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The role of the Black Church in the lives of young Black men who have sex with men Culture, Health, and Sexuality

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Abstract

The Black Church is among the most important institutions in the Black community, offering numerous spiritual, social, and health benefits. Yet, the presence of homonegativity in many Black Churches may mitigate those effects for gay Black youth. This research examines the role of the Church in the lives of gay and bisexual Black youth to understand how they reconcile any tension between their religious and sexual identities. Through interviews with pastors of Black churches (n=21) and young black men who have sex with men (n=30), we explored homonegativity and young men's experiences within the Black Church. Findings reveal that despite the prevalence of homonegativity within Black churches, religious involvement remains important for young men and many remain involved in non-affirming churches. The importance of the Church for young men stems from their significant involvement as youth and the integration of religion, family, and community. Young men may not be able to leave their religious homes as readily as other gay youth given the cultural relevance of the Church. As a result, young men made attempts to conceal their sexuality in church to avoid shame and gossip and find opportunities to balance their sexuality and religiosity.

Keywords

Religion; Black men who have sex with men; Black Church; youth

Introduction

Religiosity is associated with numerous social and health benefits including improved mental and physical health (Ellison and Levin 1998), increased life satisfaction (Ellison 1993), and quality of life (Levin, Chatters, and Taylor 1995). Additionally, among Black Americans, religiosity is inversely related to sexual risk behaviors (Levin, Chatters, and Taylor 1995; Chatters 2000), and church-based health promotion programs and interventions have been shown to significantly affect reduce smoking and increase physical activity (Campbell et al. 2007). Religiosity's protective effects are also evident among youth, as religious adolescents have lower rates of risky health behaviors, decreased likelihood of substance use and delinquency, and fewer mental health issues (Smith 2005).

Yet, these benefits do not necessarily extend to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals, as the social environment of many religious institutions is characterized by homonegativity, or negative beliefs about sexual minorities and the stigma, discrimination, and persecution of individuals based on their sexuality (Altman et al. 2012). The majority of American religious denominations condemn same-sex behavior and the preponderance of homonegative messages in religious contexts can diminish the associated health benefits for gay and bisexual individuals (Ream 2001; Meyer 2003), as messages of rejection and disapproval are associated with internalized homonegativity and difficulty accepting sexual identity (Page, Lindahl, and Malik 2013). Non-gay-affirming religions have been associated with increased levels of internalized homonegativity (Barnes 2012), psychological distress (Wilkinson and Pearson 2009), depression, and lowered self-esteem (Ream and Savin-Williams 2005).

The negative effects of religion may be amplified for Black non-heterosexual individuals due to the greater importance of religion among Black Americans, stemming from the historical role of the Church in the Black community. Traditionally, the Black Church has been understood to be comprised of seven Black American Protestant denominations with their origins in slavery and emancipation (including, The African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Church of God in Christ, and Progressive and National Baptist Conventions, although new denominations modeled on the traditions of the Black Church and with Black leadership continue to develop; Harris 2010). Black Americans are among the most religious racial or ethnic groups in the country, reflected in church attendance, daily prayer, and the personal importance of religion in their lives (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2009). Similarly Black youth are more likely than youth to attend church, pray daily, and report that their faith is important in their daily lives (Smith et al. 2002; Wilson, Rodrigue, and Taylor 1997). For centuries, the Black Church has served as a central institution for the Black community, providing social, support, and health services, and serving as a key leader on a number of social and political movements (Smith, Simmons, and Mayer 2005). Furthermore, religion is often deeply intertwined in family and community lives for many Black Americans (Jeffries, Dodge, and Sandfort 2008). In this sense, the Black Church is more than a religious institution and extends into many individual's social, familial, and cultural lives, making it difficult to separate the Church from other aspects of one's life. Given its centrality in the Black community, the Church has been instrumental in shaping attitudes toward homosexuality and thus, has been criticized as being a central source of homonegativity (Balaji et al. 2012). In addition to explicit messages of homonegativity, non-heterosexual churchgoers may encounter casual microaggressions and community gossip that reinforce homonegativity. In many ways, this condemnation of homosexuality serves an attempt to maintain values, uphold community norms, and regulate behavior (Marks 2005). Individuals raised in intolerant religious traditions may internalize these homonegative viewpoints (Yip 1998), even if they eventually disassociate from those homonegative environments (Barnes 2012). This can contribute to Black gay men feeling the need to remain 'closeted' (Valera and Taylor 2010) and can encourage sexual secrecy among young men (Woodyard, Peterson, and Stokes 2000) in order to avoid direct homonegativity within the Church.

