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Protestant Framing of Homosexuality**

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ABSTRACT

Using the lenses of subcultural identity theory and causal stories, this study examines how mainline, evangelical, and black Protestant denominations discuss same-sex relationships on their websites. Results indicate that mainline denominations call for more dialogue about homosexuality and recognize varying committed relationships. In contrast, evangelical and, to some degree, black Protestant denominations condemn homosexuality, link same-sex relationships to societal ills, and emphasize the biblical sanctity of marriage. Our findings suggest that the ways in which denominations discuss same-sex relationships are related to internal consensus about issues and to denominations' positions within the competitive market of religious organizations. The results shed light on how denominations frame and maintain their cultural stances regarding same-sex relationships.

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Debate about same-sex relationships occupies a large part of the current public discourse on sexuality, and scholars and the general public alike acknowledge that religion has considerable influence on this discussion. A substantial body of work has investigated the conflict surrounding homosexuality within mainline Protestant denominations (Cadge, Day, and Wildeman 2007; Koch and Curry 2000; Olson and Cadge 2002; Wood and Block 1995), and at least one study has examined the extent to which mainline and evangelical Protestants agree that homosexuality is a choice (Whitehead 2010). However, no study has focused systematically on how Protestant denominations frame same-sex relationships on their websites. Exploring these framings is important because research shows that national denominations' materials on sexuality, particularly homosexuality, influence how local congregations address such issues (Cadge, Olson, and Wildeman 2008). Homosexuality can be a divisive issue for some organizations, as the recent movements to split the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Episcopal Church show (Duin 2009). Clergy or the parent denominational offices might hesitate to talk about homosexuality for fear of dividing their congregations (Cadge 2002; Olson and Cadge 2002) and driving people away when memberships are already in decline (Djupe and Gilbert 2003). We do not know how these various levels of internal conflict are reflected in denominations' presentations on their websites of their views about homosexuality.

This study, which is more interested in framing than in statistics, addresses gaps in the literature by investigating how mainline, evangelical, and black Protestant denominations discuss same-sex relationships on their websites. Because religious associations make choices about what information and positions they provide on their websites, how to present them, and what to exclude from presentation, websites are useful for examining religious discourse and for gauging how groups distinguish themselves from other organizations (Bainbridge 2007; Sturgill 2004). For example, the website for the United Church of Christ proclaims: "Whoever you are, where ever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!" (United Church of Christ, 2007). The website informs readers that investigating human sexuality is important and that the United Church of Christ supports the civil rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people. Given that denominational websites constitute an important part of the face that organizations present to the public, an examination of denominational websites can yield useful information about how religious groups frame issues.

This project contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, most existing scholarship on religion and sexuality focuses on individual views, clergy views, and the work of particular congregations. This project provides an additional level of analysis by examining how national denominations frame same-sex relationships. Second, much of the existing research focuses on the views of mainline Protestant groups, excluding evangelical and black Protestant

denominations. This makes sense because mainline denominations are more likely than evangelical or African-American religious groups to report that homosexuality is of concern to their congregations (Ammerman 2005). Third, to a great extent, the current scholarship has examined only groups that are experiencing internal conflict related to issues of sexuality. Examining how these denominations frame issues related to homosexuality on their websites can offer some insight into how religious groups attempt to accommodate disagreement within their organizations. Furthermore, by including both evangelical and black Protestants, we contribute to the literature by comparing how sexuality is discussed among groups that experience internal conflict and among those for whom same-sex relationships are less divisive. By doing so, we learn something about how the presentation strategies of religious groups may be related to the degree of internal conflict the groups experience. Therefore we use the theoretical lens of subcultural identity theory to inform our investigation. By using the concept of causal stories to guide our analysis, we can also learn more about how sexuality poses different threats for these institutions. Qualitative analysis on this issue is useful in fostering quantitative research on religion and same-sex relationships.

