The Congregational Structure of Homonegativity:

Why Place of Worship may Matter more than Frequency of Worship

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Public Significance: This study suggests that aspects of the congregation one attends may have a stronger ability to predict one's homonegativity than any individual-differences variable. It further suggests that homonegativity may serve a signaling function for congregations, enabling congregants to affiliate with a congregation with attitudes toward same-sex sexuality like their own.

Abstract

Using 239 congregants from 14 randomly selected places of worship in the Southern United States—and a mega-analysis of 577 congregants from 34 similarly-located places of worship—we examined the relationship between religiousness and homonegativity. Multilevel models examining the effects of religiousness on homonegativity indicated that service attendance was more strongly related to homonegativity as a congregation-level variable than as an individual-level variable. Interaction effects between service attendance and the affirmativeness of a congregation were not significant, suggesting that the frequency of participation with a homonegative congregation is not related to homonegativity. These findings imply that the religiousness of a congregation is more closely related to homonegativity than the religiousness of an individual and that individuals may select a congregation that matches their views on same-sex sexuality. Homonegativity may serve a signaling function, enabling congregants to affiliate with a congregation with attitudes toward same-sex sexuality similar to their own.

Keywords: LGBTQ; homonegativity; religion; congregation; affirming; attitudes toward homosexuality; service attendance

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Although cultural norms are shifting and it is becoming more widely accepted for sexual minorities to be open about their identities and experiences, many continue to experience identity-based stigma and discrimination (Lefevor, Park, & Pederson, 2018). This stigma perpetuates physical and mental health disparities experienced by sexual minorities (Logie, Lacombe-Duncan, Poteat & Wagner 2017) and may be enacted through distal stressors (e.g., discrimination), proximal stressors (e.g., internalized negative beliefs), and structural disadvantages (e.g., inequitable laws) faced by sexual minorities (Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, & Link, 2013; Meyer, 2003). Though clearly detrimental to the health of sexual minorities, this stigma may be perpetuated because for some heterosexual individuals, stigma towards sexual minorities may serve as a form of in-group protection, warning individuals of perceived threats to their group (Stangor & Crandall, 2013), and enhancing group cohesion (Billig & Tajfel, 1973).

Religious belief and participation are often cited as a rationale for the maintenance and formation of homonegativity (Adamczyk, 2020; Hoffarth et al., 2018; Sumerau & Cragun, 2018). Some religious organizations and individuals view same-sex sexuality as a choice and propose punishing actions toward those in same-sex relationships (Jewell & Morrison, 2012). Homonegative views may be perpetuated among religious individuals through congregational policies and doctrines that deny membership or rights to individuals in same-sex relationships (Lefevor, Paiz et al., 2020). Many religious groups have adopted the colloquial language of “love the sinner, hate the sin” to avoid stigmatizing views; however, this rhetoric appears to facilitate rather than discourage such views (Hoffarth, Hodson, & Mohman, 2018). Although some sexual minorities appear to flourish in religious spaces (Lefevor, Beckstead et al., 2019), many report a

much more conflictual relationship with religion (Hamblin & Gross, 2013), with sexual minorities affiliating religiously half as often as heterosexual individuals (Lefevor, Park, & Pedersen, 2018).

Research examining the formation and maintenance of religious groups has focused on the role of individual-difference variables such as age, gender, or education (Herek & Glunt, 1993; Schulte & Battle, 2004). Although the impact of congregational variables has been estimated through work looking at religious denominations (Todd & Allen, 2011), few studies have examined the role of religious congregations in the formation and maintenance of homonegativity. The present study fills these gaps by investigating how homonegativity is formed and maintained in religious congregations.

Religiousness and Homonegativity

Religiousness is a multi-faceted construct that comprises religious affects, behaviors, and cognitions (Hill & Edwards, 2013). Most often, religiousness is assessed through affiliation, organizational religious behavior (i.e., service attendance), non-organizational religious behavior (e.g., scripture study, prayer), and/or intrinsic religiousness (i.e., the degree to which one has internalized religious teachings and worldview; Koenig & Büssing, 2010). Although approximately 77% of Americans identify as religious, only 63% profess an absolute belief in God, 55% pray daily, and 36% attend weekly services (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Homonegativity is a type of prejudice characterized by negative attitudes toward sexual minorities, same-sex sexual desire, and same-sex sexual behaviors (Herek & McLemore, 2013). Heterosexual individuals' homonegative attitudes are often termed "sexual prejudice" (Etengoff & Lefevor, 2020) while sexual minorities' homonegative attitudes are understood as "internalized homonegativity" (Meyer, 2003). Sexual prejudice has been associated with

increased discriminatory behavior such as violence and harassment (Herek & McLemore, 2013), and internalized homonegativity has been associated with a host of negative mental health outcomes including anxiety and depression (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010). Because our focus is on the attitudes rather than the orientation of the person holding the attitude, we use "homonegativity" throughout this manuscript to describe these attitudes.

In general, individuals who are religious are more likely to be homonegative than those who are not (Irizarry & Perry, 2018; Lefevor, Sorrell et al., 2019; Sumerau & Cragun, 2018; Whitely, 2009). Both public and private manifestations of religiousness have been linked with homonegativity (Sumerau & Cragun, 2018; Whitely, 2009) as has intrinsic religiousness (Adler, 2012; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2009; Whitehead, 2013a). Different components of belief such as orthodoxy and fundamentalism have also been consistently linked with homonegativity—sometimes demonstrating separable effects from other religiousness variables and other times exerting similar effects to other aspects of religiousness (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Ford, vanValey, Brignall, & Macaluso, 2009; Rowatt, Tsang, Kelly, LaMartina, & McKinley, 2006).

