

Becoming Non-believers: Explaining Atheism in Childhood

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Aim?

Why do children grow up godless? How does the formation of their non-belief in God(s) relate to their family upbringing, education, and wider socio-cultural contexts? The aim of our project is to examine the major causal mechanisms which sustain and strengthen non-belief in God in middle childhood (7-11 years old) in England.



Why?

- It is widely accepted that atheism and other forms of non-belief in God(s) are on the rise in many societies and that this is linked to changing processes of socialization in relation to religion and belief. Existing sociological research has demonstrated that socialization within both the family and education is contributing to the rise of the 'non-religious' (a category which usually overlaps with 'atheists'). Psychological studies have also emphasized the importance of cultural learning processes in causing atheism, and several studies have highlighted the need for further research into the effects of particular aspects of socialization in relation to atheism.
- However, without qualitative research into this formative stage in the development of atheism, significant questions remain about how distinct socialization processes – including socialization within family networks versus teaching environments versus peer relationships; and socialization into or away from religious worldviews, and into or away from atheistic worldviews – function on their own and in relation to one another. This includes fundamental questions, not only about the mechanisms and relative significance of different socialization processes, but also about whether and how these processes can be distinguished from one another in practice as in theory.

How?

- The project builds on previous research which conducted multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, child-centred research activities, and interviews with non-believing children, and their parents, and school teachers in primary schools in three contrasting areas of England to investigate how children experience and negotiate their non-belief in their everyday lives.
- Drawing on realist and process approaches to understanding causality, we are conducting new analysis of this dataset to explore the causal processes implicated in the formation of the children's non-belief via socialization processes in home and school contexts.

What?

- So far, our analysis has demonstrated:
 - Children's non-belief in God(s) is shaped by both a lack of religious socialization and by their growing up into a pervasive humanist worldview
 - Humanism here means a worldview that centres humanity in its cosmology and places emphasis on the agency and significance of humans, their broad equality as members of the same species, and valorizes reason, science, and empiricist epistemologies
 - Humanist socialization processes at home and at school are interwoven and can be hard to distinguish in practice

