American Sociological Review
1–23
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DOI: 10.1177/0003122419871957
journals.sagepub.com/home/asr

Certainty, Uncertainty, or Indifference? Examining Variation in the Identity Narratives of Nonreligious Americans

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Abstract

Much research in social science concludes that uncertainty surrounding individual beliefs and identities is negative and anxiety-inducing, and that people are continuously searching for certainty. In the context of rising rates of religious disaffiliation in the United States, and the rise of social and political organizations created to promote nonreligious beliefs and values, the nonreligious offer a strategic case to explore the meaning and lived experience of certainty and uncertainty surrounding belief and identity formation. Drawing on an analysis of identity narratives from 50 nonreligious Americans, I find that uncertainty is just as often experienced as positive and motivating as it is isolating or anxiety-inducing, and although certainty-filled beliefs and identities are available for the nonreligious, they are just as often rejected for more uncertain ones. I reveal how some nonreligious individuals fluctuate between different orientations toward certainty and uncertainty regarding their nonreligion, whereas others exhibit more trait-like orientations to certainty and uncertainty. These findings have important implications for understanding how orientations to certainty and uncertainty shape identity and belief development in the modern world.

Keywords

nonreligion, social psychology, uncertainty, identity politics, qualitative methods

The amount of certainty people attribute to their beliefs and identities has motivated numerous studies in social science. In social psychology, for example, certainty is considered to play a crucial role in shaping people's attitudes and behaviors (see Tormala 2016). Across numerous lines of research, including uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg 2010), terror-management theory (Greenberg, Solomon, and Arndt 2008), self-verification theory (Swann and Buhrmester 2003), and identity theory (Burke and Stets 2009), scholars argue that people typically avoid uncertainty and seek out certainty via things like joining identity-affirming groups (Hogg 2010) or adhering to certainty-filled belief systems (Anisman, Matheson, and Ysseldyk 2010; Hogg, Adelman, and Blagg 2010).

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In sociology, it is a common assertion that identity and belief formation in the modern world are less certain than in the past. Numerous scholars argue that the increase in abstract systems (e.g., finance, medicine, and science), competing logics (e.g., states versus markets), and the porous institutions characterizing modern societies has resulted in individuals coming to experience their beliefs and identities as reflexive and uncertain, and many studies theorize and measure the causes and consequences of these societal-level changes (Archer 2012; Berger 1974; Giddens 1991; Taylor 2007; Wuthnow 1998).

In these lines of research, scholars often assume that uncertainty is negative, and that people ultimately want or need a stable identity or meaning system to anchor their beliefs and actions (Burke and Stets 2009; Hogg 2010; Swann and Buhrmester 2003). Indeed, social psychologists typically characterize uncertainty as "paralyzing," "disorienting," and "cognitively taxing" (see Arkin, Oleson, and Carroll 2010). This has led to a range of concerns about the potentially negative effects of increased uncertainty in modern contexts (Giddens 1991).

One aspect of these concerns focuses on religious uncertainties, as scholars have depicted religion as one of the primary certainty-inducing mechanisms in social life (Berger 1967; Hogg et al. 2010). As a result, much of the recent research on rising rates of religious disaffiliation in the United States (see Pew 2015) focuses on the negative social and individual effects that can result from taking on uncertain or agnostic religious identities, including social isolation, depression, and anxiety (e.g., Baker, Stroope, and Walker 2018; Krause and Wulff 2004).

Drawing on interviews with 50 nonreligious individuals in the midwestern United States, I document the ways nonreligious people—atheists, agnostics, and other "nones"—navigate various states of uncertainty and certainty as they construct their beliefs and identities. The United States has recently seen a rapid rise in religious disaffiliation, with the percentage of religiously unaffiliated Americans growing from 7 percent to around 25 percent over the past few decades (Hout and Fischer 2014; Pew 2015; Voas and Chaves 2016). As this demographic grows, so too do the number of social and political organizations created to frame and promote nonreligious beliefs and values (García and Blankholm 2016). However, only a small percentage of the growing nonreligious population are avowed secularists or atheists; most identify as "agnostic" or "nothing in particular," and many maintain aspects of religious belief and practice (Baker and Smith 2015). In this context, the nonreligious are a strategic case for investigating the dynamics of certainty and uncertainty in belief and identity formation and for refining our theoretical understandings of these processes more generally.

The findings show how nonreligious people express a range of certainties and uncertainties surrounding their nonreligious beliefs and identities, as well as a range of positive and negative responses to those certainties and uncertainties. Most of the social scientific research on uncertainty is experimental or survey-based. The qualitative narrative analysis used in this article aims to capture the underlying processes via which people give meaning to experiences of certainty and uncertainty and how their beliefs and actions are influenced as a result. Rather than a constant search for certainty, some nonreligious people find meaning in uncertainty and describe it as a motivating framework for their nonreligious beliefs and identities. And while some nonreligious people do experience uncertainty as stressful and are motivated to seek out certainty-filled groups and ideologies as a result, others are determined to become more comfortable with uncertainty—despite the anxiety it induces in them. Furthermore, the comfort many of my interviewees had with uncertainty around their existential beliefs often translated into comfort with uncertainty in other domains of their lives. These findings run counter to dominant depictions of uncertainty as being capable of motivating little else than a desire for more certainty.

I also detail the ways nonreligious people move between uncertain and certain orientations toward an identity or belief over time. I find that some nonreligious people are relatively certain or uncertain about their nonreligion for long periods of time, whereas others describe a more context-dependent and fluid engagement with certainty and uncertainty. I show how cultivating and affirming certainty or uncertainty is more central to the expression of some people's nonreligion than others. And I describe how a certainty-filled identity politics among the nonreligious draw some nonreligious people into social and political groups, but these groups leave others feeling misrepresented by the politicized nonreligious rhetoric they often promote. These dynamics push some nonreligious people to find meaning in more uncertain beliefs and identities. Thus, my findings have implications for our understanding of not only the contexts in which certainty and uncertainty become salient (see Stryker and Serpe 1994), but also the effects of the politicization of certainty that so often come with identity politics (see Bernstein 2005).

Taken together, I argue that narratives from the nonreligious provide an important empirical setting for building new theoretical understandings of the meanings attributed to certainty and uncertainty and for investigating the range of certain and uncertain orientations to belief and identity that are experienced in modern contexts. My findings show that both certainty and uncertainty can be meaningful and motivating orientations to belief and identity, but we need better accounts of how these orientations are constructed, experienced, and politicized in everyday life.

DEFINITIONS AND TYPES OF CERTAINTY

Theories of individual identity construction and maintenance typically focus on the reciprocal relationship between self and society and the centrality of reflexivity to the creation of the self (Burke and Stets 2009; Callero 2003; Mead 1934; Stryker 1980). Via reflected appraisal processes (Cooley 1902), individuals organize the various aspects of their social self into multiple identities relating to each of the positions they have in society (Stets and Burke 2003). These identities are formed in relation to a set of shared understandings about their "standard" meanings and expected behaviors. Social scientific research on identity centers around analyzing the meanings individuals have for their identities and how those meanings are constructed and negotiated (e.g., Burke and Stets 2009).

A dominant area of inquiry in the self and identity literature regards the levels of certainty and uncertainty that people attribute to their self-concepts and identities (Giddens 1991; Hogg 2010), attitudes (Tormala 2016), and beliefs (Berger 1967; Pelham 1991). Certainty is defined as the subjective sense of conviction, clarity, or confidence one has about an attitude, identity, or belief (DeMarree, Petty, and Briñol 2007; Petrocelli, Tormala, and Rucker 2007). Uncertainty is defined as the opposite—a lack of conviction or clarity. Certainty is considered a metacognition, or a "secondary cognition," because it involves evaluation of a mental representation or thought (see Petrocelli et al. 2007). In quantitative research, levels of certainty are usually assessed with measures like "I am confident in my beliefs about X" or "I am certain about my identity as a Y."

