

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

The Counseling Psychologist

2020, Vol. 48(6) 826–851

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DOI: 10.1177/0011000020918558

journals.sagepub.com/home/tcp



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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 indicated 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 (e.g., education) and individual religious practices (e.g.,

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overzealous service attendance) that may signal homonegativity. We encourage further work examining the influence of congregational factors on congregants' attitudes.

### **Keywords**

Black, LGBTQ, attitudes toward same-sex sexuality, religion, multilevel modeling

#### **Significance of the Scholarship to the Public**

*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.*

Homonegative attitudes—held by either heterosexual or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer/questioning (LGBQ) individuals—directly impact the mental and physical health of sexual minorities (Herek et al., 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 et al., 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 et al., 2018), making it more difficult to seek and receive social support (Grey et al., 2013). Guided by minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) and attention to structural stigma (Hatzenbuehler, 2009), homonegative attitudes and the processes they trigger have been 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, such as adopting policies prohibiting LGBQ individuals from entering into same-sex relationships or serving in leadership positions. In turn, many LGBQ individuals have abandoned those places of worship and often religion as a whole (Lefevor et al., 2018). Although creating distance from homonegative denominations and churches is helpful for many LGBQ individuals (Sowe et al., 2017), others maintain ties (Lefevor, Sorrell, Kappers, et al., 2019), possibly exposing them to more homonegative messaging than those who leave.

Black LGBTQ 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 (Lefevor et al., 2020). 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 their interaction with religiousness in affecting 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 who are exploring their religious beliefs or practices. Through the use of a sampling procedure that examines congregation-level variables and multilevel modeling, we sought to fill this gap. In this study, we investigated 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 encourages us to examine the roles of power and oppression 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, 2015). 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 actions of politicians and lawmakers (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. Because of the need for a supportive community of similar people 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 obtain 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 has the potential to serve as a rallying space for sexual and gender minorities.

### *Attitudes Toward 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 et al., 2007; Irizarry & Perry, 2018). Further, it appears that religious affiliation and participation explain much of the variation in Black Americans' intolerance of same-sex sexuality (Fullilove & Fullilove, 1999; Ward, 2005; Irizarry & Perry, 2018). Although 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 toward same-sex sexuality have 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 (Lefevor et al., 2020)—the Black church may play a particularly powerful role in shaping Black individuals' attitudes toward same-sex sexuality.

Although 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 et al., 2008), advising 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 altogether (Barnes, 2013). Additionally, the acceptance of many LGBTQ individuals is often conditional on the expectation that they will “hide” their same-sex sexuality from others (Collins, 2005; Griffin, 2006; Quinn, Dickson-Gomez, & Young, 2016). 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 LGBTQ 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, 2018; 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; C. 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 et al., 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, thereby limiting generalizability of the findings. The available literature on the effects of congregation-level variables on attitudes toward homosexuality suggests that variation between congregations 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 (Chaves & Anderson, 2008). 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, those with predominantly female congregants 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 education level 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, 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 (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). 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 toward same-sex sexuality (Bonilla & Porter 1990, Elias et al., 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 roles, such that the lack of gender normativity evidenced by many sexual minorities is seen as threatening (Ward, 2005).

**Age.** Positive attitudes toward 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 et al., 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, higher educational attainment is positively related to homophobia (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 often facilitates openness to others, including sexual minorities (la Roi & Mandemakers, 2018).

**Religiousness.** Religiousness is one of the most consistent predictors of attitudes toward same-sex sexuality (Fullilove & Fullilove, 1999; Irizarry & Perry, 2018). Specifically, homophobia has been positively related to adopting a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible (Adler, 2012; Whitehead, 2013), abiding by a conservative Christian tradition (Whitehead, 2013), and endorsing frequent service attendance (Herek & Gonzalez-Rivera, 2006). 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, 2018). Additional interaction effects may exist but remain largely unstudied.

