

“Killing the Messenger”: Religious Black Gay Men’s Neutralization of Anti-Gay Religious Messages

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I use cognitive dissonance theory as a framework to examine coping strategies used by men endeavoring to maintain a coherent sense of themselves as gay Christians. Using interviews with black gay Christian men, I uncover a strategy used to maintain that identity in the face of stigmatizing religious rhetoric. While these men have managed to reconcile their religious and sexual identities, sermons delivered by church leaders disrupt that reconciliation, causing them to have to neutralize these anxiety-inducing attitudes. This study shows that they focus accusations of illegitimacy on the speaker rather than the doctrine by denigrating the speakers’ knowledge, morality, focus, and motivations. In this way, they neutralize the sting of churches’ negative messages by neutralizing the moral authority of the churches’ messengers. These findings offer new insight into how parishioners persist in religious communities in which their sexual behaviors or identities are condemned.

INTRODUCTION

I stopped wrestling with [being gay and Christian] some years ago once I realized that I’m no different than anyone else except for who I have sex with. God loves me the same as He does everyone else, you know? If it were to cross my mind, it usually happened when I heard a minister condemning those who are living this lifestyle and I’d wonder how they can preach love and forgiveness and have no compassion for those who are different. (Jamie, age 44)

Of all major racial-ethnic groups in the United States, blacks are most likely (88 percent) to report a formal religious affiliation (Pew 2008). Eighty-five percent of blacks report that religion is very important to them and 60 percent claim to attend church at least weekly (Davis, Smith, and Marsden 2004; Pew 2008). Even among blacks who do not claim a formal religious affiliation, 75 percent report that religion is either somewhat or very important in their lives (Pew 2008). Black gay men may not be much different. Woodyard, Peterson, and Stokes (2000) and Sherkat (2002) report that gay men, and black gay men in particular, are very active in churches, participating at similar levels as heterosexual women. In fact, in Woodyard and his colleagues’ study, the men reported “consistently high levels of involvement in Black churches” and that they did not see a contradiction between being gay and being active in church (Woodyard, Peterson, and Stokes 2000:454). Not only do many black gay men attend black churches, but they are involved in a range of activities there, from preaching to performing arts (Pitt 2010; Ward 2005). They say they go to church for the same reasons other black men might: churches fulfill social roles; churches are spiritual resources; and they allow men to use their talents to serve the black community (Wilson and Miller 2002; Woodyard, Peterson, and Stokes 2000).

But along with the positives, these men are also assailed by anti-gay rhetoric. Black churches are one of the most oppressive environments that black gay men encounter. Most Protestant blacks

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believe homosexual practice is sinful and hold unfavorable views towards gay men (Lewis 2003; Pew 2003; Schulte and Battle 2004). In many black churches, messages preached by leaders and inscribed in church doctrine are likely to be stridently critical of homosexuality (Comstock 2001; Douglas 2003; Ward 2005).

So what of gay men who participate in these conservative religious communities? How do they remain in churches where their religious identity is strengthened even as their sexual identity is condemned as reprehensible? Research typically shows that gay Christians do this by affiliating with gay-positive religious communities that support integration of the identities and/or give them tools they can use to combat stigmatizing anti-gay messages. But what do gay Christians do when these resources are not available?

In interviews with black gay men, I uncover a strategy used to reduce the impact of these messages. While these men have managed to reconcile their religious and sexual identities, sermons delivered by church leaders disrupt that reconciliation, requiring them to neutralize anxiety-inducing attitudes. Confronted by homophobic rhetoric, these men argue that the speaker is mediating the message between God and themselves and so the fault lies, not in God or even the message, but in the very-human messengers. As a result of this recognition, their focus moves from trying to neutralize the stigma to endeavoring to neutralize the stigmatizer. These men respond to messages they hear and to the messengers—their pastors and other church leaders who deliver them.

Strategies for Resolving Belief-Behavior Conflicts

In *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Leon Festinger (1957) argued that persistent inconsistencies between one's beliefs and behaviors create psychological discomfort for that person. This anxiety, or cognitive dissonance, leads actors to try to reduce the tension and find some sense of equilibrium. Most cognitions operate in a zone of cognitive irrelevance, where one cognition is not in conflict with another. But while cognitive irrelevance is the norm, Festinger argues that many people also hold cognitive elements that conflict with either other cognitions or behaviors. This is particularly the case for gay men and women who participate in common Western religious traditions (Fulton, Gorsuch, and Maynard 1999; Schuck and Liddle 2001).

Festinger offers three strategies whereby actors can manage some of the anxiety and reduce the dissonance. They can change the behavior or attitudes that cause the dissonance, remove themselves from social environments that reinforce the dissonance, or add new beliefs to reduce the dissonance. As this article focuses primarily on gay men who continue to participate in non-gay-affirming churches, my emphasis will be on the third strategy: restructuring their beliefs about what it means to be gay and what it means to be religious.

One approach gay men use to alleviate conflicts between their sexual and religious identities is to reject the religious identity (Mahaffy 1996). Black gay men are not likely to distance themselves from church for the reasons described earlier. In fact, many black gay men throw themselves even more deeply into church work, actively participating in church ministries and attending services regularly (Boykin 1996; Pitt 2010; Woodyard, Peterson, and Stokes 2000).¹

A second strategy that gay Christians pursue is to find religious communities that are either explicitly gay-affirming or, at the very least, gay-tolerant and silent on gay issues (Rodriguez and Oulette 2000; Wilcox 2002). As most denominations like this (e.g., United Church of Christ) are predominately white, for some black gay Christians attempts to join these communities tend to be disappointing. The men find these communities incompatible with their own cultural experiences (Pitt 2010).²

¹ It is the case that many gays and lesbians say that religion is no longer important in their lives (Singer and Deschamps 1994). Certainly some black gay men are accounted for in this number.

