

Homonegativity and the Black Church:

Is Congregational Variation the Missing Link?

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Abstract: The Black church in the United States has historically functioned as a bastion for civil rights; however, it may also be a source of pain and suffering for sexual minorities. To examine the influence of individual and congregational variables on attitudes toward same-sex sexuality in the Black church, we collected a sample of 219 participants from 15 randomly selected congregations. Results of three hierarchical linear models indicate that congregation- and individual-level variables emerged as equally important predictors of individuals' attitudes toward same-sex sexuality. Individual-level religiousness and congregation-level education emerged as significant predictors of homonegativity. Our results suggest that congregations may play a role in enacting homonegative attitudes. We encourage counseling psychologists working with religious Black sexual minority clients to help clients consider characteristics of congregations (like education) and individual religious practices (overzealous service attendance) that may signal homonegativity. We encourage further work examining the influence of congregational factors on outcomes.

Public significance statement: This study suggests that aspects of religious congregations may play a role in the formation of their congregants' attitudes toward same-sex sexuality. Survey data found that churches with members who were more religious and had less formal education tended to have more negative views toward same-sex sexuality. LGBTQ activists may seek to approach these types of Black churches to provide accurate information about same-sex experiences to reduce bias and stigma.

Keywords: Black, LGBTQ, Attitudes toward Same-Sex Sexuality, Religion, Black Church

Homonegativity and the Black Church: Is Congregational Variation the Missing Link?

Homonegative attitudes—held by either heterosexual or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer/questioning (LGBQ) individuals—directly impact the mental and physical health of LGBQ individuals (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009; Wells, 1991). When held by heterosexual individuals, homonegative attitudes may lead to discrimination in housing or the workplace, social ostracization, or even violence aimed at LGBQ individuals (Feinstein, Goldfried, & Davila, 2012). When held by LGBQ individuals about their own same-sex attractions or experiences, homonegative attitudes may perpetuate shame, self-hatred and internal conflict (Hallman, Yarhouse, & Suarez, 2018), and make it more difficult to get social support (Grey, Robinson, Coleman, & Bockting, 2013). Guided by minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) and attention to structural stigma (Hatzenbuehler, 2009), homonegative attitudes and the processes they trigger have been found to be positively associated with depression, anxiety, and a number of other mental health concerns among LGBQ individuals (Grey et al., 2013; Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010).

Many Christian denominations and churches have cultivated an institutional culture of homonegativity—for example by adopting policies prohibiting LGBQ individuals from entering into same-sex relationships or serving in leadership positions—leading many LGBQ individuals to abandon those places of worship and often religion as a whole (Lefevor, Park, & Pedersen, 2018). Although creating distance from homonegative denominations and churches is helpful for many LGBQ individuals (Sowe, Taylor, & Brown, 2017), others maintain ties (Lefevor et al., 2019), possibly exposing them to more homonegative messaging than those who leave.

Black LGBQ individuals may be particularly likely to affiliate with Christianity and hold their religious views as important, potentially due to a heightened cultural importance of

religiousness among Black Americans (CITATION WITHHELD). However, the Black church is largely seen as a source of homonegative messaging (Stanford, 2013), which may make it more difficult for its LGBTQ congregants to get support. As such, understanding the relationship between characteristics of the Black church and the way they may interact with religiousness to affect attitudes toward same-sex sexuality may be crucial to enhancing well-being for Black LGBTQ individuals, particularly those who remain religiously affiliated. Understanding these relationships may be especially important for counseling psychologists who work with Black sexual minority individuals that are navigating their religious beliefs or practices. Through the use of multilevel modeling and a sampling procedure that examine congregation-level variables, in the present manuscript, we seek to fill this gap by investigating the contributions of individual- (e.g., an individual's frequency of religious service attendance) and congregation-level (e.g., the average frequency of religious service attendance within a congregation) variables on attitudes toward same-sex sexuality in the Black church with the hope to better guide therapists working with Black religious clients.

Heterosexism and the Black Church

Heterosexism theory focuses on understanding the ways that stigma is manifest through societal institutions, which may oppress and systemically disadvantage sexual minorities (Herek et al., 2009). Heterosexism suggests that institutions may play a role in perpetuating stigma on three levels: enacted sexual stigma (e.g., specific instances of discrimination against sexual minorities), felt sexual stigma (e.g., sexual minorities' expectations of negative reactions based on their sexual orientation), and internalized sexual stigma (e.g., sexual minorities' negative self-evaluations based on their sexual orientation). Further, theorizing around heterosexism (Herek et al., 2009) suggests that individuals from historically privileged groups (i.e., more formally

educated, men) may be more likely to assume that all individuals are straight, which is a basis for perpetuating the stigma experienced by sexual minorities. Heterosexism thus encourage us to examine the role that power and oppression may play in the development of attitudes toward same-sex sexuality in institutions such as the Black church.

What is the Black Church?

