UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF BLACK GAY CHRISTIAN MEN NAVIGATING THE ANTI-GAY DISCOURSE OF THE BLACK CHURCH

by

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(Under the Direction of Linda Campbell)

ABSTRACT

Navigating the intersectionality of Black gay Christian men's religious, sexual, and racial identities is an arduous process. These men struggle with oppressive systems within the greater society and within the very institution that provides support for their racial and religious identities, the Black Church. The Black Church is often at the forefront homophobia found within the Black community. This homophobia can be internalized and contribute to muteness found among this population. Utilizing a co-cultural and cognitive dissonance perspective, this phenomenological study will examine the lived experience of Black gay Christian men as they navigate the anti-gay discourse found within the Black Church.

INDEX WORDS: Black gay Christian men, Black Church, phenomenology, co-cultural, cognitive dissonance

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to every Black gay Christian male who has had to navigate this world holding multiple marginalized identities. This study is dedicated to those who have suffered in silence and endured unspeakable mistreatment while trying just to live. This study is dedicated to men like me, who love God and the Black Church but refuse to passively allow the status quo of the Black Church continue to degrade the very people who actively contribute to its existence. Know that you are seen, you are heard, and you are loved. I honor your voices and hope that you continue to fight to be heard.

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Lastly, I thank God! My academic pursuits and subsequent research study have thoroughly tested the bounds of our relationship. I have questioned You, hated You, loved You, and worshiped You. Yet, through all I have been through, You have never left me. I feel that I have a better understanding of who You are because of this study, and I am truly grateful for the vision You have given me. To whom much is given, much is required, and I can say I dare not take this gift lightly.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Growing up in a devout, Christian, single-parent home, I had very little room to question anything. I would often hear messages from my mother and other immediate family members about what life would be like as a Black[1] man and how I was supposed to live as Christian Black man. When it came to dating, I was overtly told that whoever I dated needed to be a "good Christian woman." It was also implied that she should be Black. I even remember my grandmother stating, "don't bring no White girl 'round here." From familial messages, I learned this single truth: my family did not care who I dated as long as she was Christian, female, and preferably Black.

As I began to mature and feel safe venturing outside of the bounds of familial rules, I started to see that the world was not exactly how they described. I also began to see that many of the rules my family had created for me were in response to the shortcomings of my familial male predecessors. This realization was the catalyst for my journey of self-discovery and truth. Even though I was venturing out of my familial boundaries, my Christian foundation remained very strong.

Like many Black households, I was introduced to God and Christianity at a very early age. It was very rare to find a Black peer who did not attend church regularly or at least reverence God. Even in college, many Black peers did not attend church regularly but considered themselves to be Christian. This static religious identity is due to the strong Christian heritage and influence of the Church in the Black community. The (Black Church[2]) has been the

foundation of the Black community for decades (Foster, Arnold, Rebchook, & Kegeles, 2011). With Church being such a monumental part of the Black identity and having such rigid beliefs about homosexuality, it stands to reason that Black gay Christian men (BGCM) would struggle to navigate our identities.

Black Gay men are often given two conflicting messages. On the one hand, the LGBTQ community says it is okay to be you and be proud of your sexual identity. On the other hand, the Black Church condemns homosexuality and classifies it as a sin against God. These conflicting messages present a challenge. Black gay males are left feeling as though we can either embrace our sexual identity and reject a significant part of our cultural identity or embrace a part of our cultural identity and deny our sexual identity.

During high school, it was easier for me to avoid my sexual identity because there was an absence of temptation outside of porn. College, however, was more of a challenge. All of my beliefs were challenged, including my knowledge about my sexual identity. It was in college, and the period shortly after that, that I was overtly exposed to Black gay men in Church. My conservative Christian roots automatically caused me to judge them, further dividing my own developing identity. I could not understand how so many openly gay individuals could be active in churches that overtly condemned their sexual identity. They held a variety of positions in the Church and were often referred to as "the children (Hoffman, p. 22, 2012)" or as I have heard it referenced "the kids."

The kids are a part of an on-going stereotype stating that most men in arts-based leadership positions in the Black Church are gay. These positions include ministers of music, praise and worship leaders, and choir directors. In my experience, I have rarely found men in these positions who are heterosexual. The bigger surprise is the number of ministers and pastors

who are gay or have a same-sex attraction. I have encountered men who have been married for years and were still acting on their same-sex attraction. This phenomenon was dumbfounding to me because it went against everything I had been taught, including monogamy. It was in this befuddlement that I began to search for my understanding of the Church's function and how it related to my sexual identity.

It is common for Black gay Christian men to struggle with their religious and sexual identities. The Black Church often shapes their religious identity. To operate more comfortably in their religious identity, some Black gay men opt to be both out and not out (Hoffman, 2012). This is ideal because some Black Churches operate from the "don't ask don't tell" stance towards homosexuality (Lynsen, 2006). However, this compartmentalization negatively impacts the holistic integration of one's identities. These men often struggle with identifying safe spaces, incongruent social circles, and the interplay of simultaneous oppression and support found in the Black Church.

Problem Statement

Black gay Christian men live with multiple marginalized identities and oscillate between spaces of support and oppression within and outside of our communities. The Black Church generally believes that homosexuality is a sin and the antithesis of Christianity. Yet, there are many Black gay men who identify and live as Christian. The fundamental opposition of being gay and Christian can create cognitive dissonance for BGCM trying to live a life with integrated identities. Additionally, our multiple marginalized identities classify us as a co-cultural group that is navigating the dominate communication systems of the Black Church established within the microcosm known as the Black community. While this communication system more closely

articulates our experience as Black men, it fails to provide a language supportive of our lived experience as Black gay Christian men. The inadequate representation results in these men becoming muted.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of Black gay Christian men navigating the anti-gay discourse of the Black Church. I find it important to note that this study was not meant to understand or unpack the dynamic aspects of the Black Church or educate people about the Black Church. Instead, this study focused on the lives of the BGCM impacted by the Black Church. A byproduct of understanding their lives is learning more about the way in which the Black Church functions. My goal was that through this study, people would better understand the layered complexity that is Black gay Christian men's lives. Additionally, I hoped to use my membership within the community, educational privilege, and the power of this research platform, to amplify the voices of BGCM as a means of advocacy. That advocacy starts by breaking through the culture of silence within the Black community and continuing the work of others that will challenge the oppressive forces negatively impacting the lives of BGCM.

Research Question

The following research question guided the current study as a means to understand the phenomenon being examined. I present these questions in two sets. The first question is the overarching question of the study:

1. What is the lived experience of Black gay Christian men navigating the anti-gay discourse of the Black Church?

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Foundation of Sexuality in Christianity

The view of sexuality within Christianity has experienced several fundamental shifts since early conceptions. These shifts have influenced the role of sexuality in the Christian religion, directly impacting the Black Church and indirectly impacting the broader Black community. To understand the beginning purpose of sexuality within the Christian faith, author Kelly Douglas (1999) drew on Michel Foucault's Theory of Power. Douglas noted that Foucault's analysis is *Francocentric* and *Eurocentric* (1999), which she balances with insights from Black female and male social critics. Foucault articulated his perspective of sexuality as a means of reproducing and continuing the human race versus a sacred place where truth is read and expressed (Miller, 1993). One scholar goes on to note that Foucault expounded on the role of sexuality and sexual discourse when he argued that sexuality's purpose is to reproduce and comprehensively control the population (Kelly, 2013).

Early Christianity viewed sexuality as a gift from God as evidenced by the Hebrew scriptural references to a person as flesh rather than spirit and the celebration of sensuality in the Song of Solomon (Douglas, 1999). During this time in Hebrew life, the body was not seen as a wicked abomination that impeded one's relationship with God. However, a shift occurred in Christian discourse and humans were viewed more as sexual beings. Foucault noted that Christianity accepted and reinforced a new code for sexual behavior (Foucault, Rabinow, & Hurley, 1997). According to Douglas, Christianity innovated a way of viewing one's sexual

actions as something men and women should overcome to be more pleasing to God (Douglas, 1999). This thought essentially split people into body and spirit with the body being a member that needed to be bridled. Also, this spiritualistic dualism (Douglas, 1999) is an early representation of the cognitive dissonance experienced Black gay Christian men today.

Spiritualistic dualism was crafted from Platonic and neo-Platonic and informed by aspects of the Greeks and Romans (Douglas, 1999). According to Platonism, one had to deny bodily pleasures and activities, including sexual activity, and strive for a more contemplative and abstinent life (Douglas, 1999). The Roman contribution of Stoic Philosophy posited that nature identified with divine order, which was in turn, identified with reason; therefore, one must live according to nature to achieve union with God (Douglas, 1999). In other words, sexual activity in and of itself was not bad, but the passion was viewed as problematic because the logical antithesis of reason was emotion and passion. This position essentially deepened the schism between the body and spirit. The only rational use of sexual activity was procreation (Douglas, 1999). Following this logic, nonheterosexual sexual activity would be viewed as unproductive, and sinful.

Within the Christian faith, some believe that humans were introduced to sin through the actions of the first man, Adam. Douglas noted that before Adam's fall, every part of his body was perfectly obedient to God's will, but after his fall, the body, and subsequently sexuality, became contaminated by lust (1999). Pre-fall, sexual acts were not seen as sinful because they were a controlled act performed by humans to procreate. However, after the fall, Adam lost control of his will, body, and body parts. For instance, involuntary erections were a sign of Adam's loss of control of body parts and viewed as disobedience to God (Douglas, 1999).

Douglas continues to trace the progression of sexuality over the years. During the middle

ages St. Thomas proposed that sexual acts should be done for the right purpose (procreation), with the right person (one's spouse), and in the right way (heterosexual genital pairings) (Douglas, 1999). During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther believed that sexual activity was a strong, lustful human urge which required the parameters of marriage to control this libidinal urge (Douglas, 1999). John Calvin argued that even within marriage, sex needed to be held within the boundary of "delicacy and propriety" (Douglas, 1999). Each of these accounts represents centuries of the Christian church's separation the body and spirit which has perpetuated an internally divisive and physically repressive stance. Carter Heyward even noted that the Christian church had been the chief architect of European and Euro-American oppressive and proscriptive attitude toward sexuality in history (Heyward, 1994). It stands to reason that a similar position would exist within the Black Church given its origins in White Christianity.

The Bible of the Black Church

Black people have had a unique history of Christianity over the years. Lincoln and Mamiya point out that Black people became Christian during and after slavery by the more conservative/traditional strands of White Christianity, such as Baptist (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Research and historical anecdotes from my elders provide context for Black people's experience with Christianity in the United States. For example, Black slaves were often forced to go to the slave master's church with segregated seating and skewed biblical messages that highlight examples of servitude in the Bible. Many aspects of their church experience were designed to reinforce and remind them of the slave status. Remnants of this experience can still be seen in some Black churches where typically older parishioners will raise their index finger and lower their head as they exit the sanctuary during service. This obsolete gesture traditionally signaled to slave master's that a slave wanted to be excused to go to the bathroom. Furthermore,

most Black slaves were kept intentionally illiterate by slave owners, which meant slaves' introduction to and knowledge of the Bible was secondhand. What the slave masters did not foresee was that the very material they forbade the slaves from touching and studying with their hands and eyes, was claimed and studied through listening and memory (Weems, 1991).

Black biblical scholars have begun to understand that Black people's approach to the Bible suggests a strong sense of biblical confidence born during slavery and honed throughout our history of struggle in America (Douglas, 1999). Because of their illiteracy, slaves had to find a way to know the Bible for themselves, which came primarily through an oral/aural tradition of sermons, songs, and public readings (Wimbush, 1991). Slaves initially reacted with mixed feelings of rejection, suspicion, and awe (Wimbush, 1991). They rejected any notion of book religion because of the slave owners' utilization of the Bible as justification for slavery; however, the fact that those who were conquering the New World were Bible Christians was not lost on them (Douglas, 1999; Wimbush, 1991). Therefore, their interpretation was not controlled by the written words of the texts, but by their social experience (Wimbush, 1991). Black slaves would retell biblical stories they heard in a manner that reflected their lived experience, as well as how they envisioned changing that experience (Wimbush, 1991). Even today, I have witnessed many Black ministers and pastors whose sermons continue this approach despite a drastic increase in biblical understanding. For many Black slaves, the Bible became a world in which they could retreat, identify, draw strength from, and utilize for self-affirmation (Wimbush, 1991).

Oral/aural tradition created a canon in which specific texts and stories became favorites resulting in excessive use in songs, prayers, and testimonies (Douglas, 1999). Black church people often refer to the victory of the Hebrew children over the mighty army of Pharaoh. They

also give consistent jubilant and vivid testimony to David conquering Goliath, to Daniel being freed from the lions'den, to Jonah release from the belly of the whale, and the three Hebrew men escaping from the fiery furnace (Douglas, 1999). The Bible to which Black people attest is the Bible that has been handed down to them in tradition (Douglas, 1999). Contemporary Black people may have more access to the written Bible than did their enslaved forebears, yet they do not necessarily embrace all texts as equally authoritative (Douglas, 1999). The stories that had significance and authority in the past continue to have significance and authority today (Douglas, 1999).

The Bible has been and continues to be able to capture the imagination of Black people because significant portions speak to the deepest aspirations of oppressed people for freedom, dignity, justice, and vindication (Weems, 1991). During the genesis of the Black Church, slaves would have a person (fellow slave) interpret the Bible for them and retell the stories in an oratory fashion. This person would rehearse the contents of the scriptural texts and orate them through the lens of slaves' experiences (Weems, 1991). This process was understandable for the time given the limited knowledge and literacy of the slaves. However, the practice is problematic in today's society because it perpetuates a literal and often inaccurate understanding of the Bible versus a contextual understanding that can be appropriately applied.

White People's Impact on Black Sexuality

Black people are taught at an early age that white culture often hypersexualizes Black men and women and views them as lascivious beings (Douglas, 1999). It is not uncommon for Black people to hear a white person remark about Black men's sexual prowess or Black women's sexual promiscuity (Douglas, 1999). Interestingly a widespread belief among Black people is that white America's fascination with Black sexuality reflects their fascination and

simultaneous fear of Black sexuality (Douglas, 1999). This fear of sexuality takes on new meaning when considered in light of the fact that the freedom to choose sexual partners was one of the distinctions between the condition of slavery and the post-emancipation status of Black people (Davis, 1998).

Douglas noted that Foucault identified sexuality as playing an essential role in maintaining power (1999). Sexuality can be used to make a distinction between groups of people; therefore, if one can establish that peoples sexual behavior is wrong, then he or she can infer that those people are inferior (Douglas, 1999). An attack upon people's sexuality becomes important because sexuality implies one's very humanity. A necessary step in White people's control of Black people is the defamation Black people's sexuality, which in turn questions their very humanity (Douglas, 1999). Additionally, if one can control people's reproductive capacity, they can control their population (Douglas, 1999). Furthermore, questioning Black sexuality allows White people to suggest that Black people are somehow inferior beings (Douglas, 1999). "When one understands the role of sexuality in White people's maintenance of power, then one can understand the significance of Black sexuality to White Culture" (Douglas, 1999, p.23).

Black sexuality is a linchpin in the sustenance of White power in America (Douglas, 1999). Privileged groups define their alleged sexual practices as the mythical norm and label sexual practices and groups who diverge from this norm as deviant and threatening. Maintaining the standard of the financially independent, White middle-class family organized around a monogamous heterosexual couple requires stigmatizing African-American families as being abnormal, and a primary source of the assumed deviancy stems from allegations about Black sexuality (Hill Collins, 1990). Differences in sexuality thus take on more meaning than just benign sexual variation. Individuals become a powerful conduit for social relations of

domination, whereby individual anxieties, fears, and doubts about sexuality can be appropriated by larger systems of oppression (Douglas, 1999).

An example of this is the unnecessarily public spectacle of Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas (Douglas, 1999). White Americans saw certain sexual behaviors of two Black people allowing many to confirm their deep-seated fears concerning Black people's sexual deviance, while also satisfying their fascination with Black people's sexual activity (Douglas, 1999). There was a similar fascination with the OJ Simpson trial. For many white Americans, Simpson's guilt or innocence was less a factor than highlighting that as a Black man he would have to pay the price for what they perceived as his sexual involvement with a model white woman (Douglas, 1999).

Homophobia in Black Community

The most insidious result of the White cultural attack upon Black sexuality is that is has rendered the Black community practically SILENT in terms of sexual discourse (Douglas, 1999). Research posits that since Black people were introduced to Christianity by slave owners, and most slave owners had negative views of homosexuality, this belief was then adopted by Black people (Edwards, 2013). With a history of the Bible being used against Black people, it seems repulsive for Black people to use the Bible against other Black persons, in this case, gay men (Douglas, 1999). Unfortunately, the reality is that the discriminatory practices leveled against Blacks are now commonly carried out by some Blacks who demonstrate extreme prejudice toward Black LGBT's (Stanford, 2013). As long as the Black community refuses to engage in frank, consistent sexual discourse of resistance, Black sexuality in all of its complexity will continue to be influenced by the sexual politics of White culture, and the Black community will be handicapped in addressing significant matters of life and death for Black people (Douglas,

1999). Griffin notes the words of the late African American lesbian writer Audre Lorde, "our silences will not save us (Griffin, p.xii, 2006)." Silence serves to maintain the status quo of oppression highlights one's complicity in oppression. Griffin suggests that we must give voice to Black gays whose racial identity is often ignored in majority white lesbian and gay faith and social settings and whose sexual identity is often overlooked in predominantly heterosexual Black Churches and community (Griffin, 2006).

The spread of homophobia in the Black Church and community correlates to the sacredness of heterosexuality and expectation masculinity in Black men (Stanford, 2013). Most BGCM live in silence or denial with an enormous amount of shame. Many convince themselves that their sexuality, unlike that of their heterosexual family members and fellow parishioners, is private and unworthy of church recognition (Griffin, 2006). The more familiar story of gays in the Church is one of them leaving their gayness out of the church and treating their sexuality as a "lifestyle" that they do on Saturday night and pray to be forgiven for on Sunday (Griffin, 2006). This separation often leads to BGCM portraying themselves as heterosexual by living on the "down-low" (Stanford, 2013) (secretly engaging in sexual acts with men). These men end up living a life of double consciousness because they are ashamed and ridiculed for being attracted to the same gender.