However, contrary to the popular notion that being gay precludes religious involvement, many individuals have identified opportunities to maintain a deep faith and remain involved in non-affirming organized religion. Given its social, political, and familial centrality, non-heterosexual Black individuals may not as readily distance themselves from the Church as is seen among other LGBT individuals. In fact, Black LGBT individuals, including young gay and bisexual men, often remain active in the Black church (Woodyard, Peterson, and Stokes 2000; Douglas 1999), have consistent church attendance, and regularly participate in church activities (Balaji et al. 2012; Foster et al. 2011). Leaving one's religious institution can cause social, cultural, and spiritual discomfort, particularly for ethnic minorities for whom the Church has significant meaning and familial importance (Haldeman 2004; Pitt 2010).

Dissociation from non-affirming religious institutions has been identified as a coping mechanism for homonegativity used by gay individuals, who are often able to find more affirming religious homes (Barnes 2012). However, most gay-affirming Christian denominations (e.g. United Church of Christ) are predominantly White, and may be incompatible with the cultural and religious experiences and expectations of Black men who have sex with men (Pitt 2010). Furthermore, although dissociation may be an effective coping mechanism for some, research with youth by Ream and Savin-Williams (2005) indicates that conflict between religion and sexuality is related to internalized homonegativity and poor mental health. Gay youth who leave the Church because of their sexuality may experience lower levels of internalized homonegativity but also greater mental health consequences, potentially indicative of the struggle involved with distancing from the Church. Alternatively, mental health consequences may reflect experiences of significant homonegativity and discrimination within the Church, which led them to feel leaving the Church was necessary (Ream and Savin-Williams 2005).

There is a significant gap in research examining the context of religion in the lives of gay and bisexual Black youth, as well as how they negotiate their religious and sexual identities (Horn, Kosciw, and Russell 2009). Accordingly, this research explores the experiences Black gay and bisexual youth have within the Church and religious life and how they reconcile any tension between their religious and sexual identities.

Methods

We conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with pastors of Black churches and 30 interviews with young Black men who have sex with men between November 2013 and June 2014 in Milwaukee. Given the broader aims of the study to inform HIV prevention interventions, participation was limited to Black males, as they are disproportionately affected by HIV. Inclusion criteria for youth included self-identifying as Black or African American, being biologically male, between 16 and 25, identifying as gay or bisexual or having willingly engaged in sex with another male in the previous 12 months, and having a current church affiliation or having belonged to a church within the previous five years and left. Recruitment included a combination of service provider and participant referrals, as well as Craigslist, festivals, and youth groups. Youth received \$25 for their participation. Interviews covered their involvement in church, how that changed over time and why, and whether and how their religiosity influenced their sexuality or disclosure of their sexuality.

Pastor inclusion criteria were being 18 years of age or older, self-identifying as Black or African American, and being a pastor or clergy member in a Black Church in Milwaukee. Pastors were recruited using direct recruitment and participant referral strategies and were sampled for diversity on size of congregation, denomination, and whether their Church was involved in HIV prevention. Pastors were asked about their views on homosexuality and adolescent sexual behavior, messages they hoped to convey to their congregation and youth, and if and how they talk to their congregation about sex and sexuality. Written informed consent was obtained prior to every interview and interviews were digitally recorded. There was a waiver of parental consent for youth under the age of 18. Informed consent and research protocols were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at [Blinded].

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted by the Principal Investigator in six Black Churches over the course of nine months. There were 22 observational sessions which included attending Sunday services, Bible studies, prayer groups, volunteering in church offices, and observing in church-based health and social service clinics. Detailed notes were taken immediately following all observations. As appropriate, ethnographic data was used to corroborate or contradict emergent themes, substantiate analytic constructs, and add rigor and depth to our conclusions. In this paper, ethnographic data was used for triangulation purposes and to contextualize themes that emerged from the interviews, although no fieldwork data was independently included in our results.