The “Black church” is a collection of churches that are (a) predominantly Protestant, (b) attended and run by Black individuals, and (c) distinct in culture and tradition from White Judeo-Christian churches (Ledet, 2017). Given the systemic oppression experienced by Black Americans, many Black Americans turn to the Black church as a haven from oppression. The centrality of the Black church in the life of many Black Americans is evidenced by the fact that Black Americans are among the most religious political groups in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2007). Because the Black church represents a space of community for many Black Americans, it is often thought to simultaneously be influenced by the larger sociopolitical concerns of Black Americans and to influence the agenda that is set to address those concerns (Irizarry & Perry, 2018). Thus, church attendance may simultaneously serve to provide support, a sense of community, and an understanding of the community’s values around key sociopolitical issues to congregants. Because of the need for a supportive community of similar others to buffer racial discrimination, religious Black individuals may be more likely to adopt the views of a congregation around issues such as views on same-sex partnerships to attain this sense of community and support.

The Black church has historically served as an instrument for addressing systemic oppression and fostering societal change (Valera & Taylor, 2011). During the United States’ Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the Black church served as a nexus for organizing many

important acts of resistance such as the Montgomery bus boycotts, the Greensboro sit-ins, and the Memphis Sanitation Worker's strike. Throughout the next 50 years, many politicians and lobbyists have considered the Black church an important voting block for passing legislation (Harris-Lacewell, 2007). Contemporarily, the Black church continues to serve as a nexus of social support and networking, health services, and community advocacy, in addition to its religious functions (Quinn, Dickson-Gomez, & Kelly 2016; Valera & Taylor, 2011). Given its history of engagement with social change, the Black church could serve as a space for potential rallying for sexual and gender minorities.

Attitudes Towards Same-Sex Sexuality in the Black Church

Despite the potential for the Black church to be a place of advocacy for LGBTQ rights, Black Americans tend to hold more conservative attitudes regarding same-sex sexuality, reporting more homonegative attitudes than other racial groups (Durrell, Chiong, & Battle, 2007; Irizarry & Perry, 2017). Further, it appears that religious affiliation and participation may explain much of the variation in Black Americans' intolerance of same-sex sexuality (Fullilove & Fullilove, 1999; Ward, 2005; Irizarry & Perry, 2017). Though systemic discrimination may be at least partially responsible for the formation of a more homonegative culture within the Black church, this homonegativity has often been justified using religious doctrines and texts (Barnes, 2006; Gilkes, 2001). Attitudes towards same-sex sexuality have much been shaped by these same forces, with many clergy members using biblical doctrine to justify their refusal to openly support people in same-sex relationships in leadership roles (Barnes, 2013). Furthermore, many Black churches continue to use homophobic language and behavior (Lassiter, 2015) and preach negative messages regarding same-sex sexuality (Ward, 2005), with many clergy members feeling compelled to do so (Barnes, 2013). Given the influence of the Black church in the lives

of many Black Americans—both LGBTQ and straight (CITATION MASKED)—the Black church may play a particularly powerful role in shaping Black individuals' attitudes toward same-sex sexuality.

Though homonegativity in the Black Church is often thought of as homonegative rhetoric and doctrine, it manifests in several indirect forms as well. Many churches prohibit individuals in same-sex relationships from engaging in church leadership (Jeffries, Sandfort, & Dodge, 2008), leading those in same-sex relationships who are interested in leadership to either pursue less substantial roles (e.g., choir director) or abandon hopes of pursuing leadership (Barnes, 2013). Additionally, the acceptance of many LGBTQ individuals is often conditional only on the expectation that they will “hide” their same-sex sexuality from others (Quinn, Dickson-Gomez, & Young, 2016; Collins, 2005; Griffin, 2006). This limited tolerance and “open closet” (Barnes, 2013), combined with quiet gossip against LGBTQ individuals in the Black Church (Quinn, Dickson-Gomez, & Kelly, 2016; Quinn, Dickson-Gomez, & Young, 2016), serves to create an environment that is often hostile to LGBT individuals.

Despite the existence of homonegativity within the Black church, to say homonegativity is an inherent part of all Black churches would be a gross misunderstanding of the complexity and heterogeneity of the Black Church (Irizarry & Perry, 2017; Walsh, 2016). Although many Black clergy preach homonegative messages (Quinn, Dickson-Gomez, & Kelly, 2016), some clergy and congregations are affirming of LGBTQ identities and relationships (Walsh, 2016). Given the strong influence Black clergy may have on their congregations (Barnes, 2004; Cohen, 1999), understanding differences between congregations may be essential to understanding differences in attitudes toward same-sex sexuality.

What Congregation-Level Variables may Predict Attitudes toward Same-Sex Sexuality?

