

**NEGOTIATING MULTIPLE STIGMATIZED IDENTITIES: EXAMINING THE  
STRATEGIES BLACK GAY MEN USE TO REDUCE IDENTITY CONFLICT**

Allison Mathews

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Approved by:

Karolyn Tyson

Lisa Pearce

Anthony Perez

Kia Caldwell

Juan Battle

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## ABSTRACT

Allison Mathews: Negotiating Multiple Stigmatized Identities: Examining the Strategies  
Black Gay Men Use to Reduce Identity Conflict  
(Under the direction of Karolyn Tyson)

**Background:** Goffman's theory on stigma management has provided a useful framework for understanding the relationship between stigma, identity salience, and strategies used to reduce identity conflict. However, Goffman focused his analysis on people who only dealt with one stigma at a time. More recently, scholars have expanded on Goffman's work to examine how people manage more than one stigma simultaneously to reduce identity conflict. These contributions focus on hidden stigmas like mental illness and disease status without consideration of the effect that having a visibly stigmatized identity may have on stigma management strategies. I argue that it is important to consider how multiple types of stigmatized identities, including those attached to stigmas attached to both visible *and* hidden characteristics, interact to influence identity salience. It is possible that because visibly stigmatized characteristics are harder to hide, and subsequently control, they lead to more experiences with discrimination and increase the salience of the identity related to the stigma. Additionally, few scholars have examined how identity salience may shape people's use of particular stigma management strategies. By examining the relationship between stigma management and identity salience, this study provides insight into how salient identities influence which stigma management strategies are used in particular contexts.

**Objective:** To better understand stigma management and the role of identity salience, this study examines the church-going decisions of Black gay men (henceforth, BGM). I focus on

BGM's church-going decisions because Black churches have long been a space of refuge as well as community for Blacks in the US. However, many Black churches also have a reputation for being firmly anti-gay. Thus, BGM's church-going decisions, identity construction processes, and decisions about gay identity disclosure provide an opportunity to study how people manage stigma in the face of multiple stigmatized identities, one that is visible (Black) and one that is hideable (gay). While churches may provide some respite from racial discrimination for Black men, they may, on the other hand, stigmatize BGM for being gay. How, then, do BGM manage this dilemma? How do they manage the identity conflict and the stigma? Do they privilege one identity over the other? How does the visibility of the stigma influence the process?

**Method:** To answer these questions, I conducted a multi-method study. I constructed interview and survey questions based on previously validated scales. I conducted and analyzed semi-structured interviews and online surveys with 31 self-identified BGM between 23 and 57 years old. The survey data served as supplemental data that provided a link between participants' interview responses and standardized measures of Black identity, religious orientation, and attitudes toward homosexuality and gay identity. Lastly, I conducted 25 hours of ethnographic observation at various types of churches the men attended to provide context.

**Findings:** Despite experiencing anti-gay stigma in some Black churches, findings reveal that BGM overwhelmingly maintain connections to Black churches. To do so, however, BGM use multiple strategies to manage stigma and identity conflict, including making distinctions between "normal" Black churches and those that endorse explicit messages about homosexuality as a way to distance themselves from the stigma associated with visible

characteristics of homosexuality. BGM also find ways to manage anti-gay stigma within churches by constructing a faith-based identity that integrates their Black and gay identities. To construct a faith-based identity, BGM make distinctions between being spiritual and religious as a way to create social distance between themselves and “hypocritical” and “judgmental” religious others. Lastly, BGM use gay identity disclosure in Black churches to challenge anti-gay stigma and advocate on behalf of other BGM and boys. The pervasiveness of racial discrimination informs their decisions to continue participating in or maintain connections to predominantly Black churches, regardless of denominational affiliation and theological stance on homosexuality. Survey data further support this finding, showing that participants score highly on Black identity salience and positive attitudes toward identifying as gay as they continue to participate in and maintain connections to Black churches. These choices signal the salience of Black identity in these men’s lives and the primacy that the visibility of stigmatized characteristics associated with homosexuality plays in shaping BGM’s stigma management strategies. The study results show that people with multiple stigmatized identities may make efforts to minimize discriminatory experiences associated with the visibility of a stigma by choosing to participate in environments with individuals who share cultural similarity and do not emphasize their difference. This decision provides stigmatized BGM with more flexibility to control disclosure of their hidden stigmatized identity, challenge stigma, and claim recognition of their gay identity in Black churches.

I dedicate this work to my parents, grandparents, family members, friends, and church family, who all provided love, words of encouragement, social and financial support, and an undying willingness to read draft after draft. I also dedicate this work to those who struggle with finding a space where they “fit,” but refuse to be ignored.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
AME	African Methodist Episcopal
BGAC	Black Gay-affirming Church
BGM	Black gay men
BNGAC	Black Non Gay-affirming Church
COGIC	Church of God in Christ
GAC	Gay-affirming Church
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
IHI	Internalized Homophobia Inventory
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
MIBI	Multidimensional Inventory for Black Identity
MMRI	Multidimensional Measure of Religious Identity
MSM	Men Who Have Sex With Men
WGAC	White Gay-affirming Church

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2005, Louis Farrakhan led the effort to organize the Millions More Movement, which was an anniversary march to the original Million Man March held in 1995 by the Nation of Islam. The purpose of the march was to refocus African Americans' energy toward challenging institutional racism and building a self-sufficient Black community (Harris, 1999). According to the Nation of Islam, Black civil rights leaders, and some members of the Black community, the key to building a self-sufficient Black community was protecting Black men and their leadership positions (Harris, 1999; James, 2014). However, I quickly learned that this also meant pushing forth an agenda about Black men as masculine and heterosexual. Anyone who deviated from that characterization of Black masculinity was not welcome and was seen as a threat to the Millions More March's agenda of racial solidarity (Harris, 1999). As a student activist who worked toward fighting injustice and intolerance of all people, I was surprised to discover that gay people, and in particular, Black gay men (henceforth, BGM), were still being marginalized and characterized as a threat to Black racial solidarity and Black manhood. I questioned how a community that fought to eradicate institutional racism and racial discrimination could perpetuate discrimination against Black LGBT individuals.

To be sure, the Nation of Islam is not the only culprit in the marginalization of LGBT men and women in the Black community. For decades, political and religious leaders have characterized gay men and women of all races as sexual deviants and sinners (Pitt, 2010b). For example, Christian churches including the Catholic Church, Presbyterian Church, the United

Methodist Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the American Baptist Churches USA hold similar views, and all oppose same-sex marriage and denounce the morality of homosexuality (Masci, 2014).

Scholars have engaged in extensive study of the strategies White gay men (henceforth, WGM) use to manage Christian-based anti-gay stigma in churches. There are several strategies that WGM have used to integrate their religious and gay identities, including delegitimizing the pastor and other members of the church as flawed and misinformed humans (Yip 1997, 2002), rationalizing that God made them gay or that they were born gay (Walton, 2006; Thumma 1991), arguing that they needed to continue participation as a way to fight intolerance (Wagner 1994; Yip 1997), and arguing for an interpretive rather than literal (fundamentalist) approach to Biblical passages (Walton 2006; Thumma 1991; Wagner 1994; Buchanan 2001; Mahaffy 1996). These studies show how some gay men rationalize their participation in religious environments that are not accepting of their gay identities. Yet, the findings from these studies are limited because they cannot be generalized to populations who have to contend with racial discrimination and potential cultural differences. My study contributes to this gap by examining the strategies BGM use to navigate participation in churches, integrate their Black and gay identities and minimize stigmatizing experiences associated with being Black and gay.

In the 1980s, the onslaught of the HIV/AIDS epidemic further stigmatized gay men in churches as harboring a deadly and contagious disease (Foster, Arnold, Rebchook, & Kegeles, 2011). Within the Black community, religious leaders, particularly those from conservative Christian churches (Durell, Chiong, & Battle, 2007), delivered anti-gay sermons and garnered

support among their congregants to vote against the legalization of same-sex marriage (Abbey-Lambertz, 2014).

Some especially glaring examples of intolerance against homosexuality in predominantly Black churches recently made headlines across the country. In 2010, four Black men accused Bishop Eddie Long, the pastor of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA, of sexual abuse, bribing, and coercion (Huffington Post/AP, 2010). He adamantly denied the charges but later settled out of court with the accusers. Ironically, despite his own apparent homosexuality (if his accusers are to be believed), Long supported legislation that opposed same-sex marriage, he had a ministry that encouraged gay congregants to live heterosexual lives, he led marches against homosexuality, and he condemned homosexuality in his sermons (Huffington Post/AP, 2010). As a result of the publicity from Eddie Long's case, others called for a critical examination of the intolerance of homosexuality in Black churches, arguing that the stigma associated with homosexuality isolates and silences BGM who attend Black churches and limits the capacity of pastors to talk about homophobia in the Black community (Alston, 2010). Despite criticism, Bishop Eddie Long's congregation and many African Americans across the United States continued to support him as a pastor and spiritual leader, reaffirming his homophobic behavior.

Another Black pastor, the popular gospel singer Donnie McClurkin, has also dealt with persistent rumors that he is gay, which he has publicly denied. In an interview with Carrington Lei, a blogger for *Pearl's Window*, McClurkin explained he was "delivered" from his homosexuality: "I never said that I was cured from anything, I said that I was delivered, and that's what God does - He delivers" (Lei, 1999). These are just a few high-profile examples, but

they are relevant to understanding the climate of intolerance toward homosexuality in some Black churches and within some segments of the Black community.

Despite the prevalent messages of intolerance of homosexuality among many Black religious leaders, there has been an increasing number of representations of BGM in the media. Some argue that this reflects an increasing acceptance of homosexuality in society; however, many of the portrayals of BGM are stereotypical which only serve to exacerbate the problem of intolerance and inequality by perpetuating their “otherness” (A. Johnson, 2013). Indeed, a documentary film by Yoruba Richen entitled *The New Black* demonstrates the seemingly contradictory and complex ways in which Black community members are sometimes split between their desire to support same-sex legislation and their discomfort with homosexuality, particularly openly gay-identified Black men (Richen, 2013).

The changing political and social climate toward homosexuality as well as personal experiences with homophobia in the Black community sparked my desire to better understand how people manage experiences with multiple types of stigma (e.g., being Black and gay) and discrimination while they remain connected to communities and institutions meant to serve as sources of support. I sought scholarship and a theoretical framework to better understand the rejection Black LGBT individuals, in particular, BGM, experienced. However, I found the work done by previous scholars to be limited in its ability to explain the multidimensional ways in which BGM experience discrimination and negotiate identity conflicts. For example, most scholars examine people’s experiences with racial discrimination and anti-gay discrimination as independent phenomena. Scholars typically examine Black identity conflict negotiation as a separate process from gay identity conflict negotiation; however, for BGM, these two identities may develop simultaneously through an iterative process (Bowleg, 2013). When scholars

examine the relationship between racial discrimination and Black identity, they often focus only on heterosexual participants' experiences. By focusing on heterosexual participants, scholars assume that heterosexual people's experiences with racial discrimination and negotiation of identity conflict are generalizable to all Black people without considering possible differences that are influenced by sexual orientation. Similarly, scholars who examine sexual orientation discrimination and negotiation of identity conflict largely focus on White males or fail to analyze how the experiences of people from different racial/ethnic backgrounds may differ from WGM (Bowleg, 2013). These studies miss the opportunity to better understand strategies people use to contend with multiple types of discrimination at once. This study provides insights into the processes of identity conflict negotiation people use to deal with discrimination through an analysis of the decision-making process of individuals with multiple stigmatized identities.

One way to understand how people negotiate experiences with multiple types of discrimination is to examine their decisions about institutional participation. This dissertation examines the ways in which BGM navigate discrimination and marginalization because they are Black in White mainstream society and gay in both Black and White settings. Researchers often attempt to predict institutional participation by looking at how people identify. Scholars have found that the way people identify and their awareness of their identity depends on the relevance of that identity in a particular context (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). In many cases, the way people identify is often related to experiences with discrimination that may raise the salience or awareness of a particular identity and create conflict with how they see themselves (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Yet, most scholars focus on the influence of one salient identity in people's lives without considering how multiple identities may be salient or relevant in a particular context.

Some scholars have examined people's experiences with intersectional identities –

identities that are tied to experiences with oppression and co-exist within an individual (Bowleg, 2013; Hunter, 2010) – in an attempt to determine which identity is more salient. For example, in an ethnographic study of BGM, Hunter (2010) concludes that BGM’s Black and gay identities are equally salient; however, Bowleg (2013) argues Black identity is more salient because of BGM’s experiences with racial microaggressions and discomfort with participating in predominantly White gay settings. While these studies are useful in examining how BGM talk about the intersection of their identities, they do not look at the context in which Black and gay identities are formed and how other processes like stigma that may affect their salience and decisions about institutional participation.

In an attempt to better understand how context shapes the salience of intersecting identities, some scholars have examined the relationship between identity salience and institutional participation. For example, previous scholars show that BGM are more likely to maintain membership in predominantly Black settings when their Black identity is salient and important in their lives (Icard, 1986; Martinez & Sullivan, 1998; Wilson, 2008). In contrast, when BGM hold their gay identity to be more important, they are more likely to participate in predominantly gay settings (Icard, 1986; Martinez & Sullivan, 1998; Wilson, 2008), regardless of the racial composition. These studies examined the salience of BGM’s identities based on spaces where they were already participating without considering the decision-making process that influenced which spaces would be the most comfortable for them. It is possible that their experiences with stigma and discrimination in each space informed their decisions about whether to participate in predominantly Black versus predominantly gay spaces. Indeed, BGM are not always welcome in certain settings. Some predominantly Black settings tend to be less accepting of gays and lesbians and predominantly gay settings, which tend to be predominantly White, are less



accepting of Blacks (Icard, 1986; Martinez & Sullivan, 1998; Wilson, 2008). Thus, BGM are presented with a dilemma because they often have to choose which setting to participate in, as there are few alternative spaces where both identities are accepted. Such is the case with churches. In order to gain a better understanding of why BGM choose to participate in each respective community, I argue that we need to look at the antecedent to this phenomenon by examining the role of stigma in raising the salience of people's identities and influencing their decisions about institutional participation.

### *Stigma*

Experiences with stigma have been found to increase identity salience (Kaiser & Wilkins, 2010); thus, this study is part of a long tradition of scholarship on stigma. Stigma is defined as “a physical or character-driven flaw seen as tainting a person” (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). Scholars examining stigma have not said much about stigma management for people who have multiple types of stigmatized identities such as being Black and gay, nor have they examined how the visibility of the stigma affects the process of stigma management. Most studies focus on people's experiences with stigmas such as mental illness (Link & Phelan, 2001), homelessness (Snow & Anderson, 1987), or disease status (Daftary, 2012). Each of these stigmas arguably can be hidden if people successfully enact behaviors compliant with the norms of the dominant group. In contrast, some scholars acknowledged that stigma attached to visible characteristics, such as those caused by the sores that emerge from HIV disease progression (Daftary, 2012), can have more severe consequences than stigma attached to hideable characteristics. Race is one identity status that can have more severe consequences than the stigma attached to hideable characteristics. For example, Pager et al. (2009) found that among men who were seeking employment, White men with a prison record fared better than Black men without a prison

record and with higher educational attainment. Pager et al. (2009) argue that the stigma attached to Black men's race outweighed the stigma attached to having an incarceration record. However, in some cases, Black men's status as openly gay may benefit them (Pedulla, 2014). Pedulla (2014) found that survey respondents more positively scored Black gay men in hypothetical hiring and salary decisions over WGM and Black heterosexual men. However, the benefit Black men receive for being gay in some settings is still based on racialized and gendered stereotypes about Black heterosexual men as overly aggressive and threatening. The advantages some BGM receive in hiring and salary decisions reward BGM for being perceived as powerless and less threatening than Black heterosexual men. While these studies are useful in establishing the gravity of stigmas attached to visible characteristics, they do not go in-depth in examining how people manage multiple types of stigmas simultaneously. Does the visibility of a stigma attached to an identity make it more salient than an identity attached to a hideable stigmatized characteristics? How do people manage multiple types of stigmas at once? Do they prioritize one stigma to minimize at the expense of the other? How does the context in which a person operates shape the strategies they use to manage multiple types of stigmas simultaneously?

To address these questions, I examine two stigmatized identities, Black and gay. Blacks have been stigmatized through a long history of racial discrimination, oppression and an institutionalized system of racism that continues to hinder their upward mobility (Howarth, 2006). Similarly, homosexuality has been stigmatized through a long history of rejection and oppression (Seidman, 2009). Both statuses have been used as demarcations of difference by others and have been used to reinforce inequality. For example, people of African descent have been relegated to a subordinate status in society by assigning them the racial label "Black" and attaching stereotypes to them that characterized them as ignorant, dangerous, and sexually

deviant. Despite attempts to challenge stereotypes and achieve upward mobility, Blacks do not have the ability to change their physical characteristics or escape the visible stigma associated with being Black. Indeed, Blacks are the only group in the United States who have not been able to escape their racial label or the stereotypes attached to their group, despite acculturating into larger American societal norms (Omi & Winant, 2014).

Homosexuality has been stigmatized through religious rhetoric that characterizes homosexuality as a sin and an abomination to God's design for human nature. Members of the LGBT community have experienced social exclusion, violent attacks and murders (Marzullo & Libman, 2009), and legal discrimination limiting their ability to fully access their legal rights as US citizens (American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), 2015). However, the stigma attached to homosexuality is designated as hidden because sexual orientation is not readily identifiable by looking at a person. In fact, many gay men and women go to great lengths to hide their sexuality in unsafe environments. Although there are some generalized visible characteristics associated with homosexuality, including stereotypes about gay men's performing behaviors commonly associated with women, wearing women's clothing, and speaking with a lisp, these behaviors arguably can be controlled and hidden (Clarkson, 2006; Seidman, 2009). Some may assume they can identify people who are gay by identifying stereotypical characteristics and behaviors associated with gender non-conformity, but these characteristics are often socially constructed and culturally specific and do not necessarily equate with a particular sexual orientation (Clarkson, 2006). Thus, it is useful to examine homosexuality as an example of an identity with hideable characteristics that can be stigmatized. My research goes a step beyond exploring how identity can be hidden to examine the decision-making process about participating in particular

institutions and the coping strategies BGM employ in “safe” environments such as religious settings.

While previous scholars have examined the strategies BGM use to manage identity conflict, both in secular and religious settings, few have used stigma as a theoretical perspective to analyze their experiences. I find an examination of Black and gay identity as stigmatized identities to be useful for two reasons. First, people impose stigma upon a person rather than a person’s identity creating stigma. In that sense, I am using stigma as a way to better understand how negative attitudes and discriminatory experiences *shape* identity salience and identity formation in *reaction* to subjugation. This dissertation is as much about the internal identity BGM formulate as it about the process they must engage in to challenge external forces that subordinate them. Secondly, stigma provides a theoretical framework to better understand how and why certain aspects of an identity are rejected and other parts are embraced. Because some stigmas are visible and others are hidden, it is possible that people may be selective in the ways they formulate their identity as a response to minimizing the stigma attached to hidden characteristics, which are within that person’s control. Stigmas attached to visible characteristics are less controllable because oftentimes, the characteristic cannot be hidden or changed. Being Black or “Blackness” is an especially poignant example of a visibly stigmatized characteristic. Although people have attempted to “pass” as White due to their lighter skin color, engage in behaviors that challenge racial stereotypes about Blacks, or deny association with other Blacks, few are able to escape the stigma attached to Blackness. Additionally, it is important to note that not all non-White racial minorities experience the same level of stigma – it is especially poignant for Blacks who are darker skinned and cannot minimize their association with their racial status (Alcoff, 2006). The same may not necessarily be true for the stigma associated with

homosexuality because it is associated with characteristics that can be hidden and ones that every member may not embody. What is the process through which people engage in strategies to reduce identity conflict through the management of two types of stigmas—the visible stigma attached to being identifiably Black and the hideable stigma attached to being gay? Also, does context matter? To be sure, Blackness and homosexuality are not stigmatized in every space and may serve as a beneficial characteristic in some spaces. I examine stigma management strategies in relation to BGM's experiences with Black churches because they are spaces where both identities may be relevant and/or stigmatized.

### *Black and Gay in Church*

Black churches have traditionally been safe spaces for Blacks to buffer against racial discrimination and the stigma against being Black. Whether by speaking out and mobilizing against oppression and racial injustice or just providing a sanctuary, fellowship, or comforting words when dealing with stressful life events, Black churches have provided refuge for Black Americans. Raboteau (1980) points out in his work *Slave Religion* that slave parents risked floggings to attend forbidden secret gatherings to worship God (Raboteau, 1980). Raboteau (1980) adds that these secret meetings were so important because they provided the slave community an opportunity to fashion its self-image as well as to help others as individuals to shape their self-image. In short, they risked their lives in order to discover who they were, where they were going, and how they were going to get there. A driving force then and now in the Black church is the need to nurture a positive self-image. For the slave, that self-image defined a personal and communal sense of purpose that superseded the White slaveholding community's designs. Even today, Wimberly (1986) proclaims that three historical impulses lie at the base of Black Christian worship. These impulses are (1) the need for a positive self-image; (2) the need

for wholeness in the midst of degradation, oppression, and suffering; and (3) the need to respond to God's incarnational presence in their midst, who brought about hope, meaning, salvation, healing, wholeness, and a positive sense of self. These three impulses, he goes on to say, are still primary impulses:

Black people will worship where they have an opportunity to gain a positive sense of self, meaning, healing, wholeness, and a sense of purpose to their existence. They will give up a lot if they expect that they will meet the divine Source of their self-worth and wholeness when they attend worship. Moreover, Black people will seek out a community and worship service where they are affirmed (p. 197).

Even during slavery, the moral ideas of the slave community and the sense of community created through religious activities developed an intrinsic sense of personal dignity despite the system of slavery and superiority exercised by slave masters. Stuckey (2013) formulates an interesting dichotomy and connection between slaves and current-day Blacks in his book *Slave Culture*; despite brutal conditions of oppression, he noted that the slave community came together when they worshipped. He saw one specific aspect of slave religion—the ritual of the shout—as a ritual of Black unity that enabled slaves to overcome barriers of language and ethnic difference. Even today, in contemporary sacred culture, the Black church plays a significant and similar role. That is, the Black church continues worship traditions dating back to slavery that preserve the notion that the church is a sacred space (Sanders, 1996). One could infer that the common denominator among all Black churches, regardless of religious affiliation, is the phenomenal promise to serve as a beacon against the social history of enslavement and racial discrimination. Despite their history of struggle against injustice and their elevated sense of solidarity against injustice, some Black churches continue to deny full rights to LGBT people.

The increased visibility of the gay community has prompted a well-publicized backlash by prominent opponents of gay rights. The Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Baptist denomination globally with approximately 16 million members (mainly in the United States), issued resolutions in 1996 and 2000 in which it rejected homosexuality as a lifestyle, referring to it as a “manifestation of a depraved nature,” “a perversion of divine standards and as a violation of nature and natural affections,” and “an abomination in the eyes of God” (Farmer, 2014; Human Rights Campaign (HRC), 2015). The National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., the second largest Baptist church globally, and which is predominately African American, holds no official view on homosexuality but leaves the issue to individual congregations. They state, however, that a majority of their member churches *would* hold that homosexuality is not a legitimate expression of God’s will and *would* be opposed to ordaining active homosexuals or lesbians for any type of ministry in their church (HRC, 2015).

Importantly, then, some churches are no longer safe, sacred spaces for LGBT people because of the stigma attached to homosexuality. Indeed, LGBT people who experience stress or identity conflict in religious settings might not be able to fully enjoy the benefits of acceptance and personal nurturing because of the stigma they experience in Black churches. This consequence is particularly significant for BGM because researchers find that they often use religion as a way to cope with racial discrimination and other life stressors (Chatters, Taylor, & Lincoln, 1999; Levin et al., 1995). The dilemma BGM face in trying to maintain connections to Black churches while experiencing rejection echoes the experience of double consciousness that DuBois outlined over 100 years ago. In 1903, W. E. B. DuBois articulated the dilemma of the African American, stating:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two working ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife--this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the other selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of White Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face. (p. 45f.)

The duality BGM experience in Black churches is similar to the experience DuBois described as double consciousness due to the conflict between their Black and gay identities. On one hand, BGM are accepted as members of the Black church and affirmed for being Black. On the other hand, they are rejected in some churches for being gay. Many BGM may feel constrained in their options to find alternative spaces to be fully accepted as both Black and gay.

It is important to note that not all Black churches oppose homosexuality — there are organizations like the Southern Coalition for Social Justice that are working to help churches transition into becoming more accepting communities for Black LGBT members. Additionally, there is an emergence of openly gay-affirming Black churches throughout the country. But they are few and far between and most gay-friendly churches tend to be predominantly White. This



can present a dilemma for BGM because they may desire to maintain connections to Black churches and access respite from racism but may also be faced with anti-gay stigma. Additionally, they may feel constrained in their choices to seek membership in gay-affirming churches because of the dearth of churches that accept them for being both Black and gay. It is important to examine BGM's decisions about membership and participation in churches because it provides insight into the ways people navigate discrimination and marginalization in US society. We should care about this topic because if people are not integrated in US society, they cannot access resources, experience lowered status in society and are cut off from social support. It becomes harder for marginalized people to find employment and they are more vulnerable to experiencing depression and participating in maladaptive coping behaviors like violence, high-risk sex, drug use, etc.

One obvious alternative for some BGM as a strategy to reduce identity conflict would be to seek out "gay-affirming" churches that do not stigmatize homosexuality. Studies show, however, that the majority of gay-affirming churches are predominantly White and mainline Protestant (Masci, 2014). Studies of WGM participants find that men who participate in gay-affirming religious activities and groups actively integrated their religious and sexual orientation identities (Lease et al., 2005; Rodriguez, 2010; Thumma 1991; Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994). For example, Lease et al. (2005) conducted a survey study of 583 LGB individuals and found a positive relationship between participating in affirming faith experiences and experiencing positive psychological health, and the relationship was mediated by internalized homonegativity and spirituality. However, in a survey study of three gay-affirming, Catholic groups, including a national organization (n=75), a New York-based organization (n=53), and a community sample (n=45) of gay men raised in Catholic households,

Wagner et al. (1994) showed that those with similar religious backgrounds, but not involved in gay-affirming religious groups, had less positive attitudes toward their homosexuality and were less likely to integrate the two identities. These studies show that it is possible to integrate one's religious and gay identities in spaces that affirm homosexuality. Yet, there have been few studies to examine how Black gay men manage stigma and integrate their racial, gay, and religious identities, particularly in gay-affirming spaces. BGM may face an additional dilemma often not experienced by WGM in their quest to find churches that accept homosexuality because most of these churches tend to be predominantly White. Although White gay communities and churches often aim to be welcoming to all people and encourage diversity, they may still exacerbate BGM's discomfort due to cultural differences and potential experiences with racial discrimination. Thus, BGM may be especially vulnerable to experiences of both racial discrimination and stigma related to their sexual orientation as a result of their church-going decisions and participation.

By examining BGM's church-going decisions and participation, I address various gaps in the literature. First, church-going decisions are one way to measure the relationship between identity salience and multiple types of stigma because both Black and gay identities are relevant and potentially stigmatized depending on which church participants attend, if any at all. Additionally, by examining the nature of BGM's relationship to and participation in churches, we are able to better understand how the church context shapes the strategies BGM use to manage multiple types of stigmas. Lastly, by examining how BGM interact with pastors and congregants and discuss the strategies they use to manage identity conflict, I gain insight into the way that the visible stigma attached to being Black may have a differential influence on stigma management strategies compared to the hidden stigma attached to being gay.

I examine how BGM's identities as Black, male, *and* gay in church interact to affect their strategies to manage identity conflict and multiple types of stigma. It is important to examine how a person experiences multiple oppressions due to their statuses in society (Battle & Barnes, 2010; Collins, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991; Lemelle, 2010). These multiple oppressions, such as racism and homophobia, are tied to stigmas associated with being Black and/or gay. Consequently, stigmatized people experience a lowered status in society; yet, few scholars have examined how people manage experiences with multiple oppressions through the lens of stigma management. I argue that it is not enough to analyze either Black or gay identity in isolation because each informs and influences the other. Consequently, the experiences and coping strategies of BGM are different from non-gay Black men and gay men of other racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Similar to men of other racial and ethnic backgrounds, BGM experience privilege as men. However, they also experience stigma and oppression because they are Black and gay. According to Bowleg (2013), BGM experience just as much stigma and discrimination as Black women because of their statuses as Black and gay, despite having privilege as men.

However, BGM's experiences are distinct from White gay men's, whose race affords them the privilege of whiteness, and from heterosexually-identified Black men's, whose sexuality places them in the normative category and affords them the privilege of heteronormativity. In addition, BGM, then, are just as, if not, more vulnerable to a host of adverse life outcomes as White gay men and Black heterosexual men (Alexander, 2004; Legate, Ryan, & Weinstein, 2012; Stutterheim et al., 2011; Syzmanski & Gupta, 2009). Thus, it is important to examine the strategies BGM employ to combat stigma.

My aim is not necessarily to test how each stigma affects BGM's lives independently in comparison to other non-stigmatized groups, but to provide a more in-depth analysis of the strategies BGM participants in this study use to manage multiple stigmas. By integrating insights from the literature on stigma management with an intersectional framework, I provide a better understanding of the agency, or personal action, one may employ to manage multiple oppressions and reduce identity conflict.

#### *Outline of Research Questions and Objectives*

The objective of this dissertation is to address empirical gaps in the stigma literature by gaining a better understanding of what influence two types of stigmatized identities, such as being both Black (visible) and gay (hideable), have on participants' stigma management strategies to reduce identity conflict. Thus, I ask the following research questions:

- 1) How does having two types of stigmatized identities, being both Black (visible) and gay (hidden), influence the salience of these identities and decisions about institutional participation?
- 2) What strategies do BGM use to manage multiple stigmatized identities, like being Black and gay, in Christian churches, an environment that supports one identity but may exacerbate the stigma attached to another?
- 3) How does identity salience influence the stigma management strategies BGM use to reduce identity conflict?

To answer these questions, I conducted a parallel multi-method study, drawing on survey, interview and observational methods. I constructed interview and survey questions based on previously-validated scales assessing Black, gay, and religious identity. I conducted and analyzed semi-structured interviews and online surveys with 31 self-identified BGM between 23

and 57 years old. The survey data served as supplemental data that provided a link between participants' interview responses and standardized measures of Black identity, religious orientation, and attitudes toward homosexuality and gay identity. Lastly, I conducted 25 hours of ethnographic observation at three different types of churches participants attended to provide supplemental context for the study.

### *Outline of Dissertation Chapters*

In chapter two, I review the extant literature on stigma to provide a better understanding of how scholars extend Goffman's (1963) conceptualization of different types of stigma and the ways people manage stigma. Given my interest in examining the interplay between different types of stigma, I focus on the ways Black identity has been conceptualized as a visible stigmatized identity. I also review the literature on how homosexuality has been conceptualized as a hidden stigmatized identity. The comparison of the conceptualizations of the visible stigma attached to being Black and the hidden stigma attached to being gay allows for a better understanding of theoretical nuances, if any, scholars have identified to understand how each type of stigma operates in people's lives. In particular, I am interested in understanding if there are any differences in the way visible stigma as compared to hidden stigma have been found to influence identity salience. I am also interested in better understanding how identity salience shapes the strategies people use to manage both visible and hidden stigmas simultaneously.

There is very little research on the relationship between stigma, identity salience, and strategies to manage multiple stigmatized identities. Thus, I examine extant scholarship that highlights previous findings on the relationship between identity salience and strategies to manage conflicts between two identities, such as being Black and gay. The strategies I focus on for this dissertation are decisions about institutional, identity construction, and identity disclosure

because they have been identified as the main strategies used to manage identity conflict. While there has been research examining people's experiences with intersecting identities that are in conflict with each other, few have examined how stigma may shape the salience of their identities and the strategies they use to manage identity conflict. I argue that it is important to examine identity salience in relation to experiences with stigma because stigmatizing experiences have been found to raise the salience of an identity. By examining the literature on stigma, I am able to establish a stronger theoretical link between identity salience and the strategies people use to manage identity conflict because stigma scholars argue that people manage identity in reaction to negative appraisals from others.

People who have stigmatized identities find multiple avenues for minimizing experiences with stigma. Scholars have identified some of the strategies people use to manage stigma and identity conflict, such as challenging perpetrators of stigma, constructing new positive identities, choosing to participate in non-stigmatizing environments with "like" members who accept them, and using stigmatized identity disclosure as a way to increase visibility and challenge stigma. However, few scholars have examined how different types of stigmas may have distinct influences on identity salience and stigma management strategies. To better understand the relationship between multiple types of stigma and identity salience, I examine extant research on people's experiences with multiple types of stigma, including hidden and visible stigmas. Additionally, I review the literature that examines people's experiences with double stigma, or having more than one stigma at a time.

