



Published in final edited form as:

Cult Health Sex. 2008 June ; 10(5): 463–477. doi:10.1080/13691050701877526.

Religion and spirituality among bisexual Black men in the USA

WILLIAM L. JEFFRIES IV¹, BRIAN DODGE², and THEO G. M. SANDFORT³

¹*Department of Sociology and Department of Behavioral Science and Community Health, University of Florida, USA*

²*Center for Sexual Health Promotion, Department of Applied Health Science, Indiana University, USA*

³*HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies, New York State Psychiatric Institute/Columbia University, USA*

Abstract

Traditionally, religion has been a major source of institutional support and well-being for Black people in the USA. However, when juxtaposed against sexuality, religion's positive effect upon the lives of non-heterosexual individuals is questionable. Research suggests that non-heterosexuals often abandon structured religion for spirituality due to the homonegativity perpetuated through religious institutions. Although studies have examined religion and spirituality among gays and lesbians, few have examined their roles in the lives of bisexuals. In this study, we analyzed qualitative interviews from 28 bisexual Black men who resided in New York City. In addition to church attendance, participants expressed belonging to religious communities through activities such as music ministry. Despite rejection because of their bisexuality, some participants saw other religious individuals as being accepting of them. Others discussed the church as a place where non-heterosexuals interacted, often for meeting sexual partners. Participants evoked beliefs in God in coping with adverse life experiences; some linked faith to family and sexual responsibilities. Drawing upon relevant literature, we discuss the implications of religion and spirituality for the quality of life of bisexual Black men in the USA.

Keywords

Religion; spirituality; bisexuality; Black; USA

Introduction

Black churches have been pivotal to the existence of people of African descent in the USA. Throughout slavery, the Jim Crow Era and the Civil Rights Movement, they provided Black people with the social support necessary to cope with crippling racist ideologies that, at best, regarded them as second-class citizens (Frazier 1964, Mattis 2001, Collins 2004). Black churches' influence permeates other social institutions as well as beliefs, attitudes and everyday practices of US Blacks (Frazier 1964, Collins 2004, Ward 2005). They attend church more frequently (Dawson *et al.* 1993, Ellison *et al.* 2000) and they engage in more affective religious behaviours, such as prayer, than other ethnic groups (Roof and McKinney 1987, Ellison 1993). Even Black persons who denounce Christianity often note religious imagery and ideology as important to their moral beliefs and practices (Dyson 2003, Ward 2005). Religious participation has been shown to increase life satisfaction (Ellison 1993) and personal

empowerment (Mattis 2001) for US Blacks. It is also protective against morbidity, mortality (Ellison *et al.* 2000), mental health problems (Ellison and Gay 1990) and maladaptive coping with racial discrimination (Bierman 2006).

Churches and homonegativity

Although the historical importance of religion for Black persons is undeniable, the full transfer of its benefits to non-heterosexuals is contestable. Homonegativity – contempt for individuals expressing same-sex attractions – is apparent via vehement condemnation of non-heterosexuals by some Black religious institutions. While a few churches are openly affirming of non-heterosexual parishioners (Collins 2004, Ward 2005), intolerance of them is especially pronounced in most others. From pulpits, some Black ministers hurl condescending insults in their sermons to express disdain toward non-heterosexuals (Fullilove and Fullilove 1999; Ward 2005). While homonegativity is not unique to Black churches in the USA (Wagner *et al.* 1994, Sweasey 1997, Yip 1997, 1998, 1999, Ellingson *et al.* 2001, Oswald 2001), it has dire psychosocial consequences for non-heterosexual Blacks.

Because individuals reared in intolerant religious traditions sometimes internalise the homonegative views taught by them (Yip 1998), they often suffer feelings of worthlessness and depression (Wagner *et al.* 1994). Some scholars suggest that internalised homonegativity may lead to unsafe sex among non-heterosexual men (Williamson 2000, Huebner *et al.* 2002). Due to about half of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) cases among Black men resulting from engagement in sex with other men (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2007), homonegativity has prompted many churches to be silent about the HIV epidemic among Black Americans (Fullilove and Fullilove 1999). Some scholars, therefore, question the extent to which Black churches can be instrumental in preventing and responding positively to HIV, by which non-heterosexual Black men are disproportionately affected (Baker 1999, Ward 2005).

The importance of spirituality for non-heterosexual individuals

Because many non-heterosexuals have encountered condemnation from churches, they often esteem personal faith in God, or spirituality, higher than the Bible or their religious institutions (Ritter and O'Neill 1989, Sweasey 1997). Yip (2003) has shown that they also reinterpret church teachings in light of their own sexualities. Though non-heterosexuals often struggle with feelings of disapproval from God and churches (Oswald 2001), spirituality may maintain their formal connections to religious establishments (Ward 2005). For this reason, spirituality is key to the conceptualisation of religion in the lives of non-heterosexuals. Yip (2003, p. 139) provided a clear operational definition of spirituality:

[R]eligiosity, seems to embrace two significant components: the adherence to doctrines and beliefs, propagated by the religious institution; and the observance of rituals and practices, within a communal religious context. 'Spirituality', on the other hand, denotes a self-based internal journey of experience with the divine. It is about the relationship between the individual and her/his faith, not necessarily mediated through the church. It is personal and experiential.