Several mechanisms have been proposed to explain this relationship. Fundamentalist religious beliefs have been targeted as a foundational source of homonegativity (Cragun & Sumerau, 2015). Many Christians ground homonegative beliefs in Biblical teachings about same-sex sexuality and the roles of women (Whitley, 2009) as well as in rhetoric around "hate the sin, love the sinner" (Hoffarth, Hodson, & Mohman, 2018). Service attendance has been thought to relate to homonegativity because attendance may help form and transmit group norms around homonegativity. Although service attendance appears to relate to homonegativity broadly, it may be more or less related depending on the denomination (much variation in homonegativity has been noted within Protestant Christianity) or country in which the

congregation resides (Adamczyk, 2020; Hoffarth, et al., 2018). Finally, religious affiliation has been conceptualized to relate to homonegativity through group signaling. Because individuals are likely to associate with others who hold similar views as themselves, one's religious affiliation may be a form of group signaling that connotes sociopolitical views outside of religiousness, including homonegativity (Axelrod, 1997; Lefevor, Sorrell et al., 2020).

Homonegativity as an Attribute of Congregations

Most of research examining the relationship between religiousness and homonegativity implicitly assumes that this relationship occurs at an individual-differences level, despite growing acknowledgment of group-level influences on homonegativity (Hoffarth et al., 2018; Lefevor, Sorrell et al., 2020). Because group-level variables are not typically accounted for in this research, it is possible that differences which are usually evaluated between individuals are better understood as differences between religious groups. Given the immense power of group conformity, norms, and values on both attitudes and behavior (Asch, 1951; Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Loftus & Palmer, 1974), a deeper investigation of the potential contribution of group-level factors in the relationship between religiousness and homonegativity is warranted. Indeed, a growing body of work has called for an analysis of this relationship at a congregational level (McQueeney, 2009; Moon et al., 2018; Pitt, 2010; Sumerau & Cragun, 2014).

From a multi-level perspective, individual differences in religiousness can be separated out from congregational norms around religiousness to examine the separate relationships of each of these levels on homonegativity (Hox, Moerbeek, & van de Schoot, 2017). For example, how frequently one attends service is likely a function of both the norms of attendance in the congregation one is attending and the congregant's own preferences. Like congregants, congregations can also be distinguished from each other by examining differences in service

attendance, scripture reading, intrinsic religiousness, and orthodoxy. Additionally, some variables such as orthodoxy or affirmativeness may be the direct results of congregational doctrines and policies. For example, some congregations explicitly address issues related to homosexuality by adopting formal welcome statements for LGBTQ members or initiating policies to make services more welcoming. Examining these variables as characteristics of congregations rather than of individuals may also be more phenomenologically accurate.

Research on Homonegativity in Congregations

Given this understanding, congregational research appears to be an ideal way of examining how religiousness may relate to homonegativity (Quinn et al., 2016; Shelton & Cobb, 2016; Taylor et al., 2014). Conducting congregational research, however, is expensive, time-consuming, and difficult to do in a random or systematic way. We are aware of only two attempts to engage in congregational research examining the relationship between religiousness and homonegativity in a large-scale, quantitative way: The National Congregations Study (Chavez & Anderson, 2008) and a study by Lefevor, Sorrell, et al. (2020).

The National Congregations Study was the first and most representative examination into the influence of congregational characteristics on homonegativity. Chavez and Anderson (2008) asked participants from the General Social Survey—a US representative sample—to provide contact information about their local congregation, if they had one. Using the information provided, Chavez and Anderson followed up with a leader, administrator, or informant from each congregation to produce a national representative sample of US congregations. Research published from the National Congregations Study has indicated that how accepting a congregation is towards gay and lesbian individuals can be in part dependent on their clergy's own demographics like gender or education level. Also, the more congregants engaged in

"boundary bridging activities" that brought them in contact with others who were different from them, the less they reported homonegative attitudes (Adler, 2012; Whitehead, 2013a; Whitehead, 2013b). This work, however, studied congregations and congregants separately, making a comparison of congregation and congregant effects implausible.

In contrast, Lefevor, Sorrell, and colleagues (2020) presented data from congregants within 20 randomly selected congregations in a midsouthern city. Although their results were limited by a low rate of participation from selected congregations within a single city, Lefevor, Sorrell et al. (2020) successfully partitioned out variation that occurred on a congregant and congregational level. Using multilevel modelling, they found that homonegativity varied at both an individual and congregation level and that congregation-level variables accounted for more of the variation in homonegativity than individual-level variables. Although service attendance on both an individual and congregational level were positively related to homonegativity, the relationship between congregational affirmativeness and homonegativity was more than 3x stronger than any other relationship. This study, however, failed to assess clergy's views, relying instead on reports of congregants about congregation-level policies and procedures. By relying entirely on congregant reports, relationships between the affirmativeness of the congregation and the congregant's homonegativity may be artificially conflated as they are reported by the same individual.

