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Giving Voice to Black Gay and Bisexual Men in the South: Examining the Influences of Religion, Spirituality, and Family on the Mental Health and Sexual Behaviors of Black Gay and Bisexual Men

Black gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM) are disproportionately impacted by HIV in the United States. Previous research documents the association between unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) and psychological distress; however, neither the causes of the distress nor factors outside of individual characteristics driving sexual behaviors have adequately been explored. Research on Black MSM has yet to holistically address social and contextual factors influencing HIV-related risk and protection among this population. The purpose of this study was to explore social and contextual factors contributing to the psychological distress of Black MSM; determine how those factors influence their engagement in UAI; and examine how intersecting identities of Black MSM influence their mental health and sexual behaviors through their experiences with family dynamics, religion, and spirituality.

A qualitative inquiry was conducted using one-on-one in-depth phenomenological narrative interviews among self-identified Black gay and bisexual men (n=32) residing in Columbia, South Carolina. Participants were interviewed on their experiences with family dynamics, religion, and spirituality. Participants also discussed how the intersection of their multiple identities impacted their mental health and sexual behaviors. For the intersectional analysis, participants were categorized into four distinct groups of sexuality and racial identity expression to decipher trends in sexual behaviors resulting from psychological distress.

Participants experienced elevated psychological distress due to negative perceptions from their familial and/or religious beliefs. Some men exhibited gay- and bisexual-affirming
perceptions through the utilization of coping mechanisms that buffered psychological distress. Participants also experienced increased psychological distress due to non-conformity with cultural and social norms based on race and sexuality. The effects of family dynamics, religion, and spirituality on the engagement in UAI varied across groups.

These findings suggest that religious and familial discord were sources of psychological distress for Black gay and bisexual men. Over time, spirituality aided in lowering distress and increasing condom use self-efficacy. The findings also highlight the importance of considering socially-constructed identities and their interplay with social and contextual factors in increasing psychological distress and HIV-related sexual risk behaviors for Black gay and bisexual men. Future studies should incorporate holistic and comprehensive frameworks to enhance understanding of social drivers influencing the mental and sexual health of Black MSM and to inform intervention development and social services targeted at this population.