This research makes important distinctions between the different domains of the self that one can experience uncertainty about—in the domain of attitudes, beliefs, individual identities, or one's entire self-concept. For example, people may feel certain about their belief in a god, but uncertain about their religious identity. However, certainty can operate in similar ways across these different domains, and there may be important relationships between the levels of certainty people hold in one domain and the levels of certainty they hold in another. DeMarree and colleagues (2007:162) argue that "one can apply the concept of certainty to global versus specific levels of self-representation." They suggest there is enough similarity between different

domains of self-representation to justify theorizing across them, and they recommend more research into the relationships between these domains. For example, Clarkson and colleagues (2009) find that certainty in the attitude domain can produce greater self-certainty under some conditions.

Thus, when talking about certainty and uncertainty in nonreligious narratives, it is important to distinguish between beliefs and identities, especially because these are so intertwined for nonreligious people in the United States. To be an atheist in the United States says something about both your beliefs regarding theism and your identity vis-à-vis a politicized landscape of nonreligious identities and values. As I will show, many nonreligious Americans associate atheism with a more politicized, anti-religious, and "certainty-filled" set of values, so even people who might share similar beliefs with atheists often take on different identity labels to avoid being associated with those values. Similarly, to take on an agnostic label is to signal one's ambivalence or uncertainty about existential beliefs and one's identity in relation to other possible nonreligious identities, such as atheist or humanist. In my analysis, I flesh out in more detail these relationships between certainty in the domain of beliefs and certainty in the domain of identity.

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF UNCERTAINTY

Much of the literature on self and identity concurs that people resist uncertainty in almost all domains, and a core aspect of identity construction is the continuous process of trying to cultivate certainty around one's beliefs, attitudes, and identities. This is because identities and attitudes held with certainty are generally found to be more durable, more resistant to change, and thus more psychologically coherent and comforting (see DeMarree et al. 2007; Swann and Buhrmester 2003). Beliefs held with certainty are important for driving behaviors. As Tormala (2016:8) explains, "certainty is a catalyst that turns attitudes into action. The more certain people are of their attitudes, the more they cling to and defend those attitudes, the more they act on those attitudes, and the more they advocate on behalf of those attitudes." Conversely, social psychological theories like identity theory (Burke and Stets 2009), uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg 2010), and terror-management theory (Greenberg et al. 2008) all assert that individuals are perpetually seeking out ways to reduce uncertainty because it causes anxiety, reduces cognitive resources, and can ultimately lead to a detrimental sense of anomie and meaninglessness (Arkin et al. 2010).

An example relevant to this analysis comes out of research into the consequences of existential uncertainty. To be existentially uncertain means to questions one's beliefs about the afterlife, transcendent beings or forces, or the purpose of one's life or life in general (Landau, Greenberg, and Kosloff 2010; Schnell 2010). Sociologists of religion have long contended that religions help build shared understandings of the world unparalleled in their ability to reduce existential uncertainty (Anisman et al. 2010; Berger 1967; Geertz 1973). As such, it is a common concern that religious disaffiliation will produce harmful existential uncertainties (cf. Lee 2015; Taylor 2007). When compared to the nonreligious, people who are actively religious are often found to be healthier (Hayward et al. 2016; Krause and Wulff 2004), happier (Ellison, Gay, and Glass 1989), and more embedded in identity-affirming social networks (Ellison and George 1994; Lewis, MacGregor, and Putnam 2013).

However, other studies point to a more complex relationship between religion, secularity, and well-being (Baker et al. 2018:44; see also May 2018). For example, Baker and colleagues (2018) find that atheists—who research shows are more certain about their beliefs and who join nonreligious social and political groups at higher rates—report similar, or in many cases better, mental and physical health outcomes when compared to affiliated theists. In contrast, health is significantly worse for nonaffiliated theists and agnostics. They conclude that religious incongruence and

uncertainty are linked to negative health, but existential and ideological certainty that is supported through group participation, religious *or* secular, is linked to positive health.

Taken together, social science research characterizes uncertainty as negative and anxiety-inducing, but also one of the "defining challenges of modern life" (Arkin et al. 2010:1). Many prominent social scientists argue that changes brought about by modernization have disrupted long-standing traditions and values. As a result, individuals have in many ways become "unmoored" from historically stable identity categories and belief systems, and they must now constantly reflect upon and reorient their identities and beliefs in every new context (Archer 2012; Baumeister 1987; Brekhus 2008; Giddens 1991; Habermas 1985; Taylor 2007). Research thus often focuses on the ways individuals find and cultivate certainty in an increasingly uncertain world. Studies show that people become more certain of their attitudes and identities when they believe they have accurate and complete knowledge about those identities and attitudes, when those identities and attitudes are salient and central to their sense of self, and when they feel they have social support for those identities and attitudes (DeMarree et al. 2007; Petrocelli et al. 2007).

Social support is an especially important driver of certainty, and people often get social support for their beliefs and identities through group identifications, be they religious, political, familial, or otherwise. As Burke and Stets (2009) explain, group identities derive their identity standards from "prototypes" of that group's identity. Prototypes describe "hypothetical" or "ideal" group members who offer actual group members standards for how to act and what to think. As a result, scholars often argue that people seek out group membership for the clear and stable standards it offers (see Hogg 2010). For example, in the contemporary United States, the politicizing of prototypical identities via identity politics has become a common social movement strategy (see Bernstein 2005). A prominent example of identity politics comes from the gay rights movement and its calls to "come out of the closet" and publicly proclaim gay and lesbian identities (e.g., Armstrong 2002; Bernstein 1997). And scholarship on identity politics often suggests these movements succeed, at least in part, because they provide a kind of identity and value certainty that is attractive in modern contexts (for a review, see Snow and McAdam 2000).

However, despite the seeming consensus that uncertainty is negative, there are also examples of positive experiences with uncertainty. For some, living in the spaces "between and betwixt" identities is itself a meaningful position to occupy (Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010:598; see also Butler 1990; Taylor 2007). Landau and colleagues (2010:211) suggest that although uncertainty is negative in most instances, it can also be "channeled into constructive directions, spurring people to find novel, creative avenues" for creating meaning. Similarly, Tormala (2016) argues that people tend to think more carefully and critically about a construct when they are uncertain about it, which can reduce extremism and increase critical engagement.

Thus, a constant drive for certainty is not always positive. Certainty-filled identities and beliefs are more resistant to change, for better or for worse. For example, people will attempt to confirm and feel certain about their self-views, even if those self-views are negative (Swann and Buhrmester 2003). In the case of identity politics, while this movement strategy has been important for gaining recognition and rights among marginalized groups, it can also narrow the limits of what an identity can be, infusing too much certainty into a contested identity label in a way that can alienate movement members and allies (Butler 1997; Reger 2015; Tesch and Kempton 2004).

CONTEXTUALIZING CERTAINTY AND UNCERTAINTY

This research suggests the meaning of uncertainty surrounding individual beliefs and

identities is more complicated than is often captured in dominant social scientific narratives. Not only are there different domains of the self that one might feel uncertain about—from beliefs, to attitudes, to identities—but whether people feel uncertain in one domain is influenced by whether they feel uncertain in other domains. Note, too, that research has found positive and constructive aspects of uncertainty. It is important, however, to consider the contexts in which people might experience uncertainty.

