The Association Between Internalized Homophobia, Stigma, Racism, Religion and Sexual Risk Behaviors in Young African American Men who have sex with Men in Jackson, MS

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ABSTRACT
THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA, RACISM, RELIGION, STIGMA AND SEXUAL RISK BEHAVIORS AMONG YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN IN JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

BY
DORIAN PATRICE FREEMAN
APRIL 18, 2018

INTRODUCTION: The HIV/AIDS epidemic has had a troubling affect across all racial/ethnic groups but has disproportionately exacted its greatest toll on African Americans, specifically, African American men who have sex with men (AAMSM), inclusive of any man who has had sexual contact with another man. In 2015, among all gay and bisexual men who received an HIV diagnosis in the U.S., African Americans accounted for the highest number (10,315; 39%), followed by whites (7,570; 29%) and Hispanics/Latinos (7,013; 27%)(CDC, 2017). Despite an overall decline in HIV diagnoses in African Americans between 2005-2014, conversely a 22% increase in HIV diagnosis was observed in African American gay and bisexual men during that same period, with HIV diagnoses among African American gay and bisexual men aged 13 to 24 increasing 87% (CDC, 2017). If current diagnosis rates continue, 1 in 6 gay and bisexual men will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime, including 1 in 2 black/African American gay and bisexual men, 1 in 4 Hispanic/Latino gay and bisexual men, and 1 in 11 white gay and bisexual men (CDC, 2017). Therefore, Black MSM (BMSM) in the United States are now experiencing rates of HIV infection that rival those among the general population in the developing world (Peterson & Jones, 2009). Studies to date have demonstrated that racial HIV disparities are not explained by individual behavioral factors alone, nor higher rates of substance use, or a higher number of sexual partners in BMSM, therefore these findings have prompted exploration into a broader array of social, structural, and contextual factors experienced by minority MSM that may explain HIV disparities (Quinn et al., 2015).

AIM: To examine the association between Internalized homophobia, stigma, racism, and religion and sexual risk behaviors, sexual identity and HIV testing frequency among young AAMSM in Jackson, MS.

METHODS: A total of 600 young MSM were eligible to participant in the study. Study participants were recruited from two federally funded clinics specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of STIs, including HIV. Participants were also recruited through social media, attending bars and nightclubs. Inclusion criteria included: (1) assigned male at birth; (2) self-identification as Black/African American; (3) 15-29 years of age; (4) attending the clinic to be tested for HIV or other STIs; (5) having engaged in anal sex with a male partner at least once in the past 6 months; and (6) the ability to speak and comprehend English. Study participants provided written informed consent and parental consent was obtained for participants under the age of 18. Participants completed an online questionnaire that collected sociodemographic characteristics, sexual risk behaviors, sexual experiences and experiences of homophobia, stigma and discrimination.
RESULTS: An increase in IH was associated with a .164(SD, .081) increase in the number of times having anal sex with a male partner as a top (p-value .02). An increase in stigma was associated with a .185(SD, .057) increase in the number of different male anal sex partners as a bottom (p-value .003). No statistically significant associations were found between daily racism. An increase in racism and life experiences was associated with a .051(SD, .021) increase in the number of different male anal sex partners as a bottom (p-value .027). No statistically significant association was found between religious support and the seven sexual risk behaviors. An increase in religious attendance was found to be associated with a .360 decrease in the number of different male anal sex partners as a bottom (p-value .03). And as religious attendance increased, the odds of engaging in condomless anal sex with a male as a bottom decreased (aOR 0.77, CI 0.64-0.92) at a p-value of .005.

A statistically significant mean difference was found for IH across the sexual identity categories based on how an individual identified to male friends [F(6, 581)=7.0, p=<.0001], how individuals identified to female friends [F(6, 582)=8.8, p=<.0001], and how individuals identified to healthcare providers [F(7, 581)=7.0, p=<.001]. No statistically significant mean IH level scores was found between the HIV testing frequency groups. No statistical significance for the mean level for stigma across sexual identity categories based on how individuals sexually identified to male friends was found [F(6,582)=1.7, p=0.12]. The mean level for stigma across the sexual identity categories and how individuals identified themselves to female friends [F(6, 582)=4.0, p=0.0005] and healthcare providers[F(97, 581)=2.9, p=0.006] was found to be statistically significant. The mean level for stigma based on the HIV testing frequency groups found non-significant results [F(2, 524)=0.3, p=0.7]. The mean level for religious attendance across sexual identity groups and how individuals identified to male friends found statistically significant results [F(6, 593)=2.7, p=0.01]. The mean level for religious attendance across sexual identity categories based on how individuals identified to female friends [F(6, 593)=2.0, p=0.06] and healthcare providers [F(7,592)=1.9, p=0.07] found statistically non-significant results. There were no mean level differences found for religious attendance and the HIV testing frequency groups [F(2, 524)=2.4, p=0.09]. The mean level for religious support across sexual identity categories based on how individuals sexually identified to female friends found statistically significant results [F(6, 490)=3.4, p=0.003]. Statistically insignificant results were found between religious support across sexual identity groups and how individuals identified to male friends [F(6, 490)=1.5, p=0.2], and healthcare providers [F(7, 489)=1.0, p=0.5]. Non-significant results were also found when assessing the mean level for religious support and HIV testing frequency between groups [F(2, 439)=2.2, p=0.1].

CONCLUSION: These study findings suggest that higher levels of IH, stigma, racism and life experiences are associated with an increase in sexual risk behaviors that can predispose young AAMSM in Jackson, MS. to HIV infection. Conversely, an increase in religious attendance was associated with a decrease in sexual risk behaviors. Additionally, the impact on mean levels of IH, stigma, religious attendance and support can differ across groups based on how individuals sexually identify to male friends, female friends and healthcare providers. These finding signify the importance of a need for HIV risk reduction interventions, at the individual, community, and structural level, that address socio-contextual factors that negatively impact sexual behaviors and increasing HIV risk, and these findings also signify the vital need for further research assessing socio-contextual factors and their role in driving the HIV/AIDS epidemic in AAMSM.
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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia State University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

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Thesis Defense: April 18, 2018
Acknowledgments

I would first and foremost like to give Glory to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for the strength to endure and persevere this arduous journey. Many times, I questioned my path and ability to press forward, but only by Faith and through Grace was I able to complete this major milestone in my life. I would also like to give thanks to my biggest fans, the loves of my life, my Husband and Son, for without their support and understanding my journey would have been much too heavy, but because they believed in me and my success, more than I sometimes believed in myself, I was able to persevere. I would also like to give a special thanks to my “Study Group”, you know who you are, as you guys helped more than you know and for that I am eternally grateful. Finally, I want to express my sincere thanks to Dr. Salazar for her guidance, support and calming demeanor during my times of uncertainty and confusion. Thank you for having faith in my vision, even when my vision was cloudy. I appreciated your availability, whether by email, phone or in person, your sacrifice never went unnoticed. I would also like to thank Dr. Swahn for her time, guidance and support. Your effort and expertise were greatly appreciated.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

For more than two decades, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) epidemic has placed a tremendous burden on the United States (U.S.). Currently there are an estimated 1.1 million people living with HIV in the United States, but unfortunately approximately 15% (1 in 7) are unaware that they are infected (“HIV Basics | HIV/AIDS | CDC,” 2017). Despite tremendous strides that have been made in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, there is still a significant amount of progress needed to combat this epidemic. Even with the advancements that have been made, such as the advent of antiretroviral therapy (ART) in the 1990’s, which has greatly reduced HIV transmission and HIV mortality, thereby increasing the prevalence of individuals living chronically with HIV, and HIV preventative medications like pre-exposure prophylaxis (PREP), which reduces HIV acquisition risk in high risk individuals, disparities in HIV infection and treatment still persist. Despite highly effective treatments many individuals are continuing to be adversely affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The HIV/AIDS epidemic has had a troubling effect across all racial/ethnic groups, but it has disproportionately exacted a toll on African Americans, specifically, African American men who have sex with men (AAMSM), inclusive of any man who has had sexual contact with another man.

Although African Americans represent 13% of the U.S. population, they constitute 45% of those living with HIV/AIDS (Reed et al., 2013). In 2015, 39,513 people were diagnosed with HIV, and African Americans accounted for 17,670 of those newly diagnosed infections, with
more than 58% of those infections occurring in AAMS. Furthermore, in 2015, gay and bisexual men constituted 2% of the U.S. population, but accounted for 82% (26,375) of individuals diagnosed with HIV (CDC, 2017). Despite AAMS accounting for 9% of all MSM in the United States, they account for the majority of new HIV cases in the U.S. per year (Stacy W. Smallwood, S. Melinda Spencer, Lucy Annang Ingram, Jim F. Thrasher, & Melva V. Thompson-Robinson, 2017). Specifically, in 2015 among all gay and bisexual men who received an HIV diagnosis in the U.S., African Americans accounted for the highest number (10,315; 39%), followed by whites (7,570; 29%) and Hispanics/Latinos (7,013; 27%) (CDC, 2017).

Despite an overall decline in HIV diagnoses in African Americans between 2005-2014, conversely a 22% increase in HIV diagnosis was observed in African American gay and bisexual men during that same period (CDC, 2017). If current diagnosis rates continue, 1 in 6 gay and bisexual men will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime, including 1 in 2 Black/African American gay and bisexual men, 1 in 4 Hispanic/Latino gay and bisexual men, and 1 in 11 white gay and bisexual men (CDC, 2017). To further put into perspective the disproportionate impact of the HIV epidemic, Black MSM (BMSM) in the United States are now experiencing rates of HIV infection that rival those among the general population in the developing world (Peterson & Jones, 2009). AAMS are not only disproportionately affected by the highest number of newly diagnosed HIV cases, but they also account for the highest number of diagnosed AIDS cases and HIV/AIDS related mortality. Among all gay and bisexual men with HIV infection classified as AIDS in the United States in 2015, African Americans accounted for 3,928 (39%), followed by whites 3,096 (31%) and Hispanics/Latinos 2,430 (24%) (CDC, 2017). Likewise, in 2014, 3,591 African Americans died of HIV or AIDS, accounting for 53% of total deaths attributed to the
disease that year (CDC, 2017). BMSM also have unequally high rates of other sexually transmitted diseases (STD), including chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis infections, which are known to increase an individual’s risk of acquiring and transmitting HIV infections.