Congregations within the Black Church vary substantially on important features such as gender, education, age, religiousness, and the racial diversity of the congregation (Perry, 2013). These variations may affect the types of leaders chosen, doctrines preached, and attitudes accepted within a given congregation (Cadge, Girouard, Olson, & Lylerohr, 2012), and may reflect underlying heterosexist assumptions perpetuated by the congregation (Herek et al., 2009); however, most research on the Black church (and on church-goers in general) neglects studying congregation-level variables due to the difficulty in obtaining an adequate sample of individuals and congregations in order to facilitate generalizability of the findings. The available literature on the effects of congregation-level variables on attitudes toward homosexuality suggests that variation between congregation may account for a large proportion of the variation in attitudes toward same-sex sexuality (Adler, 2012; Whitehead, 2013). Variation between congregations may be studied in terms of policies (e.g., does a congregation allow same-sex couples to hold leadership positions?) or in terms of composition (e.g., how does the average level of education or age of a congregation relate to the congregation's attitudes toward same-sex sexuality?).

Most commonly, variation between congregations has been studied in terms of the composition of the congregation. This research indicates that congregations that adopt more conservative or literalistic readings of sacred texts tend to have more homonegative attitudes (Adler, 2012). Some research also suggests that, relative to other congregations, congregations that are predominantly female are less likely to be homonegative (Whitehead, 2013). There is some evidence that racially diverse congregations (i.e., congregations where less than 75% of the congregation is of a single race) are more likely to have homopositive attitudes than racially homogenous congregations as exposure to people from diverse cultural backgrounds may facilitate understanding and acceptance of "different" others (Perry, 2013). Although the average

age and level of education of congregants have been examined as predictors of congregational homonegativity, it is unclear whether relationships exist (Whitehead, 2013), largely due to the lack of studies examining these effects.

It is possible that congregation-level variables are more important than individual-level variables in predicting attitudes toward same-sex sexuality, particularly given the role of social institutions in perpetuating heterosexism (Herek et al., 2009). If this is the case, the finding that age or gender is related to attitudes toward same-sex sexuality (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002), may indicate that worshipping with individuals of a particular age or gender may actually be more responsible for the development of homonegative attitudes than an individual's age or gender. Since so little research has examined congregation-level variables, we reviewed research on the effects of several individual-level variables on attitudes toward homosexuality and asked how well findings may apply on a congregational level.

Gender. Gender has been shown to be a strong predictor of attitudes towards same-sex sexuality (Bonilla & Porter 1990, Elias, Jaisle & Morton-Padovano, 2017), with men evidencing more homonegativity than women (Negy & Eisenman, 2005). This relationship may be explained by the relatively constricted nature of men's gender role, such that the lack of gender normativity evidenced by many sexual minorities is seen as threatening (Ward, 2005).

Age. Positive attitudes towards same-sex sexuality are often found in younger adults (Anand, 2016; Poteat & Anderson, 2012), especially when those under the age of 30 are compared to those over 65 (Smith, Son, & Kim, 2014). However, it has been observed that attitudes tend to remain stable from adolescence to adulthood (Hooghe & Meeusen, 2012). Interestingly, some studies have found that age had no effect on willingness to restrict the civil liberties of members of the LGBTQ community (Loftus, 2001).

Education. Generally, education is positively related to homopositivity (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). This relationship holds both within religious congregations (Adler, 2012) and, to some extent, within Black congregations (Irizarry & Perry, 2018). Greater education may represent increased exposure to diverse worldviews, which may facilitate openness to others both generally and specifically aimed toward sexual minorities (la Roi & Mandemakers, 2018).

Religiousness. Religiousness is one of the most consistent predictors of attitudes towards same-sex sexuality (Fullilove & Fullilove, 1999; Irizarry & Perry, 2017). Specifically, adopting a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible (Adler, 2012; Whitehead, 2013), abiding by a conservative Christian tradition (Whitehead, 2013), and religious attendance (Herek & Gonzalez-Rivera, 2006) are all positively related to homonegativity. These attitudes vary considerably by congregation (Walsh, 2016; Barnes, 2013).

Interaction effects. The relationships between these variables and attitudes toward same-sex sexuality have been relatively well studied; however, little work has examined how variables may conjointly relate to attitudes toward same-sex sexuality. There is some evidence that religiousness alone may not predict attitudes toward same-sex sexuality among Black protestants (Ledet, 2017) and that the interaction between religiousness and class—particularly being middle class—is more instructive (Irizarry & Perry, 2017). Additional interaction effects may exist but remain largely unstudied.

The Present Study

As counseling psychologists are often faced with helping sexual minority clients navigate heteronormative environments, we were interested in examining the interlocking systems that may sustain heterosexism within the Black church. We were particularly curious to understand how various indicators that one holds a more socially privileged position (i.e., having more

formal education or being a man) either facilitated or hindered the maintenance of heterosexism from a systemic perspective (i.e., congregational level). We were also interested in salient characteristics of congregations (i.e., the average age of the congregation and the frequency with which the congregation participates in services) affected the maintenance of heterosexism from a systemic perspective. Taken in such a lens, observed differences between congregations on a particular indicator (e.g., education), may be related to systemic differences in the congregations' attitudes toward same-sex sexuality, which may suggest that a given factor may or may not sustain heterosexism. As such, our investigation is organized around three research questions and four hypotheses:

R1: What is the relationship between individual identity characteristics and attitudes toward same-sex sexuality in the Black church?

