

God Made Me Gay for a Reason

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Discrimination and Violence in the Lives of Young Men who Have Sex with Men: Implications for Policy and Practice

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Having a strong religious or spiritual connection is generally NOT important for young men who have sex with men (MSMs)?

50% 1. TRUE

50% 2. FALSE



I can explain the concept of *internalized homophobia* to a colleague

50% 1. TRUE

50% 2. FALSE



Presentation Objectives

- Describe how religious methods may be internalized by YMSM
- Identify methods of resolving internal homophobia used by YMSM when comforting homophobia and heterosexism
- Discuss potential interventions and policy recommendations



Overview

- Background of the Healthy Young Men's Study
- Resolving Internalized Homophobia from Religious Sources: A Case Study
- Implications



Background of the Healthy Young Men's Study



Healthy Young Men's Study (HYM)

Five-year longitudinal study funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (R01 DA015638)

Study Aim: To examine HIV risk and prevention among YMSM within the developmental period called “emerging adulthood”

- **Broad focus on individual, familial, peer, and sexual partner risk/protective factors associated with drug use and HIV risk behaviors**
- **Baseline and follow-up interviews every 6 months for 2 years**
- **Mixed-methods research design**
- **Bi-directional community partnership**

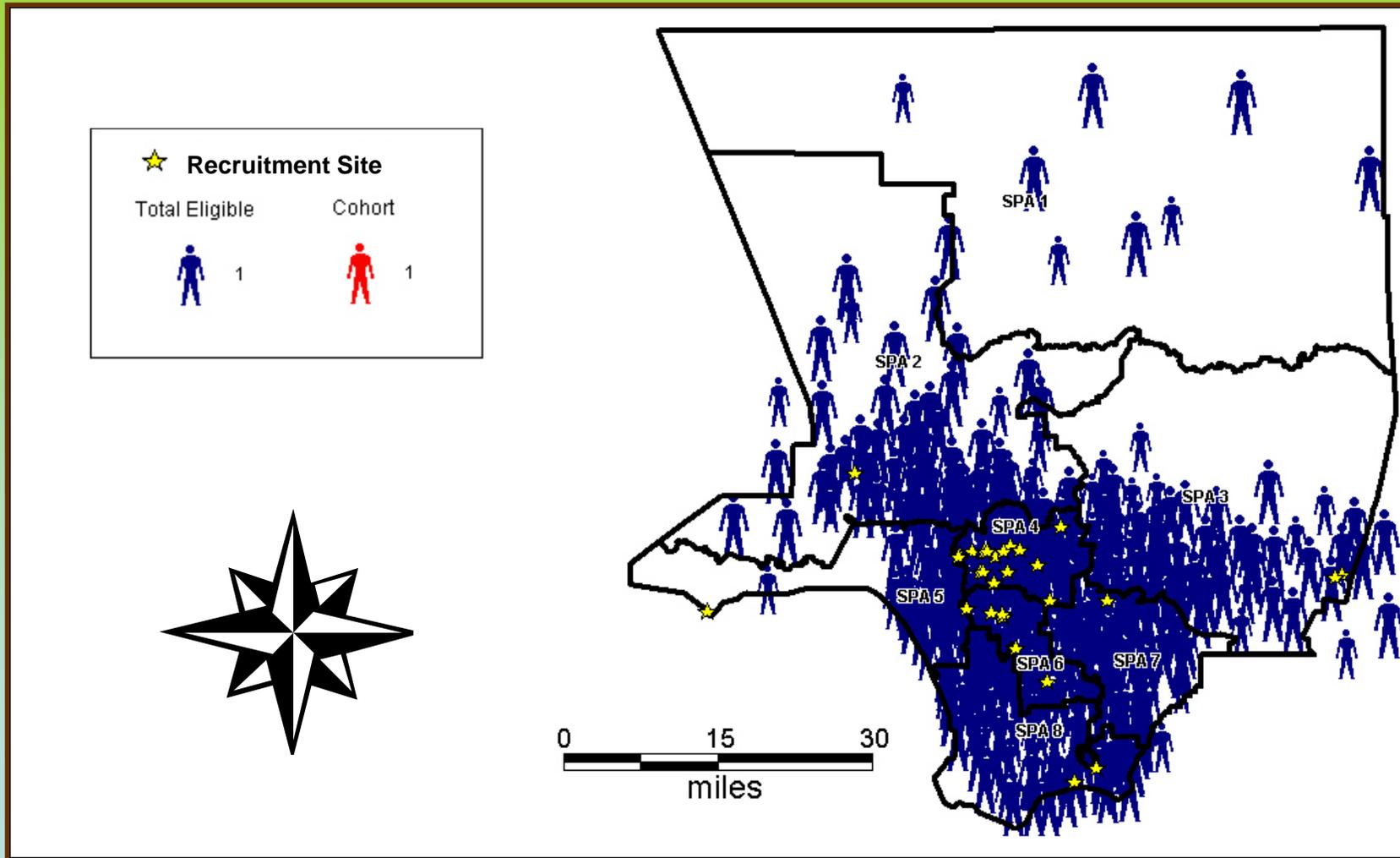


Methods

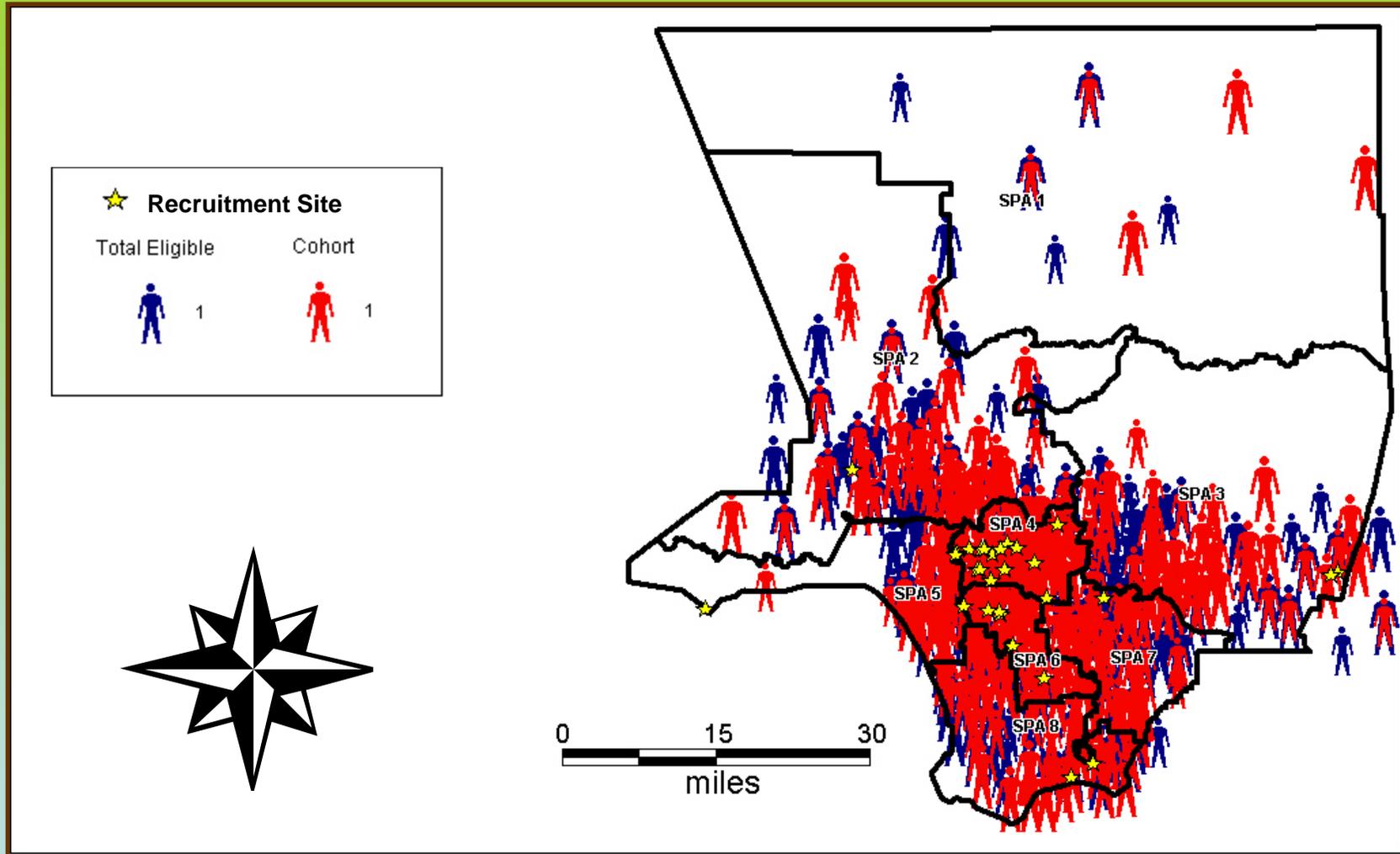
- **Venue-based randomized probability sampling in gay bars, clubs, coffee houses, social settings**
- **Sample stratified by 3 racial/ethnic groups: Whites, African American, Latino of Mexican descent (API were also initially proposed)**
- **Surveys administered using ACASI, each 1-1/2 hours in length**
- **Qualitative sub-studies to obtain more in-depth data on key topics (e.g., drug use, sexual behavior, religion/spirituality, discrimination)**
- **Retention rate of 93% @ 2 years**