SUBCULTURAL IDENTITY THEORY

The subcultural identity theory of religion (Christian Smith et al. 1998) is a useful theoretical tool for explaining why and how various Protestant denominations are likely to frame the issue of same-sex relationships differently. This theory posits that evangelicalism offers a sense of identity and meaning by providing a unique set of norms and moral values. Evangelicals also emphasize how they are distinct from other groups. Distinction can be a precursor to conflict between groups, a strategy that is particularly useful for strengthening within-group identity and commitment. As Christian Smith and colleagues (1998: 114) argue, “There is nothing quite like an outside threat or energy to bring people together, make them set aside their internal differences, and increase their dedication and loyalty to the group.” Other scholars have also asserted that the theology of white conservative Protestant denominations creates barriers to outside groups and emphasizes social ties within the church body (Altemeyer 2003; Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1992; Emerson and Smith 2000; Emerson, Smith, and Sikkink 1999). For this reason, evangelical groups are more likely to take a firm stance on same-sex relationships. Homosexuality is of particular concern to evangelical groups, since openness to same-sex relationships is viewed as disruptive to the moral order (Burgess 1999; Cadge 2002). Research shows that evangelicals are less likely than mainline Protestants to support same-sex marriage even when taking into account whether homosexuality is considered a choice (Whitehead 2010).

While evangelicals seem to be united in their rejection of same-sex relationships, mainline Protestants have debated homosexuality since the 1970s. Groups such as liberal Quakers and the Metropolitan Community Church have explicitly affirmed the civil rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people (Perry and Swicegood 1990; Warner 1995). Other mainline Protestant denominations have not established clear positions on same-sex relationships (Cadge 2002; Cadge and Wildeman 2008). Because homosexuality is often a divisive issue, clergy or the parent denominational offices might hesitate to talk about it for fear of dividing their congregations (Cadge 2002; Olson and Cadge 2002) and driving away current or potential members (Djupe and Gilbert 2003). While evangelicals highlight divisions between themselves and those they construct as out-groups, mainliners might be more concerned about the possibility of divisions within their own group. Although mainline Protestant denominations tend to recognize same-sex relationships more than evangelicals do, the discrepancy between the opinions of mainline Protestant clergy and laity on homosexuality presents challenges to mainline denominations.

Previous literature does not make clear how black Protestants address sexuality on their denominational websites. While black Protestants share evangelicals' concern with issues of personal morality, they also share mainline Protestants' values of social justice (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Reichley 1985). Because sexuality is morally charged, black Protestants could be similar to evangelicals in addressing homosexuality on their websites. On the other hand, African-American families are in general more fluid than families in mainstream culture, and out-of-wedlock births are less stigmatized than they are in the white community (Pagnini and Morgan 1996), so this group might consider issues other than sexuality to be more important. According to this reasoning, there might be less of a need to address sexuality among black Protestant denominations and therefore less discussion of it on their websites than on those of evangelical or mainline denominations because other issues, such as poverty and racism, might be seen as more pressing problems. Nonetheless, it is important to examine how national African-American denominations present their positions on homosexuality because research shows that religious affiliation is significantly related to African-Americans' views on homosexuality. Indeed, Sherkat, de Vries, and Creek (2010) demonstrate that differences in religious affiliation explain half of the variation in African-Americans' and whites' support for same-sex marriages. The high rates of attendance at religious services among African-Americans explain the rest. Sherkat, de Vries, and Creek (2010: 94) note that because of the crucial role of churches in African-American communities, "a change in public opinion will require some religious institutional support—as we have seen in mainline liberal Protestant denominations." Given the importance of religion in African-American communities in general, and in shaping opinions on same-sex

relationships in particular, an examination of how African-American churches present their views of same-sex relationships addresses a gap the literature.