Many churchgoers are very vocal about their views of gay people. Douglas noted how her students spoke about gay and lesbian people as sinners, abominations, perverts, and diseased (1999). Parishioners of Black churches often carry on diatribes as if gay and lesbian people do not deserve love and respect as human beings, all the while proclaiming that as Christians they love everybody. An example of this would be Pastor Kim Burrell's viral sermon December of 2016. In her sermon, she proclaimed many hateful and homophobic statements including that all

gay people were going to hell in 2017 if they did not change their ways. This sermon posted the week she was scheduled to perform her song from the movie *Hidden Figures* on the Ellen Degeneres Show. As a result, her performance was canceled, and many of the cast denounced her comments and in support of the LGBTQ community. Stories like this prompt questions of why the Black community is so averse to conversations about sexuality, and how the Black Church can advocate for racial equality but be so anti-gay (Douglas, 1999). The answers can be found the reasoning behind Black homophobic attitudes and practices.

Oppression is any cruel and unjust use of power that restricts individuals solely based on a pejorative understanding of their group (Griffin, 2006). The often hostile resistance to recognize the oppression of Black, white, and other gays by Black heterosexuals stems from a narrow view of oppression which fails to consider that all oppressed people suffer the constriction of their needs, thoughts, and feelings (Griffin, 2006; Young, 1990). Gary David Comstock noted that gay men and lesbians, among others, suffer the wrath of men and women acculturated in a religious world that teaches them that gay people deserve death (Comstock, 1991).

Given the intensity of feelings toward homosexuality in the Black community, many have suggested that homophobia is more virulent and rampant among Black People than among the broader heterosexist American society (Douglas, 1999; Griffin, 2006; Stanford, 2013). Empirical data on young Black gay men has found that they believe homosexuality is more stigmatized in the Black community than in the White community (Battle & Lemelle, 2002; David & Knight, 2008; Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Pitt, 2010b). Black people's views toward homosexuality must be understood in light of their responses to sexuality in general, particularly as those responses have been refracted by white culture (Douglas, 1999).

At various times in U.S. history, adultery, premarital sex, and sex between white and Black people were all considered crimes, just like homosexuality and masturbation were considered both criminal and pathological (Griffin, 2006). When one understands the history of slavery and the subsequent racial discrimination and segregation were cast as Christian moral values derived from the Bible, one can also understand why so many people believe that homosexuality is immoral (Griffin, 2006).

Despite the awareness of prominent and revered Black gay and lesbian Christians like George Washington Carver, James Cleveland, and Barbara Jordan, Black people continue to resist viewing homosexuality as anything but sin, a harmful lifestyle, and white aberration (Douglas, 1999; Griffin, 2006; Stanford, 2013). When questions of Sojourner Truth and Carter G Woodson's sexuality are raised, the heterosexual majority rebuffs the implications that Black people held in high esteem as moral leaders and Christian people could also be homosexual or even bisexual (Griffin, 2006). Griffin also noted that many scholars, including gay scholars like David Halperin, assert that humans experience sexual dives and the fact that we have identities at all is a result of the social constructionism of a postmodern world (2006). Even with growing support for LGBTQ individuals in the larger society, homophobia continues to persist in the Black Church and community.

The Role of the Black Church

The Black Church is the cornerstone of the Black community with Black children being metaphorically raised in the Church (Bryant, Bowman, & Paulette Isaac-Savage, 2016; Foster et al., 2011). It is where Black people come to deepen their relationship with God, and it serves as the location of many momentous occasions such as weddings, funerals, and christenings (Miller, 1992). The Black Church has also served as a place of education, refuge, and support for Black

people (Bryant et al., 2016). Research on Black gay men has found that spirituality is a major part of Black men's lives with many of them being indoctrinated at an early age within the Black Church (Bryant et al., 2016). Additionally, Black people are substantially more religious than White people, they comprise one of two groups with the highest levels of religious participation in the United States, and they attribute greater importance to religion than White Americans (Barnes, 2014; Bryant et at., 2016; Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Hill, 2013). "Eighty-five percent of Blacks report that religion is very important to them, and 60% claim to attend Church at least once a week (Pitt p. 40, 2010b)."

The Black Church also serves a more civil purpose. Bryant et al. noted that the Black Church functions as a social justice agency (2016). It was known to be the location for several meetings involving leaders and members of the Civil Rights Movement. Additionally, it is described as a political force that served as the training ground for many civic and religious leaders and (Blaxton, 1998; Hill, 2013). Many Black Churches to this day are classified as historical landmarks because of their significance during the Civil Rights movement. Saroglou, Corneille, and Van Cappellen noted that religion also has both positive and negative implications for people's mental and social life (2009). In this regard, there is certain irony related to the Church being a social justice advocate given its association with the oppression of Black gay men.

Black lesbians and gays are generally born into Black churches, and as a consequence oftheir existence, endure pain while their humanity, sexuality, and love relationships are denigrated (Griffin, 2006). For Black gay men, the Black Church serves as a driving force maintaining Black homophobia and internalized homophobia (Bryant et al., 2016; Hill, 2013; Pitt, 2010a; Pitt, 2010b). This oppression manifests in various forms and from multiple

mediums. Research has noted that the pulpit often becomes a place for bigoted rants against homosexuality (Lynsen, 2006; Walsh, 2016). This bigotry is unfortunate given the prominence of gay men in Church. Gay Black men's activeness in Church is comparable to that of heterosexual Black women, with many of them serving in positions ranging from clergy to praise dancers (Pitt, 2010a; Sherkat, 2002; Woodyard, Peterson, & Stokes, 2000). Despite these men's devotion to their religious identity, Black Christianity produces negative behaviors of prejudice and discrimination towards Black gay Christian men (Saroglou et al., 2009).

How Homosexuality is Viewed within Black Churches

Homophobia is manifested in various ways throughout the Black community, from the Church to popular hip-hop and gangsta culture (Douglas, 1999). Black people (both churchgoers and none) often end arguments with the Bible say homosexuality is wrong and a sin (Douglas, 1999). By invoking Biblical authority, they pace a sacred canopy that renders homophobia practically intractable. The Bible becomes a tool for censoring gays and lesbians (Douglas, 1999). The irony is, however, that the Bible does not present as clear a position on homosexuality as is often self-righteously asserted (Douglas, 1999).

Biblical scholars have painstakingly shown that the Leviticus Holiness Codes, The story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Paul's epistle to the Romans DO NOT present a compelling case against homoeroticism (Scroggs, 1983; McNeil, 1993). Additionally, neither the words nor the actions of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, suggest an anti-gay or antilesbian stance. The New Testament shows Jesus to be virtually indifferent about matters of sexuality (Douglas, 1999). Jesus used the example of committing adultery to point to the intention of sinning. When confronted with actual adulterers, Jesus recommended no apparent punishment but, instead, suggested that self-examination was of equal concern (Douglas, 1999). The only sexual issue

that seemed of grave importance to Jesus was fidelity in that he prohibited divorce except in the cases of infidelity (Douglas, 1999). Jesus made no pronouncement, and certainly no condemnation concerning homosexuality (Douglas, 1999).

Given the Bible's unclear view, the use of the Bible to support a position on homosexuality seems flawed. Yet, scripture is often the cornerstone of homophobia in the Black community (Douglas, 1999). Biased eyes often turn to the biblical witness in support of the bias, particularly when communities attempt to justify the oppression of other people (Douglas, 1999). The Bible then becomes a tool of oppression and is taken up as a weapon to censor the behavior and restrict the lives of others (e.g., slavery). (Douglas, 1999). Though many Black church leaders once refused to accept the white church leaders' use of the Bible to justify oppression them during slavery/segregation, many of them similarly use the Bible with gays and lesbians (Griffin, 2006). Black heterosexual Christians use scripture in their emphasis on heterosexuality as God's intention for all people. In their minds, no righteous person can be gay and Christian (Griffin, 2006). In order to pastor or serve in the Black Church, gays and lesbians remain silent about their sexual identity (Griffin, 2006). In the name of God, Black ministers denigrate gays and lesbians with little regard for their feelings, arguing that they are called to preach a gospel that may hurt others (Griffin, 2006).

The Black Church's view on homosexuality has typically aligned with that of conservative Christians. Most Black denominations, Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal, generally support a belief that God ordained heterosexuality and anything else is sin (Ankerberg & Weldon, 1994; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Miller, 1992; Walsh, 2016). This rhetoric impacts the views of the Black community and is perpetuated by the highly critical attitude and messages that the Black Church has about homosexuality (Pitt, 2010b; Walsh, 2016; Woodyard et al.,

2000). The few Black heterosexual ministers that differ with this view tend to be in White liberal denominations (e.g., the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, independent) (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Black churches even view AIDS as God's punishment for the sin of homosexuality (Blaxton, 1998; Tirmey, 1988).

There is a belief in the Black community that a "real man" is strong, a provider, employed, family man, and masculine (or more accurately anything not feminine) (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Pitt, 2010b; Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boles, 2013; Wise, 2001). This belief is supported and perpetuated by the Black Church. The word homosexual is often replaced by the words "punk" or "sissy" (Pitt, 2010b) which is viewed as a reflection of the Black Church's perspective of gay men as weak and effeminate.

The late Bishop Eddie Long stated, "the problem today and the reason society is like it is is because men are feminized and women are masculine! You cannot say, 'I was born this way.' I don't care what scientists say (Stanford, 2013, p. 138)!" African American lesbians and gays are generally born into Black churches, and as a consequence of this existence endure pain while their humanity, sexuality, and love relationships are denigrated (Griffin, 2006).

The Challenge Associated with Being Black and Gay

The challenge for Black gay Christians is to come out and oppose the denigration and exclusion imposed by *heterosupermacists* with the same comfort level that we display when opposing racist actions of White lesbians, gays, and heterosexuals (Griffin, 2006). Black people have spent their years of freedom, seeking to gain respectability by the mainstream as sexually moral beings and overcome historical labeling as sexually perverse people (Griffin, 2006). To achieve acceptance Black people strongly condemn and deny homosexuality with Black

communities and churches while Black Church teachers and congregants tolerate a gay presence in choirs, congregations, and even the pulpit (Griffin, 2006; Pitt, 2010a).

There have been significant Black voices that have forthrightly supported gay and lesbian rights (Douglas, 1999). Civil rights leaders such as Jesse Jackson, Joseph Lower, Coretta Scott King, and Benjamin Chavis have all publicly decried discriminatory policies or behaviors toward gay and lesbian persons. At the same time, they have supported agendas promoting gay and lesbian rights (Douglas, 1999).

Black gay Christian men often have to navigate "borderlands" which are places where their conflicting cultures, identities, and value systems converge (Anzaldúa, 2010; Means & Jaeger, 2015). These borderlands are internal struggles of clashing voices that result in cognitive distress, ambiguity, and indecisiveness (Anzaldúa, 2010). These voices are comprised of internalized homophobia, negative messages from the Black community and Church, and narratives of their White counterparts who do not have to navigate multiple marginalized identities. The influence of these voices must be considered when examining and understanding the negative feelings associated with being Black and gay (Hill, 2013).

Many Black males are less likely to identify as gay due, in part, to pressure from peers to present as straight (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009). Black men who identify as nonheterosexual risk losing their connection with the Black community in which they find protection from racism (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009). They also risk the loss of their heterosexual privilege, adverse reactions from family, and greater internalization of homophobia and adverse psychological outcomes (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009). Additionally, research has found that the higher the level of education, the less likely Black men are to associate with gay-oriented groups (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009). Black gay men face the challenge of wrestling with the coexistence of

their sexual and racial identities and a lack of integration into the broader White gay community (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Hill, 2013; Moradi, DeBlaere, & Huang, 2010).

One's sexuality is not purely a private matter, a part of one's private life, but it often is very much one's public identity. "When a person is notably silent about such issues, it is usually an indication that the person is not heterosexual (Griffin, 2006, p. 109)." Gays are always conscious of the fact that there may be negative repercussions from revealing their gay while heterosexuals never live with this reality or fear (Griffin, 2006). The private life of heterosexuals has a presence that is not criticized as flaunting but received as a very natural way of being in the world (Griffin, 2006). Gay people do not gain this same respect and often face challenges and differences in coming out that heterosexual individuals do not. The difference in coming out for the two groups is that homosexuals have a lot to lose while heterosexuals will certainly gain (Griffin, 2006).

Heterosexuals receive the following when they come out like when they marry: gifts, money, benefits, rewards, weddings, pictures, parties, church groups, media, etc. (Griffin, 2006). Heterosexuals are so privileged in this regard; they may not understand how homosexuals are condemned for the same actions (Griffin, 2006). Contrary to the prevailing negative response of heterosexuals to gays who identify themselves as gay, heterosexuals typically think that one's sexual identity is essential and matters as long as it is heterosexual (Griffin, 2006).

Meyer noted a level of resilience among LGB people of color in dealing with stress related to sexual identity (2010). Research has found that while LGB people of color experience similar levels stress as their White counterparts, but they can better cope because of the stress related to being a racial minority (Meyer, 2010). Aside from an innate resilience, Black gay men have other ways of coping with their conflicting sexual and religious identities: reject their

religious identity, find more accepting religious communities, or add new beliefs that reduce the dissonance between the two that are seemingly in conflict (Pitt, 2010a; Walsh, 2016). By rejecting their religious identity, Black gay men diminish the stress related to identity conflict but relinquish a significant part of their ethnic culture. Pitt notes that Black gay males are more likely to resort to the latter two means of coping and often throw themselves deeper into religious responsibilities (2010a).

To operate more comfortably in their religious identity, some Black gay men opt to be out but not out (Hoffman, 2012). The person and his social peers develop an understanding that he is gay or attracted to men, but the man never personally acknowledges this identity. Hoffman noted that there is a big difference between everyone knowing you are gay and telling them you are gay (2012). An example of this would be news reporter Anderson Cooper (Hoffman, 2012). Inversely, some Black Churches operate from the "don't ask don't tell" position in which congregants are tolerant of gay men in various roles as long as they do not disclose their sexuality (Edwards, 2013; Walsh, 2016). In some cases, there has been a reassessment of unfounded notions about lesbian and gay people and how they should serve the church (Griffin, 2006).

In 2003 The Episcopal Church USA emerged as the first mainline denomination in Christendom to consecrate an openly gay bishop, Right Rev. V. Gene Robinson (Griffin, 2006). Rather than engage in a dialogue of other Christian perspectives on homosexuality, such as the one taking place among Christians in the Episcopal Church, historically Black denominations are becoming more vocal in their opposition to homosexuality and the equal treatment of BGCM (Griffin, 2006). This approach and others mentioned are all ways of trying to combat the cognitive dissonance produced by the two conflicting identities.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Conceptual Framework

Cognitive Dissonance. Gawronski described Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory as, "inconsistent cognitions elicit an aversive state of arousal, which in turn produces a desire to reduce the underlying inconsistency and to maintain a state of consistency (Gawronski p. 652, 2012)." The negative view of homosexuality in the Black community fueled in part by strong religious values and messages from the Black Church creates a vortex of cognitive dissonance. The discomfort experienced by the opposing cognitions motivates people to reduce the tension (Aronson, 2012; Gawronski, 2012).

Black gay males struggle with acceptance of one identity at the risk of losing the other. As such, they employ coping mechanisms in an attempt to diminish the dissonance. Aronson noted that by changing one or both of the cognitions, individuals could reduce the cognitive dissonance experienced (2012). Additionally, Festinger noted that cognitive inconsistency only occurs if the inconsistency is in reference to the same subject (Gawronski, 2012). In this regard, Black gay Christian men are the subject, and the inconsistency is their religious and sexual identities.

Co-cultural Theory. Black gay Christian men often learned how to communicate in systems that can be oppressive and supportive (e.g., the Black Church) to actualize their various identities. Co-cultural theory is a model grounded in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and communication that describes the communication patterns of marginalized individuals within

dominant societal structures (Orbe, 1998a; Orbe, 1998b). It is derived from the lived experience of groups like people of color, LGBTQ individuals, and women and describes how they communicate in oppressive systems (Orbe, 1998b). Orbe noted two specific premises of this theory. The first premise is that co-cultural group members share a societal positioning that results in underrepresentation and marginalized status within dominant systems (Orbe, 1998b). The second premise is that co-cultural group members adapt communication orientations to confront oppressive structures and attempt to achieve success (Orbe, 1998a). The theory is grounded in phenomenology, muted-group theory, and feminist standpoint theory and helps to express the communicative experience of marginalized individuals (Orbe, 1998a).

Muted-group theory was developed by Ardener and later adapted to describe the experiences of women (Kramarae, 1980) and Black men (Orbe, 1994). Ardener posits that worldview is reflected in language, and that dominant cultures construct a language that supports their view of the world, which is in-turn imposed on non-dominant groups (1975). This imposition causes marginalized individuals to communicate with a style that is not representative of their lived experience (Orbe, 1998a). Members of co-cultural groups become "inarticulate" and cannot describe their experience within the constraints of dominant structures (Ardener, 1975; Orbe, 1998a; Orbe, 1998b). The resulting "muteness" is a consequence of the perpetuated boundaries established by dominant perceptions of reality (Kramarae, 1980).

Standpoint theory is grounded in feminist research and focuses on the specific subjective viewpoint from which non-dominant individuals interact with each other and the world (Orbe, 1998b). The theory posits that while group membership is accompanied by commonalities, individuals within the groups may have differing standpoints (Buzzanell, 1994). Additionally, it is grounded in the notion that no overarching singular perspective exists from which others are

subjectively surveyed; as such, it is vital to understand one's communication experiences from the person's point of view (Orbe, 1998b). In this regard, standpoint theory helps to construct societal positioning by highlighting the importance of lived experiences by combining and utilizing muted-group and phenomenological principles (Orbe, 1998a).

