Narcissistic Differences in Christian and Nonreligious Individuals

Sarah J. Dubebdorff
Rollins College, sdubendorff@rollins.edu

Andrew Luchner
Rollins College, aluchner@rollins.edu

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Narcissistic Differences in Christian and Nonreligious Individuals

Julianna Dubendorff

Rollins College
Abstract

The personality characteristics of nonreligious and religious individuals have been studied; however, more research has been produced on religious populations, and research into specific personality constructs has been less common. Perception research has shown that atheists, who fall under the larger category of nonreligious, are seen as more grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic, as well as having less empathy. In order to investigate this trend’s existence, the present study collected responses from Christians (n = 125) and nonreligious individuals (n = 124) on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS), and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). Additionally, a short religiosity scale was adapted to measure specific beliefs in both participant groups. Christian participants scored higher on a scale of the NPI measuring grandiosity, while nonreligious participants scored higher on the HSNS, indicating greater vulnerable narcissism. These findings implicate the role of identity, particularly those which hold power or indicate marginalization in society, in the development and support the need for further research on nonreligious populations.
Narcissistic Differences in Christian and Nonreligious Individuals

Atheism is generally defined by what it is not, or a negation of theism, and so for each definition of a particular type of theism, there can be a definition of a particular type of atheism (Hyman, 2006). In addition to different traditions and denominations, religion has been conceptualized as having three types: intrinsic, extrinsic, and quest (Batson, Schoenrade & Ventis, 1993). Intrinsic religion holds the religion itself and the individual’s religiosity as the central end, whereas extrinsic religion, which is also referred to as “mature faith,” uses religion as a means through which other goals or needs can be attained. Allport (1967) differentiated these two types by stating that, “the extrinsically motivated individual uses his religion, whereas the intrinsically motivated lives his” (p.434). The quest type constantly searches for their truth in religion, question, and doubt, while also placing importance in the questions (Batson et al., 1993).

Although atheism could be considered to be a simple negation of the collective religious traditions and types, the alternative identities that fall under nonreligion are growing in number and popularity both in the United States and worldwide (Hyman, 2006; Lee, 2014). In addition to the traditional “secular” and “agnostic” identities, groups such as the “Brights,” the “New Atheists,” and “skeptics” have gained popularity. Additionally, six different categories of nonbelief have been described in research with thematic differences in their rejection of theism: Intellectual Atheist/Agnostic, Activist Atheist/Agnostic, Seeker-Agnostic, Anti-Theist, Non-Theist, and Ritual Atheist/Agnostic (Silver, Coleman, Hood, & Holcombe, 2014). Though there are specific differences between nonreligious identities, rejection of higher powers or otherworldly existences define atheism.

**Historical and Cultural Understandings Atheism**
Historically, atheism was exclusively used as a derogatory term until the mid-eighteenth century, and even once it was used as a term of identity, it continued to carry negative connotations of immorality and lawlessness (Hyman, 2006). It was during the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the now common alternative identities to atheism were created, such as “secularism,” credited to George Holyoake or “agnosticism,” credited to Thomas Huxley. These alternatives were increasingly important as atheism continued to be associated with fringe personages and ideologies, including Karl Marx and communism (Hyman, 2006). It wasn’t until the 1960s that atheism was widely seen outside of intellectual circles; however, in recent years, the increasing religious tolerance in the United States has broken down prejudices between religions while building the exclusion of the nonreligious from society (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006). To this day, atheism is still widely seen negatively in the United States and other parts of the world (Edgell et al., 2006). However, the religious climate in the United States is different from the climates worldwide. For example, the U.S. does not fall into the trend of lower importance of religion with increased national wealth (Gao, Pew Research Center, 2015) and church attendance is higher than in similar countries such as Canada or Great Britain (Ray, Gallup, 2003). Because of this difference, it is necessary to consider the populations of the U.S. and other countries separately when studying religion. The scope of this study includes only American populations.

