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'Not that kind of atheist': scepticism as a lifestyle movement

Jonathan Simmons

Department of Sociology, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

ABSTRACT

This article examines atheist activists from a lifestyle movement perspective. I focus on how atheist activists adopt the term 'sceptic' as a distinct identity marker to represent their growing interest in other types of activism beyond atheist community building and criticism of religious beliefs. My data come from thirty-five interviews with Canadian atheist activists and participant observation in the province of Alberta. In contrast to previous social movement approaches to atheist activism, I deemphasize the importance of collective identity and instead attend to personal identity as the site of social change. My findings show that being a sceptic is a personally meaningful identity in the context of a relatively weak secularist collective identity. Moreover, atheist activists who also identify as sceptics wish to expand the boundaries of the atheist movement to include individualistic projects of personal affirmation based on science and critical thinking. This work contributes to our understanding of the everyday activities of activists who engage in individual action in the absence of a strong collective identity. In particular, this article expands our understanding of lifestyle movements beyond the current focus on socially conscious consumption. Instead, I return to the roots of lifestyle movement theory, that is, how one's everyday choices serve as a form of protest. Finally, this work contributes to atheism scholarship, which has neglected the diversity of individual identities within atheist organisations and among atheist activists.

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I guess I'm an activist, but for me, atheism and scepticism are just about being more rational. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, right? It's not more complicated than that. – AJ (age 29)

Empirical studies of secularist or atheist activism in Canada are relatively uncommon and new, with only a handful of Canadian scholars studying atheists in general, let alone from a social movement perspective (e.g. Beaman, 2015; Stahl, 2015; Tomlins, 2016). Drawing on the insights of recent social movement theory, particularly scholarship concerned with lifestyles and everyday actions, I contribute to this scant literature on Canadian atheism by describing how some secularists integrate Western secular and scientific values into a personalised politics focused on living a well-reasoned life. My central argument is that some secularists de-emphasise the role of non-belief in their lives, prefer the identity marker 'sceptic' to 'atheist,' and eschew atheist pride for a broader worldview.

This article's concern with scepticism derives in part from the emergence of a cultural movement known as 'new atheism.' New atheism is a vague umbrella term, but it typically describes a literary

genre that began with the release of Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* (2004). Several other new atheist books followed, including Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* (2006), Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (2006), and Christopher Hitchens's *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007). Scholarly interest in new atheism and the flourishing of more visible forms of non-religion has resulted in a robust literature about atheist identity and activism.

Within the context of both secularist activism and scholars' focus on atheists, the words 'sceptic' and 'scepticism' refer to what some adherents view as a distinct but related identity and philosophy concerned with scientific inquiry and the debunking of modern beliefs in conspiracies, magic, the supernatural, and scientifically impossible phenomena. Indeed, some prominent sceptics have exposed psychics, spiritualists and mediums (Randi, 1988). More recently, in early 2008, physicist Simon Singh wrote an article critical of chiropractic medicine for *The Guardian* (Singh, 2016). The British Chiropractic Association (BCA) subsequently sued him for libel. Two years later, the organisation withdrew its lawsuit due, in part, to the actions of sceptics (Nattrass, 2013; Riesch & Mendel, 2014). The Singh libel case is just one example of public secularist activism shaped by scepticism and more general current of anti-supernaturalism among atheists. As a means of understanding the ideologies that undergird contemporary atheism, scepticism is worth examining in its own right, but this article's primary concern is with how secularists experience their politics and values, integrating movement goals into multiple aspects of their daily lives.

Previous studies of atheism have investigated the social movement dynamics of secularist activism in several contexts and a growing body of research focuses on how atheists' identities manifest collectively (Guenther & Mulligan, 2013; Smith, 2013). Unfortunately, research remains limited about variations in individual identities, and how secularist organisations manage identity differences. Given that new forms of social movements tend to be segmented and polycentric (Turner, 2013), it is surprising that scholarly interest in intra-movement conflicts among secularists is limited mainly to discussions of political clashes (i.e. the de-platforming of bloggers, whether atheists should denigrate religion, and the role of social justice activism in the movement [Kettell, 2014]). In response to a lacuna in research, this article highlights some internal divisions within the secularist community concerning individual identity differences, while additionally examining my participants' frustration with conventional atheism and their desire for a more robust movement.

Researchers have discussed the 'conversion' process of becoming an atheist, coinciding with a greater appreciation of scientific and secular explanations of the world (Smith, 2013). Nevertheless, the identity formation processes of 'active' atheists are heterogeneous, and collective identity is a crucial element in these processes. Stephen LeDrew (2013) argues, however, that atheism may not follow 'traditional structure-centered approaches' to collective action. Given that secularist activism is 'identity-based,' most scholarship concerns the role that secularist organisations play in atheist collective identity construction. The literature's narrow focus on movement organisations is understandable given the relatively recent 'awakening' among atheists, as seen in the growth of nonbeliever organisations across the United States (Cimino & Smith, 2014; Langston, Hammer, & Cragun, 2015).