Certainly for some gay men, neither of those strategies is an effective way to manage the anxiety caused by trying to live as both gay men and religious individuals. But for many, neither of these options is acceptable. These men not only find meaning in religion. They also find meaning in the particular brand of religion expressed by the religious communities with which they are affiliated. Like some devout Catholic gay men (Loseke and Cavendish 2001) and white evangelical gay men (Thumma 1991), some black gay men are resistant to abandoning their affiliation with their anti-gay, but otherwise appealing, conservative religious communities. The downside of this decision is that they encounter stigmatizing messages more consistently. In these instances, they must adopt a strategy that inoculates them against anxiety-inducing messages.

The third strategy Festinger suggests is to add new beliefs that reduce the dissonance between the two that are seemingly in conflict with each other. For many gay men, this means restructuring their beliefs about what it means to be gay, replacing negative religious beliefs about being gay with neutral, or even positive, ones (Schneer and Aviv 2002; Wilcox 2002). Essentially, they change the way they think about their sexual identity. Yip (1997) calls this “attacking the stigma.” The most common approach is to pursue a kind of “gay theology,” a critical interpretation of the biblical texts that incorporates the cultural-historical foundations that shape them. This exegesis argues that the primary passages—of which there are only six or seven—used to belittle homosexuals have been misinterpreted.³ Other men apply messages they hear in church (e.g., “God made me and God doesn’t make mistakes”) to their situation as gay Christians (Thumma 1991). They then argue that Christianity is a template for living as gay men, rather than a reason to deny who they are inherently (Walton 2006).

The antipode of changing how one views homosexuality in a religious context is to change the way one views the religious context itself. Some gay men articulate discourses where the religious community (i.e., the Church⁴), and not just religious doctrine about homosexuality, is the problem (Yip 2002). These men stay at conservative churches, but reduce the Church’s moral authority by critiquing the Church itself. One way this is accomplished is by criticizing the Church’s historic handling of other supposedly moral decisions. For example, they argue that the Church failed blacks during slavery and Jim Crow and likely cannot be trusted on issues of sexual identity (Yip 1997, 2002). Yip (1997) refers to this as “attacking the stigmatizer.”

Current Study

Festinger outlines three strategies that help ameliorate tensions caused by embodying both stigmatized sexual identities and stigmatizing religious ones. Scholars tend to treat these strategies as qualitatively different from each other. One either stops being religious, starts attending gay-friendly churches, or articulates robust responses to anti-gay positions. I argue that for many gay Christians, the third strategy is facilitated by the second. In much of the literature examining this strategy, those who use it are embedded in gay-tolerant religious communities that help them craft these responses (O’Brien 2004; Rodriguez and Oullette 2000; Wilcox 2002). For example, Yip’s (1997, 1999, 2002) research on “the politics of counter-rejection” uses samples composed primarily of members of gay-friendly churches. For those remaining in anti-gay traditions, there are para-church organizations that promote gay Christian identities; for example, the Catholic “Dignity” and Seventh Day Adventist “Kinship” organizations (Drumm 2005; Wagner et al. 1994).

² The Unity Fellowship Church Movement, a denomination founded in 1982 specifically to minister to openly gay and lesbian blacks, has become an additional option for those living in proximity to one of the 15 existing congregations.

³ These are commonly listed as Genesis 19 (the story of Sodom and Gomorrah); Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13; Romans 1:18–32; I Timothy 1:10; and I Corinthians 6:9.

⁴ I capitalize “Church” to indicate references to the institutional church rather than a local church congregation.

Conversely, in studies that have examined black gay men's attempts to resist this stigmatization, there is no evidence that they either confront church doctrine or their churches in any systematic way (Ward 2005; Wilson and Miller 2002; Woodyard, Peterson, and Stokes 2000). Using these strategies would require levels of biblical knowledge that few Americans have at their disposal. For example, a 1990 Gallup survey showed that while the Bible is the most widely read book in the United States, barely a third of Americans could name the four New Testament gospels. In 2008, Stephen Prothero determined that 60 percent of Americans could not name five of the Ten Commandments. Even more relevant, Prothero found that 50 percent of high school seniors believe Sodom and Gomorrah—two cities mentioned in anti-gay rhetoric—were married to each other. While Americans claim to read the Bible consistently, their knowledge of scripture is lacking.

I argue that black gay men, even those actively involved in churches, are no different than the average American in this regard. Without access to the rich resource of gay-affirming religious institutions, these men may not have the theological tools necessary to craft robust arguments against their churches' doctrinal stances on homosexuality. Instead, these men craft arguments (e.g., "God understands") that, while useful in maintaining a positive sense of themselves as gay Christians in their day-to-day lives,⁵ likely falter in the face of direct confrontation by someone using theological arguments to stigmatize them.

Scholarly inquiries have not explored what strategies might be waged in contexts where other individuals (e.g., religious speakers) are more dynamic sources of dissonant cognitions than are the more abstract ideas found in religious texts or institutional doctrines. These confrontational moments are unexamined in the literature because, to some degree, Festinger's approaches are avoidance strategies. The first two strategies allow gay men to literally avoid anti-gay messages while the last strategy allows them to figuratively avoid them by stripping anti-gay doctrines and churches of meaning and moral authority. This is what makes them so effective. In the absence of effective reminders of the incompatibility, gay Christians can maintain some sense that a gay identity is compatible with a Christian one. But what happens when those reminders are unavoidable? For gays who remain in anti-gay churches, there are likely to be times when they are confronted by anti-gay statements. Without the institutional supports discussed above, these men are left to their own devices to defend themselves.