To be sure, stigma can be situational and dependent on the context in which a person operates. Thus, I examine extant literature on the strategies BGM use to manage conflicts between their Black and gay identities in the context of Black communities and Black Christian

churches because they are spaces in which both identities are relevant. This scholarship provides insight into the relationship between multiple types of stigma and identity salience in a particular context. I argue that by examining experiences with stigma and identity conflict within the context of Christian churches, we can gain better insight into the complex ways in which people negotiate maintaining connections to spaces that may not accept all aspects of their identity.

Lastly, I examine the extant literature on gay identity disclosure as a strategy to manage stigma because it has been identified as an important means through which LGBT populations can reduce discriminatory experiences. Gay identity disclosure may be one way people can control who has access to information about their hidden stigmatized identity and provide them with increased access to resources for social support.

Chapter three provides a description of the eligibility criteria for participants and sampling and recruitment methodology. Additionally, chapter three describes how the interviews, surveys, and ethnographic observations measure the main concepts for this project. I provide sample interview questions and sample items from the sub scales included in the survey. Lastly, I outline my data analysis methodologies and provide a reflection on my role as a researcher while completing this project.

Chapter four provides a description of the participants, the survey findings, and descriptions of each church where I conducted ethnographic observations. The descriptive statistics were provided from the online survey participants completed.

Chapter five, entitled “Searching for Whosoever Ministries: Examining Black Gay Men’s Church-Going Decisions,” examines the influence that multiple stigmatized identities, like being Black and gay, have on identity salience. I assess which identity is more salient for BGM by examining how experiences with stigma attached to visible and hidden characteristics shape their

decisions about institutional participation. Additionally, chapter five analyzes how BGM's church-going decisions serve as strategies to manage multiple stigmas.

Findings from Chapter five reveal that the salience of BGM's Black identity is an important factor in their decision to maintain connections to predominantly Black churches. However, the salience of their gay identity also influences their decision to participate in Black churches that do not explicitly stigmatize homosexuality. BGM devalue the legitimacy of GACs because of their association with visible aspects of homosexuality that are stigmatized. BGM also make it clear that they do not prefer to attend predominantly White churches because of cultural differences, potential stigmatizing experiences and discomfort as a racial minority in the church. Even when BGM do not regularly attend church, they describe ways in which they maintain connections to predominantly Black churches, either through occasional visits or tithing.

My findings present a challenge to the idea that identity conflict is solely an internal process – the internalization of negative attitudes toward themselves as Black and gay is due to external stigmatizing treatment. My findings also challenge the idea that participating in Black churches is an indicator of BGM's internalized negative attitudes about themselves as gay – not all Black churches are stigmatizing spaces, not all BGM see themselves in a negative light even when participating in stigmatizing spaces because these spaces also serve as buffers from racial discrimination, cultural centers and sources of social support. My findings challenge the assumption that all stigmas hold the same weight and operate in the same way for people. The stigma attached to visible characteristics and those that cannot be altered, changed, or hidden hold more weight and consequences for people than the stigma attached to hidden characteristics.



Lastly, we can use decisions about institutional participation and strategies to manage stigma as a way to better understand identity salience.

Chapter six, entitled “‘You Gotta Press Your Way to God’: Black Gay Men’s Use of Spirituality as Stigma Management and Identity Conflict Resolution,” examines how BGM maintain connections to Black churches. In particular, I examine how BGM manage anti-gay stigma and identity conflict. Findings reveal that some BGM attempted to separate themselves from anti-gay stigma by adopting the label, “spiritual,” and constructing a Black, gay, faith-based identity. They construct their faith-based identity by making distinctions between spirituality and religiosity, and by criticizing religious others as well as the institution of church as hypocritical and judgmental against homosexuality. Thus, faith-based identity construction is less about religious involvement and more about BGM’s attempts to minimize stigma. Examining the strategies BGM employ to integrate their Black, gay, and faith-based identities contributes to our understanding of how both stigmatized identities shape how BGM negotiate processes of identity construction to reduce identity conflict.

Findings from chapter six further emphasize the point that identity construction and experiences with identity conflict are negotiated by BGM in an attempt to minimize experiences with stigma. Additionally, the findings from this chapter challenge the assumption that people have to or would want to completely sever ties from a stigmatizing environment in order to reduce identity conflict. Instead, people with multiple types of stigmatized identities attempt to find spaces where they can minimize experiences with the stigma attached to visible characteristics first and then find ways to manage stigma attached to their hideable characteristics.

Chapter seven, entitled “Black Gay Men’s Gay Identity Disclosure and Voluntary

(Dis)engagement as Stigma Management,” further examines the strategies BGM use to manage stigma within the context of churches. The chapter addresses questions about the conditions under which and for what purposes BGM might decide to disclose their gay identity. Findings reveal that in environments that delivered anti-gay messages, many BGM felt compelled to hide their gay identity. Yet, they found ways to subvert heterosexist norms. Others chose to face the risk of disclosure because to hide their gay identity carried more personal consequences and increased their feelings of “inauthenticity.” Lastly, some BGM used gay identity disclosure as a way to gain control over the stigma attached to their gay identity and to control their level of engagement with perpetrators of stigma. In cases when BGM voluntarily disclosed their gay identity, it was used as a means to maintain connections to predominantly Black churches, gain a sense of empowerment and recognition, and maintain personal integrity.

The findings from chapter seven challenge the idea that people who hide their hidden stigmatized identity are doing so because they want to deceive others. The findings move our focus from portraying the stigmatized as deceptive people to understanding how they must make calculated decisions about exposing themselves to the risk of stigma and rejection. The findings from this chapter also highlight the gravity of disclosure for BGM that still exists in today’s society despite increased tolerance toward homosexuality in mainstream culture.

Chapter eight provides concluding thoughts on the findings revealed in each chapter, outlines the limitations of generalizing the findings to all BGM, and suggests future directions of research to further examine the questions posed in this dissertation.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a long tradition of scholars who have examined stigma and its effects on individuals' social status and identity. Most scholars focus on the effect that a single stigma has on an individual's social status and identity salience (Kaiser & Wilkins, 2010; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Link & Phelan 2001; Shelton et al., 2010). In particular, much of the stigma scholarship focuses on people's experiences with stigmas attached to hideable characteristics such as mental health disorders, homelessness, and disease status. While some attention has been paid to the differential effects that stigmas attached to visible characteristics, such as being Black, may have on identity salience and stigma management strategies, few scholars have examined the experiences of people who must contend with multiple types of stigmas simultaneously. I argue that we should pay attention to the *interaction* between multiple type of stigmas as well as the visibility of stigmatizing characteristics because they may create qualitatively different experiences and unique challenges for people to manage. One way to gain insight into this gap in the literature is to examine the strategies people use to manage multiple types of stigma and to reconcile identity conflict. In this study, I focus on BGM's experiences with stigma attached to their Black and gay identities and assess how they manage the visibility of stigmatizing characteristics.

### *Conceptualizing Stigma*

The current conceptualization of stigma does not differ much from Goffman's (1963) original framework, which defines stigma as "a physical or character-driven flaw seen as tainting a person," often involving experiences of discrimination, reduced life chances, and a reduced

status in society (p. 3). Link and Phelan (2001) added to Goffman's definition by describing stigma as a simultaneous interaction between multiple elements such as "labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination" (p. 367). As such, stigma originates from people with power who label others and strip them of their status (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001) rather than from an inherent quality that resides within the stigmatized person. This conceptualization is grounded in the symbolic interaction tradition in which scholars argue that identity development operates through relationship with others rather than solely as an internal process (Blumer, 1969). Thus, stigma does not exist as an inherent quality within a person, but arises from negative appraisal from others of a person's identity. In reaction, an individual often must negotiate stigma and find ways to minimize stigma because it often contradicts his/her self-concept (Gecas & Burke, 1995; Goffman, 1963). As such, an individual may actively engage in a process of interpreting, acting upon, and/or refuting negative appraisals of his/her identity from others (Gecas & Burke, 1995).

There are multiple types of stigmas that have been found to have different impacts on people's lives and enhance perceptions of stigma. Stigmas attached to visible characteristics or identities (e.g., being Black), are harder for people to conceal. For example, Pager et al. (2009) found that White men with incarceration records had more advantages in employment, job placement, promotions, and salary than Black men without an incarceration record and higher educational attainment. This finding highlights the gravity that the stigma attached to being Black holds in determining people's opportunities for upward mobility and subordinate status in society.

### *Conceptualizing Race as Stigma*

Analyzing data from three qualitative studies on the social and psychological consequences of “race,” Howarth (2006) argued that race should be conceptualized as a stigma to better understand people’s experiences with race. By conceptualizing race as stigma, scholars can analyze race as a visible demarcation on the body (e.g., physical characteristics) that justifies subordination; as a categorization that dehumanizes and subjugates others; as a mark that limits access to higher status, resources and power; and one whose assessment by outsiders often contradicts the “raced” person’s positive self-concept (Howarth, 2006).

For Black Americans, race operates as a visible stigma attached to their physical features (Goffman, 1963; Howarth, 2006), and one that has made them the target of discrimination and systematic oppression (Howarth, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1994; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). Racial stereotypes often stigmatize Blacks, especially Black men, by characterizing them as excessively aggressive, sexually promiscuous, violent, unintelligent, and criminal. As a result, Black men often are placed at a disadvantage because racial stereotypes applied to them often get translated into unfair treatment by others and limited opportunities for social, political, and economic advancement (Bowleg, 2013). Additionally, racial stereotypes perpetuate stigma against Black men and challenge their ability to serve as positive representatives of their families and communities as well as limit their claims to manhood (Bowleg, Teti, Malebranche, & Tschann, 2013; Bowleg, 2013). Thus, the stigma of being Black is one that is not easily hidden. However, some Blacks have attempted to pass as White because of their lighter skin tone (Alcoff, 2006). Also, Blackness may not be stigmatized in every setting, especially in spaces where people accept Black people and actively challenge interpersonal and institutional racism. Yet, there are still institutional and global barriers that continue to oppress

Blacks; thus, the conceptualization of race as stigma is useful for understanding BGM's experiences. I argue that it is also important to understand how experiences with additional types of stigmas, like the hidden stigma attached to being gay, may inform their experiences.

### *Conceptualizing homosexuality as stigma*

Stigmas attached to hideable characteristics (e.g., being gay, gender non-conforming behaviors) are not readily perceived and are more likely to go unrecognized and unresolved (Goffman, 1963). Individuals who encounter these stigmas often do so in silence and at great risk and damage to their self-identity (Greeff, 2013). To cope with the negative effects of hiding a stigmatized identity, some people inflict personal harm or engage in maladaptive health behaviors (Greeff, 2013). However, others may choose to disclose their hidden stigma as a way to challenge stigma and gain access to resources and social support (Kaufman et al., 2004; Legate et al., 2012; Orne 2013). Research on BGM tends to highlight the maladaptive behaviors they use to manage discriminatory experiences (Greeff, 2013; Jeffries et al. 2013; Wolitski et al. 2006), but fails to highlight the strategies BGM use that are adaptive and enhance their agency in coping with stigma.

Homosexuality has been conceptualized as a stigma that taints a person's character and spoils their identity, but it is also seen as one that can be ostensibly hidden from others by withholding information and/or altering behavior to conform to heterosexist norms (Orne, 2013). In fact, since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when homosexuality was designated as a sexually deviant behavior, and many gay men and women have had to go to great lengths to hide their sexuality in what they perceive to be unsafe environments (Seidman, 2003). However, there are some visible characteristics that have been associated with homosexuality. For example, gender non-conformity (e.g., dressing in drag) is a visibly identifiable characteristic that has been

associated with, and often conflated with, homosexuality (Clarkson, 2006). These visible characteristics are often devalued because they are perceived to challenge traditional masculine norms in a community (Clarkson, 2006). For example, when a man publicly identifies as gay, others may challenge his claims to masculinity regardless of whether he engages in gender non-conformity or not. Similarly, BGM's status as gay may threaten the legitimacy of their claims to masculinity (Glick, Gangl, Gibb, Klumpner, & Weinberg, 2007; Hunter & Davis, 1994). This can be harmful to their status in the Black community because masculinity has been valued as a mechanism for Black men to serve as community leaders and combat racial stereotypes (Collins, 2006; Hunter & Davis, 1994; James, 2014). The conflation of homosexuality with reduced masculinity creates an added stigma for BGM and may increase discomfort, discrimination, and pressure to remain silent about their sexual orientation (Bohan, 1996; Johnson, 2008; Sauve, 1998).

The myriad experiences BGM have with the visible stigma attached to being Black combined with the stigma attached to hideable characteristics associated with homosexuality place them at a higher vulnerability for discrimination and reduced status in society. However, it is important to note that the stigma attached to homosexuality depends on the context. For example, Pedulla (2014) surveyed respondents and asked them to evaluate resumes where information about applicants' race and sexual orientation were manipulated. Pedulla (2014) found that BGM had advantages over Black heterosexual and WGM in hiring because the stereotypes attached to BGM as effeminate and submissive counteracted common stereotypes about Black heterosexual men as aggressive and criminal. To better understand how these multiple stigmas influence BGM's identity, I turn to the literature on the relationship between stigma and identity salience. Identity salience has been found to be influential on people's

decision-making processes and experiences with identity conflict. Yet, few scholars have examined whether different types of stigmas have differential influences on identity salience and subsequently, their decisions about institutional participation.

### *The Relationship Between Stigma and Identity Salience*

Stryker and Burke (2000) define identity salience as the “probability that an identity will be invoked across a variety of situations, or alternatively across persons in a given situation” (p. 286). An identity can also become salient as people experience stigma and discrimination because the negative treatment from discriminatory experiences raises a person’s awareness of his or her difference (Kaiser & Wilkins, 2010). Discriminatory treatment often raises a person’s awareness of his or her identity in a situation by forcing awareness of the ways in which others view them negatively. For example, in DuBois’ (1903) seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*, he describes the experience of becoming aware of his Blackness and learning that Whites viewed him negatively because of his race as having “a veil lifted from his eyes.” The heightened awareness he experienced about his racial identity then led him to think about and better understand how Black people can live dual lives, or have a double consciousness, because of the inherent need to find ways to operate fully in a world where Blacks have pride in their race at the same time that Whites disparage and oppress them because of their race. In essence, racism and discrimination increase the salience of being Black, which, in turn, creates an experience of double consciousness or identity conflict, wherein Blacks struggle to find a sense of belonging in a world that does not fully accept them. Similarly, LGBT individuals may also go through a process of becoming aware of their sexuality as something that is not socially accepted in certain settings due to experiences they may have with discrimination against their sexual orientation (Eliason, 1996). It is important to note that an identity can be salient independent of experiences



of discrimination because it may have situational relevance or may be relevant to group membership (Stryker & Serpe, 1994; Stryker & Burke, 2000). For example, in a classroom setting, a person's identity as a teacher may become salient because of the setting. However, when a person experiences discrimination against a particular identity, the salience of that identity may increase and even become one that supersedes other identities that are not discriminated against (Thompson, 1999; Stryker & Bruker, 2000).

The relationship between identity salience and identity conflict that DuBois outlined in his metaphor of the veil and concept of double consciousness also may be applicable to people with overlapping identities and discriminatory experiences. For example, the discrimination and stigma BGM experience due to being Black in predominantly White settings and being gay in mainstream White or predominantly Black settings may raise the salience of both identities. The raised awareness of BGM's Black and gay identities may lead to identity conflict, because they often must find ways to negotiate membership in multiple, potentially adversarial settings while holding on to positive self-assessments. While experiences with stigma and discrimination do not always increase identity salience, I focus on the relationship between stigma and identity salience to better understand how certain types of stigma may be more influential in raising the salience of one identity over another.

#### *The Relationship Between Identity Salience and Multiple Identities*

Stryker and Serpe (1994) argue that people have a hierarchy of salient identities that influence several aspects of their life, and those identities influence their behavioral and group membership choices. BGM, for example, have several identities (including their Black, gay and male identities) that influence their behavior and life choices (Bowleg, 2013; Hunter, 2010; Sanchez & Carter, 2003). The stigma attached to being gay may cause conflict with BGM's

Black identity because it challenges their ability to maintain connections to predominantly Black spaces (Alexander, 2004; Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011). Scholars have found that BGM are often forced to choose between membership in either predominantly heterosexual, Black spaces or predominantly White, gay spaces because of experiences with anti-gay treatment in predominantly Black spaces and anti-Black treatment in predominantly White, gay spaces (Icard, 1986; Martinez & Sullivan, 1998; Wilson, 2008).

The spaces in which BGM choose to participate may indicate the degree to which a particular identity is salient for them. For example, several scholars have found that BGM who choose to participate in predominantly Black communities tend to identify as “Black gay men” and hold their Black identities to be more important than their gay identities; in contrast, BGM who choose to participate in predominantly White gay communities identify as “gay Black men” and hold their gay identities to be more important (Icard, 1986; Martinez & Sullivan, 1998; Wilson, 2008). These studies suggest that analyzing group membership decisions may be important to understanding the salience of identity for people dealing with multiple, conflicting identities. Additionally, by including an analysis of stigma, we can better understand the extent to which men’s decisions about institutional participation are influenced by their efforts to negotiate and minimize experiences with discrimination and to find spaces that provide acceptance.

In an effort to establish which identity is more salient for BGM—Black or gay—Hunter (2010) and Bowleg (2013) conducted ethnographic and interview-based studies, respectively, with non-probability samples of self-identified BGM. The researchers examined participants’ experiences with the intersection of their Black, male, and gay identities. Hunter (2010) found that BGM conceptualized their identities as Black and gay in three ways: the interlocking

conceptualization, the up-down model, and the public-private model. The interlocking model unites Black and gay identities as mutually important, whereas the up-down model privileges one identity over another; the public-private model distinguishes between race as a public identity that cannot be escaped and sexuality as a private identity that is expressed between partners and trusted others. While Hunter (2010) found participants' experiences to be shaped by their Black identity, he ultimately concluded that *both* identities were salient.

Bowleg's (2012) study examines the influence that identity salience has on a person's decision to participate in particular groups and negotiate multiple identities. Bowleg (2012) argued that her participants held their Black identity to be more salient because of the multiple ways in which their awareness of their Black identity occurred at early ages and throughout the life course. The micro-aggressions BGM experienced in regards to racism in White gay communities and heterosexism in Black communities signaled to participants the interlocking nature of their identities as Black and gay; however, they persisted in their discussion of the influence that being Black had on their experiences as gay men (Bowleg, 2012). Bowleg's study provides an important framework to assist in my examination of stigma management strategies. I extend Bowleg's examination by analyzing BGM's decisions about which types of Christian churches they attend, if any at all. Additionally, BGM's church-going decisions and participation may provide insight into how multiple identities, like being Black and gay, may be salient.

In summary, there is a gap in our understanding of how the interaction between two types of stigmatized identities affects identity salience and decisions about institutional participation. Previously, researchers have simply assumed that stigma attached to visible and hideable characteristics had similar effects on people's lives. Yet, it is possible that the visibility of stigmatizing characteristics may matter in determining people's ability to minimize

discrimination and manage stigma. Understanding the relationship between different types of stigma and identity salience is also important because it has implications for understanding what factors drive people's coping strategies and decisions about group membership. This insight will aid scholars who have attempted to predict which groups people participate in, under what conditions they make those choices, and how their choices impact their wellbeing. If some people are making choices about group membership and participation based on efforts to minimize stigmatizing experiences, and these choices inadvertently reinforce segregation, we need to pay attention – if for nothing else than to find a way to establish a more integrated society where all people are treated equally and feel fully accepted.

By examining the interaction between multiple types of stigma and identity salience, I aim to challenge the work of previous scholars who have long assumed that stigmas have independent effects on identity. Secondly, I aim to clarify the relationship between multiple types of stigma and identity salience by analyzing people's stigma management strategies. Since scholars have established that identity salience often dictates the groups people maintain membership in and the behaviors in which they engage, I argue that examining the context in which BGM use stigma management strategies can provide insight into which identity is more salient when dealing with multiple stigmatized identities at once. I turn to an examination of the existing literature on the influence of context in shaping BGM's stigma management strategies.

#### *Context Matters When Managing Stigmas*

Scholars have found that context matters in determining which strategies people use to manage multiple identities. Such strategies differ depending on whether people feel comfortable, accepted, or stigmatized in a setting. Indeed, some spaces that are meant to provide refuge from adverse life conditions and stressors have been found to exacerbate oppressive experiences for

minority groups. For example, Nnawulezi and Sullivan (2014) found that Black women seeking support for domestic violence experience racial micro-aggressions in shelters, and these racialized experiences created barriers to finding safe spaces.

In an interview study of 37 self-identified Black gay and bisexual men aged 18 to 36 years old who lived in Chicago, Della et al. (2002) found that BGM employ different strategies to deal with discrimination in environments that affirmed their identities versus in environments that stigmatized them. For example, in contexts where BGM felt affirmed for being gay, they directly confronted perpetrators of stigma and drew strength and comfort from examples of others from their ethnic community who dealt with similar experiences of discrimination (Della et al., 2002). In non-gay-friendly environments, BGM conceal their gay identity by altering their behavior to mimic traditionally masculine mannerisms, and they dress and remain silent when hearing anti-gay messages in church and familial settings (Della et al., 2002). The authors draw parallels between the strategies BGM use to manage heterosexism and the strategies they use to manage racism. Della et al. (2002) argue that when participants challenge people who discriminate against them for being gay, they are invoking a long tradition of anti-racist activism and resistance. Yet they also argue that when BGM remain silent about their gay identity, they are also invoking past strategies used by Blacks to accept their fate in a racist society and acquiesce to the status quo. As such, BGM's experiences with racism served to provide them with the necessary skills to manage both stigmas simultaneously.

Similarly, in an interview and focus group study of 85 racial and ethnic minority men who have sex with men (MSM) aged 21 to 49 years old, Choi et al. (2011) found that some Black MSM hid their sexual identity as a way to protect themselves from discrimination in the Black community. They purposefully chose to withhold information about their sexual behavior

from some members of the Black community as a way to control who did and did not have information about their identity. However, the authors did not elaborate on why Black MSM felt the need to use this concealment strategy specifically in the Black community. Additionally, the authors did not elaborate on whether BGM had a choice in which community they wanted to participate, nor the reasons why BGM may have chosen to stay in the Black community. In general, MSM from all racial and ethnic minority groups (Latinos, Blacks, and Asians) disassociated from social settings where White gays were racist (Choi, Han, Paul, & Ayala, 2011). Asian MSM were the only group of men who participated in predominantly White gay spaces. Rather than removing themselves from those spaces altogether, Asian MSM avoided individuals whom they perceived to be racist. This study is useful for understanding how stigma attached to racial/ethnic minority status influences the strategies non-White MSM use.

The findings of both Della et al. (2002) and Choi et al. (2011) speak to how context influences the strategies people use to manage multiple stigmatized identities. Additionally, Choi et al.'s findings reveal a difference in the way racial stigma operates for different groups of people despite their sharing a common experience as racial/ethnic and sexual minorities. However, they do not elaborate on why men participate in particular environments and what factors influence their decision. To date, little research examines the choices people make about group membership and institutional participation. It may be important to elucidate the decision-making process for institutional participation to better understand the strategies people use to manage stigma. I look at BGM's church-going decisions and participation as one way to address this gap in knowledge.

## *The Black Church*

An important dimension of understanding the identity conflicts and stigma BGM wrestle with is to understand their experiences in religious institutions. Historically, Black churches have served as so-called “safe spaces” by providing a sense of social support and refuge from racial discrimination and other adverse life circumstances for Blacks, in general (Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Odum & Vernon-Feagans, 2010) and for BGM specifically (Bowleg, 2013). Religion and religious institutions have been sources of socialization, political influence and an emotional haven for Blacks. However, racial stigma and discrimination have historically constrained Black people’s church-going options. For decades, racial segregation forced Black people to attend Black churches, which often were the only option for those seeking worship spaces and sites for cultural production and social support. Indeed, the majority of Black people currently attend predominantly and historically Black churches (Pew Research Center, 2009a). Research suggests that Blacks tend to choose churches primarily based on racial demographics as well as other social characteristics (McRoberts, 2003). It is possible that BGM may be more likely to participate in predominantly Black churches because they provide racial socialization, cultural production, and social support.

To be sure, church attendance is waning among multiple groups of people across the world, and people are increasingly switching denominations or stopping church membership altogether (Loveland, 2003). Additionally, people are maintaining spiritual identities and increasingly engaging in informal and private religious practices, such as prayer, reading the Bible, and meditation (Cadge & Davidman, 2006; Hodge & McGrew, 2013). Yet, scholars have not successfully identified the mechanisms through which these church-going decisions, religious practices, and spiritual identifications are occurring. BGM may be similar to other

people in regards to their church-going decisions, religious practices, and identification as spiritual; however, it is important to understand the factors that influence their patterns because of BGM's experiences with identity conflict and potential stigma in church spaces.

The question of whether BGM go to church and which types of churches they attend is important because of the relative importance that religion plays in BGM's lives compared to WGM. Research indicates that BGM have higher rates of involvement in Christian churches than any other lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) racial or ethnic group (Foster et al., 2011; Jeffries, Marks, Lauby, Murrill, & Millett, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2009b; Valera & Taylor, 2011). Additionally, religious experiences have been found to be more important for BGM and more influential in their spiritual satisfaction than for WGM (Seegers, 2007). That BGM hold religion and spirituality to be important to them, and that Black churches are closely linked to racial socialization, speaks to the relevance of examining churches as a context for better understanding the stigma management processes for BGM.

### *Black Churches and Anti-gay Stigma*

In the process of establishing themselves as major centers of Black identity socialization, Black churches often imbued traditional Christian values into the conceptualization of what it meant to be Black (James, 2014). Congregations paid particular attention to the sanctioning of gender roles in addition to sexual and other behavior as a way to gain respectability in White mainstream society and to combat racial stereotypes (Higginbotham, 1992; James, 2014). This type of sanctioning is often referred to as the "politics of respectability," which is the idea that if a group of people conforms to White mainstream society's norms and behavior, they will be able to minimize discrimination and elevate their status in society (Higginbotham, 1992; James, 2014).



Some specific ways that people have attempted to engage in politics of respectability include wearing professional clothing, speaking formal English, enacting traditional gendered behaviors, and concealing sexuality (Patton, 2014). For example, Don Lemon, an openly gay Black male news anchor and political commentator on CNN, aired several segments on TV criticizing Black men for wearing “saggy” jeans and not speaking correct English. Lemon argued that if they change those behaviors, they would be more “respectable,” deflect stigma and discrimination, and improve their life chances (Smith, 2013). This perspective ignores the fact that even when Black men wear suits, have high educational attainment, and speak proper English, they are still more likely than any racial or gender group in the United States to be racially profiled, harassed, arrested and killed by police (Smith, 2013); are overlooked for hiring and promotions (Jones & Schmitt, 2014); and cite higher rates of perceived discrimination (Hudson et al., 2015). Additionally, Lemon may enjoy some privileges as an educated, gay Black man in that he may not face the same stereotypes and barriers to employment experienced by low-income and/or heterosexual Black men (Majors & Billson, 1992; Pedulla, 2014).

The expectation that participants conform to respectable behavior is especially prevalent in Black churches because of the conservative stance some Black churches have on homosexuality. Consequently, BGM are likely to encounter messages that condemn homosexuality and feel pressure to conform to traditional notions of masculinity as ways to combat racial stereotypes. This experience of receiving such messages could potentially lead to conflict between religious and sexuality identities for BGM who hold church and/or religion to be important (Johnson, 2008; R. Miller, 2007; Pitt, 2010b; Ward, 2005).

Despite pressure to conform to behaviors deemed by some to be respectable, many scholars cite the resistance Black LGBT people enact to create space for themselves in Black

communities. In particular, some Black LGBT people adopt a Black “queer” identity, which transgresses conformity to categories of sexuality and gender (Johnson & Henderson, 2005). As such, Black queer people may express Black queerness as a strategy to combat stigma and discrimination. For example, RuPaul transgresses traditional masculine performance because he performs in drag as a woman, but he also refuses to be categorized as wanting to imitate women. He asserts that he identifies as a gay man and is just as comfortable dressing as a man as he is performing in drag. This fluidity in gendered performance also transgresses the ideas mainstream society has about sexual orientation by challenging the idea that a gay man is either/or in regards to feminine and masculine behaviors (Johnson & Henderson, 2005). It is possible that the same strategy of refusing to conform to traditional gender presentations may be used by some BGM in Black churches to manage anti-gay stigma while asserting their presence as members. For example, some BGM may dress in women’s clothing or wear make-up while attending church as a way to challenge heterosexist norms, assert their identity as gay, and maintain membership.

It is notable that despite the continued significance of Black churches in the lives of BGM, there have also been numerous studies that cite the potential detrimental effects religious participation may have for BGM. BGM experience discomfort and rejection in some Black churches because of the stigma attached to their gay identities (Battle, Bennett, & Shaw, 2004; Foster et al., 2011; Ward, 2005). As an example, some Black churches have perpetuated the stigma against homosexuality as reflected in their involvement in opposing same-sex legislation (Abbey-Lambertz, 2014), delivering anti-gay sermons (Rawls, 2010; Tucker-Worgs & Worgs, 2014; Ward, 2005), and endorsing traditional gender roles (Durell et al., 2007; Lemelle & Battle, 2004). This dissertation adds to this literature by examining differences between BGM who do

and do not attend church and analyzing whether their churches are predominantly Black and/or gay-affirming.

*Managing Conflicting Identities through Church-going Decisions*

Some scholars have examined how Black LGBT manage the conflict between being Black and gay by stopping church attendance altogether. Miller and Stack (2013) found that Black lesbian and queer women navigate Christian-based homophobia by challenging their internalized homophobic beliefs, using spirituality to achieve self-acceptance, and communicating with pastors about their intentions to leave the church. However, it is unclear from the findings of Miller and Stack's study whether women actually left their churches; although the authors do examine the strategies women use to negotiate leaving churches that perpetuate Christian-based homophobia. To further an empirical understanding of Black LGBT church-going patterns as a strategy to reduce identity conflict and stigma against HIV, Foster et al. (2011) conducted a study comparing the experiences of 31 HIV-negative and HIV-positive men between the ages of 18 to 30 years old who self-identified as Black and gay. The authors found that BGM who grew up in religious homes held spirituality to be an important way to maintain connections to churches independent of church attendance. Although experiences with anti-gay messages led some BGM to leave churches, the desire to maintain connections to Black churches influenced some participants' decision to return. Indeed, even among men who did not return to church, participants continued to identify as Christian, participate in prayer groups, study the Bible, and listen to gospel music (Foster et al., 2011). Ceasing church attendance was not always a permanent solution for BGM seeking to reconcile identity conflict. The findings from Foster et al.'s (2011) study are especially useful because they demonstrate the importance of maintaining connections to Black churches for BGM despite experiences with identity conflict

What remains unclear, however, is whether older BGM show the same relationship to religiosity and church attendance.

Another possible strategy for BGM to deal with gay identity conflict and religion is to find a different type of church, such as a gay-affirming church (GAC), to minimize stigmatizing experiences in churches. Some research studies examine WGM's experiences in predominantly White, gay-affirming churches (WGACs), but few explore the experiences of Blacks in GACs in general. Researchers define "gay-affirming" churches as those that have a mission toward accepting people who are LGBT (McQueeney, 2009). Many of these churches tend to have mostly gay members; however, other churches have begun to adopt a gay-affirming message to attract LGBT members. Although GACs often attempt to attract *all* LGBT people regardless of race/ethnicity, GACs are more likely to be predominantly White, mainline Protestant churches than White evangelical or Black Protestant churches (Pew Research Center, 2003). For some, GACs serve as safe-havens from anti-gay messages (Rodriguez, 2010). However, while they may provide protection from anti-gay messages, the predominantly White settings may make Black LGBT feel isolated or as outsiders.

In response to the need to create predominantly Black churches that welcome gay members, predominantly Black, gay-affirming churches (henceforth, BGACs) have begun to emerge. These churches offer ministries that combine traditionally Black cultural practices and political liberation theology with acceptance of gay members (Comstock, 2001; McQueeney, 2009; Moore, 2010; Shaw & McDaniel, 2007). However, little is known about the extent to which BGM attend GACs, or whether the GACs they do attend are predominantly White or predominantly Black. Lastly, there is little knowledge about which factors influence whether BGM attend GACs—BGAC or not. It is important to study whether BGM choose to attend

GACs because their decisions may provide insight into the salience of their gay identity.

Additionally, it is important to examine BGM's experiences within the context of GACs because it is possible that the strategies they use to manage stigma against being gay (or Black in the case of participating in predominantly White, gay-affirming churches) may differ from the strategies they employ in non gay-affirming church settings.