## 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 especially curious to understand how indicators that an individual holds a

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. From this perspective, 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 sustains or challenges heterosexism. As such, our investigation was 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, those 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 five members per group can yield acceptable results with minimal Type I error and bias, as well as yielding appropriate 95% confidence interval coverage (Bell et al., 2014). Given these recommendations, 15 groups were deemed sufficient for the current study.



Because we were interested in both individual- and congregational-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 institutional review board of the first author's university. A diverse research team was constructed to gather and analyze the data consisting of seven members. In discussing their intersecting identities, four identified as People of Color, four as people of faith, and three as sexual minorities. We initially identified 1,514 places of worship in the telephone directory of a mid-sized Southern city. We compiled a list and randomized the names of these places of worship. 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 a survey following worship services. When 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 we reached a sample size of 15 Black congregations with at least 200 congregants. No compensation was provided to participants.

## Measures

**Homonegative attitudes.** The short form of the Attitudes Toward Lesbian Women and Gay Men Scale (Herek, 1994) measures homonegative attitudes, with higher scores indicating more homonegative views. Participants responded to 10 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Items were summed and averaged to create a scaled score. Sample items include, "Sex between two men is just plain wrong" and "Lesbians are sick." The test authors report high levels of internal consistency ( $\alpha > .80$ ) and adequate test-retest reliability ( $r_s > .80$ ) across samples (Herek, 1988, 1994). Scores on the measure 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 adequate ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

**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 (Koenig & Büssing, 2010). This item asks participants to report how often they attend church or other religious meetings on a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 9 (*several times a week*), with higher scores indicating more

**Table 1.** Demographic Information for Individual- and Congregation-Level Predictors

| Congregation No. | <i>n</i> | Black (%) <sup>a</sup> | Racial homogeneity (%) |
|------------------|----------|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1                | 10       | 100                    | 100                    |
| 2                | 16       | 100                    | 100                    |
| 3                | 17       | 100                    | 100                    |
| 4                | 20       | 100                    | 100                    |
| 5                | 6        | 83                     | 83                     |
| 6                | 14       | 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                     |

<sup>a</sup>Percentage was calculated prior to removing non-Black participants from analyses.

frequent attendance. The index has evidenced high convergent validity with other measures of religiousness, and the organizational religiousness subscale has also evidenced discriminant validity with nonorganizational and intrinsic religiousness (Koenig & Büssing, 2010).

*Race, ethnicity, and congregational racial homogeneity.* Participants reported their race and/or ethnicity as one of the following options: African American/Black, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian American/Asian, Hispanic/Latinx, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, multiracial, European American/White, or other (with the option to specify).

We created a measure of congregational racial homogeneity (Perry, 2013) by examining the percentage of completed surveys from a given congregation that were of a single race and/or 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 included congregation). Given our focus on the Black church, this measure served in part 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 a 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 study, 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 religiousness and race and/or ethnicity.

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%), heterosexual/straight (97.3% with 1.4% identifying as questioning or other, 1.4% not reporting a sexual orientation), and an average of 50-years-old ( $SD = 14.65$ ). Participants varied in the highest level of education achieved with 4.1% reporting not completing high school, 12.3% reporting completing high school, 31.5% reporting some college but no degree, 7.3% reporting vocational training, 23.7% reporting a bachelor's degree, 20.5% reporting a graduate degree, and 0.5% of participants not reporting their education. The average participant attended religious services every week ( $M = 7.95$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ).