Why focus on bisexual Black men?

Bisexual Black men may be unique in their religious and spiritual experiences. Unlike openly gay men, they often refrain from disclosing their same-sex attractions and behaviours (Dodge *et al.* in press) and few may identify as gay (Jeffries and Dodge, 2007). Bisexual men's behaviours, therefore, often remain unknown within their religious communities. Given Black churches' roles in championing heterosexual marriage, these men may regard church attendance as a way to secure female partners and, simultaneously, avoid homosexual stigma (Ward 2005). Consequently, bisexual Black men may not experience the condemnation that

has caused many gays and lesbians to abandon organised religion. Spirituality also may have considerable prominence given the psychosocial struggles bisexuals have due to rejection from heterosexuals and homosexuals (Klein 1993, Herek 2002).

Because previous studies of religion and spirituality among non-heterosexuals have not distinguished bisexuals' experiences (see Clark *et al.* 1989, Ritter and O'Neill 1989, Peterson 1992, Singer and Deschamps 1994, Sweasey 1997, Yip 1999, Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000, Crawford *et al.* 2002, Lemelle 2004), bisexual men have been considered indistinct from gay men. This erroneous assumption has reified gay/lesbian dominance and bisexual absence in religious studies of non-heterosexuals (for examples, see Oswald 2001, Lease and Shulman 2003, Lease *et al.* 2005, Ward 2005). Even so, because few studies have examined the religious experiences of non-heterosexual Blacks, we know little of bisexual Black men's experiences with religion and spirituality. Yet, from accounts of bisexual Black men in popular non-fiction (King 2004, 2005), church attendance, integration within religious communities and faith appear to be important.

This study is unique in that it is, to our knowledge, the first to empirically examine religion and spirituality among bisexual Black men. We proceeded with the following research questions: (1) what is the nature of religious experiences among bisexual Black men? How do they negotiate religious convictions in light of their sexualities; and (2) how do bisexual Black men characterise their spiritual convictions? In what ways does spirituality work in tandem to, yet distinct from, institutional religion?

Methods

Sample

We selected participants from a larger study ($n=31$) entitled 'HIV Risk and Prevention among At-Risk Men Who Have Sex with Both Men and Women'. Its purpose was to identify social determinants of HIV risk and prevention needs among bisexual Black men in New York City. We behaviourally operationalised 'bisexual' such that all participants reported having engaged in anal, oral, and/or vaginal sex with at least one male and female partner in the past year.¹ For the present study, we selected 28 of the 31 men who provided data on religion and spirituality.

Most participants were between the ages of 18 and 30 years (the exceptions were one 36-year-old and one 44-year-old). Two-thirds were African American ($n=18$), while others were Afro-Latino (Brazilian, Panamanian and Puerto Rican; $n=3$), Afro-Caribbean (Guyanese, Haitian and West Indian; $n=4$) or Afro-Native American ($n=3$). Religious affiliations were as follows: Baptist ($n=5$), Catholic ($n=2$), Islam ($n=1$), Metropolitan Community Church ($n=2$), non-denominational ($n=1$), Pentecostal ($n=3$) and United Methodist ($n=1$). Seven participants did not specify a denominational affiliation and six had no affiliation. While the largest number of participants lived in Brooklyn ($n=10$), our sample included residents of all five boroughs of New York City. Two-thirds of the participants had some post-secondary education.

Recruitment

African American male and female research assistants conducted recruitment using targeted sampling techniques (Watters and Biernacki 1989), which were useful given that bisexual Black men are relatively hidden within homosexual and heterosexual communities. The assistants recruited participants from nightclubs, street corners and sexual cruising environments (e.g. parks and restrooms) in Brooklyn, the Bronx and Manhattan. They

¹Despite being behaviourally bisexual, our participants possessed a variety of sexual identity labels (i.e. 'straight', 'gay', 'sexual', etc.). Two men identified themselves as gay in the quotes that we present.

discretely distributed recruitment materials and informed potential participants to contact the principal investigator via telephone for screening interviews. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of New York State Psychiatric Institute. Participants were protected by a Certificate of Confidentiality from the US National Institutes of Health.

Data collection

Between April and July of 2005, the principal investigator, who is Caucasian, conducted 90-minute, semi-structured qualitative interviews in a private office at Columbia University Medical Center. The interviews included assessments of the men's families, communities and social networks. At the start of the interviews, the men were asked, 'Can you tell me a little bit about your life while you were growing up?' Probes assessed aspects of their communities and families. Towards the end of the interview, the men were asked, 'In your social networks, are there people that know that you have sex with men and women?' and 'Is your sexuality ever an issue in any of the communities you participate in?' Through these questions, we acquired most religion and spirituality data. However, the men intermittently provided data in other parts of the interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Aside from sociodemographic characteristics, no personally-identifying information was collected. Participants were compensated with US\$ 50.

