



Constructions and Performances of Atheist Identities in Online Settings

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Declaration

I, Teri Gerig (Student number 813417), hereby declare that this research report is my own work. It has not been submitted for any other degree or examination at this or any other university.

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07/06/2017

Date

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Introduction

This research report, based within the approach of discursive psychology and through the paradigm of social constructionism, examined the ways through which atheist identity is constructed and performed in online settings worldwide. The aim of the study was to focus on the methods through which atheism as an identity is constructed and performed, and the social functions that the use of such methods may serve in these settings.

Atheism, while a unique minority identity throughout the world, has typically remained an undiscussed and closed issue (Guenther, Mulligan & Papp, 2013; Smith, 2013; Smith & Cimino, 2012), often associated with a minority of people remaining inconspicuous to the general theist population (Doane & Elliot, 2015). There has been a growing number of atheists openly and expressly discussing their lack of belief in a god, through blogs, vlogs, forums and other internet based platforms (Smith, 2013). These are constructively used to discuss, promote and reflect on atheism, what it means, as well as using it as a platform through which to create a measure of activism called the New Atheist Movement (Guenther et al., 2013). The atheist movement has slowly formed a collective identity amongst atheists, and online communities are becoming a place through which to construct and negotiate this collective identity. The various constructs of atheist identity, while not a new phenomenon, are becoming a remodelled collective identity through the use of the internet (Guenther et al., 2013; Smith, 2013), but this activity has prompted relatively few studies in this area (Guenther et al., 2013; Smith, 2013; Smith & Cimino, 2012). There exists many negative stereotypes of atheists (Kettel, 2013; Schnell & Keenan,

2011) to which these attached stigma's hold influence over the ways that identity is constructed. In some cases atheists refuse to associate with the New Atheist Movement due to these negative connotations, while some attempt to raise awareness of atheism and in this way resist negative social views of the label (Kettel, 2013). Other discursive practices have been taken up in order to avoid negative connotations, such as creating different labels to describe beliefs and worldviews to construct an identity outside of the negative label (Kettel, 2013), a practice which has had little focus in scholarly research. While previous research that has been conducted does involve atheist identities in online settings, the focus has been around the boundary creation and maintenance between theists and atheists (Cerulo, 1997; Guenther et al., 2013; Smith, 2013). There has also been some focus on the political moves and involvement of the atheist movement (Kettel, 2013) and other less identity focused aims of research. A discursive analysis of the methods through which atheists construct their identities, possibly through resistance and boundary construction among other techniques, has yet to be conducted.

These studies, while providing insights into atheism and the study of this changing community, leave gaps in our knowledge of the discursive practices through which atheist identity is performed *in situ*, and this research thus engages with this topic. This study aims to analyse the atheist identity constructions and performances in online settings. In order to achieve this a review of literature is discussed based on identity, identity construction in online spaces, and ultimately focusing on atheism in the online world. Following the literature review, the aims and rationale for the study of atheist identities is addressed, stating the advantage of furthering scholarly knowledge on the topic. The methodology section will follow thereafter, discussing

the qualitative research design, focusing on naturalistic textual data source, and the four guiding questions used. The chosen methods for sampling and data collection will be covered, followed by the analytic approach of discursive psychology. Thereafter a brief mention of ethical considerations for the research will be discussed. The data analysis then takes place, discussing and analysing the samples in order to address the research questions. The report concludes by discussing the findings for the research questions and their significance for atheist identity constructions and performances online.

Literature Review

Identity

The concept of identity is one that has been approached in a number of different ways in Psychology and other social sciences. While there are thus many methods of understanding this process of identity construction, this study was guided by a social constructionist approach, which states that individuals have an active role in constructing their identities (Berzonsky, 2004; Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003). Social constructionism denies the theory that one's perception of reality grants access to true knowledge (Burr, 2015). Rather through daily interactions with others, knowledge is constructed between individuals and groups in their everyday lives (Burr, 2015). The theory claims that multiple constructions are conveyed by individuals and groups in order to construct this knowledge through language (Au, 1998). The language use constructs accounts to events, guiding the social participant (Burr, 2015). The membership of any social group is mediated by this constructed knowledge of the conventions of that social group, this is used to construct social identities (Ochs, 1993) and so the methods used in this identity

construction are an important means through which individual identity is constructed into a collective identity.

It is best to describe social constructionism through the concept that humans are embedded in their social environments which is constitutively determined (Risse, 2004). Social constructionism states that one's social environment establishes our identities as social beings, while at the same time our agency constructs and reproduces this social culture (Risse, 2004). Social constructionism thus rejects any concept of identity consisting of core features that are fixed, proposing instead a fluid and actively constructed entity that is continually renegotiated through social performances (Cerulo, 1997; Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003; Sneijder & te Molder, 2009; Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008). Those engaging in discourse may use language in order to construct their individual identities as well as the identity of the social groups that they associate with, while at the same time others taking part in the same discourse may attempt to construct an identity for another (Ochs, 1993). The significant point here is that the individual and group identity are mutually constitutive (Risse, 2004). Identities such as the atheist identity construction can therefore be performed on both an individual level, or through a community or collective identity, with both types of constructions having influence on one another through the language used and the performances of the identity.

Identity construction may be separated into two identifiable domains, known as the "front stage" and "back stage" (Pearson, 2009). The back stage tends to be a private area, often entailing a relaxed performance of identity (Pearson, 2009). The front stage is seen as the publically observable space where identities are performed and constructed (Pearson, 2009), and this would therefore include the ways in which a

person may choose to display their constructed selves for others to view. The front stage affords a sense of exchange, and an awareness of the performance due to the spotlight. Social interactions and linguistic exchanges thereby play a crucial role in facilitating and shaping the construction of identities, with identities being understood as co-constructed phenomena (Berzonsky, 2004). The flexibility of identity may also be seen through the self-categorisation theory, proposed by Turner, Hogg, Oakes & Wetherell (1987). This theory focuses on the ways in which people categorise themselves through groupings that are thereby defined as more or less important from the individual's perspective (Sneijder & te Molder, 2009). Social categories, such as atheism, are thus built through interactionally situated, co-constructed collaborations (Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003).

Collective identities are similarly constructed around categories which are collaboratively produced in social interactions (Armstrong, Koteyko & Powell, 2012). In this context individual talk does not constitute the collective identity, rather it is a web consisting of an interconnectivity of turns (Armstrong et al., 2012).

According to Eder (2009, p. 437), "collective identities refer to a space of communication, the boundaries of which vary with what is communicated" and "networks of communication generate identities as a project of control of its boundaries". With this understanding of collective identity we see that identifying as a collective allows people to position themselves in relation to other people or groups, creating boundaries between them (Eder, 2009). This assists in the understanding of the social interactions between those who share a collective identity and those that fall outside of the boundaries created by them, and in this study these identities

included various constructions of atheists against other atheist constructions, as well as the constructions of theists.

As was proposed by Burke and Reitzes (1981), identity can be separated into three characteristics under the assumption that identities are products of the social environment and its processes. The first is that one locates their identity in social categories, second claims social interactions construct identity, and the third is through the confirmation of the self-identity by persuasion and performance of identity. Burke and Reitzes' (1981) theory sums up the conceptualisation of identity construction that this research takes. The formulation of identity through constructing the self, as well as through the interactions of the social environment brings to light the self-categorisation that takes place through the careful selection in the construction of one's identity. One's performance acts as a confirmation of the construction. This research was guided by this model, and analysed the personal identity constructions and performances of individuals, while analysing the interactions between these individual constructions and the community/collective social identity.

Identities in Online Settings

The internet has had a large impact on the ways information is produced, circulated and consumed (Delaney, 2008), shaping and being shaped by its consumers' day to day lives (Miller & Slater, 2001). It is an environment through which it has become necessary for individuals to continuously define themselves, and to construct a depiction of who they are as people (Floridi, 2011). According to Eder (2009), social and collective identities become progressively important the more indirect the

relations are, and texts such as online interactions create resources with which to construct and perform these identities.

The fluid nature of the online world allows for the performer to play with various constructions of the self, without risking any relationships, due to the anonymity of the information being presented (Pearson, 2009; Perrotta, 2006; Turkle, 1996). This fluid and changing manner of online identity construction allows for the ability to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct personal identities with ease (Turkle, 1996) and it creates a space for freely constructing identities with some ultimately reaching a somewhat stable identity performance (Kennedy, 2006). Due to the online interactions, the functions of blog posts and the ability to display constructions online, identities are a deliberate construction for the benefit of the audience (Pearson, 2009). It is a selectively posted choice of identity under the spotlight of virtual passers-by with linguistic exchanges made through comments and forums.

Posts online are creating a reality rather than simply demonstrating it. As stated by Smith and Cimino (2012, p. 19), “representation is no longer representation of something; rather, representation is something”. This further indicates that social constructionism held a high relevancy in conducting this study. These constructions that become a reality are products of the social environment, and of individuals’ situated actions therein, not innate parts of the self or individual characteristics that are portrayed (Zhao et al., 2008). This demonstrates the interconnectedness between the social environment and identity, weaving a web of construction and co-construction. Therefore an understanding of the social context of the identities in question is important, and while the immediate context that is focused on in this research is the online environment, it is important to have an understanding of the

broader social context of atheist identities when examining their online identity construction, as they are an interwoven product of the broader social environment.

Stigmatised identities have been given the opportunity to emerge, with the anonymity that the internet permits allowing participants to perform aspects of identity that may otherwise have had to remain hidden due to societal disapproval (McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Ma & Agarwal, 2007). The online setting can be considered somewhat empowering as it creates a setting in which to construct one's identity, as there is no face to face interaction, and therefore no head-on judgement and rejection (Kennedy, 2006). This has allowed the rise of previously discreet identity performances, such as atheism, to become more vocal and visible. In terms of stigmatised identities, online spaces allow for a resistance against the stigma with both individual and collective identities being constructed using this method of resistance.

According to Howarth (2006) social groups have varied levels of access to the co-construction of social reality due to the constructions coming from differing positions. This points towards varying degrees of inclusion and exclusion for those groups (Howarth, 2001). Resistance to this inclusion/exclusion boundary is made evident with the social representations and constructions through debate and conflict (Howarth, 2006). This possibility for debate in discourse, particularly in online settings, allows for expressions of agency and provides space for constructions to be contested and negotiated.

Atheism

Atheists represent a minority group that has been markedly under researched (Guenther et al., 2013; Smith, 2013; Smith & Cimino, 2012). With the atheist identity

surfacing more prominently in the online world in recent years (Kettel, 2013; Guenther et al., 2013), the question rises as to who this wave represents.

Contrary to popular belief, atheism is in fact not a belief in the non-existence of a god, rather it is an absence of belief (Smith, 2010). However, the broad definition of atheism makes it difficult to fully classify, as the vagueness does not expand on any world-views, and due to it being considered a lack of belief it is difficult to infer other beliefs through this label.

The difficulty in further defining an atheist identity into a personal performance goes beyond a simple definition. Smith (2013, p. 86) states that, “organised atheism is not merely the coalescence of individuals around a single issue: their lack of belief in a god. Rather, it tends to involve and imply a host of other social and political issues, and other goal/value-orientated activities”. The growth in atheism and non-belief can be marked down to the increase in religious politicisation of many countries (Hout & Fischer, 2002) with the political debates possibly pushing some away from organised religion. The atheist identity, while not always a united front for the collective identity, can instead hold key demographic and psychological points in common which have an impact on political issues. These qualities include holding liberal values and supporting progressive political campaigns, supporting less conformist and more open minded beliefs, and displaying high tolerance for divergent religious views (Kettel, 2013). Atheism engages in the political realm in various areas such as healthcare, education, civil rights, discrimination, and social service provision, to name a few (Kettel, 2013). One of the key themes of political activism is through the opposition to religious influence within the political field in an attempt to separate the political and the religious, maintaining a secular public domain (Kettel, 2013).