Demographics of each of the 15 congregations and Black congregants are displayed in Table 1. Initially, congregants were not screened for inclusion based on race and/or 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 and/or ethnic homogeneity of the congregation. Overall, congregations were largely homogenous, with only three congregations exhibiting heterogeneity by race and/or 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 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 and/or ethnicity, religiousness, and whether individuals were 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 congregation’s predominant race and/or ethnicity, level of racial and/or ethnic homogeneity, and degree of 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. The last model included interaction 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 .13,

**Table 2.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations With Confidence Intervals

| Variable                    | M     | SD    | Level 1 |      |       |      |      | Level 2 |      |        |        |       |    |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|---------|------|-------|------|------|---------|------|--------|--------|-------|----|
|                             |       |       | 1       | 2    | 3     | 4    | 5    | 6       | 7    | 8      | 9      | 10    | 11 |
| 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. For gender, woman was "1" and man was "0." ATSS = Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Sexuality.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 3.** Results for Multilevel Models

| Predictors              | Model 1  |      |            | Model 2  |      |             | Model 3  |      |              |
|-------------------------|----------|------|------------|----------|------|-------------|----------|------|--------------|
|                         | Estimate | SE   | 95% CI     | Estimate | SE   | 95% CI      | Estimate | SE   | 95% CI       |
| <b>Fixed effects</b>    |          |      |            |          |      |             |          |      |              |
| 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   |
| L1 Gender               |          |      |            | 0.14     | 0.10 | -0.05, 0.33 | 0.14     | 0.10 | -0.05, 0.33  |
| L1 Age                  |          |      |            | 0.00     | 0.00 | -0.00, 0.01 | 0.00     | 0.00 | -0.00, 0.01  |
| L1 Education            |          |      |            | 0.02     | 0.03 | -0.04, 0.08 | 0.02     | 0.03 | -0.04, 0.08  |
| L1 Religious attendance |          |      |            | 0.10*    | 0.04 | 0.02, 0.19  | 0.10*    | 0.04 | 0.02, 0.19   |
| L2 Gender               |          |      |            |          |      |             | -0.30    | 0.34 | -0.96, 0.36  |
| L2 Age                  |          |      |            |          |      |             | 0.01     | 0.01 | -0.02, 0.03  |
| L2 Education            |          |      |            |          |      |             | -0.28*   | 0.13 | -0.54, -0.03 |
| L2 Religious attendance |          |      |            |          |      |             | 0.22     | 0.18 | -0.13, 0.56  |
| L2 Racial homogeneity   |          |      |            |          |      |             | -0.89    | 1.01 | -2.87, 1.09  |
| <b>Random Effects</b>   |          |      |            |          |      |             |          |      |              |
| $\sigma^2$              | 0.33     |      |            | 0.31     |      |             | 0.31     |      |              |
| $\tau_{00}$             | 0.05     |      |            | 0.05     |      |             | 0.02     |      |              |
| $R^2$                   |          |      |            | .05      |      |             | .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;  $\sigma^2$  = Level 1 variance;  $\tau_{00}$  = Level 2 variance.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

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,  $t(184) = 2.34, p = .021$ . Homonegative attitudes were not significantly associated with gender,  $t(183) = 1.47, p = .142$ ; age,  $t(183) = 0.64, p = .520$ ; or education level,  $t(183) = 0.67, p = .503$ . 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,  $t(13) = -0.22, p = .049$ . 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,  $t(17) = -0.88, p = .391$ ; age,  $t(14) = 0.70, p = .498$ ; racial homogeneity,  $t(194) = -1.70, p = .090$ ; or frequency of service attendance,  $t(19) = 1.22, p = .239$ . 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 levels, only one predictor was significant 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, 2018) 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 how 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 and 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 examined 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 the examined congregation-level variables 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. Although not fully explanatory, each of these effects is “moderate” according to J. 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*

Research examining attitudes toward same-sex sexuality has been done 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 with more formally educated congregants tended to be less homonegative than congregations with less formally educated congregants; however, this relationship did not hold on an individual level. Literature has noted a relationship between education and homonegativity (Adler, 2012; Ritter & Terndrup, 2002), in which those with less education have systemically less access and exposure to information and interactions that may effectively challenge homonegative views (la 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 Black and White congregants in lower socioeconomic classes; Irizarry & Perry, 2018), 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 with relatively homogenous views (i.e., majority of participants were ages 35–65; Smith et al., 2014). 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 findings 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 begun investigating further (Irizarry & Perry, 2018), 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 potential role of racial and/or ethnic homogeneity on the congregation's attitudes toward same-sex sexuality. 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 and/or 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 no more likely to have more homonegative 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 and/or ethnic homogeneity of our sample. Indeed, 90% of people in the average congregation were from the same racial background (African American/Black) with the median and mode 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 (Lefevor et al., 2020), better insight into the formation of attitudes toward same-sex sexuality in places of worship may produce interventions congregations may employ to improve the well-being of sexual minorities.