Elias Farajaje-Jones (1993) argues "[blacks] would never sit through racist tirades by a White preacher Sunday after Sunday, yet those-in-the-life sit through weekly homophobic tirades and never react. What is the price of taking in so much negativity on a constant basis?" (1993:146). But do they not react? These "tirades" present sources of disequilibrium for men who have otherwise managed to reduce the stigma of being gay by reframing homosexuality as nonproblematic. It is, therefore, necessary to understand how they might respond in light of dissonance-inducing events that could potentially reignite anxieties they may have felt before. I argue that these men pursue a strategy similar to that described earlier, but with a less abstract target than the institutional Church or its doctrines. Rather than challenge the origin of the message or even the message itself, they challenge the more "accessible" messenger. In the analysis that follows, I demonstrate how black gay men neutralize the sting of the Church's negative messages about homosexuality by neutralizing the moral authority of the Church's messengers.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

The data presented in this article were collected through semi-structured interviews with 34 black gay men who attend predominately black churches. Certainly, there are men who participate

⁵ Kim Mahaffy (1996) speaks of this as managing "internal dissonance," where the source of the conflict resides primarily in the individual's own cognitions. See Wilson and Miller (2002) and Woodyard, Peterson, and Stokes (2000) for other examples of these arguments.

in religious communities on the fringes, that is, they are not actively involved in that community or do not appropriate its proscriptions for behavior into their sense of self (Ellison and Sherkat 1999). Similarly, some men, and many black men in particular, do not consider themselves “gay” or “homosexual” in spite of their participation in same-gender sexual interactions (Boykin 1996; Icard, Longres, and Williams 1996). Therefore, in order to be included in this study, the men had to be actively involved in at least one ministry/activity at their church and must consider themselves to be “gay.”

I focus on gay men (i.e., excluding lesbians from this study) for two reasons. The first is evidence that lesbians participate in church less than either homosexual or heterosexual men and are more likely than both to have abandoned religion altogether (Sherkat 2002). Gay men are particularly interesting because they are more actively involved in churches than any group other than heterosexual women and are, therefore, more likely to be confronted by these issues. Secondly, lesbianism is not treated nearly as taboo as male homosexuality is, particularly in black churches. There is no commonly spoken lesbian version of the “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve” mantra often used to attack homosexuals. While some of this is a function of the near-absence of injunctions against lesbianism in religious texts, much of this gender-specific homophobia is tied to heteronormative constructions of masculinity. In black pulpits, the word homosexual is often replaced by code words—punk or sissy—that reflect not only a distaste for how a man might behave in the bedroom, but also how he might behave outside of it (Pitt 2010; Ward 2005). Black lesbians, while likely to face some condemnation from churches’ general stances on nonheterosexual relationships, are much less likely to be direct targets of that condemnation.

Respondents were recruited primarily through personal contacts and snowball sampling. I began with three seeds—from different congregations—and asked each of them to recruit someone to the study. The recruited respondents were asked to recruit someone else. This approach allowed for variability in both denominational background and geographic location. The strategy led to a sample primarily located in the Southeast (TN, GA, NC), Northeast (DC, MD, PA, NJ), and Southwest (TX, AZ). Most interviews were recorded in person, either at interviewees’ homes or at their place of business. Some (42 percent) were interviewed by phone or by email conversations in real time. Interviews lasted about one hour and were conducted between July 2006 and January 2009. Informants completed a brief survey that included a series of background questions. Informants who were not available to me in face-to-face interviews completed web-based versions of the survey. Means, standard deviations, and ranges of selected characteristics collected from this survey are shown in Table 1.

Because I and some of the participants socialized within the same community, there was concern that the interview might create a potential imbalance in power, as I would have access to personal information about participants at any future meetings. I allowed participants to ask about my sexual orientation and experiences with my religious community following each interview. This exchange helped to balance power during the data collection and allowed for the mutual experience of learning. Although this discussion was not included as part of the formal data, it further sensitized me to concepts and experiences that were important to the men interviewed. In order to maintain confidentiality, each respondent is identified by a pseudonym that is not shared by any of the men in the sample.

Guided by the question of how these men manage to remain committed to both their sexual and religious identities, I set out to record my respondents’ accounts of their methods of coping with the presumed incompatibility. An exploratory style of interviewing was adopted, in which I used open-ended questions and nonbiasing prompts. This approach allowed for the kind of responses that make up the empirical core of this article, particularly those that speak to continuing moments of discomfort. A grounded theory approach was used in analyses of these data. This approach is based on inductive analysis, with no preconceived categories or hypotheses, thereby allowing the data to speak for themselves rather than serve as examples supporting or refuting

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, and ranges of selected characteristics ($N = 34$)

	Mean	St. Dev.	Range
<i>Age (in years)</i>	32.59	9.73	18–61
<i>Years of education</i>	15.25	2.60	12–24
<i>Comfort level with sexual orientation (0 = not at all, 10 = totally)</i>	7.78	1.58	0–10
<i>Percent who are single</i>	62.00	49.00	N/A
<i>Service attendance (days each month)</i>			
Sunday worship	3.80	.91	2–5
Other services	5.30	2.73	2–8
<i>Beliefs about human sexuality, relationships & religion (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)</i>			
Christians should be more concerned about responsible behavior than about the acceptability of certain kinds of genital acts	3.83	.38	1–5
The traditional biblical explanations about homosexuality are inaccurate	3.67	.76	1–5
The church should recognize same-sex partnerships	2.83	.70	1–5
Monogamy is the ideal arrangement for Christian sexual relationships	4.33	.48	1–5
I find strength and comfort in my religion	3.67	1.27	1–5
A good Christian regularly attends religious services at church	3.17	.91	1–5
A good Christian believes in God without question or doubt	3.80	1.09	1–5
A good Christian believes in his pastor without question or doubt	2.50	1.14	1–5
A good Christian faithfully follows the teaching of their church	3.10	1.18	1–5
A good Christian follows his own conscience even if it means going against what his church says	3.33	1.27	1–5

existing theory, including cognitive dissonance theory (see Suddaby 2006). I carefully read interview transcripts, coded responses, and then grouped those responses based on their qualitative similarity until themes emerged. I suspended participant recruitment after acquiring 34 respondents because, after analyzing 30 interviews, I began to find the answers being replicated by respondents.