Political standpoints therefore make an important, if not a central factor, in defining one's atheist identity through constructing one's performance around these political and social issues. Although political and goal oriented positions seem to be common constructions of atheism, there seems to be little consensus within the atheist community as to what the collective atheist identity signifies. Identifiable and clearly defined positions on exactly what political standpoints and goal oriented activities are marked within atheist identity constructions are elusive within the community. However what does seem to be common amongst those who adhere to the collective label is that there is a strong sense of individualism through the concept of being a free thinker and independent minded (Smith, 2013).

On an individual scale the atheist identity can be classified as an achieved identity, one based on rejection and a product of interaction (Smith, 2011). As Cragun, Hammer & Smith, (2013) state "the adoption of the atheist label is usually not simply a statement about one's unbelief, but rather a meaningful, articulated, and important component of one's self-concept" indicating the depth that the atheist label can have in the construction and performance of identity.

Atheist Identities Online

Not only are individual atheist positions constantly being covered in online settings (Smith & Cimino, 2012), but the secular society also encourages and values the individual views over the collective identity, further promoting the individual atheist to come forward and disseminate their perspectives publicly rather than following a group dynamic (Smith & Cimino, 2012). This demonstrates a difficulty in understanding the atheist identity as individual versus a collective as they both seem to be highly intertwined, with the collective identity valuing individualism and the

individual identity searching for connections with other like-minded people. While atheists present themselves to the public as individuals, the internet's information distribution allows their personal views to become part of a collaboration in the advancement of ideas and issues within the movement without sacrificing their autonomy (Smith & Cimino, 2012). Wellman (2001) refers to this as "networked individualism".

The New Atheist identity may be the first collective identity of atheism (Smith & Cimino, 2012). Guenther et al. (2013) discuss the New Atheist movement as a collective identity, which often criticises religion while promoting a secular belief system. Kettel (2013) states that the movement is focused on activism, and openly challenges religion while promoting rationality and scientific reasoning. Part of these claims concern the concept that religion is not necessary to lead a moral life, and attempts to turn the concept on its head by claiming that it is religion that is immoral. Kettel (2013, p. 7) also mentions that the movement may be seen as a "defensive rear-guard action, an attempt to push back at the encroaching forces of faith." While there are many types of groups sporting the New Atheist label, they all act towards a shared goal of changing the stigma of the identity to become more publicly accepted and working towards other political goals such as secularised policies (Guenther et al., 2013). Not all atheists identify with the movement, but it has been a catalyst for atheists in general to form social groups as it has drawn public attention to atheism and religion in both the online and offline worlds (Kettel, 2013). The spreading of atheist information and identity construction goes hand in hand with the realisation that there are other like-minded individuals out there, which helps with the expansion and sharing within this media (Smith & Cimino, 2012). The Internet has thus

contributed to more “concrete” atheist communities being built around the world and these communities becoming increasingly member based (Smith, 2013).

Consistent with the constructionist approach taken in this study, online atheism is an actively performed identity, and is a chosen part of identity performance revealing its difference to other forms of identity as it is both concealable and selected (Doane & Elliot, 2015). Atheist identities may be considered an unsanctioned characteristic, which is often “hidden” from the public view (Doane & Elliot, 2015). In the case of online performance, they may be a constructed act of resistance (Zhao et al., 2008) being chosen to be performed on an active and conscious basis, allowing for a selection of when and how the “hidden” identity may be displayed. As is shown in my analysis, this resistance may become its own form of identity construction. The association with the atheist label is a chosen option of many when holding an epistemological position of non-belief in gods. There are many other ways in which to identify oneself in this position, including secular, freethinker, non-theist, humanist, anti-theist, and sceptic (Guenther et al., 2013) to name a few. Some may chose a combination of these labels, or chose an exclusive single one to associate with. The use of labels is complex and interwoven with the choice of associating them with the atheist label, each achieving a different purpose of identity construction, demonstrated further in the analysis.

Smith and Cimino (2012) state that the collective identity of atheism can only be understood through its use of the internet and various connected mediums, and through this understanding the group identity’s activities may be seen as activism. The increased activity and networking within the atheist community is facilitated by the social media and online interactions (Guenther et al., 2013; Kettell, 2013; Smith,

2013). The internet presence of atheism has provided a visible space through which to disseminate and mobilise the atheist identity, and through which to become a more public discussion and debate (Smith & Cimino, 2012) highlighting the importance of research in the area of atheist identity constructions. According to Kettell (2013), “Many of the most important activities, groups, spokespeople and opinion formers involved in new atheism operate predominantly, if not entirely, on the Internet” (p. 8) further underlining the important role that the internet has in the creation and growth of atheist identities.

According to Guenther et al. (2013) online content in atheist forums often centres around making fun of the religious and organised religion and a political ploy of New Atheism, often constructed as a part of identity politics, has been the outright rejection and confrontation towards organised religion (Doane & Elliot, 2015; Kettell, 2013). Also, within the atheist realm there seems to be a long standing division between those that attack religion, and those that wish to promote a system of secular ethics to change the views of the public (Smith & Cimino, 2012). This constructed boundary between the atheist and theist identities is one way in which the collective atheist identity is being constructed. A study conducted by Guenther et al. (2013) indicates that there are various other strategies that atheist organisations use in order to construct an insider and outsider boundary, useful in growing and maintaining the collective identity. These strategies consist of posing the religious as threatening to both atheists and society in general, opposing atheist and religious world views and drawing a moral and intellectual boundary between the religious and atheist (Guenther et al., 2013). These findings offer insights into the possible ways that atheists may use these boundaries to construct their identities, mainly through

the collective identity of organised atheist movements. They also demonstrate possible ways through which the movement maintains the collective atheist identity through rejection and confrontation of religion, with the use of boundaries. While these strategies are used in order to construct boundaries between the religious and non-religious, my analysis demonstrates that they may also be used in the construction of individual atheist identities.

These boundary constructions lead to the observation that much of the collective atheist identity is aimed at social and political activism (Kettell, 2013), as was discussed earlier. This is accomplished through self-advocacy directed towards changing the social meaning of atheism. The goal for this is to ultimately form congruency between the personal identity and the public's perceptions of atheism (Smith, 2013) due to the public's negative views of non-belief.

Even with the rise in numbers and increase in the vocalisation of atheism, they still remain one of the most stigmatised and distrusted minorities (Edgell, Gerteis & Hartmann, 2006). In many countries across the world the stigma of atheism remains strong, as it is perceived as an opponent to all religions, with some drawing the line between those who are morally sound and who belong culturally, with atheists falling outside that distinction (Smith & Cimino, 2012). Referring to oneself as an atheist often comes with risk due to the surrounding stigma as being an essential "other" – being perceived as a threat to the moral order of society (Doane & Elliot, 2015; Smith, 2013). The choice to associate with the atheist identity can leave one feeling ambivalent due to the emotive experience of the cognitive and freethinking experience, while at the same time experiencing the sense of "otherness" and stigma that is accompanied with the label (Cragun et al., 2013). These stigmatised

associations range from a belief that atheists are immoral, judgemental, aggressive, ignorant, and elitist to name a few (Cragun et al., 2013). Due to theists often being the dominant majority of society (Smith, 2013) and the strong stigma towards atheism, there are negative outcomes linked to associating with the atheist label such as prejudice, discrimination, ostracism, coercion, harassment, threat of job/family/marriage loss, and neglect stemming from various places such as family, work, and the general public (Doane & Elliot, 2015; Fitzgerald, 2003; Kettell, 2013; Miller & Kaiser, 2001). Openly identifying with the atheist label has been shown to be associated with increased rates of discrimination, theorised to be due to others having increasingly classified the outspoken atheist as having an out group status (Cragun et al., 2013). Current day atheists attempt to challenge these negative views (Schnell & Keenan, 2011) often through their constructions of their personal and collective identities, as is shown in my analysis.

One's perception of themselves as a stigmatised individual plays a role in identity performance, and facing the stigma allows for a distinction between the outsiders and members of the stigmatised group as well as creating a group solidarity (Meisenbach, 2010). Much of the collective identity of the atheist movement is designed to destigmatise religious doubt, while promoting political activism and secular living (Guenther et al., 2013) showing a shift from the individual atheist identity to a group identity.

Giles, Stommel, Paulus, Lester and Reed, (2015, p. 46) state that "Many communities interact exclusively online for reasons of stigma, because they express controversial points of view, or because they are simply unable to interact offline". This perhaps demonstrates the importance of and the reasons for the large amount

of atheist identities currently “coming out” in the online realm, and the reasons that stigma plays such a large role in the construction of atheist identity.

Aims and Rationale

Despite this marked growth in activity in collective atheist identities, both online and off, atheism is a vastly under researched topic, with many researchers pointing out gaps in our knowledge with respect to atheism (Guenther et al., 2013; Smith, 2013; Smith & Cimino, 2012).

Although our knowledge and research into atheism is still at a relatively early stage, there have been various recent studies within atheism conducted in the last decade or so. Most studies on atheist identity have focused on the process of deconversion, and on the causes of the loss of belief (Cragun et al., 2013; Smith, 2011). However, issues such as the social demographics of atheism (Baker & Smith, 2009), the collective identity formation of atheists (Smith, 2013; Guenther et al., 2013), the role of the internet in atheist activism (Smith & Cimino, 2012) along with a few others have been addressed in more recent research. As was demonstrated in the previous section, there are a few answers available to questions regarding mechanisms of identity construction (Doane & Elliot, 2015; Guenther et al., 2013; Kettel, 2013), however these were based around the boundary construction and maintenance of the atheist movement. These studies went into the political elements of atheism and the consequences of associating with a stigmatised label. Little research has been conducted into the discursive practices through which atheist identities are constructed (Guenther et al., 2013) and the links between these practices and broader contextual factors with respect to atheism.

In light of these gaps in the literature, the aim of this research was to further study the constructions and performances of atheist identities by examining the differing use of labels, the methods through which these identities are constructed, and what this may achieve for those constructing them. The politicization of the atheist identities (Kettel, 2013), as was mentioned above, has been taken into account throughout the data collection and analysis, having kept in mind its large role to play in atheist identity construction and performance. This research has branched out beyond the political constructions that have so often been the focus, or discussed in depth, in previous research (Guenther et al., 2013; Kettel, 2013; Smith, 2013; Smith & Cimino, 2012). The study has focused on particular on online texts, due to the large amount of atheism-related activity recently taking place online.

Methods

Research Design and Questions

In order to fully explore the methods through which atheist identity is constructed and performed a qualitative research design was chosen. The type of texts that were selected for data collection constitute a type of naturalistic material. The choice of this kind of material highlights the role of the researcher in matters of data collection (Jowett, 2015; Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003; Potter, 2010), and poses the question of whether or not participants' actions are produced in accordance with the broader agenda of the researcher, and for the researcher's benefit, rather than the performance forming a part of their daily lives. Using naturalistic sources of data provides a valuable insight into the world outside of social science research that would otherwise not exist if it were not guided by the researcher (Potter, 2010). Using online data also gives access to realms that may otherwise be inaccessible

outside the area of research, such as how identity is constructed on a public forum, without the researcher guiding the dialogue (Jowett, 2015).

Although the topic on which the research would focus was selected in advance, the strategy of analysis was inductive, allowing for a fully descriptive outcome (Merriam, 2002), which was centralised in the data, rather than based on *a priori* theorising. The central focus that this research had was on the ways in which language was used in the construction and performance of atheist identities online, and thus the discursive practices through which these constructions and their effects were produced. As such, the research questions guiding the data collection and analysis were as follows:

- How do atheists construct and perform their identities in online settings?
- What discursive practices are used in the construction and performance of atheist identity?
- How have these practices aided in the construction and performance of atheist identities?
- What do these practices accomplish in positioning atheists relative to other identities and broader contextual features?

Sampling and Data Collection

A purposive sampling technique has been used for the data collection process, which involves the researcher selecting the most productive sample to answer the research question (Marshall, 1996) in order to achieve a sample that provides access to the target phenomena of interest (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The data set for

the study consisted of discussions and informational posts, also known as blogs, on forums within the atheist online community.