The Role of Affiliation and Transmission in Homonegativity

These two studies, building on earlier theoretical work, have suggested that if homonegativity is indeed a characteristic of congregations, there are at least two mechanisms that could explain how homonegative attitudes are formed or maintained within congregations. First, it is possible that individuals *affiliate* with a congregation that matches the individual's pre-

existing attitudes toward same-sex sexuality. This view assumes a) that homonegativity is an important enough view for an individual to base a congregational affiliation on and b) that congregations intentionally or unintentionally signal their homonegativity. Alternatively, it is possible that individuals adapt their attitudes toward same-sex sexuality to those that are being expressed around them. This view assumes a) that individuals' homonegativity may change over time and b) that a greater degree of engagement with a group is likely to lead to a greater *transmission* of homonegative attitudes. We refer to the first view as the affiliation hypothesis and the second as the transmission hypothesis.

The affiliation hypothesis. The affiliation hypothesis holds that individuals choose a social group that most closely resembles themselves and is based in social psychological research on group entitativity and homophily. Entitativity is the cohesion in values, opinions, and outlooks between individuals in a group (Campbell, 1958) and may play a key role in group formation (Hohman, Dahl, & Grubbs, 2016). Groups that are highly entitative tend to have similar values and views and may thus attract individuals who also hold similar views (Kim, 2004). Research indicates that people may be drawn to those like themselves in terms of attitudes (Megens & Weerman, 2011), social identities (Kim, 2004), political orientation (Barberá, Bonneau, Jost, Nagler, & Tucker, 2015), and religious affiliation (Kim, 2004). Many have also noted that individuals' social networks tend to be homogenous to demographic factors like education or race/ethnicity (Cook, McPherson, & Smith-Lovin, 2001).

In the context of homonegativity, the affiliation hypothesis suggests that congregants choose a place of worship based on how well it matches their attitudes toward same-sex sexuality. This hypothesis leads to several empirical claims. First, the affiliation hypothesis posits that congregations vary consistently in their homonegativity such that individuals would

be able to distinguish between congregations on this basis. Second, it suggests that congregants are unlikely to change their views as they spend more time in a congregation, presumably because their views already match the views of others within the congregation. Consequently, and finally, the affiliation hypothesis suggests that changes in an individual's attitudes toward sexual minorities are more likely to lead the individual to decide to attend a different congregation than to change the views of the congregation on same-sex sexuality.

The transmission hypothesis. The transmission hypothesis—though not directly opposed to the affiliation hypothesis—suggests that social values are transmitted through group contact. It draws on theories of social influence that suggest that individuals tend to adopt characteristics of others in proportion to the time spent and psychological closeness experienced together (Axelrod, 1997). The transmission hypothesis explains how many social values—such as support for same-sex marriage—may be changed after individuals have contact with different-minded others (Lacour & Green, 2014; Megens & Weerman, 2011). Some have suggested that transmission promotes group conformity as individuals are influenced by and eventually conform to beliefs of the group (Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner, 1990).

In the context of homonegativity, the transmission hypothesis suggests that congregants' views are likely to shift as a result of their engagement in a congregation. This hypothesis leads to several empirical claims. First, it suggests that as a congregant engages more often or for a more prolonged period with a place of worship, that congregants' views are more likely to match the views of the congregation. From a longitudinal viewpoint, this would mean that individuals would have a different view on same-sex sexuality when they first started attending the congregation compared to when they have been attending their congregation for some time. Secondly, it asserts that changes in homonegativity are likely to occur in proportion to the

frequency or duration of engagement with the congregation. Therefore, from a cross-sectional perspective, the transmission hypothesis asserts that congregants who are the most engaged with a homonegative place of worship are likely to be more homonegative themselves. Conversely and lastly, because people's views on same-sex sexuality are thought to be transmitted through their congregation, homopositive beliefs can also be transmitted from a congregation to a congregant, potentially as the result of congregational policies, procedures, and doctrines.

The Present Study

The present study builds on the earlier work by Chavez and Anderson (2008) and Lefevor, Sorrell et al. (2020) to examine whether individuals select congregations based on homonegative views (e.g., the affiliation hypothesis) and whether individuals' homonegativity tends to be influenced by the homonegativity of the congregation they attend (e.g., the transmission hypothesis). This study advances previous work by (a) collecting a new sample of individuals from randomly selected places of worship, (b) assessing congregational constructs by collecting data from leaders of congregations, and (c) refining individual constructs by using more accurate measures (e.g., a measure of length of time attending a congregation, use of a validated measure of intrinsic religiousness). Based on previous research (e.g., Adler, 2012; Lefevor, Sorrell et al., 2020), we made several hypotheses:

H1: Religiousness at both an individual and congregational level would be positively associated with homonegativity

H2: Relative to individual-level religiousness, congregation-level religiousness would be more strongly associated with homonegativity

H3: Congregational affirmativeness would be negatively associated with homonegativity

H4: There will not be evidence for an interaction between religiousness and affirmativeness, in support of the affiliation hypothesis

H5: Because individuals are thought to choose a congregation for its homonegativity, individuals will not become more or less homonegative based on the homonegativity of the congregation they attend

Method

Sampling Procedure

The data presented here are part of the dataset detailed in Lefevor, Milburn et al. (2020). Institutional review board permission was obtained from the primary author's institution. We recruited participants through their place of worship. Places of worship were randomly selected from all possible places of worship of a mid-sized city in the southern United States listed in the White Pages. Based on the participation of congregations in previous congregational research (Lefevor, Sorrell et al., 2020), we selected 126 places of worship to achieve the minimum recommended sample size of 10 – 30 congregations with 5 – 40 congregants in each congregation (Bell, Morgan, Schoenberger, Kromrey, & Ferron, 2014).