These men report beliefs about religion that look very much like those reported by non-gay black Christians (Ellison 1993; Ellison et al. 2000). Most of my respondents attend church at least twice a week (on Sundays and Wednesdays); believe that Satan, Heaven, and Hell all exist; believe that Jesus Christ is the only means to salvation; pray at least once daily; and describe themselves as “somewhat religious.”⁶ They were unanimous in their assertion that “[t]he Bible is the inspired word of God, but not everything should be taken literally, word for word.” In these responses, they look very much like gay evangelicals described by Mahaffy (1996) and Thumma (1991). They report high levels of personal piety, but unlike their more traditional evangelical peers, they reject the idea that the Bible is the actual word of God. While all of the men state that everything in the Bible should not be taken literally, it was clear that some of them still consider

⁶ Some of my respondents remarked that they did not like the question because they do not see themselves as “religious,” but instead prefer to describe themselves as “being in relationship with God” or “spiritual.” This seeming contradiction with their consistent attendance at church may be an artifact of the word choice (i.e., “religious”) rather than some real indication of a mismatch between their religious behavior (i.e., church-going patterns) and their religiosity. Yip (2002) discovered a similar pattern in his respondents.

the Bible fundamentally accurate in expressing what God expects of human nature. For these men, it was faulty interpretations of those expectations that they questioned.

They are affiliated with a variety of religious traditions, ranging from Roman Catholicism to nondenominational Pentecostalism, but all of them attend historically or predominately black churches. Finally, while membership in at least one church ministry was a requirement for inclusion in the study, the average man has been involved in two ministries in the past three years; the most common were youth ministry, performing arts ministry, and religious education.

Most germane to this discussion are their complex feelings about their churches' and/or pastors' authority. They believe that traditional biblical explanations of homosexuality are inaccurate and that sexual morality is a personal matter. Personal experience ranks highest in terms of its role in how they live out their sexual identity; church authority and doctrine rank lowest (other options include "the Bible," "science & human reason," and "the gay & lesbian community"). They find strength and comfort in religion ($\bar{X} = 3.67$), yet they express distress and irritability most often when thinking about how their church community deals with homosexuality. While they believe that a good Christian believes in God without question ($\bar{X} = 3.80$), they are less likely to believe that a good Christian believes in his pastor without question ($\bar{X} = 2.50$) or faithfully follows the teaching of his church ($\bar{X} = 3.10$).

RESULTS

These men, on average, describe the comfort level with their sexual orientation as nearly an 8 on a 10-point scale and have managed to reconcile much of the supposed incongruence between their religious and sexual identity. They remain committed to both. Rather than rejecting one of the identities or compartmentalizing them as separate spheres in their life, they have managed to integrate the two into a complex identity in which aspects of their sexuality and religion complement and inform each other. This is consistent with what homosexual-identity theorist Richard Troiden (1989) calls "identity synthesis," where gay men integrate their sexual and religious identity into a Gay Christian identity. The following responses are representative of statements used to describe their successful integration:

I don't think about it due to the fact I have reconciled my spiritual and personal life with a true belief in God. (Vashan, age 29)

I seldom am torn between my faith and sexual orientation. Do heterosexuals have to worry about that? Traditionally? No. I see no distinguishing factors with my orientation and faith. It's never a concern because I am comfortable with my lifestyle. (Bryan, age 21)

I just go with what I am. I did not ask to be gay. It wasn't a decision I made. I was born this way. I have never been attracted to women, ever. So I have to think if God did not want me this way, I wouldn't be this way. That's my anchor. (Joel, age 43)

Troiden, like many stage-theorists, argues that his stages are not necessarily linear; movement between stages can stall, accelerate, or even reverse temporarily as a result of new encounters that challenge one's worldview. As Bryan's statement shows, respondents expressed indifference when asked how often they think about or worry about maintaining a gay Christian identity; they argue that these moments were rare. Nevertheless, when pressed, they indicated that there were moments when they felt some psychological discomfort about being gay. They listed four catalysts that would set off this anxiety: a) having sexual experiences that compromised their beliefs about sex outside of committed relationships; b) reflecting on their mortality and considering what it might mean not to have progeny to gather at their funeral; c) dealing with the challenges of dating men and questioning if those challenges were evidence that "it wasn't God's will for men to fool with men"; and d) listening to church sermons or teachings that attacked homosexuality. Of

these catalysts, the most consistently expressed was the last; their biggest source of anxiety was listening to their pastors or some other church leader speak against homosexuality.⁷

Most of the men suggest that they vacillate between complete acceptance and uncertainty when preachers, who they otherwise value as sources of spiritual guidance, speak negatively against homosexuality. For example, even though 20-year-old choir member Clifton states that “being gay doesn’t stop me from going to the church house,” he acknowledged that he is often shaken when confronted by his pastor’s sermons: “I definitely feel that way sometimes. I have felt like that before when he’s preaching and I feel like I was allowing Satan to win and have the victory. That that’s what [Satan] wants of me.” While Clifton’s statement is a more stark example of how these sermons affect some of the men, a milder version and one more often voiced took the following form:

All of the gospel ain’t meant to be taken like cotton candy. There is a lot of things in God’s word—which he calls a two-edged sword—that hurts. Sometimes the truth hurts. Sometimes my feelings get hurt and I have to suck it up and take it. If it’s good for me to hear, then I need to hear it and learn something from it. But what I don’t like is when preachers or anyone in a position of authority abuse that power and abuse people because of their own prejudices. (Kendrick, age 32)

In those instances, the men do not draw on the resolution strategies I discussed earlier—reframing the doctrine or the institutional Church as illegitimate—to decrease their cognitive dissonance. In most cases, they only have the tools necessary to mount a rudimentary response to these messages. While statements like those voiced above by Vashan and others are useful barriers to more consistent psychological discomfort, they are less useful against these seemingly rare,⁸ but nevertheless powerful, dissonance-inducing moments. Still needing to neutralize this attack on their belief that there is no inconsistency between their sexual identity and religious values, the men focus their accusations of illegitimacy on the messenger rather than the message.

Four variations of these accusations emerged in our conversations; they accused the messengers of having flawed knowledge, flawed morality, flawed focus, and/or flawed motivations. While I discuss each of these accusations in turn, these men did not describe them in isolation from each other. That is, within any one interview, someone might use one, two, or even all of these accusations in their defense against religious speakers. In those instances when it is relevant, I will point out particular characteristics of men (e.g., coupled men) who were especially likely to use these defenses.