For example, much of the research argues that certainty plays a crucial role in motivating action, but others would emphasize the importance of the salience and centrality of an identity or belief for whether it motivates action. Stryker and Serpe (1994) distinguish between salience and centrality, arguing that salient identities are those most likely to be activated in an individual's life, whereas central identities are those individuals themselves prioritize as important. These can and do overlap, but the idea is that identities, and their associated beliefs and attitudes, are organized into a hierarchy of salience and centrality (see also Stryker 1980). Some identities are more important in our lives than others, either because we prioritize them or because they are relevant for social interactions with significant others. The more central and salient a belief or identity is, the more likely it will be that certainty surrounding that belief or identity will motivate thoughts and actions (e.g., Clarkson et al. 2009).

People also have different orientations to certainty and uncertainty, and these orientations can change over time. Szeto and Sorrentino (2010) propose that individuals develop consistent "regulatory styles" for dealing with uncertainty that they call an "uncertainty orientation." They argue that "some people head straight for [uncertainty], while others prefer to face uncertainty indirectly, or even ignore it altogether" (Szeto and Sorrentino 2010:118). They posit two different types of people: uncertainty-oriented types who seek out uncertainty and try to resolve it in an "effortful and systematic manner" (p. 102), and certainty-oriented types who avoid uncertainty and rely more heavily on identity standards and group identifications to resolve uncertainty. Thus, an understanding of how people orient themselves to certainty and uncertainty opens up possibilities for seeing uncertainty as one kind of orientation toward meaning among many.

However, the above approach assumes a sort of trait-like nature to uncertainty orientations: individuals are *either* uncertainty-oriented *or* certainty-oriented, and they remain consistently so throughout their lives and across their different beliefs and identities. In contrast, other scholars suggest a more "state-like" conception of uncertainty orientations. Wright (2010:424) suggests uncertainty orientations can come in both "trait and state versions." He argues that some people are "chronically committed" to one orientation or the other in a way that would constitute a stable personality trait, whereas others move between more transient states of certainty and uncertainty regarding a given belief or identity. And DeMarree and colleagues (2007) propose that some people may have "cross-situational consistency" regarding the certainty they attribute to their beliefs and identities, while others may have different orientations to certainty depending on the context or the construct in question. This suggests people's orientations to certainty and uncertainty can be fluid, and developing and maintaining orientations to uncertainty might be more important for some people and contexts than for others. Social location also determines how and when uncertainty is experienced, as people with marginalized identities often have less power to define the meanings surrounding those identities (Sandoval 2000; Stets 2005).

In short, the contexts under which certainty and uncertainty are experienced matter for whether those experiences will be positive or negative and whether they will motivate actions. However, although many scholars have suggested that uncertainty can be positive and constructive in some situations, and most would agree that some forms of uncertainty are a natural part of identity construction and social interaction in the modern world, the consensus seems to be that

"uncertainty that is subjectively excessive is aversive, particularly uncertainty directly about or reflecting on who we are, what we should think, how we should behave, and how we should interact with others" (Hogg 2010:408). In other words, continuous uncertainty around an identity or belief that is central to an individual's sense of self is typically seen as problematic.

The nonreligious are thus a strategic research site for investigating the meanings of certainty and uncertainty. For one, to be nonreligious often comes with experiences of uncertainty, especially in cases of religious disaffiliation. When someone questions or leaves a religious belief system, they often have existential doubts and identity uncertainty. In longitudinal studies mapping recent demographic changes in religious affiliation, scholars find that 20 percent of those who report "no religion" in one year will go on to report a religious identity the following year (Hout 2017; Lim et al. 2010), highlighting the fluid and "liminal" nature of some nonreligious identities. But as I will show, many nonreligious people *are* certain about their nonreligious beliefs and identities, and it has become easier to find nonreligious certainties in contexts like the United States where a growing number of social and political groups cater to the nonreligious and are often built to be as identity-affirming and uncertainty-reducing as religious groups (Kettell 2014; LeDrew 2015). I detail how this context shapes the meaning of certainty and uncertainty in the lives of nonreligious Americans, drawing on 50 nonreligious narratives to test and refine some of our dominant theories about the role of uncertainty in the modern world.

THE CASE: SUNDAY ASSEMBLY AND THE NONRELIGIOUS FIELD

In the context of growing rates of religious disaffiliation in the United States, there has been a rapid increase in the number of secular, atheist, humanist, and other nonreligious social and political groups catering to this demographic (Cragun, Manning, and Fazzino 2017; García and Blankholm 2016). From political organizations attempting to legislate against religion in the public sphere, to online and in-person social groups built as spaces of community and ritual for the nonreligious, the "nonreligious field" in the United States now includes a wide range of organizations, ideologies, and identities (Kettell 2014; Quack 2014; Schutz 2017). This means nonreligious Americans navigate a distinct field of shared symbols and discourses that shape the identity narratives they construct around their nonreligion (Quack 2014). Data for this article are based largely on narratives from just one organization within this field, the Sunday Assembly, but I will briefly describe its relationship to the larger nonreligious field to facilitate a better understanding of these narratives.

The United States is still commonly seen as a "Christian nation" (see Williams 2013)—over 70 percent of the U.S. population identifies as religious (Pew 2015)—and the growing population of nonreligious Americans has encountered a culture hesitant to accept them. Atheists, in particular, are disliked and distrusted (Cook, Cohen, and Solomon 2015; Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011), seen as immoral and elitist (Edgell et al. 2016; Wright and Nichols 2014), and are discriminated against in many social contexts on the basis of their nonreligion (Cragun et al. 2012; Edgell, Frost, and Stewart 2017; Hammer et al. 2012). The rise of the nonreligious population, only a small percentage of whom actually identify as atheist, has coincided with heightened stigma for individuals in this group.

One response to this stigma has been the founding of national organizations like the American Atheists, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and the Openly Secular Coalition that engage in social and political battles to destigmatize nonreligious identities and keep the wall between church and state intact (Kettell 2014; LeDrew 2015). These groups call on the nonreligious to "come out of the closet" and mobilize against the discrimination of atheists and other "nones" in

American society, as well as fight the slow creep of religious ideology into what they believe should be a secular public sphere (Anspach, Coe, and Thurlow 2007; LeDrew 2015). The nonreligious have seen increased visibility due to these efforts, but the rhetoric of identity politics has shaped public perceptions of what it means to be nonreligious, especially for and among atheists (Kettell 2014). With the help of a highly politicized "New Atheist" movement fueled by aggressive, anti-religious journalists and academics in the mid-2000s, the more politicized, rationalized, and confrontational forms of atheism have become the public face for what is in fact a much more diverse nonreligious community of agnostics, skeptics, and "nothing in particulars" (LeDrew 2015; Lee 2015).

In contrast to the political, and often anti-religious, rhetoric dominating much of the nonreligious field, there are also a growing number of relatively apolitical social and community groups devoted to fostering communal forms and secular rituals among the nonreligious (Cimino and Smith 2014). One example of this type of community is the Sunday Assembly, a growing network of more than 70 "secular congregations" made up of primarily atheists and agnostics that intentionally, and only slightly ironically, borrow aspects of the Protestant church model as a means of cultivating meaningful traditions and communities for the nonreligious (Frost 2017; Smith 2017). Local chapters, most of which are located in the United States and the United Kingdom, meet on Sundays, sing pop songs alongside a band, listen to invited speakers and testimonies from the assemblers, and have potlucks and small group meetings during the week. They aim to be "radically inclusive," intentionally borrowing from aspects of religious practice, as well as welcoming all interested nonreligious *and* religious participants to their services. In many ways built in reaction to the narrow identity politics coming out of many prominent atheist and secular organizations, the idea behind the Sunday Assembly and other organizations like it (see Schutz 2017) is to build a more positive and diverse community of nonbelievers who want to explore new ways of understanding their nonreligious identities outside of the narrow framework offered by dominant political groups.