Digital recordings and notes were transcribed verbatim and coded and analyzed using MAXQDA. The Principal Investigator was the primary coder and an additional coder was used to check reliability and validity of the analytic process. Interviews were analyzed using thematic content analysis, guided by the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Corbin and Strauss 2008) and constant comparative method, characterized by repeated coding, analysis, and interpretation of pastor and youth interviews (Boeije 2002). This approach allowed for identification of new and unanticipated relationships, themes, and patterns and analyses were used to guide future data collection and analysis.

Results

Youth ranged in age from 16 to 24, with an average age of 21. Nine of the 30 participants were bisexual, while the others identified as gay. Nineteen participants were affiliated with a church or attended church regularly. All pastors self-identified as Black males and ranged in age from 32 to 73 years old, with an average age of 54 and had been pastors anywhere from one to 34 years. Pastors' congregations were predominately Black, ranged in size from 20 to 1500 members, with a median size of 300, and denominations included African Methodist Episcopal, Pentecostal (Church of God in Christ), Missionary Baptist, American Baptist, United Methodist, and non-denominational.

Familial expectations of religious involvement

Religion was a central aspect of nearly all participants' childhoods and family lives. As children, these young men spent significant amounts of time in the Church, often dedicating at least two days a week to various church activities, and were reared in a way that

emphasized faith and spirituality. Universally, young men noted that they did not have a choice in whether they would attend church, nor how often.

24 year-old youth: Growing up, I was brought up in a church. Like, my whole family is that church. So by being a kid, I was, you know, forced to go to church. I was in the choir, usher, you name it, we did it growing up. So it was, you know, it was part of us, that's what we had to do. Growing up at a young age, it was important the whole family went, you know. It was something that we did every Sunday, other like, maybe 5 days of the week we used to go to church.

The importance of religion and regular church involvement was magnified for the four participants whose parents were pastors, as their family lives revolved around the Church and their participation and enthusiasm for the Church was expected. Preacher's kids, or "PKs," as they affectionately called themselves, were not only among the most extensively involved in the Church, but they also had greater expectations placed upon them to behave in a certain manner both within, and outside, the Church.

23 year-old youth: You know, you are looked at a lot harder so you always got to be perfect in front of people. ... They look at you for everything. It's like you got to be perfect. You mess up, you know, they go tell. It's a lot of like, for him it would be like, how can I not control my kids when I'm trying to control the congregation. So, you always got to be on your P's and Q's and that sometimes can wear you out.

Despite not having a choice in early church involvement and often feeling forced to participate in church activities, two-thirds of participants remained involved and nearly all had positive things to say about the Church.

22 year-old youth: You know, just being closer with my family, and you know, to learn a lot of things in what our history came from back then to now and how things progressed and how things changed, bad and good, you know. So, it was just a life experience and it was like another school to me.

In general, those who had more extensive church involvement as children, including preacher's kids, had greater religious involvement as adolescents and young adults as well, often by their own accord. Yet, the importance of the Church also often extended beyond faith or religious convictions. The participant above, for example, emphasized the role of the Church in furthering his education on Black history and the Civil Rights movement, which became an important aspect of his identity. Others noted the Church offered a sense of community and extended kinship, which frequently served as motivating factors to maintain church involvement and became integral aspects of their family and community lives.

Challenges of being a Black gay youth in the Church

Although youth had positive things to say about the Church, as they became aware of their sexuality, their views and experiences within the Church began to change. All youth had been taught that homosexuality was a sin, and several participants were actively grappling with prominent religious messages around homosexuality.

20 year-old youth: [Religion has] always been pretty important to me, it's just that I've noticed that I feel a straying away from it a lot lately. It's still important, it's

just.... Well, you know, because I'm gay. And you know Christianity speaks it's a sin, and I don't know. I have just really been thinking of how I can be part of religion where it's wrong to be the way that I am, you know?

The notion that homosexuality is a sin was universally promoted by pastors, including the most liberal and accepting of pastors. Their convictions were rooted in scriptures, which pastors readily cited and interpreted to support their beliefs. Yet, pastors simultaneously noted that although homosexuality was a sin, they did not support hatred or discrimination of gay individuals.

73 year-old Baptist pastor: [Homosexuality is] against what I believe in... it's the law that we must abide by and we have to live with. People have identified as being the way they are and as long as they do what they are supposed to do in society, I can live with that. But, I'm saying their lifestyle. I can hate what you do but I have to love you. So, you love the person and hate the wrong, that is my position. I know what the Bible says so if you chose to be that way then you be that way, but don't flaunt it and really think that I have to accept it. I can accept you, but not what you do.