Flawed Knowledge

Some men argue that, while they may be experts in many aspects of theology, black preachers are simply not well-versed in theological, psychological, or biological theories related to sexuality. These men felt that this ignorance invalidated their pastors’ claims that homosexuality was unnatural and, therefore, incompatible with Christianity. While most of the men could not name even one of the biblical passages often used as foundations for the Church’s unfavorable stance on homosexuality, a few mentioned that they had done their own extensive study of them. One reason given for the difficulty some men had in pointing out specific passages was that

⁷ While five men did not mention a church speaker as a catalyst, three of those mentioned having to defend themselves against religious relatives’ criticisms of their homosexual identities. These men described their responses to these criticisms in ways that were similar to the men who spoke of church speakers. While these five men were not directly affected by church leaders, they all rendered criticisms of church leaders and, therefore, are included in this analysis.

⁸ Respondents say that ministers (including Bible study instructors) may speak on homosexuality an average of 11–12 times a year. A 2003 Pew study shows that 47 percent of black churchgoers who attend one or two services a month report hearing about homosexuality from their clergy; that is more than both mainstream white Protestants (33 percent) and Catholics (25 percent).

preachers rarely point to them explicitly in sermons. Even the men who knew the passages suggested that sermons rarely focused on particular anti-gay passages, but instead tended to include attacks without pointing to the source. This led them to believe that their pastors did not have a clear understanding or even knowledge of the passages. Instead, some suggest, the preachers are preaching inaccurate interpretations of the text that have become so ingrained in religious rhetoric that they are no longer questioned or analyzed. The following response by 34-year-old Sunday School teacher, Norman, illustrates this point: “Our pastor still talks about Sodom and Gomorrah as being destroyed because of gayness when Jesus even said that they were destroyed for inhospitality. Did he never read that? I don’t know. Would he change his message even if he did? I doubt it because things like that don’t fit with what he’s already been taught and believes.”

Many men pointed to the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah and the refrain “God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve” as the most likely ways their pastors would use the Bible to stigmatize gay people in their church. As the destruction of the biblical cities is used to show that God deems homosexual acts immoral, the story of God’s creation of man and woman as the first humans is used to depict anything other than heterosexual relationships as unnatural as well. While it would seem that the Creation story offers the strongest support for a heterosexist approach to sexual relationships, preachers’ use of the idea of “natural law” created an opening for some men to question their ability to speak competently on the issue of sexuality:

I don’t mind that he talks about how God can deliver me or God can heal me, but when he starts in on that talk about even animals have enough sense to tell the difference between a man and a woman, he’s walking on dangerous ground. I’ve seen all kinds of shows about how there are animals that do what we would consider gay. (Eli, age 36, Sunday School teacher)

These critiques were most common among men who served in religious education ministries as teachers or administrators. As I mentioned above, few respondents could point to actual scriptures that served as fodder for or as a defense against pulpit attacks on homosexuality. The paucity in the numbers of men who could render this kind of response supports my assertion that the strategy of using a complex “gay theology” as a buffer against doctrinal attacks may not be as available—to even active-churchgoers—as the literature might have us believe.

Flawed Morality

In those moments when speakers are using anti-gay rhetoric, some of these men determine that the speakers’ own issues with sexual morality—real or imagined—disqualify them from speaking meaningfully about homosexuality. This critique is expressed most cogently by the following comment:

You heard that joke about people in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones? Well, some of these preachers ain’t just living in glass houses, they walk around in them naked. They strut around talking about how being gay is a sin while everybody in the church knows they sleeping around with women they not married to. They even talk about how much of a player they are to prove that they not a sissy or nothing. (Curtis, age 25)

By arguing the moral failings of the speaker and dealing with speakers’ perceived moral hypocrisy, these men discredit the speaker as an arbiter of moral values. Rather than justify their homosexual behavior, they deflect the criticism of their sexual behavior back at the speaker. This was particularly the case for men who were in long-term committed relationships. One described it as “totally hypocritical that someone could drive past *our* house at two in the morning to hook up with a lady in the church and then get in the pulpit and talk about how God hates me” (Marcus, age 40). These men tend to hold many of the same values their church doctrine espouses, particularly values related to sexual behavior. For example, they are fairly strong ($X = 4.33$) in their agreement

that “monogamy is the ideal arrangement for Christian sexual relationships.” They are more likely to have sat through sermons about heterosexual premarital sex (i.e., fornication) or extramarital sex (i.e., adultery) than sermons specifically condemning homosexuality. Therefore, it may be just as natural for them to express indignation about others’ breaks with the sexual codes of their church as it is for the authority figures who champion those codes from the pulpit to do so. The gay men’s challenges of the messenger’s morality are not waged solely in an attempt to undermine the speaker’s case against homosexuality. The criticisms seem to come from a sense that any break with church teachings on sexual behavior—whether those breaks are committed by a homosexual or a heterosexual—is worthy of, at the very least, the same degree of stigma. Their counter-stigmatization of the “immoral” speaker is less an attack on the speaker’s stance on homosexuality than on the speaker’s authority to serve as an advocate for sexual morality.

More than one person suggested that some preachers speak of homosexuality obliquely, the most common approaches being to talk about “alternative lifestyles.” While “alternative lifestyles” likely includes practically any kind of nonmarriage coupling, these men argue that these criticisms are aimed directly at them. When asked why they believed preachers would not confront the issue of homosexuality directly, the men were nearly unanimous in their suspicions that the preachers who use this approach are, themselves, closeted or latent homosexuals. Because many churches make a distinction between “occasional sin” and “living in sin,” referring to people as “those living in that alternative lifestyle” is seen as a way to attack gay men who identify as such while sidestepping one’s own occasional lapses into homosexual behavior. Brian, a 25-year-old choir director, argued that these preachers are hypocritical in their veiled condemnation of those who embrace a gay identity: “I think that’s the biggest barrier to people being able to honestly deal with their issues. If the pastors and deacons, some of whom are gay themselves, would stop being hypocrites and hating on us just because we’re comfortable with who we are, church would be the hospital they’re always saying it should be, for us and for them.” This accusation, that some preachers were themselves closeted homosexuals, was a common refrain among these men.