DATA AND METHOD

Half the interview data for this article come from a three-year ethnographic study of one chapter of the Sunday Assembly located in the Midwestern United States, which I call Midwest Assembly.[1] From March 2014 to August 2017, I was engaged in regular participant observation with the Midwest Assembly; I attended their Sunday services and many of their social events, such as volunteering days, potlucks, and trivia nights. I also attended the monthly organizing meetings where decisions about the services and the organization were made. In many ways, the Sunday Assembly is an ideal space for exploring uncertain and liminal nonreligious identities, as many assemblers identify with Sunday Assembly's openness to ritual, emotion, and sense of "becoming something other than" a rejection of religion (see Frost 2017). As part of this ethnography, I interviewed 25 Midwest assemblers, from the founding members of the chapter to occasional attendees, including many who stopped attending during the course of my fieldwork.

However, the Sunday Assembly is only one set of actors in a much larger field. To broaden my interview sample, I also interviewed 25 nonreligious "non-assemblers" in the fall of 2017; all lived in the same geographic region as the Midwest Assembly but had never attended any of the group's services. Through a variety of recruitment methods, including snowball sampling and posting flyers and ads, I talked with individuals who inhabit diverse spaces within the nonreligious field that offer important contrasts to the Sunday Assemblers at the center of my study (see Small 2009; Yin 2002). Some of the non-assembler interviewees had joined other nonreligious groups—some were involved in humanist or Unitarian communities and others were involved in the more political atheist

groups in the area—but many had never attended or even heard of organized nonreligious groups of any kind.

I analyze the identity narratives of Midwest assemblers and the nonreligious non-assemblers, detailing the different certainties and uncertainties these individuals navigate as they create and sustain nonreligious beliefs and identities. Narrative analysis of interviews involves fleshing out the "mental maps" and life stories respondents have built to make sense of their beliefs and actions (Pugh 2013; Somers 1994). I designed interview questions to elicit the histories and life transitions leading to current nonreligious beliefs and practices. Most interviewees had developed a narrative about how and why they came to their nonreligious beliefs and identity. I focus my analysis on investigating the range of narratives I encountered, rather than setting up a stark comparison between assemblers and non-assemblers. I detail how individuals in the nonreligious field embody a range of certainties and uncertainties as they construct their nonreligious beliefs and identities, and I flesh out the cultural meanings they attribute to these experiences (see Pugh 2013).

Throughout the analysis and discussion, I will use the term "nonreligion" to denote the combination of someone's nonreligious *identities* and nonreligious *beliefs*, but I will use these terms separately when referencing one or the other. As detailed in the literature review, distinguishing between nonreligious beliefs and identities can be tricky, but it is important for this analysis. Certainty in one domain (e.g., belief) does not necessarily imply certainty in another (e.g., identity), and while many argue that theorizing across these domains is warranted (e.g., DeMarree et al. 2007), my findings suggest nonreligious people combine identity certainty/uncertainty and belief certainty/uncertainty in complex ways. I thus distinguish between nonreligious beliefs and identities at points in the analysis where I am describing relationships between them, but I use "nonreligion" as a catch-all term to avoid writing out "nonreligious beliefs and identities" every time I mean to reference them both together.

CONFERENCES, NOT CAMPFIRES: THE POLITICS OF NONRELIGION

> Reading atheist literature has not really worked for me. These books just haven't, well, I wanted them to be a thing, but they just haven't been the thing. And I've struggled with shame about that. Like, I'm not a very good atheist because I haven't finished an entire [Richard] Dawkins book before. But, like, you know, it just doesn't appeal to me. Just because I'm an atheist doesn't mean I need to be a book head or, like, know the ins and outs of science.
>
> — Natalie, former assembler, atheist

It is not unreasonable to assume that taking on an atheistic, agnostic, or otherwise nonreligious identity would result in a more uncertain or open perspective toward existential questions. To question or reject a religious belief does involve various levels of existential reflection, especially when living in a society like the United States where being religious is still the norm (Williams 2013). However, nonreligious identities can be just as dogmatic and certainty-filled as religious ones (see Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006). Politicized forms of atheism and secularism are promoted by nonreligious organizations in a way that shapes how individuals define and enact their nonreligion (Kettell 2014). As the above quote from Natalie starts to unpack, among people I interviewed, there was a pervasive sense that a bounded set of characteristics and values are wrapped up in what it means to be an atheist, and many talked about their nonreligious identities in relation to this image.

As many of my interviewees explained (see also LeDrew 2015), the prototypical image of the "good atheist" Natalie is defining herself against is an intellectual, politically active, and dogmatic anti-theist who is

generally against accommodating any kind of religious tradition or ritual. Natalie was not the only one to admit to feeling like an inadequate atheist for failing to live up to this identity standard.

Trista, an active member of a more politically active atheist group in the area, laughed as she confessed to never having read any of the popular New Atheist texts from the mid-2000s,[2] saying, "I once got half-way through *The God Delusion*. I haven't even read the whole thing! I'm an awful atheist." This intellectualized version of atheism is also assumed to reject any kind of ritualistic or emotional engagement. Sunday Assemblers are very aware that the collective singing and emotionally charged environment they are trying to cultivate at their services contradicts this version of the "good atheist." Midwest assembler and atheist Delilah explained that group singing was one of the things that really drew her to Sunday Assembly, but she was worried her atheist friends would judge her if she told them. She explained,

> I love group singing. I absolutely love it. I mean, that's the ticket for me. I've always remembered camping with friends one summer and some people started singing and I just sang along! I just love being around a campfire and singing songs. And I was kind of ashamed to say that! I didn't tell my atheist friends because atheists don't do that. Like, they have conferences and it's all about learning.

A common thread throughout the narratives I analyzed was the level of certainty my interviewees associated with committed atheism. For example, I interviewed numerous people who identify as "agnostic-atheists" because of the ways they associate atheism with certainty. Midwest assembler Blake explained that they worried identifying solely as an atheist would make them "come off as too certain," when they in fact felt more ambivalence than certainty about their beliefs. They said, "I'm not like an *atheist*-atheist because I'm still open to possibility. And I'm not ardently against religion. So I guess I throw the agnostic in because I don't want to come off as too certain."

Similarly, non-assembler Myah described her atheism as "soft" because she did not believe you could prove a god's nonexistence, and she felt she had more open-mindedness toward spiritual practices than she had seen in other "hard" atheists. Non-assembler Veronica, who identifies as "nothing in particular," associates atheism with "staunchly saying there isn't a god." She explained, "I find that for most atheist groups, they're so certain that nothing is out there. And we don't know that. There could be."

Even interviewees who had little to no interaction with organized atheist groups often described versions of this stereotype of what it means to be a "good" or "committed" atheist. Importantly, these perceptions are tied to politicized narratives circulating within the nonreligious field about the meaning of certainty and uncertainty. The stereotypes of a more singular and certainty-filled atheism are often associated with an anti-religious and intellectualized set of beliefs and values. As a result, many interviewees defined their nonreligion as more or less "certain" and dogmatic in relation to this stereotype, which was often related to how tolerant or open-minded they considered themselves to be. As I will detail, this context has cultivated a wide spectrum of certainty and uncertainty surrounding individual nonreligious identities and beliefs.