HIV related disparities are also being observed in AAMSM across various age groups, with HIV prevalence and incidence rates being disproportionately higher among young MSM (YMSM) between the ages of 13-24, specifically young Black MSM (YBMSM). YBMSM not only experience the greatest HIV burden, but they are also more likely to be living with HIV and unaware of their seropositive status. According to the CDC, despite the stabilization in the overall rate of HIV diagnosis among AAMSM in the U.S., YBMSM have experienced increases in HIV incidence. From 2005 to 2014, HIV diagnoses among African American gay and bisexual men aged 13 to 24 increased 87% (CDC, 2107), and previous research has indicated that YBMSM, BMSM 29 years of age and younger are most at risk for HIV infection (Maksut, Eaton, Siembida, Driffin, & Baldwin, 2016). Progress has been made in this population with the trend leveling off in recent years, declining 2% since 2010. But in 2015, among all AAMSM diagnosed with HIV, 38% were YMSM between the age of 13-24 (CDC, 2017). Given the one in four chance of being diagnosed with HIV by the age of 25 in this population, YBMSM are the highest priority population for intervention efforts (Crosby, Mena, & Ricks, 2017). Aside from the unequal distribution of HIV/AIDS infection by racial/ethnic groups and by age groups, the geographical rates of new HIV infection cannot be ignored. The South has the highest rates followed by the Northeast, the West, and then the Midwest with African Americans, specifically, AAMSM mostly contributing.

Regarding HIV transmission, anal sex is considered the highest risk sexual behavior, and
because of this, the MSM population are left particularly vulnerable. Gay and bisexual men who engage in receptive “bottoming” anal intercourse (RAI) (receiving a penis in the rectum from another man) have a greater risk of HIV transmission than gay and bisexual men who engage in insertive “topping” anal sex (inserting a penis into the rectum of another man). Condomless anal intercourse is one of the most commonly cited factors associated with HIV infection among MSM (Stacy W. Smallwood et al., 2017) therefore, because MSM have a significant risk of being exposed to HIV, and due to the staggering rates of HIV infection being observed in this population, particularly in AAMSM, there is a tremendous need to escalate HIV-prevention efforts. Even with the progress that’s been made to reduce HIV transmission, there are still many obstacles that contribute to HIV risk and incidence, such as poverty, homelessness, unemployment, discrimination, stigma and incarceration. Therefore, understanding these societal and cultural factors and how they contribute to sexual risk behaviors resulting in HIV acquisition and transmission is imperative.

Studies to date have demonstrated that racial HIV disparities are not explained by individual behavioral factors alone, nor higher rates of substance use, or a higher number of sexual partners in BMSM, therefore these findings have prompted exploration into a broader array of social, structural, and contextual factors experienced by minority MSM that may explain HIV disparities (Quinn et al., 2015). Unfortunately, despite this awareness, there is still a lack of community-level HIV prevention intervention research in AAMSM. To combat the scarcity of prevention research in AAMSM prevention strategies have entailed tailoring current effective prevention models to the AAMSM population. Identifying personal, social and environmental factors associated with the sexual behaviors that increases HIV acquisition and
transmission risk among MSM is critical to informing prevention policy and practice (Frye et al., 2015). Consequently, although scarce, studies in AAMSM examining the relationship between structural factors, such as internalized homophobia, racism, religion and stigma, and sexual risk behaviors are increasing and necessary as these factors could potentially be driving the HIV/AIDS epidemic and explain the racial/ethnic disparity that is being observed. Additionally, even though still limited, research is not only focusing on individual structural factors, but also on the influences of syndemics in the HIV/AIDS epidemic in BMSM, syndemics being two or more co-occurring, mutually enhancing risk factors (e.g. poverty, racism, homonegativity) or health conditions (substance use, depression, sexual compulsivity) that intersect to increase the likelihood of disease development (Lassiter & Parsons, 2016). Hence, research that examines the influence of individual structural factors and co-occurring factors is also necessary to expand the literature and better understand factors contributing to the HIV/AIDS disparity being seen in AAMSM.

PURPOSE

Structural-level factors, which include the socio-economic and cultural contexts of communities have contributed to the high burden of HIV among BMSM (Levy et al., 2014). Therefore, this study seeks to explore structural factors, including internalized homophobia, stigma, religion and racism and their association with sexual risk behaviors, while also examining their association to sexual identity and HIV testing frequency, in a sample of young, Black MSM (YBMSM) in Jackson, Mississippi. There is a dearth of research assessing the impact of social and contextual factors and their association with HIV risk behaviors in AAMSM.
Therefore, research examining these factors is necessary to fill the research gap. Apart from risk factors that affect all gay and bisexual men, AAMSM face additional risk factors that can impact HIV risks, including socioeconomic factors, smaller more exclusive sexual networks, lack of knowledge about HIV status, homophobia, racism, stigma and discrimination. Additional factors that can contribute to HIV transmission and explain the higher HIV rates in black MSM, include higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases (STD), ART noncompliance and failure to achieve undetectable viral loads. These risk factors signify why there is a compelling public health need for STD and HIV prevention programs targeting AAMSM. In addition, reducing STD incidence among this population will require programs and policies that improve care access and linkage of patients to STD screening and treatment and overall improvement along the HIV care continuum, which consist of identifying undiagnosed HIV cases, linking them to HIV care and retaining HIV-positive AAMSM not in care into high-quality HIV care and treatment. Consequently, programs must additionally address the external root causes of delayed HIV care and dropping out of care, such as homelessness, joblessness, substance abuse, mental health, stigma, and discrimination based on race, gender, and/or sexual orientation (Maulsby et al., 2014). A targeted focus on all these factors is vital if the disproportionately high rates of HIV in AAMSM are to be impacted.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. Are IH, stigma, racism and religion associated with an increase in sexual risk behaviors?
2. Are there differences in the levels of IH, stigma, racism and religion among different sexual identity groups based on how they identify to male friends, female friends and healthcare providers?

3. Are there differences in the level of IH, stigma, racism and religion among difference HIV testing frequency groups?

4. Are IH, racism, stigma or religion associated with increased odds of engaging in condomless male anal sex as a top or bottom?

**HYPOTHESIS**

1. IH, stigma, racism and religion are associated with an increase in sexual risk behaviors

2. Levels of IH, stigma, racism and religion differ between different sexual identity groups based on how they identify to male friends, female friends and healthcare providers

3. Levels of IH, stigma, racism and religion differ between the HIV testing frequency groups
4. IH, stigma, racism and religion are associated with increased odds of engaging in condomless anal sex with a male as a top and as a bottom

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

HIV AND AFRICAN AMERICAN MSM

MSM who identify as Black or African American (BMSM) historically have been and continue to be the group most heavily impacted by the HIV epidemic (Maksut et al., 2016). AAMSM experience the greatest burden of HIV incidence and prevalence in the U.S. and experience the highest rates of HIV/AIDS related mortality. Research has consistently shown that sexual risk behaviors alone do not explain the disproportionate rates of HIV in this population, and despite advancements that had been made in addressing the HIV epidemic, AAMSM continue to experience burdensome HIV rates that are comparable to rates observed in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2015, Gay and bisexual men represented 2% of the U.S. population, but accounted for 82% (26,375) of HIV diagnoses among males and 67% of all diagnoses (CDC, 2017). In 2015, 39,513 people were diagnosed with HIV, but African Americans accounted for 17,670 of those newly diagnosed infection, with more than 58% of those diagnosed infections occurring in AAMSM (CDC, 2017). There is also well-documented evidence of both race and age-based disparities in the prevalence and disease progression of HIV infection among MSM in the United States. In
2016, BMSM accounted for 45% of new HIV diagnosis, with the greatest burden being observed in YMSM (13-29 years of age), HIV prevalence among BMSM was 28%, significantly higher than among Latino (18%) or White MSM (16%), with minority MSM more likely to be unaware of their HIV infection (Quinn et al., 2015).

The geographic HIV disparities being observed in the South compared to other U.S. regions is also a major concern. In 2016, southern states accounted for more than half of new HIV diagnoses, while making up 38% of the national population (CDC, 2017). One southern state for which the HIV epidemic has caused great concern is the State of Mississippi, with the epidemic being disproportionately high in the MSM population. The highest burden of newly diagnosed cases is occurring in AAMSM between the ages of 20-24. In the fall of 2007, clinicians at a sexually transmitted disease (STD) clinic in Jackson, Mississippi, noted that diagnoses of HIV infection were increasing among young African American MSM, and a subsequent review of surveillance data revealed a 38% rise in newly diagnosed HIV infections among African American MSM aged 16 to 25 years in the Jackson area during 2006-2007 relative to 2004-2005 (Oster et al., 2011). In 2015, 56.2% of individuals living with HIV in Mississippi contracted the infection through male to male contact, and from 2011-2015, the combined estimate of new diagnosed HIV infection related to male to male contact was 65.8% (aidsvu,2017). In 2015, men between the age of 20-29 experienced the highest number of the new diagnosed HIV cases, representing 45% of new cases, but the greatest burden was observed in YBMSM between the ages of 20-24 (Health, 2018).

As previously stated, individual sexual risk behavior alone does not explain the HIV burden seen in AAMSM in relation to other racial/ethnic groups. Studies to date have
demonstrated that racial HIV disparities are not due to higher rates of high-risk sexual behaviors, nor can they be explained by higher rates of substance use, or a higher number of sexual partners. Known factors contributing to the increased HIV rates are the increased number of AAMSM who are unaware of their positive HIV status, high rates of sexually transmitted diseases, high HIV rates within the sexual network of AAMSM, and of those who are HIV positive, inadequate ART compliance and undetectable viral loads. In addition, research has shown that AAMSM are less likely to be regularly tested for STDs, including HIV, and are less likely to access HIV prevention programs. Research has also found that AAMSM are less likely than MSM of other racial/ethnic groups to disclose their same sex-behaviors to others, or to identify as gay or bisexual. Furthermore, minority MSM are also less likely to disclose their same sex behaviors to their healthcare providers. Same sex disclosure is important because MSM who disclose same-sex behaviors to a health care provider may be more likely to be tested for HIV and counseled about STD prevention and HIV preventative treatments. However, research does not suggest that a lower level of disclosure to health care providers among BMSM compared to MSM of other races has translated into differences in frequency of HIV testing (Maulsby et al., 2014).

An understanding of factors contributing to the disproportionate rates of HIV in AAMSM is important and necessary to provide focused HIV prevention programs targeting this population. Even though scarce, research has now focused its attention to structural-contextual factors and their relationship with sexual risk behaviors in AAMSM. Structural factors can be defined as forces that work outside the individual and beyond the individual’s control to foster or impede health or health behaviors and they often distally impact health
outcomes (Levy et al., 2014). According to the literature, until more research is done focusing on structural factors and their role in driving the HIV epidemic, the number of new HIV cases among black MSM will continue to escalate. Again, there are multiple factors that contribute to an individual’s HIV risk, but multiple studies have shown that structural factors may play a major role in shaping the epidemic. Hence, this has prompted an exploration into a broader array of social, structural, and contextual factors experienced by minority MSM that may explain HIV disparities (Quinn et al., 2015).