BGCM are simultaneously operating in several marginalized cultures. As a subgroup of Black, gay, Christian, and male-dominant cultures, these men possess a unique perspective that is rarely heard in within society. As posited by the foundational muted-group theory of co-cultural theory, BGCM's worldview is not reflected in the dominant language of any of multiple dominant cultures in which their membership resides. As such, their perspective struggles to be articulately articulated through the language(s) of their dominant cultures. This language filter contributes to the seemingly muted and invisible perception of this group as evidenced by limited research on these men.

As it relates to this study, Christianity serves as the overarching culture with the Black Church being a sub-culture. BGCM are situated within the sub-culture of the Black Church, positioning the Black Church as the dominant culture for these men. Additionally, standpoint theory highlights the notion that no overarching perspective exists for the sub-group. Therefore, each co-researcher perspective is vital to understanding the lived experience of these men.

Methodological Framework

Phenomenology. In this study, I used a Husserlian approach to phenomenology, which has been used in the field of psychology and provides a compatible approach for this study. Husserl characterizes phenomenology as the thematization of a single person's consciousness, and the totality of his or her lived experience (Giorgi, 1997). Within phenomenology, the experience is viewed as a narrower range of "presence" in which aspects of reality are contained

(Giorgi, 1997). Many people are cognizant of the anti-gay discourse within the Christian faith, but Black gay Christian men uniquely experience the impact of this discourse from the Black Church. Giorgi further noted that phenomenology analyzes phenomena in terms that are the meaning created by those directly impacted by the experience (1997). Husserl used consciousness, intuition, and intentionality to define the parameters of a phenomenon. Consciousness is the awareness of oneself within a system (Giorgi, 1997). Consciousness presents objects to us through a process described as intuition, or the felt or acknowledged presence of an object (Giorgi, 1997). Intentionality is an essential feature of conscious that represents the direction of consciousness as always being toward an object that is not in and of itself conscious (Giorgi, 1997).

Research Design

This qualitative inquiry employed a semi-structured phenomenological three-interview series interview format to understand and make meaning of the various ways in which the Black Church's anti-gay discourse impacts the lived experience of Black gay Christian men. Semi-structured interviews are noted as possibly being the most culturally appropriate, and they incorporate the co-researchers' voice to add depth to the investigated phenomenon (Esterberg, 2002; Hays & Singh, 2012). This form of interviewing allows for flexibility of questions, order, and pace, and grants the co-researcher the freedom to be more involved in the structure of the interview (Hays & Singh, 2012). Also, the incorporation of voice helps to counteract the potential inconsistency of data collection across co-researchers (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Three-series interviewing is a model of in-depth interviewing that focuses on the meaning of people's experiences within the context of their life (Seidman, 2013). Meaning was explored through a three-interview process. In the first interview, researchers focus on the co-researcher's

background. The interviewer asks the co-researcher to reconstruct early life experiences to present experiences in the context of the phenomenon in question (Seidman, 2013). For my study, I focused on growing up in the Black Church, familial messages, and developmental experiences of their sexual and religious identities. The second interview focuses on present experiences with the phenomenon (Seidman, 2013). During this interview, I asked the co-researcher to reconstruct concrete examples of what his life is like as a Black gay Christian man. Additional probes included questions around interpersonal/romantic relationships and roles within the Black Church. Lastly, the third interview focused on the meaning of their experience (Seidman, 2013). Co-researchers were asked to reflect on their life context and how the factors within their life interact to bring them to their present (Seidman, 2013).

Seidman outlines the typical structure for the three interviews as 60-90 minutes with a span of 3-7 days between each interview (2013). He goes on to note that there has been success with a modified version of the interview structure (i.e., two in one setting with a third in another or all three in one setting) (Seidman, 2013). These modifications maintained the content of each interview while accommodating co-researcher time restraints. For my study, I used the original formatting for two co-researchers and respectively used both modified versions of interviewing for the other two co-researchers. Version selection was based on co-researchers' availability and the flow of the information provided.

Phenomenology also served as a framework for analysis. Phenomenological data analysis seeks to understand the depth and meaning of an experience (Moustakas, 1994). As such, I used this approach to understand the meaning of Black gay Christian men's lived experience.

Co-researchers

Co-researchers (participants) were selected to understand the navigational practices of Black gay Christian men. I used *purposive sampling* (Palys, 2008) to choose individuals who provided relevant information to this study. Each co-researcher met the following criteria:

1. Self-identify as Black or African American
2. Self-identify as gay, man attracted to men, or non-heterosexual
3. Currently identify as and practice Christianity
4. Have a past or current affiliation with the Black Church
5. Self-identify as a cisgender man.
6. Be 18 years of age or older

Half of the sample consisted of ordained, seminary-trained clergy; one person was a non-seminary-trained, ordained clergy; and the last was a layman who had been a member of a Black Church at some point in time. The co-researchers were recruited using snowball sampling, which utilizes the organic social networks of co-researchers to access more co-researchers (Noy, 2008; Patton, 2015). Specifically, I used word-of-mouth and email to contact people within personal networks for initial co-researchers. I then continued this process by asking co-researchers for suggestions of people who would be interested in the study until I had met my target sample size.

Van Kaam noted that phenomenological studies describing essential features of experience would require 10-50 participants for saturation (1959). Other researchers have indicated that saturation can be achieved with 7-12 interviews if using a theory-based approach (Francis et al., 2010; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora purposed calculating qualitative sample size using *information power* (2016). The stronger the

information power of a study, the fewer participants needed and vice versa. Information power is determined using study aim, sample specificity, use of established theory, quality of dialogue, and analysis strategy (Malterud et al., 2016). The aim of my study is narrow as I am looking to understand the lived experience of a specific group of people. This required a smaller sample size.

Additionally, my sample specificity was dense, meaning each participant has characteristics that are highly specific for my study – requiring fewer participants (Malterud et al., 2016). Furthermore, I utilized existing theories, and I had healthy interview dialogues, given my in-group status, which required fewer participants. The strength of interview dialogues is based on the skills and knowledge of the interviewer, articulateness of the participant, and the interaction between them (Malterud et al., 2016). While chemistry and articulateness were challenging to predict in advance, my memberships in the target population and advanced interview skills strengthen the quality of dialogue. As such, my co-researchers produced a total of 9 interviews.

Data Generation

Data was collected using interactive interviews. Before the interview, co-researchers were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix A) and fill out a demographic questionnaire (Appendix B). By signing the consent form, they acknowledged their willingness to participate in the study and indicated that they understand the parameters of anonymity. Anonymity was maintained through the use of a pseudonym that was used throughout the study. The demographic questionnaire is a 5-item screener I developed to verify that a co-researcher met the basic requirements of the study.

Once the co-researcher completed the preliminary information, he was interviewed using a semi-structured format. Each interview was 39-85 minutes and was recorded using a digital recorder. The interviews were conducted via a secure video chat service or over the telephone as all my co-researchers were long-distance. I used the interview protocol in Appendix C as a guide, with the freedom to add or modify questions based on the co-researcher's answers. The interview questions explored the person's religious identity, sexual identity, messages received from the Black Church, and the navigation of familial and social environments.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using myself and a selected team of three individuals. Each interview was recorded and transcribed to facilitate coding and to prepare for qualitative analysis. Giorgi noted that phenomenology employs the following steps to make meaning: phenomenological reduction (precision), description, and the search for essences (1997). Phenomenological reduction requires one to bracket existing knowledge of a phenomenon and considers what is presented in its raw form (Giorgi, 1997). Phenomenology then uses language to communicate (describe) the natural form of a given object to others (Giorgi, 1997). Lastly, the essence of the phenomenon is found through imaginative variation in which the researcher changes aspects of the phenomenon to see if it can still be identified (Giorgi, 1997).

I operationalized this meaning-making process using Moustakas's (1994) seven-step modification of van Kaam's phenomenological data analysis (Hays & Singh, 2012). I started by having my team bracket their knowledge of the topic using journaling. Each team member was asked to journal about the existing knowledge about BGCM experiences with the Black Church. After they completed the journaling exercise, I had them read the transcribed data in order to become familiar with the experiences we were examining. We then independently went through

coded each interview transcript by listing relevant expressions through a process known as horizontalization (Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Next, we reduced and eliminated any variant or repetitive expressions by assessing if the expression contained a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding the experience (Moustakas, 1994). We compared those constituents to the research question and data as a whole.

After independently working to reduce the data, we met as a team and compared the reduced constituents (expressions) until each interview had a singular set of constituents. We stored those constituents in a codebook for each co-researcher and independently chunked the invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994) into themes. We then came together as a team and compared themes until each co-researcher had one set of themes. We extracted the agreed-upon theme and put them in a separate codebook where they were defined and supported with direct quotes from the data. After the themes were identified they were validated by the co-researchers. Once validated, I constructed an individual textural, structural, then a textual-structural description of the phenomenon for each co-researcher (Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). From the individual experiences, I constructed a composite textural-structural description of meaning and essences of the phenomenon as a whole.

Trustworthiness

Validity in qualitative research has been addressed utilizing a variety of methods. Lincoln and Guba addressed validity in terms of *credibility*, *value*, and *truth* (1985). Later they addressed it in terms of *rigor* and *authenticity* (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Eisner went on to call qualitative validity *trustworthiness* (Eisner, 1991). For the purposes of this study, I followed Hays and

Singh's adaption of Eisner's terminology, *trustworthiness* (2012), to address the various aspects of validity.

Hays and Singh drew on the work of qualitative researchers to create the following seven criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, authenticity, coherence, sampling adequacy, ethical validation, substantive validation, and creativity (2012). Credibility refers to the believability of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is meant to parallel the internal validity found within quantitative research and is used to determine if the conclusions of the qualitative study make sense (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Transferability is similar to external validity in the sense that it addresses generalizability to a population. However, the goal of qualitative research is to provide enough detail about the process, setting, and population that readers can determine the degree to which the findings apply to individuals and settings (Hays & Singh, 2012). Dependability refers to the degree to which results are consistent over time and across similar studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability and dependability both contribute to the potential replication of the study in future research.

Confirmability references the degree to which researcher influences were limited and how true the findings are to the co-researchers' data (Hays & Singh, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In phenomenology, this parallels the bracketing of knowledge and a firm reliance on the qualitative inductive analysis. Similarly, authenticity strives for accurately present co-researcher perspectives with the theory employed (Hays & Singh, 2012).

The next two aspects of trustworthiness deal with appropriateness of fit. Coherence refers to the extent that the research tradition aligns or fits with the research question and purpose of the study (Hays & Singh, 2012). Sampling adequacy refers to the fit of the sampling method,

composition, and size based on the research question and tradition (Hays & Singh, 2012). Sampling adequacy is hard to determine without attending to coherence.

According to Angen, ethical validation treats all parts of the qualitative study moral and ethical process that seeks to inform practice, generate knowledge, and influence practitioners' actions (2000). She then goes on to address the substantive validity of qualitative research by asking researchers to examine the degree to which one's study contributes to the profession (Angen, 2000). Lastly, Whittemore and colleagues note that creativity references exciting and imaginative ways of designing a study while demonstrating flexibility in the research process (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001).

Hays and Singh not only outlined the criteria needed for trustworthiness, but they provided several strategies to address each criterion. Of the various strategies I utilized the following five: reflexive journaling/memos, member checking, prolonged engagement, triangulation, and thick description. Reflexive journaling and memos respectively helped to address ethical validation, credibility, confirmability, authenticity, substantive validation (Hays & Singh, 2012).

A reflexive journal is a document in which I recorded my thoughts about the impact of the research on me (Hays & Singh, 2012). Much like conversations with a supervisor about transference or countertransference in therapy, this journal allowed me to note, reflect, and unpack salient moments within the research process. Similarly, memos are notes that are related to a specific co-researcher or data (i.e., interview) (Hays & Singh, 2012). Memos may be referenced throughout the research process and serve as reminders about noteworthy details from a co-researcher or his interview. Journaling allowed me to continuously bracket information and maintain as much neutrality as possible given my in-group status. Additionally, memoing

assisted in tracking background information that contributes to the substance of the research, believability, and truth of data to co-researchers.

Another strategy is member checking. Member checking consists of a consultation with co-researchers during analysis to see if the emerging findings accurately depict co-researchers' intent (Hays & Singh, 2012). It has been cited as one of the most important strategies for addressing trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Of the various ways to member check, I asked probing questions during the interviews to clarify co-researcher responses. Additionally, I had co-researchers review the reduced essence of the phenomenon to test for congruence with their meaning. Member checking addressed confirmability, authenticity, sampling adequacy, ethical validation, and substantive validation (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Prolonged engagement is a strategy that also addresses confirmability, authenticity, and substantive validation (Hays & Singh, 2012). It is seen within phenomenological research and involves being a part of the phenomenological environment to build and sustain relationships with co-researchers to accurately describe a phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2012). Given my in-group status, I have been the environment in question since early childhood. I have built personal relationships with numerous individuals and witnessed the development of this phenomenon for over two decades. This status granted me a unique perspective with salient insight into the accuracy of the described phenomenon.

Thick description or vividness is a trustworthiness strategy in which the researcher provides detailed accounts of the research process and results (Hays & Singh, 2012; Maxwell, 2005; Whittemore et al., 2001). True thick description goes beyond stating the facts and observation to provide detail about the meaning inferred from the presented data (Hays & Singh, 2012). Almost every aspect of the research process can be thickly described which allows this strategy

to address credibility, transferability, confirmability, authenticity, coherence, and substantive validation (Hays & Singh, 2012).

One of the strategies that address seven of the ten criteria of trustworthiness is triangulation. This final strategy involves using diverse types of evidence at multiple parts of the research to better understand and support findings (Hays & Singh, 2012). Examples of types of triangulation include data sources, investigators, unit of analysis, data methods, and theoretical perspectives (Hays & Singh, 2012). Within my study, I triangulated data sources by choosing clergy and laypeople who identify as Black, gay, Christian, and man. This selection allowed me to have co-researchers with similar characteristic yet various experiences within the phenomenon.

Additionally, I triangulated investigators by having a single team during the analysis of data which served to strength design and confidence in results (Hays & Singh, 2012). Lastly, I triangulated theoretical perspectives by incorporating theory into my conceptualization of this phenomenon. As such, I preliminarily conceptualized my extensive understanding of the phenomenon which in-turn helped me bracket my prior knowledge before I began to collect and analyze data.

The five strategies previously discussed, respectively address all the criterion of trustworthiness. However, there is a significant aspect of this study that threatens validity. In examining my study, I find that researcher bias is my most significant threat to validity. Objectivity was a major concern since I chose my research topic. As a member of the Black gay Christian male population, I am intimately aware of the many struggles and challenges they face. This awareness is one of the reasons I wanted to study this group. Explaining my bias and how I will manage it is a key part of the research proposal (Maxwell, 2013). Therefore, in keeping

with the first step of phenomenology, I bracketed this existing knowledge to subjectively see the phenomenon through from the perspective of my co-researchers (Giorgi, 1997). I bracketed my bias is by naming my subjectivities with what Peshkin calls the "subjective – I's (Peshkin, 1988, p. 18)

I have come up with two subjective – I's, the Hidden-Identity I and the Struggle-Is-Real I. The Hidden-Identity I is an assumption that Black males are hiding either their sexual or religious identity in some context. This comes from the research on common coping styles and my knowledge of many men's abstinence from being openly gay in the Black Church. Thus it could have caused me to assume that there was an unhealthy interaction between all Black gay Christian men and the Black Church. I could have also ignored their real struggle by exploring why identity is not a struggle. This led to my second subjective – I.

The Struggle-Is-Real I comes from an observation of media, personal experience, current events, and individual accounts. This I is an acknowledgment that being a triple minority in America is not an easy task. However, the Struggle-Is-Real I comes with the assumption that all Gay Black Christian males are struggling. This could have led to a confirmatory inquiry as opposed to healthy exploration. It could have also led to an expectation of reverse empathy as a researcher who "understands the struggle."

CHAPTER 4

Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the lives of Black gay Christian men navigating the anti-gay discourse of the Black Church. The essence of this phenomenon is understood through the lived experience of each co-researcher. The primary research question that guided this study is:

1. What is the lived experience of Black gay Christian men navigating the anti-gay discourse of the Black Church?

The results of the analysis are presented in terms of the *Individual Textural-Structural Description* and the *Composite Structural Description* of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole. This process will serve to outline the phenomenon using a combination of the co-researchers' voices and descriptions of the essential elements found. The voices represented in this study are those of four men within the Black gay Christian community: **Paul**, **Mr. X, Sean,** and **Carlo.**

The observed phenomenon is an interaction among the individual, the Black Church, and anti-gay discourse from the perspective of the BGCM. Their lived experience is presented in the following results through a narrative depiction characteristic of phenomenological analysis. The individual textural-structural description with highlight each co-researcher's unique experience of the interaction. It will then be followed by a composite structural description that will highlight

the common core themes found among the co-researchers. These core themes serve to depict the essence of the phenomenon each of these men experienced.

Individual Textural-Structural Description

Paul

I came to understand Paul's lived experience through his various identities. One of his most salient identities was his identity as a minister. "Paul is a minister of compassion, endeavoring diligently to make a difference ... He just is who he is. Paul is just African-American male, 45 years old, same-gender-loving the living, educated, social, that's it … He lives up to his name, his real name, his real name not the pseudonym Paul. His real name means wagon maker; his middle name means to make flow ... That's who I am. I'm that guy who lives up to those names he was given, purposefully. And he loves Jesus too." All of Paul's identities were relevant to who he is, but his religious identity impacted multiple parts of his personal and professional life.

The cornerstone of Paul's life is his identity as a believer. "It plays a great part in my life, from every aspect, even to the aspect of business and professionalism that I do. Those are all attached to my belief system. And so it plays a major part of my life." This identity has "played a transitioning part. In the beginning, it was very, very, very, very much all of who I was." As Paul continued to experience life, being a believer took on a different meaning for him.