NONRELIGIOUS CERTAINTIES

Some of my interviewees thought of their nonreligion as certain and stable. However, whether that certainty motivated their actions was shaped by how salient their nonreligion was to them. For some interviewees, nonreligion was central to their sense of self; they actively cultivated nonreligious certainty by regularly engaging in discussions about their beliefs and joining nonreligious groups. Others felt they had come to certain conclusions about their nonreligion, but they did not engage with or join groups based on that certainty. They were certain, but because their

nonreligion was less salient to their everyday lives, it was not a certainty that often motivated their thoughts or actions (cf. Clarkson et al. 2009). Thus, in contrast to dominant depictions of nonreligious experience as being filled with anxiety-inducing uncertainty, a stabilizing and motivating certainty characterized numerous nonreligious narratives I encountered.

One example of a more salient and certain nonreligion comes from Midwest assembler Beth's narrative about transitioning from devoted Catholic to convinced atheist. Beth and her husband were active participants in their Catholic church for over 30 years when Beth started questioning her beliefs. She explained that she and her family were very involved in the church community, and they raised their children to be "very Catholic." But after some major changes in the leadership at her congregation, Beth started questioning some of the more conservative messages coming from her new leaders. A colleague at work suggested she check out some literature to get a better sense of her position, and that led her down a rapid path of religious disaffiliation. She explained,

> I started reading skeptic magazines and then I read *The God Delusion* and it was like game over. I jumped straight to atheist. I looked at it all and I said, "Yeah, there's just no way." And agnostics, I kind of chuckle with that because, like, any atheist, if you actually showed us absolute, positive proof there was a god, we would all go, "Okay." But really, I'm like, no, not going to happen. So yeah, I jumped and said, "No, I am an atheist." I do not believe there is any universe, god, spirit, anything.

Since taking on this atheist identity, Beth has convinced the rest of her family to do the same, and they are now all active in numerous atheist and secular groups in their community, including Sunday Assembly. She expressed high levels of certainty in her atheism and described how she actively resisted "softer" nonreligious labels signaling any openness to questioning or uncertainty. She said, "I guess I think terms like freethinker or humanist are just softer ways that open up the door a little bit for something more that I don't believe exists." She described how she struggled to be accepting of these more open nonreligious beliefs she often encountered at Sunday Assembly events: "Sunday Assembly is stretching my capacity for tolerance. Sometimes I just can't hold my tongue and respect other people's beliefs in a space I feel should be focused on promoting atheist worldviews."

Trista had a similar certainty-oriented narrative in which she transitioned from being an active participant in her religious community to becoming an even stronger advocate for atheism. She described having an unquestioning attitude toward religious certainties when she was a young adult and remembered feeling disappointed when she realized most of the people around her were not "walking the walk":

> I was like, I'm all in. I mean, why would you question what your priest asks you to do? But then I realized that nobody else was getting into this or wanting to get into this as much as me. I felt that people were apathetically going to mass. They go to mass because they have to. And I found cognitive dissonance in it. I was like, okay, I'm either going to be all in or all out. I can't be this, like, half-in.

For Trista, existing in an uncertain space where you claim to have beliefs but are not living them wholeheartedly was unthinkable, and this cognitive dissonance led her to question her religious beliefs and ultimately leave Catholicism altogether. She now enacts her nonreligion with the same kind of fervor and certainty. Trista has a strong belief that people need to shed all religious and spiritual viewpoints, just like she did, to "get to the truth about what is right and what is wrong." She said she proudly wears her "atheist badge" by being active in an atheist organization and doing things in public as an atheist in the hopes of "getting people to think more realistically." She admitted that Sunday Assembly did not interest her because of its tolerance for more open and uncertain nonreligious

perspectives. Trista and Beth can thus be seen as examples of people with certainty-oriented personalities (Szeto and Sorrentino 2010) that are regularly reaffirmed and defended in nonreligious spaces.

In contrast to Beth's and Trista's stories of motivating nonreligious certainties, nonassembler Amy settled into a more or less certainty-filled nonreligion since leaving the all-consuming evangelical Christian culture in which she was raised. Amy's atheism, however, was much less salient than Beth's or Trista's. Whereas Christianity had permeated almost every aspect of Amy's life, she did not experience atheism in the same way. She explained that after a period of questioning and trying on different labels like "agnostic," she ultimately came to atheism as a stable identity and belief system. However, she had little interest in engaging with that identity in the ways Beth and Trista did. Amy said that if I had asked her a year ago, she might have been interested in joining nonreligious groups and reflecting on what it means to be an atheist, but "[n]ow I know enough to feel very confident in my view and I don't want to sound dismissive of additional learning, but it's just not on the table at the moment." Unlike the Christian identity she had actively engaged in on a daily basis, her atheist identity resides more in the background:

> I don't identify atheist the way that I ever identified as Christian. I don't wake up in the morning going, "Because I'm an atheist, I'm going to live my life better today" or "How do I live my life as a bold atheist?" I just go, well, if you want to put a label on it, fine, I'm an atheist. It's never going to be that kind of identity for me. And I think there are probably people that think, "Atheism is my identity and that's why I do everything." But for me it will never be like that. To me, atheist just means without god, and that's how I'm living my life.

Like Amy, for many interviewees, certainty did not come in the form of an actively defended and politicized set of beliefs; instead, certainty meant the ability to move on from those discussions and focus on other things. Midwest assembler and atheist Zack expressed a similar sentiment: "The debate about whether there's a god or not is a meaningless one. Personally, the debate bores me now and I've heard it all before. I already know all the ways religion is bad, can we talk about the destructive potential of other types of false consciousness now?" Importantly, Zack's boredom with these debates did not make him indifferent to or uncertain about his position in relation to them. Instead, he felt he had engaged with these discussions enough to come to a conclusion about where he stands, and he now uses that certainty as a grounding for taking stances on other social problems, like global poverty, the future of work, and global warming. Unlike Beth and Trista, who sought out ways to reaffirm their certainty and question uncertainty in others, Zack and Amy were just as certain, but their orientations to that certainty motivated them to experience their nonreligion in distinct ways.

BEING COMFORTABLE WITH UNCERTAINTY

> I try to stay away from labels. I think that labels sort of inhibit us in ways because we are automatically boundaried [*sic*]. And I think that whether or not we want to admit it, those boundaries and labels implant external identity upon you. Whether it's another religion, a political party, or being an atheist, whatever your aspect is, the moment that you confine something, you limit yourself.
>
> — Jasper, non-assembler, freethinker

I encountered various forms of certainty among my nonreligious interviewees, but I also discovered narratives that emphasized uncertainty and questioning as more than just a bridge between religious and nonreligious certainties. In contrast to atheists like Beth, Trista, and Amy, who experienced a period of uncertainty as a stop on the path away from religious certainties and toward nonreligious certainties, other interviewees experienced a more consistently uncertain nonreligion, and

it often shaped the levels of certainty and boundedness they brought to other aspects of their lives. Like freethinker Jasper, who found any kind of external identity label or set of beliefs confining, including atheism, many interviewees detailed an uncertainty-filled nonreligion that was intentionally chosen and had a variety of effects and meanings.

For a substantial proportion of interviewees, the uncertainty that came with nonreligion was "freeing," and many of the narratives I encountered emphasized an unwillingness to give up that freedom by coming to any final conclusions. Kurt, a former Midwest assembler, described his nonreligion as grounded in uncertainty, and he prided himself on his commitment to skepticism and an unwillingness to ever come to one final answer or framework. For Kurt, uncertainty was itself a motivating framework:

> I would argue that when people find atheism, they can get stuck in the honeymoon phase where they believe that just because they figured out there isn't a god, they're done. They don't examine any of their other beliefs and they stop there. It makes for a particularly toxic combo. They think they're speaking on behalf of all rationality and yet are nowhere near it. And it's helped me realize that one of the big problems in life is certainty. When you get into specific things—self-defense, euthanasia, all these other things—you can't go to a book and say, "Check one or two." You have to think about it. And I think that's what atheism encourages for me—being comfortable with uncertainty. And just modifying as you go and constantly re-evaluating. It almost feels like coming to a conclusion and saying, "Yes, this is what my framework is based on," it's almost like you've given up. Like, you found it, that's the answer, and you're done. So just constantly accruing more data points. If that's a framework, then I suppose that's mine.