LANGUAGE AND CAUSAL STORIES

Examining the language that denominations use to frame sexuality-related issues can help scholars to understand how denominational subcultures are maintained. Language is a tool that religious groups use to construct and communicate their identity and to distinguish themselves from others. Along with analyzing how groups use language on their websites to differentiate themselves from other organizations, investigation of denominational websites can provide insight into the causal stories that denominations employ to convey and justify their positions regarding sexuality. Religious institutions are stakeholders in the arena of sex, yet their influence on individual church members is not direct. While clergy must work within the structural constraints of their denominations, they must also be responsive to their particular religious marketplace as well as to the needs and culture of the local population (Ellingson, Van Haitma, et al. 2004). Causal stories may provide tools that clergy can use to negotiate between denominational constraints and the needs of the congregation. Causal stories are interpretive tools that can be used to make sense of problematic behaviors and identify solutions to these problems (Stone 1989). An example of a causal story is provided by the Assemblies of God website in its assertion that high rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock childbirth, sexually transmitted diseases, and abortion demonstrate that “sexual expression outside of God’s plan is a tragic mistake” (Assemblies of God 2007). This causal story justifies abstinence as a way to counter the social ills that are attributed to sexual permissiveness. Clergy may draw from these causal stories as they convey denominational positions to their congregations.

Internet-based data constitute an emerging area of analysis for researchers who are interested in religion (Bainbridge 2007). As public avenues by which religious groups convey their theology and position on social issues, denominational websites are an important resource. Research shows that the materials produced by national denominations on issues related to sexuality, such as same-sex relationships, influence how local congregations address an issue (Cadge, Olson, and Wildeman 2008). We know about individual differences in attitudes about sex among people affiliated with mainline Protestant and evangelical denominations, and other studies have explored conflict about homosexuality within mainline Protestant denominations (Cadge, Day, and Wildeman 2007; Koch and Curry 2000; Olson and Cadge 2002; Wood and Bloch 1995). There is some evidence to suggest that religious affiliation and practice are strongly associated with African-American views of same-sex marriage (Sherkat, de Vries, and Creek 2010). Yet no study has systematically examined how Protestant denominations

in general, and African-American churches in particular, present their views about homosexuality.¹ An examination of how different Protestant groups present their views about same-sex relationships on the denominations' websites will shed light on how religious organizations share their perspectives on social issues in the context of varying levels of interdenominational conflict surrounding those areas.

METHODS

Sample

This study includes twelve denominations that were selected to maximize diversity across four categories of the Protestant faith on the basis of theology: liberal-mainline, moderate-mainline, evangelical, and black Protestants. The three largest denominations from each category, based on membership data from the Association of Religion Data Archives (2007), were chosen for this study.

Protestants are classified theologically in part on the basis of the extent to which they believe in biblical inerrancy, openness to scientific discovery, and acceptance of secular authorities. Liberal-mainline Protestants do not interpret the Bible literally or emphasize personal salvation to the same degree that evangelical Protestants do. Rather, liberal-mainline Protestants emphasize compassion for others (Hoge 1979; Roof and McKinney 1987; Tom Smith 1990; Steensland et al. 2000). The liberal-mainline Protestants in this study are the Episcopalians, the Presbyterians, and the United Church of Christ. Moderate-mainline Protestants share liberals' acceptance of scientific understanding and involvement in social action, and they generally do not believe that every word of the Bible is the true word of God. However, the groups differ in some respects with regard to personal morality (Roof and McKinney 1987; Tom Smith 1990). The moderate-mainline Protestant denominations in this study are the Evangelical Lutherans, the United Methodists, and the American Baptists. Although we distinguish between liberal-mainline and moderate-mainline Protestants for purposes of sampling and data analysis, we combine these groups in discussing the results because the findings for liberal-mainline and moderate-mainline Protestants were very similar.

Evangelical Protestants include fundamentalist, Pentecostal, charismatic, and evangelical congregations (Woodberry and Smith 1998). They interpret the text of the Bible as the complete and absolute word of God. Personal morality and salvation are central concerns of evangelical denominations, along with traditional attitudes regarding sexuality. The evangelical Protestant denominations in this study are the Southern Baptist Convention, the Seventh-Day Adventists, and the Assemblies of God.

¹ But see Wellman (1999) for an analysis of mainline and evangelical Protestants' views about ordaining homosexuals.

Black Protestants straddle the divide between evangelical and mainline Protestant denominations. Like evangelicals, black Protestants are concerned with personal morality, but they also share mainline Protestants' values of social justice and equality (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Reichley 1985). The black Protestant denominations in this study are the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Church of God in Christ, and the National Baptist Convention. Our classification of Protestants closely resembles the categorization scheme used by Steensland and colleagues (2000).

