

**Thou Shall Not Catch HIV:
Sex Acts, Sexualities and African
Americans' Religious Meaning-Making**

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How do the religious make sense of HIV/AIDS?

- Do “the religious” religiously interpret HIV/AIDS (its incidence locally and globally), and PWAs, and if so, how so?
- Do “the religious” religiously frame the risk and prevention activities associated with HIV/AIDS, and if so, how so?
- What organizational programming responses to HIV/AIDS exist and what is the logic of these religious organizational responses?
- Do organizations’ religious constituents respond to the religious framing of risk and prevention activities and if so, how so?

Developing Literature

Questions straightforward relationship between religiosity and sexual health and risk behavior

Religiosity delays sexual initiation but lowers the contraceptive use of these delayed initiators

- Manlove, Terry-Humen, Ikramullah & Moore 2006
- Bruckner & Bearman 2005
- Cooksey, Rindfuss, & Guilkey 1996

Prior studies that *separately* identify links between religiosity and sexual initiation & between religiosity and contraceptive use

- **Delayed sexual initiation**
Manlove & Terry-Humen 2007, Billy, Brewster, and Grady 1994, Jones, Darroch and Singh 2005, B. Miller et al. 1997, Mott, Fondell, Hu, Kowaleski-Jones and Menaghan 1996, Murry 1994
- **Depressed contraceptive use**
Manlove & Terry-Humen 2007, Ikramullah, and Moore 2006, Rostosky, Wilcox, Wright & Randall 2004, Studer and Thornton 1987

Prior Work on African Americans (Micro- and Meso-Levels)

Love Inequalities (me, forthcoming, Duke University Press)

- individuals trying to remain abstinent had decreased levels of contraceptive use
- Believed risk of pregnancy was low given their efforts to and some success at remaining abstinent
- Used rejection of contraceptives as a strategy to remain celibate
- Understood contraceptive use as premeditated wrongdoing while risk-taking framed as forgivable mistakes or accidents, given otherwise good intentions

Cohen (1999)

- African American community is divided between those who are HIV/AIDS vulnerable and those who are not
- racial inequality creates secondary marginalization of PWAs and consequently their needs and access to care

Balin (1999)

- Tenuous middle-class status tied to neighborhood reputation leads to rejection of AIDS care facility
- African American opposition to facility blind to presence of gay male PWAs in the black community

Conventional Sociology's Religious Effects

Religion's independent variables

Religious Categories

Protestant

Catholic

Muslim

Jewish

Sectarian/Fundamentalist

Christian

Religious Activity Level

frequency of religious attendance

frequency of prayer

Community Categories

% Catholic

%Muslim

Religion's intermediate or dependent variables

Attitudes

(e.g. belief in Biblical inerrancy, rejection of nonmarital sex)

Behaviors

(e.g. participation in religious rituals, early marriage, unprotected sex)

Outcomes

(e.g. divorce incidence, parity, STI incidence)

Conventional Sociology's Religious Mechanisms

I. Concordance of individual & organizational beliefs

(Hartman & Hartman 1983; Mercier 1984; Boggess & Bradner 2000)

I don't believe that [it] honors my relationship with God...

II. Level & type of member interaction

(Vaughn & Heaton 1993; Petersen & Donnenwerth 1997; Garner 2000)

They made her get up in front of the congregation and apologize...

III. Structural & cultural connections between organization and broader community

(Stack & Kanavy 1983; Bainbridge & Hatcher 1982; Petersen & Donnenwerth 1997; Banaszak 1998)

We are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world...

Investigation of an alternative or concomitant model

Religion's "independent" variables

Job status

Clothing/Dress

Family status

Sexual practices

Political behaviors

Reproductive health choices

Religion's dependent variables

Religious Identity or Performance

(adopting and playing a role, being understood or intelligible in the performance of that role)

Religious Status

(inside and outside and/or hierarchy of religious persons and organizations)

Religious Experiential Rewards

(going to heaven; increasing certainty; feeling less guilt)

Symbolic Status of HIV/AIDS in Religious Communities

1. What does *HIV/AIDS mean or stand for* in the context of a diverse set of Christian communities?
2. What do various *risk and health behaviors signify* to community insiders and outsiders?
3. In what ways are organizations involved in *HIV/AIDS related symbol-making and framing*?
4. How are *HIV/AIDS and associated health and risk activities being related to religiously defined* goals and outcomes?

Why study symbols?

Religious institutional changes

secularization and science

diversification and a burgeoning spiritual marketplace (migration)

Unanswered questions from more conventional studies of religious influence

AIDS/HIV (communication)

Qualitative data from Christian churches:

2 cities (1 “rustbelt” & 1 “sunbelt”)
small cities – under 200,000 people

6 churches

- 4 > 90% black (2 in each city)
- 2 90% white (sun belt city)

Religious groups represented:

- Baptist (American, Southern)
- Non-denominational
- Methodist (United, African)

Current Analysis

- Comparison of meaning-making activities in 2 African American churches in sunbelt city
- Share Baptist history, large size, comprehensive scope

Observations (Over 70)

- Church Services
- Religious Educational Programming
- Organization Meetings
- Outreach Activities
- Informal Gatherings for Fellowship

Interviews (28)

Religious Leaders

- Church beliefs and teachings,
- Ministries to congregation and outreach to wider community,
- Personal religious and professional trajectory

Religious Participants

- Personal background and upbringing, Current family status and life, Religious and romantic life trajectories, Sexual health prevention and risk activities

Meaning-Making Activity:

Senior Pastor, African American non-denominational church

Large (membership over 1000), Multi-dimensional (school, business, political org)

What is AIDS/HIV?