Twelve female, predominantly heterosexual, undergraduate research assistants were primarily responsible for data collection. Research assistants recruited participants as part of an advanced research methods course and were provided with sample scripts and protocols to use when approaching clergy and congregants. Research assistants approached the leaders of selected congregations via phone, Facebook, or in person before/after services. Research assistants informed leaders that they were conducting a study of religious congregations and that they would appreciate the leader's help in surveying their congregation about several topics. Interested leaders were given the opportunity to preview the survey prior to scheduling a time to

distribute the survey to congregants. Of the 126 places of worship selected, 14 consented and had at least 5 congregants and a leader completed the survey. The other 112 places of worship did not participate for the following reasons: did not exist (n = 35), would not provide a straightforward answer about participation, even after follow up (n = 28), were not interested in psychological research (n = 16), opposed to administering the survey due to its contents (n = 24), unspecified (n = 7), and consented but did not provide sufficient responses to be included in analyses (n = 2).

Congregants in participating congregations filled out paper-and-pencil surveys following worship services, typically in response to an announcement from leaders about the study. Congregants were informed that they would be taking a survey about religious belief, practice, and attitudes as well as how these attitudes related to mental health treatment and gay/lesbian/bisexual individuals. Data were collected between September and November 2019. Survey responses were double coded by two undergraduate research assistants, and disputes were resolved by re-examining the data to ensure accurate data entry Congregants were not compensated for participation.

Measures

Data were collected separately from congregants and leaders of congregations. Homonegativity and religiousness were assessed through congregant-level responses and congregational affirmativeness was assessed through congregation-level (including leader) responses.

Homonegativity. We assessed homonegativity through Herek's Attitudes toward Lesbian Women and Gay Men scale (1997). Because religious individuals often differentiate their attitudes toward same-sex sexual behavior and toward lesbian and gay individuals (Moon, 2014), we only used items from Herek's scale that assessed attitudes toward lesbian and gay

individuals, as suggested by Rosik's (2007) factor analysis. This modified scale contained six items including "lesbians just can't fit into our society," "male homosexuals should not be allowed to teach school," "female homosexuality is bad for society because it breaks down the natural division between the sexes," "lesbians are sick," "I think male homosexuals are disgusting," and "female homosexuality is a threat to many of our basic social institutions." Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating more homonegativity. Internal consistency for this scale was $\alpha = .94$.

Religiousness. We used the Duke University Religiousness Index (DUREL; Koenig & Büssing, 2010) to assess service attendance, scripture reading, and intrinsic religiousness. Service attendance is assessed on a six-point scale ranging from "never" (1) to "more than once a week" (6). Scripture reading is also assessed as the frequency of engaging in activities such as prayer, meditation, or Bible study on a six-point scale ranging from "rarely or never" (1) to "more than once a day." Intrinsic religiousness is assessed with three items and demonstrated an internal consistency of $\alpha = .79$ in the present study. Participants also reported the number of years they had been attending their current congregation.

Congregational affirmativeness. Congregational affirmativeness was assessed through three yes-no questions reported by leaders of congregations: (a) "regarding leadership, if they were otherwise qualified, would an openly gay or lesbian couple in a committed relationship be permitted to hold all of the volunteer leadership positions open to other members?" (b) "some congregations have adopted written statements that officially welcome gays and lesbians. Has your congregation adopted such a statement?" and (c) "would an openly gay or lesbian couple in a committed relationship be permitted to be full-fledged members of your congregation?" Responses were coded such that higher values indicated more affirmativeness. Though the leader

sample was too small to accurately assess internal consistency in the present study, these items have been found to evidence high internal consistency as a measure of congregational affirmativeness (α = .84; Lefevor, Sorrell et al., 2020). In addition, we asked leaders to report how many LGBTQ congregants they knew in their congregation.

Participant Characteristics

Participants were eligible for inclusion if they were (a) 18 years or older, (b) currently attending a place of worship in the mid-south area of the United States, and (c) completed survey items related to demographics, religiousness, and homonegativity. In total, 239 participants from 14 congregations were included in the study.

The congregant sample was primarily women (73.7%) and identified as African American (70%). The average age was 55.4 (SD = 17.38) with 3.8% of the sample population having less than a high school diploma, 14.0% having a high school diploma, 28.8% having some college or vocational training, 27.5% having a bachelor's degree, and 21.6% having a graduate degree. Most participants (97.4%) identified as heterosexual/straight while (2.6%) identified as LGBQ. Overall, participants were largely homopositive, responding "disagree" to ATLG questions (*M* = 2.22, *SD* = 1.12, Range = 1 – 5). On average, congregants attended services every week and read scripture between two times a week and daily.

Leaders of participating congregations also completed the survey. Leaders were primarily men (71.4%), with a mean age of 53.21 (SD = 10.53). Similar to the congregants, 64.3% identified as African American, with 35.7% identifying as White. Concerning education, 21.4% of the sample had a high school diploma, 7.1% had a bachelor's degree, and 71.4% had a graduate degree. All of the participating leaders identified as heterosexual. Leaders had held their position as leaders for an average of 20 years, reported mostly homopositive attitudes (*M* = 2.22;

SD = 1.01), and indicated that their congregations had an average of 1.5 affirming policies. Leaders and congregations belonged to a variety of denominations including Baptist (*n* = 6), Presbyterian (*n* = 2), Pentecostal (*n* = 2), Disciples of Christ (*n* = 2), Methodist (*n* = 1), and other Protestant Denomination (*n* = 1).