Although this article builds on past social movement approaches to atheism, the secularist organisations featured in this study were diffuse and segmented. Few of the secularists had engaged in organised activism, and most expressed limited identification with local groups or the broader community of secularists. For many of my participants, disagreement about identity, the definition of 'atheism' itself, and how to do secularist activism was the norm. This independent-mindedness is consistent with the atheism literature, but American atheists make their independence part of their collective identities and engage in organised collective action (Smith, 2013). Unlike their American counterparts, the Canadian secularists featured in this study embraced an approach to activism more typical of lifestyle movements.

In this theoretically informed and empirically based study, I rely on Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones's (2012) conceptualisation of lifestyle movements as a 'loosely bound [collectivity] in which participants advocate lifestyle change' as a primary means to social change (p. 14). Although a sense of *we-ness* is important to lifestyle movements, the collective identity may be relatively weak in comparison to

conventional social movements. The empirical work in this paper serves to complement the rich case study work concerning atheists, as well as helping to flesh out nuanced implications of lifestyle movement theory.

In addition to providing a lifestyle movement approach to secularist activism, this article contributes to the limited but growing focus on atheists in Canada. Qualitative research concerning atheists focuses on the American context for reasons that include the influence of the Christian Right and more general anti-atheist sentiment in some US states. Although research on atheism in Canada is limited, atheism does appear to be growing, which is consistent with other trends in first world countries (Cipriani & Garelli, 2016). I do not intend to compare Canadian and American atheists, but my broader findings complement the work of other Canadian scholars who find allusions to 'Canadian politeness' and a more general interest in community-building than confrontational activism. Throughout the analysis, I show that in the absence of American 'patriotic atheism,' some Canadian secularists nevertheless make use of U.S. atheist discourses, and express views comparable to what US scholars have identified as the growth of libertarian rationalism within the movement (e.g. LeDrew, 2015). This 'radical individualism' correlated with my participants' emphasis on personal identities as the primary site of social change (Lorenzen, 2012; Portwood-Stacer, 2012).

Lifestyle movements

The differences between the sceptics featured in this study and other secularist activists are primarily meaningful at the individual level. Most of my participants saw their activism as a personal and everyday project involving thinking like scientists, eliminating delusions and wishful thinking, and taking responsibility for educating others about the dangers of scientific misinformation and pseudoscience. This personalised politics is consistent with lifestyle movement scholarship that emphasises the affective, intimate, and ethical elements of individualised activism.

Lifestyle movements are relatively diffuse, promoting a more ground-up form of activism concerned with everyday practices. Activists' individual actions create new opportunities for social change, and many social movements sustain themselves through the everyday choices of individuals submerged in informal networks (Dobernig & Stagl, 2015). Within these networks, activists interact with one another through mutual influence (Mansbridge & Flaster, 2007).

Lifestyles can and do lead to collective participation in the public sphere, even in the absence of contentious politics, but they more often result in personalised forms of social change. For example, recent social movement research has highlighted the importance of consumers acting individually and the consequent rise of socially conscious consumption (e.g. Cherry, 2015). Similarly, lifestyle activists engage in a personalised politics that emphasises a 'commitment to live consistently, according to certain principles within and across societal roles' (Micheletti & Stolle, 2010).

Given that lifestyles assist in organising self-identity and self-expression, recent lifestyle movement scholarship has understandably focused on consumption practices, that is, consumer goods and their relationship to identity (Lorenzen, 2012). Although conscious consumption played a role in my participants' lives, this article focuses on their quests for integrity, attempts to differentiate themselves from other secularists, and their private, individualised, everyday activism.

Data and methods

The material for this study comes from a two-year project focused on Canadian secularist activism in the province of Alberta (the so-called 'Bible Belt of Canada').¹ I followed a qualitative case study research design to investigate the phenomenon of secularist activism in-depth, using multiple methods of data collection (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016; Snow & Trom, 2002). I used participant observation and semi-structured interviews as my primary data collection methods. I transcribed data from all participants, which I then analysed through open coding in NVivo [10], a qualitative data storage and coding software. I then categorised open codes into a more structured coding scheme.

I drew my core participants from a larger sample of fifty secularists from several atheist organisations in Alberta with a combined offline and online membership of over 1500 people.² I conducted 35 semi-structured interviews, focusing on secularists who were involved with at least one secularist organisation. My sample included 16 women and 19 men, ranging from ages 20 to 63. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and focused on secularist identity and activism. Additionally, I asked about my participants' views concerning science, their political leanings, stigma and the persecution of atheists, and various secularist labels (including sceptic, secular humanist, rationalist, and freethinker).

The largest Edmonton group was the Society of Edmonton Atheists (SEA), in which I conducted the bulk of my participant observation because it had the most events, featured more prominently than other groups in the local media, and had established relationships with other organisations in Canada. SEA eventually came to dominate my thinking on secularist organisations in the area. I conducted my earliest interviews with people in two other organisations: The University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics (UAAA) and the Greater Edmonton Sceptics Society (GESS). I chose the former because of its typicality as a University secularist club. I chose the latter because of its exceptionality, given that its participants distinguished the group from other secularist organisations in the region, even though overlap between groups was common.