H1: Relative to other individuals, individuals who are older, less formally educated, more religious, and men will exhibit more homonegativity

R2: How well do congregational differences in experiences of oppression relate to attitudes toward same-sex sexuality?

H2: Relative to other congregations, congregations whose congregants are older, less formally educated, more religious, comprised of more men, and more racially/ethnically homogeneous will exhibit more homonegativity

H3: Congregational-level variables will explain more variation in attitudes toward same-sex sexuality than individual-level variables

R3: What role does religiousness play in moderating these effects?

H4: Religiousness will interact with education such that the effect of religiousness on homonegativity will be attenuated at higher levels of education

Method

Sampling Procedures

There are differing recommendations for multilevel modeling sample size requirements. Some researchers suggest at least 30 groups with at least 30 members per group (Hox, 2010), whereas others suggest that even a sample size of at least 10 groups is sufficient (Snijders & Bosker, 2012). Recent simulation evidence found multilevel analyses with at least 10 groups and an average of at least 5 members per group can yield acceptable results with minimal Type I error and bias, as well as yielding appropriate 95% confidence interval coverage (Bell, Morgan, Schoeneberger, Kromrey, & Ferron, 2014). Given these recommendations, 15 groups were deemed sufficient for the current study.

Because we were interested in both individual- and congregation-level variables, we decided that the most effective way to obtain a sample of members from the same congregation would be sampling at places of worship, following worship services. The survey was approved by the first author's institutional review board. A diverse research team was constructed to gather and analyze the data consisting of seven members. Of the seven, four identify as people of color, four identify as people of faith, and three identify as sexual minorities. We initially identified 1,514 places of worship in a mid-sized Southern city in the White Pages. These places of worship were placed in a list and then randomized. Members of the team contacted leaders of congregations, beginning at the top of the list, and asked if they would allow research assistants to distribute the survey following worship services. Where leaders agreed, consent was obtained from congregants to participate in a 10-minute research study about religious beliefs, practice, and attitudes. Data collection continued until the sample size of 15 Black congregations with at least 200 congregants was reached. No compensation was provided to participants.

Measures

Homonegative attitudes. The short form of the Attitudes toward Lesbian Women and Gay Men Scale (ATLG; Herek, 1994) was used to measure homonegative attitudes, with higher scores indicating more homonegative views. Participants responded to on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5) to 10 items, which were summed and averaged to create a scaled score. Sample items include, “sex between two men is just plain wrong” and “lesbians are sick.” Test authors report high levels of internal consistency ($\alpha > 0.80$) and adequate test-retest reliability ($r_s > .8$) across samples (Herek, 1988, 1994). Scores on the ATLG are correlated with endorsement of AIDS-related stigma and policies that discriminate against sexual minorities (Herek, 1988, 1994). Internal consistency for the present study was $\alpha = 0.87$.

Religiousness. We measured organizational religiousness through religious service attendance. Participants reported their frequency of religious service attendance using the single-item organizational religious activity scale of the Duke University Religiousness Index (DUREL; Koenig & Büssing, 2010). This item asks participants to report how often they attend church or other religious meetings on a 9-point Likert scale from “never” (0) to “several times a week” (9) with higher scores indicating more frequent attendance. The DUREL has evidenced high convergent validity with other measures of religiousness, and the organizational religiousness subscale has also evidenced discriminant validity with non-organizational and intrinsic religiousness (Koenig & Büssing, 2010).

Race, ethnicity, and congregational racial homogeneity. Participants reported their race/ethnicity as one of the following options: African American/Black, American Indian or

Alaskan Native, Asian American/Asian, Hispanic/Latino/a, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Multiracial, White, or Self-identify (please specify).

We created a measure of congregational racial homogeneity (c.f., Perry, 2013) by examining the percentage of completed surveys from a given congregation that were of a single race/ethnicity. We note that this measure is a proxy for congregational racial homogeneity as this variable was based only on surveys completed from a congregation prior to the exclusion of participants who did not meet our inclusion criteria (i.e., exclusion of non-Black participants; see *Table 1* for a summary of the racial homogeneity of each of our included congregations). Given our focus on the Black church, this measure served in part as a manipulation check to ensure that we were assessing churches attended primarily by Black individuals.

Participant Characteristics

We approached a total of 78 leaders of congregations. Of those, 18 had phone numbers or addresses that were no longer in use, 40 declined participation after learning about the purposes of our survey, and 20 agreed to data collection, and 15 of those had Black congregants. Common reasons for declining participation included leaders of congregations feeling uncomfortable with survey aims or questions and leaders' disinterest in psychological research. Common reasons for participation included leaders of congregations desire to support undergraduate research assistants in their schooling, interest in psychological research, and enthusiasm to share worship experiences and practices of the congregation with research assistants.