Taking into account heterosexism, researchers are encouraged to examine the ways that existing power structures—which may include religious institutions—affect the experiences of historically disadvantaged individuals

(Herek et al., 2009). Results from the current and previous studies indicate that variations in characteristics of both congregations and individuals have implications for 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 suggests that attitudes toward same-sex sexuality may develop independently of societal experiences of power, contrary to some research findings (e.g., Balaji et al., 2012; Bowleg et al., 2011; Yoon et al., 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 among both individuals and congregations in their attitudes toward same-sex sexuality and religiousness. We posit that this variation is best understood to reflect the heterogeneous views of Black churches and individuals, undermining the notion that homonegativity is characteristic of these congregations and their congregants.

### *Clinical and Practice Implications*

Findings may also be helpful in guiding therapists who are working with Black religious clients and other individuals navigating intersecting racial and/or 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 (Lefevor et al., 2020; Lefevor, Sorrell, Virk et al., 2019) that many Black sexual minority individuals continue to affiliate religiously, which also challenges assumptions that Black individuals are more homonegative than other individuals.

For therapists working with Black sexual minority clients, our findings may be particularly useful in guiding discussions about religiousness and service attendance. We found that congregations reliably varied in their attitudes toward homosexuality, with more formally educated congregations endorsing more homopositive attitudes. Therapists may thus encourage sexual minority clients to consider the average education level as an important factor when selecting a congregation.

Further, we found that the frequency of individual service attendance was related to homonegativity. Given this relationship, therapists may help heterosexual and sexual minority clients alike in examining the influence of attending religious services on their own 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. We examined 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 more generally accepted, greater variation may exist within the Black church in attitudes toward same-sex sexuality. Further, the sample belies a particular approach to religious worship that may be more characteristic of the American South than other parts of the country. Analyses did not account for the ways in which participation in the Black church is evolving over time, which may be important to examine in future investigations. Despite efforts to collect a random sample of congregations, two thirds 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 relied on a convenience sample within each congregation, which may have impacted the participants who were willing to fill out our measure. Notably, 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) whereas others did not (i.e., age, gender). We hope that intersectional research will continue to illustrate the ways that attitudes toward same-sex sexuality are formed and the role 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.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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**Jacqueline Y. Paiz** is a psychology and Spanish double major at Rhodes College. Her research interests include the relationship between racial/ethnic minority identities and well-being. She is excited to begin her PhD in counseling psychology at Indiana University and hopes to work with Latinx populations in the future.

**William-Michael Stone**, BA, recently graduated from Rhodes College with a degree in psychology. He is currently seeking opportunities to use his research skills in the professional environment.

**Kiet D. Huynh**, MA, is a doctoral candidate at the University of Miami's Counseling Psychology PhD program. His research focuses on reducing health disparities among sexual and gender minorities as it relates to experiences of discrimination, coping, and intersectional identities.

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**Sydney A. Sorrell**, BA, recently graduated with her BA in psychology from Rhodes College. Sydney's research interests include contributing factors to sexual and gender identity development and psychological health, especially among individuals from conservative religious backgrounds. Sydney is currently working at a dual diagnosis clinic serving individuals with co-occurring developmental disabilities and mental health diagnoses in Indianapolis, Indiana. She plans on pursuing a PhD in counseling psychology.

**Sierra E. Gage** is a neuroscience major at Rhodes College. She is interested in the neurological and subsequent behavioral effects induced by various pharmaceuticals and any potential variation in effects due to age and prolonged use.