This dissertation provides insight into BGM's church-going decisions and participation in GACs as a strategy to manage multiple types of stigma. To understand BGM's church-going decisions and participation as an indicator of identity salience, I also examine the stigma management strategies they employ while participating in church settings. Because of the apparent enduring influence of religion in the lives of BGM, in particular, it is important to understand the strategies they use to maintain connections to their religious faith while incorporating their gay identity. Next, I turn to an examination of the literature on the strategies BGM use to manage stigma and identity conflict while participating in predominantly Black churches. I begin with an examination of identity construction because it is one of the most extensively-studied strategies of how individuals manage identity conflict.

#### *Identity Construction as a Stigma Management Strategy*

One of the ways people challenge stigma and manage identity conflict is through identity construction. People may construct new identities by hiding their stigmatized characteristic in an attempt to deceive "normal" people, normalize their identity, and maintain "normal" group membership (Goffman, 1963). For some, identity construction may emerge as a strategy to reconcile identity conflict (Goffman, 1963; Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006). For example, in a multi-survey and multi-sample analysis of men and women from England and Italy, Vignoles et al. (2006) found that people were motivated to engage in identity

construction as a way to maintain a positive self-esteem, ensure continuity in their identity over time, nurture a sense of distinctiveness and individuality, and create a sense of meaning.

Overwhelmingly, respondents identified motivations to maintain positive self-esteem as central to their efforts to construct positive identities. Self-esteem and other identity motivations were found to be significant among individual, relational, and group levels of identity (Vignoles et al., 2006). It is important to note that Vignoles et al. (2006) did not examine the identity motivations of people experiencing stigma and discrimination. The motivation to construct positive identities may be more pronounced for stigmatized individuals because of others' negative appraisals of their identity.

Stigmatized people often use identity construction to create alternative, positive identities that deflect stigma and contest negative perceptions (Goffman, 1963; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Toyoki & Brown, 2014). Studies show that stigmatized individuals who actively challenge stigma in their everyday lives do so by adopting and internalizing a new, personal identity (Link & Phelan, 2001). For example, in an ethnographic study, Snow and Anderson (1987) found that homeless people distance themselves from associates, roles, and institutions that contradict their positive self-perception, and they embrace those who support their positive self-perception. Toyoki and Brown (2014) found a similar process among prison inmates; for instance, some prison inmates redefined their stigmatized identities by adopting the stigmatized label as a positive identity and emphasizing the positive aspects of other non-stigmatized identities they possessed (Toyoki & Brown, 2014). These studies are useful for understanding the ways in which stigmatized individuals construct positive identities and manage stigma. Yet like other studies of the stigmatized, they focus on one particular stigmatized identity that is attached to a characteristic that can be hidden.

Research suggests that there might be additional strategies people employ to construct positive identities in response to managing double stigmas. Using semi-structured interviews with 40 adults with HIV and tuberculosis in South Africa, Daftary (2012) examined the strategies respondents used to negotiate experiences with double stigma. She found that patients mitigate the stigmas attached to their disease status by segregating their identities as HIV and tuberculosis positive in ways that create symbolic or social distance between themselves and other people affected by HIV and by controlling to whom they disclosed their disease status (Daftary, 2012). In particular, they aimed to minimize the stigma attached to being HIV positive because it carried heavier consequences for their social relationships and access to resources. Daftary's (2012) study is one of the few that examines people's experiences with two stigmas simultaneously; however, both stigmas can be hidden. Only when patients displayed visible scars associated with being HIV positive did they experience more difficulty concealing their HIV status and suffer more severe stigmatizing treatment. We can pull insights from Daftary's (2012) study because she identified how the visibility of some patients' HIV status altered their stigma management strategies by increasing their efforts to disassociate from other HIV positive people.

There are few studies that examine the strategies people use to negotiate multiple types of stigmas, including both visible and hidden ones. Therefore, I outline findings from studies that examine BGM's experiences with conflict between their Black and gay identities in religious settings to better understand how multiple types of stigmatized identities may shape people's stigma management strategies. One important study explored the strategies BGM use to reduce conflict between their sexual orientation and religious identities in Black churches. Valera et al. (2011) found that Black men who have sex with men attempted to construct heterosexual identities by avoiding gay identity disclosure and condemning homosexual acts because they

found it difficult to forgive themselves for their same-sex behavior. Rather than finding a way to partially embrace the stigmatized identity, Valera et al.'s (2011) participants elected to remain silent and/or adopt an alternative identity that was viewed more favorably and was not incongruent with their social setting.

In another study, McQueeney (2009), who conducted in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation at two southern Protestant churches, analyzes stigma to understand Black LGBT experiences in churches. Specifically, McQueeney (2009) argued for an analysis of stigma management strategies that allowed room for us to examine how stigmatized people can simultaneously challenge and reproduce inequality. For example, McQueeney (2009) found that Black lesbian and gay participants used “‘oppositional identity work,’ which transform[ed] stigmatized identities into normalized ones by redefining them as noble rather than flawed” (p. 152). Their use of oppositional identity work allowed Black LGBT people to separate themselves from the stigma of homosexuality as immoral by identifying how they were similar to and/or morally superior to heterosexual Christians. Black LGBT participants rationalized that they were different from other LGBT individuals who engaged in promiscuous behavior and did not attend church because they were in monogamous, Christian relationships and were, therefore, morally superior to religious others who condemned them for being gay (McQueeney, 2009). Additionally, BGM in the study attempted to normalize themselves by challenging the notion that male homosexuality equated with performing feminine behaviors or experiencing a reduced status in church; thus, they reasserted their manhood by participating in leadership positions (McQueeney, 2009).

I use insights from McQueeney's (2009) work regarding the multidimensional and sometimes contradictory ways in which Black LGBT people simultaneously challenge stigma



and reinforce inequality in church settings to inform my analysis. In the process of managing the multiple stigmas against being Black and gay, BGM may engage in both behaviors to reinforce their higher status as men, while simultaneously attempting to separate themselves from the stigma of being gay in church. BGM's efforts to reinforce their status as men may be especially relevant if and when they maintain connections to predominantly Black churches because of the long tradition of Black men serving as church leaders and masculine role models (Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Mattis et al., 2004).

Other scholars have used psychological theories such as cognitive dissonance theory to examine BGM's experiences with reducing identity conflict in churches, but they do not analyze how stigma may be an external factor that shapes the process. Pitt (2010) examined how BGM used strategies to manage identity conflict in churches and found that when faced with negative messages about homosexuality from pastors and other church members, BGM justify anti-gay messages as political, and not necessarily condemning gay congregants. This finding is important because it identifies some of the psychological strategies BGM use to reduce identity conflict while maintaining connections to conservative, non gay-affirming, Black churches. Additionally, Pitt's work identifies how the close personal relationships some BGM have to pastors and congregants that allow room for BGM to rationalize continued church participation. However, by adopting a psychological model to analyze BGM's strategies to manage identity conflict between being gay and religious, Pitt (2010) assumes that the work BGM employ to reduce identity conflict is mainly related to negotiating negative self-perceptions of themselves as gay. Pitt (2010) and other scholars who adopt psychological models miss an opportunity to analyze how BGM may engage in cognitive strategies in reaction to external forces like stigmatizing treatment from others within the church. The strategies BGM employ may have less to do with

how they see themselves than with how they can find ways to minimize stigmatizing experiences. Moreover, their continued participation in Black churches may be related to their constrained options to find alternative spaces to worship because of the potential discomfort and anti-Black stigma they may experience in predominantly White, gay-affirming churches. While useful, Pitt's (2010) study does not examine the experiences of BGM who do not attend church and/or those who attend predominantly White, gay-affirming churches.

Many of the studies outlined in this literature review examined the strategies Black LGBT people use to manage identity conflict and negotiate intersecting identities; however, they do not compare the strategies based on whether the men continued to attend church or not, nor did they analyze how they made decisions to participate in predominantly Black settings. As with any stigma or identity-related conflicts, the strategies individuals use are situational and will vary, even in common settings.

#### *Challenging Perpetrators of Stigma as a Stigma Management Strategy*

Scholars have identified direct challenges to perpetrators of stigma as another means to manage stigma. Goffman described this strategy as a process whereby stigmatized individuals criticize "normal" people for their ignorance and discriminatory treatment (Goffman, 1963). However, as homosexuality becomes more accepted in society, it may become more difficult to identify ways in which perpetrators of stigma are openly hostile and situations where the stigmatized have to confront perpetrators of stigma. This is not to say that just because perpetrators of stigma are not always openly hostile toward gay people that they are totally accepting of homosexuality. Orne (2013) challenges the idea, originally outlined in Goffman, that there are distinct groups of people who either accept or are hostile toward homosexuality as a stigmatized identity. Using data from in-depth interviews with young, queer-identified men and

women, Orne (2013) argues that people have more choices to manage stigma than being forced to participate in a “normal,” non-stigmatized group where they may experience discrimination or join a stigmatized group with “like” individuals to buffer themselves from discrimination. His findings reveal that some queer young people purposefully maintain membership in “hostile” groups to challenge people’s negative beliefs. Other queer young people maintain connections to settings with perpetrators of stigma but adopt more socially-acceptable labels like “bisexual” rather than “gay” to minimize stigmatizing experiences. Lastly, some queer young people completely distance themselves from hostile groups and stigmatizing experiences altogether (Orne, 2013).

Orne (2013) argues that his work pushes stigma scholarship forward by applying the conceptual contributions of DuBois’ double consciousness framework to understand how stigmatized people can navigate multiple stigmatizing settings and still accept themselves. However, this research fails to consider how people from non-White racial groups may have to navigate both stigma against being a racial/ethnic minority and against being a sexual minority. Indeed, though Orne (2013) uses double consciousness as an analytical framework, he only mentions and analyzes the intersecting experiences of being a person of color and queer for one participant and never mentions the racial/ethnic identification of any other participants. Still, Orne (2013) provides an important theoretical contribution to our understanding of stigma because he identified alternative ways that queer young people manage stigma and negotiate interacting with people who may not accept homosexuality.

### *Gay Identity Disclosure*

Many scholars argue that disclosure of a hidden stigmatized identity, like being gay, is a way to gain control over discriminatory experiences and challenge stigma. Disclosure of one’s

hidden stigmatized identity may allow an individual to preempt involuntary revelations of the hidden stigma by others (Battle et al., 2004; Cain, 1991; Corrigan, Kosyluk, & Rüscher, 2013). Additionally, disclosure is seen as a way to increase visibility and add value to an otherwise condemned status (Dean, 1996; Petronio, 2002). Disclosure is defined as “revealing information about oneself to people who would not otherwise have access to that information” (Petronio, 2002, p. 67). Corrigan et al. (2007) argued that people with hidden stigmas, like being gay, might use disclosure as a strategy to increase a sense of legitimacy and avoid being labeled as a deceptive person. Furthermore, disclosure of a hidden stigmatized identity, like an HIV positive status, can increase access to support resources within environments, like churches, that do not normally accept that identity (Bauer, 2011). As such, people who disclose their gay identity often aim to increase recognition of their humanity and value as a member of the groups in which they participate (Dean, 1996).

Despite the potential benefits associated with gay identity disclosure, studies find that some LGBT may fear disclosure of their stigmatized identities because of concerns for personal safety and rejection in environments that do not accept the identity (Battle et al., 2004; Bauer, 2011; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). Depending on the context and potential threat of stigma, disclosure may not always be the most viable option. Consequently, many people with hidden stigmas must decide whether or not they will disclose their identities and directly engage with perpetrators of stigma. Orne (2013) finds that because the stigma attached to being gay is situational it is safe for LGBT individuals to disclose their gay identity in some circumstances but not in others.

However, in some cases, LGBT individuals may not have control over their disclosure status because others may discover and reveal information about their hidden stigma without

consent. To avoid disclosure, some LGBT may try to “pass” as a “normal” person without stigma (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004), but remaining silent about one’s gay identity often has detrimental effects on mental and physical health (Jeffries et al., 2013; Stutterheim et al., 2011; Syzmanski & Gupta, 2009; Wolitski, Jones, Wasserman, & Smith, 2006).

When LGBT individuals disclose their gay identity, they often are provided access to other options for managing stigma. Miller and Kaiser (2001) identify two types of responses to coping with stigma: voluntary disengagement and voluntary engagement. Other authors identify voluntary disengagement coping as withdrawing from stigmatizing situations, avoiding stigma by denying its existence, avoiding potentially stigmatizing situations, or forgiving prejudiced individuals (Choi et al., 2011; Miller & Stack, 2014; Orne, 2013). For example, LGBT individuals may avoid interaction with perpetrators of stigma and leave groups or institutions that stigmatize them (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Miller & Stack; Orne). In contrast, voluntary engagement is characterized as a strategy involving direct confrontation with the perpetrator of stigma (Choi et al., 2011; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Miller & Stack, 2014; Orne, 2013) and advocating on behalf of other LGBT individuals by becoming politically active or volunteering with LGBT advocacy organizations (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004).

None of these studies of gay identity disclosure address the role that racial identity might play in individuals’ use of these strategies. Many BGM have been characterized as deceptive because of their lack of gay identity disclosure in predominantly Black settings. Consequently, BGM have been labeled as being “on the down-low,” suggesting that they are purposefully hiding their sexuality in order to have relationships with women, which may put those women at risk for HIV/AIDS (Wolitski et al., 2006). However, there may be other reasons that BGM do not disclose their sexual orientation identity in predominantly Black churches. Fear and stigma

associated with disclosing one's gay identity may discourage BGM from revealing such information.

In many Black churches, there is an expectation that BGM will remain silent about their sexuality and not directly challenge anti-gay norms and treatment (Johnson, 2008; Ward, 2005). Disclosing one's gay identity may be perceived as an affront to the norms of respectable behavior expected of church members because of the association of homosexuality with sin and sexual deviance (Johnson, 1998; Lemelle & Battle, 2004; Pitt, 2010b). However, little is known about whether BGM actually *do* remain silent about their sexuality while participating in Black churches, and if so, for what reasons. More research is needed to understand the relationship between the strategies BGM use to manage stigma and the disclosure of their gay identities in spaces that affirm their Black identities, such as Black churches.

Few scholars have examined how gay identity disclosure may influence an individual's use of other strategies to manage stigma against homosexuality in predominantly Black churches. In addition, more information and understanding can be gleaned from how BGM may use gay identity disclosure as a means to gain control over stigmatized treatment within Black churches. Disclosure of their gay identity in Black churches may provide opportunities for BGM to engage in other strategies that challenge the anti-gay status quo in non gay-affirming Black churches and affirm their dignity as valuable members of their churches and as people.

Some scholars have examined the ways in which Black LGBT are managing the changing landscape of public attitudes toward homosexuality and identity conflict. In an qualitative study that included ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews with 25 Black LGBT people, Moore (2010) focused on Black LGBT people disclosing their gay identity while participating in Black communities as a strategy to integrate their Black and gay identities. She

found that among her participants, Black LGBT people attempted to increase the visibility of their gay sexuality and integrate it with their Black identity while maintaining connections to predominantly Black communities (Moore, 2010). While Moore's work is useful for understanding how Black LGBT people integrate their Black and gay identities while participating in Black communities, questions remain about whether Black LGBT people purposefully choose to participate in Black communities because of the salience of their Black identity, or if the strategy of disclosing their gay identity in Black communities is unique to Black LGBT members who choose to live in Black communities as opposed to those who choose to live in predominantly gay communities.

In an attempt to better understand the factors that influence the "outness" of Black LGBT individuals, Pastrana (2014) conducted a national study using a purposive sample of Black LGBT people. He found statistically significant predictors of "outness," or openness about being gay, to be family support, the belief that being gay was an important part of a person's identity, and having a connection to the LGBT community. However, given the previous research that highlights the importance of staying connected to Black communities for some BGM, Pastrana (2014) failed to consider whether BGM made distinctions between being connected to predominantly Black, White, or racially-mixed LGBT communities as an important factor in their level of openness about their gay identity. Additionally, it is still unknown whether Black LGBT participants in Pastrana's (2014) sample had a close connection to the Black community or if that connection held importance for gay identity disclosure. My study adds to this body of knowledge by teasing apart the distinctions some BGM make in their decisions to participate in predominantly Black and/or gay spaces and when, under what circumstances, and for what purpose they choose to disclose their gay identity.

### *Summary of Literature Review*

It becomes apparent that there are several gaps in our understanding of how people with multiple types of stigmatized identities manage stigma and reduce identity conflict. We know that stigma increases the salience of an identity, which, in turn, may lead to identity conflict; however, we do not know how the salience of that identity may shape the strategies a person might use to manage stigma. Additionally, research examining the strategies people use to manage multiple stigmas mostly focuses on hidden stigmas, such as mental health disorders or diseases. Although some research examines the strategies people with multiple types of stigmas, including visible and hidden stigmas such as being Black and gay, use to reduce identity conflict, those studies do not assess how people make decisions around participation in environments that support one stigmatized identity but discriminate against another. Additionally, there is much research examining the strategies gay men use to reconcile conflict between their religious and gay identities, yet the majority of studies exclude analyses of how race shapes these strategies and decisions around religious institutional participation. Finally, among studies that examine the strategies BGM use to reconcile identity conflict between being gay and religious in predominantly Black churches, few, if any, examine the differences between those who choose to continue church attendance and those who leave the church.

To address these empirical gaps, I ask the following research questions:

- 1) What influences do two types of stigmatized identities, like being both Black (visible) and gay (invisible), have on BGM's stigma management strategies?
- 2) What strategies do BGM use to manage multiple stigmatized identities, like being Black and gay, in Christian churches, an environment that supports one identity but may exacerbate the stigma attached to another?



3) How does participating in and/or maintaining connections to Christian churches shape the strategies BGM use to manage multiple stigmas?

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODS**

For this dissertation, I conducted a parallel multi-method study, which included in-depth interviews and online surveys with self-identified BGM, as well as, field notes collected from ethnographic observation at three different churches participants attended. These methods of data collection allowed me to assess the research questions from multiple perspectives. The interviews allowed me to collect stories related to the research questions in participants' own words. The survey allowed me to classify participants' responses using scales that measure Black and gay identity and religious involvement and to conduct analyses to understand the relationship between these constructs. Lastly, the ethnographic observations allowed me to better understand participants' experiences in religious institutions and how they functioned in those spaces by observing their interactions with pastors and congregants, listening to sermons and talking to church members.

Most previous studies examining BGM's experiences with intersectional identities, stigma, and/or experiences in churches either included ethnographic observations or interview data but rarely used a multi-methods approach. A parallel multi-method research design is slightly different from a mixed methods study because it collects data through multiple methods, but each method does not necessarily inform the process of the other. For example, I developed the survey questions and interview guide simultaneously, and 29 out of 31 interviewees took the survey. Although I followed up with interviewees to ensure they took the survey, two respondents did not respond to any of my follow-up correspondence. All interviewees indicated

in their consent forms whether they were willing to allow me to conduct observations at their church. I used insights gained from interviews to select churches in which to conduct ethnographic observations. Each interviewee described their religious experiences, the churches they would or would not attend, and the churches where they attended, if any, at the time of the interview. After completing the interviews, I analyzed patterns that emerged from the interviews to determine which types of churches to visit for ethnographic observation because I wanted to observe church contexts typically experienced by BGM participants. I collected interviews from July 2011 to January 2012, and conducted observations from January 2012 to the end of March 2012.

### *Recruitment*

The target population for this project was men who were 21 years or older, identified as African American or Black, and self-reported being sexually attracted to other men. The sample for this dissertation is unique from previous studies on BGM's experiences in churches because it includes men who do and do not attend church. I sampled men based on their identity as Black, male, and gay, bisexual or same gender loving. I did not specifically recruit men based on whether they attended church or not. I excluded men who were younger than 21 years old from inclusion in the study because they are less likely than older men to attend church regularly and are less religiously active than older Black Americans (Mattis et al., 2004). From a life course perspective, younger men are more likely to have a "quest theology;" that is, they are more likely than older men to be questioning religious doctrines and searching for a theology that best fits them (Thompson & Remmes, 2002). Additionally, researchers find that youth between 16-21 years old decrease church attendance as they age until they experience significant life events, such as a family death, having children, or marriage (Denton, Pearce, & Smith, 2008).

To recruit participants, I used a targeted snowball approach and continued to recruit participants for interviews and surveys until I reached saturation in data, which was determined by identifying repetition in themes and stories recounted by interviewees (Small, 2009). I used flyers, a letter explaining the project, phone calls, and in-person visits. The flyers included the title, “Church or No Church?: Black Men and Religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” and the description of the study included eligibility criteria, such as “Black/African-American self-identified gay, bisexual, same-gender-loving men who are 18 years and older.” I asked leaders from social and public health organizations, key informants, email listservs, and personal networks (established through previous work in HIV Prevention research and community engagement) to solicit participants for the study. I also recruited participants at a local gay pride festival using flyers and informal conversation. The most successful means of recruitment was through key-informant and snowball recruitment efforts.

I chose this strategy because obtaining a representative sample of self-identified BGM can be difficult. There is no definitive source to determine national-level demographic characteristics of LGBT people of color. Some studies have begun quantifying the population of BGM in the US (Battle, Pastrana, & Daniels, 2012), with some estimating the Black LGBT population comprises approximately 10% of the Black population and the largest share (between 11-16%) of the national LGBT population (Gates, 2014). For the purposes of this study, I aimed to collect data from a diverse sample of self-identified BGM by including men who were from multiple geographic regions and educational and income levels. Interview and survey participants were recruited from several locations across the US, including southeastern, southwestern and northeastern states and urban and rural locales, although the majority were recruited from the southeastern US. I recruited a total of 43 self-identified BGM to participate in

interviews, but only 31 men responded to follow-up emails and phone calls to participate.

It is important to note that because of the snowball recruitment method, some participants were connected to one another. The sample includes three couples in romantic relationships, including a legally married and a cohabitating couple. However, I interviewed each participant separately to maintain confidentiality. Men were also connected to each other through friendship networks. Six key informants from across the south and northeastern US connected me with different lines of friendship networks.

Data for this dissertation were collected over the span of one year, from June 2011 to June 2012. The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill approved the research design, recruitment materials, data collection tools, and analytical methods. I obtained verbal informed consent from all participants, and provided them with electronic personal copies of the informed consent document for their records. The consent forms included a category where participants could indicate whether they were willing to allow me to visit their church as an ethnographic observer. Participants also indicated whether they were willing to allow me to visit their church as someone they knew personally. During ethnographic observation at the churches, I spoke with the pastor of each church, announced that I was a graduate student conducting research on Black men in churches for my dissertation, and asked for verbal permission to conduct observations in church. I obtained verbal consent from pastors at each of the three churches I observed. All participants were given pseudonyms. Upon completion of data analysis, all data were de-identified to protect participants' personal information.

### *Interviews*

I constructed a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions that allowed

the respondents to explain their experiences in their own words and enabled me to capture the respondents' perspectives independent of constrained and pre-selected questionnaire categories (Patton, 2002). I developed the semi-structured interview guide by adapting questions from previous studies on BGM's experiences navigating intersectional identities (Bowleg, 2012; Hunter, 2010) and experiences in churches (Pitt, 2010), and previously validated survey items measuring Black identity (Sellers et al., 1997), attitudes toward homosexuality and personal gay identity (Mayfield, 2001), and religious and spiritual involvement (Levin et al., 1995).

The interviews assessed BGM's religious experiences, such as whether they attend church, information about their religious upbringing, how they came to attend their current church, and whether they have ever felt uncomfortable in the church. Sample questions included: "Tell me about your earliest church experiences. What were they like?" "How religious would you say you are now?" and "Are there any churches in the area that you would *not* attend? Why or why not?" Additionally, I asked BGM about their family background and upbringing, experiences they had with anti-gay messages or discrimination based on sexual orientation, and how they dealt with those experiences. I did not directly ask men about how they managed experiences with stigma. I asked participants about their experiences coming out and to whom they disclosed their sexuality, but I did not directly ask participants whether they disclosed their sexuality in churches. However, as they discussed their experiences in churches, many men volunteered this information. The full interview guide is provided in Appendix A.

I conducted 17 interviews in person and 14 by phone.<sup>1</sup> In-person interviews were conducted in rooms reserved at local public libraries to ensure safety, confidentiality, and

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<sup>1</sup> It was not feasible for me to travel throughout the country to conduct interviews, so I opted instead to conduct interviews outside of my geographical area by phone.

comfort. Telephone interviews were conducted via a secure conference call line that provided password-protected digital audio recordings. Each interview lasted between 1.5 to 2 hours. Interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed.

### *Surveys*

Twenty-nine of the self-identified Black gay male interviewees also fully completed the online survey directly before they participated in the in-depth interview. The other two interviewees did not complete the surveys despite repeated follow-up with them to do so. The surveys were collected using the online data collection tool, Qualtrics©, hosted through the password protected and fully encrypted UNC Chapel Hill server.

The survey questions were adopted from previously validated measures assessing religious identity, religious involvement, Black identity, internalized heterosexism, and gay identity. I used the survey data to investigate whether there were associations between racial identity salience, gay identity, and religious identity. Additionally, I examined whether patterns identified in the survey were congruent with the themes that emerged from the interviews and observations.

For the survey, I included questions from the Multidimensional Measure of Religious Involvement for African Americans (Levin et al., 1995) to assess participants' level of involvement in organizational and non-organizational religious activities, and their subjective religious identity. Levin et al. (1995) and Pearce and Denton (2011) argue that it is important to measure multiple dimensions of religious life because most studies only measure organizational religious involvement, without considering the role of subjective religious identity and non-organizational religiosity. Levin et al.'s (1995) measure is especially useful because it was validated on two sub-samples of African Americans with similar demographic characteristics from the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA), and considers the exogenous effects that

gender, age, education, marital status, employment status, residential location, and urbanicity have on religiosity.

Items assessing organizational religiosity include: “How often do you usually attend religious services,” and “Besides regular service, how often do you take part in other activities at your place of worship?” A sample item measuring non-organizational religiosity includes, “How often do you read religious books or other religious materials?” Response categories for each of the previously mentioned items included 1 = Never, 2 = Less than Once a Month, 3 = Once a Month, 4 = 2-3 Times a Month, 5 = Once a Week, 6 = 2-3 Times a Week, and 7 = Daily. Lastly, “How religious would you say you are?” is a sample item measuring subjective religiosity. Response categories included 1 = Not Religious at all, 2 = A Little Bit Religious, 3 = Somewhat Religious, and 4 = Very Religious. The complete list of survey items is provided in Appendix B. The sub scale measuring organizational religiosity obtained a strong overall fit for the sample of BGM included in this study ( $\alpha = .7891$ ) (Frey & Cissna, 2009: 95). However, the sub scale measuring non-organizational religiosity obtained a less than adequate overall fit for the study sample ( $\alpha = .6001$ ) (Frey & Cissna, 2009: 95).

I included the race centrality sub scale from the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI) to assess the salience of participants’ Black identity. The MIBI is a 51-item scale that measures four dimensions of Black racial identity: salience, centrality, ideology, and regard (Sellers et al., 1997). The MIBI has been used in several studies, such as one study that assessed the relationship between racial identity and psychological well-being among African American adolescents (Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006), and another that examined the implicit and explicit measures of sexual orientation attitudes among gay and straight men (Jellison, McConnell, & Gabriel, 2004). Although Sellers et al. (1997) mention salience as an



important aspect of racial identity, they do not include a specific measure of it because they argue that salience is situational, and changes according to whether a person's awareness of his/her racial identity is heightened; thus, it cannot be directly measured. Salience influences the other dimensions of racial identity, including centrality, and affects "the way a person experiences a particular situation" (Sellers et al., 1997:806). As a result, I used the sub-scale measuring racial centrality. Centrality is the extent to which it is a norm for a person to define her or himself by race (Sellers et al., 1997:806). Items measuring centrality include, "Overall, being Black has very little to do with how I feel about myself," and "I have a strong sense of belonging to Black people." These items assessed the importance of the participants' racial identity to their self-concept. Response categories included 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree. I reduced the number of response categories from seven to four so as to remain consistent with response categories for the other scales measuring gay and religious identities. I also reverse scored three items in the scale that indicated negative affect toward being Black so that 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, and 4 = Strongly Disagree. The Black identity centrality scale obtained strong fit with the study sample ( $\alpha = .8443$ ) (Frey & Cissna, 2009:95).

Lastly, I adapted questions from the Internalized Homonegativity Inventory (IHI) (Mayfield, 2001), which measures the negative attitudes gay men have about homosexual features in themselves and others. When items in the sub scales referred to "gay man/men," I altered the wording of the question to include "Black gay man/men" in order to reflect the demographics of the sample. The IHI includes items from the Gay Identity Questionnaire (GIQ) (Brady & Busse, 1994), which measures the six stages of homosexual identity development introduced by Cass (1979). Some items from the IHI include, "I feel ashamed of my

homosexuality,” “I am proud to be gay,” and “I believe it is morally wrong for men to be attracted to each other.” I included three sub scales from the IHI scale, including the gay affirming identity sub scale, the immorality of homosexuality sub scale, and the personal homonegativity sub scale. The gay affirming identity sub scales measures the extent to which respondents have adopted a personal attitude toward their gay identity. This sub scale obtained moderate fit with the study sample ( $a = .7678$ ) (Frey & Cissna, 2009:95). The immorality of homosexuality sub scale measures respondents’ negative moral attitudes of homosexuality in society. This sub scale obtained moderate fit with the study sample ( $a = .7739$ ) (Frey & Cissna, 2009:95). Lastly, the personal homonegativity sub scale assessed respondents’ level of internalized negative attitudes toward their own identity as gay and engaging in homosexual behavior. This sub scale obtained excellent fit with the study sample ( $a = .9197$ ) (Frey & Cissna, 2009:95). Other scholars have used the IHI inventory to examine how internalized oppressions affect psychological distress (Szymanski & Gupta, 2009). Szymanski and Gupta (2009) used a shortened form of the IHI, entitled the Internalized Heterosexism Scale, to examine the effect internalized heterosexism and racism had on queer people of color's psychological distress. The response categories for each item included 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree. I also reverse scored items that reflected negative sentiment toward being gay such that response categories were 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, and 4 = Strongly Disagree.

Some items in the survey, such as “Sometimes I feel that I might be better off dead than gay,” might upset some participants. Therefore, I provided participants with the contact information of a local psychologist who specialized in counseling African Americans and dealing with lesbian and gay issues.

### *Ethnographic Observations*

Upon completion of the interviews and surveys, I conducted observations at three churches that some participants attended. I used information gathered from the interviews and survey on whether respondents attended church and which type of church they attended to decide which churches to observe. I gained permission from three participants to attend their churches and conduct observations for one month each. I asked permission from church officials, such as the church pastor, to conduct observations, and informed them that my attendance was for research purposes.

I visited three churches that represented a variety of the types of churches participants attended, as well as the most commonly attended. They included a small, predominantly Black, non gay-affirming Pentecostal church; a small, predominantly Black, gay-affirming non-denominational church; and a medium-sized, racially mixed, gay-affirming non-denominational church.

During observations, I attended weekly Sunday services and Bible study sessions. Each visit lasted approximately two to three hours. The observations at each church focused on the content of the sermon, social interactions between Black men and other church members at church services, and other para-religious, organized activities in which participants were active (e.g., music ministry, AIDS ministry, singles or young adult ministry, pastoral ministry) (Shaw & McDaniel, 2007; Ward, 2005; Woodyard, Peterson, & Stokes, 2000). I also gathered data on the church's website, larger church structure (e.g., membership in national or worldwide church organization), and philosophy of the church and pastor. More specifically, I noted whether and how the pastors and congregants talked about sexuality and homosexuality, the content of sermons, biblical verses used in sermons, and conversations between congregants and/or

participants. I also noted how participants interacted with fellow congregants and the pastor, including, but not limited to, what they have conversations about, what they did not talk about, and how they talked about their personal lives and relationships. Additionally, I observed how participants interacted with other gay men and women in their congregation.

### *Data Analysis*

Given resource limitations, I analyzed interview transcripts and ethnographic field notes using Microsoft Word© and Microsoft Excel©. I employed the comparative, inductive method of coding to identify themes and exploratory relationships in the notes. I also developed theories and hypotheses from information I gathered in the data using thematic analysis (Gibbs, 2008).

The first stage of analysis began with multiple iterations of coding in which I labeled blocks of text with deductive codes based on interview questions. For example, I created codes based on direct responses to interview questions, such as, “compelled to leave church altogether.” I coded participant responses as 1 for “no” and 2 for “yes” for the respective deductive codes in an Excel spreadsheet (see full list of codes in Appendix C).