Data

The data for this project were taken from the official websites of the twelve religious groups listed above. Each organization's website was examined on or around October 15, 2007, for its positions on homosexuality. Any reference to homosexuality, same-sex relationships, or the like was recorded and analyzed. Each group's messages were analyzed and compared to the messages of the other groups.

Only data that were found on a religious group's own website were included in the analysis. Websites that were not part of the denominations were excluded because the organization might or might not have contributed to designing denominational website materials. For example, if Planned Parenthood was linked from the United Church of Christ's website, data from Planned Parenthood would not be included in the analysis. Our goal was to examine the statements of religious groups rather than the positions of other organizations to which the denominations are linked. Relevant data from the denominations' websites were combined into Microsoft Word documents for coding purposes.

Coding

An initial reading of data is the first step in a thematic analysis (Shank 2006). Data from denominations' websites were read to determine a possible coding scheme. The codes that resulted from this reading served as initial codes but were added to, modified, or deleted to represent the data accurately (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Each of the three authors reviewed the coding scheme for consistency. Data were then placed into code categories, which helped to identify general patterns and themes within the data. Predominant and reoccurring themes resulting from this process constitute the results and are the basis from which conclusions were drawn.

RESULTS

In this section, we present the predominant themes found on the groups' websites regarding homosexuality. As we noted in the section on methods, because the results of liberal and moderate mainline Protestants were very similar, we have chosen to combine these groups for the purposes of discussing the results. Furthermore, it is worth noting that in contrast to what is found on the websites of mainline and evangelical denominations, discussions of any issue related to sexuality, including same-sex relationships, rarely appeared on black Protestant denominations' websites. Two of the black Protestant denominations, the African Methodist Episcopalians and the National Baptist Convention, had absolutely no content related to same-sex relationships on their websites (African Methodist Episcopal Church, 2007; National Baptist Convention 2007). All the mainline and evangelical denominations but only one of the black Protestant groups discussed homosexuality to some extent.

Our findings indicate that Protestant denominations present differing perspectives on homosexuality via their websites, a situation that corresponds to various levels of internal conflict surrounding the issue. Mainline Protestants claim to be open to learning more about homosexuality and discussing it. They also indicate that they accept individuals who are in same-sex couples while acknowledging the conflict between homosexual behavior and traditional church teachings. Finally, mainline groups state that they recognize that people may experience a variety of committed relationships and these relationships should consist of partners who respect and love each other.

In contrast, evangelicals and at least one black Protestant group generally condemn homosexuality. Evangelicals assert that sex outside of marriage generally and homosexuality specifically are indicative of disintegrating morality. They also focus on the authority of scripture when they cite marriage as "the holy design for sexual intimacy" (Assemblies of God 2007) in the face of increasing social acceptance of sex outside of marriage. Furthermore, evangelicals connect homosexuality to a variety of social problems, such as AIDS and family struggles.

Mainline Protestants

"We Want This Dialogue to Continue." The mainline churches express a need for more dialogue and a deeper understanding of sexuality. The concern that people lack full information about human sexuality contrasts sharply with evangelical groups' reliance on scripture to guide their understanding of sexuality. Mainline denominations, while neither fully condemning nor fully condoning alternative sexual behaviors, express the need to learn more about homosexuality and to continue discussing it. For example, the Presbyterian Church website states:

We want this dialogue to continue. Homosexuality presents a particular problem for the church. It seems to be contrary to the teaching of scripture. The church though should be aware of the partial nature of our knowledge of homosexuality (Presbyterian Church 2007).

Similarly, the United Methodist Church's website suggests that at this time, we lack full understanding of sexuality and argues that the scientific community can contribute to our knowledge. It states:

We also recognize our limited understanding of this complex gift and encourage the medical, theological, and social science disciplines to combine in a determined effort to understand human sexuality more completely (United Methodist Church 2007).