Although pastors did not support maltreatment of gay individuals, youth often felt as though they were being judged or looked down upon, citing instances in which pastors or other congregants made judgmental comments about their or another's sexuality. This pastor's comments on the choice and sinfulness of homosexuality lend support to youth's perceptions of judgment by pastors, even without direct mistreatment. Other participants noted an implicit judgment in the scriptures and general atmosphere of the Church.

21 year-old youth: As a homosexual, you know, the Word is so judgmental so it's like I shouldn't go to church like this [as a gay man]. I feel like the pastor is going to make a certain summary about what he see, and I don't want to be the topic of discussion.

This participant was not alone in his struggle to integrate his religion and sexuality; several participants similarly questioned whether they can, or should be, attending church given their sexuality. Despite the consistent theme of young men feeling judged, pastors generally did not view themselves or their churches as judgmental. On the contrary, they believed themselves to be welcoming of all people, including gay and bisexual youth.

49 year-old Baptist Pastor: One thing I would want [gay youth] to know is that no matter what, I love you. No matter what, the Church is going to love you. God loves you. But think about your decision and how it will affect you. One of the things is that because when you get caught up in the lifestyle, it will draw you away from God.

Although he spoke about love and acceptance of gay youth, he simultaneously believed homosexuality was incompatible with religion, as it would inevitably draw youth away from God.

Youth were often the target of numerous anti-homosexual messages from within the Church. Although not always directly aimed at them, youth regularly heard messages that gay individuals were an abomination, unloved by God, and going to hell.

21 year-old youth: [My pastor] was saying stuff like you shouldn't be gay it's an abomination, you'll die, God isn't going to love you, God is not going to want you in his church, like, you are going to burn in your seat. Like she was just going all off into this random and she made me feel so uncomfortable sitting there. So, I felt like she was finger pointing and talking to me.

Experiences like this were not uncommon; youth recalled numerous instances of listening to pastors denounce homosexuality. One participant explained how he felt when his pastor would speak out against homosexuality.

23 year-old youth: Oh, it just made me feel kind of dirty on the inside, but I didn't want to react visibly to anybody, you know. And then I was also thinking, I don't want to maybe 'amen' the stuff. I didn't want to do it in a way where the guy next to me could be going through the same thing and I didn't want to make people feel. But it made me feel kind of dirty, it really did.

For many of these young men, homonegative messages led them to question their sexual and religious identities and several expressed shame about being gay and noted different points in their lives when they wished they were not gay. For example, one participant, whose father is a pastor, explained that his parents regularly condemned homosexuality, which led to an internal identity struggle.

21 year-old Youth: I feel like sometimes I shouldn't be doing it, but then again, there is a lot of things in the bible that they say that you shouldn't do, but people still do it anyway... it was an internal struggle with me. I didn't want to be gay. Like, growing up, I would like boys and it was like, no you shouldn't do that. It's not pleasing to God.

This participant noted he was generally not open about his sexuality. Although his parents and a few close gay friends knew he was gay, he otherwise worked to maintain secrecy about his sexuality. He was not alone in his desire to change and become heterosexual in order to fit in with religious expectations, be accepted by family members, and avoid homonegative messages; many struggled to accept their sexual identities and hoped to change their sexuality.

Managing being 'out' in the Church

The religiously rooted messages youth received about homosexuality often influenced young men's decisions on whether to be openly gay in their church. Although a few participants were completely open with their sexuality, the majority had at least some friends or family members from whom they concealed their sexual identity and the majority were not open within their church. One participant, who was open with his sexuality at church, explains why others may not be comfortable coming out to their church.

Interviewer: Are there other people at your church who are gay who aren't open about it?

24 year-old youth: I do believe there are.

Interviewer: And why do you think they might not be open?

24 year-old youth: Because of society. Society for one, all of those shames. That's what it has been, especially in the Black community. People are so judgmental that people can be harsh and hurtful, you know when it comes to that. So, you know, I wouldn't know because a lot of people are almost afraid to even be honest or real with themselves.

Pastors similarly acknowledged a larger societal stigma in the Black community around homosexuality.