Next, I analyzed and re-coded each block of text by inductive themes for descriptive and interpretive meaning using the axial coding technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, I categorized text based on themes such as, “social distancing,” to identify language BGM used to separate themselves from stereotypes associated with the stigma attached to being Black and gay. Additionally, I categorized text based on themes such as, “opting out,” “avoidance,” “direct confrontation,” and “advocacy,” to identify strategies BGM used to manage the direct and indirect experiences they had with sexual orientation discrimination and anti-gay religious stigma. Opting out included times when participants physically left churches in the moment of discrimination, visited different churches, switched denominations, or stopped attending

altogether. Strategies were coded as avoidance if participants described walking away or remaining silent and “taking it” when enduring anti-gay treatment. Direct confrontation included instances in interviews when BGM disclosed their sexual orientation to church or families *in response to* experiences with anti-gay treatment, or had conversations or arguments with discriminators. Lastly, I coded strategies as advocacy when participants described being involved in organizations or mentoring programs for the specific purpose of helping LGBT or Black LGBT individuals and issues.

I coded and analyzed the survey data using STATA 13 Data Analysis and Statistical Software©. I calculated index scores for each sub scale by computing the row mean of each item. The organizational religiosity sub scale included different response categories for each item, so I recoded the response categories to match. In addition, the first item of the organizational religiosity sub scale had a response category that allowed respondents to indicate that they “never attended church.” I dropped eight respondents who selected “never attend church” because the skip pattern in the survey prevented them from answering the remaining organizational religiosity items for the sub scale. Subsequently, I recoded the response categories for some organizational religiosity items to reflect six response categories instead of seven, such that 1=Less than once a month and 6=Daily. Additionally, for the organizational religiosity items that had “no” or “yes” response categories, I recoded them to match the new response categories created for the other items, such that 1=No and 6=Yes. After calculating the index scores for each sub scale, I calculated the correlation scores for each sub scale.

To conduct descriptive analyses of the indices from the survey data, I calculated frequencies and percentages for items of interest. I also cross-tabulated variables of interest to determine if there were any relationships between Black, gay and religious identity and church

attendance patterns. I calculated a Fisher's exact test to assess the statistical significance of each cross-tabulation to better determine if there were any significant relationships between variables of interest. The Fisher's exact test is commonly used to determine statistical significance of contingency tables using data from small, nonrandom samples.

### *Limitations*

It is important to note that there are some limitations to this study design that prohibit generalization to all BGM's experiences. The study relies on a small, convenience sample of BGM who largely have attained college degrees and moderate to high incomes. These selective characteristics limit the generalizability of the findings to all BGM. Additionally, there are no comparison groups to determine if participants' experiences with stigma and identity conflict can be attributed to unique experiences related to their race, sexual orientation, gender, geographic region, or the particular type of church where they may attend. Lastly, stigma management and identity construction strategies may differ for BGM based on characteristics or experiences not captured in this study, such as differences in socioeconomic status, educational attainment, or region. Despite these limitations, this study provides insight into the mechanisms that influence this particular group of BGM's experiences navigating stigma, identity salience, decisions about institutional participation, and efforts to reduce identity conflict.

### *Reflecting on my Role as a Researcher*

As an African American female, I have experienced stigma and discrimination prior to the study. I believed that my membership in the Black community and ability to identify with marginalization and stigma influenced my ability to connect with and recruit participants. However, I also was aware of my "outsider within" status because I was not a Black gay man. Although I assumed the men would perceive me as an "insider" because we shared the same race

(Collins, 1986, 2000), I soon discovered that being Black would only allow me a certain amount of access because I was neither male nor gay. Thus, I gained entry into Black gay male spaces through key informants who introduced and vouched for me as a trustworthy person.

During recruitment and in the middle of interviews, some participants asked me what my racial background was, whether I was mixed, or if I was Black. My sexuality was questioned as well. One question in particular recurred from potential participants: “Are you family?” BGM were asking about my sexual orientation to assess my reasoning for asking questions about their experiences as BGM in church settings. They asked if I was part of the Black gay “family” because, in some ways, if I were perceived as bisexual or lesbian, I might be accepted more than if I were just a “curious” heterosexual woman. This question alerted me to the fact that some BGM might not trust me to talk about their most intimate and potentially painful experiences with participating in churches. However, despite the sensitivity of the research topic and being questioned by recruits about my racial identity and sexual orientation, I recruited thirty-one self-identified BGM to participate in this study. Participants were open to talking to me candidly about their experiences perhaps because I was connected to someone they knew and trusted.

## **CHAPTER 4: DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a description of the participants, findings from the survey, and each church where I conducted ethnographic observations. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 57 years old. All identified as African American or Black and as men who were sexually attracted to other men. Two men who identified as Caribbean Black and one man identified himself as Puerto Rican and Black. Specifically, participants self-identified their sexualities as: gay (n=25, 86.21%), bisexual (n=2, 6.9%), and other (asexual/homoromantic n=1, 3.4%; same gender loving n=1, 3.4%). While participants' openness about their sexuality may signify a level of comfort with their identity, it is important to remember that identities are constantly in flux and situational (Moore, 2010; Moore, 2011). Table 4.1 contains descriptive statistics on the demographic characteristics of the sample. The table includes demographic data from both the interview transcript analysis and survey data collection. I indicate in the table from which source the data originated.



<b>Table 4.1: Demographics of Sample (N=31 from interviews, 29 from surveys)</b>		
<b>Age (from interviews)</b>		
23-29 years old	13	42%
30-39 years old	12	39%
40-49 years old	3	10%
50-57 years old	3	10%
TOTAL	31	100%
<b>Income (from survey)</b>		
Less than \$30,000	10	32%
\$30,000 to \$49,999	9	29%
\$50,000 to \$69,999	8	26%
More than \$70,000	2	6%
TOTAL	29	100%
<b>Educational Attainment (from survey)</b>		
Some college, no degree; or 2 year Associate's degree	9	29%
Bachelor's degree	8	26%
Graduate or professional degree	12	39%
TOTAL	29	100%

The education and income levels of participants indicate that the majority of participants were middle class, graduated from college and earned between \$30,000 and \$69,999 annually. Participants varied in their early life experiences in regards to the size of the towns they lived in, the types of schools they attended, and the neighborhoods in which they lived. The BGM participating in this study grew up in a variety of geographic locations, including rural and small towns and mid-sized and large cities in all regions of the US. The majority (n=16) grew up in predominantly Black neighborhoods, while six men grew up in racially mixed neighborhoods and four grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods. The racial demographics of the schools where participants attended while growing up were somewhat different than the demographics of the neighborhoods in which they grew up because some men attended more than one type of school, switched schools, or attended charter schools that were disconnected from their neighborhoods. The schools BGM attended were more diverse than their neighborhoods, such that the majority (n=16) of participants reported that they attended racially

mixed schools, eleven attended predominantly White schools, and only seven attended predominantly Black schools. These summary statistics indicate that BGM in the study largely were reared in racially segregated churches and neighborhoods, but had some exposure to people of other races through school attendance. Their experiences growing up in and participating in racially segregated neighborhoods and churches may have had an influence on the ways in which they see themselves as Black and gay and their current patterns of church attendance.

Baptist (including Missionary & Southern)	16	52%
African Methodist Episcopal (including A.M.E. Zion affiliation)	4	13%
Church of God in Christ	4	13%
Roman Catholic	4	13%
Jehovah's Witness	3	10%
Non-Denominational	2	6%
Pentecostal Holiness	2	6%
Apostolic	1	3%
Church of God Prophecy	1	3%
Church of God Seventh Day	1	3%
Methodist	1	3%
United Holy Churches	1	3%

Table 4.2 provides a description of the types of churches interviewees indicated they attended while growing up. Participants represented a variety of religious denominational affiliations. According to interview data, BGM often attended more than one denomination while growing up. Thus, the categories for denominational affiliation in Table 4.2 are not mutually exclusive and reflect the words participants used to describe them. The most common denominational affiliation was Baptist. However, many of the churches participants attended while growing up were historically Black churches, such as, Church of God in Christ (COGIC) and African Methodist Episcopal (AME) churches founded in response to being excluded from predominantly White Christian churches during the times of slavery and Jim Crow segregation

(Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Additionally, a number of interviewees attended a combination of different types of churches throughout their lives, including racially mixed (n=3) and predominantly White (n=3) churches in combination with Black churches.

#### *Types of churches BGM attended*

According to survey results, regular church attendance was split. Half (n=15) of the men attended church, yet fourteen men did not attend church at the time of their participation in the study. However, the survey findings do not tell us why BGM decided to attend or not attend churches and if the type of church they attended was important. Interview findings reveal more nuanced information about BGM's willingness to attend particular types of churches. In order to better understand BGM's willingness to attend particular types of churches, I asked them to elaborate in their interviews about which types of churches they would or would not attend and why.

Findings from the interviews reveal that BGM's church attendance patterns and relationship to Black and gay-affirming churches were more varied than the survey results suggest. Each of the men who indicated in their survey that they did not attend church revealed in their interviews that they maintained connections to predominantly Black churches (either gay affirming or not) through occasional visits or financial support. Thus, it is more appropriate to describe these men as those who did not attend church *regularly* because even though some indicated on the survey they that did not attend church, they sometimes visited and maintained other connections to predominantly Black churches. According to the interview findings, some BGM who did not attend church regularly also visited non-Christian meditation centers or watched church via TV or Internet, either in combination with or as a replacement for church attendance. The discrepancy in reporting of church attendance patterns found in the survey and

interview findings indicates that the interview data offers deeper insights than the survey into BGM's experiences in churches. The interview findings, which I will examine in further detail in chapters five, six and seven, also implicate that scholars should include questions about visiting churches, occasional church visits, tithing patterns, and membership status in addition to indicators of church attendance and holding leadership positions in survey instruments measuring organizational religious involvement. BGM explained in their interviews that they chose to engage in worship practices in non-Christian meditation centers and/or in private spaces as a way to minimize experiences with anti-gay stigma in Black churches while holding on to their faith. The fact that BGM continued to maintain connections to Black churches and other worship spaces despite not attending regularly is an indication of the importance of their faith in their lives.

Sixteen men reported that they attended church at the time of their interview. These men indicated that they attended a variety of churches, including GACs (n=6), gay-neutral churches (n=5), and non-GACs (n=5), all of which were predominantly Black. I define gay-neutral churches as those participants described as not delivering blatantly anti-gay nor gay-affirming messages. Thus, the types of churches BGM attended depended on whether the church was predominantly Black and whether it delivered anti-gay messages.

At the time of their interviews, participants indicated that they attended and/or visited a variety of types of churches, including predominantly White gay-affirming churches, predominantly Black gay-affirming churches, and predominantly Black non gay-affirming and gay-neutral churches. However, survey findings show that participants only attended or maintained membership in predominantly Black churches (n=29). Thus, despite prior experience and a willingness to visit non-Black churches, all men in the study chose to continue

participating in predominantly Black churches either through attendance or financial membership. In addition, six participants described themselves as pastors or ministers at their churches. These descriptive statistics provide a basic sense of how connected BGM in the study were to predominantly Black churches, either through attendance, financial membership, or serving in the role of pastor or minister.

Survey findings indicate that participants' denominational affiliations at the time of their interviews included African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) (n=1), Baptist (n=8), Church of God (n=1), Pentecostal (n=2), non-denominational Christian (n=2), "Other" (n=3) and eight missing responses of men who did not answer this survey item. The eight who did not answer the item asking about current denominational affiliation also indicated that they no longer maintained membership at any church. Thus, while eight disaffiliated from any denomination, the majority maintained a denominational identity despite not maintaining regular attendance. It is possible that BGM's variation in church attendance patterns and the types of churches they attended may be influenced by the salience of their Black and gay identities. I now turn to survey findings that showcase how BGM scored on the sub scales measuring Black identity centrality, gay identity indicators, and religious involvement.

#### *Average Scores on Black Identity Centrality, Gay Identity Indicators, and Religious Involvement*

To gain an overall better sense of participants' Black identity centrality, gay affirming identity, immorality attitudes toward homosexuality, personalized homonegativity, organizational religiosity and non-organizational religiosity, I examine survey data. In the surveys, I measured Black identity centrality, gay identity, and religious involvement using sub scales previously validated on Black respondents. The descriptions for each sub scale can be found in the methodology section (Chapter 3). I calculated the mean scores for each sub scale

(See Table 4.3). On average, respondents had high scores related to the centrality of their Black identity (mean index score: 2.9871, 1= “Strongly Disagree” to 4= “Strongly Agree”). This average score indicates that BGM’s Black identity was a salient part of their self-concept and relationship to other Black people, but some items may not have resonated as strongly with participants. Similarly, respondents had high average scores related to their endorsement of a gay-affirming identity (mean index score: 3.1092, 1=Strongly Disagree to 4=Strongly Agree). This finding is not surprising considering the fact that participants self-selected into the study as self-identified Black and gay men. Respondents also generally scored low on items measuring negative attitudes about the morality of homosexuality and negative beliefs about their personal homosexual behavior and gay identity. The mean score for immorality beliefs about homosexuality was 1.2758 (1= “Strongly Disagree” to 4= “Strongly Agree”), and the mean score for personal homonegativity was 1.6363 (range 1= “Strongly Disagree” to 4= “Strongly Agree”), which are both low and indicate BGM’s rejection of negative attitudes toward homosexuality

Lastly, I assessed BGM’s level of involvement in organized religious activities and non-organized religious activities as a way to measure their religiosity and spirituality. The mean score for organizational religiosity was 2.5393 (1= “Never,” 2 = “Less than Once a Month,” 3 = “Once a Month,” 4 = “2-3 Times a Month,” 5 = “Once a Week,” 6 = “2-3 Times a Week,” and 7 = “Daily”), and the mean score for non-organizational religiosity was 3.5689 (range 1= “Never” to 4= “All the Time”). These mean scores indicate that BGM were not highly involved in organizational religious activities, including church attendance and holding leadership positions, but were highly involved in non-organizational religious activities, such as praying and reading religious texts.

To assess the preliminary relationship between each of the sub scales, I calculated the

correlations of the index scores for each sub scale (see Table 4.3). I will highlight some of the strongly correlated relationships between variables of interest to provide an indication of some of the patterns between Black identity centrality, gay identity measures, and religious involvement. Black identity centrality and the sub scale measuring gay-affirming identity have a marginally significant, positive correlation with each other. This indicates that in general respondents who scored highly on Black identity centrality also scored highly on gay affirming identity; thus, they have fairly positive attitudes toward being Black and gay . Additionally, Black identity centrality and non-organizational religious involvement have a positive correlation, although the relationship is weak and not statistically significant. This indicates that respondents scored high on spiritually-related, para-religious activities, like prayer and reading religious books, and these activities were also associated with a positive Black identity. Lastly, non-organizational religious involvement is positively correlated with moral attitudes toward homosexuality, however, it is also not statistically significant. This relationship indicates that involvement in spiritually-related, non-organizational religious activities may have a positive influence on moral attitudes toward homosexuality, or vice versa.

<b>Table 4.3: Mean and Correlation Scores for Black and Gay Identity and Religious Involvement Sub Scales</b>							
	<b>Mean (Range)</b>	<b>1.</b>	<b>2.</b>	<b>3.</b>	<b>4.</b>	<b>5.</b>	<b>6.</b>
<b>1. Black ID Centrality</b>	2.9871 (1-4)	1.0000					
<b>2. Gay Affirming ID</b>	3.1091 (1-4)	0.3534*	1.0000				
<b>3. Immorality of Homosexuality</b>	1.2758 (1-4)	-0.2554	-0.7732***	1.0000			
<b>4. Personalized Homo-Negativity</b>	1.6363 (1-4)	-0.2231	-0.6385***	0.6538***	1.0000		
<b>5. Non- Organizational Religious involvement</b>	2.5393 (1-4)	0.1677	-0.0676	0.1403	-0.0546	1.0000	
<b>6. Organizational Religious Involvement</b>	3.5689 (1-7)	0.0878	0.0501	0.0953	0.0932	0.7805***	1.0000
*Significantly correlated at the $p < 0.10$ level **Significantly correlated at the $p < 0.05$ level ***Significantly correlated at the $p < .001$ level							

After assessing the correlations between the variables, I cross-tabulated variables of interest with demographic characteristics of the participants to see if there were any differences in participants' outcomes by age, income or education. Educational attainment had some influence on how men scored on the immorality of homosexuality sub scale, such that men with graduate or professional degrees were significantly more likely than those with some college and Bachelor's degrees to have positive attitudes toward morality of homosexuality (Fisher's exact = 0.025). There was no difference by age, income, or education for the gay-affirming sub scale or the personal homonegativity sub scale. There was no difference by age, income or education for the Black centrality sub scale. There was also no difference by age, income or education for organizational and non-organizational religious involvement. The Fisher's exact scores for these cross-tabulations are available upon request. These findings indicate that demographic characteristics were not closely related to BGM's Black identity centrality or levels of religious involvement, and some other factor not included in the survey may better explain the differences



in church attendance patterns for BGM.

It was surprising to discover that the indicators for Black and gay identity were highly and positively correlated given the literature which states that there is a conflict between those identities for most BGM. In contrast to previous scholars who posit that Black and gay identities are competing, the survey findings suggest that they are not. This suggests that negotiations of identity conflict for BGM has less to do with how they see themselves than it may do with how others treat them. Perhaps the high correlation between the indicators for Black and gay identity is indicative of participants' high self-esteem and their level of comfort with both identities. It is important to consider the sample of men who were included in this study. BGM who participated in this study were open about their gay identity and self-selected into the study knowing that it would be examining their experiences in churches as sexual minority men.

#### *Description of Churches Observed*

Based on the types of churches that participants described in their interviews and with their consent, I selected three different churches to attend that were within driving distance and in which participants indicated their consent to allow me to conduct observations. I chose to conduct observations at a predominantly Black church that did not openly affirm homosexuality, and a predominantly Black and a predominantly White church that both openly affirmed and welcomed lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender members. The Black non gay-affirming church will be referred to as “BNGAC.” The Black gay-affirming church will be referred to as “BGAC,” and the White gay-affirming church will be referred to as “WGAC.”

#### *Predominantly Black, Non Gay-affirming Church*

BNGAC is a small, Pentecostal holiness church located in a medium sized southern city (population approximately 60,000; 72% White, 10% Black), adjacent to a larger metropolitan

area. The church was located in a building that provided office space to different businesses. The sign to signify the location of the church outside the building simply said, "CHURCH," in blue all-caps on the top front of the building. Inside, there are two columns of seating, with about 4-5 moveable chairs covered in maroon fabric in each row, and about 15-20 rows. There are small windows along the right side of the sanctuary with frilly white curtains covering the windows and maroon plush carpet. On the Sundays I observed, there were approximately 30-40 regular attendees at each Sunday service, with an even split of Black male and female congregants. Congregants ranged in age between newborn to approximately 70 years old, with about 10-15 young adult men and women, approximately 10-15 children ranging in age from newborn to 18 years old, and the remaining congregants over 40 years old.

The senior pastor was a Black woman in her early 50s, and her husband served as the deacon. Worship in BNGAC included up-beat music, speaking in tongues, prophesying, congregational expressions of praise, dancing, and physical touch. The majority of congregants always wore business-like clothes to church. Men wore suits and dress shoes and women who wore dresses with stockings, heels, and wide-brimmed hats. The church pastor and her associate pastor, who was also a Black woman, wore traditional robes with purple stoles.

Both women were fairly conservative in their sermons regarding gender roles for men and women. For example, in one sermon, the associate pastor relayed a story about a time when she was in high school and a boy in her class asked her to dance. She enthusiastically agreed and began to dance on the floor, but he stopped dancing with her and admonished her by whispering in her ear, "I thought you were saved." She used that story to convey the message that women should show men how they are focused on God and not secular pleasures in order to find good and lasting relationships. In the same sermon, the associate pastor made the argument that as a

Good Samaritan, “we gotta learn to embrace the sinner before we address the sin. There’s gonna be some twitching men and some strong women, and tattooed men in church. Jesus is not at the well anymore, but we have to show them how to recognize their gift of love.” The irony of this statement was that she used diminutive and stigmatizing language to describe potential congregants who would need to be shown love and acceptance to encourage them to continue attending church. I regularly heard messages reinforcing the idea that non-traditional presentations of gender and sexuality were tolerated, but unacceptable when I attended the church.

Despite having a female pastor, the church continued to reinforce traditional gender roles by having only male ministers and men as designated communicators with God. Frank (23) served an integral role in the church as a youth group leader and a minister in the church. Additionally, he was one of the few members who were allowed to speak in tongues in the church, in addition to Prophet Oscar, who was the designated or “anointed” prophet for the church. This designation as a minister and person who could speak in tongues signified his leadership position in the church and his male privilege. Importantly, because of his leadership position, Frank was not open about his sexuality in BNGAC. However, he found ways to engage in subversive acts to challenge the anti-gay norms in his church. Frank brought his partner to church with him regularly. Although they usually entered church together, Frank and his partner never sat together and had minimal interaction with each other while in church. This was done to minimize negative treatment and to distance them from the stigma attached to being gay in his church. Additionally, Frank invited his Black gay male friends to attend church, including another study participant, John (26), who was also the founder of a new Black, gay-affirming church. Frank’s decision to invite his male partner and other openly gay Black men to church

subtly subverted the anti-gay norms of the church while partially embracing his gay identity. These observations signaled to me the complex ways in which BGM like Frank attempt to navigate membership in predominantly Black churches that do not affirm homosexuality. It is important to note that many BGM also expressed an interest, or at least a curiosity, in visiting or attending predominantly Black, gay-affirming churches.

### *Predominantly Black, Gay-affirming Church*

BGAC is a small church that is connected to a gay-affirming denomination commonly associated with predominantly White churches. BGAC was located in a large, southern city (population approximately 250,000, 43% White, 41% Black). It is situated on a property nestled in the back of a neighborhood about ten minutes from the main street. The church was a newly built structure with an angled roof, large windows on all sides, and a cross on top of the roof. The inside was newly constructed and had modern decorations, with large round lampshades hanging from the arched ceiling, purple carpet, purple cloth chairs, and lots of natural light from the windows.

The sanctuary was small, and seated approximately 45-50 people. On average, approximately 30 congregants attended each service I attended. I attended four church services over the span of a month. The majority (approximately 20-25) were women, and mostly Black, with three or four White women. There were only about 5-10 men at each service, one of whom was White. The remaining men, mostly Black, were different each Sunday. There was only one family, a Black lesbian couple and their two teenage children, who regularly attended services. Congregants ranged between 13 and 65 years old, but most seemed to be in their 40's. Some female congregants wore men's suits and ties and others wore dresses. During my visits, I did not hear any criticism of how congregants chose to dress and they openly displayed affection

toward their same-sex partner. Although the church was predominantly Black, some interview participants indicated that they were hesitant to attend because it was associated with a predominantly White, gay-affirming denomination and was mostly comprised of women. Of the men I spoke to at the church when I visited, the majority indicated that they were visiting or were from out of town.

Wesley (56) was the interim pastor of the BGAC I observed, but during his interview, he disclosed to me that he would be stepping down within the next few months. He indicated that he had some problems with the way people at the church were expecting it to be “like a traditionally Black church in its style of worship and administrative functioning.” He explained that congregants wanted fundamentalist teachings of biblical passages, and continued to internalize messages that they would go to hell because they were gay. These experiences created a dissonance between what he was seeking individually for spiritual fulfillment, his desire to integrate his gay identity into his spiritual life, and his obligation to serve his congregants. Ultimately, Wesley left BGAC to begin visiting other churches, and when I conducted observations, the church had a series of visiting pastors who delivered sermons.

Each guest pastor was female, with three Black women and one White woman, delivering sermons with common themes around accepting oneself as gay, being morally sound, and trusting in God to provide respite during times of struggle. Each pastor also wore very traditional robes and stoles when they celebrated service. One visiting pastor delivered a sermon as an “interview” with the church, conveying the message: “No one’s life who we touch will be unaffected by us, especially when we live in God’s word. ...Even when we are challenged, your light will always be there because God put it there. The single most important function of the church is discipleship. We are called to influence others.” Messages like these encouraged

congregants to be good stewards toward others and welcome people into the church. In contrast to the sermon delivered at BNGAC, they did not castigate congregants or visitors based on their gender presentation or physical appearance.

*Predominantly White, Gay-affirming Church*

WGAC is associated with the same predominantly White, gay-affirming denomination as BGAC. WGAC is located in a large, southern city (population approximately 430,000, 58% White, 28% Black), situated in an affluent, predominantly White neighborhood on a city street with heavy traffic. The church building was much larger than both BNGAC and BGAC. It has two levels, a kitchen and cafeteria, meeting rooms, and a sanctuary that held approximately 200 people. When I attended, there were approximately 100-150 congregants at each service, with approximately 20-25% White congregants, 70% Black, and 5% who were Latino or Asian. Interestingly, interviewees described it as “a predominantly White church with a Black pastor.” Others described the church as “mixed,” but with a “White worship style.” The description of the church as predominantly White with a White worship style is likely influenced by the fact that WGACs often practice culturally unfamiliar worship styles to what many BGM in this study were used to and had White congregants in leadership positions. .

Congregants ranged in age between 5 and 70 years old, however the majority were between 30 and 40 years old. There were some college-aged students who visited occasionally as well. WGAC was also mostly comprised of women, but had more male congregants than BGAC. On each Sunday, I counted approximately 8 to 10 Black men in attendance. In addition to racial/ethnic diversity and a gay-affirming mission, WGAC provided free hot meals after each service, support services for the homeless, and drug rehabilitation support groups. These

additional services were both reflective of the larger size and monetary support of the church, as well as the needs of the congregants.

WGAC had many couples, including interracial same-sex couples, and presented many visible markers of its association with being a gay-affirming church. Many male congregants wore dresses, wigs, and high heels, and female congregants wore dress shirts, slacks, and ties, all of which indicate a level of acceptance of gender bending. Inside the sanctuary on the left side of the wall were rainbow colored banners hung on the walls from the ceiling to the floor with words reflecting the gay-affirming mission of the church.

The pastor of WGAC was a Black transgender man who was around 45 to 50 years old. He wore all black clothes, with a black t-shirt, a black leather vest, and black denim pants. His attire was very casual compared to the pastors at the other churches I observed, which reflected an overall informal culture at the church. The pastor often delivered sermons that directly addressed issues of rejection related to being gay and addicted to drugs, and encouraged congregants to believe in God's strength, love and forgiveness. For example, during one sermon, he retold the biblical story of the prodigal son to portray him as a son struggling with his sexuality:

He left home, leaving his inheritance, thinking his father wouldn't accept him for being gay. He got caught up with alcohol, drugs, and sex. Then the economy started to fail and there were no jobs available. He started working with animals on a farm to earn money and food. He was so poor and desperate that he fought with the animals for their food. He was afraid to go home to "be true to me. I'm afraid my father will reject and hate me."

The pastor changed the characteristics of the prodigal son in the parable as a way to appeal to congregation members who were struggling with their sexuality and drug addiction. His decision

to explicitly address issues of sexuality and drug abuse in his sermons was different from both BNGAC and BGAC for a few reasons. First, neither BNGAC nor BGAC ever explicitly discussed sexuality in their sermons, although both attempted to convey a message of love and openness to all congregants. Additionally, WGAC's informal style of sermon and decision to modernize the details of the sermon were ways to provide a safe space for congregants and create a welcoming environment to all, which was in contrast to the relatively formal styles of worship practiced in the predominantly Black churches.

Both the predominantly Black non gay-affirming and gay-affirming churches were small churches that incorporated Black cultural elements into worship, such as singing gospel music, shouting and vocal praising during sermons. They both attempted to convey messages of acceptance, discipleship, and receiving and giving out the love of God; however, the BNGAC sanctioned non-traditional displays of sexuality and gender performance.

While the BGAC adopted a mission to accept lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender members, the pastors often did not explicitly address anti-gay discrimination and rejection that congregants might experience. The implied acceptance of homosexuality in the sermons was one way to minimize stigma against homosexuality in church while also catering to African American styles of worship. Lastly, the WGAC was the most explicit in its acceptance of homosexuality, yet many interviewees expressed their discomfort with attending because of the church's association with White congregants, White styles of worship, and blatant displays of sexuality and gender nonconformity. As such, the hidden stigma attached to homosexuality became visible in the WGAC, and was exacerbated by some participants' feelings of discomfort in a "predominantly White" church.



In the following chapters, I will examine some of the themes that emerged from the church observations in greater depth. The interviews reveal different ways in which experiences with stigma informs BGM's church-going decisions (Chapter 5); the strategies BGM use to construct new identities that separate them from anti-gay stigma in Black churches and allow them to integrate their Black, gay and faith-based identities (Chapter 6); and how BGM negotiate gay identity disclosure in Black churches (Chapter 7).

## **CHAPTER 5: “SEARCHING FOR WHOSOEVER MINISTRIES”: EXAMINING BLACK GAY MEN’S CHURCH-GOING DECISIONS AND PARTICIPATION**

I guess coming into yourself, you come into that part of yourself to when you notice that on top of being Black, [I’m] also a man who’s heavily stigmatized in both the Black and other [White] community and I’m also gay. So it came down like a triple weight. *Deon*

Deon’s (28) statement highlights the dilemma this dissertation addresses. Specifically, in this chapter I focus on BGM’s decision making around church participation. Considering that BGM hold religion to be important in their lives and see religion as closely linked to their Black identity (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; McRoberts, 2003; Seegers, 2007), how do they manage this “triple weight” with respect to church participation and attendance? What can these decisions tell us about the salience of Black and gay identity among BGM?

The decisions people make about institutional participation in response to managing multiple stigmas can provide insight into whether the visibility of a stigma influences the salience of an identity and drives their strategies to manage stigma. Some research has been done examining people with multiple types of stigmas and the decisions they make in regards to membership and participation on the community level. These studies find that BGM are more likely to maintain membership in predominantly Black settings when their Black identity is salient and important in their lives. In contrast, when BGM hold their gay identity to be more important, they are more likely to participate in predominantly gay settings (Hunter, 2010; Icard, 1986). However, BGM are not always welcome in certain settings based on their identity. Some

predominantly Black settings tend to be less accepting of their gay identity. Some predominantly gay settings tend to be predominantly White and less accepting of their Black identity (Hunter, 2010). Thus, BGM face a dilemma because there are few alternative spaces where both identities are accepted. The limitation of previous research is that scholars primarily examine participants already participating in predominantly Black or gay settings without considering the decision-making process that may determine which spaces they join as a way to minimize stigmatizing experiences. To address this gap, I examine church-going decisions and participation as a way to better understand the relationship between experiences with stigma, identity salience and institutional participation.

Previous research is mostly based on understanding the relationship between one stigma and the salience of one identity. Few scholars assess whether experiencing two types of stigmas may have a different influence on identity salience. I argue that one type of stigma may weigh more than another type of stigma in shaping identity salience because of a person's ability to control whether others can readily perceive the stigma. In this chapter, I examine two types of stigmas: stigmas attached to visible characteristics, such as race, and stigmas attached to hideable characteristics, such as sexual orientation. Both types of stigmas, as well as the discrimination experiences that catalyze them, can make some identity statuses more salient in particular contexts. I focus on the stigmas attached to being Black and gay. Black identity has been shown to be particularly and primarily salient for African Americans and a buffer against discriminatory experiences (Sellers et al., 1997; Shelton & Sellers, 2000). Gay identities are also shown to be particularly salient for LGBT individuals (Bowleg, 2013; Hunter, 2010; Rosario et al., 2004). Yet, because of stigmatizing experiences related to those identity statuses, one's racial status or sexual orientation can produce identity conflicts (Bowleg, 2013; Hunter, 2010; Rosario et al.,

2004). These conflicts arise because of discrepancies between the way individuals with marginalized identity statuses see themselves and the way they are treated in society. In order to navigate identity conflicts, people may engage in various strategies to minimize stigmatizing experiences, including making decisions about institutional participation and minimizing one's association with stigmatized visible characteristics.

It is important to examine the relationship between multiple types of stigma, identity salience and decisions about participation in particular institutions because people who manage multiple types of stigmas experience lowered status in society (Shelton et al., 2010), higher rates of depression (Holden et al., 2012), and often face obstacles in accessing resources and social support (Daftary, 2012). Indeed, Daftary (2012) found that patients contending with HIV and tuberculosis diagnoses distanced themselves from HIV positive others and not necessarily tuberculosis positive others. Additionally, the visible scars related to HIV infection made it harder for them to hide stigma. This finding suggests that the visibility of stigmatized characteristics people have may carry more weight because they limit people's ability to hide stigmatizing characteristics and their access to resources and social support (Daftary, 2012). However, Daftary (2012) did not examine whether the visibility of the stigmatized characteristics influenced participants' identity salience. Understanding the relationship between different types of stigma and identity salience is important because it has implications for understanding how stigma may drive people's identity salience and subsequent decisions about institutional participation. Thus, I seek to assess what church-going decisions tell us about the process of negotiating stigma and understanding the potential influence stigma has on the salience of Black and gay identities. Additionally, I seek to assess whether visible or hidden stigma has more weight in determining BGM's decisions about institutional participation.