The criteria for inclusion were as follows:

- Posts/threads exhibiting performances of atheist identity
- Posts written in the English language
- Posts from a range of different sources and settings

Posts were chosen based on their richness of information, variety representative to the question, and involving information central to the study, in order to encompass as wide a range as possible of relevant features of phenomena on which the study focused. Keywords that were used in searching for data included “atheism”, “being an atheist”, “atheist blogs”, “atheist identity”, and “atheist forums” in order to search for a wide range of practices relating to identity construction.

Data collection took place between 1 June 2016 and 1 November 2016 during which the data was familiarised and repeated sampling was conducted. Material within the forums were sampled from the dates of the sampling period back in time up until reaching the point of redundancy and saturation. This point of saturation was reached after 23 texts were collected, the oldest being written on 23rd July 2012.

Analytic Approach

The data was analysed through a discursive psychological approach, which is a version of discourse analysis that, as do many discourse analytic approaches, focuses on discourse as a social performance rather than treating it as a way through which to understand “objective” features of the objects in the world around us (Potter, 2010; Wetherell, 2007). Discursive psychology focuses on the ways

through which topics that are treated as “inner psychological issues” can be analysed as discourse that accomplishes goals through interaction. The discourse or talk is seen as a performative action through which descriptions are depicted as independent of the talker and the practice of talk is analysed, rather than the object or event that the talk is orienting itself to. Discursive psychology examines how speakers manufacture their actions and events in a way that constructs their version as credible (Potter & Wiggins, 2007).

Discursive psychology sees discourse as having three main characteristics (Potter & Hepburn, 2007). The first, action-orientation, concerns the way in which talk is recognised as a vital medium for action (Potter, 2010; Potter & Wiggins, 2007) and recognises that to attempt to separate action and talk/text is to create a false dichotomy. We are essentially performing our actions through discourse, through speaking we may achieve things in itself. The second characteristic is that talk is situated, meaning that discourse is specific to a setting or sequential location (Potter & Wiggins, 2007), with the context and understanding of the words being dependent on what precedes and follows them. Talk is situated within an argumentative framework with which the setting provides. In order to examine something comprehensively, one must examine it within its situational context. The third characteristic being that discourse is both constructive and constructed (Potter & Wiggins, 2007). Constructed in the sense that the words used become linguistic building blocks through which discourse is assembled and constructive in the sense that talk stabilises various versions of the world, and these versions are a product of the text (Potter & Hepburn, 2007; Potter & Wiggins, 2007). Thus, when analysing online data on atheist identities using such an approach, it was important to take into

account the participants' understandings of settings as performed in the interaction, while taking note of categories, orientations and constructions rather than beginning with a preconceived notion of behavioural and mental processes (Potter & Wiggins, 2007).

Wetherell (2007, p. 665) writes that, "For discursive psychology... identity practices are bread and butter" stating that discursive psychology seems most at home in working with identity construction, and therefore made an ideal method with which to analyse the data from this study. In the case of identity performance online, analysis focuses on how identities are produced and managed rather than being an internal state that is switched on or off according to context (Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003) and on how these productions are evident through the social actions online, through blogs and forums in which the discourse is an area of action in and of itself. The unique methodological position that discursive psychology provided allowed an analysis of participants as they displayed themselves through these naturalistic methods, supported by their own understandings and chosen orientations (Potter, 2010). The role of the researcher was not to add a personal interpretation of the world into the analysis, but to understand how the participants understand and construct their worlds, describing how participants accomplish this through their talk and text (Potter & Hepburn, 2007; Wetherell, 2007). It is in this way that discursive psychology works alongside the social constructionist approach taken in this study, as the participants own constructions of identity were the focus.

While investigating the identities of atheists the cognition of the human mind was treated as the participants' concern, and how these cognitions were constructed and oriented in talk and text became the focus (Potter & Wiggins, 2007), instead of being

treated as an explanatory resource (Potter & Edwards, 1999). This approach thus treats the participants' talk and text as a way in which cognitive matters are managed by the participants through their concerns and practices, rather than treating the text as providing direct access to their cognitive states (Potter & Wiggins, 2007).

Throughout the analysis, the focus remained on implementing the discursive psychological approach to the sample of texts. The research questions guided an analysis of features of identity performances and the practices used to construct them. Analysis approached the data in a constructive and inductive way, categorising the information through investigating the ways in which the participants were constructing their realities rather than treating the data as an insight into their cognitive states (Potter & Wiggins, 2007). Repeated identity-related practices were collected and analysis of the identity constructions were separated into relevant similar practices. The performative actions produced through the discourse were analysed as independent of the talker, focusing on the discourse itself. The first of the main identified practices that are described in the analysis that follows concerns the ways through which labels were employed in the construction of identity, as consistent labelling and defining of the labels were a common discourse. The second practice discussed in the analysis was the use of analogies in constructing and performing an identity, where the analogies tended to perform atheism in a particular way. The third and last practice analysed was the resistance of negative constructions of atheism, and through resisting the negative associations the performance of a positive construction of atheism.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the data being naturalistic and accessible to the general public, issues of ethical considerations such as deception, avoidance of harm, and privacy were of less significance (Jowett, 2015). The very nature of public posting and viewing of online material implies consent for use of the data, and therefore no consent has been sought from participants (Jowett, 2015). Ethical clearance, therefore, was not required. However, although there was arguably little need for pseudonyms to be used due to the fact that most participants are already anonymised through chosen screen names used for their postings (Kaufman & Whitehead, 2016) the data extracts have nonetheless been completely anonymised by not identifying the authors, and instead the extracts have been anonymously numbered. Although the texts are in the public domain and therefore anonymization is arguably not necessary, the extracts have nonetheless been anonymized in order to provide additional protection to the participants against any possibility of harm that may result from the analysis of their posts, particularly in light of the stigmatizing processes associated with atheism. In addition, any identifying information available in the texts has been excluded from the data extracts in order to ensure anonymity. The self-attributed gender identities of the participants were typically evident from the details in their posts and blogs, and these details have been used in selecting pronouns with which to refer to the participants in the analysis.

Analysis and Discussion

The overarching methods that the analysis produced through sampling the forums and blog posts was through three common methods. One of the most used methods in identity construction was the use of labels and the contestation or boundary

negotiation of these labels. Identity construction was also achieved through using analogies in their performance, operating as a boundary construction often placed against the religious. The last method analysed was the method through which atheists resisted the negative constructions of the stigmatised identity, often performing identities in opposition to these constructions.

The Use and Constructions of Labels and Definitions in Atheist Identity Performance

The construction of the atheist identity is recurrently achieved in debates relating to the ways in which atheism is defined and redefined, and the performance of this identity lies partly in the debate over these definitions. The debate over definitions is an ongoing dialogue that serves the purpose of creating the check list of who may be considered to fall under the construction of atheist and who falls outside of that divide. The definitions are produced as expressions of opinions and ideals on what an atheist should believe and support. This variability in definition creates a flexible usage of these ideals in the atheist context. This debate and use of labels and definitions forms a large part of the atheist identity construction method. This analysis will focus on the ways through which atheism is constructed alongside and against other labels, through the construction of their definitions and the performance of their uses.

The analysis begins with the following extract, which constructs the atheist identity in contrast to other frequently used labels. This extract originates from a comment on a blog post discussing the differences between atheism and humanism, with the author giving her own perspective on the issue.

Extract 1

I think self-definition as an "atheist" is important, particularly for those of us who've faced discrimination from family and others because of non-belief. The desire to hold on to "atheism" rather than use the term "humanism" isn't from a fundamental difference of goals and beliefs, but from a difference of self-definition.

The self-definition is constructed as an important distinguisher for this author's performance of the atheist identity, as it creates a significant aspect of the self in the face of others discrimination, stated by the author's words "particularly those of us who've faced discrimination". The self-definition specification also works to emphasize the author's construction of an individual as opposed to a collective identity, providing a demonstration of the strong sense of individualism as mentioned by Smith (2013). The experience of facing discrimination is positioned as an important justification for labelling oneself with the atheist identity, constructing the identity as having gone through difficulties and having experienced negative judgements from family and others. Through this performance the atheist identity is constructed as a strength used to overcome adverse situations, and those that choose to identify with the label are considered as strong. The author constructs the self-definition as a "desire" to identify with the label, using an emotional term rather than any other terms such as "need" or "want". This constructs the atheist identity in a positive and desirable light, and as a valuable label, having special significance in comparison to labels such as "humanism". The "desire" also demonstrates the author's positive connection to the label in her identity construction. This construction

works as a self-categorisation, where these labels are positioned as more or less valuable by the individual (Turner et al., 1987).

The author mentions humanism as a possible replacement label, as stated in her words “rather than use the term ‘humanism’”. The two constructions of “atheism” and “humanism” have been performed as distinct in the above extract, but purely for the purpose of remaining “atheist”. The label is constructed as hard fought and therefore worthwhile to hold onto as an important label for identity performance.

The above construction of atheism is positioned as a simple but important and valuable label to perform one’s identity with, a construction that is underlined through the following extract as well. The following extract was written as a part of a blog post justifying atheism as an identity, rather than an empty label.

Extract 2

Other words don’t work. Christians claim to be sceptics. They claim to be freethinkers. They claim to be humanists. But you will never find a Christian claiming to be an atheist. It’s therefore an ideal label: that you are willing to identify as an atheist means something very distinct from, say, only being willing to identify as a “secular humanist”.

The author of the above extract centres around the purpose of using the atheist label when constructing this identity. Stating that “other words don’t work” essentially covers all other possible labels that may be used to replace the “atheist” label. In order to prove the point, the author of the above text compares the use of labels with an out group identity, namely “Christians”. In this construction Christians may use labels such as sceptic, freethinkers and humanists without any contrast to their identity constructions, which helps the reader to understand the multiple possible

uses for each label and demonstrating how they are not exclusive to the atheist identity. The author then goes on to state that Christians will never claim to be atheists. This demonstrates to the reader that it is in direct opposition to Christians' identity construction, and is an identity that only the minority of non-believers have access to in constructing their identity. While the author states that one must be "willing to identify as an atheist", he compares this to "only being willing to identify as a 'secular humanist'". The use of the word "only" while giving an example of secular humanism constructs the secular humanist label as a limited and lesser identity construction. This is constructed in such a way as to place the atheist identity into a performance that manages to overcome this limit, and become a more valuable identity. The label of "atheist" demonstrates an aspect of one's identity that other labels do not and is an important and unique identifier in constructing the atheist identity. This sets apart the atheist identity from all the other labels, and the atheist label is positioned as a valuable and ultimately unmatched construction of identity. The construction of identity where the atheist label is treated with a singular meaning, and one label usage, allows for the construction to be expanded upon, creating a more meaningful label with which to associate oneself with such as in the above extract. As has been shown in extract 2, the atheist label may be constructed as a simplistic identity. However it may still be constructed as an important and distinct label which is the only label that creates a pure boundary between believers and atheists, using a method of boundary construction in order to construct the individual identity (Guenther et al., 2013) as was mentioned earlier.

While the above extracts 1 and 2 demonstrate a more simplistic construction of the atheist identity, it is often performed in a more complex and fluid manner. The

complexity of the various ways through which to navigate the field of labels and definitions of atheism are summarised neatly in the following extract, which originates from a blog post discussing the use of and frustration associated with labels in performing the atheist (or feminist) identity.

Extract 3

Atheism: a term that is exasperatingly complex in its simplicity. Many people say, “If you don’t believe in a divine being/god, then you are an atheist.” Others employ a small variation; saying, “If you believe there is no divine being/god, then you are an atheist.” ... While others argue atheist isn’t a term that should exist at all because it’s basically a label for something that is nothing ... I suspect much of the frustration about these labels exists because people are far more complex than a series of dictionary definitions.