**Contemporary Research on Atheists**

Research on atheists has increased over the last 15 years (Brewster, Robinson, Sandil, Esposito, & Geiger, 2014), and the population of atheists in the United States has grown as well (Pew Research Center, 2015). In the research on atheism and atheist individuals, there have been two main topics: comparisons between religious and nonreligious individuals and investigations
of stereotype and prejudice towards atheists (Brewster, 2014). Studies of bias towards atheists and the nonreligious have consistently shown that atheists are seen negatively, including perceptions of immorality, untrustworthiness, elitism, and deficient empathy (Cook, Cottrell, & Webster, 2014; Edgell, et al., 2006; Gervais, 2014; Gervais et al., 2011; Swan & Heesacker, 2012). These prejudices have, in turn, been shown to affect atheists, though the valence of such an effect has been shown to be both positive and negative in various studies (e.g. Doane & Elliot, 2014; Weber, Pargament, Kunik, Lomax, & Stanley, 2012).

Recent research on differences in perception between atheists and religious individuals has ventured into a specific aspect of personality: narcissism. Aspects of prejudice towards atheists such as perceived immorality, egocentrism, lack of empathy, and elitism led to an investigation of the relationship between perceptions of atheists and narcissism. Dubendorff and Luchner (2015) investigated differences in perception of narcissism between atheists and religious individuals by providing a target individual described with a varying religious affiliation that participants scored on measures of narcissism and empathy. Atheists were found to be perceived not only as more narcissistic than religious individuals, but also as less empathic (Dubendorff & Luchner, 2015). This indication of a distinct perceptual difference creates a question of the possibility of actual differences in specific personality constructs such as narcissism in the two populations. Furthermore, this question highlights a gap in the research on atheists’ personalities and how they possibly differ from religious personalities.

Religiosity, Personality, and Well-Being

The Five Factor Model of personality has been used to investigate the relationship between personality and religious affiliation (Saroglou, 2002). For example, general religiosity has been positively related to Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, as well as possibly
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positively related to Extraversion (Saroglou, 2002). By separating studies included in the meta-analytic review based on the type of religiosity studied, Saroglou (2002) identified Five Factor correlates for intrinsic and general religiosity, open or mature religiosity and spirituality, religious fundamentalism, and extrinsic religiosity. The relationship between religiosity, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness has also been found in more recent studies, which used or identified use of measures religious beliefs and behaviors (e.g. Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007) and measures of fundamentalism, open religiosity and spirituality, and general religiosity (Saroglou, 2010). Additional research (e.g. Saroglou, 2010) with different types of religiosity has found additional factors, which correlate with each type. While both spirituality or mature faith and religious fundamentalism are positively correlated with Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, spirituality or mature faith is positively correlated with Openness to Experience and religious fundamentalism is negatively correlated with Openness to Experience (Saroglou, 2010). Spirituality or mature faith is also positively correlated with Extraversion (Saroglou, 2010). These relationships between both general and more specific aspects of religiosity and trends in personality point towards possible group trends in more specific aspects of personality.

Religiosity has also been linked to other personality variables and positive outcomes. Some of the most commonly studied of these variables are sociality and prosocial behaviors along with aspects such as altruism, empathy, volunteering, and helping behaviors (Galen, 2012). Many studies have researched these traits in religious individuals, and increased prosociality has been liked to religiosity and religious behaviors (e.g. Galen, 2012). Many of these variables are linked to well-being, and therefore religiosity and religious activity are considered to be correlates of well-being, if not causal factors. Studies specifically looking at physical well-being
have found that religiosity is related to mortality rates (McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, Koenig, & Thoresen, 2000). These studies (N = 41) most frequently measured religiosity via attendance frequency (n = 21), measures of public-private religiosity (n = 8), and other self-report questions (n = 10; McCullough et al., 2000). Without separating men’s mortality from women’s, one study found a 25% reduction in mortality in the more religious group compared to the less religious group (McCullough, Friedman, Enders, & Martin, 2009). Another study separated genders and found that although there was no difference in mortality for men, highly religious women enjoyed a 41% reduction in mortality rate versus the least religious women (McCullough et al., 2009). Though the link between religiosity and well-being is well documented, many factors are related to religiosity such as social investment and health practices (i.e. refraining from smoking or drinking) and these factors likely influence the relationship between religiosity and well-being (McCullough et al., 2000).

