

Religious vs. Secular Communities: Sources of Social Support for Emerging Adult Black Gay and Bisexual Men

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Introduction

Churches are an integral source of social support within black communities as long as members of the congregation adhere to certain social expectations. Although the Bible does not take a firm stance on homosexuality either way, it has been utilized in black churches to condemn same-sex behavior (Douglas, 1999). Black LGBT individuals are oppressed by both racism and heterosexism and have limited sources of social support (Collins, 2005). This research investigates differences in sexual identity self-labeling and the likelihood of seeking social support within religious vs. secular communities especially for participants who are HIV positive.

Method

A total of 20 black, gay and bisexual men completed semi-structured interviews, assessing the intersectionality of their spiritual/religious, sexual and racial identities.

Researchers utilized grounded theory to identify the themes associated with seeking of social support in the church. Researchers analyzed responses that were assigned to the following codes:

- “Current religiousness or spirituality”
- “Negative religious rhetoric”
- “Religion as a site of support”
- “Social Support”
- “Communities”

Demographic Table

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	22.8	1.7
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Beliefs		
Christian	8	40%
Spiritual	4	20%
Agnostic	2	10%
Atheist	1	5%
Personal Connection	2	10%
None	2	10%
Unknown	1	5%
Raised in Black Church		
Yes	15	75%
No	5	25%
Sexual Orientation		
Gay	14	70%
Queer	3	15%
Bisexual	2	10%
Pansexual	1	5%

Results

Participants who self-identified as bisexual sought social support within churches. Participants who self-identified as queer did not seek social support within churches. The participant who self-identified as pansexual sought social support from a progressive church that accepts sexual diversity. A majority of self-identifying gay men sought social support outside of religious settings. The participants who self-identified as gay and also sought social support within churches were also HIV positive.

Quotes

Theme 1 – Participants who identified as bisexual sought social support from church:

“I was lucky enough to find a good pastor, once I became grown. He doesn’t encourage homosexual relationships, but he’s not gonna beat me up about it either, he’ll still love me with the love of a pastor, of a father, so I appreciate it.”

“The only person that I feel comfortable with is my reverend. He knows about my sexuality and about me being positive as well. So when I talk to him he kind of gives me counseling and guidance.”

Theme 2 – Participants who identified as queer did not seek social support from church:

“...just a sense of not belonging with folks – not being able to fully feel at ease and communicate with people, or not – yeah, just the general non-acceptance that comes with not being down with organized religion in that community ...There is a lack of connection because of that.”

“But then [the black church] also being a very isolating space, it being a very painful space”

“[Religious pressure] It’s a slight stressor. It’s not a big role in my life, because of the enormous fake role I feel that church played in my life, where I can see it as nothing.”

Theme 3 – Participants who identified as gay were more likely to seek social support outside of church:

“I club a lot, and I find a sense of community and spiritual transcendence in a club.”

“I’ve...gone into the ballroom community, the Smack youth center...developing friends and mentors.”

Discussion

A majority of participants who self-identified as gay and were raised in black churches sought social support from secular communities. The participants who self-identified as gay and sought social support within a church (despite exposure to negative religious rhetoric about same-sex behavior in churches) were also HIV positive. Currently, there is a lack of research examining sexual and religious identity self-labeling among black gay and bisexual emerging adult men. This study establishes a need for further research of sexual self-identification as well as HIV status as predictors of likelihood to seek social support in religious communities, specifically, black churches.