To be included in the present analysis, participants must have a) been 18 years of age or older, b) currently attended the place of worship selected for sampling, c) identified as Black, and d) completed survey items related to core research questions. Twenty-nine potential participants failed to respond to survey questions about race/ethnicity, and religiousness.

Our final sample included 15 congregations and 219 participants, yielding an average of 15 participants per congregation. This sample size was deemed to fit within current sample size recommendations for multilevel analyses (Snijders & Bosker, 2012). Our sample ($n = 219$) was predominantly female (70.3%), and heterosexual/straight (97.3%) who were an average of 50.1 years old ($SD = 14.65$). Participants evidenced variance in the highest level of education achieved with 4.1% reporting not completing high school, 11.9% reporting completing high school, 31.5% reporting some college but no degree, 7.3% reporting vocational training, 23.7% reporting a bachelor's degree, and 20.1% reporting a graduate degree. Our sample was very religious with the average participant attending religious services every week ($M = 7.95$, $SD = 1.07$).

Demographics of each of the 15 congregations with Black congregants and the congregants themselves are displayed in *Table 1*. Initially, congregants were not screened for inclusion based on race/ethnicity. Thus, for each congregation sampled, prior to eliminating non-Black participants from analyses, the proportion of participants who were Black was calculated for each congregation as an indicator of the racial/ethnic homogeneity of the congregation. Overall, congregations were largely homogenous, with only three congregations exhibiting heterogeneity by race/ethnicity.

Analysis Plan

Due to the nested structure of our data and our desire to capture individual (level 1) and congregational (level 2) variation in the outcome (i.e., homonegative attitudes), we used multilevel modeling (MLM) to address our research questions (Raudenbush & Byrk, 2002). Data were analyzed in R (version 3.4.0; R Development Core Team, 2018) using maximum likelihood estimation with the “nlme” package (Pinheiro, Bates, DebRoy, Sarkar, & R Development Core

Team, 2013). We used group-mean centering to decompose predictors into separate between-congregation and within-congregation (i.e., between-people) variables. This allowed each predictor to capture the pure level 1 and level 2 effects on the dependent variable (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Level 1 predictors included individuals' race/ethnicity, religiousness, and whether individuals are a minority within their congregation (i.e., Black individuals in a mostly White congregation, White individuals in a mostly Black congregation). Level 2 predictors included the predominant race/ethnicity in congregations, racial/ethnic homogeneity in congregations, and congregation religiousness.

We tested our research questions through a series of multilevel models. In the first model we computed an empty model with just a random intercept. In the second model we added level 1 predictors to examine whether individual-level age, education, religiousness, and gender were related to ATH. In the third model we added congregation-level predictors to understand whether each variable explained variation beyond what could be accounted for on an individual level. In the last model we added interactions terms between predictors that were found to be significant in the previous models. We calculated the variance accounted for by each model as well as the amount of variation on individual and congregational levels (Raudenbush & Byrk, 2002).

Results

We first computed the correlations between study variables to examine the zero-order correlations between homonegative attitudes and the level 1 and level 2 predictors (see Table 2). The data met assumptions for linearity (by examining scatter plots of model residuals with each predictor variable) and normality (by examining a normal q-q plot of residuals against z -scores). There was no evidence of outliers as indicated by standardized values below $|3|$ for all participants.

We answered our research questions by running three multilevel models (see Table 3). Model 1 was an empty model that included homonegative attitudes as the dependent variable with no predictors in the model. Results showed the dependent variable had a between-congregation (level 2) variance of 0.05 (95% CI [0.01, 0.15]), and a within-congregation (level 1) variance of 0.33 (95% CI [0.27, 0.41]). The intraclass correlation was 0.13, indicating that 13% of the variance in homonegative attitudes was from differences between congregations, and 87% was from differences within congregations (i.e., between individuals).

In Model 2 we added the individual-level predictors of gender, age, education, and service attendance. Service attendance was significantly associated with homonegative attitudes, suggesting that individuals who attend services more frequently had increased homonegative attitudes ($t(184) = 2.335, p = .021$). Homonegative attitudes were not significantly associated with gender ($t(183) = 1.474, p = .142$), age ($t(183) = 0.644, p = .520$), or education level ($t(183) = 0.672, p = .503$). Model 2 explained 5% of the total variance in homonegative attitudes.

In Model 3, we added the congregation-level predictors of gender, age, education level, service attendance, and racial homogeneity of congregation. Results showed that congregation-level education was inversely associated with homonegative attitudes ($t(13) = -.216, p = .049$). This suggests that congregations with more formally educated congregants, relative to other congregations, had less homonegative attitudes. Homonegative attitudes were not related to congregation-level gender ($t(17) = -0.880, p = .391$), age ($t(14) = 0.695, p = .498$), racial homogeneity ($t(194) = -1.703, p = .090$), or frequency of service attendance ($t(19) = 1.215, p = .239$). Model 3 explained a total of 20% of the total variance in homonegative attitudes.