37 year-old Missionary Baptist Pastor: There are individuals in African American churches who I know struggle to come out and that's clear in many instances. Again, I think the stigma is still there in so many ways with the community as a whole. The trick is again the message of balance. To what degree do we accept but still maintain integrity of messages when it comes to the Bible?

Pastors suggested that the stigma around homosexuality extended well beyond the Church and was a systemic community issue. As pastors, however, they struggled to minimize that stigma and make their churches welcoming to gay individuals given religious messages against homosexuality.

Given the integration of family and church, it is not surprising that youth often pointed to their parents and families as part of the reason they did not want to come out in the Church, often seeking to protect their family from the shame and humiliation associated with having a gay son.

For the son of a preacher, this was even more important.

23 year-old youth: I mean that was a conversation that me and [my father] had. 'If this what you are going to do, I would appreciate if you would carry yourself as a man.' So, I mean, I respect some of his wishes and I try to abide by to make it, I guess, a smoother transition, you know what I'm saying. He's already dealing with it so I don't want to put too much on him where it's like 'Wait a minute pastor, isn't that your kid there?' So you know you don't want all of that.

The integration of family and church meant that young men's decisions about disclosure often directly affected their families. It was not merely that youth risked being gossiped about themselves, but their sexuality would likely bring shame to their entire family. The anticipation of gossip and ridicule about their sexuality was powerful enough to influence disclosure decisions and many youth reported modifying their dress, mannerisms, voice, and personalities to ensure a presumption of heterosexuality.

Interviewer: Do you ever do anything to prevent people at church from knowing you're gay?

20 year-old youth: Yeah, as far as just dressing, I guess I'd wear looser pants or just baggy pants, sag. Or a hat or something. More like the boys in my family, they all sag and stuff like that.

Interviewer: How do you think people at church would respond if they knew you were gay?

20 year-old youth: Just like “what he doing here?” and I feel it would just give them something to talk about. That whole little gossip thing. And then I feel like that would have pointed fingers at my family.... How you going to be in church and like, your son is gay, and all of that?

The power and prevalence of gossip within the Church was similarly acknowledged by pastors, lending support to participant's perceptions of the damaging threat of gossip. When discussing the stigma around homosexuality, one pastor noted:

55 year-old Baptist Pastor: If we can tear down the walls of stigma, we might have people opening up.... You worry about what people might say about and church people can be so mean spirited at times, you know? We have those who just gossip and talk about people. That's why people, it's so hard for them to open up.

The stigma around homosexuality, evidenced and reinforced by community gossip, led many young men to believe the Church was not available to openly gay men, and contributed to young men's efforts to conceal their sexual identity within the Church. Given the gossip and rumors young men faced as openly gay men in the Church, concealing their sexual identity was seen as an easy and successful strategy to avoid ridicule and protect their family name.

Pastors similarly acknowledged this gossip, suggesting that even if they were to be welcoming of gay congregants, the larger congregation likely would not.

Interviewer: If someone were to be openly gay in your congregation, how do you think the rest of the congregation would react?

37 year-old Baptist Pastor: There might be some challenges around it, you know what I mean? I would, I would definitely see that there would be some challenges around it.

Interviewer: What kind of challenges?

37 year-old Baptist Pastor: Like I said, I have a family church. The Church word networks spread pretty fast and so people go in the gossip line when they get home and stuff like that. And it could impact the several other families that are at the Church, you know, basically depending upon what the situation is.

Even if someone is simply perceived of being gay, it is likely those suspicions will quickly spread throughout the church, stigmatizing the individual and his family. Although the majority of youth grew up in and were members of smaller churches, those who were members of churches with congregations of nearly 1,000 members or more were often able to be out to family and a select few individuals in church without much risk of rumors and gossip.

Despite the potential humiliation and shame associated with being out in church, eight participants were open in church. While some of these participants were still involved with the churches they grew up in, others left those churches and found more accepting religious

homes. One 19-year old was open in church and recalled the conversation he had with his pastor about his sexuality:

19 year-old youth: I just felt that everything was targeted towards me when he did his scriptures and he read out of the Bible, everything was targeted towards me. So I felt as if he was trying to get me away from it. But it's like, you can't get away from something that you are. One time he actually got to asking multiple questions about why are you gay, why do you know that your Father wouldn't have made you this way and didn't want to see you this way. There is a hell for people like that and I don't want to see you go down that path and all that other stuff.

Interviewer: And how did you that make you feel when he was saying that stuff?