Analysis Plan

We tested our hypotheses in three separate analyses, largely using multi-level modelling (MLM) to address the nesting of congregants (level 1) within congregations (level 2). MLMs were created in R version 3.6.0 (R Development Core Team, 2019) using maximum likelihood estimation with the "lme4" package (Bates, Maechler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015). Congregant-level variables were group mean centered to remove congregation-level variation from the predictors (Hox et al., 2017), and congregation-level variables were grand mean centered to reduce multicollinearity. Missing data were excluded from analyses using listwise deletion.

In the first analysis, we constructed a series of multi-level models to examine the influence of religiousness, affirmativeness, and their interaction on homonegativity. We used a model-building approach in this analysis, which starts with a null model (Model 0) and then sequentially adds predictors, comparing each model to previous models using the AIC and BIC and only retaining significant predictors (Hox et al., 2017). Because of the potential for overspecification and multicollinearity, we added predictors within a model in a stepwise fashion (adding predictors with the largest zero-order correlations first; see *Table 1*), only adding predictors that did not increase the variance inflation factor (VIF) of any predictor beyond the commonly accepted value of 4 (Hair, Black, Babin, Andreson, & Tatham, 2010). VIFs were examined using the vif.mer function (Robinson, 2019). In this fashion, four models were constructed. The null model included only an intercept, Model 1 included individual-level

predictors, Model 2 included congregation-level predictors, Model 3 included interaction effects, and Model 4 (Final Model) included only predictors found to be related to homonegativity in previous models. All models included a random effect for intercept and a fixed effect for slopes.

Because it is possible that the first analysis lacked power to detect interaction effects (Hox et al., 2017), we next conducted a mega-analysis that combined data from the present study with data from a previously published study that was collected in the same fashion, used many of the same measures, had similar demographic characteristics, and had similar research questions (Lefevor et al., 2019). Because the initial study did not use all of the measures included in the present study, a simpler model was constructed that included only measures used in both studies: religious service attendance, congregational affirmativeness, and their interaction. This analysis included 578 congregants from 36 randomly selected places of worship and definitively had a sufficient sample size to detect interaction effects (Hox et al., 2017).

Finally, we examined whether individuals who had worshipped with a congregation for a longer period of time evidenced less variation in their homonegativity relative to their fellow congregants. For this analysis, individual's ATLG scores were group mean centered, yielding transformed scores that represent how much an individual's ATLG differs from the average ATLG of that individual's congregation. These scores were then squared to obtain a positive measure of distance between an individual's score and the group's mean. Finally, a linear regression between these transformed scores and an individual's length of time attending a congregation was conducted to illustrate the relationship between individuals' "difference" in ATLG from their congregation and the length of time that they attended that congregation.

Results

Analysis 1: Multilevel Models of Homonegativity

The null model (Model 0) found that 35% of the variation in homonegativity could be modelled at a congregational level (ICC = .35), indicating that the use of multilevel modelling for homonegative attitudes was warranted. See *Table 2* for more detailed model information.

Model 1 comprised individual-level variables, including service attendance, scripture reading, intrinsic religiousness, and years attending. Although the intercept in Model 1 proved to be significant (γ = 2.06, *SE* = .19, $t(201) = 11.11$, $p < .001$), none of the individual-level predictors were significant.

In Model 2, we added congregational-level variables. Because there was substantial multicollinearity between indicators of religiousness as evidenced by high variance inflation factors, we only included service attendance in this model as service attendance has previously been used as a preferred single-item measure of religiousness when multicollinearity exists between indicators (Lefevor et al., 2020). Model 2 evidenced improved fit over the null model (AIC = 541.06, BIC = 564.39). The average service attendance in a congregation (γ = 1.36, *SE* = .23, $t(8) = 5.90$, $p < .001$), the average length of time congregants had attended a congregation (γ = 0.02, *SE* = .01, $t(8) = 2.99$, $p = .017$), and the number of LGBT congregants known by leaders (γ = -.11, *SE* = .02, $t(8) = -4.40$, $p = .002$) were significantly related to homonegativity.

Model 3 consisted of significant predictors from Model 2 as well as the interaction between service attendance and both affirmativeness and the number of LGBT congregants as well as the interaction between length of time attending a congregation and both affirmativeness and the number of LGBT congregants. We posited that if individuals' homonegativity were influenced by attending a homonegative congregation, then we would see an interaction between how often they attended services or how long they had attended a congregation and the affirmativeness of the congregation. Although each of the indicators that were significant in

Model 2 remained significant in Model 3, the interaction terms were universally non-significant, indicating the lack of interaction effects.

Our final model comprised only service attendance on a congregational level, years attending on a congregational level, and the number of LGBT congregants in a congregation. The Final Model evidenced improved model fit relative to Model 2 (AIC = 539.79, BIC = 559.78). Of the predictors, service attendance evidenced the strongest relationship with homonegativity (β = .35), followed by the number of LGBT congregants known (β = -.28), followed by the years attending a congregation (β = .21).