Although we had initially planned to compute interaction effects at the individual and congregational level, there was only a single significant predictor at each of the individual and congregational levels. As such, we did not compute a final model including interaction effects.

Discussion

Much of the research on attitudes toward same-sex sexuality among Black Americans has focused on showing that Black Americans have more homonegative attitudes than White Americans (Durrell et al., 2007; Irizarry & Perry, 2017) or has used samples of predominantly White Americans to generalize results to Black Americans (McQueeney, 2009; Ward, 2005). Due to sampling methods, research has largely ignored the ability of congregation-level predictors to explain variation in attitudes toward same-sex sexuality, which might offer insight into the way that congregations are formed and composed in the Black church. Guided by heterosexism theory (Herek et al., 2009), we examined the unique processes that may operate among the Black church that are associated with attitudes toward same-sex sexuality to help better guide the research and practice of counseling psychologists. We also sought to add additional nuance to the emerging mischaracterization of Blacks as homonegative by examining other factors that may explain the variation in attitudes toward same-sex sexuality among Black individuals and congregations.

How Much Variation Was Explained by Congregational Differences?

Because few studies have considered the congregation as a level of analysis in understanding attitudes toward same-sex sexuality (i.e., Adler, 2012; Whitehead, 2017), we first examine how “useful” congregations were as a level of analysis. We found that variation between congregations accounted for 13% of the total variation in attitudes toward same-sex sexuality and that the congregation-level variables examined could explain nearly the entirety of

that variance. In contrast, individual differences—including random error—accounted for 87% of the variation in attitudes toward same-sex sexuality, and individual-level variables successfully accounted for approximately 5% of that variation. Though not fully explanatory, each of these effects is “moderate” according to Cohen’s (1988) guidelines, indicating that both individual- and congregation-level variables are important in understanding the variation in attitudes toward same-sex sexuality.

Correlates of Attitudes toward Same-Sex Sexuality in the Black Church

As much research examining attitudes toward same-sex sexuality has been done either with predominantly White samples and generalized to Black individuals or has used race as a comparative variable, we examined associations between study variables and attitudes toward same-sex sexuality in a Black sample. Overall, we found that some, but not all, associations between identity characteristics and attitudes toward same-sex sexuality were significant.

We found that education on a congregational level and service attendance on an individual level were the strongest predictors of attitudes toward same-sex sexuality. Religious service attendance has long been connected with homonegativity on an individual level (Fullilove & Fullilove, 1999; Ward, 2005). Our data showed that the more often an individual attends worship services, the more homonegative attitudes that person will have. One explanation of this relationship may be that the more often an individual attends religious services, the more likely they are to hold traditionalist views, which may be responsible for homonegative attitudes. (Adler, 2012; Whitehead, 2013).

We found that congregations that had congregants who are more formally educated tended to be less homonegative than congregations with congregants who are less formally educated but that this relationship did not hold on an individual level. That education is related to

homonegativity has been noted in the literature (Adler, 2012; Ritter & Terndrup, 2002) and may reflect that those with less education have systemically less access and exposure to information and interactions that may effectively challenge homonegative views (Ia Roi & Mandemakers, 2018). This trend suggests that education varies more between congregations than between individuals, implying that individuals tend to congregate with people of a similar educational background and thus differences in education are largely conceptualized as congregational differences. Attitudes toward same-sex sexuality have been noted to be particularly disparate between middle class Black and White congregants (i.e., as opposed to the difference between lower class Black and White congregants; Irizarry & Perry, 2017), suggesting that the relationship between education and attitudes toward same-sex sexuality may be different for Black and White individuals.

In contrast to previous work (Anand, 2016; Bonilla & Porter, 1990; Herek, 1988; Negy & Eisenman, 2005), we failed to find significant or substantial associations between gender and age with attitudes toward same-sex sexuality. The lack of significant associations between age and attitudes toward same-sex sexuality in either bivariate correlations or the multilevel models may represent our reliance on a restricted sample (majority of participants were ages 35 – 65; Smith et al., 2014) who hold relatively homogenous views. Although gender was correlated with attitudes toward same-sex sexuality on a congregational level (*Table 2*), this relationship disappeared in the multilevel model, likely due to the significant relationship between gender and religiousness, rendering gender unrelated to homonegativity once religiousness was accounted for. We hesitate to make strong conclusions due to the limited size and geographical restrictions of our sample, but we suggest that age and gender may not play as strong a role as thought in determining attitudes toward same-sex sexuality among individuals who are part of the Black church.

So What Does Matter?