While respondents tended to invalidate male speakers’ authority to talk about homosexuality on the grounds that they are sexual hypocrites, they also used traditional “moral” values to challenge female speakers’ authority to condemn homosexuality. Rather than using sexual mores as their point of contention, they used the Bible’s patriarchal themes to argue that female speakers were hypocrites too. In particular, they pointed to injunctions against women taking the very roles that give them platforms to espouse anti-gay doctrinal principles. The following comment provides a common formulation of this theme: “How can she stand up there with a straight face preaching what Paul might have said about effeminates when the same Paul she’s talking about said in the same book that women should be quiet in church and not be over men? I never heard her preach against women preachers” (Patrick, age 22). Like the critique of male speakers who break with their church’s moral codes, this critique challenges female speakers’ breaks with it as well. Only two of these men have female pastors and neither of them used this approach to challenge their authority; this strategy was only mentioned by men who had male pastors. The primary targets of these attacks were female leaders of auxiliary Bible studies, who tended to voice their opposition to homosexuality in classrooms rather than from pulpits. Other than Patrick’s allusion to I Timothy 1:10 and 2:12, none of the men who attacked female speakers’ authority pointed to particular sexist scriptures. Like those who would seek to oppress gays, these men used the ambiguous “the Bible says” to argue for limitations on women. This, again, points to the lack of theological depth that informs these defenses.

Suspect Focus

In the absence of moral fodder for attacks on messengers’ credibility, some of these men turned to a different approach. They argued that the overarching biblical principles of unconditional love and grace superseded the more narrow injunctions against homosexuality; the

messengers were emphasizing the wrong message. But the criticism was not aimed at moving preachers' sermons away from sin and toward love. They castigated preachers for being judgmental about homosexuality and, more directly, about homosexuals themselves. One man remarked that the nearly standard slogan of "loving the sinner, but hating the sin" doesn't have much meaning because the attacks on homosexuality are not targeting an abstract idea or behavior. Instead, he argues, the judgment he feels from the pulpit is aimed at him as a person because the "hated sin" informs his sense of self: "That would be like telling me that you love me, but hate my Black skin. Now how does that sound? Having Black skin is what makes me a Black man. Loving [my partner] is what makes me a gay man" (Demetrius, age 35). These men, like those in the last section, challenged the preacher's moral authority, but on very different grounds. In this case, they accused the speaker of not being true to what they deem the principal values of Christianity: love and acceptance. They do not fault the preacher for not preaching love; they fault him or her for not showing it. This sentiment is clearly represented in the following statement:

What the Bible boils down to is love. If God has a problem with my being this way, He can tell me himself. Otherwise, preachers should be careful when they're pointing fingers and sending people to hell. (John, age 47)

Respondents occasionally set up a dichotomy between Old Testament legalism and the kind of unconditional love they believe Jesus Christ expressed in the New Testament. While they agree that biblical law holds some value for a contemporary audience, they expressed discomfort with the kind of legalism that was preached from the pulpits of their church. To make his case, one of the men raised the story of the woman who was to be stoned for being caught in the act of adultery. He pointed out that Jesus' response was a liberal one because of his refusal to condemn the woman. By challenging the people to stone her only if they were sinless themselves, Jesus condemned the judgmental more harshly than the judged. Again and again, respondents stated that they did not believe that Jesus focused on homosexuality at all, let alone with the passion their pastors seemed to do. An example of this was voiced by 44-year-old Jamie:

Of course it rubs me the wrong way most of the time, but it depends on how they are preaching about it. Most of the time, it's in a cynical manner. I've heard some preachers—who were great teachers by the way—use the terms faggots, sissies, or punks in their sermon, which I don't think is godly or Christ-like. The rest of what they were saying was good, but that part left a bad taste in my mouth. I haven't seen where Jesus went around calling people faggots and sissies. He could have, I just haven't read that part yet. I could be wrong.

It is important to note that some of the men who used this strategy also questioned speakers' morality as described in the previous section, thereby complicating their demands that speakers refrain from focusing on sin. While, on the surface, this may seem like a contradiction, this seeming inconsistency further illustrates the complexity of the "flawed focus" criticism. Again, the criticism is not made against the message of "homosexuality as sin"; they tended to understand—even if they disagreed with—their churches' doctrinal beliefs about homosexuality. The challenge in this strategy is against the preachers' emphasis on that message and the way the message is delivered. Focusing on homosexuality as a sin, using particular epithets (e.g., "faggot") to describe homosexuals, and ridiculing homosexuals are all choices in delivery that are made by the speaker. For example, one man compared his pastor's compassion when dealing with pregnant teenagers and drug addicts—both of whom are served by service ministries at his church—with his vitriolic criticisms of gay men. It is this mordacious manner of dealing with homosexuality the men reject, rather than the fact that it is mentioned at all.

Suspect Motivations

One of the most common methods of neutralizing the messenger was to question the motives behind his or her use of anti-gay rhetoric. My respondents believe that the public displays

of disapproval are devised to satisfy prejudices held by certain members of the congregation in order to increase the minister's popularity or to spur giving. They claim that admonitions against homosexuality were gratuitous and intended to have an impact on heterosexuals in the congregation rather than homosexuals. This perspective is expressed best by the following comments:

Churches are full of females and I think that the females are the most disgruntled by the whole [gay] phenomena, especially the single, unmarried females. Whenever the comments or whenever the slights are made from the pulpit, then that's when you get your biggest response, your cheering on and your "go aheads" and your "amens." (Vashan, age 29)

You can always tell when the giving is down because out comes the "sissy" talk. I think they use homosexuals as scapegoats because if they get the right people emotional, they think they will give more. What he doesn't seem to get is that the people he's making fun of are the ones keeping the lights on. (Marcus, age 40)

Other men criticize the timing of gay messages, but they do not see money as the primary motivator. Instead, they cite current events as a catalyst for their pastors' rare condemnations of homosexuality, arguing that they cannot avoid dealing with it when it is a major topic (e.g., gay marriage) in the media:

I honestly don't believe he means it when he's saying what he says, but he has to comment since it's in the news. We could be up cheering him on, but when he starts on this, we stop and listen to just what he is saying. I feel he's just throwing it in there to please the straight men and women, but that he doesn't mean it. When he starts in, I cringe, I get a little heated and just think, "Go ahead and say it. Get it over with so we can move on to the next thing." (Eli, age 36)

While respondents acknowledged that preachers probably shared the negative views of homosexuality they espoused from the pulpit, they were suspicious about the degree to which those views were held. Some felt that the level of vitriol expressed from the pulpit was not commensurate with the way preachers treated gay men in their individual interactions with them. Those interactions were described as positive and nonjudgmental even when the preacher suspected that the men were practicing homosexuals.