Analyses

Given the dearth of empirical work on religion and spirituality among bisexual Black men, we used a grounded theory analytical approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). After multiple readings of the interviews, we entered transcripts into N-VIVO Version 2.0, a widely-used qualitative data management package. We then searched within each interview for words related to religion and spirituality (i.e. church, religion, pray, Bible, God, Lord, Christian, choir and preach). Next, we created a separate data file that included blocks of text containing all religion and spirituality data.

Data coding proceeded in three phases (Strauss and Corbin 1998). First, we conducted open coding of the interviews by carefully re-reading texts and exploring them for the broad concepts highlighted in the interviews. Essentially, we addressed the following: 'What are the men saying about religion and spirituality?' Here, we identified the participants' distinctions between institutional religion and personal spirituality (in Results, see 'Involvement in religious communities' and 'Spirituality in everyday life'). Second, we performed axial coding by linking the broad categories of religion and spirituality to sub-categories within each of these. For example, we discovered that several participants used spirituality to cope with religious condemnation. Therefore, within the broad theme of 'Spirituality in everyday life', we were able to identify the sub-theme of 'Coping with religious condemnation'. Last, we conducted selective coding by systematically relating the broad categories of religion and spirituality to sub-themes by constantly comparing sub-themes across the interviews. Here, we noted the frequency of each sub-theme's occurrence as well as similarities and differences among participants. The results of selective coding appear in text that accompanies the illustrative quotes presented. For confidentiality purposes, we assigned pseudonyms to all participants.

Results

Involvement in religious communities

Participants spoke of religion in terms of public expressions of faith (e.g. church attendance). Discussion extended beyond their involvement with particular denominations or religious groups; they discussed their experiences within a broader religious (primarily Christian) community that included family and community members as well as non-denominational

religious groups (e.g. Christian clubs at school). Thirteen participants regularly attended religious services at the time of our interviews, while all attended with some regularity in the past. Four participants were actively involved with their churches' music ministries: three were ministers of music and another sang in his church's choir.

Intolerance of bisexuality

Fifteen participants unequivocally spoke of their bisexuality being unaccepted by their religious communities. No participants spoke of condemnation that they received for having non-marital heterosexual sex. All of their condemned sexual relations were those that were with other men. When asked if they were able to openly discuss their sexuality within the context of religion, participants provided remarks like 'I can't talk to them about it' or 'I know that would be an issue there'. Brenton, a 19-year-old performing arts student, discussed the difficulty he had in coming out to his own family due to the perception that he would not be accepted upon disclosing his bisexuality:

And then I look at it, you know, on a religious note. I have a strong religious family, you know. Like my dad is first deacon. His brother is like a pastor. And the other brother's like a bishop. (What denomination?) Baptist. (OK. So it just probably won't go over too well?) Right, right.

Similarly, 28-year-old Alonso, a minister of music at his church, expressed frustration in his church preaching that non-heterosexuals will inevitably 'go to Hell' for being 'that way'. Although his bisexuality was unknown to people within his religious community, he felt that it was wrong for his church to condemn non-heterosexual individuals:

[My sexuality is] an issue in church because they're always teaching that God didn't make Adam and Steve. It's a strong issue in church.

Others felt they had to go to great lengths to keep their sexuality hidden from their religious communities. Malik, a devout Muslim and our only Muslim participant, converted to Islam while in prison. This 27-year-old highlighted the immediate threat to his life if people within his religious community discovered his bisexuality:

It scares me ... the wrong people find out, how much respect I would lose. My life could be in jeopardy, and, you never know. (If people found out you have sex with guys?) Yeah, I'll be in trouble. (Even though you have sex with women, too?) Yeah, they wouldn't like it. That would be even worse, though. 'How you fuckin' guys when you fuck women? Like, what's the matter with you?' (So, how does that feel, being a Muslim, but being bisexual?) It feels dangerous, sometimes, because I've got to be careful who I run into, who I mess with, you know? I've got to be careful.

Some participants had been told by religious members of their families that they would be eternally damned to Hell for being bisexual. These participants typically hid their bisexuality from their religious communities. Two participants experienced such condemnation from their mothers. For example, Antonio, a 21-year-old Trinidadian immigrant, revealed:

I've heard my mother say some things about bisexual people, that they're nasty, they're the reason for the [HIV] epidemic ... besides the fact that we're all going to hell. My sexuality is worse than being gay, because at least you know what you're dealing with. At least you know what that person wants. But someone who's bisexual, you don't know. You're doing everything with anyone. You know what I mean?

The previous two examples highlight the unique stressors and stigma that bisexual men may face in their religious communities. As the second participant described, bisexuality was often perceived as 'worse' than homosexuality within the social networks of many participants. This is consistent with social intolerance of bisexuality reported in other studies (see Herek 2002).