Narcissism and Personality

Personality research has proposed that the personality disorders listed in the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed., DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) could be conceptualized as maladaptive collections of aspects of the Five Factor Model (FFM; Glover, Miller, Lynam, Crego & Widiger, 2012). Efforts have been made in research to increase understanding of the construct of narcissism, one of the DSM-5’s personality disorders described as “a heterogeneous construct consisting of a constellation of maladaptive personality traits” (Glover et al., 2012, p. 500), and clarify differences between narcissism and other personality disorders (e.g. Ruiz, Smith, & Rhodewalt, 2001; Glover et al., 2012). This research has suggested that narcissism is positively correlated with Extraversion (Samuel & Widiger, 2008; Ruiz et al., 2001; Glover et al., 2012), and
negatively correlated with Agreeableness (Samuel & Widiger, 2008; Ruiz et al., 2001; Glover et al., 2012) and Neuroticism (Ruiz et al., 2001; Glover et al., 2012).

Though often studied together, as seen in the Five-Factor Narcissism Inventory (Glover et al., 2012), the two accepted aspects of narcissism do differ (Ronningstam, 2009). Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism have been described in the literature as sharing similarities, such as interpersonal difficulties, a need for admiration, fragile self-esteem, and difficulties with empathy (e.g. Miller & Campbell, 2008; Ronningstam, 2009). They are seen to differ in that grandiosity is characterized by dominance, self-aggrandizement, and aggression while vulnerability contains aspects of shame, shyness, sensitivity to criticism, and insecurity (Miller et al., 2011). Additionally, gender differences have been found in grandiose but not vulnerable narcissism, indicating that on average men score higher than women on measures of grandiose narcissism (Grijalva et al., 2014). Research on differences in personality aspects between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism indicate that grandiose narcissism is positively related to Extraversion, while vulnerable narcissism is negatively related to Neuroticism (Campbell & Miller, 2011).

**Atheism or Irreligiosity, Religiosity, and Well-Being**

Atheists’ personalities have been studied both in terms of the Five Factor model and other constructs. In one study, nonreligious individuals had higher Openness to Experience and lower Conscientiousness (Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, & Knafo, 2002). Additionally, Openness to Experience has been found to be an indicator of lower religiosiy (Galen, 2009). Interpersonal factors such as sociality have been studied in atheists in efforts to support the personality differences found within the Five Factors. Data from the 1994 American General Social Survey and the International Social Survey Programme found that atheists were less social, indicating
that they would like going to a family reunion, on a family trip, or to a festive meal not at all or not really a majority of the time (Bainbridge, 2005). Though it has been disputed (Caldwell-Harris, 2012), Bainbridge (2005) considered this data to support the idea that atheists tend to be less socially encumbered, and their fewer social obligations make espousing atheism easier. Although no studies comparing nonreligious to religious individuals on measures of skepticism exist, data on magical thinking has been collected, which shows that atheists score lower than both Christians and Buddhists (Caldwell-Harris, Wilson, LoTempio, & Beit-Hallahmi, 2011). Together with the trend of low Agreeableness, these could indicate higher skepticism (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011).

Although much of the research on religious prosociality has supported the conclusion of increased prosociality and well-being with religiosity, there is a burgeoning effort to investigate whether religious people are actually more prosocial, and if so what constraints that prosociality has. Galen’s (2012) analysis indicates that although the majority of research on this topic points towards a causal relationship between religiosity and prosociality, most of that research has been biased by social desirability or in-group bias. The prosocial behaviors seen in religious individuals are very often exclusive to interactions with other religious individuals or toward religiously affiliated organizations. Additionally, priming that is often considered to induce or increase prosocial behaviors stimulates in-group bias and social stereotypes when seen as coming from an out-group member. Galen (2012) concludes that the few studies that control for confounds need to be supported with future studies in which “characteristics such as universal helpfulness or altruism [are] separated from ingroup favoritism” (p.899).