This sentiment is echoed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church's statement that people of all age ranges "need information and experience to understand and responsibility live out their sexual identity" (Evangelical Lutheran Church 2007).

The United Church of Christ offers the most accepting and liberal sentiments toward homosexuality of all the groups in our study. The United Church of Christ stretches beyond other groups that call for increased dialogue and advocates legislative action that acknowledges the legal rights of relationships other than traditional heterosexual marriage. On their website, the United Church of Christ urges states to "legislatively recognize that traditional marriage is not the only stable living unit which is entitled to legal protection in regards to socio-economic rights and responsibilities" (United Church of Christ 2007).

"Respect and Defend the Individual Integrity of All Persons." While engaged in continuous dialogue, mainline groups acknowledge alternative sexual relationships. They suggest that although the issue of homosexuality may be open to discussion and not everyone will approve of alternative relationships, the people who are in these relationships should be respected. For example, the American Baptists' website states that they "respect and defend the individual integrity of all persons within our denomination and their Christian commitment as we engage the issue of human sexuality" (American Baptist Church 2007).

Furthermore, mainline denominations warn that the church should approach the issue of same-sex relationships with caution and accept homosexuals into their congregations. For instance, the Presbyterian Church website states:

The church should be sensitive to the difficulty of rejecting a persons' sexual orientation without rejecting the person. . . . The church must turn from its fear

and hatred to move toward the homosexual community in love and to welcome homosexual inquirers to its congregations (Presbyterian Church 2007).

Again, the United Church of Christ (2007) offers a more progressive position on this issue. Beyond simply accepting homosexuals into their denominations, the United Church of Christ calls on its leaders to perform religious ceremonies celebrating nontraditional sexual relationships.

“Responsible, Committed, and Loving Forms of Expression.” Mainline denominations expressed concern for relationship quality regardless of the form of the relationship. These groups emphasize the importance of open communication, respect, and commitment. As the United Methodist Church notes,

within the context of our understanding of this gift of God, we recognize that God challenges us to find responsible, committed, and loving forms of expression. . . . We believe that sexual relations where one or both partners are exploitive, abuse, or promiscuous are beyond the parameters of acceptable Christian behavior and are ultimately destructive to individuals, families, and the social order (United Methodist Church 2007).

Similarly, the Evangelical Lutherans emphasize mutual respect and responsibility on their website while expressing concern about exploitation in relationships. Likewise, the United Church of Christ promotes the creation of programs to reduce exploitation in relationships and strives to increase awareness of how gender inequalities foster harmful relationships. As their website states, the United Church of Christ encourages people to develop and share

model programs that can help local churches minister to and educate their communities about the components of sexual violence, including rape, marital violence, child abuse, abusive medical practices and domination and submission images in the media of relationships between women and men portrayed as exclusive expressions of human interaction (United Church of Christ 2007).

Despite the acceptance of alternative sexualities and the desire to learn more about the issue by engaging in open discussion, it appears that mainline denominations are not comfortable straying completely from traditional religious teachings that assert that marriage is the ideal relationship form. The website of the Episcopal Church says: “We affirm the imperative to promote conversation between persons of differing experiences and perspectives, while acknowledging the Church’s teaching on the sanctity of marriage” (Episcopal Church 2007).

Evangelical Protestants and Black Protestants

In contrast to mainline denominations' messages of open discussion, acceptance of people, and the importance of meaningful relationships, the websites of evangelical groups and at least one black Protestant denomination emphasize disintegrating morality. Evangelical Protestants also emphasize the authority of scripture regarding the sanctity of marriage and the link between sexual sin and social ills.

Note that two black Protestant groups—the African Methodist Episcopalians and the National Baptist Convention—had no content regarding same-sex relationships on their denominational websites. Anecdotal evidence from this study suggests that black Protestant denominations' websites did not address particular social issues. Instead, they focused more on fund-raising, specific ministries, and church organization and business concerns, such as upcoming meetings. Additional research examining the general use of the Internet by black churches and how these churches may or may not utilize the Internet to discuss other social issues is needed to substantiate this claim.