MINORITY STRESS THEORY

The minority stress theory (MST) is one long-standing area of empirical and theoretical inquiry that provides a foundation for understanding gay men’s health behaviors (Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009). The theory proposes that physical and mental health disparities among sexual minority populations may be explained by the stress produced by living in heterosexist social environments characterized by stigma and discrimination directed toward sexual minority persons (Bruce, Stall, Fata, & Campbell, 2014). These factors often result in experiences of external prejudice, expectations of rejection, and internalized homophobia and may in turn impact behavior and access to care (Dentato, Halkitis, & Orwat, 2013). The MST also suggests that Black LGBT individuals are exposed to greater stress, and subsequently worse health and mental health outcomes than White LGBT persons because of the stress related to both homonegativity and racism, as well as more limited support and community resources compared to White LGBT individuals (Quinn et al., 2015). Minority stress is understood as the
excess stress to which individuals from stigmatized categories are exposed as a result of their social, often a minority position, and for MSM of color minority stress can take a number of forms, including homophobia in communities of color and racism from the gay community, which may cause them to experience multiple unique stressors forcing them to cope with their doubly marginalized status (Han et al., 2015). Stressors, such as, sexual stigma and homophobia experienced by minorities require individual adaptation, but even so these stressors can cause significant tension, thereby negatively affecting physical and mental health outcomes. Individual response to Minority stress can vary, for instance in MSM where some individuals may react to excessive minority stress with vigilance and resilience, thereby allowing the person to effectively cope with the stressor. Conversely, other MSM, for fear of rejection or harm, may hide their sexual identity or internalize society’s heterosexist attitudes and beliefs, which can result in the individual feeling devalued and inadequate. Consequently, an understanding of the theoretical origins for risk behavior is essential for developing effective prevention programs and improving minority health outcomes. As stated by Dentato et al., theoretical origins of risk behavior provide concrete evidence of the deleterious implications related to perceived and experienced stressors such as non-disclosure of HIV status, “bareback” or unprotected sex, drug use and experimentation, and sex with multiple partners.

There have been numerous studies evaluating the MST in immigrants and different racial/ethnic groups, but there have been a limited number of studies applying this theoretical framework to sexual minority populations. One of the first studies assessing the relationship between MST factors and sexual risk behavior in MSM, found no association between minority stress factors and engaging in unprotected insertive anal intercourse (UIAI) or unprotected
receptive anal intercourse (URAI), regardless of the partner being a primary or non-primary partner. Another study by Hamilton et al., found that MST moderated the relationship between social norms and gay men’s health behaviors. Despite mixed results found in these studies examining the relationship between the minority stress factors and sexual risk behaviors, the MST is important to understanding how stress experienced by MSM, whether prejudice, discrimination or harassment, can impact sexual behaviors and may be important in explaining the disproportionate HIV/AIDS rates that are being observed in BMSM.

Understanding the stressors experienced by minority groups is instrumental if we are to understand their influence on individual behaviors and health outcomes. If HIV prevention programs are to be implemented effectively, research assessing the relationship between minority stress and sexual risk-taking behaviors in AAMSM is vital.

**INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA IN AFRICAN AMERICAN MSM**

Internalized homophobia (IH), also referred to as internalized homonegativity, internalized heterosexism, or sexual prejudice, is the acceptance of societal anti-gay attitudes toward oneself, leading to internalized conflict, a devaluation of oneself, and poor self-regard. (Quinn et al., 2015). Likewise, Maulsby et al., defined internalized homophobia as the internalization of society’s homophobic attitudes. Negative societal attitudes about homosexuality and the internalization of those attitudes by AAMSM may play an important role in explaining the underlying causes of these racial and ethnic disparities in HIV incidence and prevalence (Quinn et al., 2015). The internalization of experienced societal stigma can lead to
negative thoughts and feeling about one’s own sexual identity and lead to negative social
experiences and mental health outcomes. Additionally, society’s negative perspective about
homosexuality and an individual internalization of that negative perspective could also
negatively impact an individual’s sexual behaviors, such as increasing the chance of a person
engaging in high risk sexual behaviors. These high risk sexual behaviors could play a role in
explaining the racial/ethnic HIV incidence and prevalence disparities that are being observed in
AAMSM. Unfortunately, one factor in which there is a scarcity of research is the association
between internalized homophobia (IH) and HIV risk. Therefore, examining the association
between IH and HIV risk behaviors, specifically, sexual risk behavior in AAMSM is important to
understand factors driving the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Internalized homophobia predisposes AAMSM to depression, psychological distress, and
low self-esteem, factors which can indirectly increase the likelihood of an individual engaging in
risky sexual behaviors (Puckett, Newcomb, Ryan, et al., 2017). Study findings have also
revealed several significant contextual and psychosocial factors related to internalized
homophobia including religiosity, resilience, and gay community acculturation, factors which all
have important implications for HIV risk, HIV testing, and social, psychological wellbeing for
BMSM. Despite well documented research concerning the negative consequences of IH in
AAMSM, there is still a scarcity of research examining the association between IH and sexual
risk behavior in this population, with most current research evaluating IH occurring in non-
minority populations (Quinn et al., 2015). Appropriately, due to this gap in research, assessing
the impact of IH and risky sexual behavior in AAMSM is critical.
A review of the literature has found mixed results regarding the association between IH and risky sexual behaviors in the general MSM population. In a review of the literature by Maulsby et al. (2014), inconclusive evidence was found regarding the effects of IH on HIV risk behavior in MSM. Some studies supported a relationship between IH and HIV risk behaviors and conversely, others failed to find a relationship between IH and HIV risk behaviors or found a positive relationship. A study implemented in an ethnically/racially diverse sample of HIV-positive MSM found internalized homonegativity to be strongly associated with lower condom self-efficacy and not being open about one’s sexual orientation (Quinn et al., 2015). Another study by Quinn et al., found that higher levels of religiosity, greater perceived self-masculinity, and greater AIDS conspiracy beliefs were associated with increased internalized homophobia, with a trend also being seen between increased IH and never being tested or not testing for HIV in the past year, and marijuana/drug use in the last 30 days. Even though a direct link was not observed between IH and sexual risk behaviors, indirectly these found associations could contribute to an individual’s engagement in risky sexual behaviors and inhibit safe sex negotiation.

A study by Puckett et al. assessing the relationship between IH and positive and negative urgency in MSM found that both positive and negative urgency moderated the association between IH and condomless anal sex acts and binge drinking, such that, for individuals with higher levels of both negative and positive urgency, a positive association was found between higher levels of IH and condomless anal sex acts, and binge drinking. Negative urgency being the tendency to act impulsively in response to negative emotional experiences and positive urgency being the tendency to act impulsively in response to positive emotional
experiences (Puckett, Newcomb, Garofalo, & Mustanski, 2017). No direct association between IH and binge drinking, marijuana, other drug use, or risky sexual behaviors was found. Conversely, another study found a significant association between any condomless anal sex and greater levels of IH, and men with greater IH were more likely to have had sex with women, were less likely to discuss AIDS prevention with sex partners, disclose their same sex sexual behaviors to health care providers, and test RPR-positive. Additionally, the study found that men classified as having greater levels of IH were marginally more likely to use condoms with their most recent, new sex partner, but they were marginally less likely to be tested for HIV in the past 12 months and to engage in condomless oral sex (Crosby, Salazar, Mena, & Geter, 2016).

To evaluate the HIV incidence disparity seen in YBMSM and Older, Black MSM (OBMSM), another study examined the association between IH and sexual risk behavior. This study failed to find a statistically significant association between IH and CAI, but IH was significantly, negatively associated with CAI for OBMSM. Previous research found the opposite to be true, with greater internalized homophobia being associated with higher rates of sexual risk taking (Maksut et al., 2016). A study by Fry et al., done in a racial/ethnically diverse MSM sample found no association between IH and HIV acquisition risk behavior, which consisted of a HIV negative participant who had unprotected receptive anal sex with a HIV positive or unknown status partner, controlling for psychological distress and alcohol and/or drug use before/after sex. Moreover, a study by Smallwood et al., found that IH was positively associated with an increase in the frequency of condom use, with receptive anal intercourse (RAI) and insertive anal intercourse (IAI). The review of literature, further confirmed the mixed
finding regarding the relationship between IH and sexual risk behavior in MSM. Therefore, as a result of these mixed results, there is dire need for research to understand the effect of IH on HIV risk behavior in AAMSM (Maulsby et al., 2014), and considering the dearth of research examining IH and risky sexual behaviors in this minority population, understanding the potential impact of IH in explaining the HIV/AIDS epidemic is paramount.

**RACISM IN AFRICAN AMERICAN MSM**

Racism has long been a major cause of stress for African Americans and unlike other stressors that may occur intermittently, experiencing long term and persistent stressor like racism can having a major psychological effect. The deleterious effects of racism on a wide range of health outcomes, including HIV risk, are well documented among racial/ethnic minority groups in the United States (Han et al., 2015). In addition, the high prevalence of racial discrimination reported by African American men in the USA has been well-documented, and growing research has showcased significant relations between experiences of racial discrimination and negative physical and mental health outcomes (Reed et al., 2013). Aside from racial discrimination, AAMSM are also affected by sexual orientation related discrimination, and these combined discriminatory experiences can have an even greater negative impact on AAMSM than each individual factor alone. AAMSM not only commonly experience racism in the general population, but also within the gay community. As a result of racism experienced in the gay community, research has shown that these experience plays a contributory role in AAMSM’s decision to choose same-race sexual partners, thereby increasing HIV acquisition and transmission risks due to the high prevalence of STD, including HIV, in this
population. Therefore, assessing the role racism plays in driving the HIV/AIDS epidemic and its disproportionate effect on AAMSM is necessary, unfortunately there has been a limited amount of research examining the association between experienced racism and HIV risk behaviors in African American men, and an even more scarce body of research assessing this relationship in AAMSM.

A study by Fry at el., in a diverse racial/ethnic sample examining the relationship between experiencing only racial based discrimination and acquisition risk behavior (a HIV negative participant who had unprotected receptive anal sex with a HIV positive or a partner with of unknown HIV status) found no significant association. There was also no association found between experiencing only racial based discrimination and transmission risk behavior (a HIV positive or unknown HIV status participant who had unprotected insertive sex with a HIV negative or unknown status partner). Psychological distress and alcohol and/or drug use before/during last sex, factors potentially linked to discrimination and sexual risk behavior were associated with transmission risk behavior. A study by Reed at el., assessing the relationship between racial discrimination and sexual risk behaviors for HIV in an urban, clinic-based sample of black and African American men, found that men reporting higher levels of racial discrimination were more likely to have had recent unprotected vaginal sex with women, had more than four sexual partners in a year and had been involved in sex trade involvement (buying and/or selling). The study did not find an association between higher levels of reported racial discrimination and sex with male partners, although only a small number of men in the sample reported sex with men. A study by Ayala et al., found that AAMSM with higher mean levels of experienced racism engaged in serodiscordant or unknown status unprotected anal
sex compared to AAMSM with lower mean levels of experienced racism, therefore
discrimination was associated with participation in risky sexual situations (Ayala, Bingham, Kim,
Wheeler, & Millett, 2012). Another study examining the relationship between stress, coping
strategies and perceived racism in the gay community, implemented in African Americans,
Pacific Islanders and Latinos, found that majority of the study participants reported experiences
of racism in the gay, white communities and the racism they experienced was a significant
source of stress. In addition, participants who reported that they were stressed when they
experienced racism were more likely to engage in UAI than those who were not stressed due to
racism. The association between stress because of perceived racism and risky sexual behaviors
did not differ across racial groups, and no protective effect was found between different coping
strategies, perceived racism and UAI.