Even though the negative comments come from the pulpit, I think it's still, to an extent, accepted by many of the people in the church. Honestly, I feel comfortable there. I don't sense any negative vibes from the pastor about my sexuality when she's dealing with me one-on-one. It's just pulpit talk. (Michael, age 24)

While this kind of challenge is, like the others, critical of the choices pastors make in dealing with homosexuality in their sermons, the tone of some of this criticism seems to offer a rationale for these choices. In this way, this strategy is similar to one pointed to by Joffrion (2006) in his analysis of the gay community's rationalizing Democrat Bill Clinton's signing of the federal Defense of Marriage Act as "just politics."

It may be the case that the pastors of these churches are, in many ways, ambivalent about the sexuality of the men who attend them. While preachers will rail against homosexuality generally, they do not tend to directly confront presumably gay members of their churches. The black church seems to maintain a kind of sacred version of the military's "don't ask-don't tell" policy where homosexuality is publicly denounced, while the actual presence of gay men in any particular congregation is rarely acknowledged. This isn't to say that churches are openly hospitable to homosexual men, but churches are more prone to "discreetly and covertly welcome these men without public acknowledgement of their sexuality" (Woodyard, Peterson, and Stokes 2000:457). Not being personally confronted frees the men to keep some cognitive distance between their pastors' negative messages and their own positive sense of themselves as gay Christians.

Having a “Revival Experience” and Being Resocialized

These four challenges to preachers’ authority do not always arise without help. In spite of their general confidence that being gay is compatible with Christianity, some men admit that they are occasionally convinced (albeit momentarily) that behaviors associated with being gay are in fact forbidden by God. They describe it as having a “revival experience” because these moments of anxiety about the sexual-religious identity mismatch last “only as long as the revival preacher is in town.” These incidents of cognitive dissonance are short-lived and usually ended by a kind of reindoctrination process promoted by other gay or lesbian members of their religious community. They describe the process like this. After a service in which a speaker ridicules or denigrates homosexuals, gay men and women gather together and criticize the speaker using one of the aforementioned accusations. If the gay man made an overt show of repudiating his homosexual identity (e.g., responding to a call for homosexuals to come forward for prayer), his friends would ridicule him for “buying into that message.”

A common example of this involved the Reverend Donnie McClurkin, an award-winning gospel singer and pastor, who describes himself as a former homosexual in his book *Eternal Victim, Eternal Victor* (2001). Some of my respondents described gay men who would go to McClurkin’s concerts and find themselves heading down the aisle when he would call for repentant homosexuals to come and “be delivered.” As one respondent laughed: “Honey, I grabbed Renaud when he got back to his seat and said, ‘Baby, the only thing straight about Ms. Donnie is his you-know-what when some Miss Honey [a term for an effeminate gay man] walk by’” (D’Marcus, age 29). By claiming that McClurkin isn’t truly a *former* homosexual, the men call on his suspect morality to neutralize his message and, thereby, assist wayward gay men in reintegrating the two identities.

This approach is similar to, but not nearly as organized as, the approach used by the evangelical “Good News” organization studied by Thumma (1991): “Good News presents a model into which its members are socialized. A central premise of the concept of socialization is that individuals are brought to conform to the expectations and ideals of the group through internalization and social learning” (1991:343). In the “Good News” approach, that socialization is focused on helping gay evangelicals reframe their experience with the Church and its doctrines in a more general way, as I’ve described earlier. This works differently for my respondents. While there is no *organized* attempt to resocialize the potentially lapsing gay man back into a position where he is comfortable with holding both the gay and religious identities, these after-the-service gatherings have a similar impact by attacking the speaker without attacking the Church or its doctrines. The gay community in these men’s churches encourages them to embrace the identity more strongly by helping them neutralize the messengers’ influence. In the end, the men renegotiate their commitment to the gay identity, often within a couple of hours or days of nearly abandoning it entirely. Evidence of this phenomenon is identified in Sharif’s comments:

You go to a revival and the preacher connects being like this with fornication and adultery and other sexual sins that I believe are wrong. I always get convicted by that. But, once the revival is over, you still have to live with yourself and how you really feel inside. I’ve had two relationships that I’ve broken off for religious reasons because of what I heard in a sermon. It was like on Sunday I’d listen to a message and be convicted and then go home and tell the guy I’m seeing that “pastor said it’s wrong, then it’s wrong.” That doesn’t last very long because he and our friends sort of bring me back to reality. (Sharif, age 29)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Gay Christians use a number of strategies to ameliorate the tension caused by embodying both a stigmatized sexual identity and a stigmatizing religious one: leave the church entirely

(Singer and Deschamps 1994), switch to gay-friendly churches (Wolkomir 2001), refute negative religious perspectives on homosexuality (Loseke and Cavendish 2001; Thumma 1991), or reject the institutional Church's authority to establish them (Wilcox 2002; Yip 2002).

The implicit message of current literature is that once a gay Christian settles on one of these strategies, he or she no longer has moments of disequilibrium; he or she has reached a state of cognitive resonance promoted by the use of one of the strategies. Yip (1997:125) says as much when he concludes: "There is no more guilt and shame for having violated the normative order imposed by the Church. Their accounts signify that they have already experienced dissonance resolution rather than attempting dissonance reduction." If cognitive resonance truly takes place, it is often facilitated by gay-positive religious institutions that support it either by not contributing to the tension or by supplying theological responses to messages that might exacerbate these tensions. But what do gay Christians do in the absence of these gay-affirming institutions? As I've shown here, there is evidence to suggest that many black gay men find themselves precisely in this predicament as members of non-gay-affirming churches.