Although atheism is claimed to have a straightforward and simple definition in a semantic sense, namely defined as having a lack of belief in god/s (Smith, 2010), in the realm of identity construction and performance the meaning and definitions are described by the above author as “exasperatingly complex”. The author expresses frustration at the complexity in defining this seemingly simple term. He goes on to give two separate but comparable definitions on the meaning of atheism, with the only difference being the positive claim of a belief versus the position of non-belief. These two definitions are stated as “If you believe there is no divine being/god” and “If you don’t believe in a divine being/god”. This opens up to the frequent debate on whether or not being an atheist requires belief or simply a rejection of a claim, altering the definition in a distinct way. This “small variation” as noted by the author creates a line of distinct variance which offers up two constructions on the belief systems that would ultimately be performed in the atheist label. The two

constructions of atheism by definition opens up the analysis to an issue of multiple atheist identity constructions available to associate with, which will be discussed in further depth at a later stage. The author also presents a way in which others may define one's own belief system, through the application of labels that may be independent from the individual's self-constructions (see Ochs, 1993). He does this by stating how others say "then you are an atheist" in both definitions of atheism, rather than "then I am an atheist". This places the label outside of the self-identity and as a label that may be placed on another if they seem to fit the given definition. This indicates a social construction that may lay claim on another's identity by those within the debate of definitions, reinforced by the author's use of the words "many people say". The author constructs the atheist identity through the use of this social construction, in a manner that positions atheism as a collective identity, one which is able to debate definitions and label individuals as is suited for the identity construction. This collective construction is in contrast to the constructions of extracts 1 and 2 in that both of the previous extracts state that an individual must be willing to identify with the label as well as constructing identity through self-definitions, rather than being labelled by the social community, as extract 3 demonstrates. This refers back to the debate discussed above regarding whether the atheist identity is a collective or an individual identity, demonstrating how performances of both may be constructed online. Not only is the definition of atheism debated and it's labelling process a social given power, but the need to label oneself is constructed unnecessary by some within the community, with the author stating that some claim the term "shouldn't exist at all".

This stance is explained as being due to the lack of meaning behind the label as it is “a label for something that is nothing”. This position stated by the author constructs a performance taken by some who feel that atheism is an empty label, to be discussed in more detail below. While these proposed debates over atheism are based around defining the term and its necessity, or lack thereof, the author touches upon the depth and complexity of the atheist identity by stating that his frustration is also based on the fact that “people are far more complex than a series of dictionary definitions”. This indicates a construction of atheists as complex individuals, and the author performs this identity through constructing these debates in a manner that does not seem to encompass the full depth of what atheism is. He does this by expressing the “frustration” at the labels, and the use of the words “far more complex”. The identity’s complexity lies in the constant back and forth dialogue used to construct the individual and group sense of what atheism is, and what it isn’t, in an attempt to encompass the full spectrum of an atheist identity construction.

The following extract originates from a comment on a blog post discussing the problem of using labels when identifying as an atheist. It introduces us to some labels often used to address this complexity and demonstrates the complications over the usage of varying labels, as well as the difficulty in navigating these definitions and labels in identity construction.

Extract 4

What am I? Often overwhelmed by countless and constantly changing labels, but ...
let’s go with a hominid usually comfortable with agnostic atheist, and sometimes casually anti-theist when not being militantly agnostic, but mostly just me.

Welcome to the asylum!

The opening statement of “What am I?” instead of “Who am I?” creates an instance of objectifying the self, and points to the use of labels in identity performance in order for others to correctly perceive the person from an objective point of view, outside of the personal perspective. This author’s objective perspective goes so far as to label himself as a “hominid” to begin his construction by use of labels. This performance of identity uses this outreaching label to state the human aspect of identity while working towards a better construction of how one can perform their identity beyond this basic label. The use of “hominid” is a broad statement to include in this identity construction and serves a unique purpose of aligning the author with all humankind, creating a sense of similarity to all regardless of personal identity performance. This begins the identity performance on equal ground to others, and then goes on to construct from the ground up the complex mix of identity using labels. The term “hominid” also position the author in an explicitly scientific performance, using a category associated with evolutionary theory. This emphasises scientific fact and method, positioning the author on a scientific, and in the process, a logical level. This selected positioning of identity constructs the atheist identity with intelligence and logic as a part of the performance, which relates to the finding that the activist movement promotes rationality and scientific reasoning (Kettel, 2013).

The complexity with which this atheist identity is constructed is in contrast to the more simple constructions of extracts 1 and 2. The labels that the author of extract 4 uses to construct this identity begin with “hominid” and create a more multifaceted picture through using the labels of “agnostic atheist”, “anti-theist” and “militantly agnostic”. This author demonstrates the construction of the atheist identity by emphasising the complex use of varying label combinations denoting that each one

represents a separate part of his identity, while all adding up to the “mostly just me” construction. This extract allows us to see the complexity in navigating the field of atheist identity construction. From an outsider’s perspective these labels may seem confusing and repetitive, but the author of extract 4 is familiar with the ways of changing definitions within the atheist online community and indicating that each label represents a new aspect of his atheist identity construction. The author uses agnostic in two separate terms, both indicating a different meaning and aspect to his identity performance. In the label “agnostic atheist”, the agnosticism refers to the construction of affirming the ability for something to be knowable. An agnostic atheist claims that because there are no falsifiable tests to be conducted to confirm or deny a god’s existence that it is not possible to claim fact or fiction either way. However agnosticism tends to lean more towards a perceived probability of none existence due to this lack of evidence. The term “militantly agnostic” similarly focuses around this construction of knowledge and that it is not possible to know one way or the other, being militantly so expresses the strength with which one believes so. While the two “agnostic” labels both centre around the attainability of knowledge in these constructions, each one signifies a separate construction in his identity, one remaining atheist but scientifically acknowledging the difficulty in making that claim against proof either way, and the other claiming that the only position to take on this topic is towards an understanding that it is not possible to know either way and therefore remaining open to either possibility. The uses of the word “agnostic” in these two separate labels indicate some flexibility in its use, and shows the possibility of a fluid and complex association with atheist identity performance.

In his construction he states that he is “usually comfortable with agnostic atheist”, demonstrating the flexibility of choice in constructing his identity. His statement suggests that this label is how he usually performs his identity, but that it does not always fit for the construction that he is trying to achieve and so may instead be more comfortable in using other labels to do so. Such demonstrated fluidity relates back to the social constructionism perspective, where there is constant renegotiation and fluid and active performances in identity construction (Cerulo, 1997; Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003; Sneijder & te Molder, 2009; Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008).

The association with one label that links to others creates a more complex and expansive construction, deeper than a brief and one dimensional label of atheism, and ultimately redefining what this author’s atheist construction may include in its performance. This may suggest the author’s changing performance of his identity in the flexibility in his choice of labels, but it also may possibly signify the change in definitions in the social context. The constantly debated labels and their boundaries may allow for a change in labelling oneself in identity performance, to suit the social context and current defined labels. The author of extract 4 also uses the label “anti-theist” in his identity construction. This label refers to a position of seeing religion and theism as a negative force in the world, and so the author indicates a position that opposes belief and organised religion. The “anti-theist” label positions the author in a morally sound category, reversing the construction discussed above that atheism is seen as being an outsider to a morally sound existence (Smith & Cimino, 2012). This label instead places the theist identity as a threat to the moral order of society.

However, he mentions that he is “casually” so, constructing a more relaxed performance of anti-theism. This suggests a belief in the position of anti-theism, but a flexibility in its use. Each label is specifically chosen in order to fully construct this

complex identity but each label cannot be used in conjunction with each other, as demonstrated by his use of “usually comfortable with agnostic atheist”, “sometimes casually anti-theist” and “when not being militantly agnostic”. Each precursor to the identity label signifying a singular and situational usage, indicating that the author uses each label interchangeably when context suits it. The distinction and careful selection of the labelling performance gives the author’s identity a range of constructions, each with their own importance and intended meaning. With this method of inclusion of various labels when performing his atheist identity, it allows a chance to include multiple aspects of identity and a more dynamic presentation to become a part of his identity performance.

While the author aligns himself with each of the labels, he makes this distinction of being “just me”. Stating this serves to resist the labels stated previously, reflecting a preference for remaining an individual in the face of navigating the field of labelling oneself, and thereby once again performing a position of individualism as discussed above (Smith, 2013). While he is indicating a preference for remaining distinct from the labels he has chosen, he has still constructed himself through the use of the labels, indicating an association with the labels. This allows for both an individual construction of identity as well as the author being able to align with the group identity constructions, all the while constructing a discursive performance of the atheist identity. The performance of an individual identity remains an important factor in this author’s identity construction. This perhaps paradoxically performs a valuable atheist construction of individualism being part of the collective identity performance, as was mentioned in the literature review. This individualism performs an essential part of atheist identities, to be demonstrated further below. The “insanity” of the

changing labels and definitions debate is stated by the author through using the “Welcome to the asylum!” comment. This is said in a humorous manner, in recognition of the ridiculousness of the changing labels and the difficulty in the use of them to construct an atheist identity.

The label of agnosticism in relation to atheism is approached in a different manner in the following extract, originating from a blog post discussing atheism as an identity and emphasising the importance of constructing the label.

Extract 5

The problem with “agnostic”, for example, is that an agnostic *is* an “atheist,” so to prefer “agnostic” as a label tends to have a psychological, not a rational motive behind it... it communicates that you are still cowed by the stigma. You are not free. Or you are not proud of who you really are. Or are you afraid of what it means to be who you are.

In this extract, agnosticism is being equated with atheism, while at the same time presenting an issue with using this as a synonym for atheism. The author describes the issue with agnosticism as not one of definitions, but one of motives and the avoidance of stigma. This construction of agnosticism is presented as irrational as the author has stated that it has a “psychological, not a rational motive”, explicitly stating there is no rational link in the use of this label. In describing it as so is opposing it against the more “rational” approach that is frequently performed in the atheist identity. This opposition against the rational approach involves an argument over the meanings of these labels, indicating a significant difference in meaning between the use of atheist and the use of agnostic which contrasts the author’s original statement of “agnostic *is* an ‘atheist’”. While the author contrasts atheism

and agnosticism based on the reasoning behind their selection, he states that they are one and the same, saying “an agnostic *is* an atheist” drawing little to no line between the two beyond the courage needed to claim the label of “atheist”.

However, in stating that they are the same identity, the author repeatedly uses quotation marks on “agnostic” and “atheist”. This repeated punctuation may indicate the use of scare quotes, used to draw attention and to call into question the accuracy of the use of the words, or irony. While the first and last mention of the agnostic label are both in quotation marks, the second one lacks this punctuation. The change in usage indicates a separation of the constructions of agnostic and atheist. The first and last mention of the agnostic label are discussed as opposed to the atheist identity and as having a problem with its usage, with the agnostic identity being separated through the use of the quotation marks. This constructs the agnostic label in a way that makes it seem inaccurate or ironic to use. In the second mention of the agnostic label used without the punctuation, it is directly linked with atheism, with the atheist identity being placed in quotation marks. The punctuation works to implicitly separate the constructions even while claiming they are equated, it also places the “atheist” identity that an agnostic actually performs on a different level of the atheist construction, possibly claiming an ironic use of the atheist label in linking it to agnosticism. Therefore stating that “an agnostic *is* an ‘atheist’”, using the quotation marks for the atheist identity, constructs both an equivalent identity while opposing it to an identity claiming a “real” atheist performance. Separating the labels and their meanings in this way allows for a more specified construction of identity.

The use of the label agnosticism indicates a psychological performance, and by stating that it is “cowed by the stigma” it constructs the identity in a cowardly manner.

An agnostic is an atheist who is constructed as “not free”, “not proud” and “afraid”, constructing the agnostic label in a negative way. In contrast, the performance of atheism is constructed as a rational and sensible performance, one that is courageous in its use. This suggests that the label of “agnostic” is used as an excuse for not being who you really are, an easy way out when one is too scared to own the label and claim their identity. This draws on the discourse of minority courage and emphasises the importance of claiming the label, as well as the strength required to be able to perform such a label. There is a mention of being “cowed by the stigma” referring to when one is psychologically affected by the negative stigma, showing difficulty in performing the atheist identity, but also the necessity of moving beyond this stigma and performing the identity despite the negative connotations. Through these constructions of agnostic and atheist identities, the author implicitly performs his own identity as not being any of the above negative performances that an agnostic possess. Thus as an atheist he constructs his own identity as courageous, unapologetic, psychologically strong, free, and proud. The importance of the atheist label stands out amongst the rest in this extract, as it is treated as a distinct and separate label, rather than being constructed with the other labels and their implications, which in this sense indicates the strength in the willingness to perform the identity.