19 year-old youth: Kind of really started making me pull away from the Church, and kind of, he kind of hit me, because then I felt like I was an outcast to everybody, and I'm just as human as anybody else, so yeah, it kind of hurt.

Being open in church was not without a struggle or risks for most youth, most of which were related to feelings of isolation, being gossiped about, ridiculed, and taunted. These negative responses from a pastor or members of the congregation caused many youth to distance themselves from the Church as they got older, while others struggled to find ways to maintain involvement despite these experiences.

The integration of religiosity and sexuality

Nearly all young men discussed their struggle to balance and integrate their sexuality and religion, and their difficulty in doing so was cited as a primary reason for disassociating with the Church.

16 year-old youth: It's just like they talk about gay people so bad. They say 'God don't like gay people.' Ok, I get it, but they just talked about it so bad, it made me feel bad so I didn't want to go no more and I didn't want to stay home.... It's like I try to believe in God, I try to go to church, but it's like everywhere I go they always talk about gay people.

Young men often felt as though these messages were directly targeted at them, leading shame and isolation. As they got older and began to identify as gay or bisexual and acknowledge their sexuality, the perceived incompatibility of homosexuality and religion became even more pronounced.

19 year-old youth: Well, I was really into the Church. I was a praise singer. I was in the choir. I led a lot of things. And once I started growing up, I started to see myself growing away from it because the Church that I go to, they don't accept my kind. And what my kind is, is gay or homosexual. So I felt any time they did a testimonial or anytime somebody read scriptures or anything that felt more like they were targeting me, so after that I started really tearing myself away from churches after that.

As youth began to self-identify as gay and come out to their family and friends, a few pulled away from the Church, at least for a short period. The following participant recently left his church and explained his struggle to balance sexuality and religion.

18 year-old youth: I know I used to always talk to people. Like, not a priest or pastor or stuff, but like friends who were going through the same thing. And I was asking them how did they balance religion and sexuality, 'cause I know those are two things that don't, you know, they go together, but they have two different views. So, I never really got a straight forward answer 'cause everybody I asked would say that they didn't try to mix the two. They would try to do both of them on their own time.

Although some youth found the Church too alienating to maintain their involvement and distanced themselves from the Church as soon as they were old enough, many sought to reconcile their identities as Black, gay, Christians and remain in the Church. In attempts to resolve the conflict between their sexuality and religion, many young men offered critiques of religious ideologies, biblical interpretations, and religious messages. They focused on inconsistencies in church teachings and messages and presented counter-arguments to many of the anti-homosexual messages they had received from their parents and the Church.

19 year-old youth: Everyone would know that it's not of God to be, you know, in a relationship with another man or something, I guess. But, I mean, if God created everyone how they are, perfectly, like, he doesn't make mistakes as people. So, I mean, like how I feel like religion contradicts itself a lot, so I really just don't feed into those things.

Young men tended to affirm the notion that homosexuality is inherently part of who they are and generally rejected the idea that homosexuality was a sin. These participants had an especially difficult time understanding how an intrinsic characteristic could be considered sinful. In general, they believed that God would not have created them gay if being gay was a sin. In contrast, pastors generally rejected the idea the idea that people were born gay.

72-year-old Church of God in Christ Pastor: These kids were not born like that. They were not born like that, but they have allowed that spirit to take hold of their lives and I believe much of that is because parents have not done their job... I don't know of any place in the Bible where it points to anyone in that condition. All I can say is what the Bible says relative to that lifestyle and the bible refers to it as an abomination. Now, I don't take that and beat them over the head with it. I tell them "God loves them. He loves the criminals, the murderers, he loves all people. And he can change them."

Not only did this pastor reject the notion that sexuality is an inherent characteristic, he suggests that, although God loves them, being gay is an abomination and can be changed.