Kurt described his childhood as "nominally Catholic," and although his parents were not strong believers themselves, they believed exposure to Catholicism's moral culture was an important part of raising a child. However, he does not remember ever believing any of the religious teachings he encountered and claims to have been "at least agnostic" by the time he was 12 years old. Kurt describes not only his nonreligion, but also his general orientation toward life, as being one of intentional skepticism and cultivated uncertainty. He was drawn to Sunday Assembly because of its potential to keep things open and allow for more questioning, but he ultimately felt boundaries were being drawn in ways he did not agree with. When I asked him why he stopped attending, he said, "I admire the idea that they want to be, well, they want to be positive. Not just say what they're against, but what they are for. It's just the more you get into the details, the harder it is to stay on board with everything." For Kurt, Sunday Assembly's attempts to define and cultivate a more positive nonreligious community were starting to limit his goals of never being constrained by one single framework.

A similar narrative of uncertainty came from non-assembler Patrick, who described himself as "agnostic by nature." Similar to Kurt, Patrick was raised in a passively religious home and his family attended a Catholic church semi-regularly. Patrick had enjoyed the ritual of church-going, but he started to question the teachings early on. In high school he sought out texts to help him work through these questions, but he explained he was not searching for an ultimate truth or to be convinced of either theism *or* atheism by reading these texts. He said, "I wasn't actively trying to make myself go one way or the other, but I was trying to convince myself to be more agnostic. I'm the kind of person who is by nature, I won't say moderate but, I guess, yeah, I always leave room for doubt and for changing my mind. So I don't think I could ever firmly go one way or the other." Like Kurt, Patrick also sees his comfort with uncertainty as central to other aspects of his identity and character. He described how his "moderate nature" means he also identifies as politically independent, he is not likely to ever join any one group or cause, and he

"gravitates toward people who are more tolerant" of difference and contradiction.

In an important contrast to these narratives that detail positive experiences with uncertainty, former assembler Natalie had a very different experience. Natalie, who was introduced earlier as feeling like "not a very good atheist" because she was not interested in reading the intellectual arguments for atheism, was raised in a conservative evangelical religion. Natalie was highly involved in her church and participated in multi-year missions to share her convinced Christian beliefs with others. But after a long and painful journey away from Christianity, Natalie came to an atheist identity filled with uncertainty. Unlike Kurt and Patrick, Natalie has struggled to navigate the uncertainty of this new perspective and has sought out counseling to help her work through the anxiety it often induces in her. She explained that far from feeling "freed" by her nonreligion, like many other interviewees did, the uncertainty surrounding her nonreligion gives her frequent panic attacks. Our conversation shows how she relates her anxiety to her existential uncertainty:

> *Natalie:* All I remember for sure is that I probably was fully de-converted by 2007 or so. Because then the panic attacks started real hard-core the next year.
>
> *Interviewer:* Okay, and you think those were related?
>
> *Natalie:* One hundred percent.
>
> *Interviewer:* Just because of all the uncertainty involved?
>
> *Natalie:* Yeah. "Hey, guess what? We're going to die now and there is no heaven or hell. And guess what, you're all alone now. And guess what? Every pain and everything that happens to you, you have no control over that and no one's going to help you." So there's a lot of stuff to deal with there.

Despite these negative experiences with uncertainty, Natalie was determined to come to terms with them and avoid falling into another "binding" ideology. She said that after coming out of such a "black and white world where you just took the bullet list that was given to you," certainty was no longer appealing to her. She had first sought out nonreligious communities like the Sunday Assembly to cultivate a replacement for the religious certainties she lost, but "[t]hen I realized that's not at all what I want, I don't ever want that again. I don't ever want this just, like, constructed community that's this arbitrary, binding thing." Natalie continues to experience her uncertainty as stressful and disorienting, but it is an uncertainty she sees as hard won through years of being consumed by anxiety-filled existential doubt and experiencing painful cleavages from her religious friends and family. She now uses her increasing comfort with uncertainty to question boundedness in other areas of her life. For example, she and her husband recently decided to open their marriage and are now in a polyamorous relationship, a move she describes as positive and enriching. She said the mindset that brought her to atheism also brought her to question other "arbitrary constructs" in her life: "The same thing happened with monogamy. Like about a year ago, we just started asking, 'Wait, why?'"

It is here that Natalie's narrative begins to map onto the narratives of uncertainty detailed by Kurt and Patrick. For all three, an uncertain and questioning nonreligion was an active choice made in the context of numerous other, more certain, options. While uncertainty comes "naturally" for some, and for others uncertainty is understood as a necessary discomfort, these narratives show how uncertainty can be more than just a means to a more certain end—it can be a meaningful end in itself. For some, like Natalie, this uncertainty can lead to mental anxiety and physical distress, as much of the literature on religious disaffiliation predicts (e.g., May 2018), but it is important not to assume that Natalie's only available solution is to come to a more certain religious or nonreligious set of beliefs. By finding ways of "being comfortable with uncertainty," Natalie, Kurt, and Patrick exemplify an intentional uncertainty that is central to the expression of their nonreligion, actively chosen, and experienced as a meaningful framework for orienting their beliefs and actions.

These narratives also reveal how identity certainty/uncertainty and belief certainty/uncertainty can combine in complex ways. For example, Natalie and Kurt both felt confident in their identity as atheists, but they defined that atheism as being grounded in questioning and uncertainty about their existential beliefs and moral commitments. In contrast, Beth, Trista, and Amy, who were also certain about their nonreligious identities, attributed much more certainty to their atheist beliefs. Often times, certainty or uncertainty in one domain influenced certainty and uncertainty in other domains. In other narratives, like the ones detailed in the next section, people described both their nonreligious identities *and* their nonreligious beliefs as being uncertain.

LIVING IN THE GRAY ZONE: STATES, NOT TRAITS

The narratives described so far come from nonreligious individuals who, at the time of our interview, felt they had come to a fairly consistent orientation to certainty or uncertainty surrounding their nonreligion. This does not mean these orientations will never change, but their current narratives are centered on certainty or uncertainty as more stable and trait-like orientations, which often informs their orientation to other identities and attitudes.

In contrast, other interviewees talked about being in what some people called "gray zones," in which they experienced certainty and uncertainty more like transitory states that they expected to change in the foreseeable future. Some of the earlier quotes have already provided evidence of this. Trista, Amy, and Beth all detailed states of questioning and uncertainty as they transitioned between more trait-like orientations to certainty-filled theism and atheism, and Natalie described how she sought out a more bounded and certain nonreligious belief system for a few years before becoming disillusioned by "binding" systems of any kind. These examples show how orientations to uncertainty and certainty can change over time, and they can be experienced as transitory states and as stable traits.