The above author has discussed the term “agnostic” as meaning the same as atheist, only differing with motive behind the use, whereas the author of extract 4 used the term both in conjunction with “atheist” and as its own separate term indicating a flexibility and renegotiation in the use of labels in constructions of the atheist identity. The flexibility in the uses of labels in identity construction

demonstrate various manners through which the atheist identity may be performed. There is no one way in which to construct the atheist identity, but rather there are multiple routes and links used in both constructing an individual identity and a collective one. The extracts above all show boundary placement between different kinds of atheists, constructing an identity through the various possibilities of that in-group identity. This expands the usual construction of atheism which sets boundaries against the religious identity (Guenther et al., 2013), to setting boundaries between non-believers. The difference in performances above demonstrate that no single atheist identity construction remains more dominant or uncontested than another, all of which are flexibly performed in particular situations.

Beyond the use of agnosticism in the atheist construction is one that focuses on the comparison between sceptic and atheist identity constructions, scepticism being a separate distinction from agnosticism and other labels. The following three extracts all centre around the debate of the atheist and sceptic labels and their relevance to what being an atheist or sceptic involves. Extract 6 was a part of a comment on a forum questioning the distinctions between agnosticism, scepticism, atheism and theism, with the author offering an answer to the question, while extracts 7 and 8 were separate comments posted on a blog discussing the distinction between atheism and scepticism, in which the author of the blog has called for a separation of the two terms.

Extract 6

Personally, I think a true sceptic cannot be religious, because they question everything.

Extract 7

If you are a non-atheist sceptic or otherwise, you are just compartmentalising incorrectly different areas of knowledge in your head.

Extract 8

I still think atheism fits hand and glove with scepticism, in the commonly used terms. In extracts 6 and 7 the possibility of being a sceptic and not being an atheist is dismissed under the construction of what scepticism is. Extract 6 states that a true sceptic cannot, at the same time, claim to be religious as they should “question everything”. In this discourse, religion and scepticism are mutually exclusive constructions. This construction is also demonstrated in extract 7 where a non-atheist sceptic is considered to be “compartmentalising incorrectly” and separating sceptical thoughts into different areas of their knowledge, and therefore is not correctly approaching their lives in a sceptical manner. The performance of “true scepticism” then also comes into play as a “true sceptic” must be an atheist but an atheist does not necessarily have to be a sceptic, as constructed by extracts 6 and 7. This construction is identified through the above extracts positioning of scepticism and atheism, as a “true sceptic cannot be religious” stated in extract 6, in extract 7 a sceptic that is religious is “compartmentalising incorrectly”, and in extract 8 “atheism fits hand in glove with scepticism”. All of the quotes suggest a logical relationship between atheism and scepticism, where atheism is a required part of being a sceptic. The extracts construct the religious as non-questioning followers who are anti-intellectual, demonstrated by the words “a true sceptic cannot be religious, because the question everything” in extract 6. In contrast to this religious identity, the identity of atheism and scepticism are positioned as a kind of intellectual performance, questioning and being based in logic rather than belief. This once

again reinforces the finding that atheist identity is recurrently performed through a rational and intellectual positioning (Kettel, 2013). This constructs the atheist identity against that of the religious construction, performing it in opposition to the traits of anti-intellectualism and “blind” following. Extract 8 approaches the construction of atheism and scepticism in a sense that they work “hand in glove” together, emphasising the similarities and the closeness of these two labels. This does not necessarily point to a conflation of the two meanings, but it does indicate that the atheist and sceptic labels hold traits within each other. In this construction, atheism is a trait of scepticism. The two terms are frequently used amongst those that construct their atheist identities online, with many atheists referring to themselves as sceptics alongside their atheist identity, and thus both labels being treated as important in this construction. This construction is in direct opposition to that in extract 2, where they state that the sceptic label may be used by the religious and any other out group, and therefore does not work to perform the atheist identity in a unique way separate of other out group constructions.

Agnosticism and scepticism are just two of the many varying labels used in constructing and performing atheist identity; the below extract shows another perspective of the atheist identity construction versus using other forms of identity performance. This extract originates from a comment on a blog post discussing the meanings of labels such as atheism, humanism, agnosticism and scepticism, and how they all fit together.

Extract 9

I don't even bother identifying myself as an atheist, because it says NOTHING about my values, or what I believe in... it says only what I DON'T believe in, and only in one

specific category. I instead identify as a humanist... because THAT designation identifies specific values that I hold, and that I am happy to have identified as being part of who I am.

The author of this extract denies an atheist identity construction in favour of a humanist construction. The reasoning that the author uses for the denial of the atheist label is not due to having failed to reach the theoretical check list of what an atheist is, as through his definition of atheism he states what he does not believe in, rather than what he does. This allows a deduction of his possible lack of belief, as although he does not use the atheist label, he does align himself with what the definition points towards his lack of belief in. Stating “what I don’t believe in” points towards himself, rather than towards a third party, allowing us an insight into his actual position on the issue. The author constructs the atheist label with a unidimensional definition, unlike with the previous authors of extracts 3-8 whose definitions of atheism are more complex, expanding on the construction to include a wider array of possible performances.

The purpose of performing the above definition in a more narrow fashion works to construct the identity as an empty label to fulfil the purpose of justifying the author’s choice of preferring a separate, more acceptable, label. He rejects the atheist label in favour for another on the fact that the atheist label does not tell others anything about what he does believe or what his values are, but rather only states his non-belief in one thing, demonstrated through the words “it says NOTHING about my values, or what I believe in”. Therefore this author constructs the atheist identity as an ineffective way through which to perform ones identity. This relates to extract 3, where the author discusses the discourse of rejecting the label as unnecessary

because it is a label for “something that is nothing”. The emptiness of the atheist identity construction is emphasised by the author in extract 9 by the capitalised use of the word “NOTHING”, and so this author constructs the identity as difficult to perform. The construction of atheism in this manner allows for little movement to perform the construction, it does not encompass a deep value system and it limits the extent that the personal identity can be constructed. The author, while considering himself of the atheist persuasion, performs his identity through the use of this label but through constructing his identity in opposition to it. This is used by the author to demonstrate the resistance to the label, and therefore to build an identity directly opposing the construction, using the label as a discursive resource in his construction. He constructs the atheism identity in a way that he dis-identifies with, even though he admits to technically being an atheist. This serves as a “negative” identity, which serves as a framework with which to then construct a “positive” identity around his resistance to the label. He chooses humanism instead as this allows for a wider performance variation, pointing to his values rather than his non-belief. The humanism construction by the author creates a contrast between the negative identity of atheism and the positive and active belief system of humanism. The emptiness of the atheist identity constructed both in extract 3 and 9 contrasts the various other constructions of atheist identity in extracts 1, 2, and 4-8. This demonstrates various methods through which to construct the atheist identity, and the ways that these performances differ in order to suit the chosen performance of the individual, as is discussed above.

This points to the overall importance of the use of differing labels in the methods of construction, as an atheist – while lacking a belief in a god - may not always identify

themselves as such, and instead may choose to use alternate labels in order to construct a more “complete” and varying identity persona. However, while some may find the atheist identity to be an “empty” or “shallow” label which gives little to no meaning to one’s identity construction, such as in extract 9, when that label is performed in a way that encompasses other labels and meanings demonstrated in extracts 4 and 6-8, the singularly simple identity such as the atheist construction becomes flexible and malleable to then fit the purposes of the individual’s choice of construction. This is in contrast to the “empty” construction of extract 9, where there is a preference for a singular, less complicated construction of identity that allows for reference to one label rather than a host of labels with each difference. The author’s performance constructing the position that only the humanist label allows for his entire identity construction to be performed through this single label.

The Use of Analogy

Through the various performances of atheism lies an interesting and well employed method of construction used in order to justify and meaningfully explain the construction of self-identification as an atheist. This method employs the use of analogies in order to construct an atheist identify. While the use of analogies is more often used in the process of comparison, which is most certainly the case in these constructions, they make a unique method through which to construct identity and are commonly used in contestation with religious beliefs in order to do so.

These analogies often employ child-like fairy tales and children’s stories to clarify the perceived level of intellectual realism necessary for religious belief. The extract below, stemming from a blog discussing atheism as an identity rather than a simple

label, demonstrates this story telling analogy while discussing the similarities of all atheists.

Extract 10

My point is that atheism as an identity means something: it's how we find each other... Atheists identifying with a movement to which they belong... They are like us, because they, like us, have admitted the emperor has no clothes. And in a world run largely by people convinced the emperor is fabulously dressed, and who socially punish everyone who disagrees with them, saying out loud that we side with the no clothes is pretty damned important.

The author discusses the importance of the atheist identity as a means to bringing them all together in a joint movement. It is a meaningful construction for the purposes of being able to identify others with the same belief system or world view. This construction of atheism is in direct contrast to the constructions of atheism as an empty identity, as was discussed in extracts 3 and 9. The author above states that "atheism as an identity means something". The meaning in the identity is then constructed as the social associations and community construction of the identity, ultimately performing the identity as a collective construction. It is not constructed as a negative identity in this example, as is demonstrated in extracts 3 and 9, but rather as an identity with meaning and one that allows other atheists to "find each other", who are then welcomed into a "movement to which they belong". This constructs a group identity in which others who are non-believers are welcomed into the community. The use of the word "belong" indicates the shift from an individually performed atheist identity to one that operates in a community. When the author states "they" he is referring to others who lack a belief in a god and essentially want

to join the atheist movement or identify with the atheist label, “they are like us” refers to those aligning themselves with the chosen construction. This performance relates more to a collective atheist identity construction (Smith and Cimino, 2012), in contrast to the individualism that was a focus in extracts 1 and 4.

The use of the children’s story of the Emperor’s New Clothes in extract 10 works to place religious belief into an analogy of a seemingly obvious observation opposed by a majority. The story involves a king who has hired two weavers to sew clothes for him out of the finest material for a procession. The weavers convince the king that the finest material available is invisible to all those that are stupid or unfit for their position. The king and his ministers continue the ruse of being able to see the material in order not to be seen as unfit for their position or stupid. On the day of procession all the king’s subjects behave as though they can see the material until one child cries out that the king isn’t wearing anything, ending the ruse. The “people convinced the emperor is fabulously dressed” in the analogy refers to those who hold on to their religious beliefs, comparing the theists to those that refuse to acknowledge an obvious truth. This places the atheist in the minority of the “sane”, being able to recognise and state the reality within this situation. The ability to state the obvious while the majority refuse to see it is demonstrated through the author’s words “they, like us, have admitted the emperor has no clothes”.

The author states that it is important to side with the “no-clothes” which refers to the importance of atheists making the move to identify with the movement. This is to make use of the label in their identity construction to create a larger group of those who can allegedly see the truth and oppose the majority who refuse to. The “social punishment” that the writer discusses possibly refers to the stigma of being non-

religious or atheist, and the picture presented in the extract is that of the stigma being placed on those that see the truth and are willing to speak out against it. This creates a distinct image of the social punishment being unjustifiable due to atheists being a vocal minority who are seeing and vocalising reality the way that it truly is. Within the story, the ruse of the emperor having no clothes is continued due to people not being willing to stand up and state the obvious, which all fell apart after someone did so. This construction of the religious through the analogy of the Emperor's New Clothes places them in a position where they are scared to admit the reality that they are seeing, such as being able to see that the emperor has no clothes, due to the pressure that society has for them to remain socially acceptable. In the same way that the story indicates that the subjects should show admiration for the emperor, the religious should continue the ruse of admiration for their god or religion. This also relates to the stigma attached to the atheist identity (Edgell et al., 2006), which has been reported to result in fear of associating with the identity due to the negative consequences of stating that the "emperor has no clothes", or that god does not exist. The author, through stating the importance of being able to admit the truth even though a possibility of social punishment may follow, constructs the those who identify with atheism as brave in their pursuit of truth, and proposes that the social punishment should not deter them from their goal of ending the ruse of religion, and in identifying as an atheist constructs a community of courage. This once again draws on the discourse of courage in minority, as was performed in extract 5, constructing an identity where strength and courage are key to its performance.