Previous work has described the Black church as a largely homonegative institution, effectively erasing variation that exists among individuals and congregations within the Black church and discouraging further investigation. Although a handful of researchers have recently begun investigating further (Irizarry & Perry, 2017), this narrative remains largely unchallenged. Guided by heterosexism theory (Herek et al., 2009), we sought to nuance this narrative by examining the ways that religiousness may interact with other identity-based variables (i.e., age, education, and gender) as well as the role that the racial/ethnic homogeneity may have on the attitudes toward same-sex sexuality of the congregation. Unfortunately, due to the lack of significant main effects, tests of interaction effects between religiousness and other identity-based variables were not conducted. We note, however, that the existence of substantial heterogeneity in attitudes toward same-sex sexuality at an individual and congregational level is in itself evidence against a characterization of the Black church or Black individuals as universally homonegative.

Although previous work has suggested that more racially/ethnically homogenous congregations may have more homopositive attitudes (Perry, 2013), our results failed to replicate this finding. We found no association between homogeneity and attitudes toward same-sex sexuality, indicating that more homogenous congregations may have been likely to have more *homopositive* attitudes than less homogenous congregations. Homogeneity has not always been associated with homonegativity (Adler, 2012), and likely, the results of our study are best interpreted in light of the overall racial/ethnic homogeneity of our sample. Indeed, 90% of people in the average congregation were from the same racial/ethnic background with the median and mode congregation being 100% homogenous. Thus, there may not have been substantial

heterogeneity in our sample to detect an effect. Nonetheless, the fact that congregations were so homogeneous is interesting in itself and may reflect the actuality of religious life in the southern United States (Emerson & Yancy, 2008).

Research Implications

As researchers continue to understand homonegativity and its effects on the mental health of sexual minorities, we suggest that researchers examine congregations as a meaningful locus of analysis. Few studies have examined the effects of congregations on their congregants' attitudes toward same-sex sexuality (Adler, 2012; Whitehead, 2017), and this is the first study to our knowledge that examines this effect in the context of the Black church. Particularly given the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of many Black heterosexual and sexual minority individuals alike (CITATION WITHHELD), better insight into the formation of attitudes toward same-sex sexuality in places of worship may produce interventions interested congregations may employ to improve the well-being of sexual minorities.

Heterosexism (Herek, 2009) encourages researchers to examine the way that existing power structures—which may include religious institutions—may affect the experiences of historically disadvantaged individuals. Results from ours and other studies indicate that variations in characteristics of both congregations and individuals have implications for the congregants' attitudes toward same-sex sexuality. We did not find a consistent connection between socially less powerful characteristics (e.g., being a woman, having less education, being older) and attitudes toward same-sex sexuality, which suggest that attitudes toward same-sex sexuality may develop independent of societal experiences of power, contrary to some thinking (e.g., Balaji et al., 2012; Bowleg et al., 2011; Yoon, Moulton, Jeremie-Brink, & Hansen, 2012).

We encourage researchers to more closely examine the ways that religious identities may shape individuals' experiences in conjunction with other identities.

Finally, we noted substantial variation between both individuals and congregations associated with the Black church in their attitudes toward same-sex sexuality and religiousness. We posit that this variation is best understood to reflect the heterogeneity between Black churches and individuals in their views and undermines a unilateral view of homonegativity being characteristic of the Black church or individuals.

Clinical and Practice Implications

Our findings may also be helpful in guiding therapists who are working with Black religious clients or with clients who are navigating intersecting racial/ethnic and religious identities. We found substantial heterogeneity in attitudes toward same-sex sexuality between congregations, indicating that some churches were more affirming of same-sex identities and experiences than others. We challenge counseling psychologists to query beliefs and assumptions that they may hold about the homonegativity of Black churches and Black individuals. In particular, we have noted elsewhere (CITATION WITHHELD) that many Black sexual minority individuals continue to affiliate religiously, which also challenges assumptions that Black individuals are more homonegative than other individuals.

When working with Black sexual minority clients who attend religious services, our findings may be particularly helpful in guiding therapists' efforts to discuss religion with their clients. We found that congregations reliably varied in their attitudes toward homosexuality, with more formally educated congregations evidencing more homopositive attitudes. Therapists may thus encourage sexual minority clients to consider the average level of education of a congregation as an important factor when selecting a congregation.

Further, we found that the frequency of individual service attendance was related to homonegativity with the average degree of service attendance in our sample being approximately weekly. Given this relationship, therapists may help heterosexual and sexual minority clients alike to examine the influence that attending religious services may have on their attitudes and views. Particularly as sexual minorities may be more strongly impacted by homonegativity, therapists may help sexual minorities who are religious to examine the degree to which they are internalizing homonegative views that may be expressed in their place of worship.