Half of my participants associated themselves with SEA as their primary organisation, most had past and present involvement with other organisations (UAAA and GESS). Given a significant amount of overlap among groups both regarding the issues and the activists involved, I found it difficult to impose classifications. For example, the members of GESS spent as much, if not more time, discussing religion than the members of SEA. Nevertheless, I categorised members according to their organisational affiliations even as I saw the same people at various events. Later, I de-emphasised such categorisations, as more members of my sample revealed that they did not place importance on their membership to particular organisations, even if they went to some length in distinguishing 'sceptic' groups from 'atheist' groups.

The majority of my participants had some level of postsecondary education, with many possessing an undergraduate degree or higher. Since UAAA was a university club, all of my interviewees from the group were enrolled in undergraduate degrees, though (over the course of my research) several left the group to join other organisations. SEA's executive talked about making a UAAA a satellite group, but this idea never manifested. Concerning religious traditions, most had a Christian background. Two participants had grown up in explicitly atheist or agnostic households. Two participants had Muslim backgrounds, one had Neopaganism affiliations, and another identified as culturally Jewish. Most of my participants identified as 'left' or 'liberal,' although I noticed a developing consensus that local groups contained many libertarians.

Scepticism

Although scepticism has a long history in philosophy, most prominent self-described sceptics associate modern scepticism with Martin Gardner's *In the Name of Science: An Entertaining Survey of the High Priests and Cultists of Science, Past and Present* (1952). Gardner surveyed a variety of pseudosciences, including Flat and Hollow Earth theories, UFO cults, dowsing, Atlantis and various forms of what we now call complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), such as homeopathy, osteopathy and chiropractic.

For most of my participants, scepticism encompassed a distinct form of individualistic activism primarily focused on what they regarded as 'extraordinary claims,'³ which has become an axiom of scepticism (Goertzel & Goertzel, 2015). One can trace this emphasis on extraordinary claims back to the concerns of sceptical societies and other 'rationalist' organisations that supported late nineteenth and early twentieth century efforts to investigate and debunk paranormal claims (Hammer, 2007).

According to the late philosopher Paul Kurtz (1925–2012), who remains an influential figure in secularist discourse, today's scepticism is 'a method of doubt that demands evidence and reasons for hypotheses' (2010, p. 20), with inquiry being the primary goal. In addition to a method of doubt,

Kurtz (2010) described scepticism as an essential part of scientific inquiry that should be extended to ‘all areas of human endeavour, science, everyday life, law, religion and the paranormal, economics, politics, ethics, and society’ (p. 226). Consequently, ‘scientific scepticism’ or sceptical inquiry is positive and constructive, selective and contextual, and based on the everyday practice of wisdom. The term *eupraxsophy* is relevant to this outlook, which is derived from the Greek roots *eu* (good), *praxis* (practice), and *sophia* (wisdom) to refer to a life lived by logic, observation and science (Kurtz, 2010).

As a lifestyle movement, scepticism has two layers (Hammer, 2007, pp. 388–389). The first layer consists of a small number of activist researchers and science writers who act as cultural entrepreneurs or movement ‘authorities’ (Haenfler et al., 2012). Early examples included Kurtz, the magician James Randi (b. 1928), psychologist Ray Hyman (b. 1928), and sociologist Marcello Truzzi (1935–2003). Today, the most active professional sceptic is likely historian Michael Shermer (b. 1954), editor of *Skeptical* magazine. The second layer of scepticism includes more passive secularists who read sceptical literature and attempt to employ scepticism in their everyday lives. My participants were of the second layer, sharing a hobby-like interest in understanding and critiquing pseudoscience and the paranormal.

Several organisations support the work of professional sceptics and provide community and ideological coherence for sceptics. They include the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (abbreviated CSICOP until a rebranding in 2006 to the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry), which is a programme within the non-profit educational organisation Center for Inquiry (CFI); The James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF); and The Skeptic’s Society. In addition to various organisations and their products (such as journals *Skeptical Inquirer* and *Skeptic*), secularists who embrace a sceptical lifestyle engage in self-publishing, blogging, podcasting and remixing various media. YouTube, in particular, is a favourite space for secularist activists enthused about scepticism (Farley, 2009).

In Canada, the largest secular organisation that caters in some fashion to sceptics is CFI Canada, which prioritises human rights, education and critical thinking, as well as science through campaigns such as 10:23, which raises awareness about homeopathy and includes ‘overdoses’ on homeopathic pills to illustrate their ineffectiveness. According to LeDrew (2012), the CFI is in the tradition of ‘scientific atheism,’ which surmises that we can eradicate religion through scientific critique. Outside of CFI Canada, several smaller organisations have catered to sceptic interests over the years, but most exist primarily at the provincial or even municipal level. Few of my participants had affiliations with CFI, and their main entry-point into organised scepticism was limited to Edmonton-area groups. Despite having limited national representation, many of my participants made regular ‘pilgrimages’ to The Amazing Meeting (TAM), an annual scepticism conference in Las Vegas, Nevada, sponsored by the JREF.