Two participants discussed instances of ministers within their religious communities trying to convert them to heterosexuality. Although the American Psychiatric Association (2000) and other health-related entities denounce conversion therapies, religious groups often claim success in converting non-heterosexuals to heterosexuality (see Exodus International 2006). These participants were told to pray or do other spiritual activities in order for God to change their sexualities. Corey, a 19-year-old college student and frequent church attendee, described an experience with his pastor, who prayed for him to become heterosexual:

My pastor's one ... he knows about me. So I go in there, I was going to do my change. So he was just like, you know, asking God to give me strength, and that I'm going to make it, I'm going to do my change, and this and that. (He knew about the change?) Yeah, I had told him. He said, 'You're going to make it. So you're going to be just like me. And Donnie McClurkin [the Gospel singer] used to be gay. But, he was delivered from it.'

The purported sexual conversion of Donnie McClurkin, a Grammy award-winning Gospel singer, is frequently cited by Black ministers who use homonegative rhetoric to justify their actions toward non-heterosexuals. They assume that if Donnie McClurkin could (presumably) change, then so can other non-heterosexual men (Boykin 2005).

Tolerance of bisexuality

Despite the general sentiment that their religious communities were not accepting of them, five participants noted that individual members or churches sometimes expressed complete tolerance. Alex, a 20-year-old, unemployed resident of Brooklyn, did not make his sexual orientation known to members of his church. However, he felt as though, upon knowing that he was bisexual, they would still be accepting because of the church's tolerance of nonheterosexuals. After being asked about the potential consequences of disclosing his bisexuality, he responded:

Um, I doubt anything would happen. I mean, they can't judge me. You know, 'cause their motto is only God can judge us.

For two participants, acceptance came by way of attending one of the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCCs), which are widely known as 'gay' churches (Yip 1998). Dante, a 21-year-old escort, expressed his frustration with the traditional Christianity he experienced while living in the southeastern USA. He regarded the MCC as a place where he could openly be bisexual:

And that's why I had to get away from South Carolina. Because people down there are just so closed-minded ... they just like to condemn you. And, you know, my [foster] mother used to call me, all the time, a dick sucking faggot, in front of my nieces and nephews and stuff, just really, you know, put me down and stuff. And in church! In church, especially down there, they love to throw the homosexuality thing in your face. That's why I go to a gay church. I don't have time for that. Because as soon as you step in a hetero-, so-called heterosexual church, everybody looks at you. And everybody looks at you like you're not supposed to be there.

Don't ask, don't tell

Four participants discussed that they were welcomed to be a part of their Christian communities, but they were expected not to make their sexualities explicit (see also Peterson 1992, Zulu 1996, Stokes *et al.* 1998, Woodyard *et al.* 2000, Collins 2004, Ward 2005, Boykin 2006). Josh, a 25-year-old police officer, appreciated that his church would not make an issue of his sexual orientation had they known that he was bisexual. However, like many other participants, this would only be the case if his sexuality was not openly displayed to his congregation:

Actually, that's what I love about the church: they don't discuss it. With old Southern traditional Baptists it's like you don't discuss it, and that's what I like about it. (What do you think would happen if they knew about your sexuality?) They would try to change me, you know. That's something that I wouldn't like. (But you still feel comfortable and accepted there?) Yeah.

Church as a sexually diverse community

Despite the homonegativity encountered in churches, nine participants expressed that other non-heterosexuals regularly interacted within their religious communities; or, they knew non-heterosexuals who were actively involved in churches. Despite some of these churches being staunchly opposed to deviations from heterosexuality, other nonheterosexuals provided a sense of community and, thus, made them feel connected to their churches. For example, Michael, a 26-year-old professional in the securities industry, felt that church was the one place in which he did not have to hide too much simply because of the presence of others like himself:

You've got to be careful. And you've got to use control, that is, keeping everybody separate. You know, you just don't want people to run into you anywhere. (Right. So it's kind of keeping lots of separate worlds?) Yeah. But in some cases, they're geographically separated ... except in church.

The second dimension of this theme emphasised the Christian community as a place to meet sexual partners. Six participants engaged in sexual relationships with men that they met at church or through religious activities. For example, Clay, a 44-year-old grandfather said:

Some of them I may have met through other friends. Some of them I may have met in a supermarket or at church. [One recent partner] was a family friend. During one of [me and my wife's] separations, he came on to me. And I kind of said, do you think it's time for you to go home? And then we got over that and became friends. We were very much in the church.² And then, sometime later on, after our final separation, we wound up having oral sex.

Spirituality in everyday life

Our participants clearly distinguished between religion and spirituality (Sweasey 1997, Yip 1999, Oswald 2001). The men expressed spirituality in terms of their own faith and personal relationships with God. They often questioned sanctions touted by organised religious entities and, in the face of religious condemnation, used spirituality to validate themselves as bisexual men. As well, several drew upon Biblical passages and church teachings (e.g. 'God is loving' and 'only God can judge me') to positively view themselves and counteract homonegative views of religious groups. Spirituality as a coping mechanism was most prominent.