"Thirty years ago religion was a young boy … who wanted to basically just preach. Twenty years ago it was a young man who was the African-American male in an all-white experience many times who found out that preaching wasn't all of it. Ten years ago it was a guy who was in the marketplace as a veteran publisher … and it played a great place in my ability to keep my integrity … And now it has become a core of who I am that is extended or used in

different ways now. It's no longer all of who I am, but it's definitely the core or grounding of who I am." His life experience shaped his understanding and presentation of his religious identity, but his introduction to religion was through his family.

The familial matriarch was instrumental in introducing religion to Paul. When "I was seven years old … [My grandmother] presented what I believe is the gospel… and that's when my formation began." However, the gospel (religion) was not new to Paul because of other members of his family. Paul's bloodline was filled with not only fellow believers but clergy as well. "From a father who's a mega-church pastor to a mother who was a seminarian and all that stuff, grandmother who's a seminarian, aunts and uncles, everybody pastoring." The salience of religion and ministry is evident throughout his family.

Paul's salient religious identity was accompanied by a powerful connection to the Black Church. Paul was introduced to the Black Church by his family at an early age. He "was born into the church, literally born into it, passed around the church as a baby." This birth was in a church where "dad pastored, mom, Sunday school [taught] until she started her theological training." "It was not an option" for Paul to not be involved with the Black church. As such, Paul has had various roles within the Church.

Church was more than a building with four walls for Paul. He actively engaged in the Church experience through a variety of roles. "I got called when I was eight, to preach. I pastored for 20+ years. My role right now in the Black Church is director of worship arts, but I do a lot of preaching, a lot of teaching." His current relationship with the Church is "a very strong working relationship, sometimes frustrating, sometimes disappointing, but working." For Paul, "there's no place like the Black Church." It is from this intimate understanding and dynamic relationship that Paul describes the Black Church as "always a day late and two dollars

short." For him, the church's "embedded theology keeps us wrapped up in a whole lotta shit." The Church's developmental delay is characterized by being the "last to get revelation of scripture…which puts us way behind on stuff," and assessed by a comparison of religious peers "like United Church of Christ Congregational Church" who have been practicing from a more progressive theology for a century.

Paul did not come into his identity as gay until later in life. "I was alone with my former wife, met a guy, had a relationship for seven years. I had been in a very discreet relationship with someone, and presently I'm married. I literally don't have a horror story. I don't even have a horror story concerning the church knowing I was gay." Acceptance and affirmation characterized his journey. When he married his male identified partner, he received well wishes, even from his church members. "Two of my almost 90-year-old church members called me and said, 'I heard you got married.' And I said, 'Yeah.' And the mother as they call her, she said, 'Well, this may have been who you's always been. And if anybody say anything to you about it tell 'em fuck 'em, fuck 'em, fuck 'em.'" His nuclear family shared similar sentiments of affirmation.

Paul disclosed his sexual identity to his children 15 years ago, after his divorce from his wife. The only noted comment came from his then 4-year-old daughter who "just still wanna know if you're gonna be my daddy." The message he received from is clerical peers "is that, overwhelmingly, from some of the same people that preach against that in the pulpit, all I've got is love. I think it's because of what we had before they found out about my sexuality." His sexual identity did not become his primary identifier. Instead, it integrated into singular expressed understanding from others that "Paul is still Paul." However, this external validation has not prevented him from experiencing anti-gay discourse.

Paul's identity as a BGCM is one that is not characterized by a fight between his religious and sexual identities. Some people see these identities and "are often looking for the struggle involved in [one's] relationship with God." However, Paul has "never struggled with whether or not God loved me because of sexuality." When he encountered anti-gay discourse, he challenged it with his life experience. He refused to believe that "I'm not anointed, God doesn't love me, I'm an abomination, I'm going to hell, when I just left … my lover, done made mad love, walk the pulpit and preach, turn the church out." Paul's rationale is that it is counterintuitive for God to use someone like him when God could "just grab some of these perfect people to do all that." People who believe in the discourse countered by saying, "God use you in spite of…" how you identify. However, to Paul, that context makes "God sound crazy. He sounds abusive and a user." Paul's critical view of his relationship with God allows him to see "God is love. God is not that what you're hearing at church." Paul not only challenges this discourse in his life but through his ministry as well.

Paul has not allowed the Church's conservative delayed theology to influence his way of preaching. "I've been walking progressive theology for a decade or so now, and I have friends who are just coming to understand that … if we communicate with God spirit to spirit, then God is less concerned about our gender than he is our spirit." As a pastor, Paul does "a lot of lecturing, and a lot of it on churches that may possibly wanna transition into being affirming, welcoming and affirming, which is open to the LGBTQIA community." Paul is using his position in the church as a means of advocating for Q+ integration within the Black Church. This work is difficult given factors that continue to perpetuate the discourse.

Paul noted that the perpetuation of anti-course among his peers was based more in economics than scripture. To Paul, his peers are "still working it out, some of them. It's not a

matter of theology; it's a matter of economics. They got bills." For many of them, pastoring is their livelihood and their salaries based on the congregation. Therefore, "the economic need outweighs their theological premises or theological standings." This economic underpinning fuels the anti-gay discourse that perpetuates an embedded theology which keeps the Black Church delayed.

A byproduct of the anti-gay discourse of the Black Church is hurt. Paul works with gay men who report that "the church don't give a damn about us; they just use us." He has seen been who have "been dogged out" or "dicked-down by pastors." This form of verbal abuse and sexual use manifests as hurt for BGCM. As such, Paul is working with Black gay Christian men to find healthier ways of navigating the injury experienced from the church.

"One of the things is there are some passages that I call the clobber passages. They are the scriptures that are repeatedly used to abuse, in other words, LGBTQIA persons of the church. I walk through those passages and tell them why that ain't so." He also teaches "them to build support systems around other people who can support them." If he had the time, he would "teach them about liberation theology…about Black liberation theology, about being free."

The structural essence of Paul's lived experience with the anti-gay discourse of the Black Church is characterized by the following core themes: the Black Church, relationship with Black women, identity, anti-gay discourse, navigational methods, acceptance, and relationship with God. Paul's early indoctrination into the Black Church through family, primarily his familial matriarch. His grandmother provided a foundational value of Church that guided the following generations, including his mother. His matriarchs not only established a generational pattern of preachers but introduced him to the Black Church as well.

Familial values and a variety of church roles set the foundation for him to know the Black Church intimately. Church has been salient in each of his life stages, and much like his religious identity has meant served different functions in each stage. In the early stages of his life, it served as a place in which he developed his religious and ministerial identity. Now it serves as the backdrop to his professional career. The Church has continuously been whatever Paul need in his life. As such, his relationship with the Church has been overwhelmingly positive. However, this positive relationship has not blinded Paul to many ways in which the Church's delayed development has done a disservice to his Black gay peers.

Paul greatly values his identities and intentionally lives in a holistic authenticity not often found. This authenticity is the reason he was able to be open about his sexual identity and experienced widespread acceptance. Paul was not defined by his identity; the identity was defined by Paul. Therefore, those around him were not learning about gay Paul; they were accepting and affirming Paul, who just so happens to be gay. His command of his narrative and willingness to challenge that in which he does not believe has characterized his life, including his relationship with God.

Paul's relationship with God was developed through years of learning about the attributes of God. Paul challenged the presentation of God given to him by the Black Church and developed an understanding that was congruent with the scriptural depiction. This relationship not only shaped his personal life but the way in which Paul understood God's interactions with gay people. Personally, he saw how God continued to use him even after he came into his gay identity, which further supported the truths gained through his studies about the inaccuracy of anti-gay discourse.

Paul's beliefs and values are grounded in knowledge gained through years of education. This formal and informal learning is what guides Paul's practice of helping others navigate the anti-gay discourse. Even though his journey was not directly impacted by this toxic narrative, he is aware of its effects and actives works to provide healthy ways of navigating this toxic theology, including correcting clobber passages.

Mr. X

Mr. X's lived experience with the anti-gay discourse of the Black Church is shaped by his various identities. One identity directly influenced by the Black Church is his religious identity. Mr. X's identified religion is "Christian. I grew up in a Christian household. More specifically, grew up Baptist, but that has changed, more so Apostolic." His religious identity was not a choice but a product of being raised by his family of origin. "I think [my religious identity] was just natural from my upbringing. If I was raised Muslim, I would be Muslim. If I was raised Jehovah's Witness, I'd probably be Jehovah's Witness. I think that was just something that happened in my household." While he chose his religious identity in the home, his church shaped his understanding of Christianity. However, his family still determined which church he would attend when he was younger. The difference between how he identified as a child and how he identifies now is that "Baptist is more traditional, more old-school, more conservative. I did that because it was natural; we had no choice but to go to church. And so, if I had a choice to pick what type of church I went to as a child, I probably would've picked a different type." When given a choice later in life, Mr. X chose an Apostolic church, which is "like a holiness type of church. A sevenfold ministry. They believe in speaking in tongues. I guess I don't know how I will explain it more than just a sevenfold ministry. Teaching, prophesying, laying hands,

that type of stuff." It was in this type of church that is roles within the church and other identities developed.

Mr. X gained the identity as "a licensed minister at [his] current church now. [He's] also the director of Christian counseling at [his] church, now." Being a minister is salient to Mr. X now, but he initially struggled with this idea. "I think I'm still in this weird phase. But, I've come to accept who I am more." His are struggles because he does not see or perform his identity in a stereotypical manner. "I know I've been called to reach, in this new age, different people. The way [I] connect with a person that's not gonna be traditional." "I'm not a type of minister that would get behind the pulpit and start preaching. I'm the minister that goes to different churches talking about mental health at the church." He sees himself more as an advocate for Christian mental health than a minister. However, with his platform being the church, his pastor felt his identity should be more aligned with a church role. "That's why [the pastor] did that because more credibility comes through different churches, and even in my own church, people talking as, Minister X." This process was facilitated through in-house ordination.

Mr. X's ordination process did not contain a formalized seminary training, but a uniformed processed developed and implemented within his church. "We had training in-house. All the leaders were licensed in-house. I guess my bishop oversees different type of programming across the region. So, I didn't officially go to seminary school." Additionally, he went to a "Christian school for my master's, but that was in counseling," which further highlights his struggle to accept his call. He sees himself as more of a mental health professional who works in the Church than a minister.

Mr. X also identifies as "homosexual." This identity is defined by conflict because of how it intersects with being Black. In his experience, a Black gay man "doesn't go. You learn

how to be okay with who you are. Being Black in the South is a whole issue. Being Black and gay is a whole other thing. My experience of being Black and gay, I feel like ... I got bullied when I was younger. I had a lot of behavior issues. And I think a lot of that was because of my sexuality. I think, I can't put it in words how I describe my experience being a Black gay man. Because that's like describe who you are." Being Black and gay is an indescribable struggle. Even though those are two different identities, they are inseparable for Mr. X. He sees himself as "a person who's proud of every bit of who I am. I'm a person who has struggled with identity. I'm a person who has been strong… I don't have a problem being Black and gay. I'm happily Black and gay." Despite the difficulties he faced trying to exist, Mr. X is content with who he is and how he identifies.

Mr. X's experience with the Black Church started at an early age, with his introduction to the Black Church. It was not a choice he made, but one that was made for him through the familial matriarch. "My aunt was like, 'All right, you're going to church. Get dressed, get up'." The value and importance of the Church were passed down through his aunt and various practices she had for the house. "Every Sunday we got up for church, Bible study, I don't care if you sick, you going to church. So, it just became customary, just going every Sunday, it's routine."

Going to church was not only a family but a community affair. "Everybody in the community went to this church. That's the church we all went to. All my family went there, cousins, aunts, uncles." Also, it was not about just going to church, but Mr. X was active in the church. "I remember singing in the choir and going to Sunday School. And as you got older you went to a different choir, this and that. And you had summer camp at the church." He spent his formative years involved with the Church in different ways.

Mr. X describes his roles and involvement in the Church with fond recollection. However, when asked to describe the Black Church as a whole, his first word was "traumatizing." Additional descriptors were "resilient. I would say I equate it to civil service. I mean, everything that we have come out of, as it concerns the Black Church was from the civil movement. The power in the church regarding civil rights. That's why I said the first word was traumatic for me personally. Powerful, resilient, yet traumatic." Mr. X holds a holistic view of the Church as this powerfully resilient civil servant that has also been personally traumatizing.

Anti-gay discourse characterizes Mr. X's trauma. Concerning homosexuality, Mr. X "would assume … that homosexuality is a sin, according to the Black church." His assumption comes from his experience with various Black churches. "Honestly speaking, none of the churches that I were in or that I grew up in, really taught against it. But, I've been to other churches where they were preaching against it." Although his Church took a different approach, the message was still evident. "They taught on a multitude of sins, and homosexuality was one of them. I didn't really feel singled out in my church … I didn't feel like it was singled out as far as oh, you, you, you in a sense. I think it wasn't ... It wasn't bashed into our head; you know what I mean? It was a taught sin is sin, and homosexuality is one of the sins." Anti-gay beliefs were not highlighted but interwoven into overarching messages around sin. Conversely, the anti-gay discourse was more explicated discussed in the home.

"I was taught at a very young age from my aunt, who raised me, that homosexuality is a sin, and that's it's not good, and it's in the Bible, and if you were gay, you were committing a sin. I was taught at home more so than in church first." Mr. X's family and Church, directly and indirectly, perpetuated anti-gay discourse. These confusing messages forced Mr. X to reconcile *being* sin versus *committing a* sin, "… being taught that my lifestyle is a sin. I'm a Black gay

man. But, I was also taught that what I'm going through, what I'm living each and every day is a sin … Why is everything else that everybody did okay? I won't say okay, but sin is a sin is a sin is a sin, but when we talk about homosexuality, it's higher than everything else. They'll beat you down, beat you down to the floor."

This reconciliation was traumatizing for Mr. X. "If you go into that environment feeling like, okay, what you truly feel for a loved one or somebody else you're connected to, and they're telling you 'you're gonna go to hell', and this and that, and what you're doing is a sin, that's very traumatic." These messages also had another adverse impact. "It is a lot of pain, especially when you thought you can't control how you interact with people." Unfortunately, while navigating these traumatic messages, Mr. X was taught to police how he presented himself, especially around the Church.

Mr. X's aunt made sure he was mindful of how he presented himself. "I've always been a person who was this big, bubbly personality and just bigger than life attitude. And I was always taught to reel it in, dial it down. 'You can be who you are, but everything ain't' ... this is my aunt, 'everything ain't for everybody.'" These restrictive messages served to police his presentation were found in and out of the home. "I remember at college, and I was singing in a gospel choir … I almost got sat down because I had a tongue ring … they were saying I was too much … Did you ask these women over here to take their nose piercing out or this and that? It's like, 'well, Mr. X, you're going to be offensive if you're singing for God's glory and you're going to be, you're focusing the attention on you.'"

Mr. X even found himself performing in his romantic relationships. He and his ex-boyfriend were active in the same church, yet his boyfriend "came from a very conservative household, so he was more I guess, discreet and showed more respect I guess … where I'm like I

just don't care. I am what I am, and that's who I am." Even though their bishop knew about their relationship, Mr. X was "not going to hold [his] hand in church, [I'm] not going to kiss [him] in church; it's like respect the [Church]." The presentation monitoring was "difficult at first because I felt like I had to basically dumb down who I am, or I feel like I had to limit my sexuality if that can be even done." Adhering to these restrictive messages helped Mr. X navigate the stigma found in anti-gay discourse.

Other ways Mr. X navigated anti-gay discourse was by minimizing the impact. For Mr. X, the discourse doesn't "phase me. I really don't; I don't care." In his minimalization, he also rationalized the discourse by saying, "a lot of this stuff is historical context, and they're coming from a certain place." For him, his experience was not negative because he "wasn't one who was bashed and you know, hurt in the church and left the church because of reasons like that. You know, I've actually always had a very supportive social environment." Mr. X viewed the impact of anti-gay discourse as something that was shaped by the person's perspective. "If you talk about it and discuss it too much, of course, you're going to feel oppressed…Life is really what you make it. If you want to feel like you want to be oppressed, then you will be oppressed. If you feel like you want to be in a prison of your own doing, then you will be. Because happiness is a choice, I feel like certain people chose to stay in low places. Half the time, it ain't even people doing stuff to you. It's how you receive it." Choice is Mr. X's ultimate way of navigating the impact of these messages. "I feel like I can sit in a sermon where they talk about homosexuality and this that, and nothing even phases me. I feel like, okay well listen, at the end of the day, people still do their thing at the church, at the service, so why personalize it? That's just me."

The core themes that structure Mr. X's lived experience are Identity, matriarchal impact, the Black Church, anti-gay discourse, emotional impact, and navigational methods. Mr. X's

identities were greatly influenced by the Black Church. How he presented and expressed himself was policed by restrictive messages that served to maintain the appearance of heteronormativity. Even his professional identity was shaped and developed in the Church. Mr. X was forced to navigate various identity conflicts that prevented him from fully accepting the call to the ministry and stopped him from being true to who he is.

Despite these identity conflicts, the Church supported Mr. X. It nurtured him through programs and his various roles. The Church is a place of community and an extension of his family. The very foundation of his family of origin made Church an essential part of Mr. X's life. His experience with his home church and other Black Churches informed how Mr. X understood the Black Church.

Mr. X's memories of his home church are filled with positive portrayals of community and family. He even speaks of his current church, fondly. However, the Black Church universal is traumatizing, powerful, and resilient. Mr. X intentionally distinguishes his churches from the Black Church universal, even though they have the same message about homosexuality. He also distances himself from that which he perceives as harmful.

Mr. X described the Black Church as having a view that homosexuality is a sin. However, his church included homosexuality with the rest of the sins verses highlighting it separated. Additionally, he experienced more anti-gay discourse from his matriarch than his church. His use of the word "traumatizing" to describe the Black Church indicates a severe impact. This characterization aligns with the pain he described and his struggles as a young child. Hearing messages that he, as a person was a sin and not being able to do anything to change that, was difficult to navigate. As an adult, he has chosen not to be traumatized and oppressed by the Black Church. His reframe of his experience served to minimalized much of

what he has and is experiencing. Even his stories of his presentation being policed have minimal effect on him currently. He attributes those negative messages to other churches, which allow him to negate examples found in his church.