Although all of the secularists I interviewed belonged to at least one secularist organisation and attended atheist and sceptic conferences in Western Canada when possible, they only occasionally engaged in typical social movement behaviour – marching, and protesting on behalf of various causes related to their interests, such as protesting a TV psychic, challenging complementary and alternative medicine, and so on. They were reticent to organise, suspicious of group identifications, and weary of what one participant described as ‘tribalism’ within the movement.

Being a sceptic

My participants sometimes used the terms ‘skepticism’ and ‘atheism’ interchangeably, even if they acknowledged that scepticism had a distinct mission, organisational history, and ‘culture.’ Some secularists were more discriminating, viewing atheism as a position and scepticism as a way of life. To illustrate this distinction, one of the more common phrases I encountered during my fieldwork was ‘Not all atheists are sceptics, not all sceptics are atheists,’ speaking to the perception among some secularists that scepticism is a distinct movement (e.g. Loxton, 2013).

Although my participants emphasised the importance of their scepticism and distinguished themselves from ‘naïve atheists’ (one participants’ term for secularists who lacked a broader and more

sceptical worldview), they were loosely networked, and only occasionally engaged with formal organisations. One explanation for my participants' limited valuing of organisations is that even though all of the groups featured in my study embraced elements of scientific scepticism, only one made scepticism the group's primary focus, that is, the Greater Edmonton Sceptics' Society (GESS). In the absence of more sceptic-specific groups, my participants found community in other secularist organisations (e.g. SEA). As one participant explained, the distinction between atheism and scepticism is mainly semantic:

I don't see a difference, to be honest, but I do remember when everyone started talking about new atheism. A lot of sceptics were pretty annoyed because Dawkins [and other prominent atheists] were treading on their turf, using scientific arguments to challenge religion. Today, we all basically do the same thing and challenge all forms of pseudoscience. (Marco, age 26)

The notion that atheists and sceptics are the same finds some support in non-religion scholarship, where the distinctions that secularists make between the two identity markers seem incidental to literature's greater emphasis on collective identities.

Despite multiple self-representations, many secularists place significant emphasis on science, the scientific method, and the pursuit of knowledge. In his typology of non-religion, Cotter (2015) described 'The Naturalistic Type,' referring to those secularists who have an aversion to faith, share a 'materialistic' outlook, and emphasise a lack of evidence when it comes to the possible existence of God or gods. Scepticism is central to the Naturalistic Type in the sense that secularists have a high degree of 'doubtfulness,' hence Johannes Quack's (2011) observation about organised rationalism in India:

The notion 'ideology of doubt' captures, therefore, what the rationalists aim at evoking within their fellow Indians. Yet, it refers also to a rhetorical element within their self-perception that stresses the openness of rationalism and those who try to spread it against the dogmas of religions and the stubbornness of their representativeness. (p. 274)

Given the parallels between my participants' scepticism and the Naturalistic Type, I considered using Cotter's typology, but my participants' naturalism (and ideology of doubt) extended beyond conventional atheism and a scientific positionality regarding religion or other spiritual realities.

My participants thought their actions had a social purpose, but they emphasised the individual, and mostly private, aspects of their scepticism, providing a second possible explanation for their casual relationships with Edmonton-area organisations. As Pat (age 34) explained, sceptics aren't 'team players.' Putting a more positive spin on sceptics' individualism, Will (age 29) argued that scepticism is a 'private thing, and [organisations] are more like social hubs than anything else.' In addition to downplaying the importance of local organisations, my participants shared an ambivalent and contested relationship with the broader movement, at times distancing themselves from American atheism; prominent figures in the movement, e.g. Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens and Dennett; and organised activism. For example, Will questioned the *movementness* of secularist activism:

Mostly, we just do our own thing, you know? You could call us activists if you wanted, but really, what does that mean? I think it's super personal. When was the last time you saw atheists or sceptics marching? I mean, it would be kind of fun, but we're so different. Like, what unites us? Not believing in God and thinking Bigfoot is silly?

Like participants in other lifestyle movements, the views of individual secularists varied considerably regarding how secularist activism should look at the macro level, leading to disagreements about the best approach to cultivating identities per their principles.

Although some secularists were satisfied with the direction of atheist activism and its scientific analysis of religion (e.g. scientific atheism [LeDrew, 2015]), many were not, and attempted to distance themselves from what they referred to as naïve or 'dictionary atheists,' referring to those atheists who lacked an interest in scepticism. Ryan (age 31) described dictionary atheists to me as part of his larger critique of local activism:

I'm a skeptic first and an atheist second, you know? I doubt you will find anyone who hates religion as much as me – I am more of an anti-theist than anything. But, it's not enough to just be an atheist. We don't live in a theocracy, right?