Coping with bisexuality

Seven participants used their faith to cope with discomfort they felt about their sexuality and/or ill treatment that they received as a result of it. Some had friends and family members who regarded them as 'confused' and 'sick' for being attracted to men and women. Others had internalised negative stereotypes about bisexual men but felt that God validated them despite their bisexuality. These participants relied upon prayer, Bible reading and meditation. Phillip, a 19-year-old fast-food restaurant employee, expressed frustration that he felt for being bisexual and negative perceptions that others possessed of him:

²Among African Americans, 'in the church' is synonymously used with 'saved' or 'Christian'. It denotes being an active member of the Christian community rather than mere church attendance (see Boykin 2006).

God said, you know, go on this Earth, be fruitful and multiply, you know, leave the Earth happy. And I think that he knows, because ... well a lot of times, people don't let me be gay. Like, you know what I'm saying? Like, God, can I wake up tomorrow, just don't like boys anymore? But it doesn't never happen. And, you know, I tried to, make some sense in my head, and it's that the solution I came up with is that he knows, and he knows that I can't control it, and that he knows what's going on. I mean, he has to accept that, because, I mean, like, why would he not like me, and why would he want to send me to Hell, if I can't control this feeling, and I want to do it, and if I don't do it, I'm going to be unhappy?

Coping with religious condemnation

Four participants drew upon their spirituality in order to cope with hostility from religious people. Rather than abandoning religious teachings and denouncing their beliefs, these men used spirituality to validate their senses of personhood amid intolerance. In their narratives, they often evoked a naturalistic view of sexuality, one that presumed that sexual orientation was instilled by God at birth and, therefore, beyond their control. For example, Dante revealed:

I don't believe that all gay people are going to Hell. That's the first thing people like to throw up in your face. You know, we are going to Hell. I don't believe that at all. Because the Lord knew who I was going to be, who and what I was going to be before I was put on this earth ... I didn't have a choice. You know, people'll be like, oh, it's a choice whether or not you're gay. No, it's not, really. I don't think I was born straight. Because even when I was younger, I always had sort of an attraction for men.

Coping with other adversity

Three participants used spirituality to cope with difficult life experiences. One participant shared his belief that God enabled him to endure emotional, physical and sexual abuse as a child, while another discussed God's help in coping with an HIV-positive diagnosis. Sean, a 24-year-old college student, felt God helped him to cope with an abortion that his cohabiting partner secretly obtained, despite his wishes to become a father:

Yeah, I wanted another baby. She actually had, she had gotten pregnant, but she got an abortion. (So you wanted a baby and she had an abortion?) Yeah. (How did that make you feel?) I was hurt, I was hurt. I just brushed it off because I just thought ... I guess it wasn't my time. I guess God, I just thought God said it wasn't my time to be a father right now. Or, maybe she wasn't the right person. You know. But I was hurt, I tried to play like I wasn't hurt. But I was hurt. But, then still ... in a way, I'm thankful because she's just not a right mother.

God as protector

Related to the theme of coping with adversity was the notion that God had protected or would protect participants from danger, bodily harm or death. However, we distinguish this theme from that of coping because the men specifically emphasised 'protection'. Several men credited God for being free from HIV, other sexually transmitted infections or ill health. Others felt that prayer and spiritual devotion would protect them from harmful circumstances. Rather than simply saying 'thank God' as a sigh of relief that they escaped what would have otherwise been the inevitable, our participants' statements regarding God as a protector were interwoven with their narratives on spirituality. Six participants provided data on the concept of protection. Derrick, a 23-year-old actor with a brief history of drug use, felt as though God protected him from a potential overdose and other threats to his life:

I feel like God is the sustainer of my mind and my heart. And he's been there. He's gotten me this far. It's been five and a half years, almost six years, and I could've

already killed myself, could have already OD'd [overdosed]. Could have done a lot of things. But I just thank God that [I didn't].

Responsibility

The last theme that emerged was the men's moral responsibilities consequent to their spiritual convictions. For the three participants who provided data on this theme, responsibility was discussed in terms of future monogamy (usually in a heterosexual marriage). Monogamy was perceived as essential for honouring their future partners, families and religious communities. The men desired to be sexually-active with only their wives upon becoming married because it was the 'Christian thing to do'. Michael, when asked about his desires for the future, said:

I mean, even though I say sometimes, you know, I'd be in love with her, and realistically speaking, though, those little quick run-ins, you know, I can't say that I would not allow that to happen. You know, I try to think that maybe I'll fill in all this void time with my children, my family. (Would [quick run-ins] be a bad thing?) You know, I'm one ... that's more an issue because I'm so Christian ... I want to be fair and honest to people. That's the Christian thing to do, not so much selfishness.