Sean

Sean's lived experience is contextualized in through the lens of his identities. He identifies as a "gay Black man seeking ordination, currently seeking ordination in a predominately white ordination, predominately white denomination. Born and raised in South Dallas." He is being ordained as a clergy in the Christian faith, which represents another salient identity for him. The intersectionality of his identity gives him a sense of pride, "…being a Black gay Christian man, as a man who is unapologetic of his heritage and pursuing perfection through Christ, to be their best Black gay man self. That's honoring God."

Along with his sense of pride is a struggle to navigate the narrative of gay men. "Trying to be my best self is hard work … knowing that I love and have sex with other men, and working to be my best self and not perpetuate the stereotypes as well as the stigmas that gays have. Whether it's just fucking for the sake of fucking, wherever … trying to be better than that, while still pursuing a relationship with another person, with another man, in order to move forward in life with, monogamously."

Sean's awareness of his sexual identity was a process that started early and continued into adulthood. "I knew that I was gay at an early age. Coming out though, I didn't come out until college because up until then, in high school I had girlfriends, but we never had sex … Up until I graduated college I wanted to be known as [Sean] who just so happens to be a Black, gay, Christian whatever other adjectives, as opposed to that Black gay kid [Sean]." His awareness and acceptance of his identity was positive, as well as, his coming out process to others. "My

[friend] turned around, she was driving, I think we were stopped at a light, she said, 'So you're gay now right?' And I was like, 'Yup!'. And my other friends were like okay cool, so we'll go down to the Quarter. And that was that." The hardest conversation he had related to his sexual identity was with his mom. "So she like, 'Oh, so you're gay now?', and I was like yeah, yeah that's the way it is. She said, 'Well I had my suspicions but okay. Well, I got some stuff to work out on my own'. So there was some tension between us for I'd say about a year or what have you, but then with all the questions that she asked along the way, and because of the conversations she had with some of her close friends, and ministers as well … she came to the realization hey, that's my son and it just so happens he's gay, and I'm going to love him anyway."

Sean's mother's reaction was toughest he faced coming out. However, he also had a fear of coming out in another place. "I was scared, initially. Because I went to a Black church I knew about the stigmas and whatnot, so that's one of the reasons the church was one of the last places I was allowed to be gay, I allowed myself to be gay." Sean was fully cognizant of the stigma associated with the Black Church, but his personal experience did not match what he had heard from others. Fear "was unwarranted because of the Black church that I went to. [My fear] went from the generalized stigma or the generalized fear, because of the Black church, to okay what the fuck am I worried about mentality, because of my Black church that I attend." His church displayed true acceptance and provided him with a healthy and positive experience. "Because of the church I grew up in, it was an affirming process… my Black church experiences is kind of atypical, but not really, because I know that there's other Black gay men, Black gay women who have experienced similar experiences. Had that struggle of coming out, had that struggle of dealing with them and their Blackness and gayness at the same time, and also in dealing with the church, but have eventually found those supportive voices along the road and have followed

those as opposed to clinging to and leaning into the toxicities of just the nastiness the Black Church stereotypically has." Sean internalized the experience of finding support and turned it into one of his primary objectives as a minister. "One of my main ministerial missions is social justice advocacy in and through the church." However, his identity as a minister is not one he welcomed openly.

Sean was aware that ministry was going to be part of his life early on; however, he actively avoided it for a significant portion of his life. "At an early age I knew, I can't explain how I knew, whether we want to understand it as the spirit of God spoke to me, or God put within my own personal understanding that I am called to be in the active ministry in the church." He spent 15 years avoiding ministry because of his peripheral knowledge of the treatment of clergy. "I knew how ministers were treated. My Godfather and some of my uncles and aunts, you know just working in the church. Church people are nasty." Sean's avoidant behaviors turn into unhealthy coping that eventually culminated with the revelation that he could no longer run. "I had been in jail, I had clubbed a lot, was only worried about me, myself and I. That kind of thing lead to some crazy pretty situations in life and at one point I prayed, I got back spiritually active, I talked to my mom more instead of avoiding her. Then push came to shove. One night I couldn't sleep and I just say there praying and I felt some kind of way, and was reminded of the fact that I am supposed to be a minster."

Once Sean embraced his calling, he decided to develop that calling through formalized training in seminary. His seminary considerably changed how he understood scriptures. "Me being in seminary these past four years opened my eyes to a whole different world that I had not even considered when it comes to studying the Bible, and it's afforded me a lot of better interpretations." This informed scriptural understanding allowed Sean to contextualize the Bible

in a manner that his untrained counterparts could not. “Some denominations, or some churches, they don't push their ministers as their denomination, to study more than just with their Bible and in their own office, or with each other … not having that seminary training to know how to study the scriptures, to know the etymology of the words and knowing the ancient languages, and knowing the different types of written language that's used to develop the stories that we hold near and dear, and also to know the Hebrew history. Why certain traditions are our traditions, as Christians, as opposed to what's fiction and what's non-fiction.” As he continued to develop in clerical identity and understanding of scripture, he also began to counter the anti-gay narrative of the Church.

Sean was first introduced to anti-gay discourse through Black televangelists. Sean would see Black ministers and church programming that contained this “toxic theology.” “Bishop G. E. Patterson … I'd turn on the TV and see him and hear him … in his younger older years, he would demean gays and that kind of thing.” Despite his home church being affirming, Sean would hear anti-gay discourse from other Black Churches he would visit. “I did hear about it from some Baptist preachers, you know, that I would go visit or whatnot, and they'd talk about gays in a not so nice light. They would defame them while claiming Christ.” Sean’s earlier years of development were sprinkled with the various types of exposure to anti-gay discourse “Even though I wasn't personally targeted, or directly handed down that doctrine of demonization … I saw it. but it didn't influence me.”

He also experienced this discourse outside of the Black Church. “I can remember in high school, because I went to an all-boys Catholic school, that the f word, faggot, was thrown around, and gays were seen as less than, that kind of thing, and because of the Catholic theology, some people did say in my religion classes that homosexuality is a sin.” However, in this

environment, he also found people who were affirming. "For the other three years that I had theology in high school … they kind of beat around the bush because they couldn't say anything outside of Catholic doctrine … but they were affirming, nonetheless. So even in a conservative environment, I had liberal liberational messages and affirming messages there." This interweaving of affirmation with anti-gay discourse characterized much of Sean's experience, yet his exposure to anti-gay discourse brought up questions of where this discourse fit within Christianity.

Before Sean gained his seminary informed understanding of the Bible, he found himself questioning this anti-gay discourse that was pervasive throughout Christianity. "There's contradicting scriptures that says that nothing can separate us from God's love, but if you're gay, I guess, you know, some of these people, that scripture doesn't apply to them, or what have you. You know, I always thought it was kind of odd that there are certain entities of persons, certain sects of humankind, that would be automatically divested of the beloved community or the preferred future for God's people." As he questioned this contradictory doctrine, he also began to question its impact on his sexuality. "It caused me to … question my own Christianity, and my own salvation as it relates to my sexuality, because, I mean, I really did not put the two together until I started questioning my own sexuality and my faith, until I started questioning those demonized versions of theology that I heard from some Baptist ministers, and some others, and started seeing it on TV, and the news stories, and that kind of thing, and hearing about other people's experiences in the Church."

Sean became more grounded in his truth in seminary and created a personal theology based on his studies. "So we had to write a 30 page Credo based on the … ten doctrines of the church … and within my doctrine of humanity section, I articulated homosexuality is not a sin,

and here's why, but at the same time, here is what humanity is according to theology and the sociology behind it." Through this assignment, Sean was able to question what he believed, why, and the scriptures on which he based his beliefs. He also tested his theology with others to see how it would stand. "You have to compare it to other folks. It has to be tested and approved through conversation in conflict, sometimes, with other folks." As such, Sean's understanding of gay individuals is that they "… can't be an abomination because God created them this way, and here's why," which he confirmed, "because I've always held that revelation is an individual experience with God, but is often confirmed and affirmed by conversation with others."

Sean's training is not solely based in a formalized setting. While in college in New Orleans, he got "an education outside of the classroom, and even inside the classroom too, but I got a well-rounded experience there." Seminary helped him understand himself as a minister, but New Orleans helped shape him as a person. "Doing all of those activities and really finding out who I am, or coming into who I am, getting to know more about myself and how God works in the world, and the nature of discovering more than just Sunday morning understanding of God's nature really empowered me to be able to live authentically, and to be able to live strongly in the face of folks that … don't know or that only believe in what they've been taught." Sean is now able to use his knowledge and training in the "overturning of all that toxicity that … I had seen on the news that I hadn't personally experienced until I got to college." Another byproduct of Sean works to understand himself was a deeper understanding of God and the Black Church. Sean relationship with each is unique based on the attributes he has come to know about them. His introduction to both started in the home.

Church has been a foundational piece of Sean's entire life. "Church has never not been a part of my life … during about a 15 year period when I was running from my calling, I tried to

avoid the church and it's activities but was unsuccessfully, obviously. For the most part, church has never not been a part of my life." This foundation was established by the Black matriarchs in his life. "My grandmother always went to church; she was actively involved in church. Her brothers and sisters were, consequently, my mom and her brother and sisters grew up in the church, and it's that line, that family tradition." His familial matriarch laid the foundation for his experience while his church served to provide a positive experience that continues to shape his journey to this day.

To fully understand Sean's church experience, one must understand Sean's church. Sean's church experience is based in a predominately white Christian denomination "United Methodist." Within his denomination "there's 150 some odd churches, United Methodist churches in my conference … out of those 150 some odd churches maybe 10, 20 are Black or some other ethnicity." However, Sean was introduced to Christianity through a sub-denomination. "I was born and baptized into the CME church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal church." This sub-denomination is a "Black Christian denomination that focuses on the methodical thinking of John Wesley's Methodism and the liberty, freedom and justice advocacy of Richard Allan and the other Black Methodist reformers that constituted the original colored Methodist Episcopal church." Within his larger denomination, they are actively working to address the way United Methodist church attend to the Q+ community. "Within the United Methodist church right now, next week our global denomination is deciding what to do on the gay issue." Among the churches within the denomination, there is a divide on how the Church practices related to Q+ identified individuals. "It's going to be interesting to see how the church responds to the issues that have been brought before it, the possible departure of some conservative sects within the church… I hope that we all come to a cross in the middle." Sean is

hopeful that affirmation he found in his church and others like it, will spread to the larger denomination, especially given the importance of church to him.

Unfortunately, this is only half of Sean's experience with church, specifically the Black Church. The healthy exploration of Q+ issues and messages of affirmation received in his home church is juxtaposed toxic theologies of rejection and damnation witnessed at other Black Churches. These two sides create a coin representative of his experience and subsequent relationship with the Black Church, which Sean cares about deeply. "The church has its flaws, and there are denominations that are making progress, but some that are still stuck. But for the most part, flaws and all, I love the Black Church, but there's still much work to do in becoming the true church of Christ."

Sean's relationship with God also comes with mixed emotions. "It's growing; it's a growing relationship. It's a bittersweet relationship, more sweet than bitter, but it does have its bitter moments, especially when I want to do things my way but I have to succumb to the will of God." Sean's relationship with God is characterized in part, by a battle between his will and God's. This battle is highlighted in Sean's life decisions like accepting his call to ministry. "When I accepted my calling to ministry, did not want to become pastor, did not want to deal with the issues that pastors and administrators have to deal with as far as being treated like a catch-all, or having to constantly pour out for other people even though I don't have it myself." However, his relationship with God is one where God's will take priority creating an inevitable path. "Yeah, I did not want [ministry] for my life. But God had another plan and I had no choice but to acknowledge it, because of the fact that my life was crap until I actually answered the call and started pursuing my calling." Despite the bitter part of having to succumb to the will of God, Sean finds this relationship to be sweet, growing, and one that he is actively working to cultivate.

“God is awesome. God never disappoints or fails me. And I just have to, I'm working on my trust in God. God has always moved when I needed God. And also, moved when I didn't expect it. But when it was necessary for me and for my benefit for the edification of me and my community.”

Sean’s relationships with the Black Church and God are shaped by mixed emotions; however, he navigates those emotions differently based on the relationship. “I can leave the Black church, can’t leave God. I can point out the failures of the Black Church. Can't do that with God. I can work with both entities for the betterment of myself and each other. It's a lot less difficult of a struggle with God.” He also had different emotional responses to each relationship based on the context with which they operate. “The tangibles of the Black church often lead to frustration, because they're here. They're visible; they're physical, they're people that I'm in association with. When I don't see progressive change, it's disheartening.” He has a different experience related to God. “But with God … I don't have to look too far for the blessings or for the glory that God has revealed in the past and, even the scripture says, ‘Eyes haven't seen, or ears heard or hearts understand the glories that shall be revealed,’ essentially. But based off of that history, that relationship that I had with God, I can only imagine what's going to come in the future. Because God never fails, God is loving, God is always working and speaking.”

Sean made meaning of his experience with anti-gay discourse and the Church through his relationship with God, relationship with the Black Church, and his life experience. His life experience highlighted the plight of Black people. “There's a lot of us Black folks, in general, straight or gay or otherwise, male, female or otherwise, that are still poisoned by the toxicities of the dominant community throughout history.” This understanding is characterized by the plight of Black people that results in an often unrecognized pain that we navigate. “There's a lot of

people just working in their pain, that's a lot of people that's comfortable with their pain and not really doing the due diligence to move past it, to grow from it, to pull along someone else with them in their growth." "There's a lot of people that are just so sick that they don't even realize it, and it's causing other folks to be infected too. Infected and affected negatively." Sean's understanding not only impacts the meaning but allows him to identify ways in which this experience can shift to one that is more positive.

"So understanding that nature of humanity and of the church, going back to God, I know that there is liberation and healing available. And also because of God's unfailing and faithful nature, God is always working through people and through creation to right the tide." Sean's identification of hope influences the way in which he navigates his feelings associated with his experience. "I feel them. Avoiding those issues or avoiding those feelings that are associated with the struggle, whether it's frustrations, whether it's hope, whether it's just outright pissed-off-ness. It's toxic not to feel them, so I make it an intentional effort to actually process those thoughts, to go ahead and feel them and to work towards, to use those feelings for my own personal good, the of others."

The structures that created Sean's layered lived experience with the anti-gay discourse of the Black Church are identified by the following nine core themes: identity acknowledgment, development, struggle, and intersection; impact of Black women; understanding of, roles within, and relationship with the Black Church; anti-gay discourse; acceptance of sexual identity; relationship with God vs. relationship with the Black Church; navigational practices; clerical training; and his personal theology. These core themes do not exist independent of each other and often presented in a mixed fashion through his narrative. They also fall under four domains that capture the experience: The Person; The Church; Navigation; and Discourse.

The Person represents the intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of Sean's experience. These aspects include identity, personal theology, clerical training, and influence of Black women, acceptance of sexual identity. The Person and its core themes provide the context through which experience is understood. Sean's intrapersonal experience was defined by his salient identities of being Black, gay, Christian, clergy, and man and cultivated by his understanding of these identities through his various life experience.

In developing his identity as clergy, Sean engaged in formalized clerical training, which resulted in the creation of his personal theology. This theology was an articulation of how Sean has lived his life supported with scriptural text. His personal theology helped him navigate identity struggles between being Christian and being gay. He also faced other identified intrapersonal difficulties in navigating the intersectionality of being a Black gay man. The struggles were defined him coming into, understanding, and accepting his various identities while navigating external influences that his very being. It was hard for Sean to live in his authenticity while receiving messages from church and society that part of who you are is wrong. However, these struggles were reconciled through counternarrative of acceptance and personal work to understand how he fits in the greater context of humanity.

Understanding humanity was part of Sean's interpersonal work that began with the people in his life. Specifically, Sean examined his social, familial, and church relationships to understand the impact they had on his life. Overall, Sean found his interpersonal relationships to be positive and healthy, except his mother. After coming out to her, and while he was running from his clerical identity, their relationship suffered. His mother was doing her work to accept her son, who was gay, and Sean was fully coming into himself. Once they had done their respective work, their mother-son relationship evolved into a healthier version that included

acceptance and affirmation. As such, Sean was able to utilize these healthy examples and his heart for people, to better understand the multiple sides of humanity and grant them grace for their shortcomings. This grace was particularly salient in relation to the Black Church.

Sean relationship with the Black Church is dynamic. The Church is one of the most stable and essential elements in his life for which he cares deeply, flaws and all. Within this entity, he has come to understand many parts of himself while being challenged to navigate life through incongruent values and toxic theology. This relationship is also one that is dependent upon the people. Much like his understanding of the multiple sides of humanity, there are multiple aspects to the Black Church, many of which are influenced by the people within the church. Sean witnessed love, acceptance, and affirmation from the people and ministers involved with his home church. However, he experienced vicarious persecution and oppression from people perpetuating messages from toxic theologies in other Black Church. Yet, because of his understanding of humanity, Sean's relationship with the Black Church and its people is couched in a grace that understands many of the people in the church are hurting as well. Therefore, he does not entirely fault them for the impact of their projected hurt. This perspective-taking is characteristic of Sean's navigational practices.

Sean utilized his life experience to develop very healthy navigational practice. He actively attends to emotional impact directly. He is able to process his experiences by being attuned to what he is feeling because of all of the intrapersonal work and contextualization through perspective-taking practices. This allows Sean to understand his experiences at a level beyond the initial impact. It is also very natural for him to question that which he does not understand, much like he did with anti-gay discourse.

Anti-gay discourse was not part of Sean's primary Black Church experience. Therefore, when he began to encounter it in other places and Black Churches, he faced the dilemma of seeing how this applied to his understanding of Christianity. This contradictory presentation combined with his personal identities helped motivate him to ground his beliefs and understandings. He utilized his educational privileged and addressed his quandaries with scripture. As such, he came to understand anti-gay discourse as a toxic theology based inaccurate Biblical understandings and perpetuated through a system of hurt people struggling with their humanity.