Analysis 2: A Mega-Analysis

Because it is possible that the lack of significant interaction effects in the first analysis could be attributed to a lack of statistical power, we conducted a mega-analysis combining data from the present study and that found in Lefevor, Sorrell et al. (2020). Both samples were drawn from the same metropolitan area, and participants were largely similar across the samples as to race/ethnicity, age, and gender. Using these data, we constructed a model that included service attendance on both individual and congregational levels, congregational affirmativeness, and the interaction between congregational affirmativeness and service attendance at both individual and congregational levels. We found that neither individual level service attendance (γ = 0.05, *SE* = .06, $t(468) = 0.89$, $p = .371$) nor congregation level service attendance (γ = 0.18, *SE* = .12, $t(468) = 1.50$, $p = .134$) were related to homonegativity. Although congregational affirmativeness negatively predicted homonegativity (γ = -.60, *SE* = .28, $t(468) = -2.17$, $p = .031$), neither the interaction between individual level service attendance and affirmativeness (γ = 0.14, *SE* = .11, $t(468) = 1.29$, $p = .199$) nor the interaction between congregation level service attendance and affirmativeness (γ = -.09, *SE* = .20, $t(468) = -.46$, $p = .641$) were related to homonegativity.

Analysis 3: Congregational Homogeneity of Homonegativity

We examined whether individuals' homonegativity was increasingly more likely to resemble that of their fellow congregants over time in this final analysis. We regressed the squared value of individuals' deviations from their congregation's average ATLG onto the length of time they had attended the congregation. The regression was not significant, $F(1, 198) = 2.35$, $p = .127$, $R^2 = .01$, nor was the coefficient for the length of time attending, $b = .01$, $p = .127$. This analysis, though somewhat ambiguous, may confirm the effects of previous analyses to suggest that individuals do not tend to conform to congregations' homonegativity over time.

Discussion

With a sample of 239 individuals recruited from randomly selected places of worship, we found that congregation-level variables more strongly predicted homonegativity than individual-level variables. On the congregation level, we found that service attendance and length of time attending a congregation—which may have been confounded with age—were positively associated with homonegativity and that the number of LGBTQ congregants in a congregation was negatively associated with homonegativity. In both the overall analysis and a mega-analysis of over 500 congregants, we failed to find support for an interaction between congregational affirmativeness and engagement with a congregation on homonegativity. We also failed to find evidence to support the idea that individuals' homonegativity more closely resembled that of their congregation as time went on. Together, our findings appear to indicate that homonegativity serves as a congregational signaling characteristic. We discuss the implications of these findings on our understanding of the formation and maintenance of homonegativity.

The Relationship between Religiousness and Homonegativity

Correlational analyses indicated that service attendance, scripture reading, intrinsic religiousness, and the number of years a congregant had been attending a congregation were all positively related to homonegativity. These findings have been long noted in the literature (Herek, 1988; Cragun & Sumerau, 2015; Whitley, 2009). Historically, many religious organizations have condemned same-sex sexuality on moral grounds (Herek & McLemore, 2013). Thus, those who are more religious may have been exposed to more frequent condemnation of same-sex sexuality, are less likely to know sexual minorities personally, and may consequently tend to hold more homonegative attitudes (Lefevor, Sorrell et al., 2020). Our findings extend these trends by noting that they apply to intrinsic religiousness as well as to other outward indicators of religiousness.

Similarly, we noted that congregations with more LGBTQ congregants tended to be less homonegative. Somewhat surprisingly, we noted that the actual policies held by the congregation related to LGBTQ individuals were not related to the homonegativity of the congregation. In our current study, we asked leaders to report about congregational policies rather than congregants. In this design, the information about policies was likely accurate but did not assess congregants' awareness of those policies. Previous research that has examined congregants' reports of congregational policies and found congregants' perceptions of congregational policies to be related to homonegativity (e.g., Lefevor, Sorrell et al., 2020). Thus, integrated with previous work, our findings may indicate that *perception* of congregational policies may be more closely related to homonegativity than actual policies.

Homonegativity as a Characteristic of Groups

Like recent research, we found that congregational variables explained more variation in homonegativity than individual variables (Lefevor, Sorrell et al., 2020). In our study, variance

attributable to congregations was 35% of the total variance with congregation variables explaining 32% of the total variance. In contrast, variance attributable to individual-level factors and error was 65% of the total variance but individual variables explained only 6% of the total variance, meaning that congregational variables explained over 5x as much variance as individual variables. Further, only congregational variables emerged as significant predictors of homonegativity in our multilevel models. These results align well with research that has called for a deeper and fuller exploration of the effects of congregation-level variables (McQueeney, 2009; Moon et al., 2018; Pitt, 2010) and with research that has examined "affirming" congregations (Rodriguez, 2010; White et al., 2020).

Because we used group mean centering to create congregational variables, the effects of a group on an individual were statistically removed in individual level variables (Hox et al., 2017). Therefore, individual level variables indicate the degree to which individual differences that *were not* attributable to contextual congregational effects related to homonegativity. Practically, these variables indicate ways that two congregants may differ in their homonegativity because they have different backgrounds, attitudes, beliefs, and practices. In contrast, congregation level variables may be seen as unique ways a congregation affects an individual's homonegativity. Practically, these variables indicate the ways that congregations may impact attitudes, beliefs, and practices through direct congregant-congregant interactions or congregational culture (see Feaster, Brincks, Robbins, & Szapocznik, 2011 for a detailed explanation of contextual effects).