Related to the notion of relationship fidelity was family responsibility and, notably, the importance of setting positive examples for youth. Alonso articulated this in his narrative by emphasizing commitment to children within his future procreative family as well as youth at his local church. He felt that sexual fidelity in a heterosexual marriage would correctly model the lifestyle becoming of a Christian father:

I mean, it's just the way I look at it. I mean, it's my opinion ... do this stuff [sex with men and women] before you get married. [B]ecause I'm in Church, you're making a promise before God, and I just can't (laughter) ... certain things you got to stop. You know, you get to a point where you want it to stop, enough is enough. And that's why I say, when I get married and make my kids, you know, it's going to have to be strictly be straight ... I'm in a leadership role, and I want to be a positive role model, and I got young people looking up to me ...

No participants expressed the possibility of being a responsible leader or role model while simultaneously being bisexual.

Discussion

The bisexual Black men in this study esteemed religion and spirituality as vital components to their lives. Religion's importance extended beyond mere church attendance and doctrinal beliefs. Half of them currently attended church and they discussed church attendance and religious worship as deeply intertwined with family and community life. Their strong spiritual convictions were evident as they discussed their beliefs by drawing upon life experiences, Biblical passages, and church teachings (see also King 2004, 2005). These findings distinguish bisexual Black men from lesbians and gays (including, perhaps, those who are Black), for whom institutional religion has been found less significant in providing meaning in life (Ritter and O'Neill 1989, Singer and Deschamps 1994, Sweasey 1997, Yip 2003). That we acquired a substantial amount of in-depth data on religion and spirituality from a study that was not specifically designed to acquire such data is, perhaps, testament to the religious heritage sustained by bisexual men of African descent in the USA. Without considerable probing, participants in this study candidly volunteered information on the roles of religion and spirituality in their lives.

It is arguable that bisexuality distinctly influences bisexual Black men's negotiations of religious life and spirituality. Our participants' re-evaluations of church doctrines and their

religious upbringings engendered affirmative spiritual beliefs. Given the historical relevance of US Black churches for Black people, it is not surprising that many bisexual Black men, especially those able to conceal their bisexuality, would actively participate in churches and draw upon their spiritual beliefs to cope with hardships (Collins 2004, Ward 2005). However, bisexual Black men may uniquely experience religion. They are socially marginal to White communities and White gay communities (Cahill *et al.* 2003). Simultaneously, due to their bisexuality, they are not fully accepted into Black, or Black gay, communities (Peterson 1992, Stokes *et al.* 1998, Ward 2005). For these reasons, bisexual Black men may be more likely than even Black gays and lesbians to seek solace in religion. Moreover, given the lack of social validation available to them on the basis of their bisexuality, they are forced to constantly re-examine their identities and existences. Questions such as 'Who am I?' and 'Why am I here?' are often left unanswered for bisexual men (Sweasey 1997). Consequently, bisexual Black men may use spirituality to empower themselves.

A minority of participants felt accepted by their churches' enactments of 'don't ask, don't tell' and others expressed complete tolerance from churches or individual church members. The 'love the sinner, hate the sin' attitude of Black churches toward non-heterosexuals has left bisexual and gay Black men within the embrace of their churches (Stokes *et al.* 1998, Collins 2004). Because of the moderate degree of music ministry involvement among participants, marginal acceptance of these men may be how churches balance doctrine with need to employ these valuable members (Zulu 1996, Fullilove and Fullilove 1999; Woodyard *et al.* 2000, Collins 2004, Ward 2005). Given the outright acceptance experienced by several participants, it is clear that, despite denominational injunctions, some members were compelled to be accepting of the men because of their faith convictions. For some religious people faith mandates unconditional love for all (Lease and Shulman 2003) and this likely motivated our participants to maintain their ties to churches. This argument is consistent with findings on White (Sweasey 1997, Yip 1998, Lease and Shulman 2003) and Black (Crawford *et al.* 2002) non-heterosexuals.

Nonetheless, many men's religious communities were intolerant of them because of their same-sex orientations (Clark *et al.* 1989, Sweasey 1997, Woodyard *et al.* 2000, Oswald 2001, Boykin 2005, Ward 2005). In this regard, the experiences of bisexual Black men are similar to those of gay men. Religious intolerance and condemnation sometimes were accentuated due to their attractions to men and women rather than men alone. For others, religion promoted a desire to become heterosexual in order to be respectable fathers, romantic partners and church leaders. These findings raise issues regarding the quality of life implications that religion has for bisexual men: (1) do bisexual men reap long-term health benefits through religious participation? (2) does religious participation buffer racial and socioeconomic marginalisation for bisexual Black men?, and (3) how might bisexuality mediate social and psychological effects of religion upon well-being? Although our study cannot answer these questions, it does highlight the need to be attentive to issues of sexuality when considering the quality of life benefits of religion (Lease *et al.* 2005).