Carlo

Carlo's experience of navigating the anti-gay discourse of the Black Church is a journey best understood in the context of his identities. Yet, describing himself and his identities was something with which Carlo struggled. When asked, Carlo responded, "good question … I don't know." However, he persisted and found a way to describe himself. "I'm a Black, gay male, and I say those in that order for a reason, because to me my Blackness is far more salient than my gayness or my manness because that's the first thing you see when you look at me. Yeah, so I'm a Black, gay male. I am a creator." Once he started, Carlo was able to connect with his most salient attributes to depict his personhood. "I am a questioner … I'm a friend, I'm a brother, I'm an uncle … I'm a researcher; I'm a scholar. I'm a teacher."

While describing himself, Carlo accidentally tapped into tinder part of his being. "I was going to say I'm also a lover … as I was thinking I'm a lover, in my mind, the other word that popped up was that I'm a broken lover." Carlo's acknowledgment of being a broken lover resonated in a manner that caused him to pause. "God! I think this is therapy. Yeah, damn! Whoa, give me a second. Oh, my, god, what the hell. Yeah. Okay. That's a way to describe

yourself, Carlo, but I am, I'm a broken lover." Simply describing himself uncovered painful truths that had not been processed. "I mean, clearly I've been through a lot of things as everybody has, but for some reason that's been a part of my identity lately, it's, I'm a broken lover, because I love hard, but it's also difficult for me to accept that because of how broken I've been, to accept it from other people."

Interestingly, one of the primary identities of this experience was omitted in Carlo's description of himself, Christian. When asked about his religious identity, Carlo described it as "Christian non-denominational, specifically a sort of a subset of Christianity … the non-denominational is the free denomination … where there aren't any restrictions or rules on what you have to wear, and how you present yourself, where you go and things like that. It's just like the free sector of Christianity." Like many of his other identities, religions was not something he chose. "I think I was just born into it. I didn't know … I still don't know anything else … I just born into the church, and we've never gone to another church, or another denomination, nothing, I've never known anything else except Christian non-denominational." His reference to religion is expressed and understood not solely in terms of the organized religion but in conjunction with his denomination and church.

Identity development in Carlo's journey began at an early age, specifically related to his sexual identity. "I've actually known since kindergarten, which is a little weird I guess, but yes. My earliest memory of any sort of romanticism or anything was one of my classmates … [male classmate], actually kissed me in the bathroom." This same-sex peer interaction started sparked his awareness of his sexual identity. However, the global understanding of his identities was impacted by direct/indirect social messaging and interpersonal interactions. "Each one of those labels … has a different connotation within each one of the other ones. Being a man, being male

in a Christian church, I had no issues, except of the fact that people expected certain things of me." These external expectations affected how Carlo expressed his various identities.

Extrinsic expectations immersed in social messaging attempted to dictate how Carlo should present. "It's the societal cue; they expect me to be the masculine, the hyper-masculine type of guy, they expect me to dress a certain way, they expect me to date girls a certain way, they expect me to walk a certain way." This messaging was consistently cis-gender and heteronormative, even within the Church. "In the church … I had people whispering about things, asking certain questions, or even trying to force certain things like, 'Oh, you should date this little girl. She's cute.' … trying to make it seem like it's a normal conversation, but they're forcing women on me." His autonomy and choice were under constant threat of these heteronormative expectations. Uniquely, Black women also contributed to these forced gender expectations.

Carlo's mother actively worked to ensure Carlo did not present as feminine. "When I was younger, [his mother] didn't put me in a [dance] studio because all of the men who were in studios … were very feminine, and she didn't want them to be my mentor or my role model and then me end up like that as well." While standing in the living room one day, his aunt told him to, "Get your hands off your hips, boy. Only girls do that." Even one his favorite teachers "Ms. D came and got me, and she pulled me to the side … and she like wrapped her arm around me, and she was leaning over … she told me that I needed to start playing with the boys, because playing with the girls is really feminine, and she wants me to sort of be more of a man as I grew up."

For Carlo, "one of the most damaging things that I've ever heard in my life was those three things from my mother, from my aunt, and from my teacher. All black women. All

religious black women, at that, very religious black women." Yet, in spite of all the external influences, "I definitely view myself as more feminine, as more soft and submissive, than a lot of other gay men." Social messaging challenged gender expression and left him with a damaging experience. However, social learning taught him the intersectionality of his identities.

Carlo's understanding of what it means to be a BGCM was derived from struggling to navigate social experiences that started in college. "I went to a Catholic institution, and so I identified as Christian [at a] Black and Catholic institution … Catholicism is even more strict, and so no one talked about LGBT issues on that campus at all. There was no clubs, the health center did not give out condoms or have conversation about it, like it was banned from campus." Campus silence and restrictions caused him to seek community elsewhere. "I think it was more difficult that I was a Black, Christian, gay male in a city where there were so many resources, but because of religious identities, because of homophobic identities, all the other things, I had to literally find myself in the streets." The streets, people, and places of New Orleans served as a dangerous classroom in which Carlo explored what it meant to be a Black gay man. "When I think back on it now, I literally could have died many times because of the people I was hanging with, places I was going, the questions I was asking, the promiscuity that came along with it, because I didn't have anybody to talk to, so my outlet was, 'Oh, this guy is cute I can talk to him,' and then that means he's trying to get to sex, or whatever." Fortunately, this was only part of his experience.

Grad school was a time in which Carlo was able to embrace himself more. "Grad school had changed my life. I became a little bit more open, because at this point I'm more adult, and I'm in a different city … I'm living my life like it's golden. He was comfortable with himself and began to engage in healthy interpersonal exploration. "I began to date a little bit in grad school.

A few of my classmates knew, but I had never really come out, so I didn't really go around other people with my dates and all of that, or with my partners." He also found a church that allowed him to explore being a BGCM.

While living his golden life in grad school, Carlo found a place that positively transformed his life. "I found a church in the city where my grad school was … that was the most accepting place, ever, like I literally … I came out right before I went to that church … well, no … I went to the church and then I ended up coming out after being there for a little while, because they were so accepting." Coming out was not a decision he made lightly, and it was after he spoke to the pastor that he was reassured. "I had a conversation with the pastor, a really young, millennial church, the pastor is 31, 32. I was like, 'I'm just really scared because this is me, I'm gay and I'm young and I'm Black, and I love God, I'm a very spiritual person, and I don't want to lose that." Carlo took this moment to be transparent about his experience with anti-gay discourse in past Black Churches and his lingering fear of experiencing that again. "Churches keep pushing me away, not because they were being rude to me, but because of their beliefs and the things that they preached about, and how gay people were going to hell, but never talk about liars and adulterers, and all of these other things, they just want to focus on homosexuality."

By having this conversation and being so transparent, Carlo risked falling victim to an all too familiar pattern of being pushed out of the Church. However, his risk paid off with great reward, resulting in disruption of his previous pattern. "So I had that conversation with him and it actually changed my life, because he was like, 'Okay.' He was like, 'Your point is?' I was like, 'You don't care?' He was like, 'No. So, are we going to church Sunday?' I was like, 'Yeah,' and

I actually ended up being very open at this church, very, very open." He took a leap of faith and landed in a place of acceptance where he could live in the totality of his identities.

Unfortunately, this place of affirmation was not one of true acceptance. Carlo soon realized that his utopia was tainted with anti-gay discourse; the people just responded to it differently. "There was another guy that was there, who used to identify as gay … but through prayer and supplication, and all these other things, he ended up changing his life, and so now he identifies as a straight." This pseudo-conversion was unsettling to Carlo who decided to converse with the pastor. It was in this conversation that Carlo experienced faux-acceptance. "So me and the pastor had a conversation about that one day, and as welcoming as they are … the pastor told me, 'It's not my job to change you. I'm never going to try to change you, that's God's job, I'm just going to love you.'" It was in this moment that Carlo realized "they still believe that homosexuality is a sin, and I'm still going to go to hell and that I can be changed."

Carlo was no stranger to this trope. It "was still the same underlying thing from my childhood about, we have to change eventually, or God is going to change you eventually." He found himself perpetuating the patterns of his past by having to leave Church because of anti-gay discourse. "Now, here I am. Still, gay as hell, living my life like it's golden, and not so much in the church anymore, I have joined a church here in my new city, but I'm more spiritual and I have those spiritual experiences in a lot of other places than I do being so much involved in the church building itself." The trope of change and pattern leaving the Church after experiencing anti-gay discourse characterizes much of Carlo's relationship with the Black Church.

The Black Church has served different functions in Carlo's life. These various functions are dependent on the perspective from which Carlo views his relationship with the Church. "I think for me as a Christian … First, it represents home, honestly, because I was there very often

… and not just physically home, but emotionally, spiritually … because of people … conversations … lovingness, the hugs that I get, as crazy as it sounds, the pastor yelling across the mic, all of that is like: this is home." From that same perspective, Carlo found the Black Church to be a place of

> Freedom and safety as well … Safety because if I really wanted to hide anywhere, I can truly in the Black church, in terms of my identity. If I truly wanted to hide and not let anybody know that I'm gay, whatever, whatever, the Black church is the best place to do it, because all I've got to do is get a couple of girlfriends, have a sex with a couple folks, and let people find out, the whole church will know, and I'm good. Now, everybody thinks, "Oh, Carlo the player, Carlo the pimp, that's my boy, I taught him right. He's good. Now, we are going to raise him up in the church, and we're going to get him a good wife, they will have a couple kids."… That's freedom because the Black church for me, as a Christian, not as a gay male or anything, as a Christian, the Black church represents me being free, me being open to worship God how I want, open to ask God for all the things that I want in life, and getting them, and just being free to just be.

This home of liberation and safety served as a conditional refuge for those who met the cis-gender heteronormative qualifications. However, from the perspective of someone outside of these qualifications, it was a place with a more negative qualitative experience. "The Black church in a gay lens. Woof, whoa! Oh, Lord. In that lens, it honestly represents persecution, so I don't … Yes, persecution it represents hatred for sure, it represents fear, and when I say fear I mean from me, to literally walk into that space sometimes."

Navigating the hatred and persecution that Carlo found in the Church was scary. He was afraid of the very place he called home even though there were people there who were affirming.

“There are progressive folks and all that, but the church itself, I still think it's very ... I still view it as a very conservative place that, although it is a safe space as a Christian person, and it still does remind me of home because that's how I grew up. I still see it as sort of a scary place.” The interplay of support and persecution helped to create the cycle in which Carlo found himself. He was longing for the connection that he had previously experienced but continued to be disappointed and dismissed by the condition that he does not meet. This constant cycling had an emotional impact on Carlo.

When Carlo reflected on his emotional experience with the Black Church, he “still [feels] hurt.” This hurt “… sucks. It definitely sucks. It's very isolating.” Carlo felt like there was no way to connect back to the place he loved because of persistent anti-gay messages. “The biggest message I would say is that homosexuality is like the worst sin possible. Like you can lie, you can cheat, you can be an adulterer, all these things, and all you've got to do is repent and be good. But if you gay, that is like you're going straight to hell. No repentance. No nothing.” The anti-gay discourse of the Church singled Carlo out and demonized part of who he is.

Being demonized and persecuted through anti-gay messaging was, “harrowing … That's the word I could think of to describe it. It was distressing. Like just all the time hearing and seeing my church talk about it, my family, TV, and media, and whatnot.” All of these contextual influences created a narrative that began to shape Carlo’s self-concept. “It's telling me that I am a sin. So I started equating the actions with myself … This was as a young kid. I was thinking like, ‘If I like boys, and everybody else says that that's wrong, then I'm wrong.’ Not just my sexuality. I started equating everything about myself as wrong, so I started trying to change myself as well.” Hearing that a significant part of his identity was wrong generalized into him as

a person being wrong. Feeling isolated, hurt, and distressed, Carlo started trying to find ways to cope with the emotional impact.

Carlo greatly struggled to live his life. He deduced that the easiest way to minimize his distress was to buy into heteronormativity by being embracing stereotypical gender expressions. "I tried all different types of things. I tried the sports. I tried being hyper-masculine, and sagging my pants, and listening to rap music, and this and that. These changes even manifested in the way in which he presented in Church. "Sometimes I'm overly feminine, and so when I walk into church spaces I make myself more masculine, or hyper-masculine to make it seem like there's no issues, or no, he's not gay, or whatever … Honestly, like now, to this day, I wear jeans and a T-shirt to Church most of the time … just to blend in." He also has found it easier to "avoid the events and the services and stuff." He would rather not engage with people or discourse at all.

Aside from behavior changes, Carlo also changed the way he conceptualized anti-gay discourse. Carlo was aware that the discourse was founded in scriptural interpretations. As such, he studied those specific scriptures and produced his own understandings. "Yes, Sodom and Gomorrah was … demolished because of what was going on in the city, but if you read the Bible and interpret it for yourself it … for me, when I interpreted it, it never said that they were demolished because of homosexuality, I personally think, from my own talks with God, and from my own thoughts, that they were demolished because of lust, and because there was just so much sex, and lust, and they forgot about God."

He also found it comforting that he "really genuinely think that it's a walk between me and God" that is most important. He personalized that relationship and has faith that God will tell him if homosexuality is truly a sin. Furthermore, he secures his salvation through daily atonement. "Maybe it is a sin, it could be, but I do know that the God that I serve in the church,

outside the church, wherever I am serving him, is forgiving and understanding, and loving, and he loves on me, and so every morning, my grace and my mercy is new. Every morning I repent, and every night I repent, and I'm like, 'Do you know what? If it is a sin, here, I'm repenting right now, so if I go in my sleep, I'm going to meet him at them gates, and I'll be good.'" However, he still views his actions as insufficient to reap the full benefits of Christianity. "Now, I might meet him at the gates, and you all going to get your wings. I'm going to get like a scooter or something, to move around heaven. I might not be able to fly because I did a few things in life, but I will be in heaven, my house is going to be a little smaller, and I'm going to be closer to the sun on the hotter side of heaving, but I'm not going to be in hell. I'm ready to abandon my house."

Carlo's experience of cis-gender heteronormative expectations was present outside of the realm of the Church's anti-gay driven culture. Aside from his exclusion from the men's dance team at church, Carlo struggled to find his place in male-dominated areas in his life. In school, guys would "talk about stuff like penis size and measure them, and … either I'm going to be attracted to someone, or I'm going to feel really insecure because they're all comparing themselves to each other. So, whether it's a physical comparison or talking about how many girls they've been with, or whatever it is, I don't fit in any of those conversations." These situations were complicated by the fact that people around him were not overt mean-spirited, yet they perpetuated that narrative that Carlo was not the type of guy that belonged with the rest of the guys. "We would go out of town on buses and what not, all the guys would clique up, and I would be sent to be with the girls. It's not that they didn't speak to me; it's not that we did not hang out; it's just that when it came to certain conversations, they excluded me from those. Even when it came down to roommates on those trips … they never said, 'Oh, I don't want to be

around you,' but they had their cliques, and they made sure that they roomed with their cliques before they even tried to room with me."

The nature and context of these interpersonal encounters often put Carlo in the awkward position of finding a way to navigate the experience without drawing more attention to himself. Specifically when it came to male-dominated conversations, Carlo would "either get the hell out of the conversation, which I'll get made fun of, if I ignore their conversations and go talk to the girls, I'm going to get made fun of, or if I lie in the conversation, which they're probably going to know it's a lie because everybody knew me in the church and people know my brother as well, so they know what he does versus what I do, and I was always the little good kid. So they knew all that stuff was a lie, if I said I slept with three girls, please. Carlo where?" Even if he chose to not participate in the conversation and just stand with the guys, "they would have a lot of questions too as to why are you not engaged in this conversation."

These secondary experiences of anti-gay discourse come with additional emotional impact. "It was literally like I could not win, and that caused a lot of depression, and even like I said, suicide attempts. I wrote a note one time to my mother … it was definitely a suicide note. Left it on the counter and had a knife in my room, and I was ready to slit my throat. I said I was going to wait until she came home and read it. Then I was going to slit my throat because I wanted her to save me. I didn't actually want to die." Carlo's emotional pain was so loud that he needed an equally loud cry for help to be seen. Unfortunately, this was not the only time he felt the need to cry out. His emotional pain escalated from suicidal gestures to partial suicide attempts. "I remember it was New Year's Eve night and I was working on my master's, and I had to call one of my friends who's a therapist because I was driving down the street away from the school … I just had the biggest thought of just ... It was an overpowering thought of just

drive off the road right now, just go. I was balling crying in my car, trying to force myself not to do it, not to listen to my thoughts because, had I let my thoughts get me, I would have been gone."

The impact of anti-gay discourse for Carlo is more than just words that oppose an identity; it is embedded messaging that forces people to find a way to act against that which is natural to them. "Having to figure out myself in the midst of people telling me that I am a sin … To tell somebody that they're a sin, which in the church as a Christian, that is the worst thing. That is what sends you to hell. Being ugly doesn't send you to hell. Having a bad character, you can change and whatnot. But when it's something you can't change and it's your life and it's who you are, and you tell somebody that is a sin, that is one of the deepest and most hurtful things you can do to someone … This is who I am."

The influence of his family compounded the difficulty of his experience. Carlo has a very close relationship with his family, and they are involved in every aspect of his life. "My family is very close-knit, like very, very close-knit, we all do all the holidays together, we have group text and group chats, we talk, and not just like my mom, so with me and my brother are in house, or were in the house. My dad passed away when I was a kid, but I'm talking about everybody, like my cousin, and we all have group chats, aunts, all have group chats." Because of his position in the family, he was often protected from familial issues. "I'm the youngest grandchild, so I was very, not sheltered, but I was hidden from the issues. I didn't know about any of them, so for me, my family was perfect in my eyes, like did no wrong." This protection extended beyond familial issues. "I had an older brother who would fight anybody if they talked about me."