**RELIGION AND AFRICAN AMERICAN MSM**

One of the oldest and most influential institutions in African American communities is
the African American Christian faith community, commonly referred to as the “Black church”
(Stacy W. Smallwood et al., 2017). Religion has long been recognized as a foundational
cornerstone for African American people, symbolizing freedom and strength during times of
oppression, such as during slavery and segregation. As a result of the integral role religion has
played in the Black community, beginning early in childhood and extending well into adulthood,
for many Blacks, their identity is molded by the church and the religious community at large.
Religion typically refers to the formal set of beliefs and practices affiliated with an
acknowledged religious authority and includes such overt visible acts as praying before meals, attending worship services, and reading sacred texts (Watkins et al., 2016a). Religion is an important factor in the lives of African American, including gay and bisexual men, and multiple and studies have found that it plays a significant role in influencing behaviors, both positively and negatively. For instance, positive health consequences related to religion are adherence to HIV medication, social support, less psychological distress, improved quality of life and the ability to effectively cope with stressors, conversely, negative health consequences of religion having an opposite effect.

There is a strong body of literature that signifies the importance of religion to African Americans. For example, studies have shown that Blacks in the U.S., including Black men who have sex with men (MSM), tend to have stronger religious and spiritual affiliations compared with other racial/ethnic populations and a recent national survey of religious behaviors and beliefs found that relative to their racial and ethnic groups, Blacks are more likely to report a formal religious affiliation (Watkins et al., 2016b). Specifically, the survey found that a high majority (85 %) of Blacks reported that religion is very important to them, and 60 % of Black individuals surveyed reported weekly or “regular” church. Comparatively, 56% of the general population reported that religion was very important to them and 39% reported regular or weekly church attendance (Watkins et al., 2016a). In addition to differences seen in religious affiliation across racial/ethnic groups, there are also differences seen regarding the acceptance of homosexuality and same-sex relationships, with Blacks being less accepting of homosexuality compared to whites. Hence, the Black church can be a source of strength and support for the Black community but can also play a significant role in defining the community’s attitudes about
same-sex behavior and relationships, and according to Quinn et al., the church can be a source of homonegativity, and is therefore criticized for perpetuating negative attitudes toward homosexuality.

Given the fact that Blacks, including AAMSM, normally have strong affiliations with Black religious institutions and these institutions play a major role in shaping sexual norms, emphasizing the sinful nature of homosexuality, AAMSM can be left feeling shame, guilt, and rejection due to their sexual orientation. Even in the face of anti-gay teaching in the church, many AAMSM continue to remain actively involved in the church, because of the social support and sense of pride they receive from the non-affirming religious institution. Because of the Black churches homonegativity, research as shown that Black MSM are less likely to disclose their sexual orientation in religious institutions than white MSM, despite the church symbolizing a source of support and strength for them. Homonegative attitudes experienced by individuals have been linked to increased internalized homophobia and cognitive dissonance, causing the individual to feel disconnected and isolated. The relationship between religious engagement and internalized homonegativity is thought to begin in early life and is reinforced through continued participation in non-affirming religious settings (Barnes, 2012). It is not surprising then that higher religiosity or church involvement significantly predicted internalized homonegativity (Quinn et al., 2015)

Attitudes in the Black community about religion and homosexuality, along with experiencing high levels of homophobia can contribute to increased HIV/AIDS risk behaviors in AAMSM. Negative attitudes about homosexuality can leads to feeling of internalized homonegativity, which can inhibit BMSM from engaging in same-sex monogamous
relationships and accessing HIV prevention services. Additionally, the presence of homophobia in African American churches has hampered AAMSM ability to engage in AIDS prevention (Fullilove & Fullilove, 1999). Conversely, Religious faith has been found to significantly contribute to resiliency (participants’ ability to handle changes or misfortunes in their lives) among Black LGBT emerging adults even when they had high levels of internalized homonegativity, therefore these findings highlight the multifaceted influences religion could have on the health of MSM (Lassiter & Parsons, 2016). Unfortunately, as was seen with IH and racism, there is a limited body of research examining the cultural role religion plays in the HIV epidemic, specifically the association between religion and sexual risk behaviors. Current research on religion and HIV emphasizes the role of religion as a resource for people living with HIV, and suggests that religion is useful in helping individuals cope and find meaning, but less research is available on pathways through which religion may influence HIV risk behavior (Shaw & El-bassel, 2014). Religion may be particularly salient for MSM people of color and thus may influence their health in significantly different ways than their white counterparts (Lassiter & Parsons, 2016).

A review of the literature was consistent with a prevalence of studies assessing the effects of religion on health outcomes in seropositive participants, with many of the study designs being qualitative in nature. Therefore, to fill the gap in research, more quantitative studies are necessary that evaluate the role religion plays in seronegative individuals. In a systematic review of the quantitative HIV research that assessed the relationships between religion, spirituality, HIV syndemics, and individual HIV syndemic-related health conditions (e.g. depression, substance abuse, HIV risk) among men who have sex with men (MSM) in the U.S,
Lassiter et al. found no published peer-review articles that quantitatively examined the relationships between religion, spirituality, and HIV syndemics; further, only nine studies were found that assessed the association between religion and individual HIV syndemic related health conditions. One study found a positive association between self-reported religious/spiritual identity and alcohol and drug use, and a negative association was observed between religious identity and club drug use. Engaging in religious activities was found to be negatively associated with condomless anal sex and an individual’s church’s positive attitudes towards homosexuality was negatively associated with the likelihood of engaging in sex without condoms. Lassiter et al. also found that studies which included more racially/ethnically diverse samples found more positive effects of religion and spirituality on the health of MSM than in studies with majority white samples.

A qualitative study by Miller et al. examining the religious experiences of a small sample of AAMSM living with AIDS found that many of the participants shared many of the same experiences in the church, feelings of homophobia, heterosexism and AIDS phobic views, experiences causing most participants to leave the church permanently because of feeling oppressed and devalued due to their sexual orientation and HIV positive status. Another study by Watkins et al., examining the relationship between religiosity, spirituality, high-risk behaviors and high risk sexual behaviors in AAMSM, resulted in a significant association being found between religiosity and HIV infection, use of cocaine, crack and poppers, and a marginal association was found between religiosity and ecstasy use. A negative association was found between HIV status, ecstasy and poppers use and religiosity, and a nonsignificant negative association was found between religiosity and both unprotected receptive and insertive anal
intercourse (UAI). In the same study, the association between spirituality and high-risk behaviors and sexual risk behaviors found a positive association between spirituality and STD infection status, HIV infection status, alcohol and crack use, but there was a negative association found between receptive anal intercourse and unprotected anal intercourse. Watkins et al. examination of the relationship between religiosity, spirituality, depression and substance use found that AAMSM with higher levels of religiosity had more substance use (crack, cocaine, poppers) and reported being depressed in the last week. Conversely, AAMSM with higher levels of spirituality reported less alcohol, crack and cocaine use, and no association was found between ever being depressed or being depressed in the last week. AAMSM who reported being depressed and using cocaine had higher levels of religiosity, and AAMSM who were depressed and using substances, also had higher levels of religiosity. Therefore, this study was consistent with religiosity being a risk factor and spirituality being protective when correlated with risky behavior. These associations between religiosity, spirituality, depression and substance use have important implications considering the strong body of research supporting the correlation between depression, substance use and increased HIV risk behaviors.

A cross-sectional study by Smallwood et al. examining the relationship between Religiosity, Spirituality, Internalized homonegativity and condom use in AAMSM living in the deep south found that higher levels of religiosity were associated with higher levels of personal/moral homonegativity but associated to lower levels of gay affirmation. Conversely, higher levels of Spirituality were related to higher levels of Gay affirmation, but lower levels of personal/moral homonegativity. No significant direct effect was observed between either
religiosity or spirituality and the frequency of condom use during IAI or RAI in the past 3 months. Higher levels of both gay affirmation and personal/moral homonegativity were associated with increased frequency of condom use with IAI/RAI in the past 3 months. An evaluation of personal/moral homonegativity and gay affirmation as mediators between religiosity, spirituality and frequency of condoms use during IAI/RAI found that personal/moral homonegativity acted as a mediator between religiosity and the frequency of condom use. No significant mediating effect was found between spirituality and any dimension of internalized homonegativity. According to Smallwood et al., study findings showing that internalized homonegativity was associated with an increase in the frequency of condom use challenges the notion that negative feelings about one’s own homosexuality are associated with higher engagement in risky sexual behaviors.

**STIGMA AND AFRICAN AMERICAN MSM**

As attention into socio-cultural and contextual factors and their role in explaining HIV disparities have drawn increased attention, stigma is one factor being examined. Stigma is a complex concept that refers to prejudice and discrimination based on a devalued characteristic of an individual, and stigma reduces an individual's social status based on attitudes about the stigma held by significant others (e.g., families, friends, community members) who define standards of behaviors (Preston., et al). Considering the HIV/AIDS epidemic has exhibited the greatest impact in MSM, this population tends to experience a great deal of stigma due to their homosexuality and HIV status. Sexual stigma has been defined as “the negative regard, inferior
status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively accords to any non-heterosexual behavior, identity, relationship, or community” (Christensen et al., 2013). In addition, according to Puckett et al., sexual orientation-based stigma refers to the knowledge that individuals hold negative societal attitudes about sexual minorities or individuals who engage in same-sex sexual behaviors, including an awareness of the marginalized status of anyone with a non-heterosexual identity or who has same-sex relationships (Puckett, Newcomb, Ryan, et al., 2017).

Stigma experienced by MSM can be internalized and result in an individual engaging in negative behaviors that can impact health outcomes. Stigma and IH are closely related terms, especially as it relates to external experiences of marginalized individuals, but stigma differs from IH. For instance, despite an individual’s awareness of the stigma they may not necessarily internalize societies heterosexist beliefs or feel as though their own homophobic feeling are wrong, as is the case with IH. Stigma has been well documented as an obstacle to HIV care and treatment, and studies have shown that stigma results in an individual never receiving HIV testing and not participating in HIV prevention efforts, and as a result, individuals who are unaware of their HIV seropositive status risk unknowingly transmitting HIV infection to their sexual partners. Additionally, higher levels of stigma have been found to be associated to psychological disorders, such as anxiety and depression, both factors which can increase an individual’s risk of engaging in sexual risk behaviors.