In addition to the critical evaluation of religiosity literature, increased research on mental and physical health outcomes for atheists would work to round out the overall literature on
religiosity and irreligiosity in relation to well-being (Brewster, 2014). If being religious increases positive outcomes, then nonreligious identities could be associated with lower rates of well-being (Brewster et al., 2014). Atheists are a marginalized group and are generally viewed negatively (e.g. Cook, Cottrell, & Webster, 2014; Edgell, et al., 2006; Gervais, 2014; Gervais et al., 2011; Swan & Heesacker, 2012), but the little research performed does not conclusively indicate that they are more immoral and less prosocial than religious individuals, as atheists have been generally understudied (Brewster et al., 2014). One recent study found that children from nonreligious families across six countries were more altruistic than both Christian and Muslim children (Decety et al., 2015). Though this one finding used specific and controlled games for the investigation of altruism in children (Decety et al., 2015), it is possible that the societal prejudices that exist in American society have influenced findings supporting the benefits of religiosity (Galen, 2012).

Though there is no known research on internalized prejudice in nonreligious individuals, the research that has investigated psychological distress in nonreligious people shows that the negative perceptions of the nonreligious by others was the only source of stress (Weber, Pargament, Kunik, Lomax, & Stanley, 2012). This conclusion was based upon an analysis of the 14 applicable studies Weber et al. (2012) found in their search and is supported by more recent research studying the Rejection-Identification Model (RIM), which proposes that individuals with stigmatized identities react with increased identification with those groups, mitigating the negative effect of stigma on the individual’s well-being (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Doane & Elliot, 2014). This model was found to be consistent with data collected (Doane & Elliot, 2014). Within other minority groups, such as ethnic minorities, minority status has been
shown to influence identity development and even result in internalization of negative stereotypes of their identities if they are unable to assimilate to the majority ideal (Smith, 1991).

Research on differences in specific constructs of personality has yet to be published on nonreligious and religious individuals. However, a small study compared Christians, Buddhists, and atheists and found no differences in empathy between the groups (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011). Empathy is known to be an important factor in narcissism (Ronningstam, 2009). With this link, one would expect empathy and narcissism to have a direct relationship with one another, as was found with perceptions of both constructs in Dubendorff and Luchner’s (2015) study. Additionally, the pattern of FFM correlations with atheism (i.e. high Openness to Experience, low Conscientiousness) has been found to be different from that of religiosity (i.e. high Agreeableness and Conscientiousness). Previous research has indicated that atheists are perceived to be more narcissistic than religious individuals (Dubendorff & Luchner, 2015); however, there is no known research on the existence of such a relationship. The investigation of the possibility of this relationship is important in further understanding atheists as a marginalized and under-researched group. Therefore, it is likely that atheists and nonreligious individuals in general will score higher on scales of narcissism or lower on scales of empathy than religious individuals.

Method

Participants

Responses were collected from 271 participants, of which 22 responses were excluded, and 249 responses were used for analysis. Participants that were excluded either failed to complete the survey or completed it in less than six minutes. The participants included 140 males, 106 females, and three transgender individuals. Ages of the participants ranged from 18 to
69 years old, with a mean age of 31.37 ($SD = 11.33$). The majority of participants were Caucasian (73.5%) and college educated (82.7%). Based on pre-selection for specific religious groups, 124 of the participants identified as Christian and 125 identified as Non Religious (Agnostic, Atheist, No Religion).

**Measures**

**Narcissistic Personality Inventory.** The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) is a self-report measure containing 40 forced-choice items that measure grandiose narcissism (Raskin & Terry, 1988) and has been commonly used in social-personality psychology research (Ackerman et al., 2013; Miller & Campbell, 2008). An example of an item is “Choose one: A. I have a natural talent for influencing people. B. I am not good at influencing people.” A higher score on the NPI indicates a greater amount of grandiose characteristics, while a lower score indicates fewer grandiose characteristics. Although multiple studies (see Ackerman et al., 2011) have made attempts to distinguish factors in the scale, one model has been increasingly utilized, which contains three subscales: Leadership/Authority, Grandiose Exhibitionism, and Entitlement/Exploitativeness (Ackerman et al., 2011). Research has shown the satisfactory reliability and validity of the subscales, frequently greater than the total score (Ackerman et al, 2013).

**Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale.** The Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS) is a 10-item self-report measure of vulnerable narcissism (Hendin & Cheek, 1997). The items are scored on a five-point Likert scale from “Not true of me” to “Very true of me.” An example of an item is “I can become entirely absorbed in thinking about my personal affairs, my health, my cares, or my relations with others.” Scores range from 10 to 50, with higher scores indicating greater
vulnerable narcissism. Research supports the satisfactory internal consistency, reliability, and validity of the HSNS (Fossati et al., 2009; Hendin & Cheek, 1997).

**Interpersonal Reactivity Index.** The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) is an empathy measure with 28 items (Davis, 1983). The items are scored on a five-point Likert scale from “Does not describe me well” to “Describes me very well.” Scores range from zero to 28, with higher scores indicating greater levels of empathy across subscales. The IRI contains four 7-item subscales, each measuring a distinct aspect of empathy: Perspective-Taking (PD; e.g. “I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the ‘other guy's’ point of view.”), Fantasy (FS; e.g. “I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel.”), Empathic Concern (EC; e.g. “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.”), and Personal Distress (PD; e.g. “In emergency situations, I feel apprehensive and ill-at-ease”) (Davis, 1983).

In previous research, the association of the Fantasy scale with social functioning was considered unclear and not included in the analyses; the present study will also not utilize this scale in final analyses (Schreiter, Pijnenborg, & aan het Rot, 2013).

**Religion scale.** Participants were asked to select their position on seven items regarding religion. These items were adapted from three scales developed by Batson, Shoenrade, and Ventis (1993): the External and Internal scales of the Religious Life Inventory, and the Doctrinal Orthodoxy scale. One item from the External scale (“My religion serves to satisfy needs for fellowship and security.”) and one item from the Internal scale (“I have found it essential to have faith.”) were added to five items from the Doctrinal Orthodoxy scale (e.g. “I believe in the existence of God.”). The complete scale can be found in Appendix A. The scores ranged from zero to 14, with high scores indicating greater levels of belief and lower scores lower levels of belief. The items adapted from the Doctrinal Orthodoxy scale provided the possible responses of
“Yes,” “Unsure,” or “No,” and the items from the Religious Life Inventory provided the possible responses of “I agree,” “Unsure,” or “I disagree.” The internal validity of these items, as measured by Chronbach’s alpha, were found to be very good, $\alpha = .924$.

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited through Prolific Academic, an online survey research platform that allows researchers to prescreen participants based on a variety of characteristics. Participants were required to have selected “American” as their nationality and either “Christianity (e.g. Baptist, Church of England, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Jehovah’s Witness, etc.)” or “Non Religious (e.g. Agnostic, Atheist, No Religion)” previous to being eligible for the study. In order to control the proportion of Christian to Non Religious participants, individual studies were run through Prolific Academic selecting for each religious variable. Thus Study 1 prescreened for Christianity, while Study 2 prescreened for Non Religion. All studies run after the first included prescreening for participation in any prior studies. Participants under the age of 18 or who did not give their informed consent were excluded from the study. Additionally, if the participant completed the study in under six minutes, their response was rejected and excluded from the study. Upon satisfactory completion of the study, participants were compensated $1.56 (the equivalent of £ 1.10, as Prolific Academic is a British company).

Participants were informed that the study would ask them to complete multiple surveys on personality. They were provided with the appropriate directions for the completion of each scale.

**Results**

The data were tested for normality and found to be non-normally distributed, therefore Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to compare grandiose and vulnerable narcissism and
empathy scores between Nonreligious and Christian individuals. A significant difference was found in the scores for Nonreligious individuals \((Mdn = .10, IQR = .00–.30)\) and Christians \((Mdn = .20, IQR = .00–.30)\) on the Grandiosity/Exhibitionism scale of the NPI, \(U = 6392.00, p = .014\).