Where Participants Lived at Enrollment



Where Participants Lived at Enrollment



Description of Study Participants

	Categories	n (%)
Age	18 - 19 yrs	206 (40)
	20 - 21 yrs	196 (37)
	22+ yrs	124 (24)
Race/ethnicity	African- American	127 (24)
	White	196 (37)
	Mexican descent	205 (39)
Sexual identity	Gay	391 (74)
	Other same-sex identity	38 (7)
	Bisexual	85 (16)
	Straight	3 (1)
	DK/RF	9 (2)
Sexual attraction	Males only	371 (71)
	Males and females	144 (27)
	Females only	6 (1)
	Neither, don't know, missing	5 (1)



Additional Descriptive Data

Variables	Categories	n (%)
Immigration	Born in another country	82 (16)
	Latino of Mexican descent	62 (30)
Residence	Family	281 (53)
	Own place/apartment/dorm	191 (36)
	With friends/partner	36 (7)
	No regular place/other	18 (3)
School/Employment	In school	113 (21)
	In school, employed	142 (27)
	Employed, not in school	201 (38)
	Not employed, not in school	70 (13)
HIV testing among sexually active	Never tested	127 (26)
	Tested > 1 year	100 (20)
	Tested 6 months-1year ago	97 (20)
	Tested < 6 months ago	168 (34)
HIV status	Positive	15 (3)
	Negative	420 (80)
	Don't know	90 (17)



Key Findings – Multivariate Continued

- Greater number of stressful life events predicted elevated levels of depression, greater drug use, and sexual risk



Resolving Internalized Homophobia from Religious Sources: A Case Study



Introduction to Religion/Spirituality

- **Among adolescents high levels of religiosity are associated with better mental health and fewer risk behaviors**
- **Limited research with YMSM and other sexual minorities:**
 - Our survey shows a relationship between higher religiosity and lower use of club drugs
 - Conflicts between sexuality and religious beliefs
 - Homophobic messages can diminish positive health benefits for gay/bisexual adults
- **Strong religious commitment linked with internalized homophobia**
- **Religious settings are common locations for hearing these messages – how individuals manage them differs**



Methods

- **36 participants from Wave 3 (18 month-follow up)**
- **Stratified by ethnicity and survey response**
 - “very/somewhat religious”
 - “very/somewhat spiritual” & “not very/not at all religious”
 - “neither religious nor spiritual”



Analysis

- **Qualitative analysis to identify:**
 - Sources of homophobic messages
 - Manifestation of internalized homophobia
 - Process of dealing with homophobic messages
 - Integrating religious and sexual lives



Religiosity & Spirituality (N=483)

	Categories	n (%)
Level of religiosity	Not at all religious	138 (29)
	Not very religious	124 (26)
	Somewhat religious	172 (36)
	Very religious	43 (9)
Level of spirituality	Not at all spiritual	37 (8)
	Not very spiritual	60 (13)
	Somewhat spiritual	216 (45)
	Very spiritual	168 (35)



Religiosity & Spirituality (N=483)

	Categories	n (%)
Importance of religion/spirituality	Not at all	7 (2)
	Not very	45 (12)
	Somewhat	164 (42)
	Very	177 (45)
Religion growing up	Agnostic/atheist	9 (2)
	Protestant/Christian	174 (36)
	Catholic	195 (40)
	Non-religious	24 (5)
	Other religions	20 (4)
	Multiple religions	60 (12)
Current Religion	Agnostic/atheist	76 (16)
	Protestant/Christian	134 (28)
	Catholic	102 (21)
	Spiritual	32 (7)
	Non-religious	79 (16)
	Other religions	21 (4)
	Multiple religions	32 (7)