“Erosion of Moral Sanity.” Evangelical churches express concern about society's increasing acceptance of sexual expression outside of marriage. Not only do evangelical churches believe that secular society is abandoning its traditional stance on the issue, but they also believe that Christianity is becoming too accepting of same-sex relationships. Evangelicals suggest that society's moral relativism with regard to homosexuality is a serious threat to the sanctity of the family. For example, the Assemblies of God argues that the cultural acceptance of homosexuality threatens both the institution of the family and society at large. The denomination's website says:

We believe, in the light of biblical revelation, that the growing cultural acceptance of homosexual identity and behavior, male and female, is symptomatic of a broader spiritual disorder that threatens the family, the government, and the church (Assemblies of God 2007).

Similarly, the Southern Baptist Convention argues that moral relativism permeates both U.S. culture and religious communities. Its website states:

Scripture condemns any abuse of sexuality, including premarital sex, adultery, rape, incest, pornography, promiscuity, prostitution, and homosexuality. These authoritative biblical guidelines are now under persistent and concerted attack by a culture of moral relativism, even within the religious community (Southern Baptist Convention 2007).

The Assemblies of God also expresses alarm that secular ideals are infiltrating religious institutions. The Southern Baptist Convention further asserts that homosexuals are accepted, and sometimes praised, by secular society. Their website states: “The erosion of moral sanity continues to be a major problem of modern society. Homosexuals are justified and even glorified in our secular media” (Southern Baptist Convention 2007).

Black Protestant denominations closely resemble evangelical ones in discussions of homosexuality. The Church of God in Christ opposes same-sex unions because it believes that such unions violate traditional standards for relationships:

We declare our opposition to any deviation from traditional marriages of male and female. Notwithstanding the rulings of the court systems of the land in support of same-sex unions; we resolve that the Church of God in Christ stand resolutely firm and never allow the sanctioning of same-sex marriages by its clergy nor recognize the legitimacy of such unions (Church of God in Christ 2007).

While seemingly being uncompromising toward homosexuality, the Church of God in Christ highlights its willingness to forgive heterosexual deviance under specific conditions: It allows people who engage in improper sexual behavior to continue practicing within the church after they take appropriate steps to seek forgiveness and prevent the behavior from reoccurring.

Marriage as the “Holy Design for Sexual Intimacy.” In addition to being concerned about the eroding of morality, evangelical groups argue that the Bible decrees absolute boundaries for marriage. They cite scripture as the authority for establishing these standards, and they condemn sexual acts outside of heterosexual marriage as impure. Instead of desiring more dialogue about homosexuality, evangelicals defer to scripture. The Southern Baptist Convention website asserts: “The Bible is very clear in its teaching that homosexuality is a manifestation of a depraved nature” (Southern Baptist Convention 2007). Similarly, the Seventh-Day Adventist website states: “Sexual acts outside the circle of a heterosexual marriage are forbidden” (Seventh-Day Adventist 2007).

According to evangelical denominations, sexual intimacy should occur only within marriage because biblical texts are clear on this issue. The Assemblies of God website states: “we must also set an example of God’s intended holy design for sexual intimacy—that it be reserved only for our lifelong spouse, and that it always follow marriage” (Assemblies of God 2007).

Evangelicals’ deep faith in the authority of scripture may lead them to be wary of open communication on issues that run contrary to biblical text. In fact, the Assemblies of God website warns against the danger of using personal reasoning and experience instead of relying on scripture.

“Sinfulness Has Brought Such Devastation and Decay to Our World.” Evangelical groups claim that a myriad of social problems in the United States are linked to homosexuality. A few groups in our study believe that family decline is connected to sexual deviance. They assert that sexual purity is needed for maintaining a peaceful world. For example, the Assemblies of God website states:

Each day the broken hearts of abandoned spouses, the children born out of wedlock, the families torn by divorce, the emotionally scarred children, the injuries to extended family, the scores of people dying from sexually-transmitted diseases, and the thousands of aborted babies who are denied life, all cry out to us that sexual expression outside of God’s plan is a tragic mistake. Perhaps no other area of sinfulness has brought such devastation and decay to our world (Assemblies of God 2007).