A significant difference was found in the HSNS scores for Nonreligious individuals \((Mdn = 39.00, IQR = 34.00–44.00)\) and Christians \((Mdn = 38.00, IQR = 31.50–42.00)\), \(U = 6551.50, p = .035\). A series of nonsignificant findings are reported in Table 1.

The religiosity scale was used to remove Christian participants who scored below nine and nonreligious participants who scored above six (on a scale of zero to 14). The remaining Confirmed Christian \((n = 92)\) and Confirmed nonreligious \((n = 109)\) participants were compared in nine independent-samples t-tests. A significant difference was found in the scores for nonreligious individuals \((Mdn = .10, IQR = .00–.20)\) and Christians \((Mdn = .20, IQR = .00–.40)\) on the Grandiosity/Exhibitionism scale of the NPI, \(U = 3633.50, p = .001\). Christians \((Mdn = .36, IQR = .09–.55)\) and nonreligious individuals \((Mdn = .27, IQR = .09–.45)\) were also significantly different on the Leadership/Authority scale of the NPI, \(U = 4214.50, p = .050\). A significant difference was found between nonreligious \((Mdn = .20, IQR = .10–.35)\) and Christian \((Mdn = .28, IQR = .15–.42)\) individuals on the total NPI, \(U = 3952.00, p = .010\). Finally, as significant difference was also found between nonreligious individuals \((Mdn = 39.00, IQR = 34.00–44.00)\) and Christians \((Mdn = 37.00, IQR = 30.25–42.75)\) on the HSNS, \(U = 4196.50, p = .046\). The remaining results were nonsignificant (see Table 2).

The final analyses performed were post hoc analyses on differences between Christian and nonreligious individuals separated by gender. No significant differences were found between Christian and nonreligious men (see Table 3). However, significant differences were found between Christian women \((Mdn = 37.00, IQR = 30.00–42.00)\) and nonreligious women \((Mdn = \)
40.00, $IQR = 34.00–44.00$) on the HSNS, $U = 1033.00$, $p = .019$. Christian women ($Mdn = .10$, $IQR = .00–.30$) and nonreligious women ($Mdn = .05$, $IQR = .00–.20$) differed significantly on the Grandiosity/Exhibitionism scale of the NPI, $U = 1089.00$, $p = .038$. Significant differences were also found in the Personal Distress scale of the IRI between Christian women ($Mdn = 11.00$, $IQR = 7.25–14.00$) and nonreligious women ($Mdn = 13.50$, $IQR = 8.75–19.25$), $U = 1093.00$, $p = .049$. The remaining differences were nonsignificant (see Table 4).

**Discussion**

The data support the hypotheses in that nonreligious individuals scored higher on scales of vulnerable narcissism; however, inconsistent with the hypotheses, Christians scored higher on the Grandiosity/Exhibitionism subscale of grandiose narcissism. Thus, Christians can be identified as being more grandiose and having more of the characteristics associated with grandiose narcissism, including self-aggrandizement and dominance, whereas nonreligious individuals can be identified as being more vulnerable and having more of the characteristics of vulnerable narcissism, including shame and sensitivity to criticism. The measured differences between nonreligious and Christian individuals might be influenced by the relationships between dominant and marginalized groups and results of holding dominant and marginalized identities within American society. Research on racial and ethnic majority and minority statuses, their development, and their influence on individuals provide an analogous basis for analysis because of the paucity of research on nonreligious groups, specifically atheists (Brewster et al., 2014). Theories of ethnic identity development have postulated that not only does a group’s majority or minority status matter in the context of development, individuals within a minority group are likely to internalize the negative portrayals of their identities if they are unable to achieve the ideal of the majority (e.g. Smith, 1991).
The findings of the present study can be contextualized within a theory of majority and minority statuses, which include oppression (Smith, 1991). In the United States, Christians are the majority group and atheists, agnostics, and those who identify as having no religion are religious minorities. Christians hold power and are likely influenced and even encouraged to be not only more dominant, but also more open and exhibitive in their sense of entitlement and superiority. Christians are societally rewarded for outwardly demonstrating their Christianity because it confirms their identity in the majority group. However, atheists, and the larger group of nonreligious individuals, are not only widely perceived negatively (e.g. Cook, Cottrell, & Webster, 2014; Edgell et al., 2006), they are also given the message that they are full of themselves, pushy with their beliefs, and don’t fit into the expected characteristics of American citizenry (Edgell et al., 2006). Nonreligious individuals, as a marginalized group, are likely very sensitive to the criticism towards them: a hallmark of vulnerable narcissism. The conflict a person experienced between feeling that they were a productive member of society and experiencing the majority culture as criticizing the ability to be an adequate citizen would induce feelings of inadequacy, wanting to be appreciated, and attempting to demonstrate their value in society. Furthermore, based on the application of ethnic identity development theory to religious minorities, nonreligious individuals are likely to internalize the prejudicial portrayal of them (Smith, 1991).