A review of the literature was consistent with a scarcity of studies assessing the relationship between stigma and sexual risks behaviors in seronegative AAMSM, with most studies having been implemented in a seropositive population. A longitudinal research study
with a sample of predominantly White MSM living with HIV demonstrated that perceptions of HIV-related stigma were positively associated with sexual behaviors that increase risk for HIV transmission and may place MSM at greater risk for other sexually transmitted infections (Quinn et al., 2017). Stigma toward homosexuality in the U.S has pervasive effects on Black MSM (Peterson & Jones, 2009), for whom their race and sexual identity or behaviors present co-occurring stigmatizing identities, for example, YBMSM have reported experiencing racism from the White, gay community and struggling with the intersection of stigma and discrimination due to the intersection of their sexual orientation and race (Quinn et al., 2017). Research has consistently found an association between stigma and negative mental health outcomes, such as depression and low self-esteem, in AAMSM, factors that can increase HIV risk behaviors. As a result of stigma some AAMSM may be less likely to identify their sexual orientation as gay or bisexual and to be long-term monogamously partnered, less likely to arrive at high-risk locations with prevention supplies, and/or less likely to engage in safer sex practices, such as condom use (Watkins et al., 2016a), and these behaviors can contribute to HIV acquisition and transmission. Research assessing the relationship between perceived stigma, and substance use or sexual risk taking has been limited and a review of the literature was consistent with a prevalence of studies examining stigma in mostly HIV positive samples only. In studies assessing the relationship between perceived stigma and substance use or sexual risk-taking behaviors, researchers found that higher levels of perceived stigma were associated with increased number of days of drug use and high-risk sex acts under the influence of substances in MSM. Multiple studies also found a positive relationship between sexual orientation related stigma and HIV related stigma in MSM, with HIV related stigma resulting in
reduced medical compliance and unwillingness to take antiretroviral therapy (ART). Some studies have also found that stigma experienced by AAMSM was associated with lack of HIV testing and lack of accessing preventative services.

Stigma is a major factor that can impact sexual risk behavior, especially in MSM, therefore research assessing its impact on risky sexual behaviors is crucial. In a review of the literature, a study examining the association between stigma and sexual risk behavior in rural MSM found stigma to be predictive of modified high sexual risk in comparison to low or no risk sexual categories. A study by Quinn et al (2017) in a population of seropositive YBMSM assessed the association between varying forms of HIV related stigma and health related correlates, such as medication compliance and viral load, and results showed that individuals with higher levels of total stigma and personalized stigma were less likely to be virally suppressed and higher levels of personalized stigma was a significant predictor of CAI and having a partner that uses marijuana as a sex drug. Concerns about public attitudes toward HIV was the only level of stigma that was positively associated with medication compliance and a predictor of psychological distress. Another study done in a diverse group on YMSM found that a reduction in shame related to sexual stigma was correlated to a reduction in UAI.

**SEXUAL RISK BEHAVIOR IN AFRICAN AMERICAN MSM**

Sexual risk behaviors include any sexual behaviors that increases an individual’s risk of contracting or transmitting a sexually transmitted disease (STD), including HIV. Oral, vaginal and anal intercourse are all well-known sexual risk behaviors that can increase an individual’s risk of acquiring and transmitting a STD, but risk varies based on the type sexual intercourse.
According to the CDC (2017), anal intercourse is considered the riskiest sexual behavior for transmitting HIV infection, with receptive anal intercourse (RAI) carrying the greatest risk. The bottom partner is 13 times more likely to get infected than the top, however, it’s possible for either partner to get HIV through anal sex (CDC, 2017). Most men diagnosed with HIV infection acquired infection through anal intercourse, with MSM accounting for the highest number of new and existing HIV infection. Sexual behaviors that increase an individual’s risk for disease transmission include any unprotected sexual intercourse, although rare with oral sex, having multiple sexual partners, changing sexual partners frequently, and having unprotected sexual intercourse with seropositive partners or partners with unknown HIV status. In addition, for AAMSM, having anal intercourse with other AAMSM is considered risky sexual behavior. Research has shown that AAMSM are more likely than White MSM to engage in sexual intercourse with MSM within their own race, this thereby increasing their risk of HIV transmission due to the high rates of HIV infection in the population.

Despite limited evidence of the role individual-level risk behavior alone, such as, the number of sexual partners and drug use, have in explaining racial disparities in HIV incidence and prevalence, the role of sexual behavior in HIV transmission is crucial to epidemic propagation among MSM (Frye et al., 2015). Research has shown that AAMSM are less likely to disclose their sexual identity as gay or homosexual, less likely to disclose their sexual orientation to their health care provider, less likely to be aware of their HIV status due to lack of HIV testing, in comparison to white MSM. AAMSM who are HIV seropositive are also less likely to be ART compliant and have undetectable viral loads than white MSM. All these factors reduce an individual’s likelihood of receiving targeted HIV prevention education and HIV
testing, increasing the individual risk of HIV transmission and acquisition. While interventions focusing on reducing individual risk behaviors are important, as previously stated, these factors alone do not explain the HIV racial disparities being observed, therefore examining previously discussed structural factors and their association to risky sexual behaviors is crucial.

In a review of the literature, a study by Tieu et al., found that AAMSM were more likely to test HIV positive and less likely to be aware of their HIV positive status than other racial/ethnic groups. In comparison to white MSM (WMSM), AAMSM reported fewer male sexual partners in the last year, and when compared to three other racial groups, AAMSM were more likely to have black male partners in the last 12 months (57.1% for Black MSM vs. 5.7% for White, 21.0% for Hispanic, and 17.7% for Other,) (Tieu, Murrill, Xu, & Koblin, 2010). AAMSM were not found to have more UAI with their same race male partner. Despite observing higher undiagnosed HIV infection in AAMSM in Tieu’s et al. study, consistent with previous research findings, AAMSM reported less risky sexual behaviors than WMSM. Another study by Oster et al., assessing factors associated with HIV infection in young MSM (YMSM), found an association between HIV infection and engaging in UAI with a casual male partner and being more likely to give in to a partner who wanted to have UAI (Oster et al., 2011). Study findings further signify the need for continued research to identify factors other than individual risk behaviors only in explaining the disproportionate rates of HIV in AAMSM.
CHAPTER 3

Methods

Study Sample

The study is an National Institute of Health (NIH) funded randomized control trial (RCT) of a safer sex intervention program targeting YBMSM. Study participants were recruited from two federally funded clinics specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of STIs, including HIV. The clinic was located in a southern city where HIV incidence rates are among the highest in the U.S. Participants were also recruited through social media, attending bars and nightclubs. Inclusion criteria included: (1) assigned male at birth; (2) self-identification as Black/African American; (3) 15-29 years of age; (4) attending the clinic to be tested for HIV or other STIs; (5) having engaged in anal sex with a male partner at least once in the past 6 months; and (6) the ability to speak and comprehend English.

All Black men between the ages of 15-29 were approaches by clinic research staff and asked about their interest in volunteering in an HIV prevention study. Those expressing interest in the study were then screened for eligibility. A total of 789 men were screened for eligibility, with 623 considered eligible. After being offered the opportunity to enroll in the study, 14 declined, yielding an overall participation rate of 96.6%. Nine of the enrolled participants were pilot subjects, leaving a study sample of 600 YMSM. The current study only used baseline data (data collected before sample randomization and intervention). All study procedures were
approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the University of Mississippi Medical Center, The Mississippi State Department of Health and the University of Kentucky.

Procedure

Study participants provided written informed consent and parental consent was obtained for participants under the age of 18. Participants then completed an online questionnaire using Qualtrics© (Provo, UT) in a private office unaffiliated with the clinic. The questionnaire collected sociodemographic characteristics, sexual risk behaviors, sexual experiences, religious experiences, and experiences with homophobia, stigma and discrimination. Subsequently, participants were tested for gonorrhea and chlamydia in 3 anatomic sites using nucleic acid amplification testing(NAT). Additionally, blood samples were obtained, testing participants for syphilis, using RPR testing, and HIV testing was performed in participants not already HIV positive by use of OraSure.

**PREDICTOR MEASURES**

**INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA.** IH was assessed by the following 7-item scale with response options ranging from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (5): 1) “I have tried to stop being attracted to men in general”) 2) If someone offered me the chance to be completely heterosexual, I accept the chance” 3)” I wish I weren’t attracted to men) 4) I feel that having sex with men is a personal shortcoming for me) 5) “I am glad I have sex with men 6) “I often feel it best to avoid personal or social involvement with other men who have sex with men” 7) “I wish I
could develop more erotic feeling about women.” Scale scores were calculated based on the sum where a higher score indicated higher levels of IH

**RACISM.** Racism was assessed by the following 13 items, but by two separate scales, with Daily Racism being measured by item one and two, with response options ranging from Never(0 times) (1) to A lot(7+ times) (4). Racism and life experiences was measured by item three through thirteen, with response items ranging from Never(1) to Very often(4): (1) “Racism at work or school”; (2) “Racism in public places”; (3) In the past 12 months, how often have your civil rights been violated (i.e., job or housing discrimination due to racism, racial, discrimination, or racial prejudice)?”; (4) “In the past 12 months, how often have others said or acted as if you over-sensitive or paranoid about racism?”; (5) “In the past 12 months, how often have you witnessed prejudice or discrimination directed at someone else because of their race/ethnic group?”; (6) “In the past 12 months, how often have you heard about someone else’s experiences of racially-motivated discrimination or prejudice; (7) “In the past 12 months, how often have others reacted to you as if they were afraid or intimidated of you because of your race/ethnic group?”; (8) “In the past 12 months, how often have you been observed or followed while in public places because of your race/ethnic group; (9) “In the past 12 months, how often have you been treated as if you were “stupid” or “talked down to” because of your race/ethnic group?”; (10) “In the past 12 months, how often have your ideas or opinions been minimized, ignored, or devalued because of your race/ethnic group?”; (11) “In the past 12 months, how often have you heard (or been told) a racially offensive or insensitive comment or joke?”; (12) “In the past 12 months, how often have you been mistaken for someone who serves others (i.e. janitors, bellboy, maid) because of your race/ethnic group?”; (13) “In the past 12 months, how
often have you been mistaken for someone else of your same race (who may not look like you at all)?”. Scale scores were calculated based on the sum where a higher score indicated higher levels of Racism.

**RELIGION.** Religion was assessed by the following 3 items, but by 2 separate scales. Religious attendance was measured by item one, with response options ranging from Never(1) to More than once a week(5). Religious support and acceptance were measured by item two through three, with response options ranging from Strongly disagree(1) to Strongly agree(5): (1) “How often do you attend religious services?”; (2) “How much do you agree with the following statement: I would be accepted by members of my church or religious community if they knew that I sleep with men.”; (3) “How much do you agree with the following statement: If I was going through a hard time, I have someone who would be right there with me”. Scale scores were calculated based on the sum where a higher score indicated higher levels of Religion.