Our findings suggest that affirmative spiritual and religious experiences may be beneficial for bisexual Black men's psychological well-being. Although we did not directly investigate health effects of religion and spirituality, spirituality was used to cope with sexuality discomfort, life adversity and condemnation from religious people. The willingness of participants to use spirituality to cope with various life challenges testifies to its importance for these men. Because the internalisation of homonegativity is associated with adverse health outcomes among non-heterosexuals (Williamson 2000), it is possible that spiritual coping helps buffer the deleterious effects of anti-bisexual sentiment. Other studies have found that affirmative spirituality is beneficial for the mental health of non-heterosexuals because it decreases the likelihood of internalising homonegativity propagated by religious institutions (Wagner *et al.*

1994, Lease *et al.* 2005). Although further research is needed to examine the relationships between spirituality, coping and sexual orientation, spiritual coping is perhaps a vital mediator of bisexual stigma and the internalisation of it.

As with all research, this study has limitations. The small sample size and purposive sampling strategy prevent our findings from being generalisable to all bisexual Black men in the USA. Also, we did not acquire data from three of our 31 original participants, who may have been qualitatively different than those who willingly volunteered religion and spirituality data. Although the religious diversity of our study somewhat mirrors the religious diversity of people of African descent living in the USA, we have limited knowledge of the men's denominational affiliations. Given the increasingly affirming stances that many churches have now taken toward non-heterosexuals (Wagner *et al.* 1994; Lease *et al.* 2005), such knowledge would have been useful for comparison among participants. Moreover, although using Black research assistants for recruitment likely facilitated the men's willingness to respond to recruitment materials, the use of a White interviewer may have influenced participants' responses in different ways than if a Black interviewer had been used. More data are needed to determine the potential impact of ethnic concordance between interviewers and interviewees on qualitative data collection. Last, because religion and spirituality were not primary foci during the data collection phase, we likely reduced the quality of in-depth data related to religion and spiritual belief formation.

Future studies of bisexual Black men should be especially attentive to religion and spirituality as it is likely that they will influence the men's social and sexual relationships, identities and values. Research should also examine the effects of religion and spirituality upon health and quality of life among this population as little remains known in this regard.

Acknowledgments

The authors sincerely thank their participants. This study was supported by the HIV Center Pilot Studies Program Award from the HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies at the New York State Psychiatric Institute and Columbia University (P30 MH43520, Anke A. Ehrhardt, Principal Investigator) and the Behavioral Sciences Research Training in HIV Infection postdoctoral fellowship (NRSA T32 MH19139, Anke A. Ehrhardt, Program Director), both awarded to the second author. During the production of this manuscript, the first author acknowledges support in the form of the McKnight Doctoral Fellowship from the Florida Education Fund. All authors would like to thank Toby Anekwe of Harvard University and Leslie Campbell of the Minority Task Force on AIDS for their invaluable assistance with participant recruitment.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. Position statement on therapies focused on attempts to change sexual orientation (reparative or conversion therapies). *American Journal of Psychiatry* 2000;157:1719–1721. [PubMed: 11183192]
- Baker S. HIV/AIDS, nurses, and the black church: a case study. *Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care* 1999;10:71–79. [PubMed: 10491804]
- Bierman A. Does religion buffer the effects of discrimination on mental health? Differing effects by race. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 2006;45:551–565.
- Boykin, K. Is Donnie McClurkin still gay?. 2005. Available from: http://www.keithboykin.com/arch/2005/09/30/is_donnie_mcclu [Accessed 1 November 2006]
- Boykin, K. Black and gay in the church. 2006. Available from: http://www.keithboykin.com/arch/2006/10/31/black_and_gay_i_4 [Accessed 1 January 2007]
- Cahill S, Battle J, Meyer D. Partnering, parenting, and policy: family issues affecting black lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. *Race and Society* 2003;6:85–98.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. HIV/AIDS surveillance report: cases of HIV infection and AIDS in the United States and dependent areas, 2005. 2007. Available from:

<http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/surveillance/resources/reports/2005report/pdf/2005SurveillanceReport.pdf> [Accessed 5 October 2007]