The writer also makes clear the importance of owning the label of atheism as it effectively places the boundary between “sanity” and “insanity” of belief in the same way that those who see that the Emperor has no clothes must express this perceived truth. This boundary construction is employed specifically between the religious and atheist identity constructions (Guenther et al., 2013) in order to perform a collective identity, and to establish an in-group versus out-group construction. In the same sense, the author suggests that in atheists standing up and stating the obvious it will eventually end the ruse of religion and belief, and allow for reality to be perceivable and socially acceptable. This construction then works to help destigmatise the atheist identity, constructing it as a generally acceptable and valuable identity. This goal of destigmatisation is a regularly used construction in performing atheist identity, as noted by Genther et al. (2013). This performance of resistance is further discussed below.

Along with the Emperor’s clothes analogy, other story like characters and childhood beliefs are brought into the construction of atheism. The extract below uses the belief in Santa Claus in an analogy in order to construct the “reality” of atheist belief systems in comparison to theist belief. This discussion was a part of a two part blog post attempting to explain what it is like to be an atheist.

Extract 11

Imagine that you live in a world where 90% of the people around you sincerely believe in something that appears to you to be downright whacky... Say they believe in Santa Claus; beard, the big red suit, the flying reindeer, the sled loaded with a billion gifts... they want you to publicly agree all the time that you also believe in Santa...pretend that they are not strange or childish for believing this.

In this extract the author constructs a world view around the belief in Santa dictating politics and influencing the ways through which society enforces its norms. In this way the author theoretically constructs religion as analogous to the belief in Santa Claus which works to demonstrate the “child-like” belief system, placing the atheist in an adult-like and knowledgeable position amongst those who have an immature and factually incorrect belief system. The author lists a number of statements identifying Santa Claus and the supposed beliefs of those in the analogy, “beard, the big red suit, the flying reindeer, the sled loaded with a billion gifts...”, with each item becoming more ridiculous and unbelievable. This creates an implicit connection to the analogy of religion, and in the same way that each item on the list becomes more ridiculous does it connect with atheism and its gradual disbelief in religion. It also works to position the reader in this disbelief, viewing the construction of religion from an atheist angle through this analogy. The unbelievable list constructs the religious identity as ridiculous, and implicates the atheist identity in opposition to this construction, making it a reasonable and logical identity construction. This construction of the religious identity as ridiculous demonstrates how, as noted by Guenther et al. (2013), making fun of the religious can be employed as a method of identity construction, through the use of analogy.

The author’s words from extract 11 “sincerely believe” constructs a total and true “child-like” belief, and shows that the belief is no ruse, but is a true conviction. The “child-like” belief system is reinforced when the author states that any one person, be it the reader, believer, or non-believer, must “pretend that they are not strange or childish for believing this”. This works to point the reader towards acknowledging that such “childish” beliefs are strange and out of the ordinary, whether they be a belief in

Santa or a belief in a god. The suggestion that the author makes here is that belief in a god can be taken no more seriously than a belief in Santa Claus, which suggests that it is something that should be grown out of when entering a more adult like stage of belief. In contrast the belief in a god is constructed in such a way as to be considered being “stuck” mid-way through these developmental stages. This belief should ultimately be grown out of as part of an individual’s development, constructing atheism as an “end-point” of the developmental trajectory of belief.

The construction of the atheist identity in this manner assists in demarcating appropriate and inappropriate beliefs an atheist may hold, as well as the correct way through which to conduct oneself by growing out of the religious ways into a seemingly better and more realistic worldview, therefore achieving the goal and endpoint of development of belief. This “end-point” of belief construction is further demonstrated through extract 12 in which the same author goes on to address the need to “face reality” and “become an adult”. This is a continuation of the previous two part blog post.

Extract 12

And just as a child must abandon comfortable fantasy, like Santa, if they’re going to be a productive member of society and deal with real life, we as a species must abandon comforting fantasy, like YVHW...

This places the atheist as a productive member of society in contrast to the religious as they can “deal with real life” as a strong adult might. Not only is atheism compared to entering the end-phase of the belief system and becoming an adult, but it is compared to becoming a “productive member of society” which works beyond simply entering adulthood. This implies that atheism involves going beyond growing

up, and enters into becoming dynamic and useful to the society as a whole, which ultimately constructs an identity of superiority in comparison to the “child-like” belief system demonstrated by the Santa Claus analogy. The difficulty of this process of entering adulthood and going beyond is compared to the difficulty of “abandoning comforting fantasy” such as growing out of the Santa Claus belief and the overall process of growing up. Comforting fantasy as an adult is referred to as “YVHW” or Yahweh, as an explicit comparison between the belief in Santa Claus and a belief in a god. This explicit comparison directly connects the construction that religious beliefs are considered to perform a similar and comforting function like childhood beliefs, such as Santa, and they should be outgrown.

The analogy is further employed in the same post when the author of extracts 11 and 12 states the following.

Extract 13

We're adults who can get by fine at Christmas time and enjoy ourselves without 'it' having to be true.

Again, the explicit comparison between “adult” atheist beliefs and “child-like” religious beliefs is made. Being an adult is likened to being able to put aside others’ beliefs and continue on with one’s own life and belief system, thus being able to enjoy a religious holiday without necessarily believing in it. “It” may refer to both Santa Claus and a god, further creating the analogy between a belief in Santa Claus over Christmas and religious beliefs concerning this holiday. There is a position constructed in the entirety of the Santa Claus analogy that shows how others’ belief systems such as religious beliefs are being constructed as obviously not true, and therefore this construction of falsity creates an easier way through which to function

without following the social norms of the beliefs. Because the belief systems are considered a non-reality, atheism is constructed as both the sane and simpler way to function, allowing an ability to operate outside of the system with ease and normality. The opposing construction of atheist and religious identities once again demonstrates the method of boundary construction in identity performances, as discussed by Guenther et al. (2013), highlighting the various methods of boundary construction. Extracts 10-13 all use the method by creating an “adult” versus “child-like” contrast as well as a “sane” versus “insane” contrast in order to perform and construct these boundaries.

Along with childhood stories and Santa Claus belief analogies that are employed in the construction of the atheist identities, there are often other such comparisons with strange and nonsensical claims. While discussing the meaning of atheism in comparison to other labels such as humanist, agnostic, and sceptic, one author employs the following strange belief as an analogy.

Extract 14

It is simply the rejection of daft claims, akin to perhaps rejecting a claim that pink unicorns dance in your garden each night when nobody is watching.

The author states that religious beliefs are “daft claims”, constructing atheism in opposition and as a “rejection” of these claims. He then uses an analogy that summarises what he finds an equivalent daft claim. The image that pink unicorns dance in your garden while no one is watching creates a humorous and absurd picture. The use of the analogy of this known mythical being, described to be pink rather than the usual white, creates an irrational image of something that is commonly known to not exist in our reality, with the pink colour constructing an even

more absurd image for the analogy as unicorns are more typically created in white. The construction of unicorns is also commonly used in fairy tales and children's stories, rather than used as an adult construction of reality, perhaps implicitly linking the "child-like" sensibility of believers. The author further creates a ridiculous image with mentioning that the unicorns are dancing, instead of merely being present or taking part in any other activity. The placement of the mythical beasts in "your garden" rather than in someone else's garden, or in a different place around the house, creates an image of selective attention to the one whose garden the unicorns are dancing in and a picture of a brightly coloured pink unicorn dancing amongst trees, flowers and bushes adds to the complexity and the absurdity of the claim.

The author uses the words "when nobody is watching" while this strange and ridiculous event takes place in order to create a claim that is easily dismissible and one which has no way through which to prove happened. This statement that there are no witnesses also implicitly links the pink unicorn claim and claims of religion/stories of god as neither have eye witnesses to prove the claim and therefore both are beyond rational and scientific explanation. This performance serves the purpose of drawing an intellectual boundary between the religious and non-religious (Guenther et al., 2013). Each construction in the analogy and the combined image it creates constructs a bizarre and nonsensical claim, which is simply dismissed as being "daft". Building the analogy in such a manner, as well as linking it to "daft claims", constructs believers and the religious in a ridiculous light, once again making fun of the religious (Guenther et al., 2013). Their beliefs are as easily dismissible as the unicorn claim, and those that follow them are irrational and foolish. The atheist identity is constructed in opposition to this religious identity

demonstrated, constructing it as rational, reasonable and logical. The atheist construction is performed in a manner that can easily dismiss the ridiculous, and so is observant and seeking truth rather than wanting comfortable stories.

The author of the previous extract continues the analogy, but this time in defence of the atheist construction and belief system.

Extract 15

Some strands of belief also assert that non-belief does not actually exist (because the bible tells them this), and so they claim we all secretly believe and are simply angry with their god (yes indeed those fracking pink unicorns really do exist, you simply reject the assertion because they keep on mucking up your flower display).

The above extract responds to the claim that atheists still believe in a god but are merely angry instead of genuinely holding no belief for a god to exist. The atheist label is dismissed by some theists through this opinion based on the Bible and its teachings. The author links this to the unicorn analogy by constructing the dismissal of the atheist identity parallel to a belief in unicorns. The “anger” towards god is constructed as an anger towards the unicorns that do exist in this new perspective, and the reason for claiming that they do not exist is because they destroy your garden in their nightly dance routine. The use of the word “fracking” allows a placement of the alleged “anger” towards god on the unicorns, further linking the analogy between the two. The construction of the “anger” towards their god is dismissed as a nonsensical claim, which functions to reject the “angry atheist” stereotype – to be discussed in more detail below. This anger that was placed on the atheist identity is rejected and resisted by furthering the ridiculous analogy of the pink unicorns which ultimately constructs the atheist identity without the anger.

This nonsensical claim of rejecting the unicorns' existence due to the anger towards them is used in defence of the atheist belief, while simultaneously being an attack on religious beliefs, creating the view that even this theistic construction of the atheist label is wrong and absurd. This aids in taking back the belief system of atheism and allowing the author to freely construct his own identity outside of the ridiculous claims. It also allows the author to once again place theists under a construction of silly and absurd belief systems, and in doing so functions to construct the atheist identity in opposition to that. This repeated boundary construction, as was discussed in the analyses of extracts 10-15, demonstrates a common purpose for which analogies are used. Analogies therefore provide a method for constructing the atheist identity by juxtaposing atheist and religious identities.

Resisting negative constructs of atheist identity

While there are many techniques used in the construction of atheist identity, one stands out as a rhetorical method through which to respond to negative attributions made against them and attacks on the identity itself. These attacks are often used as a stereotype and a stigma against those that perform this identity, and this method serves to reject and reconstruct their atheist identities in a manner more suited to their chosen identity performance. These responses are often addressed towards the stereotype that atheists are aggressive or harsh in their discussions and debate tactics, and that the stereotype of the atheist identity is often performed in such a way as to create harsh verbal attacks on the religious. Not only are blog posts created to address this point of concern, but this negative identity marker is often brought up and discussed in the comment section of threads not originally aimed at

addressing this construction, and is discussed by both atheists and theists as an issue within the atheist community.

In the following extract an author discusses this sense of harshness that the atheist identity forces upon her. It is within this blog post that the author attempts to confront the difficulty of labelling herself with “hard” labels, while discussing what the labels mean for her.