Ryan's frustrations with the perceived myopia of secularist activism in Edmonton was a frequent observation and complaint among my interviewees, who found their personal projects more engaging than the broader discourse of secularist activism, including the works of the new atheists.

Despite their involvement in secularist organisations and their attachment to an imagined community of like-minded individuals, many of my interviewees had reservations about what they variously described as 'organised atheism,' the 'atheist movement,' or 'new atheism.' Raj (age 33), for example, was critical of what he called a 'cult of personality' regarding the 'leaders' of the movement (e.g. Dawkins):

[We] atheists can be very taken in by the cult of the personality. You know, so you have in atheist groups themselves, you have people completely taken by certain figures without even questioning them.

Raj was particularly concerned that atheists' lack of scepticism about claims outside of religion. Speaking of this desire for more critical thinking from atheists, Sean (age 34) thought anti-supernaturalism and an emphasis on critical thinking should take priority over atheism, broadening the vision of the movement:

There are huge number of atheists that are incredibly dogmatic about their beliefs; that are incredibly unfair and unrealistic about what other people think; about treating the arguments for certain positions a certain way; who are great at straw-manning and all these sorts of things that just sort of prop up their own position without ever making sure their own position is the correct position.

Of particular note in some critiques of atheism, many interviewees felt that conventional atheist activism had run its course, especially given the growth of religious 'nones' in the census, and what they saw as the decline of religion in the Western world.

In addition to distancing themselves from conventional atheists, many secularists emphasised the importance of individualism to scepticism, linking their Enlightenment ideology to lifestyle approaches to activism. For example, Terry (age 43) talked about scepticism's important role in avoiding tribalism: 'To be a good skeptic, I think you have to kind of dislike organising, groups, tribes. You have to take a libertarian approach.' Similarly, Raj (age 33) thought sceptics were 'natural libertarians.' Although secularists share some ideological features that lend themselves to individualism (LeDrew, 2015), my participants' focus on individual change in aggregate is consistent with previous work on lifestyle movements, such as vegetarianism, virginity pledgers and the locavore movement (Haenfler et al., 2012).

Although many conventional atheists adopt a libertarian individualism, particularly in the United States (LeDrew, 2015), my participants were concerned primarily with attempts to make atheism 'into a religion,' with events like Sunday Assembly, which mimic the communal experiences of a church for the non-religious. Despite being pleased with the growth of atheism, Connor (age 27) criticised his fellow secularists for attempting to provide secular alternatives to religious institutions and activities:

We are not here to provide people with community or 'religion-lite.' You can join the Unitarian Universalists if you want that. We're supposed to be about critical thinking and challenging dogma, but it seems like all anyone wants to do is prove to everyone that atheists are just like everyone else. This attitude also leaks into the politics of atheism.

Connor's reference to the 'politics of atheism,' highlighted a growing tension among secularists over whether the movement should embrace social justice values. This debate escalated with the rise of Atheism Plus (A+), its primary focus being the advancement of a particular form of feminism within the movement (Amarasingam & Brewster, 2016; Simmons, 2017).

Not all of my participants shared an individualistic or libertarian view of scepticism, particularly some members of GESS who identified as 'Marxists' or 'socialists,' and who linked scepticism to a communitarian ethos, even as they acknowledged that organising other secularists was like 'herding cats.' In this communitarian spirit, GESS members wanted to create a space for both nonreligious and religious sceptics to engage in critical thinking. Ryan (age 31) underscored the fact that Martin Gardner, an early founder of contemporary scepticism, believed in God:

It's kind of a myth that you need to be an atheist to be a skeptic. Gardner believed in God, and I've definitely encountered religious people at skeptic events. They may not be evangelicals and Biblical literalists, but they definitely believe in something. Even though I'm an atheist, I think that what makes us different from garden-variety atheists is that we welcome everyone.

Although my participants discussed efforts to welcome theists into GESS, I did not encounter any religious skeptics during my fieldwork, and most 'leaders' and members of sceptic organisations are atheists, even if some groups do not present themselves as explicitly atheistic (Hammer, 2007; Mendham, 2011).

Although some secularists emphasised the importance of community, many more (including members of GESS) were adamant about the importance of private action, applying their scepticism in all areas (including politics), and the immunising properties of individualism concerning ideology. They regularly spoke of autonomy, self-determinism, and being free from the influence of 'groupthink' and group conformity. In other words, they prioritised Enlightenment values over what one participant described as 'collectivism,' suggesting a preference for individual freedoms over communitarian values of diversity, justice, and solidarity (LeDrew, 2015).