People don't catch AIDS and HIV, venereal disease less they fornicate. That's the life of the fornicator. Or they doin' it through drugs. They [AIDS and HIV are] choices. Nothin' you can do about it. They wanna live promiscuous lives, they gon' suffer the consequences of it. Ain't nothin' you can do about it. 'Til they decide to stop livin' that danger, livin' on the edge, doin' that garbage, they gon' catch AIDS, herpes, everything else. So you just have to tell 'em, "It's your lifestyle, brother."
[Pause] "It's your lifestyle!"

What do we do about an AIDS pandemic?

I personally think they need to be quarantined. I think that the health service need to go back to identifyin' people who are carryin' sexual transmitted disease the way they used to. When we used to identify sexual transmitted disease, if you had a sexual transmitted disease, you went to the hospital or the health department, the sheriff would come to your house, make you identify everybody you been with, and that's the way they would control the spread of sexual transmitted diseases back in the 50s and the 60s, when people had some sense.

HIV/AIDS Responsive Activity

Religious education

(on sexual sin getting past it, pastor's book)

Abortion ministry

(facility shut-down, girls' education on
abortion as murder)

Kinder, Gentler Meaning-Making:

Field notes of weekly Bible Study, African American Baptist church
Large (membership over 1000), One-dimensional, diversifying

Associate Pastor begins class with...

“Last week we were talking about fornication, and this week we are discussing the development of a healthy sex life. You were supposed to complete the exercise from last week on Godly sexual expression.” She passes out copies of the exercise to last week’s absentees and anyone who did not have theirs.

She explains why Christian sexual ethic needed...

“The world is different than when the Bible was written... We have to decide what to adapt and what to keep... Some say we should not do any adaptation.” She continues by offering a list of the relevant world changes including lack of universal marriage, can have sex w/out known or seen consequence (contraception, migration), conversations about the idea that some folks are wired differently and could be homosexual.

Democracy in Meaning-Making?

Class talks about their completed exercises. They were asked to raise their hands indicating acceptance or rejection of particular forms of sexual expression for themselves and others while single.

kissing

petting

wearing provocative clothing

oral sex

intercourse

spending a night in the same bed

Pastor offers a list of questions and Bible verses for reference when making decisions about which sexual expressions are appropriate at what times.

“Who” questions:

Am I married to this person?

Is the person married to someone else?

Is the person a close relative?

Spiritual consequence questions:

Does it bring God glory?

Does it have reverberations on the Christian community?

Is the practice explicitly affirmed or rejected in Scripture?

Individual Decision-Making Concerns

Religious Rewards...

“Keith” (29, gay, single, African American)

Now I have been to a gay church twice, here in “Southtown”... Metropolitan Community Church...

I mean – I couldn’t go there to be my permanent church. Hmm Hmm.

I just felt like maybe – I said, Lord, if God would come back right now, would I be goin into heaven ‘cause I be sittin’ up in this church? I felt like that too. That’s my ultimate goal to get in those golden gates and He say, “Keith come on in. You’ve done good my faithful servant.” You know. And that’s the ultimate thing we should want in life. That we should try to be to go to heaven and be like Jesus. But am I being like Jesus being gay? You know the song, “To be like Jesus”?

Individual Decision-Making Concerns:
Democracy & the Performance of an authentic
Christian identity

“I think contraception is a good thing... But sometimes I think that churches’ silence on the issue says a lot about... I think they need to be more aggressive about educating people... more aggressive and and comprehensive sex education... Forget this abstinence only thing... People don’t understand their risk.”

“Contraception is a part of my spiritual life: I don’t think there’s anything wrong with contraception... I think contraception is another way of expressing your free will and being responsible.”

Symbol-Making Exists Within & Among Cultures

<p>AIDS is a lifestyle...</p>		<p>Developing a Christian sexual ethic...</p>
<p><u>Formerly Baptist</u> Switch to non-denominational organization over 20 years ago meant change from “democracy to theocracy”</p>	<p><u>Inside culture</u> Organizational context <i>Norms</i> Overlapping & competing cultural symbols</p>	<p><u>Baptist denomination</u> Church votes on budget, policy, major hiring, etc.</p>
<p><u>Salt and Light:</u> “We have to fight against [this world]. We can never fit into it. I will never believe in evolution. I will never believe abortion is right, homosexuality is right!”</p>	<p><u>Outside culture</u> Religious <i>Identity</i> <i>Performance depends on salience and nature of the symbol-making going on around you</i> (Legacy of past symbols)</p>	<p><u>Letting my light shine</u> Is the person a practicing Christian? “Non-believers are trying to see how you live out your ethic... to see how much you are going to bend for them.” Advice vs. missionary dating – “might pull you instead of you pulling them.”</p>

Religion As Outcome

Religion's "independent"
variables

Racial/Social Hierarchy
Status

Audience/Situation

Sexual Activity

Contraception

Abortion

Religion's "dependent"
variables

Religious Identity or
Performance

(adopting and playing a role)

Religious Rewards

(going to heaven; increasing certainty;
feeling less guilt)