Limitations

Our findings are inevitably limited by several factors. This examination of the Black church examines the Black church as it exists among heterosexual congregants in one mid-sized Southern city—a city with a deep history of racial tension where worship is still often a segregated experience and where law does not prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. In locations where worship is more racially integrated or where same-sex sexuality is accepted more generally, more variation may exist within the Black church in attitudes toward same-sex sexuality. Further, the sample belies a particular approach to religion and religious worship that may be more characteristic of the American South than of other parts of the country. The current analysis also does not examine the way that participation in the Black church may be evolving over time, which may be important to take into account in future investigations. Despite efforts to collect a random sample of congregations, 2/3 of the congregations approached refused participation due to disinterest in research efforts and general discomfort with research aims, and thus the collected sample may be further unrepresentative of the Black church as a whole. Finally, we ultimately relied on a convenience sample within the churches sampled, which may have impacted the participants who were willing to fill out our

measure. In particular, we note that our sample was comprised primarily of middle- to older-adult women, which may limit the generalizability of our results.

Conclusion

With a sample of 219 Black participants from 15 congregations, we found evidence that participants' attitudes toward same-sex sexuality varied significantly based on both individual and congregational factors including religiousness and education. We found that associations between some variables and attitudes toward same-sex sexuality noted among White participants and congregations replicated among our sample (e.g., education, religiousness) where others did not (i.e., age, gender). We hope that continued intersectional research may continue to illustrate the ways that attitudes toward same-sex sexuality are formed and the role that the Black church may have in their formation. Doing so may illuminate ways that the Black church may serve as a contemporary rallying point for social justice as it has historically.

Table 1

Demographic information for individual- and congregation-level predictors

Characteristics of congregations					
Congregation Number	<i>n</i>	% Black ¹	Racial homogeneity		
1	10	100%	100%		
2	16	100%	100%		
3	17	100%	100%		
4	20	100%	100%		
5	6	83%	83%		
6	24	100%	100%		
7	17	100%	100%		
8	20	100%	100%		
9	8	100%	100%		
10	3	67%	67%		
11	11	100%	100%		
12	22	100%	100%		
13	7	100%	100%		
14	28	100%	100%		
15	20	5%	95%		
Characteristics of the entire sample					
	<i>n</i>	% College Graduate	% Male	% Female	Age <i>M (SD)</i>
Total	219	43.8%	29.7%	70.3%	50.24 (14.51)

Note: ¹% Black was calculated prior to removing non-Black participants from analyses

Table 2
Means, standard deviations, and correlations with confidence intervals

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. L1 ATSS	3.39	0.64										
2. L1 Gender	0.29	0.46	.14									
3. L1 Age	50.13	14.60	.07	.05								
4. L1 Education	3.96	1.50	.02	-.12	-.17*							
5. L1 Religious Attendance	7.95	1.07	.18*	.16*	.08	.03						
6. L2 ATSS	3.39	0.30	-.05	.01	-.02	-.01	.03					
7. L2 Gender	0.32	0.25	.11	.02	.01	.02	-.02	-.51**				
8. L2 Age	49.84	8.25	.01	.00	-.01	.01	-.02	-.07	-.13			
9. L2 Education	4.16	0.67	.02	-.01	.01	-.01	-.01	-.54**	.03	.21**		
10. L2 Religious Attendance	7.75	0.88	-.04	-.01	.00	-.03	.01	.37**	-.10	-.34**	-.17*	
11. L2 Racial Homogeneity	0.91	0.18	.01	.00	.00	.00	.00	.17*	-.03	.28**	-.30**	.56**

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. ATSS = Attitudes toward same-sex sexuality

Table 3
Results for Multilevel Models

<i>Predictors</i>	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			
	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI	<i>Std. Est.</i>
(Intercept)	3.44 ***	0.07	3.29 – 3.58	3.43 ***	0.07	3.29 – 3.58	3.43 ***	0.06	3.32 – 3.54	0.03
L1 Gender				0.14	0.10	-0.05 – 0.33	0.14	0.10	-0.05 – 0.33	0.10
L1 Age				0.00	0.00	-0.00 – 0.01	0.00	0.00	-0.00 – 0.01	0.04
L1 Education				0.02	0.03	-0.04 – 0.08	0.02	0.03	-0.04 – 0.08	0.05
L1 Religious Attendance				0.10 *	0.04	0.02 – 0.19	0.10 *	0.04	0.02 – 0.19	0.16
L2 Gender							-0.30	0.34	-0.96 – 0.36	-0.08
L2 Age							0.01	0.01	-0.02 – 0.03	0.09
L2 Education							-0.28 *	0.13	-0.54 – -0.03	-0.22
L2 Religious Attendance							0.22	0.18	-0.13 – 0.56	0.17
L2 Racial Homogeneity							-0.89	1.01	-2.87 – 1.09	-0.12
Random Effects										
σ^2	0.33			0.31			0.31			
τ_{00}	0.05			0.05			0.02			
R^2				0.05			0.12			
Deviance	353.78			343.82			337.75			
AIC	359.78			357.82			361.75			
BIC	369.62			380.76			401.08			

Note. Unstandardized results for models 1 through 3. Model 3 was retained as the final model and standardized results are presented for this model. Std. Est. = Standardized Estimate; L1 = Level 1 variable; L2 = Level 2 variable; σ^2 = Level 1 variance; τ_{00} = Level 2 variance.

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

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