Extract 16

I have labels I didn't choose but are mine anyway: daughter, sister, British, South African, white. And then I have my two 'ists'; the labels that I have evolved into: feminist, atheist. It is these labels, because I chose them, that define my experience of myself. I worry that they are beginning to shape me into the necessary thing and not the soft one. It is not that I want to renounce these labels. Rather, I want to live inside of them in a way that still allows me to be gentle

In the first few lines of the above extract, the author distinctly separates the formulation of labels that she was born into and labels that she has chosen for herself. Her feminist and atheist labels are those that she has “evolved into”, that she has become over time. These are labels that she has chosen to construct her self-identity with as opposed to labels that she did not choose but which is still a part of her identity. The separation of these labels between “chosen” and “non-chosen” creates a discourse of will and autonomy. While some labels have little choice over their inclusion in the construction of one's identity, there are others that allow a freedom in constructing aspects of how one's identity is performed. In the above extract, these chosen labels are linked with how the author experiences herself, and her formulations of her own identity construction are influenced towards suggesting

that she is being shaped towards being “necessary” instead of “soft”, placing the two constructions in opposition. Her concern over the formulation that the “necessary” construction is shaping her in ways that she does not essentially agree with is demonstrated through her use of the words “I worry that they are beginning to shape me into the necessary thing and not the soft one”. In the construction of being “necessary”, the author discusses this performance of identity in a way that constructs it as a way of being atheist or feminist, opposing these constructions of performance from one another. In opposing these two performance types and through the selected use of the words “necessary” and “soft” there is a construction of the “necessity” of the former identity’s performance over the later. This creates a discourse of the required atheist and feminist performance, towards a near obligatory construction. This places the “necessary” performance as a more likely choice between the two identity constructions. In placing “necessary” opposing the “soft” label, it creates the discourse that the “necessary” identity holds no softness in its construction, negating this performance from the implicit formulation of the atheist/feminist identity. It is through this contrasting of “necessary” and “soft”, and thus through the “necessary” label lacking this “softness”, that there is an assumption towards the harshness of the “necessary” labels.

In the above author’s statement “It is not that I want to renounce these labels. Rather, I want to live inside them in a way that allows me to be gentle” there is a construction of how others see the atheist and feminist labels in a non-gentle manner, which is a “necessary” performance. The choice to identify with the atheist and feminist labels is implied by the author to go hand in hand with the harsh consequences of this “necessary” identity performance, the harsh consequences

referring to having been shaped in a way that lacks gentleness in its performance stated by the authors words "...in a way that still allows me to be gentle". The author constructs an opposing identity through the "soft" construction that she aligns herself with while resisting the "necessary" or "non-gentle" construction of the label. The reference towards the idea of label renouncement brings forth a dilemma of the use of these chosen labels into context. This dilemma raises the issue that in identifying with these labels, she may then be associated with the negative constructions that have been linked with them. The ways through which she is managing this dilemma is through rejecting the negative connotations and the harsh constructions associated with the identities but still identifying with the labels, reiterated by the words "I want to live inside of them". This allows her the opportunity to reconstruct the atheist identity in a gentle manner, pushing back against the "non-gentle" and "necessary" performance that others perceive the identity to be. This self-construct of the label is attempting to be gentle in a manner that resists the harsher identity, creating a construction that she wants for herself outside of the way that the "necessary" performance shapes her towards being.

The author's concern that "they are beginning to shape me into the necessary thing and not the soft one" produces an image of the "necessity" of harshness in performing the identity of an atheist, and the difficulty in going against this "necessary" change instead of embracing it. The discourse between the "soft" or "gentle" atheist and the "harsh" and "non-gentle" atheist/feminist is also brought into light, allowing the author space to resist the default "harsh atheist/feminist" discourse that others may construct, in favour of her own performance. In this sense, she is creating the possibility of a "soft" and "gentle" atheist through her construction. It is in

this instance that the author is challenging and rejecting negative views of the atheist identity, as Schnell and Keenan (2011) discuss, in order to perform a more socially acceptable construction of atheism.

The author discusses further in her post that in constructing these identities she has taken notice of injustices that she previously was unaware of. This places her in a defensive position in anticipation for these injustices, which in defending she requires “armour”. The need for defence along with the external social construction of atheism as being a hated identity brings her to further discuss the construction of “softness” in two separate extracts of the same post as was discussed in extract 16.

Extract 17

All of this robs me of my softness.

She comments on the possible uses of the atheist identity and its importance to perform a soft construction.

Extract 18

I can see it as a force of good in the world – and the seed of goodness is softness.

The extracts, both addressing the author’s construction of the atheist and feminist identity through the performance of “softness”, juxtapose the ability to remain soft while performing these labels. While stating that having to remain in a defensive position and to have “armour”, to do so claims that it “robs me of my softness”.

Through the choice of the words “robs me”, she positions herself as having her “gentleness” being a part of her construction, but then having it taken against her will through the performance of the atheist and feminist identity. This places her in a victim role, as though having little to no choice in the transaction. “My softness” allows the author to take possession of “softness” as a personal quality, and as

being an original part of her identity construction prior to the “theft”. In this sense there is a cost to performing these identities, in that they take “soft” personal qualities whether the person is willing or not.

The author constructs a performance of choice and lack of choice through the above extracts 16-18. She states that she has chosen the labels of feminism and atheism in extract 16, but in extract 17 the choice of associating with these identities stole a part of her personal qualities against her will. This further works to construct the atheist identity as being “harsh” in its social construction and in the way in which the label negatively impacts the performer. Her choice in the construction lies in attempting to be gentle through the identity, therefore resisting the negative impact of the identity and reconstructing it in a way that allows “softness” and “gentleness” to no longer be personal qualities that are impacted or “stolen”.

The proposed consequences of no longer being soft – having been robbed of softness – is that there will be a discourse constructed around a lack of goodness in her identity as softness is formulated as the root of goodness. The atheist identity that the author is performing is constructing the identity in a positive light, stating that it can be a “force of good in the world”. Using the phrase “the seed of goodness is softness” constructs the author’s emphasis on softness in performing a good atheist identity. These comments on the seeds of goodness and creating a force of good combined constructs an image of growth and progress. In planting a “seed” of softness, there is a possibility for it to grow into “goodness”, which may ultimately become a positive force in the world. However, being “robbed” of this softness while emphasising its importance for a positive atheist identity demonstrates her resistance to the social construction of atheism. Her placement of the wording used

in order to construct this discourse of “a seed for good” specifies this change in perspective, that instead of allowing the harshness of the label to become a part of her performance she will change this “necessity” of harsh performance into a “softness”.

In a separate blog post specifically aimed at addressing the issue of atheist identities and aggressiveness towards others, the author opens with the following statement.

Extract 19

I'm an atheist and I'm embarrassed. Not because I'm self-conscious about my convictions (lol, no), but because so many people insist on being such condescending dicks in the name of atheism ... And I don't appreciate people turning my worldview into some weird, weaponised intellectual superiority complex

In the first sentence, the author both identifies with the atheist label and states her aversion to doing so. She immediately goes on to address possible rhetoric from readers about her embarrassment being a part of her insecurity of her convictions and beliefs, countering possible alternative arguments and misconstrued meaning before it takes place. She points towards the source of embarrassment as an issue independent of the speaker and outside of her personal construction. She does this by initially denying an issue within her own personal convictions, formulating a construction of the strength of her own beliefs while denying the embarrassment being a consequence of these beliefs, stating “Not because I'm self-conscious about my convictions”. Her use of the “lol, no” addresses this possible counter argument as a laughable matter, dismissed by a simple “no”. This helps solidify her position on her atheist identity as decidedly her own which is again reinforced by referring to the position as “my worldview” as opposed to “this/their worldview”. Her choice of the

words “my worldview” and “convictions” constructs her atheist identity as a “belief system”, one which she strongly aligns herself. Her strength and conviction of this belief system is demonstrated through her defence against others changing it into a system that she does not align herself with. It is through this that the author demonstrates her offense at having others construct the identity in such a manner, and thus resists the discourse and construction of “harsh” atheism.

She goes on to explain the cause of her embarrassment, namely the construction that this identity is rife with the aggressive and arrogant performance of atheism – demonstrated by her use of the words “weaponised intellectual superiority complex” and “condescending dicks”. The author then goes on to discuss the reason for this embarrassment as a factor outside of her own construction, stating “...because so many people insist on being such condescending dicks in the name of atheism”. This places her outside of the discourse of atheists being aggressive, and as a knowledgeable protestor to this harsh construction. This statement, placing the issue of her embarrassment on “so many people”, suggests that a large number of atheists perform this identity label in an aggressive manner throughout the atheist community.

The author constructs an identity of atheism independent of her self-construction, distancing herself from this construction of atheist performance. However, she discusses that “so many people” are behaving in this harsh manner rather than using the phrase “so many atheists”, and in doing so she constructs an atheist identity as a separate assertion to this aggressive behaviour that “people” are employing in their performance. This acts to distance the atheist identity itself from these harsh constructions, leaving it open for other performances. The harsh performance is also

structured as being “in the name of atheism” rather than being performed as atheists. This works similar to the previous statement of “people”, which is used to distance the atheist identity from these harsh constructions. In using these methods, the author constructs an identity that is easier to align with as the harsh constructions are placed somewhat distant from the atheist identity that she performs. Her ownership of the atheist identity, and her distancing of the atheist identity from the harsh performance of others, creates an identity which is distanced from the stigma and negative connotations that is associated with the aggressive performance.

Their “insistence” in doing so also suggests that they have a choice in the matter of how to perform their identity, as well as the significance of the choice that they make to continue this performance in the face of potential criticism and rejection. This once again brings to light the discourse of chosen versus unchosen identity and performance demonstrated in extract 16, which addressed “soft” and “gentle” atheism in resistance to the harsh atheist construction. In this sense, agency plays a large role in the construction of the atheist identity. The common construction of an atheist identity is that of an aggressive or harsh atheist, and the authors from extracts 16-19 both emphasise the importance of choice in either following this stereotype or resisting it in their performance. The author of extract 19 states her embarrassment to identifying with the construction, which suggests a limitation in her ability to choose her construction, but she actively resists the negative identity construction through her methods. This demonstrates an agency in the ways that her identity is performed even though her choice may be limited with regards to the associated negative connotations. The author of extracts 16-18 also demonstrates this performance of agency in her construction of a “soft” atheist identity. While

acknowledging the opposed “necessary” identity, being constructed as harsh, she actively formulates a gentler performance to counter this harsher construction. In doing so she selectively chooses to resist the negative connotations associated with the harsh construction.

This focus on choice and agency can be linked to the independent identity construction as is performed in extract 4. The performance of the atheist identity often involves remaining an individual in the face of the growing community. This individualism, while paradoxically a part of the group identity of atheism, is what reinforces the agency and the choices in how one may perform and construct their own identities outside of the collective claims.

While the above extract 19 shows that the author is clear on her position against this harsh performance of atheism, she does play devil’s advocate through her method of constructing a possible aggressive atheist’s position on the matter through the same blog post as above.

Extract 20

Atheism – especially in its incarnation as a movement – can so easily transform into smug hostility and dog-whistle classism. How do you avoid that? How do you find common ground? If you think you know better, how do you keep from feeling like you are better? And why does such a historically destructive force as religion deserve to be treated with kid-glove cordiality? People kill for religion. And I have to be nice? Well, yes. If you want to be considered a nice person. I do want to be considered a nice person, so I try.

The author points towards atheism being transformed into these hostile performances, indicating that prior to these transformations atheism was lacking

these negative traits. She makes mention of the atheist movement, targeting it as a large portion for the aggressive atheist performance that has become an issue of discussion. She also mentions the “incarnation” of atheism into the movement, constructing an atheist identity prior to this transformation. The “ease” of constructing the identity into the harsh performance is mentioned, stating “...can so easily transform” indicating a difficulty in avoiding that “transformation”. This creates a claim of an “un-tainted” atheism, one prior to the negative performances, and prior to its harsh incarnation.