His family also introduced him to the Black Church. "The church that I go to in my hometown, my brother who was three years older than me, was born the same year that the church opened. They share birthdays, and anniversaries, whatever, and so my mom and dad and brother started going there at the opening, and I just born to the church, and we've never gone to another church." Family is the cornerstone of Carlo's life experience. As such, that have had a salient impact on Carlo's experience as a Black gay man.

Carlo's family is at various degrees of acceptance related to his sexual identity. His brother has wholly rejected his sexual identity. He "doesn't like me being gay … doesn't really care for it at all." However, his cousin's perspective is different. Carlo shared a conversation with his cousin in which his cousin stated, "'I don't care what you do, who you like, who you bring home,' he was like, 'I want you to know that I will treat you like my little cousin … honestly, I just want you to know,' he said, 'I don't care, what none of the family say… this is your life, you be happy, you make the decision … I'm proud because you made a decision to be happy, and include us.' This is what made me really emotional."

Carlo's mom struggled with his sexual identity. She actively worked to limit the influences that could make him gay by not allowing him to dance in a studio. All while growing up, Carlo received messages that let him know his mother did not approve of homosexuality. "We were looking up at the TV mounted up on the wall, and … I remember there was a gay couple that kissed, and my mother literally changed the channel, and she got sick to her stomach. She was like, 'Oh my God. That's the most disgusting thing ever. This is not right. Jesus doesn't want all of this.' I remember in that moment I was like, 'Wow … If you think so strongly about these people that you've never seen before, I can imagine what you'll think about someone who

you birthed.'" This message made it difficult for Carlo to come out to his mother. "For a long time I thought I would literally kill my mother if I told her."

Despite his fears, Carlo came out to his mother in a process that took a year and a half. Carlo's mother refused to accept his sexuality and attempted to convert him through prayer. "The first two times, she prayed, and she wanted me to pray and go to church." The second time he came out to his mom, he gave in to her plea and attempted to live as straight. "I came out to my mom for the second time and she was like let's pray about it and change again. I was like, okay, I'll try it. So I tried changing and … I even told my mom. I was like, 'I think I like women.' Then months later ... I met a guy at that church, ironically … We talked after church … What I realized when he talked to me after church, and then we went on a date the next day, I realized that it wasn't that I changed, it was that I was suppressing who I was to make the church and my mom happy."

Each time Carlo came out to his mom, her religious beliefs prevented her from accepting her son. However, this was not the only factor. It was not until Carlo came out for the final time that his mom shared the fear that was also contributing to her denial. "The first things my mom told me when I came out the third time … was, 'I don't want you to die of AIDs.' I was like, 'What?' I was like, 'Girl, one, I get tested.' I mean, I didn't tell her all that … But in my head I'm like, 'I get tested regularly, and I don't have anything right now, and if anything ever happened, it's not a death sentence.'" This newfound insight resulted in Carlo engaging in perspective-taking and ultimately not faulting his mom. "But I get it, and I don't want to fault her, and I don't want to get mad at her, because that's just what she's seen. My mother was in college in the '80s, and I'm sure being in college around that time, college is an exploratory time, and folks is having sex, and doing all types of things in college. Hearing about that going on, plus being in a college

atmosphere I'm sure was scary. We don't talk about it, but I can imagine that that was very scary for her. So, to know that she has a son who identifies as gay is probably a lot, and she automatically equates it to the religious background she has, and growing up in that era."

Ultimately, Carlo views his family through a lens of hope because of their salience within his life. "I'm gaining a little bit more hope in my family, and they're starting to play a bigger role, they played a huge role, and then lost a few roles within there, and now they're starting to play a bigger role with at least my gay identity." He is actively working to figure out how to be authentic to himself and with his family. "I wanted to get to a point where I can … take my family home with me, and my husband, or a partner, or whoever it is, can be in a room playing spades with everybody, and I'm in another room having a conversation, like the kids, if we have kids, are running around." There are still hints of moderation within his dream, as he accounts for familial fears. "I'm not trying to be all up in nobody's face with … Hey, it's us and we are gay… I don't think people understand that. I think people think that I'm going to be overly, or overtly gay, and doing so." However, the reality is that "I just want to bring my family home to meet my family, when I have a family … I just want to be happy."

The essence of Carlo's experience is characterized by the following core themes: identity, relationship with Black women, the Black Church, anti-gay discourse, navigational methods, gendered expectations, exclusion, emotional trauma, degrees of acceptance, and relationship with of his family. These structures overlap to create an experience that is rich and dynamic. One of the most overlapping themes was anti-gay discourse.

Carlo's lived experience of anti-gay discourse was found in his relationship with the Black Church, his relationship with Black Women, people in his family, and it was fueling gender expectations. Most of his life has been navigating anti-gay messages in some shape,

form, or fashion. Anti-gay discourse dominated so much of Carlo's life until he struggled to truly understand himself apart from discourse. His identities were often altered to attend to the message that being gay was a sin. The pervasive nature of the discourse was due to the people around him intentionally and unintentionally perpetuating an anti-gay narrative. This narrative was so normalized that there were times when he was not aware of how the narrative was impacting his life. It was also hidden under the guise of well-intended suggestions from people for which Carlo cared.

The Black Church presented a huge struggled for Carlo because of the behavioral pattern at play. Carlo loves the Black Church and has secure connections to the Church through his family. His family was instrumental in introducing him to the Church and made participation a family affair. With Church being a familial value and Carlo highly valuing family, the Black Church serves as a double value for him. However, anti-gay discourse prevents this value from being fully reciprocated. Repeatedly, Carlo was given direct messages that his sexual identity was not welcomed in the Church. As such, Carlo engaged in a struggle to honor his value of Church while distancing an identity from which he could not separate. This struggle often resulted in Carlo being pushed out of the Church to later return.

Acceptance also contributed to Carlo's cycle with the Black Church. Carlo was surrounded by people who had varying degrees of acceptance related to his sexual identity. Some family members accepted him while others struggled. This behavior was also reflected in the Church. Generally, Carlo did not find Church accepting of his sexual identity. However, when he did, it was tolerance disguised as acceptance. This bait and switch type of acceptance had passive undertones of conversion, which ultimately led to the continued pattern of being pushed away from the Church.

Another way in which the discourse manifested was through policing of his gender presentation. Even though gender and sexual orientation are not synonymous, the messaging related to anti-gay discourse was that Carlo had maintained gender stereotypes as not to appear gay. Despite Carlo personally describing his gender expression as more feminine, people around him and in the Church continuously tried to force a more masculine presentation. Teachers monitored his play, family members commented on his body language, and even his mother limited his extra-curricular activities to those were she deemed gender appropriate. This gender policing became so prevalent that Carlo internalized it into a coping mechanism. To diminish the risk of being outed by his gender expression, Carlo would curate his outfits, his conversations, and interpersonal interactions to present as more masculine.

Despite his curation, there were places and groups in which Carlo was not allowed. He was excluded from church dance teams, male-dominated conversations, and peer-selected rooming options on trips. Between the gender policing and anti-gay messaging, Carlo's life experience was emotionally toxic. These targeted critiques generalized to a negative view of his whole self. Over time, this continuous critiquing transformed into a prolonged complex that trauma with which Carlo could not cope. His internal pain externalized to behavioral cries for help in the form of suicidal gestures and attempts. Eventually, Carlo found other ways to navigate the discourse.

Carlo found behavioral and cognitive ways to navigate anti-gay messages. From a behavioral perspective, he initially tried to change aspects of himself to fit in, but eventually decided that moderate avoidance was more effective. Cognitively, he studied the Bible and developed his interpretations that aligned with his beliefs. However, none of his efforts completed eliminated fear that being gay is a sin that will ultimately send him to hell.

Composite Textural-Structural Description

The experience of BGCM navigating the anti-gay discourse of the Black Church is a journey that encompasses multiple dimensions of these men's lives. Each of the men in this study had an experience that impacted their life universal, not just their relationship with the Black Church. As such, it is fitting to think of this phenomenon in terms of the lived experience of BGCM.

Each of the men in my study had a lived experience that was characterized by the following core themes: identity, Black Church, anti-gay discourse, navigational practices, and the impact of Black women. These men experience of these core themes were all marked by a dynamic interplay of the themes. Despite having shared identities, their experiences of these common themes were greatly influenced by their respective contexts. Therefore, it is befitting to start by contextualizing the essence of this phenomenon.

Identity

The lived experience of BGCM is understood in the context of their identities. The co-researchers' development of their various identities was dependent on the identities' connection to other parts of their life. Social learning from their environment shaped their multiple identities. The Black Church impacted the development of not only their religious identities but their sexual identity as well. For two co-researchers, it also affected their gender expression. Although those around them heavily influenced them, each man developed an understanding of his various identities that was congruent with his personal values. Some men experienced identity struggles when those personal values conflicted with the values of external influences.

Identities did not develop independently of each other. Each co-researcher had to learn to navigate the various intersections of their identities. For some, the reality of living with

multiple marginalized identities resulted in struggles that compounded trauma. The difference was related to their qualitative experience of acceptance. Those around them generally accepted Paul and Sean's sexual identities. As such, their experience with their identities overall was more positive. Carlo and Mr. X struggled to find acceptance, and both reported more severe emotional damage as a result.

Black Church

Each of the co-researchers spoke of the Black Church in terms of their home churches and the Church universal. They were also very active in the Church with many of them having multiple roles throughout their lifetime. They all talked about the relationship starting at birth and continuing, to various degrees, throughout their life. Everyone had a mixed relationship with the Church that was characterized by both benevolence and disdain. This dichotomous relationship was impacted in part by the people who make up the Church. Each co-researcher talked about the value their respective family placed on Church and how family connected them to the Church. This connection and involvement allowed them to know the Church intimately.

Despite the Black Church universal being comprised of different denominations and the men coming from various types of Black Churches, they all had a shared understanding of the Black Church. They were able to identify toxic aspects of the Church that indirectly or directly impacted their experience with the Church. Specifically, they spoke to the experience of hearing traumatizing messages that left people emotionally damaged. Yet, these experiences did not cause any of them to permanently leave the Church, which highlighted the value that these men placed on Church.

Anti-gay Discourse

The men understood anti-gay discourse in terms of anything related to homosexuality being a sin or wrong. They also knew Biblical scriptures supported this narrative. This narrative was perpetuated throughout their lives through various mediums, although the only shared medium was the Black Church. Some co-researchers experienced it in interpersonal relationships as well. Mr. X noted he was exposed to this discourse with family more than the Church, while Paul's experience was vicariously through those with which he worked.

Additionally, those who were seminary trained had a different understanding of the discourse than those who were not. Paul and Sean knew the discourse was a false narrative that they actively worked to counter. Conversely, Mr. X and Carlo were not sure of the validity of the narrative yet found respective ways to cope with the effects of the message. Regardless of their understanding of the discourse, they all understood the negative emotional impact of the narrative and its effect on the lives of them and their peers.

Navigational Practices

Navigation practices appeared in personal and expressed methods of navigation as some co-researchers did not have toxic experiences to navigate. The most frequent personal method of navigation was avoidance. Co-researchers would avoid conversations, people, and even the Church when presented with anti-gay discourse. Paul and Sean both worked to counter the anti-gay narrative with education related to the scriptures that supported the discourse. Carlo also countered the narrative by creating his own interpretation of those same scriptures. Uniquely, Mr. X decided to cognitively train himself not to be affected by the discourse. He chose to not view these moments as harmful and oppressive.

Impact of Black Women

Black women were vital in each of the men's lived experiences. Each co-researcher came from a matriarchal household in which that matriarch introduced them to Christianity and the Church. Additionally, each co-researcher noted the impact of Black women on their coming out process. For Paul, he found the Black women in his life to be supportive and accepting. However, Sean, Carlo, and Mr. X all had matriarchs that struggled in various ways with their sexual identity. Carlo and Mr. X also had Black female family members who directly perpetuated anti-gay discourse and policed the ways in which they expressed their gender.

CHAPTER 5

Summary, Implications, and Conclusion

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of Black gay Christian men navigating the anti-gay discourse of the Black Church. I explored this phenomenon through the lives of four BGCM, two seminary-trained ordained clergy, one non-seminary-trained ordained minister, and a non-clergy Christian. The research question guiding this study aim was:

1. What is the lived experience of Black gay Christian men navigating the anti-gay discourse of the Black Church?

This research project was a phenomenological qualitative study conceptualized through a co-cultural and cognitive dissonance theory lens. These theories helped to conceptualize the previous research related to this study and my knowledge as a member of the population in question. Additionally, these frameworks will be used to discuss the findings later in this chapter. Data was collected using semi-structured phenomenological interviewing over two months. Data collection started on December 19, 2018, and ended on February 13, 2019. Two co-researchers completed the full three-series phenomenological interviewing, one co-researcher completed the modified 3-in-1 phenomenological interview, and the last co-researcher completed two modified phenomenological interviews for a total of nine interviews.

Moustakas' modification of Van Kaam's phenomenological analysis was used to find the essence of the lived experience of BGCM navigating the anti-gay discourse of the Black Church. My research team and I analyzed the verbatim interviews and developed individual and

composite textural and structural descriptions, as well as a synthesis of the essence of the phenomenon.

In this chapter, I summarized this study, specifically related to the research problem and the procedures I utilized to complete the inquiry. Next, I will discuss the findings and consider them from the position of previous research and the conceptual framework. Lastly, the chapter will end with the limitations of the study and recommendation for further research.

Discussion of Findings

The men in this study navigated the anti-gay discourse of the Black Church in various aspects of their lives. Given the prominence of anti-gay discourse, navigation became an unconscious way of life. Their lived experience was significantly impacted based on the presence or absence of anti-gay discourse. Anti-gay discourse impacted aspects from intrapersonal areas such as identity and self-concept to interpersonal areas such as relationships with others, systems, and entities.

Co-Cultural Perspective

As stated in the tenants of co-cultural theory, each co-researcher's perspective is vital in positioning the context of this phenomenon. Each person's narrative served to articulate his worldview and the way he communicates with various dominant cultures. Co-cultural theorists identified 25 *communicative practices* that co-cultural group members utilize based on a preferred outcome or communication approach (Orbe, 1998a). Nine of these communicative practices were seen in throughout the co-researchers' narratives. Much like the themes produced from their stories that subsequently depicted their shared experience, these communicative

practices often overlapped. As such, I will be discussing the practices in relevant overlapping groups.

Communicative Practices

The first group of communicative practices consists of the following: Averting Controversy, Avoiding, and Dissociating. Averting controversy is characterized by "averting communication away from controversial or potentially dangerous subject areas (Orbe, p. 11, 1998a)". Much like the distancing described in averting controversy, avoiding consists of maintaining distance and refraining from activities and location where the dominant group is found (Orbe, 1998a). Dissociating is defined by distancing oneself from behaviors that are associated with the co-cultural group (Orbe, 1998a). This group is categorized by its distinctive feature of distancing oneself from either dominant or co-cultural group associations. Some form of distancing was described in both the composite and individual themes.

Carlo's individual theme of navigation methods employed the use of averting controversy. He described how there were certain conversations he would avoid when in male-dominated spaces or questions he tried not to answer related to dating, specifically when interacting with women at church. These conversations typically focused on interpersonal interactions with women, sexual exploits, and stereotypical male behaviors.

Dissociating was articulated within the Identity theme of Sean's narrative. As he described the intersection of his identities, he noted how he was actively trying to avoid stereotypes related to his sexual identity. The identified co-cultural group in his narrative was Black gay men. However, his dissociation was slightly different from the communicative practice described because he was striving to correct a negative narrative associated with the

community versus dissociating from the community as a whole. Conversely, Carlo actively tried to dissociate from his gay identity.

Within his theme of Identity, Carlo described the time after he had come out, again, that he tried to be straight at his mother's request. In a practice reminiscent of conversion, Carlo described striving to live as a straight man and even telling his mom that he liked girls. He embodied dissociation to the extent that he temporarily convinced himself that he was no longer gay. Not only did he directly engage in conversion behavior, but he indirectly observed conversion from another man in his church. Both the direct and indirect conversion practices described employed dissociation from the co-cultural group.

Avoiding was discussing in within the core theme of Navigational Methods. For instance, Paul encouraged gay men to avoid places that caused them harm (e.g., the Black Church). Carlo also engaged in avoidance of the Black Church as a way to cope with the anxiety he felt just thinking about attending church services. In both examples, co-cultural group members were trying to distance themselves from the Black Church, where dominant group members were located. This practice was protective and was used to mitigate the negative emotional impact of interactions with dominant group members.

The second grouping is comprised of Extensive Preparation and Mirroring communicative practices. Extensive preparation is characterized by very detailed mental or concrete groundwork before engaging with members of the dominant group (Orbe, 1998a). Mirroring is "adopting dominant group codes in attempts to make one's co-cultural identity less visible (Orbe, p. 11, 1998a)". Unlike the first grouping, this one is not identified by a uniformed feature. However, co-researchers in this study engaged in mirror practices, among others, as part

of their preparation to interact with the dominant group. Specially, this was demonstrated with gender expression and navigational practices of individual co-researchers.

Within the composite theme of Navigational Methods, the men in my study engaged in extensive preparation in both passive and active ways. Paul and Sean's passively and actively utilized their clerical training to engage with dominant groups. Neither of them reported attending seminary to counter the narrative of anti-gay discourse; however, they both have actively used their training when engaging with dominant group members. Specifically, they counter people who continue to use clobber passages as a means of oppression. Unlike his seminary-trained counterparts, Mr. X did not use his clerical training. Instead, he actively used cognitive restructuring as extensive preparation. He changed the way in which he views and subsequently reacts to oppressive situations. He decided that interactions with the dominant group were not oppressive to him, and therefore, he was not oppressed.

Carlo's extensive preparation was unique in that he employed mirroring in his preparation practices. Carlo described how he would mirror the clothing, gait, and speech pattern of stereotypical Black straight Christian men in an attempt to blend in the Black Church. His preparation involved identifying those attributes that would make him appear straight. Even as described in averting controversy, Carlo examined his life experience and created a list of conversations and people to avoid to engage with dominant group members safely. Preparation for Carlo was extensive because of how employed many communicated practices in a variety of ways to engage with dominant group members.