- Clark JM, Brown JC, Hochstein LM. Institutional religion and gay/lesbian oppression. *Marriage and Family Review* 1989;14:265–284.
- Collins, PH. *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. Routledge; New York: 2004.
- Crawford I, et al. The influence of dual-identity development on the psychosocial functioning of African American gay and bisexual men. *Journal of Sex Research* 2002;39:179–189. [PubMed: 12476265]
- Dawson, MC.; Brown, R.; Jackson, JS. National black politics study. 1993. Available from: <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/issr/da/index/techinfo/I20181.HTM> [Accessed 16 November 2006]
- Dodge B, Jeffries WL IV, Sandfort TGM. Beyond the down low: sexual risk, protection, and disclosure practices among at-risk black men who have sex with both men and women (MSMW). *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. (in press)
- Dyson, ME. *Open mike: reflections on philosophy, race, sex, culture and religion*. Basic Books; New York: 2003.
- Ellingson S, et al. Religion and the politics of sexuality. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 2001;30:3–55.
- Ellison CG. Religious involvement and self-perception among Black Americans. *Social Forces* 1993;71:1027–1055.
- Ellison CG, Gay DA. Region, religious commitment, and life satisfaction among Black Americans. *Sociological Quarterly* 1990;31:123–147.
- Ellison CG, et al. Religious involvement and mortality risk among African American adults. *Research on Aging* 2000;22:630–667.
- Exodus International. Who are we?. 2006. Available from: http://www.exodus-international.org/about_exodus.shtml [Accessed 10 December 2006]
- Frazier, EF. *The negro church in America*. Schocken Books; New York: 1964.
- Fullilove MT, Fullilove RE III. Stigma as an obstacle to AIDS action: the case of the African American community. *American Behavioral Scientist* 1999;42:1117–1129.
- Glaser, B.; Strauss, A. *The discovery of grounded theory*. Aldine De Gruyter; New York: 1967.
- Herek GM. Heterosexuals' attitudes toward bisexual men and women in the United States. *Journal of Sex Research* 2002;39:264–274. [PubMed: 12545409]
- Huebner DM, et al. The Impact of internalized homophobia on HIV preventive interventions. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 2002;30:327–348. [PubMed: 12054033]
- Jeffries WL IV, Dodge B. Male bisexuality and condom use at last encounter: results from a national survey. *Journal of Sex Research* 2007;44:278–289. [PubMed: 17879171]
- King, JL. *On the down low: a journey into the lives of 'straight' black men who sleep with men*. Broadway Books; New York: 2004.
- King, JL. *Coming up from the down low: the journey to acceptance, healing and honest love*. Crown Publishers; New York: 2005.
- Klein, F. *The bisexual option*. Haworth Press; Binghamton, NY: 1993.
- Lease SH, Shulman JL. A preliminary investigation of the role of religion for family members of lesbian, gay male, or bisexual male and female individuals. *Counseling and Values* 2003;47:195–209.
- Lease SH, Home SG, Noffsinger-Frazier N. Affirming faith experiences and psychological health for lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 2005;52:378–388.
- Lemelle AJ. African American attitudes toward gay males: faith-based initiatives and implications for HIV/AIDS services. *Journal of African American Studies* 2004;7(4):59–74.
- Mattis JS. Religion and African American political life. *Political Psychology* 2001;22:263–278.
- Oswald RF. Religion, family, and ritual: the production of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender outsiders-within. *Review of Religious Research* 2001;43:39–50.
- Peterson, JL. Black men and their same sex desires and behaviors. In: Herdt, G., editor. *Gay culture in America: essays from the field*. Beacon; Boston: 1992. p. 147-164.

- Ritter KY, O'Neill CW. Moving through loss: the spiritual journey of gay men and lesbian women. *Journal of Counseling and Development* 1989;68:9–15.
- Rodriguez EM, Ouellette SC. Gay and lesbian Christians: homosexual and religious identity integration in the members and participants of a gay-positive church. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 2000;39:333–347.
- Roof, WC.; McKinney, W. *American mainline religion: its changing shape and future*. Rutgers University Press; New Brunswick, NJ: 1987.
- Singer, BL.; Deschamps, D. *Gay and lesbian stats: a pocket guide of facts and figures*. Harper Collins; New York: 1994.
- Stokes JP, Miller RL, Mundhenk R. Toward an understanding of behaviourally bisexual men: the influence of context and culture. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 1998;7:101–113.
- Strauss, AL.; Corbin, J. *Basics of qualitative research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Sage; Thousand Oaks, CA: 1998.
- Sweasey, P. *From queer to eternity: spirituality in the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people*. Cassell; London: 1997.
- Wagner G, et al. Integration of one's religion and homosexuality: a weapon against internalized homophobia? *Journal of Homosexuality* 1994;26(4):91–110. [PubMed: 8006423]
- Ward EG. Homophobia, hypermasculinity and the US Black church. *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 2005;7:493–504.
- Watters JK, Biernacki P. Targeted sampling: options for the study of hidden populations. *Social Problems* 1989;36:416–430.
- Williamson IR. Internalized homophobia and health issues affecting lesbians and gay men. *Health Education Research* 2000;15:97–107. [PubMed: 10788206]
- Woodyard JL, Peterson JL, Stokes JP. Let us go into the house of the Lord: participation in African American churches among young African American men who have sex with men. *Journal of Pastoral Care* 2000;54:451–460. [PubMed: 11190999]
- Yip AKT. Attacking the attacker: gay Christians talk back. *British Journal of Sociology* 1997;48:113–127. [PubMed: 9178598]
- Yip AKT. Gay male Christians' perceptions of the Christian community in relation to their sexuality. *Theology and Sexuality* 1998;8:40–51.
- Yip AKT. The politics of counter rejection: gay Christians and the church. *Journal of Homosexuality* 1999;37:47–63. [PubMed: 10207824]
- Yip, AKT. The self as the basis of religious faith: spirituality of gay, lesbian, and bisexual Christians. In: Davie, G.; Heelas, P.; Woodhead, L., editors. *Predicting religion: christian, secular, and alternative futures*. Ashgate Publishing Company; Burlington, VT: 2003. p. 135-146.
- Zulu NS. Sex, race, and the stained-glass window. *Women & Therapy* 1996;19(4):27–35.