**STIGMA.** Stigma was assessed by the following 4 item scale, with response options ranging from Never(1) to More than a few times(4): (1)“Dealing with prejudice or discrimination from others due to being gay or having sex with men”; (2) “Introducing your lover as a “friend” or roommate”; (3) “Verbal harassment by straight people about being gay or having sex with men”; (4) “Being physically affectionate with another man in public”. Scale scores were calculated based on the sum where a higher score indicated higher levels of Stigma.

**OUTCOME MEASURE**
**SEXUAL RISK BEHAVIORS.** Sexual risk behavior was assessed by the following items: (1) “In the past 90 days, have you had anal sex with a male partner (penis in the rectum of a male)?” (yes, no); (2) “In the past 90 days, how many different male anal sex partners have you had when you were the top?”; (3) “In the past 90 days, how many different male anal sex partners have you had when you were the bottom”; (5) “In the past 90 days, how many times have you had anal sex with a new partner, as a TOP?” (6) “In the past 90 days, how many times have you had anal sex with a new partner, as a BOTTOM?”; *(8)“In the past 90 days, how many times have you had condomless anal sex with a male when you were the TOP?”; *(9) “In the past 90 days, how many times have you had condomless anal sex with a male when you were the BOTTOM?”;  

**COVARIATES**

**AGE.** Age was assessed by the following item: “How old are you? (Please enter in number of years)”

**INCOME.** Income was assessed by the following item: “About how much is your total income in a typical month, either in the form of income or social assistance? (less than $500, between $500 and $1000, between $1000 and 1500, between $1500 and $2000, more than $2000)"

**HIV SEROSTATUS.** HIV serostatus was assessed by the following item: “What is the most recent HIV test result you have received? (positive, negative, didn’t get my results)"

**EDUCATION.** Education was assessed by the following item: “What is the highest level of education you have completed?” (less than high school, high school graduation or GED, some
college, trade school, or vocational school, college graduation, graduate school, more than graduate school)

**EMPLOYMENT STATUS.** Employment status was assessed by the following item: “Are you currently employed?” (yes, no)

**RELATIONSHIP STATUS.** Relationship status was assessed by the following item: “From the following list, which word best describes your present relationship status?” (married, divorced, widowed, separated, single never been married, long-term relationship with a partner)

**RACE OF SEXUAL PARTNERS.** Race of sexual partners was assessed by the following item: “During the past year, what was/is the race/ethnicity of your sex partner(s)? (please check all that apply)” (Black or African American, White or Caucasian, Hispanic or Latino, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian American or Pacific Islander)

**FREQUENCY OF HIV TESTING.** Frequency of HIV testing was assessed by the following item: “How often do you get tested for HIV” (once a year, twice a year, more than twice a year)

**SEXUAL POSITION.** Sexual position was assessed by the following item: “In the past 90 days, what role have you played during anal sex with another guy?” (Top (put your penis in his anus/rectum), Bottom (he put his penis in your anus/rectum))

**SEXUAL IDENTITY TO MALE FRIENDS.** Sexual identity to male friends was assessed by the following item: “In the past 90 days, how did you usually identify yourself to male friends?” (as gay, as bisexual, as a straight guy who sleeps with women only, as a straight guy who sleeps
with women and other guys, as a straight guy who sleeps with other guys, I do not label myself, but sleep with other guys, I do not discuss this with them)

**SEXUAL IDENTITY TO FEMALE FRIENDS.** Sexual identity to female friends was assessed by the following item: “In the past 90 days, how did you usually identify yourself to female friends?” (as gay, as bisexual, as a straight guy who sleeps with women only, as a straight guy who sleeps with women and other guys, as a straight guy who sleeps with other guys, I do not label myself, but sleep with other guys, I do not discuss this with them)

**SEXUAL IDENTITY TO HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS.** Sexual identity to healthcare providers was assessed by the following item: “In the past year, how did you usually identify yourself to your healthcare providers?” (as gay, as bisexual, as a straight guy who sleeps with women only, as a straight guy who sleeps with women and other guys, as a straight guy who sleeps with other guys only, I do not label myself, but sleep with other guys, I do not discuss this with them, I have not seen a healthcare provider in the past year)

**DATA ANALYSIS**

Secondary data analysis was utilized for this thesis. Univariate data analysis was used to provide a description of the study sample. Multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to determine the relationship between the predictor variables IH, stigma, racism, religion, and seven outcome variables measuring sexual risks behavior, controlling for age, income, education. Coefficient estimates with standard errors, 95% confidence intervals and p-values were calculated. Logistic regression was conducted to analyze the association between the IH,
stigma, racism, religion, and the binary outcome variables condomless anal sex with a male as a top and condomless anal sex with a male as a bottom. Adjusted odds ratios, confidence intervals and p-values were calculated. Additionally, one-way between subject analysis of variances (ANOVA) was conducted to compare the means of the above predictor variables across sexual identity categories, based on how participants identified to male friends, female friends, healthcare providers and HIV testing frequency groups. Where statistically significant differences were observed, Tukey testing was performed to make post hoc pairwise comparisons and determine the source of the significant findings at a p-value of 0.05. The F-value, p-value and mean difference with confidence intervals for statistically significant Tukey test results were calculated. All analyses were conducted using SAS version 9.4.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the men in the sample. The study sample consisted of 600 young MSM. All participants identified as Black or African American. The mean age was 22.6 years (SD, 3.2). 25.7% of the sample had a monthly household income between $500-$1000 and 19.8% had a monthly income <$500. 34.3% of the sample graduated from high school or received a GED and 43.3% had some college, trade or
vocational education. 58.5% of the participants were employed, 69.5% of the sample was single, never having been married. A majority of the sample (98.83%) reported the race of their sexual partners as Black or African American, 13% reported having a white sexual partner, 7.5% reported having a Hispanic partner and less than 3.0% reported having an American Indian or Asian American sexual partner in the last year. 20.50% of the sample was HIV seropositive. Greater than 60% of the study sample identified as gay or bisexual to male and female friends and more than 70% identified as gay or bisexual to healthcare providers. The mean number of different male anal sex partners as a top was 2.5 (SD, 7.3) and as a bottom 2.1 (SD, 4.2). The mean number of times having had anal sex with a new partner as a top was 2.5 (SD, 7.2), and as a bottom 3.4 (SD, 11.3). 69.2% of the participants reported having had anal sex as a top and 67.3% had anal sex as a bottom. 35.1% of the participants reported having at least one episode of condomless male anal sex as a top and as a bottom. 36% of the sample reported having HIV testing twice a year. The mean for IH, having a scale range of 7-35, was 18.6 (SD, 5.8), and the mean for Stigma having a scale range of 4-16, was 8.7 (SD, 3.1). Religion was measured by two scales: the mean for Religious attendance was 2.7 (SD, 1.1), with a scale range of 1-5 and Religious support and acceptance had a mean of 6.8 (SD, 6.8), with a scale range of 2-10. Additionally, Racism was measured by two scales, with daily racism having a mean of 3.0, with a scale range of 2-8, and racism and life experiences having a mean of 19.2, with a scale range of 11-55.

### TABLE 1. SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND, SEXUAL IDENTITY, SEXUAL BEHAVIORS, HIV TESTING, HIV STATUS, STRUCTURAL FACTORS AMONG YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN (AAMSM) AGE 15-29 YEARS (N=600)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age in years: Mean (SD)</th>
<th>22.6 (3.2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monthly household income: n (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income Range</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;$500</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$500-$1000</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1000-$1500</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1500-$2000</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;$2000</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Education Level: n (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; high school</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>(5.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high school or GED</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>(34.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college, trade school or vocational school</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>(43.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>college</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>(13.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>graduate school</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>(2.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; graduate school</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(0.8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Employment Status: n (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>(58.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>(41.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Current Relationship Status: n (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>married</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>(3.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>divorced</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>(2.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>widowed</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>(0.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>separated</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>(2.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>single, never been married</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>(69.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>long-term relationship with a partner</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>(21.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sexual identity to male friends: n (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>gay</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>(51.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bisexual</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>(15.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>straight and sleeps w/women only</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>(2.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>straight and sleeps w/women and guys</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>(2.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>straight and sleeps with guys only</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(0.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no label, but sleep with guys</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>(12.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do not discuss</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>(15.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sexual identity to female friends: n (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>gay</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>(52.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bisexual</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>(14.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>straight and sleeps w/women only</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>(6.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>straight and sleeps w/women and guys</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>straight and sleeps with guys only</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>(1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no label, but sleep with guys</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>(6.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do not discuss</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>(18.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sexual identity to healthcare providers: n (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>gay</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>(54.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bisexual</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>(18.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>straight and sleeps w/women only</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>(2.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>straight and sleeps w/women and guys</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>(2.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>straight and sleeps with guys only</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>(0.33)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
no label, but sleep with guys 37  (6.2)
do not discuss 64  (10.7)
have not seen a healthcare provider in the past year 31  (5.2)

**Race of sex partner: n (%)**
- Black/African American 593 (98.8)
- White/Caucasian 78  (13.0)
- Hispanic/Latino 45  (7.5)
- American Indian/Alaska Native 9  (1.5)
- Asian American/Pacific Islander 7.0  (1.2)

**Role played during sex with another guy: n (%)**
- top 415  (69.2)
- bottom 404  (67.3)

**Had 1 or more episodes of condomless anal sex w/ male partner: n (%)**
- As a top 142  (35.1)
- As a Bottom 150  (35.1)

**Sexual Behaviors: In the past 90 days**
- Had anal sex w/ a male partner: n (%) 508  (84.7)
- Number of different male anal sex partners as a top: mean(SD) 2.5  (7.3)
- Number of different male anal sex partners as a bottom: mean(SD) 2.2  (4.2)
- Number of times had unprotected anal sex as a top: mean(SD) 5.0  (13.0)
- Number of times had unprotected anal sex as a bottom: mean(SD) 4.7  (10.6)
- Number of times had anal sex with a new partner as a top: mean(SD) 3.0  (7.7)
- Number of times had anal sex with a new partner as a bottom: mean(SD) 3.5  (11.4)

**HIV testing frequency: n (%)**
- Once a year 158  (26.3)
- Twice a year 153  (25.5)
- More than twice a year 216  (36.0)

**HIV status: n (%)**
- negative 375  (62.5)
- positive 123  (20.5)

**Internalized Homophobia: (scale range 7-35): Mean(SD)** 18.6  (5.8)

**Stigma (scale range 4-16): Mean(SD)** 8.7  (3.1)

**Religion**
- Religious Attendance (scale range 1-5): Mean(SD) 2.7  (1.1)
- Religious Support/Acceptance (scale range 2-10): Mean(SD) 6.8  (1.9)