Given my participants' ideological emphasis on personal freedoms, their scepticism of ideologies, and their preference for privatised action, building strong personal connections with other Edmonton-area secularists was not particularly relevant to their lives. They mainly focused on sharing ideas through online forums or blogs and social media websites like Facebook. This minimising of organisations is similar to other lifestyle movements, which are more likely to have an 'imagined community,' made up of those who share the same commitments (Haenfler et al., 2012, p. 8). Despite my participants' individualism, they integrated secularist public discourses in their daily lives. As Laura Portwood-Stacer (2012) argues, individualistic activists who feel an affinity with an imagined community can 'see themselves and their activities as part of a larger collective of individuals who are living in similar ways' (p. 7), even if their identity-work manifests as an outsider-based, anti-system ideology.

Participants often discussed the impact of scepticism on their desire for independence and autonomy, linking critical thinking with their attempts to free themselves from dogma and authority structures. In this regard, scepticism is similar other lifestyle movements such as the modern homesteading movement, in that sceptics 'opt out of' of what they see as immoral systems, and distance themselves from anything that resembles those systems (Radke, 2016). At the same time, my participants were optimistic about their lifestyles. Many interviewees thought their individualistic approaches to activism could make the world a better place, by searching for truth throughout their lives and by being exemplars of rational living.

'Doing' scepticism

Regardless of which identity marker my participants preferred, or how they viewed the state of secularist activism, all emphasised the process of adopting scepticism as a lifestyle concerned with the discovery of truth. Despite this commonality, secularists did vary in how they came to scepticism and how their daily activities contributed to their sense of self. For many, atheist groups were a 'gateway drug' to scepticism as a lifestyle:

I'm an atheist, and I advocate for atheism, but after a while, I started noticing just how common nonsense is, whether it's belief in Bigfoot, alien abductions, or the Tarot. I think it's great that I can talk about those issues at atheist groups. But, the longer I do this, the more I realize that it's not about what you think, but how you think, and all of us have – we all have a long way to go. (Serena, age 25)

Serena's description of atheism leading her to a path of thinking critically about a wider variety of issues resonated with my other participants who also linked their irreligiousness with an overall re-evaluation of their beliefs.

Although many secularists came to scepticism through a gradual process, others had more catalytic experiences, or what Elizabeth Cherry (2015) describes as a tipping point in the adoption of a lifestyle. For example, Liz (age 44) described learning about her sister's use of CAM as a cancer treatment as the motivation behind her later interest in scepticism:

Here I am complaining about prayer in public schools while my sister is going on a detox diet to 'cure' her breast cancer. Religion isn't going away, and my concerns seemed so petty and pointless at the time. That's when I started looking into cancer quackery, and one thing led to another.

Although not every story was quite as severe as Liz's experiences with pseudoscience, my other participants did describe 'lightbulb moments' that pushed them to look more deeply into learning about science and critical thinking. As with Cherry's findings regarding vegans, my participants reconstructed their identities around 'moral and ethical issues' (Cherry, 2015, p. 61) that emerged as a consequence of their growing concerns about the harms of pseudoscience. For example, Richie (age 38) described how he became a sceptic after attending a lecture by alternative medicine advocate Deepak Chopra:

The girl I was dating at the time was deep into her Indian spirituality. Even though I was an atheist at that time, I didn't really think atheism was opposed to spirituality. I have a physics background, okay, and so I am sitting there listening to this guy talk about quantum physics, and it suddenly hit me that this guy has no idea of what he was talking about. It was complete and utter nonsense, to the point that it made me wonder if he had ever taken a physics class before. After that, exposing people like Deepak took up way more space in my head than whether we should remove references to God. [from the Canadian national anthem]

Through atheist groups, particularly SEA, Richie found an outlet for his desire to combat pseudoscience and consequently participated in a homeopathy overdose on his YouTube channel.⁴ At the time of the interview, he was considering going back to school to continue his science education with the hope strengthening his commitment to a rational life.

Although most of my interviewees were atheists-turned-sceptics, a minority did not experience much in the way of identity change and lacked the 'light bulb moments' that I described earlier. Rather, they had an early, hobby-like interest in pseudoscience and the paranormal. Unlike the majority of my participants, they were less concerned about the harms attributed to pseudoscience than improving their reasoning skills. Despite their arriving at scepticism through a different process than my other participants, the hobbyists were nonetheless interested in a prefigurative politics, that is, in manifesting a more rational society in their daily choices and activities. In other words, they were not merely satisfied with being 'cheerleaders for science,' as Marco (age 26) elaborated:

I think a lot of people see us as geeks, and that's it, but for me. [...] It's more than just saying 'science is usually right.' It's a process for all of us, a process of refinement in our thinking and also [...] it's about how we see the world. You know? It's easy to dismiss that for some reason as if it's just a fun thing we do on the weekends.

Rather than just seeing his atheism as related to a scientific understanding of the universe, Marco saw himself as well as other secularists as having a responsibility to uphold a worldview that privileges a naturalistic view of reality.

Continuous with Marco's emphasis on personal responsibility, many of my participants emphasised the moral basis of their activism, whether it was a voice against pseudoscience because of its potential harms, or reinforcing a rational worldview. According to Haenfler et al.'s (2012), the primary tactic for many lifestyle movements, particularly those that are critical of consumption practices, includes a quest for personal 'integrity,' and a transformation of their lives for the better. Sasha (age 31) said that following her journey as a sceptic made her happier:

I know it's cheesy, but I see myself as a seeker of truth, and it's actually a lot of fun! A lot of people think skeptics are grouchy, but being skeptical has really helped me with my depression and dealing with life's up and downs.