Terrance is an example of someone who had a more state-like experience with certainty and uncertainty at the time I spoke with him. Terrance described his nonreligious identity as being very much in flux, although he *does* believe there is some "ultimate truth" out there to find. In this way, he differs from people like Kurt, Patrick, and Natalie who are not seeking out one final answer or framework. And Terrance, a non-assembler who hesitates to put a label around his nonreligious identity, is willing to get creative and experiment with new ideas in what he calls this "quest for the truth." He describes his various experiences with religion and phases of questioning as periods of "moving upward and outward." Sometimes he feels as if he is working toward a single truth, or moving "upward"; other times he feels the need to expand by moving "outward":

> So I think I'm moving upwards, but at times in life, if I'm stagnant, then I feel like I have to move outwards a little bit. You know, sometimes I feel like I've found the answer, and I'll stay there for a bit, but then something shifts, and I go out questing again. . . . I think it's like a day-to-day experience with me. Because like, some days it's just like nothing happens, you know, I might not leave the house or something, and it's just such like a blank day that like it doesn't even come into question, you know what I mean? I don't even think about it. And then some days, you know, something really good or really bad happens and then it comes into question, like, "What's going on? Is this a greater plan or is it just random?"

Terrance believes that if he moves upward too fast, he will risk coming to an incomplete truth. As a result, his "quest" is an intentionally slow and often haphazard search for truth and certainty. He described periods throughout his life where he would explore new philosophies, like Buddhism or agnosticism, or a

month-long stint where he seriously considered joining the Mormon Church. He sees each branch in his journey as a necessary detour to reaching his final conclusions: "I'm not afraid of failure and taking new risks. And I think that's a big part of my spiritual experiences, it's just like diving in. . . . My path isn't set in stone."

Many interviewees experienced a version of what Terrance described. Some were still questing for answers; others had largely ended their quest but described it as a formative part of their nonreligious identity and a necessary step for everyone to take. For example, non-assembler and atheist Josh said that being in a "gray zone" of curiosity and uncertainty was an essential step for him, and he joked that he had taken the easy way out by coming to atheism and ending that phase:

> So, yeah, that's an essential step. I spent several years of my life in that area, in what I want to say was a gray zone. I think that my having gotten to the point at which I claim to be an atheist is a result of all those years of curiosity and my inability to place a framework around it. So, and maybe that was an easy way out, saying, "Well, I'm an atheist because I don't want to spend the next 70 years of my life being agnostic. Like, I'm fine with this!" I don't know, I guess I've not gone to that level of self-reflection. But I think that's an absolutely essential area for people to explore.

Whereas Terrance and Josh narrativize these "gray zones" as extended periods of actively "questing" for a more certain framework, and Terrance described how he continues to move between certainty and uncertainty frequently, Veronica is currently standing more in a zone of indifference. Veronica, a non-assembler who describes herself as "nothing in particular," explained that she never found a nonreligious label that fit because, as she put it, "I'm really just nothing." She does not engage with any religious or nonreligious groups, and she rarely thinks about her perspective on existential questions related to religion or the afterlife. She said she is open to the possibility of anything, but when her friends tell her that makes her an agnostic, she disagrees. She said, "I find that most agnostics, or at least the ones I know, they are searching and I'm not really searching or hoping to find anything." Like atheism, agnosticism also comes with identity standards that nonreligious people define their identities in relation to. However, when I asked her if that meant she would always be "nothing," she expressed an openness to the possibility of becoming more actively engaged or certain, either religiously or nonreligiously, at some point in the future:

> I'm definitely nothing right now, but I wouldn't say that I'm stuck there because I'm always looking at different possibilities of things. . . . You know, I just think until I stumble down the path of where I think I belong, I'm going to be in that box. And whether or not I come out of it is yet to be seen. It could be that I hear something that sparks an interest and I might say, "This fits for me." But I haven't found it yet. I feel like I'm kind of in this gray zone. There's all this stuff swirling around me, but nothing's really grabbing me.

Narratives like these reveal the ways some nonreligious individuals can move in and out of states of certainty and uncertainty regarding their nonreligious beliefs and identities over time (see Wright 2010). Unlike Terrance and Josh, whose quest for certainty and truth was central to their sense of self, Veronica's uncertainty was less central to her daily life, although she felt she might shift to a more affirmative and certain set of beliefs in the future. And while Josh said his quest had ultimately ended with a fairly certainty-filled atheist identity and set of beliefs, Terrance still experienced different levels of uncertainty and certainty on an almost daily basis. In line with other work that finds day-to-day contexts matter for if and how existential questions are engaged (see Kucinskas et al. 2017), these narratives highlight the often fluid nature of

certainty and uncertainty and the ways many people narrate their lives as moving between meaningful states of both over time.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Findings

In an analysis of 50 individual narratives of nonreligious identity formation, I examined the meaning of certainty and uncertainty surrounding nonreligious beliefs and identities in the United States. I found that nonreligious identities like atheism and agnosticism are contested in the public sphere, and individuals interpret their own identity narratives in light of politicized discourses found within the growing field of atheist, humanist, and other secularist organizations (Kettell 2014; Quack 2014). Some prominent secular groups espouse an identity politics that promotes an assertive and anti-religious atheism (LeDrew 2015), but many nonreligious individuals are hesitant to put such strict boundaries around their identity and beliefs. The call to "come out" and embody a narrowly defined and politicized identity, which characterizes many identity-based movements, can be empowering, but it can also marginalize and misrepresent (Bernstein 2005; Butler 1990). This study suggests the same is true among the nonreligious.

In the context of nonreligious identity politics, certainty has become part of a politicized narrative constructing and promoting bounded, "certainty-filled" nonreligious identities associated with a specific set of politics and values. I encountered several nonreligious individuals who described their own nonreligious identities and beliefs in ways that resonate with these certainty-filled discourses, but I also met people who developed counter-narratives of intentional uncertainty, often as a means of resisting these more certainty-filled orientations and identities. And I found others who were simply indifferent to the dominant, politicized nonreligious identity narratives developed by movement leaders. Taken together, the narratives I encountered begin to delineate the meanings and lived experiences of certainty and uncertainty among the nonreligious.

Implications for the Study of Uncertainty in Contemporary Life

These findings have several important implications for how social scientists think about uncertainty in the contemporary context. First, my findings point toward a more refined conceptual understanding of how orientations to certainty and uncertainty shape identity and belief development. Much of the social scientific research in this area characterizes self-uncertainty as negative and something to be avoided because it is anxiety-inducing and cognitively taxing (Arkin et al. 2010). Because of this, it is often assumed that individuals will ultimately seek out group identifications and "world-maintaining" belief systems to reduce uncertainty and gain access to stable identity standards and worldviews (Berger 1967; Burke and Stets 2009; Hogg 2010). In contrast, I find that both the desire for and meaning of certainty can vary, within and across individuals. Some of the nonreligious people I interviewed did seek out political or social groups to collectively affirm their nonreligious beliefs and worldviews, but others avoided any kind of bounded group or ideology, much of which was shaped by the politicization of identity among prominent nonreligious organizations.

Implications for Studies of the Link between Identity and Action

Second, my findings point to the importance of the context surrounding experiences of certainty and uncertainty and how the centrality and salience of nonreligion moderates the effects of certainty and uncertainty on attitudes and actions. Some scholars argue that people have relatively stable, trait-like orientations toward certainty and uncertainty (e.g., Szeto and Sorrentino 2010), suggesting that people are either comfortable with uncertainty or they are not. I find that not only do people operate on a spectrum of orientations

toward uncertainty, but those orientations can and do change over time. And as people's orientations to certainty and uncertainty change, so too do the various negative and positive effects they experience. Some of my interviewees believed certainty was on the horizon and they would come to a more stable and certain perspective after a temporal phase of uncertainty, but for others, uncertainty was a way of life they achieved after rejecting a more "bounded" approach to religion or nonreligion. And for others, orientations toward uncertainty and "ultimate truths" shifted on an almost day-to-day basis.