Little is known about the extent to which BGM attend predominantly Black versus gay-affirming churches. It is possible that they choose to participate in predominantly Black churches that affirm their Black identity. Yet because of the potential stigmatizing experiences BGM may have in predominantly Black churches, it is possible that BGM may seek alternative church spaces that affirm them for being gay, or stop church attendance altogether. The objective of this chapter is to address the following questions:

- 1) What do BGM's church-going decisions tell us about the salience of their Black and gay identities?
- 2) How does the type of stigma attached to visible versus hideable characteristics influence BGM's church-going decisions?

This chapter begins by examining the survey data to assess BGM's church attendance patterns. I examine the types of churches BGM attend, if any at all. Specifically, I focus on whether they attend predominantly Black gay-affirming or non gay-affirming churches, or predominantly White gay-affirming churches. This will give us some sense of whether one identity is more salient for BGM in the study in regards to their church-going decisions. Then I move to an analysis of how stigma influences BGM's decisions about which types of churches they would attend and why. Overwhelmingly, BGM characterized predominantly Black churches that did not blatantly stigmatize homosexuality or emphasize visible characteristics of homosexuality as the ideal type of church. Lastly, I examine the historical and cultural significance of predominantly Black churches in BGM's lives to show how the stigma against being gay complicated that relationship.

### *Results*

As reported in chapter 4, BGM church attendance patterns depend on both racial

demographics as well as the church's stance on homosexuality; however, the racial demographics seemed to matter more. The survey results (based on 29 participants) indicated that 15 men were official members of a church at the time of their interview while 14 men were not. However, 21 men attended or maintained connections to predominantly Black churches and the remaining eight did not attend any church at all.

Given the connections BGM in the study have to predominantly Black churches, we might assume that Black identity salience has a major influence on decisions to attend a particular type of church. I examine survey data to determine if there is a statistically significant relationship between participants' Black identity salience and church membership and attendance patterns.

In order to assess the relationship between Black identity centrality and participants' relationship to churches, I first created sub-categories of "high Black centrality" and "low Black centrality." These categories allowed me to assess whether there are differences between BGM who scored high or low on Black identity centrality. It was important to aggregate the data in this way because of the small sample size. To create the sub-categories of "high" and "low" Black centrality, I calculated the mean index scores of the Black centrality sub scale, and then I calculated the percentile scores to determine where men fell on the Black centrality sub scale. Next, I stratified the index scores of the Black centrality sub scale into five distinct categories based on whether their responses fell into a percentile category. The percentile categories included: 10% and below, 25 to 49%, 50 to 74%, 75 to 89%, and 90% and above. Once the index scores were stratified into percentile categories, I calculated the midpoint. I then grouped respondents into the "low Black centrality" and "high Black centrality" categories based on whether their responses fell above or below the weighted midpoint. The difference between the

low Black centrality group and the high Black centrality group was statistically significant. I repeated this method for all of the sub scales.

This type of categorization may result in an arbitrary distinction between participants based on their sub scale index scores and will not necessarily translate to being identified as a person or group with high versus low scores based on the full range of response items. For example, the mean midpoint for the Black centrality scale was 3, which is actually high if we compare it to the response categories of the sub scale, which ranged from 1-4. However, I am also interested in understanding how respondents scored in relation to each other as a way to better understand which men are more likely to engage in particular stigma management strategies and church attendance than others. Thus, I believe the method of analysis I chose is appropriate for the purposes of this study.

Participants' index scores on the Black centrality sub scale range from 2.125 to 4 (response categories ranged from 1 to 4, with 4 categorized as the highest score for Black identity centrality), with the midpoint being 3 (Table 5.1). Sixteen participants are categorized as having "low Black centrality" and 13 respondents are categorized as having "high Black centrality."

<b>Table 5.1: Dichotomized Scores of Black Identity Centrality</b>	
<b>Black Identity Centrality</b> <i>(Range of Index Scores 2.125 – 4.0, Midpoint 3)</i>	<b>Total</b>
Low Salience	16
High Salience	13
Total	29
$t(28) = 4.77, p < 0.0001$	

This analysis allows me to better understand the relationship between respondents' level of Black identity centrality and variables of interest. In particular, I calculated Fisher's exact tests to assess whether there was a statistically significant relationship between Black centrality and whether BGM were members of a church and how often they attended church. There were no

statistically significant relationships between Black identity centrality and membership at a church (Fisher's exact = 0.435) and frequency of church attendance (Fisher's exact = 0.181). This finding is odd considering that almost all participants maintain connections to Black churches. Despite not regularly attending, one might assume that Black identity centrality would have a statistically significant relationship to church attendance patterns, but it does not. It is possible that the survey is not capturing an important factor that may influence the relationship between Black identity salience and church-going decisions and participation. Still, it is important to consider why some BGM scored high and others scored low on Black identity centrality yet almost all men expressed a strong relationship to Black churches and had varying connections to churches (as measured through church membership and frequency of church attendance). If participants' church attendance patterns have little to do with how positively or strongly they see themselves as Black, then what other factors may be at play to determine BGM's church-going decisions?

Perhaps some BGM in this study maintain connections to Black churches because they strongly endorse traditional religious beliefs that are related to negative attitudes about homosexuality (Lemelle & Battle, 2004; Rodriguez, 2010). Survey data may reveal whether negative moral attitudes about homosexuality and personalized negative beliefs about gay identity are related to BGM's connection to Black churches. It is possible that some BGM continue to attend BNGACs because of their internalized negative perceptions of themselves as gay. Some men may continue to attend church as a way to seek redemption from homosexuality and/or seek solace from internalized negative beliefs about their gay identity.

In Table 5.2, I provide the dichotomized index scores for participants' gay-affirming identity, moral attitudes about homosexuality and personalized homonegativity to gain a better



sense of where respondents fell on the sub scales.

<b>Table 5.2: Dichotomized Scores of Gay Identity Sub Scales</b>	
<b>Gay-Affirming Identity</b> <i>(Range of Index Scores 1.67-4.0, Midpoint 3.16)</i>	<b>Total</b>
Low Gay-Affirming Identity	12
High Gay-Affirming Identity	17
Total	29
$t(28) = 6.30, p < 0.0000$	
<b>Immorality Attitudes of Homosexuality</b> <i>(Index Score Range 1.0-2.4, Midpoint 1.4)</i>	<b>Total</b>
Negative Attitude	11
Positive Attitude	18*
Total	29
*18 respondents scored an index score of 1.	
$t(28) = 4.14, p < 0.0003$	
<b>Personalized Homonegativity</b> <i>(Index Score Range 1.0-3.18, Midpoint 1.63)</i>	<b>Total</b>
High Personalized Homonegativity	12
Low Personalized Homonegativity	17
Total	29
$t(28) = 4.45, p < 0.0001$	

The findings from Table 5.2 showcase how BGM in this study generally had high gay-affirming identities, positive moral attitudes toward homosexuality, and low personalized homonegativity. There was a statistically significant difference between each of the categories representing the dichotomized scores for each sub scale. The difference between the men who fall into each respective category may be due to some men continuing to struggle with their negative attitudes about homosexuality and negative attitudes about themselves as gay. In order to better understand the relationship between participants' church attendance patterns and their attitudes toward homosexuality and themselves as gay, I cross-tabulated the dichotomized categories for each sub scale with BGM's church attendance patterns. Survey findings did not reveal any statistically significant relationship between participants' moral beliefs about

homosexuality and their frequency of church attendance (Fisher's exact = 0.945) or whether they attended GACs (Fisher's exact = 0.642). Similarly, there was not a statistically significant relationship between BGM's level of personalized homonegativity and their frequency of church attendance (Fisher's exact = 0.471) or whether they attended GACs (Fisher's exact = 0.387). The lack of a strong relationship between these factors is perhaps because the majority of BGM expressed extremely positive attitudes about their personal gay identity, as well as their moral beliefs about homosexuality in general (see Table 4.3). Although some men in this study may have experienced inner turmoil and personalized homonegativity in relation to church attendance at some points in their lives, the survey results may indicate that they have reached some level of acceptance of their gay identity. These results contradict previous scholars who have theorized that BGM who maintain attendance at predominantly Black churches do so because of their negative attitudes toward homosexuality or internalized negative attitudes about themselves as gay men. If participants' Black identity centrality and gay identity are not driving factors in their decision to go to church and what types of churches to attend, then what factors influence their church-going decisions? I turn to the interview findings to examine what factors influence their church-going decisions.

#### *Searching for the "Ideal" Church*

The patterns of church attendance from the survey data indicate that it was more important for the BGM in this study to maintain connections to predominantly Black churches, yet we do not know from the survey data whether the churches BGM attended stigmatized or affirmed their gay identity. We also do not know what factors influence BGM's church-going decisions. All surveys were completed by interviewees; thus, it may be useful to examine the interview narratives to gain insight into the reasons why BGM varied in their church attendance

patterns, yet maintained connections to Black churches.

During the interviews, BGM talked about the characteristics of the church they would attend. Interviewees often expressed that they were still searching for the ideal church to attend, one that allowed them to integrate both their Black and gay identities.

I was looking for some—at one point *I was looking for a place where I didn't feel like I was being condemned for being who I was*, and having a pastor just pretty much standing up and tell me I was going to hell for the way that I was. I just haven't—I—I just haven't really found it because it just—it's not there. [emphasis mine] *Kendall*

For Kendall (37)<sup>2</sup> and other BGM, an ideal church was one where they no longer had to deal with stigmatizing treatment because they were gay. Yet, the ideal church also had to be predominantly Black. But this raises a question, in the absence of the ideal church, why do BGM choose predominantly Black churches rather than gay-affirming churches? We find some insight from Louis' (32) comment:

I think it's [BNGACs] a place still where [BGM] feel they fit in the most, because probably a lot of them are like me. They have all this deep, Biblical background inside and they feel in some ways they can be made a little whole with some kind of faith, if faith is involved. and they can ignore it [being gay]. If they go to a church that is a *gay church*, then *it's nothing that they can ignore. It's there in their faces*. [emphasis mine]

Additionally, for Louis, gay-affirming churches were not legitimate spaces to worship.

Probably if I could find what I consider to be [*a*] *regular, home grown, Black church* or whatever *and they're gay affirming*, I'm probably fine, but a lot of the gay-affirming churches that I've seen are *just very kind of store front*. [emphasis mine]

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<sup>2</sup> The numbers in parentheses refer to the ages of the participants.

Louis associates gay-affirming churches with “store front” churches, which are seen as illegitimate, financially unstable churches that have been established in empty store spaces. In doing so, he employs social distancing, which I identify as a strategy used to distance oneself from visible markers of stigma, by making a distinction between “regular” churches and labeling gay-affirming churches as storefront churches that are less institutionalized and less established worship spaces. Consequently, the search for a gay-affirming church that is similar to “regular” Black churches seems elusive.

Other BGM expressed similar concerns about attending a “gay” church:

I may think about it differently now, but back then I just didn’t want to go to a “gay” church. *I was one of those people who didn’t want to wear my sexuality or my sexual orientation on my sleeve. ...We don’t come here to sleep with one another, do we? So why do we have to talk about being gay? [emphasis mine] Mark*

Like other BGM, Mark (28) did not want to have to directly associate himself with visible markers of homosexuality that are found in gay-affirming churches. Additionally, the “gay church” label made homosexuality a readily identifiable characteristic that could not be easily hidden. It is important to note that like Mark, many people in general, may also want to compartmentalize where they may find a sexual partner from their church-related experiences. Mark’s quote indicates his discomfort and seeming frustration with not being able to compartmentalize his church experience from being identified as gay. This criticism allows Mark to distance himself from the visibility of the “gay church” label and disassociate his church-going experience from his gay identity. However, it is important to note that these quotes highlight how attending “gay” churches makes visible the stigma associated with being gay and

reveals the hidden and often ignored internalized negative attitudes some BGM may hold about themselves as gay.

Some participants even resist using the word “gay” to describe GACs. As David (32) said: “I don’t want to say it’s a gay church. I think it’s really open. But even that, when I look back and sit at this, I still say it’s not for me.” The word gay seems to connote something negative and highlights the stigma attached to associating with openly gay-affirming churches. Lamar (29) suggested that gay churches were marginalizing:

I don’t feel that I need to marginalize myself into this sect over here because of that [being gay], but at the same time, there are affirming churches that are not *gay churches*. [emphasis mine]

The consequences of associating oneself with churches that adopted a gay label seemed too extreme for some BGM to want to become official members. As a result of these concerns about being associated with “gay” churches, some BGM created social distance between themselves and these types of churches.

BGM wanted to find a church that accepted them for being both Black and gay, without necessarily calling attention to the gay label. Dwayne (27), an openly gay minister and founding member of a predominantly Black, gay-affirming church, referred to his vision of such a church as “whosoever ministries”:

I guess you can call them, “whosoever ministries.” Whosoever you are... So they are accepting of gays, bisexuals, transsexuals. Whatever you are and whatever decisions you've made, and why you made them, it doesn't matter. You just come. You're free to worship here. Some of the churches that are in this organization consider themselves to be gay churches. The churches I'm involved with...we're not gay churches, we're open to

everybody. *Dwayne*

Dwayne adopted the terminology of “whosoever ministries” to avoid being typecast as a church solely for gay members and labeled as a “gay” church. Importantly, he endeavored to establish safe spaces where Black LGBT congregants could be accepted as both Black and gay. While pastors at BGACs wanted to provide safe spaces for LGBT congregants, they were hesitant to adopt the “gay” church label, perhaps because of their desire to not be limited to being characterized as churches solely for gay members.

By characterizing some GACs as similar to “regular” Black churches, BGM could minimize the stigma attached to such spaces. John (26), who like Dwayne (27) is also a pastor of a GAC, attempted to deemphasize the differences between GACs and BNGACs:

It’s not a church where we wave *rainbow flags* or anything. *It’s just like any other church* that you would go into but it’s a place...I wanted to create a place that was safe, for people to come to where you didn’t have to worry about being called a faggot. You don’t have to worry about being called a dike or a sissy. All the derogatory terms that are blared out so heavily in the church. We’re not gonna damn you to hell. [emphasis mine]

*John*

It was clear that participants appreciated gay neutral or “whosoever” churches over ones that openly adopted the gay-affirming label. As Frank (23) said about a GAC after visiting a few times, “I liked that they were affirming. I liked that they were open. It really is similar to a ‘regular’ quotation marks church. It is very similar.” In particular, the men appreciated churches that did not emphasize visible characteristics of homosexuality that could lead to stigma, such as waving “rainbow flags.” Rainbow flags are often used as symbols of gay pride, particularly among White LGBT populations. Some participants’ hesitation with having their churches use

rainbow flags as a symbol was also tied to a lack of desire to be associated with *White* gay churches that did not have culturally familiar symbols and worship styles. The potential cultural differences and norms that exist in some GACs and many White churches may have reduced the incentive for some BGM to want to become members.

In addition to cultural differences, some participants expressed discomfort with some GACs being “too open” for their liking. Jeremiah (27) states:

I want to be able to go to church and worship and not be distracted by all of the other things that sometimes come along with gay-affirming churches. I feel like everybody should be able to do what they want to do, but *it distracts me that the minister is in drag*.  
[emphasis mine]

We see that some participants believed that some GACs became “too open” when congregants engaged in explicit expressions of gender non-conformity. Many BGM found visible symbols or signs of homosexuality in church or sermons on sexuality distracting or out of place, as the comments below indicate. John (26) explains:

It seemed almost like a comedy show, just about. The pastor, well not the pastor, but whoever was MC’ing would say off-the-wall things. *Using a lot of gay terms, a lot of gay lingo*, and I’m the type, I’m not about...*I’m proud of who I am, but I’m not about Pride*.  
And when I go to church, that’s what I want. I want us to focus on God.

Similarly, Brandon (45) and Frank (23) explain their discomforts with GACs:

They got [name of predominantly Black gay-affirming church] now. ...It’s a gay church. I know the pastor... I went to [his church]. He’s a radical preacher. He talks about all these things, young kids, and women and all us gay people, and that’s not what you go to church for. *Brandon*

But something that caught me off guard is the feminine guys, very, very feminine guys.

...It made me just a little uncomfortable. *Frank*

The characteristics BGM identified as problematic in GACs were associated with the *visibility* of homosexuality, their association with effeminate characteristics, and the presence of open discussions about sexuality. BGM in this study did not necessarily with the affirming message that pastors delivered. There was a boundary of gendered and religious behavior that was considered to be acceptable in church, and when others crossed that boundary, BGM in this study expressed discomfort.

At times, this discomfort undermined the sense of affirmation for being gay the men experienced in gay-affirming churches. For example, while Frank, in the quote above, expressed discomfort with men who perform effeminate behavior in church, he also reported later in his interview that he enjoyed his experience in the GAC he visited. Even though the GACs affirmed participants' sexuality, the visible and explicit representation of gender non-conformity in the church called attention to the stereotypes that BGM were particularly focused on disassociating themselves from to minimize stigma.

Even in GACs where BGM supposedly were protected from anti-gay treatment, they still had to contend with stereotypes. For example, Omar (37) mentioned a time when his pastor delivered a sermon where he described a conversation he had with another man about accepting gay congregation members:

[The pastor] said he told him, "*Well if you get rid of all the gay people in the church then you won't have anybody to sing in your choir,*" or something like that. Basically saying that the whole choir was made up of gay people and he was trying to say it in a way of



saying like this is ridiculous but to me *I found that very offensive*. I actually went to him after service and said that to me *that comment was like a White preacher saying if you get rid of all the Black people you won't have any cooks*. I said that—I was just like that was pretty offensive to me because the gay people aren't just in the choir. They're all so in the pulpit. They're on the usher board. They're on the deacon board. [emphasis mine] *Omar*

In this example, Omar challenges his pastor's humor because it stereotypes gay congregants. Omar was open about his sexuality at church and his pastor was accepting of homosexuality, yet he still faced stigma in the form of demeaning jokes.

BGM's criticisms of GACs mostly focused on their open expression and affirmation of homosexuality and gender non-conformity, but the men also criticized GACs for perpetuating stereotypes about homosexuality. Calling attention to their difference directly challenged participants' desire to be seen as "normal," even though both their Black and gay identities were affirmed in GACs. While the men wanted to participate in church spaces that affirmed both their Black and gay identities, they only wanted a particular *type* of Black and gay identity to be affirmed – one that presented them as masculine. Consequently, some BGM created social distance between themselves and the *visible* representations of homosexuality and gender non-conformity because it associated them with femininity. For some, becoming a member of an openly gay-affirming church seemed to challenge their attempts to maintain their status as masculine and respectable Black men.

This section highlights the seeming dilemma BGM have in attempting to find spaces where they can be accepted as gay while not be stigmatized. Their church-going decisions hinged on a desire to not be associated with the visible characteristics of homosexuality that were stigmatized. To be sure, these negotiations reflect some level of internalized negative attitudes

about gender non-conformity. However, their negotiations should not be misconstrued as reflective of internalized, negative beliefs about themselves as gay. In their quest for finding a church that allowed them to minimize their association with the visibly stigmatized characteristics of homosexuality, BGM were also searching for predominantly Black churches that provided them with a sense of belonging.

### *Searching for a Sense of Belonging in Black Churches*

In contrast to how participants described GACs, none of the men spoke of Black churches as marginalizing or worried about calling attention to their Blackness in Black churches. In fact, most seemed to prefer predominantly Black churches, whether gay affirming or not. Whether they attended regularly, visited occasionally, or had only financial memberships, BGM preferred to maintain connections to predominantly Black churches. As many of the men explained, the Black church provided a sense of belonging and comfort. In his response to a question about how he felt as a Black person attending a predominantly Black church, Alex (26) explained the preference for a predominantly Black church setting: “I felt a sense of belonging, a sense of community, because when you go into a Black church, there are all these people who look like you, and a lot of them have had kind of the same experiences as you. It was a feeling of ‘we are one group of people at church praising God’.” Deon (28) echoed Alex’s comment: “there is something comforting about” being “in a traditionally [Black] Baptist church.” Despite Deon’s sense of comfort attending predominantly Black churches, he also expressed discomfort with receiving anti-gay messages and treatment in Black churches. Thus, there was a dilemma for some BGM in terms of deciding which types of churches to attend because of their desire to be comfortable as well as affirmed for their identities as Black and gay.

According to interview findings, the majority (n=23) of BGM in this study attended predominantly Black churches while growing up, which likely influenced their sense of belonging in those spaces. Louis (32) and Eric (27), like many other BGM, explained their perception of the inextricable link between their Black and religious identities:

I mean the Black church, that's part of me being Black. If I was White, I wouldn't have been in the Black church. ...*I feel that the church, specifically the Black church is important* and [I] may not like or understand exactly the position of the Black church today, *but I do feel that it's important to the Black community...I feel connected* to others who also have some of the same beliefs that I do. [emphasis mine] *Louis*

I understand why *Sunday is the most segregated day of the week*. One, White culture and Black culture are very different. Black church culture and White church culture are very different. ...*I just think that in a lot of ways, growing up in a Southern Black Baptist church, that really was the worship style that I was used [to]*. It was one that felt the best, felt the most natural to me. [emphasis mine] *Eric*

For many BGM in the study, attending predominantly Black churches was an assumed part of their Black identity. As Louis and Eric stated, the Black church was important to the Black community, and despite not understanding or agreeing with all aspects of it as an institution, the Black church served as their connection to other Blacks with similar faith. The worship style and “Black church culture” were more familiar and influenced participants’ desire to maintain connections to Black churches. However, Eric’s reference to Sunday being the “most segregated day of the week” speaks to the enduring influence of racial discrimination and segregation on BGM’s church-going decisions.

For most participants, Black identity was salient in the context of religion because many of their early religious experiences involved family members and occurred in predominantly Black church environments. Fifteen men described their churches as “family” or “home” churches, indicating that the churches were either founded by family members, comprised mostly of their family members, or in some cases, had many family units with small children who were congregation members. As Carter (28) describes:

My dad was chair of the deacon board, my grandmother—In the South, we have what we call “mothers of the church.” So, it’s basically the grandmothers or the older women in the church. and the church I grew up in, pretty much everybody except the pastor was related to each other. *Carter*

Like other BGM in the study, Carter associated congregation members with family. As such, not only does church socialization center around moral teachings, but also helps establish bonds of support and familial ties.

It is not surprising, then, that BGM wanted BGACs to be more like regular Black churches, minus the anti-gay messages or silence about homosexuality. To accomplish this, members of BGACs attempted to incorporate traditional Black worship styles. However, this was not always appreciated or successful.

In visits to Wesley’s (56) BGAC, I observed the church attempt to replicate traditional Black worship styles yet struggle to get more Black LGBT people to attend. The church had a hard time attracting additional Black members even though the church had a predominantly Black congregation, a Black pastor, incorporated worship styles commonly associated with Black churches, like singing gospel music and guest pastors who delivered dynamic, “story-telling” sermons, and BGM in the area knew about it. Many still associated the church with

WGACs and White churches. Additionally, White congregants were very involved in leadership roles and often led parts of the service. Two White congregants in particular held leadership positions in the church and were sometimes the main people making announcements about the financial and organizational concerns of the church. For example, when I first arrived at the church, there was a White man who greeted me at the door, asked me where I was from, gave me the program for the service, and showed me where to sit. At the beginning of each service I attended, a White woman delivered the church announcements about the upcoming schedule of visiting pastors, fundraising efforts for the church, and organizing the finances to pay church employees. The White members' visual as well as highly vocal presence in the church gave me the impression that they served in the main leadership roles for the church and had a major influence on the church's functioning. Other Black visitors to the church may have had the same impression, which may have contributed to the perception of the church as a "White church."

While this BGAC made many efforts to integrate Black cultural elements into the worship style, it also incorporated White worship styles. On one Sunday during the "sign of the peace," when people walked around the sanctuary and gave each other hugs, a recording of a country song, "Jesus is the Lighthouse," played in the background. People in the congregation quietly listened to the music without any seeming discomfort or distaste for the music. However, the soundboard that was playing the music suddenly stopped working. At this point, a Black woman sitting in the front of the sanctuary stood up and started clapping and singing a high energy, traditional gospel song a capella. She began wailing and jumping, lifting her hands and praising God. No one joined her. She was the only person who participated in this type of ecstatic worship, which was similar to the style of worship I observed at the BNGAC that was part of the Pentecostal Holiness religious tradition. Although no one openly objected to the

woman's worship style, it seemed somewhat out of place considering the lack of participation by other congregants and that it directly followed the country music song.

The fact that cultural elements of the church service did not always reflect those seen in traditional Black churches and White congregants held leadership positions seemed to undermine the BGACs attempt to provide a space that would be appealing to other Black LGBT, who were seeking a church that accepted them as gay but still provided them with the "regular" or traditional Black worship experience. Importantly, participants' willingness to consider attending a BGAC was related to their desire to maintain a connection to the cultural aspects of the "Black worship experience." Although few elaborated on what they meant by the Black worship experience, there were some clues. For example, Malik (32) explained that he would not go to "just any Black church," especially those that did not "believe in the Holy Spirit." He equated beliefs in the Holy Spirit with his expectation that a church should include "praying in tongues...laying on of hands...words of knowledge, ministry gifts." While churches of any racial demographic could lack these elements, Malik seemed particularly opposed to attending non-Pentecostal and predominantly White churches.

#### *Avoiding Potential Marginalization in White Churches*

The majority of BGM in the study were more comfortable attending a predominantly Black church than a WGAC. Participants were critical of White churches because they do not include the same cultural elements as Black churches or provide the same type of comfort. For Malik and others, that comfort was tied to the style of worship they were used to:

I don't know of any [WGACs]. I'm sure there are some but I don't know of them. I don't know where they are. I probably wouldn't go there, and the only reason I wouldn't go there is because there's a White church across town that is kind of mixed. The pastor's

really good. He's got really good words, but I enjoy the Black worship experience. So it's hard for me to plug in and get focused on what the pastor is saying when I don't get the full experience of the music, and...do you know what I mean? You get the whole Black worship experience. *Malik*

The problem...well I don't know if it's a problem, *but most of the gay affirming churches I was aware of were all White*. I went to one and I was like, "Well, it's great that you're affirming me and my sexual orientation, but I have an expectation of what church is and this is not it." It was just not doing it for me. [emphasis mine] *Reggie*

The men's discomfort with attending or becoming members of predominantly White churches is tied not just to their desire to maintain connections to churches that are culturally relevant to them, but also to a desire to avoid spaces in which they faced racism or were marginalized because they were Black. For example, Peter (33) expressed his frustration in feeling marginalized as a student in a predominantly White seminary school because the WGM students did not value the preaching styles of BGM nor see them as valid examples of queer preaching:

There are several LGBT preachers who do queer preaching really well. The difference is they're Black and because you all don't necessarily tend to think of the Black community, then, you don't think it exists in a manner that can present good examples of preaching. So, I think many times the White gay community overlooks the Black gay community and it causes frustration.

The frustration Peter expressed from being marginalized as a Black man in a religious space that encouraged gay-affirming theological teachings was not uncommon. Often, the norms of gay-affirming spaces were set based on WGM's experiences. Participants did not see their religious

cultural practices, such as traditional African American preaching styles, music, and dancing, valued in predominantly White gay-affirming churches. Additionally, other BGM expressed frustration and disgust due to experiences they had with racism from WGM. Reggie (29) avoided predominantly White churches because he often found WGM in general to be racist. As he explained:

The White gay people [that] I do dislike, I dislike just because they're bad people. Like some of the most racist encounters that I've had in my life have been with other gay men. I mean, just flat out.

Omar (37) provided a specific example of a disturbing racial incident at a BGAC church with a White pastor:

It seemed like to me to be a prosperity church and also the fact that the pastors were White, but the majority of the congregation was Black and then just some of the things that were said seemed insensitive to me racially. ...A [visiting] White minister saying something [to the White pastor of the church] about, you know, "Why are you there? Why do you choose to have a church *with all these N-words?*" and he said something -- his response was something to the effect of "Those people are good to me," which I found—and they erupted in praise and clapping—and *I just found that racially insensitive, personally. "No, they're not the N-word, but they're good to me." I had problems with that.* [emphasis mine] Omar

These experiences with discrimination and insensitive racial jokes from White gay people and pastors translated into an unwillingness to participate in predominantly White gay-affirming churches and engage with some White gay people. As mentioned in chapter four, participants overwhelmingly indicated that they would neither *attend* (n=19) nor become a member (n=20) of



predominantly White churches when probed about church attendance preferences during interviews.

Some BGM described their disdain for participating in predominantly White churches because of the racism they experienced at the hands of WGM in secular settings and homophobia they experienced from White people in general. As Lamar (29) responded when asked if he ever thought about going to a predominantly White church: “One of [the churches] is like, ‘Oh we love everybody, so come on in.’ You generally find predominantly White folks there, but White folks are homophobic. White folks spew that same hateful bullshit.”

Yet other BGM expressed a perception that people in White communities were more accepting of homosexuality than many Blacks, who held deep-seated anti-gay religious beliefs. Alex (26) states:

In the South it's [being gay] much more hush-hush. Don't talk about it. If you talk about it--because we're in the Bible belt, everyone here is like “Oh God hates you.” *Especially in the Black community, we have been so closed minded to a lot of things. I think that Black people are much more traditional in terms of beliefs and values than White people are.* [emphasis mine]

Similarly, John (26) reflects on his perception that White gay men may have easier lives than Black gay men because of his perception of the acceptance of homosexuality in White communities:

I have remembered times thinking that *it would sometimes be easier to be a White gay male because the majority of White people are more accepting of gay people and gays versus the Blacks.* Not saying all [White] people are and certainly not saying all Blacks are not accepting, but [the] majority. [emphasis mine]

Carter (28) and Peter (33) echo similar sentiments about the virulence of anti-gay stigma that may be worse in Black communities than White ones:

R: I think a lot of *people in the Black gay community try to mask or hide their being gay*. Particularly because of I think the perception is what the Black man is supposed to be. Whatever religious beliefs you had, preaching gay people are going to hell or if you didn't grow up knowing anything about it. I think as far as my connection to [the Black gay community], I'm probably more connected to it because that's the life I live than I am connected to the White community.

I: What about White gay people?

R: Oh yeah, pretty comfortable. *I think they're a little less judgmental*.

I: Why? How so?

R: I don't know. They're just more laid back and free-flowing. [emphasis mine]

*Carter*

R: I was bullied by the Black kids for being a smart kid, for having all A's. I wore glasses. I was different. and then *as I came out, it got worse. Because it has been perceived in society that Blacks are more homophobic than White, which isn't necessarily true. It's just Blacks express it in a different kind of way*. Then my Black identity started to become a struggle for me because to a certain extent you couldn't be Black and gay, but you could be Black and smart and *accepted by the White folk*.

I: Did you experience intolerance for being Black and gay in the White spaces?

R: I was always accepted. I was always loved. I was always--*White folk love me, have always loved me*, and I have always enjoyed being in majority White spaces... [emphasis mine] *Peter*

The quotes above reflect the diversity of BGM's experiences in White and Black churches. While some felt marginalized in predominantly White church settings because of cultural differences and anti-Black stigma, others found them to be more accepting of homosexuality than predominantly Black church settings. Yet, even BGM who believed Whites were more accepting of homosexuality were not willing to completely forgo membership in predominantly Black churches. Thus, church-going decisions were shaped by a desire to maintain connections to predominantly Black churches, partially because of the cultural familiarity and partially because of their fear of experiencing potential marginalization in predominantly White settings.

Despite the perception that Black churches and Black people are more homophobic than Whites, studies show no statistically significant difference in attitudes toward homosexuality among Blacks and Whites (Lewis, 2003). In fact, Blacks have been found to be more supportive of equal rights for same-sex couples than Whites (Lewis, 2003). The perception from some participants that Blacks are more homophobic than Whites may be because they had more day-to-day interactions with Blacks than Whites. Indeed, participants had critiques of predominantly Black churches, both gay affirming (as illustrated earlier), and non gay-affirming.

#### *Avoiding Potential Anti-gay Stigma in Black Churches*

As we see from the previous sections, BGM's church-going decisions were influenced by a desire to avoid potential stigma attached to the visible characteristics of homosexuality in GACs, find Black churches that provided cultural familiarity, and minimize potential experiences with marginalization they may have in White churches. BGM's search to find a

predominantly Black church also included efforts to avoid anti-gay stigma. Some BGM church-going decisions were shaped by their criticism of anti-gay stigma in BNGACs. One participant stated:

My evolution came when I moved away to [large Midwestern city], and *I stopped going to church... it's like being proud to be Black, but then going to Klu Klux Klan's meetings* or something like that. It doesn't...I don't know how that works, and I struggle with that. That's probably one of the reasons why I stopped going to church so much, because that's a struggle for me. [emphasis mine] *Graham*

Another participant observed:

There were times as soon as the pastor would get up to preach, I would get up and I would walk out of church. ...It's kinda like, if I'm a Black man, why would I go to a KKK meeting? If I know that someone does not like me, or want me there, or accept me for who I am, why would I subject myself to that?" *Alex*

Graham (30) and Alex (26) paralleled their anti-gay experiences with racial discrimination. Instead of continuing to expose themselves to anti-gay messages in churches, some BGM choose to find alternative spaces where they could minimize stigmatizing experiences associated with being gay and discomfort with cultural unfamiliarity. However, alternative options that fit all of their criteria (i.e., predominantly Black, culturally relevant, gay-affirming, but does not call attention to gay stereotypes) are limited. In their attempts to find alternative worship spaces, BGM must weigh their options based on the possibilities that they may have to manage the potential marginalization associated with being Black in predominantly White spaces and minimize potentially anti-gay stigmatizing experiences in predominantly Black spaces. It becomes difficult to make these decisions; however, as we see from previous findings,

BGM seem to make their church-going decisions based on their ability to minimize stigmatizing experiences – perhaps without an expectation of completely eliminating stigmatizing experiences altogether.