**Racism**
- Daily Racism (scale range 2-8): Mean(SD) 3.0  (1.4)
- Racism and Life Experiences (scale range 11-55): Mean(SD) 19.2  (8.2)

*All percentages include missing data

**MULTIPLE LINEAR REGRESSION ANALYSIS**
Tables 2 displays the results of the association between IH, stigma, racism, religion and seven sexual risk behavior outcomes, controlling for age, income and education. Results were found statistically significant at a \( p \)-value <.05. One of the seven associations assessing the relationship between IH and sexual risk behavior were found to be statistically significant. An increase of one unit in IH was associated with a .164(SE, .081) unit increase in the number of times having anal sex with a male partner as a top, at a significance level of .02. One of seven associations between stigma and sexual risk behavior were found to be statistically significant. An increase of one unit in stigma was associated with a .185(SE, .057) unit increase in the number of different male anal sex partners as a bottom, at a significance level of .003. No statistically significant associations were found between daily racism and any of the seven sexual risk behavior outcomes and only one statistically significant association was found between racism and life experiences and sexual risk behavior. An increase of one unit in racism and life experiences was associated with a .051(SE, .021) unit increase in the number of different male anal sex partners as a bottom, at a significance level of .027. No statistically significant association was found between religious support and the seven sexual risk behaviors. The association between religious attendance and the sexual risk behavior outcomes resulted in one statistically significant association. A one unit increase in religious attendance was found to be associated with a .360 unit decrease in the number of different male anal sex partners as a bottom, at a significance level of .03.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the past 90 days:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STIGMA</th>
<th>&quot;b&quot;</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Had anal sex with a male partner</td>
<td>-0.001(0.002)</td>
<td>-0.006-0.004</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of different male anal sex partners as a top</td>
<td>-0.012(0.053)</td>
<td>-0.116-0.092</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of different male anal sex partners as a bottom</td>
<td>-0.033(0.030)</td>
<td>-0.093-0.027</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had condomless anal sex with a male, as a top</td>
<td>0.164(0.081)</td>
<td>0.005-0.323</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had condomless anal sex with a male, as a bottom</td>
<td>-0.545(0.418)</td>
<td>-1.366-0.277</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had anal sex with a new partner as a top</td>
<td>0.077(0.055)</td>
<td>-0.031-0.186</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had anal sex with a new partner as a bottom</td>
<td>-0.047(0.078)</td>
<td>-0.200-0.106</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERCEIVED DAILY EXPERIENCES OF RACISM</th>
<th>&quot;b&quot;</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Had anal sex with a male partner</td>
<td>0.004(0.005)</td>
<td>-0.005-0.013</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of different male anal sex partners as a top</td>
<td>0.114(0.100)</td>
<td>-0.082-0.310</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of different male anal sex partners as a bottom</td>
<td>0.185(0.057)</td>
<td>0.073-0.297</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had condomless anal sex with a male, as a top</td>
<td>0.117(0.151)</td>
<td>-0.180-0.413</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had condomless anal sex with a male, as a bottom</td>
<td>0.265(0.792)</td>
<td>-1.292-1.822</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had anal sex with a new partner as a top</td>
<td>0.122(0.104)</td>
<td>-0.082-0.327</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had anal sex with a new partner as a bottom</td>
<td>0.165(0.147)</td>
<td>-0.123-0.453</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RACISM AND LIFE EXPERIENCES</th>
<th>&quot;b&quot;</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Had anal sex with a male partner</td>
<td>&lt;0.001(0.010)</td>
<td>-0.019-0.020</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of different male anal sex partners as a top</td>
<td>0.135(0.215)</td>
<td>-0.288-0.558</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of different male anal sex partners as a bottom</td>
<td>0.109(0.123)</td>
<td>-0.133-0.351</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had condomless anal sex with a male, as a top</td>
<td>0.335(0.324)</td>
<td>-0.300-0.971</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had condomless anal sex with a male, as a bottom</td>
<td>-1.420(1.630)</td>
<td>-4.624-1.787</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had anal sex with a new partner as a top</td>
<td>0.074(0.224)</td>
<td>-0.365-0.514</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had anal sex with a new partner as a bottom</td>
<td>0.055(0.316)</td>
<td>-0.565-0.675</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RELIGIOUS ATTENDANCE</th>
<th>&quot;b&quot;</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Had anal sex with a male partner</td>
<td>-0.001(0.001)</td>
<td>-0.005-0.002</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of different male anal sex partners as a top</td>
<td>0.006(0.038)</td>
<td>-0.068-0.079</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of different male anal sex partners as a bottom</td>
<td>0.051(0.021)</td>
<td>0.009-0.093</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had condomless anal sex with a male, as a top</td>
<td>0.013(0.058)</td>
<td>-0.101-0.127</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had condomless anal sex with a male, as a bottom</td>
<td>0.374(0.286)</td>
<td>-0.187-0.936</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had anal sex with a new partner as a top</td>
<td>0.029(0.039)</td>
<td>-0.048-0.106</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had anal sex with a new partner as a bottom</td>
<td>0.051(0.055)</td>
<td>-0.057-0.160</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Had anal sex with a male partner  
Number of different male anal sex partners as a top  
Number of different male anal sex partners as a bottom  
Number of times had condomless anal sex with a male, as a top  
Number of times had condomless anal sex with a male, as a bottom  
Number of times had anal sex with a new partner as a top  
Number of times had anal sex with a new partner as a bottom  

**RELIGIOUS SUPPORT AND ACCEPTANCE**

*In the past 90 days:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>aOR</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Had anal sex with a male partner</td>
<td>-0.019(0.013)</td>
<td>-0.044-0.006</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of different male anal sex partners as a top</td>
<td>-0.447(0.270)</td>
<td>-0.978-0.083</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of different male anal sex partners as a bottom</td>
<td>-0.360(0.156)</td>
<td>-0.666-0.054</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had condomless anal sex with a male, as a top</td>
<td>0.323(0.411)</td>
<td>-0.484-1.130</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had condomless anal sex with a male, as a bottom</td>
<td>-3.99(2.137)</td>
<td>-8.193-0.207</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had anal sex with a new partner as a top</td>
<td>0.134(0.278)</td>
<td>-0.412-0.681</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times had anal sex with a new partner as a bottom</td>
<td>-0.144(0.392)</td>
<td>-0.914-0.627</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above models controlled for Age, Income and Education
Statistically significant at a p-value <.05

**LOGISTIC REGRESSION**

Table 3 displays the results of logistic regression analyses conducted to examine the association between each predictor variable, IH, stigma, racism and religion and the outcome variables, condomless anal sex with a male partner as a top and condomless anal sex with a male partner as a bottom. Only the predictor religious attendance was found to be statistically significant, at a significance level of .005. As religious attendance increased, the odds of engaging in condomless anal sex with a male as a bottom decreased (AOR 0.77, CI 0.64-0.92). This statistical significance was not captured with Linear regression.

**TABLE 3. LOGISTIC REGRESSION ANALYSES PREDICTING CONDOMLESS ANAL SEX IN YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN (AAMSM)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA</strong></th>
<th><strong>aOR</strong></th>
<th><strong>95% CI</strong></th>
<th><strong>p-value</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Condomless anal sex with a male as a top</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.98-1.06</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condomless anal sex with a male as a bottom</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.98-1.05</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STIGMA**
The above models controlled for Age, Income and Education statistically significant at a p-value <.05.

One-way ANOVA testing was conducted to compare the association of six sexual identity conditions and three HIV testing frequency conditions on the dependent variables IH, stigma, racism and religion (No table provided for ANOVA results). Results were statistically significant at a p-value <.05. There was a significant difference in mean levels for IH across the six sexual identity categories, based on how individuals identified to male friends [F(6,581)=7.0, p=<.0001]. Post hoc comparisons using the tukey test indicated that the mean IH score for three group comparisons was statistically significant: the group who identified as gay (M=17.5) and the group who did not label themselves, but slept with other guys (M=20) was statistically significant (MD=3.5, CI 0.7-6.3), the group who identified as gay (M=17.5) and the group who did not discuss sexual identity(M=20.6); (MD=3.1, CI 0.7-5.1), and the group who identified as gay (M=17.5) and the group who identified as bisexual (M=20.4); (MD=2.9, CI 0.8-4.9). The difference in mean levels for IH across the six sexual identity categories, based on how
individuals identified to female partners was also found to be statistically significant \[F(6, 582)=8.8, p=<.0001\]. Tukey post hoc comparisons found statistically significant mean IH score differences between four groups, the group who identified as gay \((M=17)\) and the group who identified as a straight guy who sleeps with women \((M=21.9)\); \((MD=4.9, CI 2.0-7.8)\), the group who identified as gay \((M=17)\) and the group who did not label themselves, but slept with other guys \((M=20.5)\); \((MD=3.5, CI 0.7-6.3)\), the group who identified as gay \((M=17)\) and the group who did not discuss their identity with them \((M=20.1)\); \((MD=3.1, CI 1.2-4.9)\), and the group who identified as gay \((M=17)\) and the group who identified as bisexual \((M=19.5)\); \((MD=2.5, CI 0.4-4.6)\). The difference in mean levels for IH across the six sexual identity categories based on how individuals identified to healthcare providers was also found to be statistically significant \[F(7, 581)=7.0, p=<.001\]. Tukey post hoc testing found statistically significant IH mean scores between two groups, the group who identified as gay \((M=18)\) and the group who identified as a straight guy who slept with women only \((M=23.7)\); \((MD=5.7, CI 1.4-9.9)\), the group that identified as gay \((M=18)\) and those who identified as bisexual \((M=21.4)\); \((MD=3.4, CI 1.5-5.3)\). No statistically significant mean IH scores were found between the HIV testing frequency groups.

Likewise, the mean levels for Stigma across the six sexual identity categories based on how individuals sexually identified to male friends was assessed, although no statistically significant association was found \[F(6, 582)=1.7, p=0.12\]. The difference in the level for stigma and how individuals identified themselves to female friends \[F(6, 582)=4.0, p=0.0005\] and healthcare providers\[F(97, 581)=2.9, p=0.006\] was found to be statistically significant. Tukey post hoc testing assessing the mean stigma scores across group comparisons, based on how
individuals sexually identified to female friends found statistically significance results between four groups, the group who responded I do not label myself, but slept with other guys (M=9.8) and the group who identified as a straight guy who sleeps with women only (M=6.6); (MD 3.2, CI 1.1-5.2), the group who identified as gay (M=8.8) and the group who identified as a straight guy who slept with women only (M=6.6); (MD 2.2, CI 0.5-3.7), the group who identified as bisexual (M=8.4) and the group who identified as a straight guy who sleeps with women only (M=6.6); (MD 1.8, CI 0.04-3.6), and the group that responded I do not discuss it with them (M=8.3) and the group who identified as a straight guy who sleeps with women only (M=6.6) (MD 1.7, CI 0.04-3.5). Additionally, a statistically significant mean stigma levels across sexual identity categories were found according to how individuals identified to healthcare providers [F(7, 581)=2.9, p=0.006], although the Tukey post hoc test failed to find statistically significant mean stigma scores between group comparisons. One-way ANOVA assessing the mean levels for stigma based on HIV testing frequency found non-significant results between the groups [F(2, 524)=0.3, p=0.7].