The vast majority of research examining homonegativity—and stigma more broadly—measures only individual-level factors, effectively ignoring contextual effects. Our results highlight the importance that group-level factors may play in the formation and enactment of stigma. Research on homonegativity has examined several variables that may be conceptualized

as group-level factors including engagement with LGBTQ communities and resources (Walch Orlosky, & Sinkkanen, 2010), race/ethnicity (Chonody, Woodford, Brennan, Newman, & Wang, 2014; Irizarry & Perry, 2018), and political affiliation (Chonody et al., 2014; Walch et al., 2010). These variables are often discussed as exerting a group effect on stigma through the establishment of subjective norms, collective attitudes, and behaviors (Jonathan, 2008; Lewis, 2003; Whitehead & Perry, 2016). However, because of the difficulty in collecting group-level data, few studies use an analytical method (like multilevel modelling) that allows researchers to understand the contextual effects that a group may exert on an individual.

Homonegativity as Congregational Signaling

Since congregational factors were stronger predictors of homonegativity than individual predictors, we suggest that homonegativity may be best understood as a characteristic of congregations more than of individuals. Taken thus, homonegativity may be a form of congregational signaling. The question of how to approach same-sex relationships and marriage is a watershed issue that has caused considerable divisions in many religious organizations (Barnes, 2013; Djupe, Olson, & Gilbert, 2006). Given this position, congregations may signal their stance on same-sex relationships and marriage as a way to attract like-minded congregants. This trend may be particularly pronounced within Protestant Christianity—the dominant religion within the United States (Newport, 2016)—where individuals choose a place of worship among a variety of options rather than being assigned to a place of worship based on location.

In addition, within homonegative congregations, establishing an identity as a "non-affirming" congregation may facilitate cohesion by providing congregants a sense of "who we are and who we are not" (Stangor & Crandall, 2013). We found that congregations varied consistently in the number of LGBTQ individuals in a given congregation—with leaders of

about half of congregations reporting having no LGBTQ members—and that congregations with fewer LGBTQ congregants were more homonegative (Lefevor, Milburn et al., 2020). Having a designated out-group is central to the formation and maintenance of many social groups (Billig & Tajfel, 1973). Research has consistently demonstrated that religious beliefs that entail a sense of us vs. the world (i.e., exclusivity) and beliefs that are viewed as containing the entirety of truth about the world (i.e., fundamentalism) are among the strongest predictors of homonegativity (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Rowatt et al., 2006; Whitley, 2009). Taken together, these trends suggest that particularly within homonegative congregations, homonegativity may facilitate group formation.

Affiliation and Transmission

We were particularly interested to understand whether congregations influence congregants' homonegativity with more intense or prolonged exposure. Three separate analyses suggested that congregants' homonegativity appears to be unaffected by participating more frequently or for a longer duration of time in homonegative congregations. In contrast, we found evidence that congregations that were characterized by congregants who attended religious services more frequently and for a longer period of time tended to be more homonegative. When taken in the light of an understanding of the relative import of congregational and individual factors, these results suggest that the congregation one attends may have a stronger impact on one's homonegativity than how often or how long they attend the congregation.

These findings support the Affiliation Hypothesis, which holds that an individual's congregational affiliation, as opposed to the individual's engagement with that congregation, is most predictive of homonegativity (Lefevor, Sorrell et al., 2020). Within congregations, homonegativity may be sustained by group entitativity—the sense of internal cohesion in values,

opinions, and outlooks within a group (Campbell, 1958). Individuals also tend to be motivated to seek out like-minded people and groups (i.e., homophily; Megens & Weerman, 2011). Taken together, congregants may search for congregations that represent their views and, once immersed in that congregation, evidence little shift in their views because those views facilitate cohesion. If congregants find themselves at odds with the views of the congregation, they may seek out another congregation rather than making change within their congregation.

Implications

Beyond indicating the need for more congregational research, our results have direct implications for social justice advocates and mental health professionals who are invested in LGBTQ health. Because homonegativity appears to vary more substantially by congregation than by congregant, those invested in promoting LGBTQ health and reducing homonegativity may target interventions toward *congregations* rather than toward *individuals*. Given that congregations with the most homonegative views had no LGBTQ congregants and that positive intergroup contact may be one of the most effective ways to reduce stigma (Herek & Glunt, 1993), advocates may seek to facilitate positive contact between LGBTQ individuals and homonegative congregations. For example, a local LGBTQ center may collaborate with local places of worship to host a movie night in a neutral space that highlight common humanity.

For some places of worship, homonegativity may facilitate group cohesion by providing the congregation with an established “out-group.” Advocacy efforts to reduce homonegativity would thus be best targeted by helping these places of worship find other issues rather than groups of people that may function as an “out-group” such as poverty or lack of sustainable housing in a community. Taking this approach may be more likely to succeed than simply

advocating for a reduction in homonegativity, as homonegativity may be serving an important function in preserving group cohesion and unity.