Survey Findings

- **More than half (52%) changed religious affiliations from the one in which they were raised**
- **Those who did not change religions:**
 - Identified as more religious and spiritual, attend religious services more frequently and report having “influential” individuals in their lives who are more religious
 - Had higher levels of proactive coping, felt more support from God, less likely to be distressed/depressed



Sources of Homophobic Messages

- **Evangelical and more conservative churches more consistent and detrimental**
- **Catholics less stringent on messages about homosexuality – sex in general a taboo**



Sources of Homophobic Messages

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- **Catholics less stringent on messages about homosexuality – sex in general a taboo**

It's like he [the pastor] would preach a different thing but it would always go back to homosexuals and sexuality for some reason. And he seemed like he looked dead at me and it's like, "Gays would go to hell," and stuff like that...And it's like every time he would say that, it would always seem like he was saying it directly to me and it would scare me. It would scare the crap out of me. I would like, hold my mom's arm like real tight. Like why is he talking to me? Like why me?



Sources of Homophobic Messages

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- **Catholics less stringent on messages about homosexuality – sex in general a taboo**
- **Messages are internalized by some**
- **Messages also received by religious family members**



Sources of Homophobic Messages

My brother knew I was gay and when I broke out of my shell, I got more involved I would want to have Bible sessions at my house. And he liked the fact that I was being more involved but it's like he'll sometimes try to cut it short...So then we had a discussion about me, about me and my sexuality and he said that I am heavenly minded but no earthly good...Meaning I can think about God and pray about God and talk about God as much as I want but I am no earthly good because I am gay...I am a sinner. I have no purpose here.

- **Messages are internalized by some**
- **Messages also received by religious family members**



Manifestations of Internalized Homophobia

- Those with a stronger religious connection had more detrimental effects

I just remember hating myself so much and I tried to-- I tried to run into the religion that was supposed to protect me. This religion that was teaching me about Jesus and the powerful love of God... God would never test you more than you could handle and this to me was the biggest test of my life...



Manifestations of Internalized Homophobia

- Those with a stronger religious connection had more detrimental effects
- Types of behaviors/feelings attributed to internalized homophobia
 - Questioning of themselves – wondering if they would “be saved” which led to fear, guilt and shame



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It felt like the rest of my life pretty much. Very numb. And I was really good at not feeling. So it felt kind of easy. To not feel, to be numb...Not liking who I am or what I'm not doing, but I'm just going to be here you know, going along with my daily activities. However, not really feel that I am myself. And that's okay, because I'm never myself anyways and I've always been numb in a lot of ways.



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 - Questioning of themselves – wondering if they would “be saved” which led to fear, guilt and shame
 - Self-hatred – at times resulting in taking frustration out on gay men or women
 - Feelings described as depression, distress, suicidality



Manifestations of Internalized Homophobia

- Those with a more detrimental impact
- Types of behaviors associated with internalized homophobia
 - Questioning one's faith and the need to “be saved” which leads to fear, guilt and shame
 - Self-hatred – at times resulting in taking frustration out on gay men or women
 - Feelings described as depression, distress, suicidality

What I did was instead of finding proper help, maybe talking to a counselor or something I got into this huge depression and it's ridiculous but...I would fast four or five times a week because I felt that I needed to be closer to God. I would pray. I would wake up at six in the morning to pray...and at the same time I knew what was bubbling inside of me. I knew that I couldn't help the fact that this little preference for boys had turned to attraction to boys and it was seriously a sexual desire for boys. Like you know, I couldn't get it over, I couldn't. And it just made me miserable.



Manifestations of Internalized Homophobia

Rodrigo – a young man whose mother converted to a “Christian” religion when he was a teenager

It was like slowly realizing that the religion was only suppressing me and not uplifting me where it should... I was depressed and I was turning to religion because it was supposed to be an answer, but it was not helping me; if anything it was making things worse. Because you're told that you're not supposed to be this way [gay]. It's a sin. You could go to hell. I think that is a big one to be depressed about. The one answer you know that's supposed to be there for you and to motivate you to keep going and it's telling you that you're going to be doomed and have everlasting fire burn on you. It's kind of...not too uplifting.