In the present study, participants’ religious affiliation was initially identified through a preselection procedure in the survey platform that identified participants who had previously identified themselves as either Christian or Nonreligious as qualified to participate in the study. Because of this, and the potential for preselected and categorical identification to lack the depth of information on the individual that the comparisons in the present study would possibly benefit
from, a religiosity scale was adapted from three scales developed by Batson et al. (1993) to measure specific beliefs associated with doctrinal religiosity. Using this scale as a measure of level of belief, with a low score indicating that the individual held few to none of the beliefs associated with religiosity (and congruent with Christianity specifically) and a high score indicating that the individual held most or all of the beliefs associated with religiosity. These adjustments based on specific beliefs was intended to clarify the beliefs of individuals specifically within the nonreligious category, as nonreligious categories have been shown to include a variety of identities related to rejection of specific religions and nonbelief including atheism, humanism, agnosticism, and non-nominal identities (Lee, 2014). When participants of the Christian and nonreligious groups were removed based on their low religiosity score or high religiosity score, respectively, additional differences were found between the two remaining groups. These two groups were confirmed to hold the beliefs associated with their preselected identity, and will be referred to as Confirmed nonreligious and Confirmed Christian. The differences of greater overall grandiose narcissism and greater leadership and authority in addition to greater grandiosity and exhibitionism confirm the findings that Christians have greater grandiosity. The Confirmed nonreligious group was also found to have greater vulnerable narcissism, which supports the original findings.

Although the present study hypothesized differences in empathy between Christians and nonreligious individuals, differences were only found in maladaptive empathy between Christian and nonreligious women. In addition to supporting previous research finding no empathic differences between Christians, atheists, and Buddhists (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011), this finding presents an interesting contrast to the narcissistic differences found. Deficits in empathy have been tied to narcissism of both types, although the specific difficulties associated with
grandiose and vulnerable narcissism vary (Ronningstam, 2009). Because both Christians and nonreligious individuals were found to have patterns of greater grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, respectively, it is possible that their lack of difference in empathy is connected to the empathic difficulties associated with narcissism overall. Another possible interpretation is that because empathy is thought to be a natural ability, the influence of the minority status of nonreligious individuals has a nonsignificant effect on empathy in these groups.

Gender is an important consideration when investigating narcissism because of the differences found between men and women on grandiose narcissism (Grijalva et al., 2014). Additional analyses found differences between Christian women and nonreligious women but no differences between Christian men and nonreligious men. Nonreligious women had higher vulnerable narcissism, whereas Christian women showed higher grandiose narcissism, both of which are consistent with the overall findings and likely have similar implications on the role of marginalized and dominant identities in development. Additionally, nonreligious women had higher personal stress empathy. This empathic disparity is possibly a result of the combined effect of being female and nonreligious. Women have been shown in research to have higher scores on personal stress than men (Schreiter, Pijnenborg, & aan het Rot, 2013), and adding the stress of a marginalized identity and the experience of the range of stereotypes associated with nonreligiosity would likely increase the personal stress an individual experienced. Additionally, personal stress has been correlated with sensitivity to criticism from others and vulnerability (Davis, 1983), both characteristics of vulnerable narcissism. Thus, the current finding of nonreligious individuals generally and nonreligious women having greater vulnerable narcissism than Christians and Christian women, respectively, could be tied to the increased personal stress in nonreligious women.
The findings of the present study contrast with previous research on perceived differences in narcissism and empathy. Previous research found that nonreligious individuals, specifically atheists, were seen as being more grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic as well as having lower empathy than religious individuals (Dubendorff & Luchner, 2015). There is an apparent discrepancy between people’s perception of attributes of atheists, a marginalized group, and the measurable differences that can be found between nonreligious individuals and Christians. This disparity between perception and measurable difference could be considered the result of a stereotype that is inaccurate. Stereotypes, which may be accurate, inaccurate or inaccurately valenced, often lie somewhere on a spectrum of accuracy and are affected by in-group bias (Judd & Park, 1993). The stereotype of atheists being narcissistic (both grandiose and vulnerable) and lacking empathy is partially supported in the research, in the sense that higher rates of vulnerable narcissism were measured, but also unsupported, in that lower rates of grandiose narcissism were measured and no differences were found in empathy. This inaccuracy (perception of lack of empathy) and inaccuracy in valence (perception of grandiose narcissism) can be interpreted as a result of in-group bias amongst the majority religious group, Christians.