BGM like Alex and Graham chose to stop attending churches that perpetuated discrimination against any of their identities. Jeremiah (27) described a similar decision:

I did realize that because the churches are within a community and they feel like it's their responsibility to uplift the community, they stick to what causes the community some danger or harm or threatens it. In [urban southeastern city], it seemed to be that the *church community seemed to think that homosexuality was bad* and it was uncomfortable for me because ...it was difficult for me to divorce how I felt, who I thought I was, from ... the type of person they said I was because I was homosexual. It was difficult for me so I separated myself [from church] for that reason. [emphasis mine] *Jeremiah*

Some BGM left Black churches that delivered anti-gay messages, but others stayed. Many BGM said they stayed in Black churches for cultural familiarity and social support; however, they did not necessarily accept anti-gay messages delivered in churches. Many BGM were critical of the stance those churches took on homosexuality. As Jeffrey (30) explained:

They'll preach, "Vote against [same-sex marriage legislation]. Homosexuality is wrong. It's an abomination," but nobody can reach out and say, "Hey, I want to help you get through this; I want to help you come out."

Louis (32) was similarly critical of Black churches:

[It] pisses me off that the Black church doesn't use its influence in a more positive format. When you can have a preacher sit up in the pulpit and denounce homosexuality and XYZ and you're going to have these homosexual ministries and conversions, etc., *you still got*

*me going to your church and paying my tithes [10 % annual income] and offers and participating in all these various ministries etc. You're able to handle that [anti-gay messages and ministries] and process that and push it aside.* That tells you how powerful the Black church is in its overall experience. [emphasis mine] *Louis*

Louis and others were critical of the high level of influence the Black church had over congregants' sense of obligation to attend church, pay 10% of their annual income, and participate in ministries that perpetuated anti-gay sentiment. In addition to cultural relevance and social support, it seemed like some BGM's sense of obligation to financially and practically support church activities also played a major role in their continued connection with Black churches.

The conflict BGM experienced was not only tied to the perception that Black churches delivered anti-gay messages, but also the perception that they are integral institutions within Black communities. Louis was critical of the deep level of influence Black churches have in Black communities and the church's ability to create for them a nearly unavoidable conflict between staying connected to Black churches and avoiding anti-gay messages. It becomes clearer that both identities, Black and gay, are tied to the struggle and frustration BGM experience in their church-going decisions.

The BGM in this study seem to want to downplay their difference by sexual orientation in churches. Although Blackness is much less stigmatized than homosexuality in church spaces today, it is still a stigmatized identity in mainstream US society. The legacy of racial segregation of churches as well as fear of marginalization in culturally unfamiliar White churches drives many BGM's church-going decisions and participation. BGM's preference for predominantly Black churches highlights that it is acceptable and legitimate for religious settings to be racially

identifiable spaces, but it is not acceptable or legitimate for them to be identifiable by sexual orientation. However, it is also important to note that their decisions were informed by a desire to minimize stigmatization of their sexuality. Few BGM were comfortable venturing out to explore churches that were unfamiliar and that emphasized their racial or sexual orientation difference. It is possible that in the future, the traditions and practices of GACs will be seen as “normal” and acceptable by BGM, but at present they are not.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter addressed two research questions: 1) What do BGM’s church-going decisions tell us about the salience of their Black and gay identities? and 2) How does the visibility of stigma influence BGM’s church-going decisions?

The survey findings show that BGM hold both their Black and gay identities to be equally important and positive influences on their lives. The interview data reveal that there are multiple mechanisms that influence BGM’s church-going decisions and participation. It is important to examine the interplay between Black and gay identities because in some cases, Black identity and cultural familiarity trumps BGM’s efforts to join church spaces that totally affirm their gay identity. BGM overwhelmingly chose to participate in and maintain connections to predominantly Black churches even if they did not attend regularly. I would argue that this choice indicates the salience of participants’ Black identity. Most participants were more willing to endure homophobia in BNGACs rather than call attention to the visible characteristics of homosexuality that perpetuated stereotypes in gay-affirming churches. Still, few were willing to tolerate any racial insensitivity or cultural marginalization in predominantly White churches.

Importantly, the findings also reveal challenges to scholarship on the relationship between stigma and identity salience (Goffman, 1963; Stryker & Serpe, 1994), and the influence

of identity salience on decisions about membership and participation in particular institutions. BGM's experience with stigma attached to visible markers of homosexuality raised the awareness of their gay identity in Black church spaces; however, the cultural relevance and sense of obligation to maintain connections to Black churches remained ever-present and maintained the salience of their Black identities. Previous experiences with cultural unfamiliarity, discomfort, and in some cases, racial discrimination in predominantly White churches reinforced participants' desire to maintain connections to predominantly Black churches. BGM were sensitive to potential aware of the discomfort and marginalization they might experience in some predominantly White churches and preferred to avoid those settings. These findings support Bowleg's (2013) conclusion that Black identity was more salient for BGM in negotiating the interplay between their identities as Black and gay.

Many research participants took for granted that Black churches existed and were necessary, but often questioned the validity and need for GACs. This finding illustrates the importance of examining people's experiences with overlapping identities who also have to manage multiple stigmas. The visibility of particular stigmatized characteristics made it difficult for some BGM to minimize discriminatory experiences; thus, participants used their church-going decisions as a way to find spaces that would enable them to reduce stigma. The findings from this chapter suggest that scholars should consider how visible markers of stigmatizing identities affect people's lives and interact with multiple identities. Additionally, scholars should assess how multiple stigmas may interact and have multiplicative effects for non-normative groups.

Previous research shows how context matters in shaping the strategies BGM use to manage multiple types of stigma (Della et al., 2002; Choi et al., 2011). Della et al. (2002) and



Choi et al. (2011) do not examine how BGM make decisions about whether they would participate in a particular context as a means to minimize stigmatizing experiences. Findings from my research reveal that often, BGM in this study had to make decisions about institutional participation by weighing their options to minimize experiences with anti-gay stigma and maintain links to culturally familiar spaces. By examining church-going decisions, we are able to better understand this group of BGM's negotiation of stigma. For some BGM, churches are a context in which they must negotiate being stigmatized for one identity but accepted and supported for another. For many participants, anti-gay stigma in some Black churches was easier to manage than being associated with visible markers of homosexuality in GACs and dealing with potential discrimination and discomfort in some White churches. Although not directly addressed in this dissertation, BGM in the study also described experiences managing anti-gay stigma in non-church settings and racial discrimination in predominantly White non-church settings. It is possible that those experiences also influenced participants' perceptions of Black and White communities and their desire to participate in those spaces.

Lastly, some BGM were pastors of BGACs that attempted to incorporate culturally relevant Black worship styles and gay-affirming messages. However, even in these spaces, BGM minimized their association with "gay" churches because they over-emphasized visible and often stereotypical characteristics of homosexuality. Indeed, even pastors and members of BGACs attempted to replicate the worship styles practiced in traditional Black churches as a way to maintain connections to those traditions. The ethnographic field notes revealed a similar pattern whereby some Black congregants performed traditional Black worship behaviors but were unsuccessful in fully integrating them into the church because of the presence and influence of White congregants in leadership positions. The added element of White congregants in

leadership roles in the BGAC undermined their attempts to be like other “regular” Black churches. These failed attempts at fully integrating Black worship styles into BGACs may reflect some BGM’s concern that gay-affirming churches cannot provide the same level of cultural familiarity and comfort that traditional Black churches do.

That some BGM are creating *new* religious spaces that provide a safe space for BGM to integrate their Black and gay identities, challenges previous conceptualizations of the “either-or” options scholars identified for managing stigma. In the past, scholars identified the options BGM had to manage conflicts between their Black and gay identities as constrained to either joining predominantly Black communities that did not accept homosexuality or joining predominantly White gay communities that marginalized Black members (Icard, 1986; Martinez & Sullivan, 1998; Wilson, 2008). However, as homosexuality increasingly becomes more accepted in Black communities and the wider society, and as Blacks gain access to the capital necessary to establish new institutions, BGM are finding ways to create new safe spaces that are “both-and” (Orne, 2013). New BGACs are attempting to integrate *both* Black and gay identities *and* minimize stigma against being gay in religious spaces.

Previous research has found that for some WGM, attending a GAC reduced conflicts between their gay and religious identities (Rodriguez, 2010). To a certain extent this is also true for the participants in this study, yet they continued to use social distancing strategies to separate themselves from “flamboyant” gay men at GACs. Additionally, the BGM in this study also had strong cultural and racial ties to the churches where they maintained connections. For BGM, the *visible* stigma of homosexuality and association with femininity increased their discomfort with attending or becoming members of GACs because these characteristics seemed to challenge their status as masculine and respectable Black men. This finding provides insight into the contexts in

which some BGM sanction stereotypically effeminate behavior and queerness. These verbal social distancing strategies parallel Schwalbe et al.'s (2000) discussion of how stigma management strategies can deflect stigma while also reproducing inequality. Characterizing BNGACs as “normal” and “regular” reinforces the status quo and highlights the way in which Blackness is privileged as an accepted identity and status among BGM. However, characterizing Black churches as “regular” also accepts the marginalization of homosexuality in Black churches, and relegates gay people to a lower status. Furthermore, even though BGM wanted to reduce the stigma against being gay, some inadvertently reinforced the stigma by characterizing “gay churches” as abnormal and financially unstable worship spaces.

This research also suggests we should reconsider categorizing certain stigmas as strictly visible or hidden because there are certain elements of hidden stigmas that also present as visible. Indeed, BGM's church-going decisions were informed by a desire to minimize their association with visibly stigmatized characteristics attached to homosexuality. While BGM still had to manage gay-related stigma in general, it was the visible and stereotypical characteristics associated with homosexuality that garnered the most attention. Often, when the stigma becomes visible or identified in some way, it leads to negative consequences. People make decisions about which institution to participate in based on their ability to minimize stigmatizing experiences attached to the visibility of particular stigmatized characteristics. I would argue that people weigh their options about institutional participation based on their ability to minimize stigmatizing experiences attached to visible characteristics.

In conclusion, the findings in this chapter illustrate the extent to which the visibility of stigma is an important factor that influences people's experiences with discrimination and informs their decisions about institutional participation. This is not to say that BGM see their

Black or gay *identity* as stigmatized, but that they readily recognize the stigma attached to being Black and gay in the United States, and this in turn, raises their awareness of their own Black and gay identities. By participating in and maintaining connections to predominantly Black churches, they are affirming and reinforcing the positive aspects of their Black identity and actively participating in a community that buffers them from potential marginalization and discomfort in predominantly White settings. Additionally, they are seeking ways to *control* their exposure to stigmatizing experiences by choosing to participate in predominantly Black spaces where they can arguably hide the stigmatizing characteristics attached to homosexuality. In contrast, they are not able to put aside or hide their Blackness in White churches. The stigma of being gay is important and also informs BGM's decisions around group membership and participation, but does not supersede the "pull" factors associated with participating in predominantly Black churches. Thus, I argue that Black identity and cultural familiarity hold more weight than gay-related stigma for the BGM in this study.

The findings from this chapter have implications for better understanding what factors drive decisions about membership and participation in particular institutions. The visibility of a stigma may be more important in determining the salience of an identity, which in turn, informs people's institutional participation and strategies for navigating social marginalization. The findings from this study also have implications for our understanding of "safe" spaces. We should question whether spaces meant to serve as sources of refuge for people actually achieve that goal for all of their members. It may not be appropriate to assume that "safe" spaces do not also engage in stigmatization and marginalization of people; thereby, reproducing inequality.

The next chapter turns to an examination of the strategies BGM use to manage stigma and identity conflict within the context of the churches they attend and how they construct their identities to integrate being Black, gay *and* religious.

## **CHAPTER 6: “YOU GOTTA PRESS YOUR WAY TO GOD”: BLACK GAY MEN’S USE OF SPIRITUALITY AS STIGMA MANAGEMENT AND IDENTITY CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

As we learned in Chapter 5, many BGM chose to remain connected to Black churches, despite homophobic experiences in some of them. The choice to maintain ties to Black churches allowed BGM to stay connected to Black communities, avoid potentially feelings of discomfort and marginalization in predominantly White churches or in their family and peer groups. Some BGM in this study also chose to maintain connections to Black churches to minimize their association with visibly stigmatized characteristics associated with GACs. These choices, I argue, indicate the salience of BGM’s Black identity and highlight the influence that visibly stigmatized characteristics have on decisions about institutional participation. Given the choice to maintain ties to Black churches, the main objective of this chapter is to address the questions: 1) What does BGM’s religious involvement with Black churches look like?; and 2) How do BGM manage identity conflicts that may arise as they continue to participate? Numerous studies cite the potentially detrimental effects religious participation may have for BGM. These include discomfort and rejection in some Black churches (Foster et al., 2011; Pitt, 2010; Ward, 2005). Therefore, it is important to examine how BGM engage with Black churches through religious involvement and how they reduce identity conflict, especially because they may be at high risk for depression, feelings of marginalization, and a reduced status in society.

Some scholars have examined BGM’s experiences with identity conflict and the strategies they use to manage identity conflict within Black churches. Wilson (2008) defined identity conflict among Black men engaging in same sex behavior as having “social identities

that an individual perceives to have inconsistent value-orientations, levels of stigmatization, and cultural beliefs ascribed to them” (p. 795). In an attempt to understand how BGM manage identity conflict, scholars have conducted a series of mixed-method and qualitative studies. For example, in an interview and multi-wave survey study of BGM, Alexander (2004) found that BGM hid their gay identity in Black churches that did not accept homosexuality and were more likely to experience depression when they had conflicts between their Black and gay identities. In another study, Pitt (2010) conducted interviews with BGM to understand how they negotiate identity conflict within the context of BNGACs. Pitt (2010) uses psychological theories of identity, including cognitive dissonance theory to identify strategies BGM use to reduce identity conflict in conservative Black churches. Both studies conclude that BGM attempt to find ways to combat internalized negative attitudes toward themselves as gay. However, I argue that the authors’ use of psychological theory is limiting because the theory assumes that identity conflict is a reflection of negative self-concept. If identity conflict is about negative self-concept, then the strategies people use are solely for the purpose of improving one’s self-perception and self-esteem rather than negotiating external forces like stigma and discrimination.

The findings from the previous chapter of this dissertation contradict the assumption that BGM hold negative attitudes about themselves as gay. Indeed, BGM scored high on both indicators of Black and gay identity, yet still had to navigate the influence of stigmatizing experiences on their church-going decisions. I argue that we should also analyze how stigma and negative treatment from others shapes BGM’s efforts to reduce identity conflict within Black churches. By analyzing the role of stigma in the identity conflict resolution process, I aim to challenge the notion that identity conflict is solely related to internalized negative beliefs about one’s identity. Instead, I argue that identity conflict occurs in reaction to stigmatizing treatment.

Consequently, BGM construct a faith-based identity in contrast to religious others, whom they characterize as hypocritical and judgmental against homosexuality. This type of identity construction serves as a strategy for BGM to reduce identity conflict and minimize stigmatizing experiences while engaging with Black churches.

The objective of Chapter 6 is to better understand how BGM engage with Black churches and how stigmatizing experiences shape the type of identity BGM construct to reduce identity conflict. To do this, I rely on the survey and semi-structured interview data. I use the survey to assess BGM's organizational and non-organizational religious practices to gain a better understanding of how BGM engage with Black churches. Findings in Chapter 4 show that BGM scored high mean scores on both organizational and non-organizational religious involvement, and these indices were highly and positively correlated. In this chapter, I cross-tabulated the index scores of organizational and non-organizational religious involvement to better understand how BGM combined these activities in their engagement with Black churches. I examined whether there were any statistically significant relationships between BGM's religious involvement and their Black identity centrality, gay affirming identity, moral attitudes toward homosexuality, and personalized homonegativity. An examination of these factors is important because previous scholars have posited that religious participation is potentially deleterious for BGM who experience identity conflict (Foster et al., 2011; Pitt, 2010; Ward, 2005).

In addition to examining participants' religious involvement, I analyzed interview data to better understand how they managed identity conflict while participating in Black churches. I asked interviewees how religious they would say they were, how being religious (or not being religious) changed throughout their lives, and how they managed their feelings when receiving anti-gay messages in church.



Interview findings reveal that participants overwhelmingly adopted a spiritual label as opposed to a religious label. They engaged in identity work to construct a faith-based, Black, gay identity by distinguishing between being spiritual and being religious. In doing so, they were able to integrate all of these identities and maintain connections to Black churches while challenging anti-gay stigma.

### *Results*

BGM in this study continued to maintain connections to Black churches, either through a combination of organizational religious involvement (e.g., continued church attendance, occasional visits, or financial membership) or through non-organizational religious involvement (e.g., praying, asking others to pray for them, participating in non-church related religious organizations). In order to further understand the relationship between BGM's organizational and non-organizational religious involvement, I turn to the survey data. I examine whether men who participate in organizational religious activities also engage in non-organizational religious practices. To begin, I calculated the mean index scores of the two sub scales measuring BGM's religiosity: organizational and non-organizational religious involvement. If you recall from Chapter 5 (see Table 5.1), I calculated the percentile scores of the mean index scores of each sub scales. The mean index score for organizational religious involvement was 3.5689 (range 1-7) and the mean index score for non-organizational religious involvement was 2.5393 (range 1-4). By calculating the percentiles of the mean index scores for each sub scale, I was able to determine the range of index scores for organizational and non-organizational religious involvement for men in the study. Next, I cross tabulated the percentile scores for organizational and non-organizational religious involvement to assess whether there was some overlap in BGM's types of church involvement. As shown by the shaded cells in Table 6.1 below, BGM

clustered into three sections based on their combined level of involvement in organizational and non-organizational religious activities. There were statistically significant differences between the percentile categorizations of BGM’s organizational and non-organizational religious involvement (Fisher’s exact = .021) (See Table 6.1).

<b>Table 6.1: Cross-Tabulation of Organizational and Non-Organizational Religious Involvement for Black Gay Men</b>							
	<b>Organizational Religious Involvement</b>						
<b>Non-Organizational Religious Involvement</b>	<b>10% and below</b>	<b>11-25%</b>	<b>26-50%</b>	<b>51-75%</b>	<b>76% - 90%</b>	<b>91% and above</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>10% and below</b>	1	3	0	0	0	0	4
<b>11-25%</b>	1	2	3	0	0	0	6
<b>26-50%</b>	1	0	1	3	0	0	5
<b>51-75%</b>	0	0	2	3	2	1	8
<b>76% and above</b>	0	0	1	1	3	1	6
<b>Total</b>	3	5	7	7	5	2	29
Fisher’s exact = .021							

The clusters in the shaded areas in Table 6.1 help provide a clearer picture of how BGM can be clustered into groups based on their different levels of organizational and non-organizational religious involvement. These clusters demonstrate that the majority of BGM used a combination of formal religious practices and informal religious practices. As would be expected, men who scored low on non-organizational religious involvement also scored low on organizational religious involvement because, perhaps, they were not very involved in religious practices to begin. However, more interestingly, in the middle percentile categories for both organizational and non-organizational religious involvement, there is quite a bit of variation in the combination of BGM’s religious involvement. The variation in the middle percentile categories suggests that some men were more involved in formal religious practices than others, yet they all used some combination of informal religious practices. The survey findings should be analyzed with some reservation considering the cells have very small numbers and do not tell

us why there is so much variation in organizational religious involvement for BGM.

Maintaining connections to Black churches was important to BGM in this study, regardless of their demographic differences. As mentioned in chapter four, there was no statistically significant difference in men's organizational and non-organizational religious involvement by age or education. Additionally, there were no differences in religious involvement based on scores of Black identity centrality. The lack of statistical difference between Black identity centrality and the religious involvement sub scales makes sense given BGM's choice to participate in Black churches. Additionally, survey results show that there was no statistically significant relationship between non-organizational religious involvement and gay affirming identity (Fisher's exact = 0.168), moral attitudes toward homosexuality (Fisher's exact = 0.705), and personal homonegativity (Fisher's exact = 0.479). Similarly, there were no statistically significant relationships between organizational religious involvement and moral attitudes toward homosexuality (Fisher's exact = 0.346) and personal homonegativity (Fisher's exact = 1.000); however, there is a significant relationship between organizational religious involvement and gay affirming identity (Fisher's exact = 0.034). These findings showcase that in general, participants' varying levels of organizational and non-organizational religious involvement are not related to how they see their Black and gay identities. Yet, the more BGM in this study participate in organizational religious activities, the less positively they see their gay identity. This suggests that participants are experiencing conflicts between being Black and gay in Black churches. I turn now to the interview data to understand the conflict and how the men manage it.

*Defining a Spiritual Identity as a Resource for Reconciling the Conflict Between Being Black and Gay*

In an attempt to understand how BGM manage identity conflict while engaging with Black churches, I examine how BGM talk about their religiosity and the importance of religion in their lives. During the interviews I conducted with participants, I asked a series of questions to gain a better sense of BGM's religious experiences, including "How religious would you say you are now?"

Overwhelmingly, participants spontaneously rejected the "religious" label during their interviews. Instead, they described how they better identified with the term "spiritual." Twenty-four men used the spiritual label to describe themselves, and nine men used the religious label to describe themselves. However, as we will discover through BGM's narratives, even men who used the religious label emphasized their spiritual practices as important to their ability to maintain connections to Black churches and integrate their gay identity.

Below, Louis (32) described his spiritual identity and why he did not identify with the religious label:

I have a spiritual connection to the church, to God, my community but I wouldn't say I'm religious. *Religious to me is a lot of ritualistic activities that you have to do and if you don't do them then you're not a Christian, or you're less than or you're not fully.* I don't get into all of that. I don't go to church frequently. I don't belong to any type of church groups and clubs and activities. I don't pray. I don't read my Bible every day, none of that. On spiritual, I believe in God. [emphasis mine] *Louis*

The quote from Louis exemplifies the way in which many BGM made distinctions between their spiritual and religious identity. By identifying as spiritual, Louis is able to maintain a connection

to the church and reclaim his legitimacy as a Christian, even though he no longer attended church.

BGM in this study who identified as spiritual defined spirituality with at least one of three components: 1) as a personal relationship with God, 2) as a way to reconcile their Black and gay identities, and 3) as distinct from church attendance and formal religious practice. For them, spirituality included listening to gospel music, praying, and watching church on TV or the Internet.

#### *Spirituality as a Personal Relationship with God*

The most resounding theme in the men's narratives was a definition of spirituality as a personal relationship with God. The men described how they chose to identify as *spiritual* instead of religious because they desired a personal relationship with God.

I'm trying to tap into a system, at this point of my life, [of] being a more spiritual person and letting go of a lot of religion because religion itself, the practice, is based on ritual. I don't know how connected that is to *an actual relationship with God*. [emphasis mine]

#### *Jeremiah*

I am not very religious at all. I am spiritual. I still have some religious--there are just some things that I hold on to, but I think my--I have more, or am morphing into one who--*I'm more concerned about my relationship with God rather than a lot of things that are a part of religion*. I struggle with that. [emphasis mine] *Elijah*

I guess what happened is, over time, I just didn't like organized church. I didn't like the whole idea of paying tithes, and having to worship in large groups to have a connection

with God. Based on what I've learned over the years, [I'm] just kind of *building my own personal relationship with God and my own interpretation of the Bible* and what we used to read in our religion classes and stuff like that. That's where I'm at. [emphasis mine]

*Kendall*

Each of these men related their spirituality to a relationship with God that was detached from the traditional and organized aspects of religion. However, the detachment of spirituality from organized religion did not necessarily mean that the men stopped attending church.

Approximately half of 'spiritually-identified' BGM attended church at the time of their interview; the other half stopped attending regularly but continued to visit churches occasionally and incorporated practices of spirituality into their lives.

The men who defined spirituality in terms of a personal relationship with God were more critical of organized religion than others. Both Jeremiah (27) and Kendall (37), for example, explicitly criticize organized religion and differentiate it from a spiritual connection with God. Kendall, who grew up in predominantly White Roman Catholic and predominantly Black Jehovah's Witness churches, did not attend church at the time of his interview. He emphasized that his spirituality evolved in reaction to his negative experiences in church and subsequent dislike of organized religion. Even though the men's sense of obligation to attend church differed, each described his spirituality in similar ways, as an effort to distance himself from what he deemed to be the negative aspects of organized religion.

#### *Using Spirituality to Reconcile Black and Gay Identities*

BGM like John (26) and Jeremiah (27) faced a struggle between their Black and gay identities because of the stigma attached to being gay within Black churches. Yet, they continued to attend predominantly Black churches and explained how spirituality helped them do this:

I: You said you are spiritual. How does spirituality manifest itself in your life now?

R: It helps me to come to grips with who I am. *Because it's one thing to be Black. It's one thing to be gay, but it's a whole other thing to say, "Ok, I'm a Black gay Christian."*

*...It has helped me come to grips with who I am and to be honest with who I am—that I am a Black gay Christian versus "I'm a Black man struggling with my sexuality."*

*...Being spiritual has taught me that it's [being gay] no longer a struggle. It's the essence of who I am. [emphasis mine] John*

I: What are some resources that you use to deal with racial discrimination and homophobia?

R: [I've been] stepping more into-spirituality and away from religion and figuring things out for myself and not based on what I've been told. Coming up with my own understanding of what I've been told because like I said it's self-hatred when you won't allow yourself to be happy because you feel that makes the rest of the world happy, but it's a miserable place for the individual. *Jeremiah*

Both John and Jeremiah described spirituality as a means through which they were able to integrate their Black and gay identities. John grew up in a large Black Church of God in Christ (COGIC) church and was attending church and pastoring at a Black, gay-affirming church at the time of his interview. For both men, adopting a spiritual identity allowed them to reject the stigma against being Black and gay and stop struggling internally or trying to change.

Rejecting the stigma against being gay also meant rejecting religious beliefs against homosexuality and this allowed the men to continue to attend predominantly Black churches. Staying connected to the Christian church, and in particular, predominantly Black Christian

churches, outweighed the potential stigma and discrimination they might experience as gay men in the church because, for them, leaving the church altogether had more severe social and personal consequences.

As Malik (32) explained, if BGM chose to stop attending church regularly, they had to contend with the perception that family members judged them for separating themselves from church, and by proxy, God.

We have been taught that to not go to church is a bigger sin [than being gay] and that it doesn't matter how people treat you but *you always have to press your way to God*, because what ultimately matters is not your relationship with the person sitting next you but *your relationship with God*. Although the people around you may have a negative opinion of you there will always be a word from God for His people. [emphasis mine]

*Malik*

Some scholars describe this process as conducting a cost-benefit analysis about church attendance (Ellison & Sherkat, 1990; Ellison, 1995). For some BGM, the stigma attached to leaving church, abandoning their belief in the divinity of God, and questioning the validity of Christianity carried more weight than the stigma attached to identifying as gay in the church. It also meant abandoning part of their connection to the Black community. In order to reconcile the conflicts between their Black and gay identities, John and Jeremiah chose to adopt spiritual identities that incorporated acceptance of their gay identities and rejection of anti-gay messages that led to “self-hatred.”

#### *Spirituality as Distinct from Church Attendance and Formal Religious Practice*

For some BGM, spirituality is distinct from formal religious practice and organized religion. For example, one participant stated:



I really transitioned more so into this spirituality thing. I pray. I believe in God. But I don't feel like I need to go and be in a church to show God that I love him or to do godly things. I can be of service to people in the community and I don't need to necessarily tithe, but I can give my money to charity in other ways. *Lamar*

Another participant echoed a similar sentiment about being spiritual:

I don't know that I would consider myself religious in the sense of going to church every Sunday and praying all day every day or things like that, I would say that I'm probably more spiritual now ...I pray every day. *Alex*

For Theo, spirituality allowed for fluidity in his worship and participation in organized religion:

I'm more spiritual than anything. I love religion, love it, love it, because I've identified the fact and I've accepted the fact that religion is manmade. ...I'm at a point in my life, where regardless of which religion, or what you believe in some form of deity, if you invite me, I'm coming... So I am way much more spiritual than anyone in organized religion. *Theo*

Lastly, Roderick defined religion in opposition to spirituality:

I think for me the difference is that *religion connotes a sort of an association.*

Spirituality has to do with the spirit, the internal in terms of how you feel, how your spirit feels. It's more [of] an internal relationship as opposed to being assigned or attached to a church, a building or a priest. [emphasis mine] *Roderick*

Each of these men identified his spirituality as a connection to God, but one that is not necessarily tied to organized religion. Spirituality included believing in God, listening to music, participating in community service, and praying.

In the quotes above, Lamar's (29) and Alex's (26) descriptions of spirituality reflect the distinction they made between a connection to God as an internal and private practice as opposed to an institutional, organized connection conducted in church. Not surprisingly, neither attended church at the time of his interview. In contrast, Theo (38), who attended church, distinguished spirituality from religion by declaring religion "manmade." Doing so allowed him the freedom to attend different types of religious institutions without discrediting organized religion.

BGM simultaneously used a spiritual identity to separate from both traditional religious practices and to find a release from a sense of obligation to participate in organized religion that promotes anti-gay attitudes. This strategy provided them with the independence to stop attending church, integrate their Black and gay identities, and maintain connections to God.

Many BGM explained that as they became more aware and open about their sexuality, they began to become more aware of congregation members and pastors who condemned homosexuality.

Me not attending church, the homosexuality aspect is a big part of it, but *I just find church people to be messy and mean and judgmental and not godly at all*. They're very destructive a lot of times and jealous. [emphasis mine] *Lamar*

I guess when I was like I'd say 22, 23, is when I started realizing that *people were lying* and they were doing their thing while pretending, in my eyes, to be something that they were not, and preaching on a subject that clearly they were [gay]. So when I started seeing things like that that's when I started turning away. *I don't want to be part of an organization* that you can't be yourself or be accepted even if their beliefs are that this is a sin. [emphasis mine] *Rafael*

After I ended up coming out, it became that much more apparent because it became the talk of the church. and, these people who taught me that God and Jesus loves everyone, to come as you are, *I started seeing them as hypocrites* because that come as you are had restrictions to it, had limits to it, and it led me to--*I just stopped going to church altogether* cause of that. [emphasis mine] *Peter*

Each of these men characterize people within the church as “hypocrites,” “liars,” and “judgmental.” Doing so allowed them to create social distance between themselves and religious others in churches while maintaining connections to their faith.

The quotes reveal that it is important to BGM to be able to construct faith-based identities in congruence with their gay and Black identities. Each identity informs and interacts with the other to form an integrated, Black, gay, faith-based identity. Some men constructed this identity by making distinctions between themselves and others by framing religious others as hypocritical and judgmental against homosexuality. Their criticisms were also a means through which they could self-identify as spiritual without subjecting themselves to anti-gay stigma in Black churches. By framing spirituality in individualistic terms, the men could detach themselves from any sense of obligation to conform to organized religious doctrine or internalize anti-gay messages. It is important to note that many populations other than BGM have begun identifying as spiritual and limiting church attendance; however, it is important to understand the utility that a spiritual identity serves for BGM that may differ from other people’s experiences. BGM in this study often use their spiritual identity as a way to navigate anti-gay stigmatizing experiences while attempting to be accepted in culturally familiar spaces like Black churches.

*Continued Struggles to Integrate Faith-based, Black, and Gay Identities*

In contrast to the majority of men who used a spiritual identity to integrate their Black and gay identities, there were two older BGM who continued to struggle with anti-gay religious stigma and internalized negative beliefs about being gay. Raymond (57) explained his struggle with accepting himself as gay as a consequence of his connection to the church. He defined his religious identity as a belief in faith.

I'm still very religious – [but] I believe more in faith than I do in religion. ...Religious is more like activity to me, more regular activity. Faith is more having a relationship with whom you believe. I've come to—I really hated myself. I hated who I am, what I was and to this day, I still have conflict and struggle [with being gay], because of the way I was raised and because of my beliefs and because I read the Bible and the Bible says it's out of the question to even ask God about it, even to the point of asking him to make me a eunuch, asexual. I've cried and prayed about this all my life. *Raymond*

Raymond still had not reconciled his gay and religious identity and he was the only participant to completely reject his sexuality in this way. To maintain his faith-based identity, he diminished the importance of claiming a gay identity by relegating it to “this other thing.” Wesley (56), who also struggled with his gay identity, quit serving as a pastor of a BGAC about a month after his interview. He explained his identity as a “spiritual seeker:”

I: How religious would you say you are now? You said not at all so how would you describe yourself.