The author goes on to construct a brief account of the processes through which atheists may exhibit negative elements or perform their identity in an aggressive manner, perhaps demonstrating the transformation process into the harsh atheist identity, while at the same time explaining what may need to happen in order to avoid this transformation if they wish to resist the stigma of aggressive atheist. The arguments behind the aggressive construction are established in such a way as to place these arguments into an undesirable identity performance through using words such as “smug hostility and dog-whistle classism” and in her previous quote in extract 19 “weird, weaponised intellectual superiority complex”. This addresses the means through which the stereotype of aggressive atheist is founded and acts to place these harsh performances into a negative and arrogant construction. She separates herself from this harsh construction while aligning herself with a less negative performance of the atheist identity through the previous extracts “I don’t appreciate people turning my worldview into...” and the above extracts “I do want to be considered a nice person” differentiating herself from the “not nice” version of the identity. In constructing this “nice” and in opposition the “not-nice” atheist identities,

she constructs a discourse of “good atheism versus bad atheism” and the correct ways in which to manage the performance of this label according to the author’s construction. She attempts to align herself with the “nice” identity construction, rejecting and resisting the performances of the arrogant and “not nice” constructions. It is through this negative atheist construction that the author draws a distinction between her atheism, and the atheism performed in this manner. Her own atheism, formulated as a counter to the harsh atheism rather than as a stand-alone construction, consists of her “trying” to be nice instead of slipping easily into the performance of the arrogant atheist identity construction. Her performance consists of constructing her identity as a belief system and possessively defending it, while resisting the negative construction through her attempt to be “nice” rather than arrogant and hostile. Both of the authors from extracts 16-20 discussed above use their constructions of “niceness” or “softness” in order to resist the stigma of the harsh atheist which works towards a purpose of challenging and renegotiating the stigma of the negative atheist identity, and changing the social meaning of atheism (Guenther et al., 2013; Schnell & Keenan, 2011). The choice to perform the atheist identity in a soft or nice manner is constructed as a tough performance due to the ease of the transformation and the “necessary” identity, but it is an important distinction for both authors.

The above author of extracts 19 and 20 also approaches the issue of when the “necessity” of harshness is permissible and when niceness is required by seemingly opposing viewpoints.

Extract 21

I'm not interested in being a part of a movement that actively excises "nice". If you take your understanding that god is a fiction and use it to insult and abuse others, you're being exactly the kind of amoral garbage bag that religious bigots say we are.

The author of the above extract makes a statement regarding her being unwilling to be involved in a movement with respect to their inclusion of "niceness", the statement is conditional and her association is contingent to the inclusion of this trait.

The author discusses how the movement "actively" removes the positive trait of "niceness", suggesting a conscious and willing choice to exclude this trait from the identity construction. The choices and actions of those that perform the harsh atheist identity are constructed through the section "If you take your understanding that god is a fiction and use it to insult and abuse others" and is aligned with the choice of this performance by directly following the mention of "actively excises 'nice'". The use of the words "insult and abuse" constructs the harsh and offensive behaviour that causes one to be subject to the author's construction of the aggressive atheist.

These actions are aimed at "others" rather than at the solely religious, indicating that the negative behaviour is aimed at an indiscriminate selection of people. This emphasises the lack of "niceness" as the aggressive behaviour is aimed towards the general population. This conscious choice of harsh behaviour is one that the author constructs as amoral by referring to them as "amoral garbage bags" placing those that perform the harsh atheist construction under the negative identity of "bad atheism". This once again demonstrates the importance of agency and choice in the atheist identity performance, and the construction of individual identity in the atheist performance.

Using the phrase "...as religious bigots say we are" works to place some of the negative atheist construction outside of the atheist community, as the harsh atheist identity is placed as being what "religious bigots" construct the atheist identity to be rather than what other atheists construct. This produces the discourse that the stigma against atheists originates, or is constructed, from an external point which the author uses to justify the rejection of the harsh atheist performance as it is considered playing into the negative stereotype.

Briefly after discussing the lack of "nice" in the atheist identity/movement, the author addresses possible "harsh" justifiable responses that may be permissible in the performance of the atheist identity.

Extract 22

Tell me – ME – I'm a degenerate who deserves to spend eternity getting poked a red goatboy with a trident because I think consenting adults should be able to lovingly caress each other's bodays? Now we have an issue.

I have no interest in being nice when it comes to actual issues.

While this extract may at first glance seem in opposition to above extract 21 due to its disinterest in remaining "nice", contradictory to "I do want to be considered a nice person", the formulation of this identity performance is reconcilable with the authors overall atheist construction. The above harshness is distinguished from the "insulting" and "abusive" harshness in the previous extract as in this performance it is appropriate to react harshly in situations where the atheist individual is being attacked or harshly criticised for their worldview. The author deems this attack on her identity as being unjustified through her repetition and capitalisation of the word "me" in the phrase "Tell me – ME – ". This constructs a claim of disbelief at her being

considered a “degenerate”, and this disbelief is based on the assertion that these harsh comments and the active desire for harm to come upon her are unwarranted. It is in these “unjustified” situations that a lack of “niceness” is permissible.

The author creates a reversal of the sense of nastiness or harshness, whereby the nasty people are the ones who are attacking or making judgements against the atheists. While being accused of being a “degenerate who deserves to spend eternity getting poked by a red goatboy with a trident” demonstrates this reversal of aggressiveness showing how harm is being wished upon her due to a particular view that she holds. This reversal works to place the religious in an amoral and threatening construction (see Kettel, 2013). The aggressiveness then performed from the atheist perspective is in response to this attack, in defence to one’s right to personal belief rather than in attacking others beliefs. The defence of her belief that “I think consenting adults should be able to lovingly caress each other’s bodays” is constructed both in the wording of that phrase and by stating “Now we have an issue” directly after. Using the words “consenting adults” and “lovingly” constructs an image of her belief being justifiable and politically correct as the discourse of age and consent, as well as love are demonstrated indicating a healthy romantic relationship. This particular mention of politically correct perceptions also brings into light the construction of political activism that was discussed in the literature review, in the suggestion that issues which pertain to all by law should not be dictated by religious beliefs (Kettel, 2013), thereby maintaining a secular society. The authors use of the word “now” in “Now we have an issue” indicates that prior to the attack on her identity there was no need for harsh relations, and that this unjustified aggressiveness has created a need to respond and defend her belief. It is through

this construction that aggression or harshness of the atheist identity performance is positioned on a different path than that of the stereotypical harsh atheist. It creates a permissible and defensible position of belief, avoiding blatant insults and nastiness and allowing for a sense of niceness and goodness to remain in the atheist identity construction.

Alongside the same line of discourse a blog post was written discussing the aggressive tendencies of atheists while disagreeing with the hostile approach in confronting religion, emphasising a discomfort in this discovery. The author of the post states the following:

Extract 23

If someone's religious beliefs give them comfort and they're not trying to make public policy based on those beliefs, why do you feel it is your responsibility to tell them their beliefs are wrong?

This again constructs an identity based on the unjustified harshness or criticism. By stating that "If someone's religious beliefs give them comfort" the author constructs an image of well-being and works to specify that if religious belief is a comfort to some then criticism of that belief is unwarranted. The author does provide a clause to this performance by stating "... and they are not trying to make public policy based on those beliefs", claiming that criticism of others' religious beliefs is acceptable when their beliefs attempt to enter political agendas, further highlighting the role of political activism in the construction and performance of atheist identities (Kettle, 2013). Through this discourse it is in the defence of the rights of others, both in the defence of the religious right to comfort and in protecting the rights of others through the political system that places the atheist in a good position. This places the

acceptable construction along a defensive stance rather than an attacking one similar to the previous extract. The necessity of speaking out against those that may attack others or influence their political and social rights creates a sense of “goodness” in the atheist identity construction, while allowing for any necessary harshness on behalf of this defensive process.

Conclusion

Atheism as an identity has become a more outspoken performance over the past decade or so, creating a change in the ways and means through which this identity is constructed and performed. The internet provides an important and widespread medium through which to perform the atheist identity (Guenther et al., 2013; Smith, 2013), with the anonymity it provides (Pearson, 2009; Perrotta, 2006) giving a certain level of freedom and protection from the stigma attached to the atheist label. This research paper analysed the methods through which these atheist identities are constructed and performed. Taking into account the constructions of identity in online settings, this research took a discursive psychological approach to the analysis method, focusing on the language used in the construction and performance within naturalistic materials. This allowed for an inductive reasoning technique centralised in the data, making discursive psychology an ideal method through which to analyse the data.

The findings demonstrated some methods through which the atheist identity is constructed and performed, each with their own unique purpose and approach. Three of these methods on which the analysis focused were the performance involving the use and constructions/contestations of labels and their boundaries, the

use of analogy in construction and performance, and resisting negative constructions of atheist identity.

The use and construction of labels and their boundaries involve various labels including atheist, agnostic, sceptic, humanist, and anti-theist. These labels are often constructed alongside the atheist label, being considered an important part of the atheist identity construction. Labels such as sceptic and agnostic may be seen as a strong part of being an atheist, in that one cannot be an atheist without ascribing to these labels as well. However, there is also contestation with these labels whereby they are strongly discerned from the atheist identity, where they are seen as uniquely different and holding various definitions that are able to be used by other performances contrasting the atheist identity such as Christians and other religious identities. This highlights the importance of the use of the label “atheist” in constructing the identity and shows how using other words, while constructing various aspects of one’s identity, does not completely build a full performance of atheism. The label of atheism constructs the identity in a unique and important way that cannot be replaced through the use of other labels.

The use of analogy is an interesting and frequently used method that constructs the atheist identity in a unique way through each analogy used. A frequent construction through these analogies is a placement as atheism as an adult or sane belief, where atheists can see the reality that others cannot. This is often contested with the religious being constructed under a “child-like” belief system, or being unable to see what is blatantly in front of them. This method is effective in its construction of atheism as being both a minority belief, as well as being performed as rational and as the only identity able to see through the foolishness.

The third method of resisting negative constructions of the atheist identity allows for the atheist to construct their identity by rejecting the negative stereotype of the label. The rejection and resistance of the harsh or aggressive label allows for a construction avoiding these negative attributes, by performing a “soft” or “gentle” identity. Through the use of these constructions, the atheist identity is formulated in a manner that retains a sense of goodness and highlights the importance of autonomy and choice in the performance of identity. Harsh actions are justified through only the defence of one’s right to believe, whereas attacking another’s beliefs without provocation are constructed as unjustified and playing into the negative stereotype of the atheist identity.

These three methods are commonly used in order to construct the atheist identity through individualistic methods, but through the individualised construction they are constructing a collective identity through networked individualism (Wellman, 2001). The common traits that are found among these performances indicate a collective means through which the atheist identity is performed. As a community, the identity is constructed in a good light, while still retaining the individualistic performances and identities that remains an important defining feature of the atheist collective identity (Smith & Cimino, 2012). This analysis highlights this debate of the atheist identity in an individualistic manner while demonstrating how this debate forms a collective identity of atheism by using these common methods and the personal constructions of atheism that align to construct a socially acceptable performance of identity.

The stigma of atheism has a large role to play in its identity construction (Meisenbach, 2010), and in the analysis we can see how exactly the stigma has an influence on the performance of identity through this act of resistance and through

the construction of the identity in socially acceptable manner. This resistance avoids negative stigma associations such as “aggressive”, “childish”, “insane” and “harsh”. These analysed methods provide insight into the link between defining the atheist identity and its performance, as well as the methods that allow for a label to resist the stigma of the public while constructing the identity in a manner that allows for a deeper and more meaningful identity. The resistance of the negative atheist construction supports the concept of internet identity performances being a “constructed act of resistance” (Zhao et al., 2008), with the analysis demonstrating how this resistance works both as an identity construction and as a method through which to destigmatise the atheist community.

These findings indicate the importance that the methods of identity construction have on the atheist identity and social interactions. With these performances of the atheist identity there are often constructions related to what society’s understanding of atheism is as an identity, and how the community reacts towards these outsider constructions. These personal identity constructions perform a valuable role in creating an atheist performed identity, based on atheist constructions rather than on constructions outside of the minority. This works to reduce the stigma and negative stereotypes that are constructed from those outside of the identity, as well as working towards constructing a collective identity that may be accepted by the public. Understanding these methods is a valuable course of research as it grants an insight into the process of identification of a marginalised and stigmatised identity that is still in the process of collectively defining itself as a vocal minority. The methods work to place the atheist identity under a unique and valuable minority umbrella, taking pride and effort into the importance of the atheist collective identity performance.

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