Sasha described herself as a 'born again' optimist due to her belief that reason could triumph over most problems. Similar expressions of optimism featured heavily in both my interviews and informal conversations. My participants often stressed that rather than leading to disenchantment, science's unveiling of the world opened their eyes to new forms of wonder, enriching their lives.

Although my participants acknowledged the positive impact scepticism had on their daily lives, their identities were shaped by a desire for social change, with many secularists emphasising the mundane aspects of living a rational life. For example, Sienna (age 21) was of the opinion that the 'personal is political' and that 'individuals can change their world' simply by attempting to be a more rational person. Doing 'scepticism' for many secularists consequently involved living a never-ending process of revision – particularly the review of their beliefs. On this account, many interviewees described themselves as 'works in progress,' working on 'being more skeptical,' or 'trying to be more scientific.' For example, Chris (age 24) described his activism as follows:

It's a struggle to integrate skepticism in my life, but I start with simple things. [...] I avoid organic food and stuff like that. [...] I deliberately go for the GMO [genetically modified] stuff. When I'm in [a pharmacy], I always read the claims on the shampoo bottle, not because I'm worried about 'chemicals,' but because I don't want to spend money on silliness. More than anything, it's just me trying to get myself in order because if you slip up at all, skeptics will call you out!

Chris emphasised one-on-one interactions and 'leading by example' when it came to thinking critically about certain issues. When asked about the relationship between his daily choices and activism, Chris admitted to having changed people's minds without necessarily intending to do so: 'It's a slow thing for sure, but I've seen people change. My sister used to believe in all that chakra, energy healing stuff, but now she doesn't.' Other secularists had similar stories about the impact of both passive and active sceptical interventions on others.

Although my participants valued the roles they played in changing minds, much of their enjoyment of scepticism involved cultivating a morally coherent sense of self and supporting influencers who reflected the principles of the broader movement. The notion that they could be positive exemplars of 'good thinking' played a significant role in this identity work, but as Bill (age 43) explained, scepticism was in many ways a 'selfish pursuit':

I think I started being more skeptical to fit in because I had already joined an atheist group and I didn't want people thinking I was dumb. I started looking more into skepticism and various authors who represented the kind of life I wanted to live, like Carl Sagan. It's not just about reading popular science articles, not that there's anything wrong with that, but about making yourself happier through rational thinking.

Rather than just combatting pseudoscience and the paranormal, many secularists like Bill preferred to invest themselves in improving themselves as a kind of self-help, such as learning about cognitive biases, filling gaps in scientific understanding, and developing argumentation skills. Awareness of others who were doing the same in their social networks aided in their continued 'conversion' to scepticism. For example, Bill talked about how his friends in 'the movement' made him a better sceptic by teaching him about the nuances of critical thinking. Although recent scholarship has called into question the theme of critical thinking in new atheism (Cotter, 2017), my participants at the very least valorised scepticism as more productive vehicle to 'truth.'

Beyond living a well-reasoned life, many of my participants emphasised the importance of supporting grassroots skepticism. In practice, this support involved attending conferences, subscribing to sceptic magazines, buying books by well-known cultural entrepreneurs, e.g. Michael Shermer, and purchasing 'merch' [merchandise] from sceptic websites. For example, Bonnie (age 39) described how she supported sceptical publishing:

It's hard for people with a skeptical mind-set to get their work out there. I try, as much as possible, to purchase the books of people like [Michael Shermer]. These guys barely break even, so I think we all need to do our part in encouraging that kind of work. It might not seem like much, but I assume other people are doing the same, and that's why get so much content related to critical thinking. I can then take those books, auction them off, and help finance more local activism, especially if they're signed.

In addition to supporting authors and publishers, many of my participants kept an updated library on 'woo-woo,' (i.e. pseudoscientific practices) so they could better understand what they were opposing. Greg (age 52) described what he referred to as his 'Library of Nonsense':

When people walk into my house, all they see are books on faeries, alternative medicine, conspiracy theories, and cults. It's pretty weird. I hate to give snake oil salesmen my money, but this is the only way you can really get good at skepticism. You have to know what you're fighting, so I think of it as my duty to do the research. It's the small role I play in the community: 'Oh, you need to know about dowsing? Yeah, I got that.'

Like Greg, some secularists, saw themselves as cultural warriors in the fight against pseudoscience, and they worked hard to maintain a rigour in how they approached their targets. Although this rigour helped them in online and offline discussions, their primary interest was in the intellectual satisfaction of knowing they were doing their part for the movement.