The results of this study should be understood in light of their limitations. The aim was to compare the personalities of the majority religious group in the United States, Christians, and a marginalized religious minority, nonreligious individuals. Because the nonreligious category can be ambiguous in the way individuals use it as a category of identification (Lee, 2014), a religiosity scale was used to attempt to separate out those who identified themselves as nonreligious but identified beliefs in religious doctrine. While this adjustment likely improved the validity of the groups being measured and the adjusted results supported the original findings, the overall findings may not be applicable to any specific group within the nonreligious
category; rather it identifies trends within a low-belief segment of that population. A better understanding of the specific identities of participants within the nonreligious group could have been gathered with a question on religious affiliation in the study; this was an oversight.

Although the category of nonreligious remains ambiguous, the results found with the separated groups support the original findings that show narcissistic differences between Christian and nonreligious individuals. Further research into differences between atheists and Christians or between groups that fall within the nonreligious category could illuminate potential differences or support the current findings. Additionally, differences between Christian and nonreligious women should be considered for greater examination, particularly the finding that nonreligious women had higher Personal Distress than Christian women. It could be that the doubly marginalized position of nonreligious women puts them at a particular disadvantage within society, which has a negative effect. More generally, nonreligious, and especially atheist, women would benefit from further research into differences between them and nonreligious and atheist men, as atheist populations are generally majority male (Edgell et al., 2006). Christians, religious groups, and different kinds of religiosity would also benefit from further research investigating possible differences in non-majority religions or between the different types of religiosity.

Finally, this study uses ethnic identity development theory to interpret its findings because of the paucity of research on identity and personality development of nonreligious groups. Thus, further research into how minority and majority religious identities affect the individuals who hold them should be pursued. Nonreligious groups, including atheists, are under-researched (Brewster et al., 2014) and marginalized in American society (Edgell et al., 2006); however, the religious majority was also shown to be affected by their identity. The
present study indicates that the marginalization of both majority and minority religious groups could have an effect on their development and personality, though in different ways.
References


Figure 1. Median comparisons between Christian and Nonreligious participants on grandiose narcissism and subscales.
Figure 2. Median comparisons between Christian and Nonreligious participants on vulnerable narcissism and empathy.
Figure 3. Median comparisons between Christian and Nonreligious men and women on vulnerable narcissism.
Figure 4. Median comparisons between Christian and nonreligious men and women on personal stress.
Figure 5. Median comparisons between Christian and nonreligious men and women on grandiosity.
Appendix A

Religiosity Scale

1. I believe in the existence of a God.
   Yes; No; Unsure

2. I believe God created the universe.
   Yes; No; Unsure

3. I believe there is a plan for the universe.
   Yes; No; Unsure

4. I believe in life after death.
   Yes; No; Unsure

5. I believe there is a transcendent realm (an "other" world, not just this world in which we live).
   Yes; No; Unsure

6. My religion serves to satisfy my needs for fellowship and security.
   I agree; Unsure; I disagree

7. I have found it essential to have faith.
   I agree; Unsure; I disagree