In the Woodyard, Peterson, and Stokes study, they asked "how do [black gay] men cope with the dichotomous messages received from these churches? How do they manage to stay involved in the face of vilification and the concomitant erosion of self-esteem?" (2000:459). My findings illustrate the way many do it: they reduce the impact of the messages by reducing the power of the messenger. When confronted with homophobic sermons, these men argue that the speaker is mediating the message between God and themselves and so the fault lies, not in God or even the message, but in the very-human messengers. Their focus moves from trying to neutralize the stigma to endeavoring to neutralize the stigmatizer. In the absence of strong defenses against anxiety-inducing religious rhetoric, actors attack the more easily delegitimized deliverers of that rhetoric.

While this finding is similar to Yip's (1997) extension of Festinger's "adding new cognitions" strategy, it goes even further, showing that actors without the tools to challenge abstract institutional messages or the inclination to challenge the similarly incorporeal "Church" choose a more accessible target. The extant literature in this area would predict that these men would have responded with a challenge to Church doctrine using the gay theology approach or to the Church itself as too traditional an institution; they didn't. In each case, their response—taking one or more of the forms described in my results—targeted preachers by focusing on their limitations and choices. This approach is made possible by their understanding of, as my respondents describe it, one essential truth: the Church is composed of people and is, therefore, bound by humankind's values, prejudices, and limitations. As Walton states, "God is perfect, but churches are imperfect human organizations through which God works" (Walton 2006:11). In challenging their imperfect leaders' authority to speak as experts, as examples, as critics, or even as people with pure and spiritual motivations, these men free themselves to see the messages of these leaders as guides, rather than scripts to be followed.

With few exceptions, the scholarship that informs our understanding of how Festinger's resolution strategies are used is based on samples that are either predominately white or located in religious communities quite different from the ones my respondents are embedded in. I consider this a limitation of prior research, but recognize that focusing on black men limits my work as well. It is clear that being black has some impact on which strategies are available to these men. Larry Icard (1985) describes two ways that black men manage conflicts between their gay identity and the heterosexist attitudes of the black community. Some become "gay black men," men who identify as gay men first and find some solace from homophobia by locating themselves primarily in the gay white community. Doing so may enable these men to appropriate certain strategies like abandoning religion altogether or, in lieu of that, finding a religious community that is more accepting of an integrated gay and religious identity. More likely, Icard argues, the men identify as black men first (i.e., as "black gay men") and most of their social interactions remain centered in

the black community, a community in which a fairly conservative form of religion still maintains a meta-institutional role. As such, more black gay men than white ones may face the kinds of trigger moments described in this article.

That said, I would argue that what I have discovered here is not exclusive to black gay men. My sample represents a set of respondents that differ from others in the degree to which they have access to either compatible gay-friendly religious communities or strong gay-positive theological arguments. These findings are applicable to nonblack gay men and lesbians who are similarly limited in the support structures or theological toolkit that they might bring to bear when confronted by anti-gay religious messages. This is especially the case if those gay men and lesbians are members of conservative religious traditions without local or electronic access to para-church organizations like Evangelicals Concerned or (Catholic) Dignity. Festinger (1957) argues that the more important two opposing identities are, the more intense the feeling of discomfort and the harder one must work to undo the dissonance. It would follow that any gay men or lesbians who strongly value both their sexual and religious identities would encounter similarly challenging incidents and use similar strategies. Further research on their responses to these direct confrontations would enhance the findings of this study.

Understanding this approach to religious authority may also help us better understand how anyone whose behavior contradicts the teachings of his or her religious community would be able to persist in those environments. We understand *why* they stay. The findings of this study give us a greater understanding of *how* they stay and are certainly suggestive for further research. The most obvious avenue for extension of these findings is analyses of other points where this strategy might be used to allay anxiety caused by Sunday morning reminders of parishioners' failures to live up to the doctrinal demands of their religious community. Is this strategy used by parishioners who cohabit in spite of sermons denouncing that behavior as "shacking up"? How do Catholics who use birth control manage priestly proclamations against its use? What of families who have to make hard decisions about an unexpected pregnancy who are members of avidly pro-life congregations? Certainly, in all three cases, parishioners might leave those congregations to join congregations that either affirm these decisions or offer theological responses to their detractors. But what about those circumstances (e.g., distance, cultural differences) where alternative communities or perspectives are not readily available? My findings would suggest that instead of taking a stand against the doctrine, parishioners would articulate a response that reduced the moral authority of the spokesperson for the doctrine. For example, are teenagers in compulsory abstinence-only courses more likely to insist that the message is wrong or argue that married (and, therefore, sexually active) teachers are inappropriate advocates for that message? Do they find it easier to challenge, and thereby reframe or even ignore, the message if they first reframe the primary spokesperson for that message as flawed? This research would say, "yes."

Finally, it is worth noting that, while this strategy may be useful in managing personal conflicts between one's sense of his sexual identity and his church's sense of it, it still falls short of challenging homoantagonism in the Church itself. These rhetorical, but nevertheless internal, reframings of the messengers' authority are system defiant—but not system changing—coping strategies; they still maintain the heterosexist status quo in these churches by not *openly* confronting the messengers. Nevertheless, they serve as a mechanism whereby these men, for their own sake (and, occasionally, for the sake of wayward friends), are able to craft a cognitive safe-space for them to be gay in an environment that would otherwise destroy that part of who they are. This enables them, in spite of Church hostility, to make statements like this one from 43-year-old Joel, a member of his church's deacon board: "I go to church, and God willing, I will continue to do so. I've always been taught from childhood that the church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints. As bad as some may think I am, I'm sure I'd be a whole lot badder if it wasn't for the benefits I get from worship and fellowship every week."

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