One-way ANOVA conducted examining the mean levels for perceived daily racism across sexual identity categories, based to how individuals sexually identify to male friends[F(6, 582)=1.0, p=0.44], female friends[F(6, 582)=0.6, p=0.7] and healthcare providers[F(7, 581)=0.5, p=0.8], were all found to be statistically non-significant. In addition, non-significant results were found with one way ANOVA testing conducted to assess the mean levels for stigma between the HIV testing frequency groups [F(2, 524)=0.1, p=0.9]. One-way ANOVA assessing the mean levels of racism and life experiences across the sexual identity categories, based on how individuals identified to male friends [F(6, 582)=0.7, p=0.12], female friends [F(6, 582)=0.9,
and healthcare providers \( F(7, 581)=1.6, p=0.1 \) also resulted in non-significant results. One-way ANOVA results testing the mean level for racism and life experiences across the HIV testing frequency categories also found non-significant results \( F(2, 524)=0.6, p=0.5 \).

One-way ANOVA conducted assessing the mean levels for religious attendance across the sexual identity categories and how individuals identified to male friends found statistically significant results \( F(6, 593)=2.7, p=0.01 \), conversely, Tukey post hoc testing found non-significant mean score differences between group comparisons. One-Way ANOVA assessing the mean level for religious attendance across the sexual identity categories based on how individuals identified to female friends \( F(6, 593)=2.0, p=0.06 \) and healthcare providers \( F(7,592)=1.9, p=0.07 \) found statistically non-significant results. There were no statistically significant mean levels for religious attendance across the HIV testing frequency groups \( F(2, 524)=2.4, p=0.09 \). The mean level for religious support across sexual identity categories based on how individuals sexually identified to female friends, found statistically significant results \( F(6, 490)=3.4, p=0.003 \). Tukey post hoc testing found statistically significant mean level religious support scores between two sexual identity groups, individuals who identified as a straight guy who slept with women only \((M=5.8)\) and the group who responded I do not label myself, but sleep with other guys \((M=7.2)\); \((MD=1.4, CI 0.02-2.8)\) and the group that identified as a straight guy who sleeps with women only \((M=5.8)\) and the group who identified as a straight guy who slept with other guys only \((M=8.9); \((MD=3.1, CI 0.3-5.8)\) . Statistically non-significant results were found between mean levels for religious support across sexual identity categories and how individuals identified to male friends \( F(6, 490)=1.5, p=0.2 \) and healthcare
providers \( [F(7, 489)=1.0, p=0.5] \), and HIV testing frequency between groups \( [F(2, 439)=2.2, p=0.1] \).

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

An understanding of factors contributing to the disproportionately high rates HIV in AAMSM is critical. For this epidemic to be impacted effective interventions addressing the external root causes are necessary. Many studies have found that sexual risk behaviors alone do not explain the HIV disparity being observed in AAMSM, therefore an exploration of other factors driving the HIV epidemic is necessary. Consequently, this thesis sought to examine multiple social-structural factors to determine their role in increasing sexual risk behaviors for HIV transmission. Analysis found that 98.8% of the sample participants reported having Black or African American sexual partners. This finding is consistent with previous research showing a high level of assertive mixing by race among AAMSM. These findings are important in understanding HIV acquisition and transmission risk in AAMSM. Despite this population being a small sub-population, its high HIV prevalence increases AAMSM exposure. Study results also found that 84.75% of the participants reported recent anal sex with a male partner, with more than 60% of the sample engaging in anal sex as a top and 60% as a bottom. In addition, more than 30% of the sample reported having condomless anal sex with a male. These sexual risk behaviors are important to further our understanding of AAMSM’s risk of HIV infection and signify the need for HIV risk reduction education in this population.
As hypothesized, an increase in IH was found to be associated with an increase the number of condomless anal sex encounters with a male, as a top. Conversely, IH was not found to be associated with an increase in the number of condomless anal sex encounters with a male, as a bottom. Also, as hypothesized, higher levels of stigma, and racism and life experiences were found to be associated with an increase in the number of different male anal sex partners as a bottom. These findings are important because these sexual behaviors, engaging in male anal sex as a bottom and having multiple sexual partners are well known to increases HIV risk. Although an increase in church attendance was hypothesized to be associated with increased sexual risk behaviors, results showed that an increase in religious attendance was associated with a decrease in the number of different male anal sex partners as a bottom and a decrease in condomless male anal sex as a bottom. Despite the Black church’s opposition of homosexuality and criticism regarding its role in perpetuating the HIV/AIDS epidemic, these finding show a protective effect of the church on sexual risk behaviors, behaviors that effect HIV transmission.

An examination of the differences in the level of IH among groups based on how individuals sexually identified to male friends, female friends and healthcare providers found significant mean differences between the groups. A majority of the differences were found between groups who identified as gay and bisexual, and the groups who identified has either gay or bisexual and the groups who identified as straight only having sex with women or those who did not label themselves or those who did discuss their sexual identity. Differences were also found in the levels of stigma based on how individuals identified to female friends, in the level of religious support and how individuals identified to female friends. According to
previous studies, AAMSM are less likely than other racial/ethnic groups to disclose their same-sex behaviors or identify as gay or bisexual, and are more likely to report having sex with women only due to fears of sexual discrimination and stigmatization, from their own community and abroad. Therefore, these findings are important to understanding the relationship between social-contextual factors and sexual identity. In the U.S., there is an urgent need to provide HIV prevention services to African American men who have sex with men and women (MSMW), but do not identify as gay or homosexual, but engaging these individuals in HIV prevention has historically been challenging (Saleh, Operario, Smith, Arnold, & Kegeles, 2011), especially HIV prevention services targeting AAMSM. Finding a way to reach individuals that fail to identify their same-sex behaviors is critical in order to reduce HIV transmission.

**LIMITATIONS**

There are several limitations of this study. One study limitation is the convenience sampling method used in obtaining the sample. Considering the sample consisted of only Jackson, M.S. residents, generalizability of the study findings to other populations is limited. In additions, study behaviors were self-reported, therefore relying on participant recall. Also, taking into consideration the sensitive nature of the survey questions, the results relied of the participants willingness to accurately report behaviors. Another limitation of the study is the limited number of sexual risk behaviors assessed in the study, as these selected behaviors are not an exhaustive list of sexual behaviors that fully capture the broad spectrum of behaviors.
that fully measure sexual risk. In addition, the data is cross-sectional, so temporality and causality cannot be inferred.

**IMPLICATIONS**

In the U.S., prevention of HIV infection in the African American community is a national public health priority (Saleh et al., 2011), especially among AAMSM. Therefore, these study findings have critical public health implications. These thesis findings imply the need for further research examining social-structural factors and their association to sexual risk behaviors. This study not only fills the gap in research, but also provides valuable information that could assist in explaining the HIV disparity in AAMSM. The relationship found between higher levels of IH, stigma, racism and life experiences and risky sexual behaviors signify the need for individual, community and structural level interventions addressing societal homophobia, stigma and racism. Considering the observed effect of IH, stigma, and racism and life experiences on sexual behaviors in this young AAMSM sample, its important that the implementation of individual level interventions begin before or early in adolescence. Interventions should focus on increasing skills to cope with homophobia, stigma and racism. For example, mindfulness training has been shown to be a powerful tool to help different minority populations overcome negative outcomes associated with racism and stigma. Additionally, individual level behavioral interventions are needed, programs focusing on safe sex education, with an emphasis on consistent and correct condom use, education on anal sex risks and the risk with having
multiple sexual partners. Disseminating messages targeting young AAMSM about safe sex practices is also a much-needed intervention.

Thesis results also found differences in the levels of IH and stigma among groups based on how they sexually identified to male and female friends and in the level of IH based on how individuals identified to healthcare providers. These findings have significant public health implications and has challenged public health, because individuals that fail to identify as gay or bisexual are less likely to access HIV prevention services targeting the MSM population. Individuals that fail to disclose their sexual identity to healthcare providers may fail to receive recommended HIV testing and preventative education. In an effort to improve structural level interventions, healthcare providers need to be culturally sensitive, and provide a comfortable, non-judgmental environment where individuals feel comfortable disclosing their sexual identity and sexual behaviors and receive appropriate HIV risk reduction education and counseling. A difference in the level of religious support was found between groups based on how they identified to female friends and an increase in religious attendance was related to a reduction in the number of male anal sex partners as a bottom, therefore the implementation of community level interventions can be instrumental in combating the HIV epidemic in AAMSM, including educating Black religious institutions and the communities they serve about the role churches can play in reducing HIV risk sexual behaviors and ultimately HIV rates among AAMSM. These significant study findings not only stress the urgent need for effective intervention strategies, but also the dire need for further research exploring socio-cultural factors and their role in driving the HIV/AIDS epidemic in young AAMSM.
CONCLUSION

In the U.S., the HIV epidemic continues to disproportionately affect AAMSM and despite numerous studies examining correlates of sexual risk behaviors across racial/ethnic groups, studies have failed explain the HIV disparity. Research has found that AAMSM, compared to other racial/ethnic MSM groups, do not engage in riskier sexual behaviors. Therefore, an exploration into other factors contributing to the elevated rates of HIV among AAMSM is crucial. Determining the external root cause of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in this population is necessary before effective HIV risk reduction interventions can be implemented.

Unfortunately, there is a scarcity of research examining socio-contextual factors and their association to sexual risk behaviors in AAMSM, so the purpose of this thesis was to provide a gap in research examining the relationship between IH, stigma, racism and religion and sexual risk behaviors among young AAMSM.

Higher levels of IH was found to be associated with an increase in the number of condomless anal sex encounters with a male, as a top. Higher levels of IH, stigma, and racism and life experiences were found to be associated with an increase in the number of male anal sex partners as a bottom. Furthermore, an increase in religious attendance was found to decrease an individuals risk of engaging in the riskiest type of anal sex, bottoming. In addition, differences in the levels of IH, stigma, religious support were found between groups based on how an individual sexually identified. Thus, these study findings provide valuable information that can assist in better understanding socio-contextual factors and their impact on sexual risk.
behaviors in AAMSM. The implementation of individual, community and structural interventions addressing IH, stigma, racism and life experience, religious attendance and support are important. In addition, behavioral HIV risk reduction interventions and program targeting AAMSM are necessary, but these thesis findings also signify the vital need for further research assessing socio-contextual factors and their role in driving the HIV/AIDS epidemic in AAMSM.
REFERENCES