Therapists working with LGBTQ clients may benefit by understanding that religiously-based homonegativity is rooted more in congregations than in individuals. Particularly as sexual minorities may affiliate with conservative religions (Lefevor, Beckstead et al., 2019), therapists may assess the homonegativity of the congregation that a client is attending to understand the potential risk of a client internalizing those homonegative views. Therapists may help guide LGBTQ clients for whom religion remains important toward more affirming congregations.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our results are necessarily limited by several characteristics of the sample and procedure. Our sample was comprised predominantly of Black women from a single midsouthern city; results, therefore, ought to be replicated with more diverse samples in various locations to better understand the role that social desirability or environmental context may have played in the trends observed. There are many ways in which the Southern United States may not be representative of other parts of the country or the world including having a strong cultural emphasis on worship and stronger social norms surrounding making social connections at worship. In particular, our study is limited by the possibility that participants selected congregations because of racial similarity rather than homonegativity, and this possibility should be explored in future research. The participants in the main analysis came from Christian congregations. Both the mega analysis and other research has examined these findings in the context of other religious traditions and has reported findings consistent with the main analysis. Nonetheless, additional research ought to be done with religiously diverse samples to examine the generalizability of our findings. Results only examined attitudes toward homosexuality and

did so among cisgender individuals. Although research regarding attitudes toward bisexuality has shown similar trends (Sumerau & Cragun, 2018), more research should be done to examine how well these results generalize to attitudes toward bisexuality. Extension of this work is also needed among transgender and genderqueer individuals, as they may have different experiences than cisgender individuals (Lefevor, Boyd-Rogers et al., 2019; Sumerau, Cragun, & Mathers, 2016). Finally, our results were cross-sectional and thus cannot speak directly to how homonegativity may be formed or maintained. Longitudinal research is needed to draw more definitive conclusions.

Conclusions

Despite these shortcomings, our sample represents the first random sample of congregants, leaders, and congregations to assess homonegativity. Results of analyses using a sample of 239 congregants from 14 places of worship—and a larger mega analysis of 577 congregants from 34 places of worship—revealed large relationships between congregational religiousness variables and homonegativity. These findings indicated that congregations varied reliably in their homonegativity and that individuals' homonegativity appeared to be unchanged by their participation with a homonegative congregation. We suggest that homonegativity may serve a signaling function for congregations, enabling congregants to affiliate with a congregation with attitudes toward same-sex sexuality similar to their own. As religious leaders, researchers, and social justice advocates alike move forward with a stronger understanding of the congregational structure of homonegativity, we hope that efforts to improve health and well-being of LGBTQ individuals will be more likely to succeed.

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Table 1. Zero-order correlations between homonegativity, religiousness, and affirmativeness.

	M	*SD*	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. L1 ATLG	2.22	1.12	1 – 5											
2. L1 Service Attendance	5.30	0.89	1 – 6	-.05										
3. L1 Scripture Reading	4.29	1.39	1 – 6	.05	.30									
4. L1 Intrinsic Religiousness	4.51	0.74	1 – 5	.04	.28	.36								
5. L1 Years Attending	23.61	20.53	0 – 85	.01	.18	.05	.26							
6. L2 ATLG	2.22	1.12	1 – 5											
7. L2 Service Attendance	5.30	0.89	1 – 6						.49					
8. L2 Scripture Reading	4.29	1.39	1 – 6						.49	.64				
9. L2 Intrinsic Religiousness	4.51	0.74	1 – 5						.58	.61	.79			
10. L2 Years Attending	23.61	20.53	0 – 85						.47	-.04	.13	.23		
11. Affirmativeness	0.58	0.27	0 – 1						-.08	-.27	-.27	-.28	.12	
12. LGBT Congregants	2.18	3.14	0 – 10						-.66	-.25	-.25	-.28	-.30	.28

Note: means and standard deviations for level 2 variables are calculated as unweighted averages using level 2 units (n = 14); ATLG = Attitudes toward Lesbian Women and Gay Men; L1 = level 1; L2 = level 2; Cut off: $p < .001$ ($r > .21$), $p < .01$ ($r > .16$), $p < .05$ ($r > .12$)

Table 2. Multilevel models examining the effects of religiousness and affirmativeness on congregant homonegativity

	Model$_0$ Unstd. (*SE*)	**Model$_1$** Unstd. (*SE*)	**Model$_2$** Unstd. (*SE*)	**Model$_3$** Unstd. (*SE*)	**Model$_{Final}$** Unstd. (*SE*)	**Model$_{Final}$** Stand.
Fixed Part						
Intercept	2.12** (0.19)	2.06** (0.19)	2.21** (0.07)	2.17** (0.08)	2.21** (0.08)	
L1 Service Attendance		0.03 (0.09)				
L1 Scripture Reading		0.06 (0.05)				
L1 Intrinsic Religiousness		0.07 (0.10)				
L1 Years Attending		< .01 (< .01)				
L2 Service Attendance			1.36** (0.23)	1.23** (0.26)	1.28** (0.25)	.35
L2 Years Attending			0.02* (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	.21
Affirmativeness			0.29 (0.29)			
LGBT Congregants			-.11** (0.03)	-.10** (0.03)	-.10** (0.03)	-.28
Attendance x Affirmativeness				0.06 (0.12)		
Attendance x LGBT Congregants				0.02 (0.03)		
Years x Affirmativeness				< .01 (0.01)		
Years x LGBT Congregants				< .01 (< .01)		
Random Part						
σ^2	.80	.66	.73	.72	.73	
τ_{00}	.43	.42	.02	.03	.03	
R^2_{Total}		.12	.39	.39	.39	
Model Fit						
AIC	619.51	577.48	541.06	540.56	539.79	
BIC	629.74	601.21	564.39	573.79	559.78	

Note. Unstd. = Unstandardized coefficients; Stand. = Standardized coefficients; L1 = level 1 variable; L2 = level 2 variable; σ^2 = Level 1 variance; τ_{00} = Level 2 variance; R^2_{Total} = Amount of total variance accounted for in attitudes toward gay men and lesbian women by the model.* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$