Process of Dealing with Homophobic Messages

- **Critically evaluate sources of the messages – “you can translate the Bible so many different ways”**
- **Assessment of people seen as hypocritical**
- **Identifying logical contradictions in doctrines – belief that God was “loving”**
- **This process led respondents to believe that they were “created gay”**
- **Very few made efforts (e.g., praying, therapy) to attempt to change their sexuality**



Process of Dealing with Homophobic Messages

When you are younger, it's like you know that you are different but you don't know why you are different and when you grow up you start to realize that... I knew I was [gay]. I knew that those small little things could lead up to that and it's like I didn't choose to like what I like when I was four or five. I didn't choose to like the Spice Girls. [chuckle]

- **Very few made efforts (e.g., praying, therapy) to attempt to change their sexuality**



Integrating Religious & Sexual Lives: Exploring other Churches, Religions or Beliefs

- **Respondents spoke of wanting to find a sense of “tranquility” or “acceptance”**
- **Other Western religions as well as Eastern such as Buddhism, Hinduism – leading many to believe that all religions believe essentially the same thing**



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I just kind of put all these religions together and I was like, “Damn no matter what, if you live a good life you are going to go to a good place and if you live a bad life you are going to go to this place.” I am like, I just kind of thought to myself I am like, “Okay, that’s what every religion teaches maybe they are not all connected in the same way with the same worthy God but they have the same beliefs.



Integrating Religious & Sexual Lives: Exploring other Churches, Religions or Beliefs

- Respondents spoke of wanting to find a sense of “tranquility” or “acceptance”
- Other Western religions as well as Eastern such as Buddhism, Hinduism – leading many to believe that all religions believe essentially the same thing
- Less traditional beliefs such as Paganism, Wicca and Kabbalah
- Gay specific churches with some unexpected results



Integrating Religious & Sexual Lives: Exploring other Churches, Religions or Beliefs

When I was in the Christian churches in Tennessee, they're like being gay is not of God. It's like you are going to hell, like it's not what the Lord put you on earth for. But in the gay church that I used to go to, it's like God loves us regardless of our sexual orientations, like he put us on this earth for a reason. He loves all his creatures. He made us this way. I am like, "Did he really, like for real?"... That's what makes it so confusing, I am like, I want to believe them but then I've been raised on this.

- **Gay specific churches with some unexpected results**



Integrating Religious & Sexual Lives: Exploring other Churches, Religions or Beliefs

In our church when they talk about homosexual, it's wrong....Now it's like, that's why I don't really go...But I know if we go to this church, we're actually gonna listen to the priest to see what he has to say cause it's our time. I'm pretty sure we're gonna like it. We're gonna be able to go

- **Gay specific churches with some unexpected results**



Integrating Religious & Sexual Lives: Defining and Developing an Individual Spirituality

- **Spirituality described as related to Karma, nature and doing good things;**
 - Provided a connection to a higher power while allowing them to choose how they practice



Integrating Religious & Sexual Lives: Defining and Developing an Individual Spirituality

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It's open to making it what you want it to be or what you think applies to you. Being spiritual you can say 'Well, I am a spiritual person and I agree with this and I agree with this...' It's open to having an opinion and open to really "being at yours" I guess...mean[ing] taking from different things that you agree with....So I think you kinda just grab what you think is who you are and what you agree with.



Integrating Religious & Sexual Lives: Defining and Developing an Individual Spirituality

- **Spirituality described as related to Karma, nature and doing good things;**
 - Provided a connection to a higher power while allowing them to choose how they practice
- **Difference well articulated by “Deren” whose mother he saw as spiritual and his father as religious and did not become a Christian “til Sunday”**



Integrating Religious & Sexual Lives: Defining and Developing an Individual Spirituality

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 - Provided a connection to a higher power while allowing them to choose how they practice
- **Difference well articulated by “Deren” whose mother he saw as spiritual and his father as religious and did not become a Christian “til Sunday”**

When I think of religion, I think of my father. I think of someone who - they live in a structured world of black and white.....I think of structure, black and white, right and wrong and hierarchy.



Integrating Religious & Sexual Lives: Defining and Developing an Individual Spirituality

- **Developing this sense of spirituality seemed to fill a void for many respondents**
 - Provided a purpose in life – letting them know there “is something more” and giving them strength
 - No restrictions in how you practice or who you are
 - Gave many a sense of support



Integrating Religious & Sexual Lives: Defining and Developing an Individual Spirituality

- **Developing this sense of spirituality seemed to fill a void for many respondents**

Pretty much I can say it's not that I'm worshipping something for me to be gay but it's just like being spiritual about it, like having stuff that will say "Okay, I'm gay"...I'm spiritual in that sense. Yes, I have a rainbow kind of spiritual because I decide I have a rainbow there...when it comes to being gay, to me that's being spiritual....Like okay that's our flag, it represents us...I smile all the time when I see a rainbow out there or whatever it is, I smile.