Discussion

Findings from this research highlight youths' perceived tension between their sexual and religious identities. Their marginal acceptance and occasional discrimination by an institution so central to their identities and family lives led youth to question their religion

and their sexual identity. Although pastors were clear in their conviction that homosexuality was sinful, several simultaneously noted the importance of loving individuals regardless. Yet, as one pastor noted, it could be difficult to accept gay youth while maintaining the integrity of the bible, consistent with previous research that demonstrates how pastors demonize sinful behavior while loving the individual (Wilson et al. 2011). Given the historical and familial relevance of the Black Church, it is not surprising that many of the young men in this study continued to actively participate in non-affirming Churches. Black gay individuals may have a more difficult time distancing themselves from their church, as the costs associated with leaving are often greater (Barnes 2012). Some youth retained affiliations with churches that rejected their sexual identity because they derived significant personal meaning from religious settings they had been accustomed to since childhood. For many participants, dissociating from the Church for even short periods often coincided with a distancing from family and community and youth were acutely aware of these social costs of leaving versus maintaining affiliations with their church. Yet, although they were able to maintain familial and social ties, internalized homonegativity as a result of homonegative religious environments may diminish the otherwise positive effects that religious affiliation can have for gay individuals (Barnes 2012). Decisions about coming out in the Church were also influenced by experiences and perceptions of gossip and rumors resulting from, and reinforcing, the stigma around homosexuality. Gossip, as an informal method of social control and public scrutiny, frequently forced youth to conceal their sexual identity in an attempt to protect themselves against more overt stigma and discrimination and protect their parents and families from the shame associated with having a gay son. That pastors and youth recognized the social influence of gossip highlights how powerful the threat of gossip can be in influencing behaviors and defining community norms about sexuality and disclosure.

Youth who remained in the Church used several strategies to manage and integrate their religious and sexual identities. For example, in order to manage the stigma around their sexual orientation, several youth reported in engaging in role flexing, or the modification of behavior to adapt to non-gay friendly environments or situations (Della, Wilson, and Miller 2002) and avoidance of cues that might reveal their sexual orientation. The decision not to disclose their sexuality within their church was protective against ridicule, gossip, and shame for themselves and their families, as disclosure meant the possibility of a loss of community and familial support systems (Fukuyama and Ferguson 2000) and significant psychological distress (Goode-Cross and Good 2009). Although non-disclosure may have social benefits, role flexing may increase youths' vulnerability to internalized homonegativity and HIV (Balaji et al. 2012). In addition to social and mental health consequences, internalized homonegativity may be an important precursor to sexual risk taking and is thought to contribute to and maintain racial disparities in HIV (Earnshaw, et al. 2013). Avoiding negative and discriminatory experiences by concealing their sexuality in church may keep more gay youth involved in the Church, as those who had more explicit or severe negative experiences tended to disassociate from the Church. Yet, it is unclear whether the continued church involvements of young men who participate in role flexing still result in the positive and protective effects typical of religiosity.

There are limitations of this research and important directions for future research. Inclusion criteria required youth had current or recent religious involvement and thus, the prevalence of faith-based homonegativity and the importance of religion may be greater among. Although pastor sampling efforts allowed for the achievement of greater diversity in terms of congregation size and denomination, pastors' time constraints proved to be a barrier to recruitment for some pastors. Many pastors of smaller churches are bi-vocational, which made it difficult for some pastors to participate in the interview. Those who did participate may have been more likely to have an interest in public health, HIV prevention, or community partnerships. Additional research is needed to fully understand the effects of young men's decisions about whether or not to disclose their sexuality within their church and the broader community. It is unclear whether the protective effects of religious involvement outweigh the adverse effects of not disclosing one's sexual identity.

Religion and spirituality are prominent in the lives of young Black gay men, despite homonegativity within the Church. Although many youth remained involved in a church to some extent, their involvement was inconsistent and most youth noted periods of time in which they left the Church. Furthermore, the majority of youth did not disclose their sexuality at church and put significant effort into ensuring their sexuality remained hidden. Given that the Church plays a prominent role in shaping and influencing attitudes, efforts to promote tolerance and acceptance of gay individuals may go a long way in reducing the community-wide homonegativity.

Challenging clergy about their theological positions on homosexuality may prove futile. Rather, couching this as a social justice and public health priority that may subsequently decrease internalized homophobia and reduce racial disparities in HIV may be more effective (Hill and McNeely 2013). In addition to addressing HIV, stigma reduction efforts may be successful in increasing self-esteem and reducing depression and isolation among gay congregants (Foster et al. 2011). Furthermore, it may result in increased or prolonged engagement of young gay Black men in the Church and allow them to reap the many salutary effects of religious participation and decrease the likelihood of internalizing homonegative messages propagated by the Church (Wagner et al. 1994; Lease, Horne, and Noffsinger-Frazier 2005).

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