R: Not very. I would say not very spiritual but I'm a spiritual seeker. That's what I would say because in recent years, in fact in the last eight years, my spirituality can be formed by lots of other religious movements... Sometimes I struggle with incorporating what we

take as scripture and having it really fit where I am right now religiously or spiritually.

*Wesley*

Unlike most other BGM in the study, the persistent struggle between attending church and grappling with his sexuality was not resolved for Wesley by claiming a spiritual identity. Even serving as a pastor in a BGAC did not resolve the conflict he experienced between being gay and religious. So, Wesley chose to leave his position as a pastor and begin a quest for reconciliation through exploration of non-Christian faiths. Although neither Raymond nor Wesley successfully incorporated a positive gay identity into their self-concepts, both remained deeply connected to church through attendance.

#### *Claiming Faith-based Identities Without Distinctions Between Religious and Spiritual*

There were some BGM who adopted a religious identity but did not make distinctions between being religious and spiritual. These men did not go through major efforts to describe how their religious identity differed from being spiritual. According to interview findings, 9 of the 31 BGM used the religious label to identify themselves.

Similar to BGM who identified as spiritual, BGM who identified as religious emphasized the importance of their personal relationship with God. Frank stated:

It has definitely evolved, being religious now. *Although I'm really active and involved in my church, I tend to emphasize what's most important is relationship with God. I think that's the most important part of what we do. Because there's so many religious people who don't really have a relationship. [emphasis mine]*

Deon explained:

I still am very religious. *I actively go to a church that I'm a member of. I definitely would consider myself to be religious. I know that there was a place in time when I was in*

college that I really did not go to church as much, at all. But I was still extremely religious as far as *my faith in God, my belief in the Bible*. [emphasis mine] *Deon*

Religiously-identified BGM like Frank (23) and Deon (28) described their religious identities as *both* a connection to *church* and a personal relationship with God. Both participants attended church at the time of their interviews. The integration of spiritual practices (e.g., reading the Bible and prayer) with church attendance was central to the descriptions of their religious identities. For Frank, who grew up in a small, Pentecostal Holiness church and served as a minister in a non gay-affirming Black church at the time of his interview, his personal relationship with God was important to his church attendance. Similarly, Deon, who grew up in a large, Black Baptist church and attended a non-denominational, non gay-affirming church, emphasized that even though there were periods when he did not attend church regularly, he emphasized non-organizational links to his religious identity through his belief in God and the Bible.

In contrast, Carter (28) identified as religious although the practices he describes engaging in are similar to those described by BGM who identified as spiritual:

I don't know. I believe I'm religious, not to the point of walking around with a Bible and quoting verse [sic] every five minutes, but I do think that my religious beliefs play a big role in the decisions I make daily. ... For example, if something's bothering me, instead of me drinking my problems away, I might go and pray about it or try and read about it, find an a story in the Bible on it versus the other non-traditional ways [like drinking alcohol] of dealing with problems. *Carter*

Carter's uncertainty about his religiosity may be tied to the fact that, although he attended church at the time of his interview, he did not participate in other practices that he associated with being

religious. As previous research has shown, many Blacks make distinctions between spirituality and religiosity based on church attendance (Mattis & Watson, 2008). For BGM in this study, making distinctions between religious and spiritual was a way to integrate their Black, gay, and faith-based identities in the face of potential anti-gay stigma.

These examples show that there is some overlap in the ways spiritually-identified and religiously-identified BGM describe their faith-based identities. They engage in the same strategies of claiming a personal relationship with God to maintain faith-based identities that incorporated their gay identities. However, some religiously-identified men were more likely to connect church attendance and external expressions of religiosity with their ability to stay connected to God and claim religious identities. It may be that religiously-identified men did not make distinctions between religious and spiritual identities because they just had not thought as deeply about the differences and thus had not adopted the “language” of spirituality.

BGM in this study maintained faith-based identities by adopting labels as either religious or spiritual. For both spiritually-identified and religiously-identified BGM, their connection to God through non-organizational and informal practices was central to the definitions of their identities. For spiritually-identified BGM, spirituality was the mechanism through which they could maintain connections to churches through a belief in God without feeling obligated to be a member of a particular denomination or attend church regularly. In contrast, religiously-identified BGM associated their religious identities with both their church attendance and informal religious practices, such as reading the Bible, praying, and maintaining a personal relationship with God.

BGM make distinctions between spirituality and religiosity as a strategy to maintain their faith-based identities while incorporating their gay identities and reduce identity conflict. The

majority of the men adopted spiritual identities as a way to distance themselves from the anti-gay messages they experienced in Black churches yet continued to maintain connections to Black churches. Even religiously-identified men, who did not make distinctions between religiosity and spirituality, emphasized the informal aspects of religiosity as integral to the process of incorporating their gay identities.

### *Conclusion*

BGM prefer to maintain connections to Black churches, yet often must find ways to negotiate anti-gay stigma in those spaces. Some scholars theorize that BGM maintain connections to Black churches because of an internalized negative attitude toward being gay; however, survey and interview findings from this study reveal a different pattern. Survey findings reveal that BGM differ in their use of organizational and non-organizational religious involvement with Black churches. BGM fell into three clusters based on a combination of their involvement in organizational and non-organizational activities. There was a statistically significantly negative relationship between organizational religious involvement and gay-affirming identity. However, there was no statistically significant difference in BGM's religious activities based on demographic characteristics or Black identity centrality. The lack of relationship between these items suggests that future scholars should measure external factors like stigmatizing experiences that influence BGM's religious involvement and identity construction strategies as well as psychological measures of identity.

Despite a lack of significant difference in demographic factors, such as age and education, in the survey results, there were age differences that emerged in the interview data. According to the interviews, the eldest men struggled with integrating their Black, gay, and faith-based identities. This may be because they grew up at a time when being religious and gay were



more contradictory and more universally condemned in society. Consequently, it remains difficult for them to find ways to construct new identities that positively integrate their Black, gay, and faith-based identities and minimize stigma. This difference in experiences between older and younger men is important because most studies fail to examine older BGM's experiences or the strategies they use to manage stigma and identity conflict. The studies that do examine the strategies BGM use to manage identity conflict mainly concentrate on younger men's strategies (Foster et al., 2011; Della et al., 2002). Additionally, the few studies that include a sample with a wider age range do not conduct an analysis of age differences (Choi et al., 2011). For BGM in this study, faith-based identity construction included a need to find ways to manage anti-gay stigma tied to scriptural passages and Christian cultural practices that condemned homosexuality in Black churches. This analysis is important because previous literature posits that BGM who identify as religious also internalize negative attitudes about themselves as gay men (Barnes & Meyer, 2012) and experience identity conflict between their Black and gay identities (Foster et al., 2011; Ward, 2005). The findings from this chapter highlight how identity is more complex than measurements of behavior can capture. The external nature of the stigmas attached to being Black and gay is not being captured in the survey items because they measure Black and gay identity rather than Black and gay stigma.

Spiritual identity construction served as way for BGM to reduce identity conflict due to stigma they experienced in some Black churches. BGM made distinctions between religiosity and spirituality. They associated religiosity with hypocrisy and judgment against homosexuality. Previous scholars have found that people often make distinctions between religion and spirituality. A study based on a nationally representative sample of social workers found that they define spirituality as related to the individual beliefs connected to a higher deity or force and

religion in negative terms as oppressive and man-made (Hodge & McGrew, 2006). Another study of predominantly White congregants from various age groups found that participants associated religiousness with authoritarianism, religious orthodoxy, and church attendance; whereas, spirituality was associated with mystical experiences and New Age beliefs (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Rodriguez (2010) found that predominantly White groups of gays and lesbians make similar distinctions between religiosity and spirituality. However, none of these studies examined the reasons why participants made distinctions or what purpose they served. Indeed, other scholars have argued for a more in-depth understanding of how and why LGBT people of color make distinctions between religiosity and spirituality (Loue, 2009). The interview findings from this study reveal that instead of completely severing ties with Black churches, BGM found ways to manage, the conflict between their Black, gay, and faith-based identities while maintaining connections to churches. BGM made distinctions between spiritual and religious as a way to reconcile identity conflict and challenge Christian-based anti-gay stigma. These findings challenge the assumption that people who experience stigmatizing experiences in a particular institution have to or would want to completely sever ties from that environment to reduce identity conflict.

BGM's construction of Black gay faith-based identities was part of a larger process of normalization through which they attempted to minimize stigma against being gay in Black churches (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). By describing religious others as "hypocritical" and "judgmental," BGM used what Schwalbe et al. (2000) term "defensive othering," a stigma management strategy to avoid directly confronting homophobia in church while still combating it through verbal criticism. Similar to Schwalbe et al. (2000), other authors found that some BGM incorporated social distancing strategies to construct new positive

identities that established them as morally superior to religious others (McQueeney, 2009; Toyoki & Brown, 2014). When people are faced with stigma, they often identify ways in which they are different from others to build their self-esteem and reduce identity conflict.

BGM in this study associated spirituality with a personal relationship with God, accepting oneself as gay, and making independent Biblical interpretations. Within the context of Black churches, some scholars have suggested that personal religiosity can serve as a strategy for Black LGBT to manage conflict between wanting to maintain their faith while accepting themselves as gay (Miller & Stack, 2013). For example, in an interview study of Black lesbians, Miller and Stack (2013) found that participants used their spiritual beliefs (e.g., “I have direct relationship with God;” “God loves me for who I am”), to reconcile conflict between wanting to accept their gay identity and challenging what the authors call Christian-based homophobia in Black churches (Miller & Stack, 2013). The authors posit that BGM may also use their spiritual beliefs to maintain connections to Black churches and challenge Christian-based homophobia, yet they do not actually collect any data to assess this claim. The findings from my study reveal that BGM do use their spirituality as a means to challenge anti-gay sentiment and treatment in Black churches.

Another way Black LGBT people have been found to challenge anti-gay sentiment and treatment in Black churches is by adopting a liberation theology (Shaw & McDaniel, 2007). Liberation theology is a belief that emphasizes the importance of fighting against racial oppression while doing God work on Earth rather than waiting for salvation in heaven, and was established through African American Christian traditions (Shaw & McDaniel, 2007). Black LGBT people have used liberation theology to argue that they should fight against anti-gay oppression within Black churches because God created all people as equal and loves all of

creation (Shaw & McDaniel, 2007). Additionally, Black LGBT activists and some Black gay-affirming churches have adopted liberation theology as a way to incorporate gay-affirming messages and connect Black LGBT congregants to the social justice legacy of Black churches while fighting for acceptance as full-fledged members of the Black community (Comstock, 2001; McQueeney, 2009; Shaw & McDaniel, 2007). BGM in this study did not necessarily invoke social justice or liberation messages to justify their connections to Black churches. However, they did claim to have a personal relationship with God, which allowed some to invoke their spiritual beliefs and challenge stigmatizing religious notions of homosexuality in Black churches.

In the next chapter, I examine the relationship between BGM's openness about their sexual orientation in Black churches and the strategies they use to manage anti-gay religious stigma. Examining these strategies will provide more insight into the agency BGM employ in managing multiple stigmas in an environment that affirms one identity but exacerbates the stigma of another.

## **CHAPTER 7: NEGOTIATING RISK ASSOCIATED WITH GAY IDENTITY DISCLOSURE IN BLACK CHURCHES**

As demonstrated in previous chapters, the process of managing multiple types of stigma involves making decisions about institutional participation and engaging in personalized identity work. The findings from previous chapters reveal that BGM preferred to create a positive and integrated Black, gay, faith-based identity while maintaining connections to Black churches rather than engage with predominantly White gay-affirming churches. Experiences with racial discrimination and stigma shaped BGM's decisions to continue to participate in Black churches despite facing potential stigma against being gay. One way that BGM in this study negotiated stigma and managed identity conflict in Black churches was by constructing a spiritual identity that distinguished them from perpetrators of stigma. Another possible strategy BGM may use to manage anti-gay stigma in Black churches may be gay identity disclosure. Although some studies have examined BGM's strategies to manage identity conflict between being Black and gay in churches, few have examined whether BGM disclose their gay identity as a strategy to manage stigma and reduce identity conflict.

Studies identify disclosure as a primary means through which stigmatized people can gain a sense of control and mitigate experiences with discrimination (Choi et al., 2011; Corrigan et al., 2013; Greeff, 2013). Once people disclose their hidden stigmatized identity, they are better able to confront perpetrators of stigma (Choi et al., 2011; Miller & Stack, 2014; Orne, 2013), find alternative spaces that do not exacerbate their stigmatizing experiences (Della et al., 2002; Orne, 2013), and advocate on behalf of others to challenge stigma (Miller & Kaiser, 2001).

Some scholars argue that disclosing one's hidden stigmatized identity is a positive strategy because it might preempt discrimination and remove power from perpetrators of stigma (Choi et al., 2011; Corrigan et al., 2013; Greeff, 2013). Yet, the circumstances around disclosure may be different for those who must also manage stigma attached to visible characteristics associated with being Black. Scholars find that BGM are less likely to disclose their gay identity than WGM (Legate et al., 2012; Orne, 2013; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004) – possibly because they do not want to jeopardize the social support they receive in Black communities. However, Moore (2011) demonstrates how some Black LGBT are disclosing their gay identity as a way to gain visibility and better integrate themselves into Black communities. To my knowledge, there are few, if any, studies that examine the process of gay identity disclosure for BGM in Black churches. Thus, this study has the potential to be the first of its kind to examine this process. It is important to examine gay identity disclosure among BGM in churches because churches are arguably the most contentious spaces for anti-gay stigma and a space where BGM's Black identities are especially relevant. The findings from this chapter challenge the idea that people who hide stigmatized characteristics do so because they want to deceive others by showcasing how the circumstances surrounding stigma often increase the risk of rejection for people with hideable stigmatized characteristics. Thus, people dealing with stigma attached to hideable characteristics may have to find ways to negotiate both the risks of disclosure and the risks of non-disclosure.

While previous literature identifies disclosure to be an effective strategy for LGBT individuals to manage anti-gay stigma, few scholars have considered how a person's willingness and ability to disclose their gay identity is associated with management of other stigmatized identities. I argue that it is important to examine how the visibility of stigmatized characteristics

may influence the contexts in which BGM disclose their gay identity, to whom, when, and for what reasons. It is important to examine the processes of disclosure of stigmatized hideable characteristics attached to an identity like being gay for BGM because lack of disclosure has been associated with depression (Stutterheim et al., 2011; Syzmanski & Gupta, 2009). The disclosure of one's hidden stigmatized identity may also be used as a way to gain control over stigmatizing experiences.

For this chapter, I ask the following research questions: 1) How, when, and to whom do BGM disclose their gay identity within the context of Black churches? 2) For what purposes do BGM disclose their gay identity? I draw on data from interviews and church observations. From the interview data, I focus on responses to questions such as, "When did you come out as gay? To whom?" I also incorporate an analysis of observations I conducted while attending a BNGAC, BGAC, and WGAC to better understand the conditions that shaped BGM's gay identity disclosure experiences.

### *Results*

For BGM in the study, gay identity disclosure was often a tough process to endure and meant facing potential rejection from congregants and family members in their churches. However, the majority (n=21) of BGM disclosed their gay identity at church. The process of disclosure included having private conversations with pastors and congregation members about their sexual orientation, providing public "testimonies" of their experiences as gay men, attending church with their partner, or writing letters to church leaders to discuss their struggles with their gay identity. Six men explained that they never disclosed their gay identity at church because of fear of rejection from family members and friends. Men who did not disclose their gay identity in church described experiences where they either elected not to have conversations

with church members about being gay and/or felt compelled to hide their gay identity. Two men described “not hiding” their gay identity in church, but did not explicitly mention any experiences where they disclosed their gay identity. “Not hiding” their gay identity involved behavior such as gender bending (i.e., wearing makeup and jewelry, bringing partner, etc.) in church, while not openly discussing being gay to church members. As a reminder, all men who participated in the study self-identified as gay men and self-selected into the study, so they were all open about their sexual identity in certain contexts. However, differences in BGM’s gay identity disclosure at church indicate that Black churches may not always be an environment in which men feel safe to be open about their sexuality.

Throughout BGM’s lives, they had to negotiate when, where, to whom, and to what extent they would disclose their sexual orientation. In the following sections, I analyze the conditions under which BGM did and did not disclose their gay identity in Black church settings and to whom they disclosed.

#### *Hiding Gay Identity to Manage Stigma*

BGM who had not disclosed their gay identity at church described being silent in churches that delivered explicitly anti-gay messages. Miller and Stack (2014) refer to this strategy as voluntary disengagement, which is when a person chooses not to communicate or interact with perpetrators of stigma by avoiding direct conflict.

OK, I think I should pause here and say *that I think there is a difference between identifying as a gay man and I will argue as being openly gay. Because I don’t consider myself openly gay, but I’m not afraid to say who I am.* I don’t consider myself to be openly gay, especially around members of my church. ...Now, if I put on [social media],



“I’m an openly gay, Black male,” or something to that effect, I think I would be discriminated against, especially in church. [emphasis mine] *Frank*

Frank (23) was acutely aware of the stigma attached to being gay in church, and considering his role as a youth minister, he was especially concerned about people associating homosexuality with pedophilia:

I do feel constrained. I feel like—Especially since I work with the younger people the younger, the teens. I’m a teen Sunday-school teacher and I feel very constrained that there’s a certain way that I have to be, a certain way that I have to act, an image that I have to portray for them. So, I don’t want to say it’s two different lives, but *definitely there’s a difference between when I’m at church. Yeah, definitely two different images.* I’ll just leave it at two different images: when I’m at church and when I’m in my social circle. Those people who also go to those same [types of BNGAC] churches, *we can all get together and have fun and really kind of be who we can’t be at church*, if that makes sense. [emphasis mine]

Despite stigma in church, Frank tried to strike a balance between being true to himself and keeping his gay identity private in church. For example, one Sunday as I was waiting for church service to start at the BNGAC that Frank attend, I saw him enter the sanctuary with his partner. However, while his partner took a seat at the back of the sanctuary by himself, Frank kept walking to the altar, sat by himself and read the Bible. The men did not interact with each other again until they left the sanctuary and went to the car together to leave the church. I wondered whether the distance they kept from each other was a way to avoid disclosing either person’s gay identity. This was not the first time I had seen them do this. During my observations, I noticed that Frank regularly brought his partner to church with him. However, while they usually entered

church together, they never sat together and had minimal interaction with each other while in church.

Although Frank's church was not considered gay-affirming, I never heard anyone say anything negative about Frank or his partner during my visits. It is possible that by bringing his partner to church services, Frank was attempting to subtly subvert some of the traditional gender and heterosexist norms of the church. However, because he had not openly disclosed his gay identity, these actions may not have been as effective at challenging anti-gay stigma as if he had been open about his sexuality and partnership with a man.

As I described in Chapter 4, the associate pastor of Frank's church delivered a sermon where she talked about welcoming gay and lesbian people to become members of the church, but described them as "twitching men and hard women." This description was contradictory to her message that the church should accept LGBT members into the church. After the service ended, I asked Frank how he felt about the sermon, and he said that he chose not to pay attention to those messages because "they didn't know any better." Frank rationalized that the people delivering the anti-gay sermons were ignorant, which allowed him to dismiss their offensive words and maintain connections to the church.

For Frank and other BGM in this study, staying connected to their church was a priority because the church served other important functions in their lives. Therefore, as Jeremiah (27) and Carter (28) explain, it was best to ignore anti-gay messages:

Because for a lot of Black gay men, we compartmentalize – [the] "church is church" experience. "The head of the church doesn't have to accept me, but I know how God feels," you know? "As long as he's not making me outwardly uncomfortable. As long as

he's not persecuting me directly. As long as it's not a situation where I have to sit here every Sunday and listen to a hate message, I'm okay." *Jeremiah*

R: Every once in a while, when [the pastors] make gay comments, I do feel uncomfortable ... *those moments don't arrive often*, but sometimes I have that feeling.

I: What did you do about it when you felt uncomfortable?

R: Just dealt with it. Tried to keep a straight face. Tried to smile if everyone else was smiling based on the comment that was made.

...

[During one sermon], me, the choir director, one other choir member, we were like, we looked at each other, but we were like, "We can't look at each other long, because people will go, 'Oh, y'all are gay. He's offending you.'" You try to concentrate, keep looking at the audience or nod your head. *Carter*

By compartmentalizing their lives and remaining silent about their sexuality in church, some BGM were able to avoid stigmatizing experiences, but they freely expressed their gay identity in non-church environments. As the men's statements above show, some feared revealing their gay identity and that of other gay congregants in the church because of experiences with discrimination and possible rejection by family and friends in churches. Others hid their gay identity as a way to control the disclosure of information about their lives and to minimize experiences with discrimination. Below, Mark (28) explains:

I: It's really interesting because the stereotype is that BGM are always involved in music and all of these things, but if you're out about it...

R: *If you're out about it. Yep, that's where the problem comes.* As long as you keep it on the hush and you don't tell nobody, you're good. [emphasis mine] *Mark*

It is important to note that not all men who used silence strategies were closed about their sexuality in all aspects of their lives. Some men chose not to disclose their sexuality to particular people because of prior experiences with negative treatment and/or the fear of potential stigma.

Below, Peter (33) explains:

I started telling people when I was like in the 5th grade. and *I knew who I could tell, and I knew who I couldn't tell.* and I made the mistake of telling a friend I had known since kindergarten and he didn't take it well, so I had to backtrack. So I had gotten really good at quote unquote "being in the closet." I knew who I could trust and I knew who I couldn't trust. [emphasis mine]

Wendell's (38) views are found below:

R: You know you lie, of course. I'm not ashamed to say you just lie about it. and that's what I did. I lied about it. I just played the whole part of, "Yea, I'm just waiting for the right woman to come along." I just basically lied ...about the whole thing.

I: Were you out while you were at that church? Did they know?

R: Yes. Yes, I was out to my family. Yes.

I: Okay, but not to the people at the church?

R: But not to the community, yes.

The quotes above emphasize the importance of understanding the context in which BGM use silence strategies and with whom they use them. Silence strategies were used to minimize the potential for future stigmatizing experiences or feelings of discomfort. Thus, even when BGM were open about their sexuality in other settings, some did not feel as though they had a choice in

whether they could safely disclose their gay identity in church settings. Others purposefully chose to avoid direct confrontation and disclosure in church settings because of the potential for exacerbating their feelings of discomfort and potential discrimination.

Often BGM chose to employ silence as a stigma management strategy to hide their sexuality in church environments that were not safe and around people who would reject them for being gay. However, silence did not necessarily prevent others from suspecting that participants were gay, nor protect them from internalizing the anti-gay messages. The stereotypes of gay men performing effeminate or “flamboyant” behaviors made visible the hidden stigma of being gay and discredited their character in Black churches. Yet, for many BGM, silence about their gay identity allowed them to maintain connections to Black churches without direct confrontation or outright rejection.

#### *Gay Identity Disclosure*

As BGM in this study evolved in their gay identity, many felt compelled to disclose their sexual orientation despite the stigma attached to homosexuality in some Black churches. As Wendell (38) states, to not be open about his sexuality was to not present an “authentic” part of himself:

*I felt like a hypocrite. I felt like a liar. I felt like here I am paying my tithes, and worshipping in a church that if they knew I was gay wouldn't-- which basically wouldn't like me. So I felt for a long time like a hypocrite actually because it was a secret so I had to play the part, and worship God at the same time.*

As a result of the conflict he experienced between wanting to worship God and be open about his sexuality, Wendell found ways to carve out space within churches and his family to be openly gay. He further stated:

*I just told myself that I was not going to live this lie anymore, that being gay was not all that I was and the fact [my family] can only see that [I was gay] was very stupid to me. They basically had no choice. I was like, “Listen, if you can't accept all of me, then you can't have any of me.” But now it's, “You have to respect me. All of me.”*

Many BGM described having conversations with church members about their sexuality. Graham (30) described his experience discussing his sexuality with others:

I do have friends who are members of [my church] who know I'm gay. We've had conversations about it, but they don't agree with it. They always say, “We love you anyways.” But it's not my place to make you agree with it and I don't need your acceptance either.

Similarly, Brandon (45) mentioned that at a time in his life when he was homeless, sick, infected with HIV, and without transportation, the people from the large, predominantly Black Baptist church he attended, and especially the pastor, took care of him and gave him rides to the church. During one New Year's Eve watch night service, Brandon's pastor encouraged him to disclose his sexual orientation and HIV status by “testifying” about his experiences:

[The pastor] said I ‘had a testimony,’ and I stood up. The church was packed. It was no standing room, nothing. No room and I told my story. Afterward, he told me to come up and he prayed with me. Everybody laid the hands, and he prayed for me. And it was just the environment, the feeling, like he was in touch with me.

Such experiences helped Brandon to see that, as an openly gay, HIV-positive man, he was welcome in the church even though he described it as not being gay affirming. Brandon explained: “I liked the church because they had this ‘accept you just the way you are.’ They make you feel like you have purpose.” These experiences are important to consider when trying

to understand why openly gay Black men attend churches that are not gay-affirming environments.

The congregants and pastor made an effort to welcome Brandon, assist him with transportation, food, finding a shelter and a job, and did not openly judge him for being gay or HIV-positive. However, Brandon described some experiences that indicated his church pastor and congregants held some implicitly anti-gay sentiments.

They don't really judge *me*, but they talk about *people in general*. But they don't realize that you're sitting there listening to what they are saying. They may stop or they may not stop, but I say, "You ain't bothering me one bit. Go on with your lives anyway, 'cause you don't understand." [emphasis mine]

Brandon insisted in other descriptions of his church that the pastor and congregants were accepting of *him* being gay, but this suggests that they were not accepting of *other* gay people. Brandon simultaneously criticized their negative talk as offensive and ignorant while justifying it by saying that they were not talking about him personally. Even in a space where he was accepted for being gay, he was very aware of the stigma still attached to homosexuality in his church.

Other BGM in the study also described developing personal relationships with pastors and church members, which made it difficult for them to simply walk away. Jeffrey (30), for example, had been attending the same church since he was a child and had a deep sense of belonging and love for the church. He saw his pastor "as a father figure." In his interview, Jeffrey described having open conversations with his pastor about homosexuality and same-sex marriage legislation, but the relationship had boundaries. Once, when Jeffrey had his ears pierced, the pastor told him that he could not sing in the choir with pierced ears because he

associated it with being gay. Jeffrey explained what the pastor told him about the incident years later: “he thought I was gay and he just didn't know how to handle it. He was like any way he felt like he could keep me from being gay, that's what he was doing.”

Jeffrey’s relationship with his pastor made it difficult for him to reconcile his gay identity with continued participation in the church. The negative experiences in the church created a conflict for him, and he considered leaving the church altogether:

I went in his office and I was in tears. I was just in tears. I was just like, “I think it's time for me to go,” and he told me, “I don't think it's time for you to go. I think it's time for you to stay here and work hard [as a member of the church choir].”

Close relationships like the one Jeffrey had with his pastor are often developed over time, sometimes before BGM realize they are gay or become open about their sexuality. The close relationships may have made it easier for them to disclose their gay identity, but they did not necessarily make it easier for BGM to reconcile the conflicts between their gay and religious identities. BGM’s close relationships with congregation members and pastors in BGNACs were complicated by the fact that BGM held the opinions of church members and clergy in high regard.

Sometimes, the conversations men had with congregation members became contentious, and revealed underlying intolerance. In some cases, interactions with congregation members became confrontational because they refused to hide being gay. In the example below, Mark (28) confronted his choir director for refusing to let him sing in the choir.

R: “Bitch, who the fuck are you to tell me that I’m not spiritual enough? Because I told your son to shut the hell up? Because I’m trying to focus on learning these songs? This is important to me.” She told me I can’t sing because apparently she don’t see me waving



my hands enough during the devotionals, or whatever. She can't tell that I'm "spiritual enough." [His siblings] said, "Well, Mark, you know, honestly, we think it's just because you're gay."

I: So why did they think it was because you were gay?

R: Just because I wasn't...*I was never vocal about it in my mother's home church, but I didn't hide it either.* Like, I wore make-up to church. [emphasis mine] *Mark*

Even though Mark did not directly disclose his gay identity in his church, he still experienced discrimination for being gay because he chose to present visible markers of his homosexuality that did not conform to traditional masculinity. However, as he aged, disclosure got easier, partially because people became more receptive to his disclosure.

I think it [being openly gay in religious settings] became more acceptable, as weird as this may sound, after going to graduate [Divinity] school. My letter, you know how you have to write those personal statements? I put it right there. I put it out. Like, "this is who I am. Lord, if you..." I was trying to be clever, so I didn't address the audience who was reading. I wrote it as a prayer and I think that really won them over, and plus the Dean of students at the time, she just came out as a lesbian as well, and I think she really fought hard for me to get in.

Mark continued to use gay identity disclosure as a means to claim his place in religious spaces while integrating his gay identity. By insisting on participating in religious spaces as an openly gay man, he refused to allow those discriminatory experiences separate him from his desire to remain connected to religion. Eventually, the disclosure strategy proved useful because he found the Dean to be an ally who supported him.

Sometimes gay identity disclosure was not voluntary. In contrast to Mark (28) and Graham (30), other BGM had to deal with unauthorized disclosure, or in other words, being “outed” by church members.

I used to write for this teenage newspaper. I wrote this story about coming to grips with my sexuality, [and about] being molested by a cousin, a babysitter's son, and a next-door neighbor, two males and a female. *But, I never expected adults to see it. I never expected family friends to see it.* One Sunday, [Big Mama]<sup>3</sup> saw the pictures of me and read that article... Big Mama, pulled me to the side, like *she snatched me up* and took me into the pastor's office, and [she] said to me, "I don't think you are this way. I think you're just doing it to rebel against your parents." Then she told my mom and dad... After I ended up coming out, it became that much more apparent [that anti-gay sermons were about me] because it became the talk of the church. [emphasis mine] *Peter*

Peter's (33) experience with unauthorized disclosure by Big Mama resulted in increased discrimination within the church he attended and a heightened awareness of the anti-gay messages delivered in sermons. Even in his attempts to disclose his gay identity and sexual abuse story in a safe space, he exposed himself to the risk of being rejected and discriminated against in other realms of his life. Like Peter, many BGM in the study were aware that gay identity disclosure in church settings came with potential consequences.

The consequences of gay identity disclosure in churches were a concern for not only BGM but for their families. John (26) described the concern his parents had for him being an openly gay pastor:

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<sup>3</sup> Big Mama is a term commonly used in Black communities to refer to a grandmother or elder woman with whom a person has a close relationship. Peter referred to an elderly woman in his church as Big Mama, but he was not related to the woman.

[Parents] don't want you getting gay bashed. They fear you getting AIDS. So a lot of it isn't necessarily that they can't accept it. A lot of it is the fear that, "Wow, you're saying people [send you] bomb threat[s]..." I know of some openly gay pastors and next thing you know, you're seeing security guards. A lot of it is out of fear of what people may do or people may say about you. But yeah, they're not a fan of it. *John*

Even though his parents accepted John as gay, they feared for his life because of the stigma attached to being openly gay, especially as a pastor of a church. However, John chose to continue to be open about his sexuality and face the threats associated with being a pastor of a gay-affirming church. Given the risks associated with disclosing one's gay identity in churches, one might assume that most BGM would hide this aspect of their lives to minimize stigma. However, the interview findings reveal that the majority of BGM were open about their sexuality in churches. For many, the consequences of continuing to hide their gay identity outweighed the potential risks associated with disclosure.

#### *Gay Identity Disclosure as a Conversation Starter*

Some BGM used gay identity disclosure and conversations about homosexuality as a way to advocate on behalf of other Black gay boys and men and challenge the notion that BGM were not supposed to be fully accepted in church. Below, Deon (28) explains:

The double-edged sword of [having open conversations about homosexuality] is *what happens to people who come out and are kicked out* and that sort of thing. They don't have support around. So, I think what also has to happen is there has to be some support around for people who choose to come out and talk about those different things. How do you start having those conversations, not just between kids or other gay men, but also

within churches, within schools, within, you know, beauty salons and those types of things?

Even though gay identity disclosure meant risking the loss of one's social support, BGM like Deon insisted that it was important to break the silence. Gay identity disclosure is one way that BGM could challenge heterosexist norms in society and help start conversations about what it is like to be a gay man. The disclosure process was one way BGM in this study could control the visibility of their identity as gay in Black spaces while not being associated with stereotypes attached to homosexuality.