Mirroring was also found within Mr. X's core theme of Identity. Mr. X described being encouraged to mirror those behaviors of the dominant group because his identity expression was "too much." Mr. X was given feedback from past partners, family members, and choir members

to lessen his natural presentation, effectively mirroring those of the dominant group. Despite being out, Mr. X gave specific examples of romantic gestures (e.g., handholding) that he will not do in the Black Church out of "respect." He internalized the messages of others and unintentionally adopted mirroring as a way to function in the Black Church.

The final grouping contains Increasing Visibility, Dispelling Stereotypes, and Communicating Self. Co-cultural group member increase visibility by covertly maintaining their presence in dominant structures, and they communicate self by being authentic and open in their interaction with dominant group members (Orbe, 1998a). The practice of dispelling stereotypes is characterized by the countering of generalized group myths about co-cultural group members behaviors by being oneself. This grouping is identified by authenticity and intentionality to integrate one's holistic self in dominant spaces. This practice was aspirational for each co-researcher but achieved in the narratives of Paul and Sean.

Paul achieved increased visibility by first communicating himself. He integrated his identities in a manner that portrays him as a holistic person versus a person who identifies as blank. As such, when he came out as gay and married his male-identified partner, he effectively increased visibility within his circles. Paul remained active as clergy within the Black Church and continued to occupy spaces with other dominant group members as he had done before he came out. His space within dominant group spaces was already firmly secured when integrated his sexual identity became a visible co-culture group member.

Much like his counterpart, Sean lives a visibly out and open life. His process began when he was in college and continued until now. He described how the church was the last place he allowed himself to be out; however, once he came out, he was positively received. This

acceptance permitted Sean to communicate himself and increase the visibility of a co-cultural group member.

Another part of his process involved dispelling stereotypes. Sean dispels the Black Church's myth that he and his counterparts are abominations by living as a seminary-trained ordained minister. Sean and Paul both counter this myth by being openly gay active clergy in the Black Church. Their communication of self and increased visibility within the very entity that perpetuates the myth against their co-cultural group works to dispel their group's stereotype.

The last communicative practice demonstrated by these men is Using Liaisons. Using liaisons is characterized by "identifying specific dominant group members who can be trusted for support, guidance, and assistance (Orbe, p. 12, 1998a)". Every man in this study utilized this practice. Paul, Sean, and Mr. X described this practice within their core theme of the Black Church. They all described identified liaisons who were either specific people or the congregation as a whole within their respective churches. Paul, Sean, and Carlo identified those individuals in their families and social circles. The number of specific people in each of those spaces varied based on the co-researcher; nevertheless, this was the only practice which they universally shared.

Cognitive Dissonance Perspective

W. E. B. DuBois identified Black man's dissonance as a *double-consciousness* in his book The Souls of Black Folk. He described two identities (American and Negro) that represented warring ideals on opposite sides of a veil that only allowed the Black men to see themselves through the eyes of others (DuBois, 1903). Leon Festinger went on to describe this tension between inconsistent cognitions as *cognitive dissonance* that is unpleasant and drives people to work to resolve it (Aronson, 2012). The "others" described by DuBois are people of

dominant groups. Much like the languages of dominant groups described in co-cultural theory, this dominant perspective prevents Black men from viewing themselves through their own eyes. This filtered perspective contributes to the incongruence of identities experienced by these men of a co-cultural group. Therefore, it stands to reason that if Black men were allowed to perspective shift, they would experience less dissonance.

In relation to BGCM, the literature highlights that the anti-gay discourse of the Black Church (Ankerberg & Weldon, 1994; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Miller, 1992; Walsh, 2016) contributes to the perspective driving the conflict between Black men's religious and sexual identities. From this perspective, the global experience of BGCM is one characterized by cognitive dissonance related to their religious and sexual identities. Previous studies have found these men reject their sexual identity, reject their religious identity, compartmentalize the two identities, or integrate them to attend to the dissonance (Pitt, 2010b). Walton's study identified strategies such as Biblical interpretation and perceiving inconsistencies as a means of integration (2006). However, the dissonance that was exhibited by the men in this study manifested between various combinations of their identities. This dissonance was also the result of viewing themselves through the filter of dominant groups. As such, effective ways of resolving the dissonance involved viewing themselves from their personal perspective.

Sean, Carlo, and Mr. X all described dissonance in the form of identity struggles. For Sean, the dissonance occurred between the contradicting doctrines he received growing up. Sean identified one doctrine that taught homosexuality was a sin while other doctrines quoted scriptures that stated nothing could separate someone from the love of Jesus. These conflicting doctrines cause him to question the coexistence of his sexual and religious identities. To resolve this discomfort, he embraced his inquisitive nature and employed Walton's strategies Biblical

interpretation and perceiving inconsistencies (2006). Sean utilized his seminary training to create an empirically grounded interpretation of scripture. This interpretation corrected the inconsistencies he perceived and allowed him to develop a personal perspective that integrated his sexual and religious identities.

Carlo experienced inconsistent cognitions within and between his various identities. An example of within identity dissonance was his identity as a dancer. Carlo identified as a dancer; however, he was only allowed to dance in the Church because his mother did not want the men in dance studios to influence him. This limitation presented additional dissonance because he danced with the women and was never invited to dance with the men at church. Carlo had to wrestle with being a dancer within the acceptable boundaries created by his mother but wanting to experience more. As such, he resolved his dissonance by joining a studio during his later teenage years.

He also experienced dissonance related to a filtered perspective while trying to express his gender. Carlo described being presented with an expectation of stereotypical male gender norms. However, he described himself as more feminine presenting. Dissonance was typically experienced when entered dominant spaces (e.g., the Black Church) where he was expected to perform a masculine gender according to their standards. This discomfort often resulted in Carlo coping by using the previously mentioned communicative practices. Unfortunately, these spaces did not allow him to perform gender from his perspective, causing dissonance to be unresolved.

Inter-identity dissonance stereotypically manifested between Carlo's sexual and religious identities. Anti-gay discourse perpetuated by his family members, the Church, and even teachers created the perspective that caused him discomfort. Carlo attempted to resolve the pain using a combination of the methods. One method Pitt identified was to reject his sexual identity (Pitt,

2010b). Through mirror and dissociating, Carlo attempted to reject sexual identity. More recently he resorted to avoiding the Black Church and identifying as spiritual opposed to religious. Unlike what Pitt described as rejecting his religious identity, he has redefined his identity as something more congruent with his views.

Much like his counterpart, Mr. X experience dissonance between his religious and sexual identities. Uniquely, he resolved his dissonance is different ways that his colleagues. Mr. X experience severe emotional discomfort as a result of his cognitive dissonance. He described how, during his childhood, he wrestled with committing sin versus being a sin. This dissonance continued well into adulthood. To attend to his dissonance Mr. X mixed pseudo-compartmentalization with qazi-integration. He did not entirely reject his sexual or religious identity. Instead, he chose how his sexual identity would present in Church. He acknowledged his sexual identity with people in the dominant spaces with whom he is open. However, because of previously mentioned internalized messages to "tone it down," he unintentionally presents inauthentically by presenting as less gay. Interestingly, this presentation diminishes his dissonance because it is a presentation he chooses.

Paul did not describe any dissonance in his experience. He observed it vicariously through those with which he worked, but he did not have direct contact with it. This lack of dissonance was a result of full integration. Walton identified strategies for integration, and much like Sean, Paul used both. Additionally, Paul's experience was different from his peers. He came into his sexual identity much later in life compared to the others in the study. Most of his developmental life stages were experienced as a straight man. While I cannot definitively say these differences contributed to his seamless integration, his process was made easier by the overwhelming amount of acceptance he received from the people in his life.

Limitations and Future Research

One of the main limitations of this study is not a real limitation, but the product of qualitative research. This study is not generalizable to BGCM as a whole and should only be considered in the context of the experience of the men in this study. While much of their narratives was not surprising to me given my own experience and research, I had to be mindful not to draw causal relationships where none existed. Additionally, their experiences varied considerably once contextualized. There were identifiable commonalities, but their experience of these commonalities differed.

The study was rich with future ideas for research. Most of the themes found in both the individual and compositive textual-structural descriptions could be expanded into future research. One of the most surprising was the relationship of BGCM with Black women. Black women repeatedly appeared in these men narratives in various ways. I was not expecting to see so many references to matriarchs and influential Black women. They played numerous roles in these men's lives with a shared role of introducing them to the Black Church. It is interesting because Black women have been instrumental in many aspects of my life, including introducing me to the Black Church. A future study should examine the impact of Black women in the lives of BGCM. The study could also examine the impact of anti-gay discourse and acceptance on the relationship of Black women and BGCM. An additional study could examine all these relationships except with Black men.

Another study for consideration would be the interaction between the Black Church and BGCM but from the perspective of the Black Church. I realized very quickly that the Black Church was very influential in these men's lives. However, its contribution was only discussed from the perspective of BGCM. To truly understand this phenomenon, another study should

examine the relationship from the perspective of the Black Church. Additionally, a study should expound on this research and create a generalizable depiction of this phenomenon from the perspective of BGCM. Having those two perspectives would lay the groundwork to truly understand the impact of the relationship between BGCM and the Black Church.

In relation to identity, there is future research to be done on the identity development of BGCM. Specifically, I am curious to see what the global impact of the Black Church is on the identity development of BGCM. Within my study, the Black Church impacted the development of sex, gender, and religion. This study did not examine race in isolation, but given the role of the Black Church in the greater Black community, I hypothesize that it will have a significant impact on racial identity development as well.

An additional study for consideration would examine the relationship between anti-gay discourse and seminary training. Within my research, there was a clear distinction in the understanding of anti-gay discourse from those with seminary training versus those without. This study could specifically examine this relationship within the Black Clergy population and see how training impacted their relationship with the discourse and BGCM.

A future direction of this study would be the exploration of different denominations within the Christian faith to identify which ones are affirming and why. One could then continue to explore those differences at a micro-level. Such studies could examine the interdenominational affirming differences within the Black Church and Christian churches universal. Then one could study the intradenominational differences within affirming denominations of the Black Church universal. These studies would help understand affirming practices within the Christian faith and help inform and create tangible plans of action with which Q+ supporters could advocate for actionable change within the Black Church universal.

Conclusion

The suicide of 15-year-old Nigel Shelby, the murder of Mark Carson, and massacre of 49 people at Pulse (a gay nightclub in Orlando) serve as evidence of how dangerous it is to be a Black gay man in America. As mentioned in previous paragraphs, the Black Church has been as a sanctuary and place of refuge for Black people as a whole. Challenging a significant belief of the Church and shedding light on a dark spot within the Church is dangerous for my gay brothers and me. This acknowledgment could have horrible backlash for the already targeted Black Gay male. Additionally, people like Donnie McClurkin and Andrew "I'm Not Gay No More" Caldwell, who have publicly claimed to be delivered from homosexuality, serve as fuel for conversion-based sermons and actions from the Church.

Moving forward, I aim to continue the collaborative work achieved in this study and pair with seminary-trained clergy to create a guide to help clinicians and pastors work with gay Christian men. I plan to use my expertise in the clinical implications of navigating different identities with their clerical knowledge of the sacred text to help rewrite the narrative of oppression and provide interventions that will help these individuals to thrive.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] The word "Black" is used in lieu of African-American as racial identifier of people in the United States who directly and indirectly have ancestral ties to Africa. Some people included in this group are first and second generation immigrants from Africa who have a more direct connection to the continent. These people have a different cultural experience than those whose ancestry is more deeply infused in America. While acknowledging their membership of this group, this study will focus directly on those members whose ethnic identity is based more in the United States.

[2] The Black Church or the Church refers to Black people within the Christian faith and the various denominations to which they ascribe. The operational definition of "Black Churches" is one used by other scholars in the field to refer to those Christian churches in the United States that are independent, historic, and totally Black controlled denominations (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

APPENDIX A

Interview Consent Form

Researcher's Statement

I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study, so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Primary Researcher: Jesmond Fair

Education Counseling and Human Development

jesmondfair07@gmail.com

334-750-3062

Principle Investigator: Dr. Linda Campbell

Purpose of the Study

This research study will look at the lives of self-identified Black gay Christian men who have/had some affiliation with the Black Church. The Black Church is made up of several denominations of the Christian faith, with a shared commonality being their predominately Black/African-American congregations. The Black Church also has a shared overarching belief that the homosexuality is a sin. While some Black Churches may differ from this view of homosexuality, there is an established history of this belief and subsequent treatment of the LGBTQ+ community. The purpose of this study is to allow men who have identities in both the LGBTQ+ community and Black Christian faith to tell their story. From their stories I hope to better understand their experience in navigating these potentially oppositional spaces.

Study Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to …

- Do an audio recorded interview that is projected to last 1.5 hours
- Possibly give feedback on the themes found within the study
- Provide the name(s) of others who might be interested in participating in the study.

Risks and discomforts

- A potential risk of this study is psychological discomfort.
    - You may feel sadness, anger, shame, or guilt
- To minimize these feelings, you can
    - Have access to the questions ahead of time
    - Withdraw from the study at any point
    - Have access to therapeutic resources

Benefits

- There are no direct benefits to you.
- A hopeful benefit is that the participants' collective stories will help people (specifically the Black community) better understand what Black gay Christian men experience and start a dialogue that will being to change how the Black Church interacts with Black LGBTQ individuals.

Audio/Video Recording

Audio recording is necessary to collect the stories of each participant. No one outside of the research team will have access to the audio recordings.

Privacy/Confidentiality

Your identity will be protected by assigning you a pseudonym to be used throughout the study. The recordings will be transcribed, and the transcripts are what will be used for analysis. Direct quotes from the transcripts will be used in potentially publish works and presentations; however, only the assigned pseudonym will be linked to quoted content. The audio recordings will be kept in a secure drive with the primary researcher and deleted two years after the completion of the study. No names, contact information, or identifying information will be used outside of contacting you. Additionally, only the primary researcher and research team members will have access to contact information. All identifying information will be deleted or destroyed at the completion of the study.

Taking part is voluntary

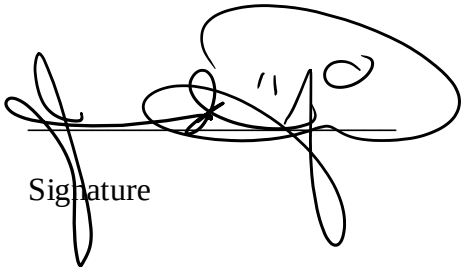
Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you have questions

The main researcher conducting this study is Jesmond Fair at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at jesmondfair07@gmail.com or at 334-750-3062. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form and have had all your questions answered.

Jesmond Fair		12/13/18
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

APPENDIX B

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your race/ethnicity?
2. What is your sexual orientation?
3. What religion do your currently practice?
4. Are you now or have you ever been, affiliated with a Black Church?
5. What is gender do you identify as?

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

Interview 1: Life History

A comprehensive picture of the participants' involvement over time. (Think of this like your intake). What has been your past involvement with the Black Church. First things you learned about the Black church. Introduction into the Black Church. What was your involvement before you came out. After you came out. What were you taught about homosexuality in the Church.

1. How would you describe your religious identity? (How did come to be a Pastor)
    a. What role does (previously identified religion) play in your life?
2. How did you come to identify as (Religious Identity)?
3. How would you describe the Black Church?
4. Describe for me your relationship with the Black Church?
    a. How were you introduced to the Black Church?
    b. What is your current/past relationship with the Black Church? (If not previously addressed)
    c. (If they are active in the church) What is your role within the Black Church?
    d. (If they are inactive) What contributed to your decision to no longer be affiliated with the Black Church?
5. What did/does the Black Church Represent?
6. How would you describe your sexual orientation?

7. Tell me about your experience as a Black (however they sexually identify).
8. What messages from the Black Church have you received about your sexual orientation?
9. What does it mean to be a Black gay Christian man?
10. What are the spaces/communities that you interact with?
11. What messages have you received from the gay community about religion?

Interview 2: Details of the Experience

Focused on eliciting the details of the experience. Have the participant reconstruct the concrete details of the phenomenon. Critical incidents are very important

1. What do you know of the Black Church's view on homosexuality?
2. How did you come to learn about this view?
3. What messages have you received from the Black Church about being gay?
4. Where or from whom did these messages come?
5. What has it been like for you to hear these messages?
    a. How do you feel when you hear these messages?
6. What places outside of the Black Church have you experienced these messages?
7. What do you do with your feelings of _____?
8. How have you tried to navigate these messages?
    a. What has been the result of engaging in these practices?
9. How has this viewpoint impacted other aspects of your life?

10. What made this experience(s) so impact?
11. Thinking of your experience overall with the Black Church what are some significant
12. Public vs private messages?
    a. Actions vs Words?

Interview 3: Reflect on the meaning

This will happen throughout, but really focus on meaning making and connecting thoughts and feelings from the first two interviews. Key question "given the experience you described with the church before coming out and your experience after coming out, how do you feel about the church now?"

1. We've spoken about your experience with the Church both past and present. Think back on our conversations, how do you view the Black Church now?
    a. What does it mean that you now view the Church in this manner?
2. How do you feel about the Church now?
3. What is it like to feel this way?
    a. What do you do to navigate these feelings?
    b. How do these feelings impact how you interact with the Black Church?
4. You mentioned feeling _____ while viewing the Church like _____. What do you make of this?
5. What do you make of the Black Church being a _____ as you stated?
6. You mentioned noticing a difference between how the Black Church responds to gay men verses lesbian women. What do you make of that?
7. You mentioned you were born into "the Church" what would it be like if you weren't?

8. What would your experience of the Black Church be like without the homophobic undertones?
    a. What would the Black Church be like if you felt wholly accepted in your identities?
    b. What would it have been like if you were not taught homosexuality was a sin?
9. Christianity verses the Black Church?
10. BGC man relationship with God?
11. What does the Black Church mean/represent to you?

    What does it mean to be a Black gay Christian man navigating anti-gay rhetoric in the Black Church?
12. How have you felt sharing your story