Other, more concrete forms of individualistic activism included editing Wikipedia entries. At the time of our interview, Sasha has joined an online community focused on improving sceptical content

on Wikipedia. She described what she did, which mainly involved supporting existing articles with citations:

I'll find something related to skepticism, like maybe acupuncture, and I'll look through it, okay, particularly the stuff on the science of acupuncture (or lack thereof), and I'll basically just add links to recent scholarship. I can still get access to library subscriptions to journals, and I'll sometimes ask people to send me links to PDFs so I can read them. It's not enough to grab the abstract. Sometimes it leads to a fight, as there's a lot of people on Wikipedia that vandalise – they make up stuff.

Sasha's form of activism kept her engaged with local conferences, where she sometimes acted as a speaker if only to get the message out about alternative forms of activism that did not require much organisations or resources.

In addition to cultivating a rational life, supporting influencers in the movement, and engaging in improving sceptical content on the Internet, many of my participants talked about avoiding certain products such as organic foods, boycotting pharmacies that sold alternative medicine, and educating others about pseudoscience (e.g. criticising chiropractic medicine). Much of the conscious consumption literature overlaps with the concerns of lifestyle movement scholars, who are similarly interested in consumption as a political statement (Wahlen & Laamanen, 2015). Although many secularists engaged in some form of targeted consumption or boycotting, their primary focus was on education. For example, Marco (age 26) talked about how he tried to maintain a list of local organisations that supported pseudoscience, including the municipal police force:

They use a polygraph for recruitment, but we know that polygraphs are pseudoscientific. So, I posted a blog about how inaccurate polygraph testing is, and soon enough I was getting calls from the media about the whole thing. I'm not really comfortable with being a public figure, but doing small things like that – getting the info out there, that's something I can do.

Marco's emphasis on education shows that consumption is just one type of 'lifestyle politics' that occurs in daily life (Bennett, 1998). Regardless of how they went about doing scepticism, my participants saw their individuality and self-expression as tactics of social change.

Conclusion

This analysis provides a theoretically informed case study of secularist activism that nuances the role of identity differences in lifestyle movements. In particular, I emphasise how sceptics negotiate intra-movement divisions by highlighting difference and accentuating uniqueness. Prior social movement approaches to secularist activism has mainly focused on how secularist movements create and maintain collective identities. By contrast, my findings show that some secularist activists prefer to cultivate personally meaningful identities based on individualism, scepticism, and other Enlightenment values. The individualism of self-described sceptics, while similar to what others have described as 'radical individualism' and 'rational libertarianism,' is distinctive in that my participants preferred to do movement action privately.

Most secularists saw their activism as a personal and everyday project involving thinking like scientists, eliminating delusions and wishful thinking, and taking responsibility for educating others about the dangers of scientific misinformation and pseudoscience. More concretely, their lifestyle practices included boycotting and buycotting, consumer advocacy (particularly through educational initiatives), online grassroots activism and supporting influencers in the movement. Additionally, given that much of lifestyle activism involves identity-work, many secularists were careful to distinguish themselves from naïve or dictionary atheists who did not share their respect for reason and science.

Some secularist activists downplay the importance of their non-belief in favour of scientific scepticism, a broader worldview focused on critical thinking and living a well-reasoned life based on Enlightenment values. Given my focus on self-described sceptics' transformation of their daily lives, this article shows applications of lifestyle movement theory that go beyond conscious consumption, emphasising the importance of contentious identities in motivating activists to action. Additionally, this analysis sheds light on how different social movement approaches affect the development of identities

and practices. As with other lifestyle movements, sceptics' strong individual identities were paired with a relatively weak collective identity, impacting my participants' everyday actions and practices in their attempts to live well-reasoned lives (Haenfler et al., 2012). Some secularists sought out alternative lifestyles at odds with organisationally coordinated activism and social movement structures that appeared to seek homogeneity through organising and group consensus. As self-described critical thinkers, my participants set themselves apart, both from notions of community and *movementness*, as well as other secularists. Despite their contrariness, these same secularists also individually felt connected to a collective identity that emphasised reason and science. Future research should consider further the relationship between identity disputes and intra-movement conflict within lifestyles movements. Finally, non-religion scholars should seek to examine further, how secularist activists justify individualised private action in other socio-political and geographic contexts.

Notes

1. I began my study after receiving approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Office (REO) in 2014.
2. I had planned to include secular humanists. I met with a local secular humanist group, but meetings were infrequent and attended by few people with no overlap with the other organisations. As my project matured, I learned that many of my participants had a dim view of secular humanism in Edmonton, and the few secular humanist group members I did encounter did not think of themselves as activists and had little interest in building a secularist community.
3. In 1979 astronomer Carl Sagan (1934–1996) popularised the aphorism 'extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.'
4. Every year hundreds of sceptics 'overdose' on homeopathic pills as part of the 10:23 campaign organised by the Merseyside Sceptics Society in the UK to protest the sale of homeopathic remedies. Many of the sceptics I interviewed had participated as well.

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Notes on contributor

Jonathan Simmons is a PhD candidate at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta. His research focuses on atheist activism in Canada.

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