Gay identity disclosure was a means for some BGM to engage in conversations, activities and organizations that worked to eliminate stigma against being gay and Black. Some BGM (n=7) described advocating on behalf of other BGM and boys as a way to, protect them from discrimination and provide social support. Below, Wendell (38) explains:

I have a desire to be involved ...with the young gay youth, young adults, children, and teenagers... because I think there's a lot of young adults, there's a lot of children dying, committing suicide, or going through a whole lot of problems because they either don't have anyone to talk to or they either don't have good examples and I have a desire to be a part of that. *Wendell*

Similarly, Jeffrey (30) stated:

I was just flipping through [a gay dating website] and I saw one of the little boys in my church on there. He's twelve years old. He's from a single parent home. At first I didn't know what to do. I'm like, "Do I just let him stay on here like I don't see it or do I do something?" His mom asked me to talk to him... There are no role models for the youth and I think I realize why I've been through it [childhood molestation and discrimination

against being gay], even if it was just to help this one child to keep him from being dead at the age of fourteen. ...I think just then, at thirty years, I found out what my purpose was.

Mentoring gay youth served a dual purpose for BGM. Both Wendell (38) and Jeffrey (30) wanted to provide guidance for gay youth at risk of adverse mental and sexual health outcomes. However, for Jeffrey, advocacy and mentorship also served as a means for him to process his feelings about his experiences with similar circumstances. Similarly, Deon (28) expressed a desire to prevent others from experiencing the same discrimination he did:

I got to a point where it [anti-gay discrimination] really didn't matter and *I actually started to advocate for a lot of these different issues*. Where I'm at now, *I continue to speak about those different issues in peoples' lives to hopefully address a lot of the discrimination that I kind of got when I was younger*. [emphasis mine] Deon

For Deon, the importance of challenging anti-gay discrimination and protecting other gay men outweighed the potential risk and negative experiences he faced in his personal life.

Participants were compelled to circumvent the cycle of stigma, discrimination and abuse associated with being gay. For some, the means to advocate and challenge sexual orientation discrimination was through their gay identity disclosure because it allowed them to engage in conversations with others about homophobia in the Black community.

At the center of some BGM's focus for being out and purposefully talking about their experiences as BGM was their desire to fight anti-gay stigma in Black communities. Graham (30), who participated in organizing Black Pride events, but was critical of BGM's experiences in Black southern communities commented:

I'm part of Black Pride, so I try to—I work with them creating events and planning for

the Pride at the end of the year for the Black gay community. But even that, I don't feel like there's a strong connection. That could just be a south[ern] thing. I think people in the south are more afraid, especially BGM are a lot more afraid or fearful of coming out and being in the open. So the [Black gay] community is not as strong as I feel like it is in bigger cities or accepting in cities. [emphasis mine] *Graham*

While Graham saw the importance of fighting against the stigma of being gay in larger society, he was especially attuned to the experiences of BGM. Advocating on behalf of others was a source of pride and empowerment for him, but it was also a means to speak out against discrimination particularly in the context of Black communities.

Disclosure and advocacy was also used as a means to create a community of social support for BGM who feared the stigma of coming out as gay in the south and in Black communities. Even though there were events and organizations being established to combat stigma against being gay in Black communities, their reach had limited effectiveness because of the fear many BGM still felt related to the stigma of being gay. Participants discussed the challenge of getting other BGM involved in advocacy organizations because they did not want to be openly identified as gay. Graham and other BGM who participated in advocacy work emphasized the importance of creating safe spaces within Black communities, and particularly Black gay communities. Additionally, the racial marginalization BGM experienced in predominantly White LGBT spaces often prohibited BGM from wanting to engage in advocacy work with WGM. Below, Peter (33) describes his frustration with working with WGM:

[There are] not that many Black gays that are jumping on the marriage equality bandwagon *because there are other issues that Black gays are trying to deal with, particularly equality in the Black community, and particularly equality of Black church.*

...I've begun to recognize how BGM have normally been left out of the narrative. I am right now sort of frustrated with the White gay community. I've also come to realize in certain spaces...when there are conversations around homosexuality, it is always done from a White gay male perspective. [emphasis mine] *Peter*

Part of the reason BGM worked so hard to establish community and social support in Black communities was because of the antagonistic relationship they had with White gay men. BGM who desired to advocate on behalf of other BGM and LGBT issues in general often encountered segregation, discrimination, and marginalization of Black gay issues. For Peter, his experience advocating on behalf of Black gay issues raised his awareness of the marginalization and exclusion perpetuated by some WGM. Despite these challenges, advocacy became an avenue through which some BGM could gain a sense of accomplishment in their ability to engage in conversation, challenge stereotypes and discriminatory treatment, and negotiate stigma against being both Black and gay. The potential benefits associated with disclosing one's gay identity seemed to outweigh the costs associated with facing discrimination and stigma—presumably because remaining silent did not buffer them from anti-gay stigma either.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter examined BGM's experiences with gay identity disclosure in Black churches. Findings revealed that in some Black church spaces, BGM were afraid to disclose their gay identity for fear of rejection, discrimination, and even violence. However, some dealt with the repercussions of involuntary disclosure. Many BGM often voluntarily disclosed their gay identity to supportive people within the context of Black churches and Black communities. They were willing to face the risks associated with gay identity disclosure because it increased a sense

of empowerment and recognition, and in some cases, enabled them to advocate on behalf of others who were vulnerable to stigma and discrimination within Black churches.

Some BGM used silence as a strategy to minimize the frequency of their experiences with direct sexual orientation discrimination in churches. Even though some BGM chose not to directly confront perpetrators of stigma in the moments they described in their interviews, it is important to note that they still found ways to subtly challenge anti-gay stigma. Some BGM wore make-up, invited gay male friends and romantic partners to church, and used other ways to “not hide it.” The fact that some BGM engaged in subversive acts demonstrates how they attempted to gain some control over their stigmatizing experiences by engaging in similar behaviors as other BGM who have been found to “queer” Black spaces (Johnson & Henderson, 2005). Still, BGM who had not disclosed their gay identity in church recognized the necessity for them to minimize their association with homosexuality to maintain connections to their churches. Thus, silence was often used in combination with other strategies to minimize the visibility of stigmatizing characteristics and discriminatory experiences.

The process of gay identity disclosure was also a means to challenge stigma. Some BGM engage in strategies that directly challenged perpetrators of anti-gay stigmatizing treatment. Some BGM described having conversations with family and church members about homosexuality, disclosing their gay identity, or criticizing discrimination. However, their disclosure and confrontation also came with a cost. Some BGM experienced *more* discrimination because they were breaking the norms of silence in Black churches about the topic of homosexuality. This finding relates back to Johnson’s (2008) work examining BGM’s experiences with being gay in the South. As long as BGM were silent about being gay, they were tolerated in Black communities and Black churches (Johnson, 2008). Similarly, Kaufman et al.



(2004) argue that gay identity disclosure is dependent on the perceived safety one feels in revealing that identity. Yet this work challenges the idea that anti-gay stigma completely discourages people from disclosing. Additionally, these findings showcase how the support and refuge BGM experience in Black churches may outweigh the risks of gay identity disclosure in those spaces. Despite the repercussions for gay identity disclosure, BGM expressed a sense of empowerment and accomplishment for disclosing their gay identity in churches.

Some BGM chose to engage in advocacy work to challenge anti-gay and anti-Black stigma. BGM expressed a desire to advocate on behalf of Black gay issues in particular. BGM's gay identity disclosure and advocacy work falls in line with Moore's (2011) study, which finds that Black LGBT people are becoming more vocal and active in social justice activities that challenge anti-gay stigma in Black communities. BGM used advocacy as a strategy to challenge stigma attached to both their Black and gay identity, gain a sense of control over their ability to engage with others who perpetrate stigma, prevent others from experiencing the same discrimination, and process their feelings about their experiences.

The findings from this chapter show that for BGM, the negativity associated with remaining silent about their hidden stigmatized identity outweighed the risks associated with being discriminated against for revealing it. Thus, BGM used gay identity disclosure as a strategy to control who knew about their gay identity and protect others from potential discrimination. Gay identity disclosure was also a way to claim recognition and space within Black churches to be openly gay. This chapter contributes to our understanding of how people may use voluntary disclosure as a way to preempt discriminatory experiences and combat stigma. Voluntary disclosure of one's gay identity was a way for BGM in this study to maintain connections to Black churches and gain control over who has information about their gay

identity. Additionally, this chapter contributes to our understanding of how the consequences related to hiding one's identity to avoid stigma can outweigh the potential risks associated with disclosure. Participants' experiences suggest that stigma management is not just about minimizing the visibility of a particular stigmatized identity, but minimizing association with the stereotypical characteristics that drive the stigma and finding ways to disclose that identity in a supportive and comfortable environment.

## **CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION**

This dissertation provides insight into several theoretical questions regarding the relationships between stigma and strategies to reduce identity conflict. The evidence presented from the interviews, surveys, and ethnographic observations allow for some preliminary conclusions regarding the multiple mechanisms that influenced BGM's strategies to manage multiple types of stigma and the relationships between stigma, identity salience and overlapping identities.

Findings revealed that people with multiple stigmatized identities have constrained options in their ability to find safe religious spaces that allow them to integrate their Black and gay identities. It was the visible aspects of the stigma attached to being Black and gay that often constrained these options. Some BGM preferred not to participate in predominantly White churches and predominantly White gay spaces because of cultural unfamiliarity, previous experiences with racial discrimination, and potential discomfort. Some older men were especially hesitant to join gay-affirming churches and described experiences when they were younger that were especially virulent toward homosexuality. Part of their negative association with gay-affirming churches and lack of willingness to join them was influenced by their early negative experiences with anti-gay treatment in churches where they grew up. Younger BGM in the study also had negative experiences with anti-gay treatment, but also seemed more aware of the options available to them for attending gay-affirming churches. Additionally, some men preferred not to join gay-affirming churches because of the stigma attached to visible aspects of being gay, such as stereotypes tied to effeminate mannerisms, wearing clothing commonly

associated with women, being perceived as hyper-sexual, and/or being openly affectionate with a person of the same sex.

Part of participants' hesitation with being associated with gender non-conforming and visible characteristics of homosexuality in churches might have to do with the fact that these characteristics are common among WGM and did not reflect the cultural expressions of many BGM in this study. Cultural expectations about how men should be open about their sexuality are often shaped by WGM's experiences and cultural norms. As scholars, we should reconsider the assumption that every man has to be "out" and open about their sexuality in the same way.

Men in this study negotiated the disclosure of their gay identity in Black church spaces with caution because many were wary of the potential rejection they might experience from family and friends due to the stigma attached to being gay. I argue that their refusal to be attached to the "gay" label and stereotypical characteristics of homosexuality was reflective of their continued struggle to challenge internalized homophobia as well as their desire to maintain privilege as men and an elevated status as "masculine" men. Thus, predominantly Black churches were the most desired option because of cultural familiarity, familial connections, refuge from racial discrimination, and potential maintenance of their status as masculine men.

The negotiations men made about their church-going decisions signal the importance of the salience of Black identity for BGM as well as the pervasiveness of the stigma attached to being Black. However, it also becomes apparent that the visible aspects of any stigmatized identity seem to supersede stigma attached to hidden characteristics because of one's inability to escape or hide stigma attached to visible characteristics. Participation in and connection to Black churches were used to maintain links with "like" individuals and gain access to social support while also finding ways to challenge anti-gay stigma.

The findings challenge multiple assumptions about the way that stigma operates in people's lives and the relationship between stigma, identity salience, and decisions about institutional participation. First, not all stigmas operate the same way for all people. The visibility of stigma seemed to outweigh the stigma attached to hideable characteristics. As such, the stigma attached to visible characteristics was strongly linked to BGM's decisions about participation in Black churches and the strategies they used to minimize discriminatory experiences. Their decision to participate in Black churches also serves as an indicator of the salience of their Black identity and the importance of cultural familiarity. This finding showcases how decision-making processes are informed by experiences with stigma and serve as an indicator of identity salience. Future research should measure identity salience both through decisions about institutional participation as well as group membership. Additionally, future scholars should examine how multiple types of stigma interact to shape decisions about institutional participation.

Identity salience was also assessed in this study by measuring BGM's attitudes toward their Black and gay identities through previously validated sub scales. The findings from the survey indicated that BGM had very positive attitudes toward being Black and gay, and maintained connections to Black churches, yet they still had different patterns of church attendance. The findings from the survey did not capture all of the important factors that influenced BGM's differential relationships to religious involvement; thus, it was important to examine interview data to determine if there were other factors at play. Interview findings revealed that even though BGM were highly involved in both organizational and non-organizational religious practices in Black churches, it was important for them to find ways to minimize anti-gay stigma. Given the potential for BGM to receive anti-gay messages in Black

churches, participants engaged in personal and interpersonal strategies to manage the hidden stigma attached to being gay and reduce identity conflict. Constructing a spiritual identity was a primary means through which some BGM were able to combat identity conflict. Instead of internalizing negative attitudes about themselves as gay, some BGM adopted a spiritual label and/or engaged in informal religious practices as a way to integrate their Black, gay and faith-based identities while maintaining connections to Black churches. Others who adopted a religious label were similar to men who adopted the spiritual label because they also engaged in informal religious practices and emphasized their personal relationship with God. These findings highlight how people manage to find ways to minimize stigma and maintain positive self-concepts while participating in stigmatizing spaces.

BGM found ways to minimize stigmatizing experiences in some non gay-affirming Black churches by claiming control over who had access to information about their stigmatized identities and limiting involuntary interactions with perpetrators of stigma. BGM managed the stigma attached to being gay in Black churches by choosing where and to whom they disclosed their gay identity. To be sure, not all BGM had the *choice* to hide or disclose their gay identity, but some found ways to regain control by leaving non gay-affirming churches. Many men continued to struggle with internalized negative beliefs about being both Black and gay. Some BGM even expressed outrage over their experiences with discrimination and rejection in Black churches and often sought ways to directly challenge stigma. By disclosing their gay identity in Black churches, BGM were simultaneously challenging stigma, demanding recognition and dignity, and taking control over their experiences with anti-gay stigma. These findings demonstrate the enduring challenges and occasional triumphs BGM have in minimizing discriminatory experiences with multiple types of stigmas. Yet, the findings also challenge the

assumption that people hide stigmatized characteristics as a way to deceive others, or that they are not empowered to challenge perpetrators of stigma. Indeed, gay identity disclosure can be used as a means to challenge anti-gay stigma in Black churches; yet we should also acknowledge how BGM must negotiate different ways to control disclosure based on the potential risk of rejection and marginalization.

Insights gained from this small, selective sample provide a better understanding of the mechanisms that influence the relationships between stigma and identity salience, stigma and identity conflict, identity salience and identity conflict, and decisions around group membership as a strategy for stigma management and identity conflict resolution. However, there were also some limitations to this study that prohibit generalization to all BGM's experiences. The study relied on a convenience sample of BGM who largely have attained college degrees and moderate to high incomes. These selective characteristics limit the generalizability of the findings to all BGM. Stigma management and identity construction strategies may differ for BGM based on characteristics or experiences not captured in this study, such as differences in socioeconomic status, educational attainment, or region. Additionally, newer cohorts of BGM may use different strategies or have different experiences with stigma as attitudes toward homosexuality become more positive and socially acceptable in mainstream society and as the number of gay-affirming churches increase in Black communities. Despite these limitations, the findings provide a better understanding of the theoretical questions posed in this research; thereby, presenting theoretical generalizability that can be applied to other groups and contexts dealing with similar circumstances. Additionally, the findings are similar to previous studies of groups of gays and lesbians who attempt to reduce identity conflicts between being Black, gay and religious (McQueeney, 2009; Pitt, 2010; Rodriguez, 2010) in that BGM distinguish themselves from

stigmatized others, separate themselves from perpetrators of stigma and attempt to find churches that allow them to minimize stigmatizing experiences. Similarly, studies examining the experiences of Black gay men in secular settings parallel findings from my study in that participants were acutely aware of racial discrimination and found ways to integrate their Black and gay identities while maintaining connections to predominantly Black communities (Bowleg, 2013; Della et al., 2002; Hunter, 2010; Pitt, 2010). However, my study contributes a new perspective on the reasons why BGM's Black identity is more salient than their gay identity and why BGM maintain connections to Black churches despite the potential for rejection. The pursuit of ways to minimize experiences with multiple types of stigma is an influential factor that shapes BGM's identity salience and negotiation of their intersecting identities as Black and gay.

My dissertation findings show that BGM maintain connections to Black churches and use them as refuge from racial discrimination despite the stigma attached to being gay in those settings. Yet, it is possible that immigrant Black gay male participants who do not identify as African American and/or are Black immigrants to the United States may experience different relationships to Black identity, the stigma attached to Blackness in the United States, and traditionally Black American churches because their identities may not be strongly linked to the same histories of racial oppression. Indeed, some immigrants from other areas of the African Diaspora openly and persistently reject association with the "Black" label or any association with African American culture, despite or perhaps in response to, experiences with racism (Rahier & Hintzen, 2014; Waters, 1990). Questions still remain as to whether the stigma attached to Black identity operates similarly for those of different ethnicities. Might the processes to reconcile identity conflicts related to multiple stigmatized identities differ among immigrant versus US-born Black men who have sex with men? Might the labels attached to same-sex behavior, as well



as the additional stigma attached to HIV status, alter the ways in which Black men manage multiple stigmatized identities? Future research might examine how experiences with stigma and strategies to manage multiple types of stigma differ by ethnicity for African descended men and those who do not adopt the label, “gay.” Additionally, men of African descent who have sex with men have also been found to disassociate themselves with the label, “gay,” despite engaging in same-sex behavior (Hunter, 2010). They may reject the gay label because of its association with White LGBT individuals, and specifically WGM (Hunter, 2010). Indeed, some men of African descent openly reject any association with WGM, and have begun to adopt labels, such as “same gender loving,” or choose not to adopt a label at all (Mount et al., 2014). I am interested in examining how experiences with visible and/or hidden stigmas may influence these processes of identity negotiation.

In addition to ethnic and label differences, it is possible that other groups with intersecting identities may engage in similar processes to manage visible and hidden stigmas. Insights from this study can help us to better understand why the visible markers of stigmatized identities carry more weight than hidden stigmas in regards to treatment in society and what measures people take to navigate and challenge experiences with multiple stigmatized identities.

Lastly, it may be useful for researchers to further examine the influence of particular contexts in shaping how people manage stigma. People who participate in spaces that are supposed to serve as sources of support for one identity may also experience stigma related to other intersecting identities. Instead of assuming that people *choose* to participate in particular groups or social contexts because they simply feel more comfortable with “like” members, it is important to examine how their choices may be constrained by the lack of alternative spaces. Other spaces deemed to be “safe,” such as schools, workplaces, family units, and friendship

networks may not always embrace every aspect of a person's identity, and may thereby aggravate identity conflicts and feelings of marginalization. Due to the lack of alternative spaces for people to access, scholars should explore how people with intersecting identities might create *new* spaces that allow them to minimize stigma and integrate their identities.

In conclusion, the findings from this study provide a framework for identifying and buttressing stigma management strategies that enable people to minimize discriminatory treatment and control engagement with perpetrators of stigma through decisions around disclosure of their hidden stigmatized identities. Additionally, the findings from this study have implications for understanding how people in other contexts and with other overlapping identities manage stigma. Specifically, the findings from this study showcase how the visibility of stigmatized characteristics shape people's experience with identity conflicts and influence how they make decisions about participating in particular institutions. I argue that people are likely to prioritize finding ways to minimize their association with visibly stigmatizing characteristics over hideable stigmatizing characteristics. Lastly, if a person must decide which institution to participate in based on having two or more types of visibly stigmatizing characteristics, they may prioritize participating in spaces that provide refuge from stigma attached to characteristics they cannot control or hide.

## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCRIPT

*Interviewer to read: Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ . Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this individual interview today. I would like to begin by asking you a few questions regarding your religious background, then we'll move into your experiences growing up Black. Lastly, we'll talk a little bit about your experiences with being gay*

### **Religious Experience**

Can you describe your religious upbringing when you were growing up?

PROBE: How important was religion in your home when you were growing up?

PROBE: What was your religious background while you were growing up?

Tell me about your earliest church experiences? What were they like?

PROBE: What kind of church was it?

PROBE: Was it a big church?

PROBE: Did you enjoy it?

PROBE: Are there any experiences that stick out to you as particularly good or bad?

How religious would you say you are now?

PROBE: How has your being religious (or not being religious) changed or stayed the same over the years?

PROBE: Can you think of any specific events or examples that led you to that change? or helped you stay religious?

How did you come to attend the church you currently attend now? or to not attend church at all?

Are there any churches in the area that you would NOT attend? Why or why not?

PROBE: Do you know of [name of predominantly-black gay affirming church]? Have you ever considered going there? Why or why not?

PROBE: Do you know of [name of predominantly-white gay affirming church]? Have you ever considered going there? Why or why not?

Have there ever been times when you've felt uncomfortable at church? which one?

PROBE: What happened?

PROBE: Why did that make you feel uncomfortable?

PROBE: What did you do?

Have you ever heard negative messages about homosexuality in the church you currently attend, or messages about homosexuality that made you feel uncomfortable? what about any other churches you've attended in the past? which ones?

PROBE: Who delivered those messages: the pastor, congregation members, family?

PROBE: How often do you hear negative messages about homosexuality in your current church? How often did you hear negatives messages about homosexuality in previous churches you attended?

PROBE: How does/did that make you feel?

PROBE: What did you do to deal with that feeling?

Have you ever felt compelled to stop attending church altogether? Describe that experience.

PROBE: Where did you go as an alternative to attending that church, if anywhere?

PROBE: If you've chosen not to attend church at all, can you describe any other sources of support or worship you use?

## **Racial Identity**

When did you become aware of race or any racial differences between you and others?

How did your parents and family members talk about race when you were growing up?

Can you describe the racial composition of your neighborhood(s)? the schools you attended while growing up? the church you attending while growing up?

PROBE: How did it make you feel as a Black person living in that type of neighborhood? attending that type of school? attending that type of church?

How often do you think about your race on a daily basis?

PROBE: Can you describe a situation where your race become especially important/relevant/poignant?

Can you describe experiences with racial discrimination, if any, that you've had?

PROBE: How did it make you feel?

PROBE: What did you do about it?

PROBE: Did you talk to anyone?

PROBE: Did you pray about it?

How comfortable do you feel around other Black people?

PROBE: Can you describe any experiences where you felt uncomfortable around Black people?

### **Gay/Bisexual Identity**

Can you describe when and how you discovered you were attracted to men?

Can you describe the first time, if ever, you came out to someone?

PROBE: Who have you come out to and why?

PROBE: Who have you not come out to and why?

How did your parents and family members talk about homosexuality/gay people when you were growing up?

PROBE: Can you describe how, if ever, you told your parents and family members about your gay or bisexual identity?

PROBE: Have you talked to your parents and family members about your life as a Black gay or bisexual man recently? Describe those conversations.

Is being gay/bisexual an important part of who you are? If so, when and how did being gay become important to you? If not, why not?

How would you describe your connection to the gay community? the Black gay community?

Can you describe any experiences when you've felt embarrassed of being gay/bisexual?

PROBE: How did you deal with that feeling?

PROBE: Did you talk to anyone?

PROBE: Did you pray about it?

Can you describe any experiences when you've felt discriminated against for being gay/bisexual?

PROBE: How did you deal with that feeling?

PROBE: Did you talk to anyone?

PROBE: Did you pray about it?

Can you give me examples of avenues (e.g., things you do, people you talk to, places you go) that you might use to deal with any experiences you might have with racial discrimination or homophobia?

*Now that we've reached the end of our interview, I want to ask a couple of final questions:*

Do you have any additional comments on topics that we discussed today?

What are some things about Black gay men in terms of religion that I didn't ask that I should have thought to ask?

## APPENDIX B: SURVEY

### Multidimensional Measure of Religious Involvement for African Americans (Levin et al. 1995)

#### *Organizational Religiosity*

1. How often do you usually attend religious services?

- a. Never
- b. Less than once a month
- c. Once a month
- d. 2-3 times a month
- e. Once a week
- f. 2-3 times a week
- e. Daily

2. Are you an official member of a church or other place of worship?

- a. No
- b. Yes

3. If so, what is the name of your place of worship? \_\_\_\_\_

4. How many church clubs or organizations do you belong to or participate in? \_\_\_\_\_



5. Besides religious service, how often do you take part in other activities at your place of worship?

- a. Never
- b. Less than once a month
- c. Once a month
- d. 2-3 times a month
- e. Once a week
- f. 2-3 times a week
- e. Daily

5. Do you hold any positions or offices in your church or place of worship?

- a. No
- b. Yes

6. If so, which ones? \_\_\_\_\_

*Non-organizational Religiosity*

6. How often do you read religious books or other religious materials?

- Never      rarely      sometimes      often      all of the time

7. How often do you watch or listen to religious programs on TV or radio?

- Never      rarely      sometimes      often      all of the time

8. How often do you pray?

Never      rarely      sometimes      often      all of the time

9. How often do you ask someone to pray for you?

Never      rarely      sometimes      often      all of the time

**Black Centrality Scale (Sellers et al. 1997)**

10. Overall, being Black has very little to do with how I feel about myself.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

11. In general, being Black is an important part of my self-image.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

12. My destiny is tied to the destiny of other Black people.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

13. Being Black is unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

14. I have a strong sense of belonging to Black people.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

15. I have a strong attachment to other Black people.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

16. Being Black is an important reflection of who I am.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

17. Being Black is not a major factor in my social relationships.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

**Internalized Homonegativity Inventory (Mayfield 2001)**

18. I believe being gay is an important part of me.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

19. I believe it is OK for men to be attracted to other men in an emotional way, but it's not OK for them to have sex with each other.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

20. When I think of my homosexuality, I feel depressed.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

21. I believe that it is morally wrong for men to have sex with other men.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

22. I feel ashamed of my homosexuality.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

23. I am thankful for my sexual orientation.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

24. When I think about my attraction towards men, I feel unhappy.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

25. I believe that more gay men should be shown in TV shows, movies, and commercials.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

26. I see my homosexuality as a gift.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

27. When people around me talk about homosexuality, I get nervous.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

28. I wish I could control my feelings of attraction toward other men.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

29. In general, I believe that homosexuality is as fulfilling as heterosexuality.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

30. I am disturbed when people can tell I'm gay.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

31. In general, I believe that gay men are more immoral than straight men.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

32. Sometimes I get upset when I think about being attracted to men.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

33. In my opinion, homosexuality is harmful to the order of society.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

34. Sometimes I feel that I might be better off dead than gay.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

35. I sometimes resent my sexual orientation.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

36. I believe it is morally wrong for men to be attracted to each other.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

37. I sometimes feel that my homosexuality is embarrassing.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

38. I am proud to be gay.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

39. I believe that public schools should teach that homosexuality is normal.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

40. I believe it is unfair that I am attracted to men instead of women.

strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

### **Demographic Information**

41. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

42. What is the highest level of education you have received?

- a. Less than HS diploma
- b. HS graduate
- c. Some college, no degree; or 2 year Associate's degree
- d. Bachelor's degree
- e. Graduate or Professional degree

43. What is your race or ethnicity? (Please check all that apply)

- a. American Indian or Alaska Native
- b. Asian
- c. Black or African American
- d. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- e. White
- f. Latino or Hispanic

44. What is your primary race?

- a. American Indian or Alaska Native
- b. Asian
- c. Black or African American
- d. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- e. White

45. What is your personal annual income?

a. Less than \$10,000

b. \$10,000 to \$29,999

c. \$30,000 to \$49,999

d. \$50,000 to \$69,999

e. \$70,000 to \$89,999

f. \$90,000 to \$99,999

g. \$100,000 to \$149,999

h. \$150,000 or more

46. How would you describe your sexual orientation? \_\_\_\_\_

47. What is your religion and/or denomination?

\_\_\_\_\_

48. Do you attend church? \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, what church do you

attend? \_\_\_\_\_

Is the church you attend predominantly Black, White, or racially mixed?

\_\_\_\_\_

Would you consider your church to be openly accepting of gay

people? \_\_\_\_\_



**APPENDIX C: LIST OF QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS CODES AND DEFINITIONS**

List of Qualitative Data Analysis Codes and Definitions	
<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Age</b>	Numerical age
<b>Currently Attends Church</b>	Coded based on whether participants indicated they attended church at the time of their interview
<b>Denomination when growing up</b>	Text response
<b>Grew up in rural or urban area</b>	Rural included any reference to a small town, rural town, country town, etc.  Urban area included any reference to a large city, metropolitan area
<b>Size of Church</b>	100 or less people in the church or respondents describing the church as “small” was coded as a small church  101 to 500 people in the church or respondents describing the church as “medium” or “average” size was coded as a medium-sized church  Any number over 500 or respondents describing the church as “big” or a “mega-church” was coded as a large church
<b>Descriptors of type of church participants grew up in</b>	The descriptors included strict, family oriented, traditional, Pentecostal, Bible-based, fundamental
<b>Descriptors of church activities involved in at church when growing up</b>	Descriptors included choir, usher board, pastor, minister, instrument player, etc.
<b>Did not attend church for extended period of time at point in life</b>	Coded as Yes or No. Included any descriptors of times when men described stopping church attendance for any reason, and for longer than a few months
<b>Felt compelled to leave church altogether</b>	Coded as Yes or No. Included any descriptors of men who described feelings of wanting to leave church.
<b>Watches church/gospel music on TV/internet</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Identifies as Spiritual</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Identifies as Religious</b>	Coded as Yes or No.

<b>Currently a Pastor or Minister</b>	Coded as Yes or No. Included when men discussed serving in ministerial or pastoral role in church.
<b>Currently Has other leadership position in church</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Used to have leadership position in church</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Religion was important when growing up</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Changed denominations (either while growing up or as adult)</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>"Shopped around" for church to attend</b>	Interviewee described visiting several different churches and/or denominations. Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Grew up in White church</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Grew up in Black church</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Grew up in racially mixed church</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Went to church because of invite from friend/family member (specify who)</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Attends gay affirming church</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Attends non-gay affirming church</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Attends gay-neutral church</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Would not become member of "gay-affirming" church</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Would attend "gay-affirming" church</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Attending gay church is like "meat market"</b>	Interviewee described experiences in gay-affirming churches where they felt like it was a "meat market" or where they were receiving unwanted sexual advances. Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Would not become member of White church</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Would attend White church</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Would not become member of Black church</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Heard negative messages about homosexuality from pastor</b>	Coded as Yes or No.

<b>Heard negative messages about homosexuality from congregants</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Heard negative messages about homosexuality from guest pastors/speakers</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Heard negative messages about homosexuality from media</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Experienced calling/message from God</b>	Interviewee described experiences communicating with God and describing being "called" by God for ministry or some other behavior. Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Received formal religious education (M.Div., etc.)</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>In a romantic relationship</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Being Black is important to him.</b>	Interviewee explained that Black identity was important to his main identity or self-definition. Coded as Yes or No.
<b>How often does he think about his race?</b>	Often, Sometimes, Not Very Often.
<b>Being Black doesn't "define" me</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Attended White schools growing up</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Attended racially mixed schools</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Attended Black schools</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Grew up in White neighborhood</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Grew up in racially mixed neighborhood</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Grew up in Black neighborhood</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Attended Historically Black College or University</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Attended Predominantly White Institution for college</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Parents talked about race and/or racism.</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Experienced racial discrimination</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Embarrassed about being Black; feels uncomfortable around other blacks</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Comfortable around Black heterosexual men</b>	Coded as Yes or No.

<b>Member of Black fraternity</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Being gay is important</b>	Interviewee explained that gay identity was important to his main identity or self-definition. Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Being gay doesn't "define" me</b>	Interviewee explained that gay identity did not determine his main identity or definition of himself. Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Talk to parents about being Black gay man</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Parents talked about homosexuality</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Heard negative messages about homosexuality from family</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Parents accepted him as gay</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>When first realized he was gay</b>	Coded as age or life stage.
<b>When first came out as gay</b>	Coded as age or life stage.
<b>Came out to straight person first</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Came out to gay person first</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Came out to female first</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Came out to male first</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Came out to mother</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Came out to father</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Came out to extended family (not parents)</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Came out to friends</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Came out to work colleagues</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Out as gay in church community</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Close to White gay community</b>	Interviewee described how he felt close to members of the White gay community. Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Close to Black gay community</b>	Interviewee described how he felt close to members of the Black gay community. Coded as Yes or No.

<b>Embarrassed about being gay</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Experienced sexual orientation discrimination</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Uses prayer to deal with negative experiences</b>	Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Experiences with molestation.</b>	Interviewee spontaneously discussed experiences with being molested. Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Stereotype of homosexuality being associated with HIV</b>	Interviewee mentioned in that he or others associated homosexuality with HIV. Coded as Yes or No.
<b>HIV positive</b>	Interviewee spontaneously indicated that he was HIV positive. Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Gay brother</b>	Interviewee indicated that he had a gay brother. Coded as Yes or No.
<b>Gay sister</b>	Interviewee indicated that he had a gay sister. Coded as Yes or No.

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