In addition to the erosion of the traditional family, AIDS is a more specific concern that some groups link to homosexuality. For instance, the Southern Baptist Convention website notes:

This deviant behavior (homosexuality) has wrought havoc in the lives of millions. . . . Homosexual activity is the primary cause of the introduction and spread of AIDS in the United States which has not only affected those of the homosexual community, but also many innocent victims (Southern Baptist Convention 2007).

In sum, the websites of evangelical groups and of one black Protestant denomination emphasize how same-sex relationships reflect a lack of moral order and are tied to a variety of social problems. Websites of evangelical denominations and of the Church of God in Christ also focus on upholding the sanctity of marriage. Interestingly, these are also the Protestant groups that tend to experience less conflict in regard to issues of same-sex relationships (Ammerman 2005). By contrast, websites of mainline denominations emphasize accepting all people regardless of sexual practice, open dialogue about same-sex relationships, and a focus on fostering healthy relationships rather than promoting the institution of marriage. It is noteworthy that same-sex relationships have been a highly contentious issue for mainline Protestant groups.

DISCUSSION

Although there is a large body of research examining links between religious affiliation and attitudes toward sexuality, Gay, Ellison, and Powers (1996) note that further inquiry is needed to clarify how denominational subcultures are

created and sustained. Using a thematic analysis, this study examined how the largest mainline, evangelical, and black Protestant denominations in the United States frame homosexuality via their websites.

Text, such as that on a group's website, is the group's deliberate and conscious presentation of itself and its positions. Our results show that to different degrees, with the exception of two black Protestant groups, all the Protestant organizations included in this study discuss homosexuality on their websites. Ellingson asserts that institutions are likely to address sexuality only "when it threatens to disrupt the institutional order or when clients bring sexual concerns to institutional actors" (2004: 286). Our analysis of denominational websites suggests that homosexuality threatens these groups to various degrees. Using the concept of causal stories to guide our analysis, we can learn more about how sexuality poses threats to these institutions.

For mainline groups, the causal story that emerges from our thematic analysis is that the problems related to sexuality include limited understanding, lack of respect afforded to people because of their sexual orientation, and exploitation in sexual relationships. In response, mainline groups advocate having open dialogue about sexuality, defending the integrity of all individuals, and fostering healthy relationships. The mainline groups support a communicative ethic that asserts that sexual morality is based on consensual, mutual, and caring sexual relationships (Seidman 1999). Such an emphasis on dialogue rather than definitive mandates regarding homosexuality allows denominations to minimize controversy, as echoed by an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America minister who asserts that "church is a place where we do have diverse opinion, our unity is not our uniformity" (Cadge, Day, and Wildeman 2007: 255). Despite this sentiment, both the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Episcopal Church are experiencing pressures to split after their national bodies voted to ordain gay clergy (Duin 2009).

Our finding that mainline denominations emphasize continual dialogue is consistent with previous research indicating that mainline Protestants address issues of sexuality by calling for inclusivity (Burgess 1999; Cadge 2002). Specifically, Cadge and Wildeman (2008) found that when working with their congregations on the issue of same-sex relationships, mainline clergy attempt to facilitate conversations about this issue. Because homosexuality can be one of the most divisive issues in religious groups, clergy or the parent denominational offices might hesitate to talk about it (Cadge 2002; Olson and Cadge 2002). Mainline churches do not want to risk alienating people at a time of declining memberships (Djupe and Gilbert 2003). Consequently, mainliners might be more concerned about the threat of divisions within their own group as they strive to compete in the religious marketplace. Framing homosexuality as an area in which there is little understanding and more need for discussion provides a useful

interpretive tool to clergy as they work with local congregations on an issue involving diverse opinions.

At least one previous study indicates that mainline Protestant congregations claim that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teachings (Cadge, Olson, and Wildeman 2008). Our research shows that mainline Protestant denominations, both liberal and moderate, rarely draw from scripture in presenting their views on their websites. Instead, the national mainline Protestant denominations suggest that a variety of parties, both religious and secular, such as the family, schools, and the church, should play a role in addressing homosexuality. These findings are consistent with other research indicating that mainline denominations are open to secular understandings arising from outside the church (Marsden 1991). With the exception of the United Church of Christ, mainline groups in this study did not express a firm position on either side of the debate about homosexuality—a situation that reflects the internal conflict many mainline denominations are experiencing regarding homosexuality and allows for continued dialogue.