Limitations

- **Qualitative sample cannot be generalized**
- **Cross-sectional data; cannot assess causal relationships**
- **Measures not exhaustive**
- **Social desirability bias – minimized with ACASI**
- **Representative of YMSM who attend gay identified venues**



Discussion

- YMSM are able to identify positive and negative aspects of religiosity
- Many seem to desire “tranquility” and undertake a complex journey to integrate spirituality/religion into their lives
- Assessing data related to religiosity can be challenging
- Some ethnic/racial differences identified



Implications



Implications & Future Directions

- Internalizing these messages can have negative outcomes
- Spirituality can be important source of support
- Providers (e.g., interventionists, counselors) should work with YMSM to fully integrate sexual identity with religious/spiritual beliefs



Implications & Future Directions

- **Programs/interventions to help YMSM deal with consequences from these experiences**
- **Highlight the importance of programs that work to reduce homophobia in schools, as well as programs that may reach out to families**
- **Inform programs targeted at specific ethnic groups**
- **Additional research should examine how violence/victimization relates to other risk behaviors and the long-term impact of these experiences**



YMSM Voices

- **Earning respect - losing masculinity, looked on as a woman**
- **Black/African American men have more problems with institutional racism (e.g., police, workplace)**
- **Homosexuality still taboo in Black community**



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I think the other reason a lot of people are kind of, I don't wanna say scared, is that the high incidents of HIV in the gay, Black male community is really high... it's just like high risk and high risk and high risk put together in one and it's people are a little freaked out about that.



YMSM Voices

- Earning respect - losing masculinity, looked on as a woman
- Black/African American men have more problems with institutional racism (e.g., police, workplace)
- Homosexuality still taboo in Black community
- Mixed ethnic/racial young men felt they experienced additional challenges because
 - *“just being biracial in general it’s kind of like you never really feel you’re enough of either or and you’re in the middle, and I think it’s mostly accepting that you’re in the middle and owning that than trying to see which am I really, you know. That’s kind of what I struggle with growing up, like obviously I’m not Black enough or I’m not Mexican enough”*



YMSM Voices

- **Qualitative data indicate that many of these experiences of discrimination occur at school. Respondents had suggestions about how schools can minimize that:**
 - **Schools should promote programs like Gay Straight Alliances, Mentoring**
 - **Ensure that they are proactive in discipline, discourage intolerance or derogatory language (“I had a PE coach who say ‘you’re such a fag or you're such a queer’.**
 - **Have counselors and teachers make more of an effort to get to know students so they can connect and help on a more personal level**
 - **Provide education on acceptance, understanding and awareness – and educate kids early in elementary school**



YMSM Voices

- **Qualitative data indicate that many of these experiences of discrimination occur at school. Respondents had suggestions about how schools can minimize that:**

I would have like a “Walks of Life Day”. Like have someone who’s a recovering alcoholic come and speak, someone who’s dealt with heroin, coke, crack, cocaine. Have someone who’s had a sex change. Someone who is a cross-dresser. Have someone who’s gay. Just every - I think that would be cool.

So a person that has a view has an open view on life, I know that I could talk them and I know that if-- instead of judging me and instead of coming from that teachers point of view in class, comes as just a person then its going to be easier for anyone that has that person as a teacher to confide in them.



Closing Thought

I think if bringing it up, like talking about it as much, ... it was more effective when they would, my teacher brought in like a parent of a gay person to talk to us about that, like their experience and stuff like that. I think that was more helpful and moving to the whole class than it would be like the principal to have like a rule or like a policy, like no tolerance policy about things like that because then it's like they're telling them what to do, and kids just are going to rebel against it and things like that. But in that situation, in my health class, it was just like, she was, they're just talking about their situation, you don't want to listen you don't, but like it was moving and it made you understand. They weren't really telling you how to think, it was just, they were sharing their experience and you saw from someone that wasn't gay and how, how they felt and how they reacted and I don't know. It, I think it goes farther that way than just, "oh let's just set time aside and talk about this problem that they have".



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(past and present members)

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More Information

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