately. You may withdraw until April 1, 2018 after which time withdrawal will no longer be possible. Your decision of whether or not to participate will have no negative or positive impact on your relationship with St. Catherine University, nor with any of the students or faculty involved in the research.

What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?

There are no foreseeable risks to participants taking part in the in person interviews. For individuals partaking in interviews using video calling systems there is a minor risk of data interception. Due to the nature of a focus group, confidentiality between participants cannot be guaranteed.

What are the benefits (good things) that may happen if I am in this study?

Some participants may appreciate the ability to reflect upon and talk through their experience. Through this study I hope to add to the public knowledge insights on how non-religious individuals navigate others' stereotypes and perceptions of their identity to establish themselves as credible leaders.

Will I receive any compensation for participating in this study?

You will not be compensated for participating in this study

What will you do with the information you get from me and how will you protect my privacy?

The information that you provide in this study will be audio recorded and transcribed. To ensure confidentiality, all data will be de-identified and participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will keep consent forms, audio files, transcriptions and my notes in a secure location and only I and the research advisor will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by December 2018. I will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you by May 2019. In order to protect the confidentiality of those participants being interviewed over an internet video calling system, I will be using a password protected and secure network to access the system and will ask participants to do the same. I will only use video calling systems that requires a password protected account to access the call. In the consent form and through verbal instructions I will ask members of the focus group to keep information about other participants confidential.

Are there possible changes to the study once it gets started?

If during the course of this research study I learn about new findings that might influence your willingness to continue participating in the study, I will inform you of these findings.

How can I get more information?

If you have any questions, you can ask them before you sign this form. You can also feel free to contact me at sekruger@stkate.edu or (402) 672-3110. If you have any additional questions later and would like to talk to the faculty advisor, please contact Amy Ihlan at ajihlan@stkate.edu or (651) 690-6887. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739 or jsschmitt@stkate.edu.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I consent to participate in the study and agree to be audiotaped.

My signature indicates that I have read this information and my questions have been answered. I also know that even after signing this form, I may withdraw from the study by informing the researcher(s).

_____

Signature of Participant   Date

_____

Signature of Researcher   Date

Demographics

If you agree to participate in the study, please complete the following demographics questions. Please note, for any question you do not wish to answer a question please mark "Prefer not to answer". Choosing not to respond to any or all questions below will not negatively impact your participation in the study.

1. What is your current age?

   _____ ☐ Prefer not to answer

2. What gender do you identify as?

   ☐ Female
   ☐ Male
   ☐ Non-binary/ third gender
   ☐ Prefer to self-describe _____
   ☐ Prefer not to answer

3. What race or races do you identify as?

   ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
   ☐ Asian
   ☐ Black or African American
   ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   ☐ White or Caucasian
   ☐ Multi-racial or bi-racial
   ☐ Other, _____
   ☐ Prefer not to answer

4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

   ☐ Less than a High School Education
   ☐ Some High School Education
   ☐ High School Diploma or GED
   ☐ Some College
   ☐ Associates Degree
   ☐ Bachelor's Degree
   ☐ Master's Degree
   ☐ Doctoral Degree

□ Prefer not to answer

5. How many years of leadership experience do you have?

□ Less than one year
□ 1-3 years
□ 4-6 years
□ 7-9 years
□ 10-12 years
□ 13-15 years
□ 16 or more years
□ Prefer not to answer

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your professional background and how you came to be in your current position.

2. In what capacity/capacities do you consider yourself to be a leader?

3. How did your identity as a non-religious individual form?

4. How openly do you share your identity as a non-religious individual?

    a. How do you decide whether, when, and in what settings to share your identity as non-religious with others?

    b. How do others respond when you share this information with them?

5. How do your identity, views, or experiences as a non-religious come in to play in your leadership style, if at all?

6. How do you think most people in our society view non-religious individuals?

7. What perceptions or stereotypes do you believe non-religious individuals face as leaders?

8. How do those perceptions or stereotypes influence a leader's ability to establish credibility?

9. Have you personally experienced any of these perceptions or stereotypes directed at you? If so, how have they impacted your credibility as a leader? What did you do as a result?

10. In your opinion, how can non-religious individuals best establish themselves as credible leaders?

Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourself and briefly describe the field in which you consider yourself to be a leader.

2. How would you describe your experience in society as a non-religious individual?

3. What do you consider in deciding whether or not to share with others that you are non-religious?

      a. Can you think of any examples of when you felt the need to cover your identity as non-religious? If so, what was the context?

4. Interviewees repeatedly spoke about the concept that religion provides a built in moral platform for its followers and that non-religious people have to work harder to demonstrate themselves to be moral and ethical. How does your experience compare to that observation?

5. What experiences do you have managing or responding to others perceptions of your morality, specifically as it relates to your leadership position?

6. Interviewees repeatedly touched on the perception that non-religious individuals have the greatest difficulty establishing themselves as credible leaders in the political sector, if you agree, why do you think this may be? If you disagree, what is your opinion?

7. Can you think of any other professions or fields that non-religious individuals in particular may struggle to establish credibility as leaders? What about those fields makes it particularly difficult?

      a. How can leaders that identify as non-religious establish credibility in those fields?

8. Another theme from the interviews was that one's religious identity is becoming a less significant factor in how society perceives an individual's moral character, do you agree or disagree with this, and why?

9. How do you think perceptions and/or stereotypes will continue to evolve around non-religious individuals' ability to be credible leaders?

10. Several participants discussed the idea that it is highly important for non-religious movements to establish credibility and that the increased credibility of the group as a whole will increase individual credibility. What are your thoughts on this?

11. What else can non-religious individuals do to further establish credibility as leaders?

12. Do you have any other insights that may benefit my study?