Consistent with sociological conceptions of identities as varying in centrality and salience (Snow and McAdam 2000; Stryker and Serpe 1994), I also find that whether or not certainty or uncertainty motivated nonreligious people's actions is shaped by the relative saliency of nonreligion in their lives. Certainty or uncertainty was central to and actively cultivated in some nonreligious narratives, but the levels of certainty surrounding one's nonreligious identity was less of a concern to others. I am not suggesting my analysis can determine if people are perpetually inclined toward uncertainty or certainty, but I do believe a narrative analysis can reveal the processes through which people come to see themselves as moving between more and less permanent states of both over time.

Implications for Studies of Religious Disaffiliation

Third, this study contributes to a growing line of research about the personal and social effects of uncertainty, especially in regard to the rising rates of religious disaffiliation in the United States. Religious involvement has long been associated with higher levels of pro-social activities like volunteerism and community activism, as well as positive social and physical health benefits (see Lewis et al. 2013; May 2018), so concerns about the health of our citizens and social institutions is a common frame for research on the causes and consequences of religious disaffiliation. Recent quantitative research has found that more committed forms of nonreligion, like atheism, can motivate civic engagement and positive mental health outcomes in the same ways as committed religious identities, but agnostics and more uncertain "nones" are often less involved in civic life and more likely to experience anxiety and depression (Baker et al. 2018; Frost and Edgell 2018; May 2018).

Using in-depth qualitative examinations of nonreligious identity narratives, this study shows that uncertainty carries complex meanings for nonreligious people. Social isolation and anxiety did characterize some of the nonreligious narratives in my study, but many more narratives described positive and intentionally cultivated uncertainty that was experienced as a *freedom from* former anxieties and isolation. I was able to examine questions regarding when and why states of uncertainty were exciting and motivating, when and why uncertainty resulted in anxiety and depression, and whether uncertainty was a newfound state or a more permanent trait-like aspect of someone's approach to meaning. I found that these questions matter for how uncertainty is experienced, and I detailed examples of positive aspects of uncertainty and how some individuals actively cultivate it in their lives.

Implications for Studies of Political Identity

Finally, this analysis offers new insights into the effects of identity politics and the ways people "sort out and combine" contested sources of collective identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001). As other scholars have found, identity movements often promote narrowly focused movement identities that spur the development of more critical identities deployed in opposition (e.g., Bernstein 1997). This is also the case among the nonreligious, and I found that uncertainty is a key characteristic of the more critical nonreligious belief identities I encountered. In opposition to a more certain atheism promoted by prominent secular organizations, there is a growing

defense of uncertainty and fluidity as an equally valid framework for doing atheism and other forms of nonreligion.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should thus pay attention to the distinct narratives of certainty and uncertainty surrounding identity movement scripts. As I detailed, the nonreligious are an interesting case in this regard because nonreligious identity politics are about both identity certainty *and* certainty about existential beliefs. For example, to take on the label "agnostic" says something about both your nonreligious identity in relation to other nonreligious identities and your level of existential uncertainty about the existence of a god or an afterlife. However, orientations to certainty and uncertainty matter for contested identities of all types. Scholarship on identity politics often suggests that identity movements succeed, at least in part, because they provide a kind of certainty that is attractive to late-modern subjects (for a review, see Snow and McAdam 2000).

However, I have shown how certainty and the desire for it are shaped by social and political contexts. Whether people call themselves an environmentalist (Tesch and Kempton 2004) or a feminist (Reger 2015), for example, and whether they engage in political action on the basis of those identities, has as much to do with their current orientations toward certainty and how central those orientations are to their sense of self as it has to do with their politics or values. And individuals who *are* seeking out certainty might find the dominant narrative of certainty and its associated politics surrounding an identity to be incompatible with their values, pushing them to seek out alternative narratives of certainty *or* uncertainty.

This analysis focuses on orientations to uncertainties associated with nonreligious beliefs and identities, but my interview participants embody numerous other intersecting identities that they might approach with more or less certainty than they ascribe to their nonreligion. I encountered people who described their nonreligion as being associated with certainties or uncertainties in other areas of life, from politics to polyamory, and future research should investigate the cultural work that goes into combining identities with varying levels of engagement, certainty, and fluidity. Are people more inclined to approach all of their identities with similar levels of certainty or uncertainty, or do they rely on certainty in some identities to allow for the exploration of uncertainty in others (see DeMarree et al. 2007)?

The lack of racial and economic diversity in my sample is an important limitation when considering such questions, as power and privilege shape the meaning and distribution of fluidity and uncertainty (Butler 1990; Sandoval 2000). The narratives included in this study come largely from white, middle-class, and formerly Christian U.S. citizens, so they cannot speak to the intersections of racism, classism, and xenophobia that so often shape if and when uncertainty is experienced as a choice or option. Future research should build on this gap to explore the intersection of social location and uncertainty within different narratives to further investigate how our modern institutions and discourses shape identity and belief construction processes, which include various orientations to and experiences with certainty and uncertainty.

Future research should also investigate how specific contexts and life experiences influence orientations toward certainty and uncertainty. My analysis is based on interviews with nonreligious people from a specific region—the Midwestern United States—at one point in time, so I cannot speak to how region and cultural context might influence orientations to uncertainty. Research suggests that the number and types of nonreligious groups vary by region in the United States (García and Blankholm 2016), and uncertainty orientations vary by culture (Szeto and Sorrentino 2010). Thus, future research should investigate whether different regional contexts promote or constrain different orientations to certainty and uncertainty. Similarly, my

analysis starts to flesh out differences between nonreligious people who join secular, identity-affirming groups and those who do not, as well as differences between people who are formerly religious and those who have always been nonreligious, but these comparisons are necessarily limited by the small sample size of my interviews.

However, I did find that the formerly religious in my study were just as prone to seek out uncertainty as the never religious; in fact, the formerly religious were often some of the most adamant proponents of uncertainty. And I did not find that people who joined the organization my research is centered on, the Sunday Assembly, had distinct orientations to uncertainty. Some people who joined were searching for certainty, others joined for its openness to new ideas but found too much certainty there and left. And while many of the "non-joiners" I interviewed expressed an openness to uncertainty, this was not always the case, and some chose not to join nonreligious groups because they had already come to certain conclusions about their beliefs and moved on.

In conclusion, narratives from the growing nonreligious demographic in the United States reveal a complex landscape of certainty and uncertainty. Much of the social scientific theorizing about uncertainty characterizes it as negative and anxiety-inducing, but also as one of the "defining challenges of modern life" (Arkin et al. 2010:1). As such, it is important to gain a more thorough understanding of what it means to be uncertain and the ways that orientations toward uncertainty and certainty are constructed, experienced, and politicized in everyday life. If we assume people are always seeking out certainty, we might overlook new and emerging ways that modern individuals are making sense of their lives by constructing and further developing their "cosmic imaginary" (Taylor 2007) through finding meaning in uncertainty.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the *ASR* editors and anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank Penny Edgell and members of the Culture Club reading group at the University of Minnesota for feedback on numerous versions of this paper.

Funding

This project was supported by a dissertation fellowship through the Edelstein Foundation and a research grant from the Anna Welsch Bright Memorial Fund.

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Notes

1. The city has been anonymized and participants have been given pseudonyms in attempts to protect participant confidentiality.
2. These texts include *God is Not Great* (2007) by Christopher Hitchens, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2005) by Sam Harris, *The God Delusion* (2006) by Richard Dawkins, and *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006) by Daniel Dennett (for examinations of the New Atheist movement, see Kettell 2014; LeDrew 2015).

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