In contrast to mainline groups, evangelical Protestant denominations' websites emphasize the importance of religion in sexuality-related issues. The causal story that emerges from our thematic analysis indicates that evangelical groups believe that sexual permissiveness and moral relativism are threatening because they contribute to the disintegration of the family and the church. Ellingson, Laumann, Paik, and May (2004) note that causal stories support particular culturally sanctioned norms for sexual expression. The evangelical denominations' causal story about sexual permissiveness reflects a moral logic that assumes that certain sexual acts are intrinsically bad and abnormal while reinforcing heterosexual marriage as the moral venue for sexual expression. In response to the threats posed by sexual permissiveness and moral relativism, evangelical denominations stress the authority of scripture and the need for sexual relationships to occur only within marriage. They are very clear in their condemnation of homosexuality, and they ground their position in theological teachings. This is consistent with subcultural identity theory's assertion that evangelicalism offers people a sense of identity and meaning by providing specific norms and emphasizing how evangelical groups are distinct from other groups (Christian Smith et al. 1998). Our findings regarding the threat from "sexual sin," moral relativity, and homosexuality illustrate how evangelical denominations distinguish themselves from other groups; this distinction helps to strengthen evangelical group identity and commitment. Additionally, Wellman (1999) asserts that homosexuals may serve as a particularly useful out-group for evangelicals because few negative consequences result from this strategy. By invoking the power of scripture when discussing issues related to sexuality, evangelical Protestants reinforce their Christian distinctiveness, in contrast to mainline Protestants, who frame their positions using more secular and less religiously distinctive arguments.

In comparison to mainline and evangelical denominations, black Protestants say very little about homosexuality on their websites. What scant attention these denominations give to homosexuality suggests that they generally oppose it. One possible reason why black Protestants have little to say about homosexuality is that they are reluctant to speak about sexuality because they do not want to confirm stereotypes held by whites (Douglas 1999; Ward 2005). Furthermore, the church is the oldest and most influential institution in the black community (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Ward 2005), and because of the profound impact of churches on the African-American community, church messages about sexuality greatly influence definitions of masculinity and femininity (Ward 2005).

Historically, the black community has had a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy toward homosexuality (Phillips 2005). As Keith Boykin, founder and former President of the National Black Justice Coalition, indicates, this policy serves a dual purpose, allowing “the church to remain simultaneously the most homophobic in the black community and the most homo-tolerant” (Boykin 2004: paragraph 10). Racial solidarity is possibly more important to homosexuals of color than is acceptance of their sexuality because of the racial and ethnic discrimination in the society at large as well as in the lesbian and gay communities (Herek and Capitanio 1995; Weston 1995). A person can often conceal sexual preference more easily than racial or ethnic identity (Ellingson and Schroeder 2004), so African-American homosexual congregants might not feel motivated to challenge the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. The limited discussion of homosexuality could also reflect the view that there are other, more pressing threats against the family. William Shaw, the President of the National Baptist Convention, indicates that although he does not favor same-sex marriage, “[m]arriage is threatened more by adultery, and we don’t have a constitutional ban on that. Alcohol is a threat to the stability of the family, and we don’t have a constitutional ban on that” (Banerjee 2005: paragraph 24).

Furthermore, like some mainline Protestant groups, black Protestant denominations might worry that addressing sexuality on their websites would alienate potential members or create divisiveness in their churches. Boykin (2004) asserts that particular churches might have difficulty surviving without the involvement of gay black men, and the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy allows these men to continue to play vital roles in their churches. Focusing on the African-American population and the issues that are most salient to this group, such as economic and social justice, fosters distinctiveness and in-group ties within the competitive market of religious organizations. Interestingly, while mainline Protestants respond to the potential of losing members by using welcoming language, black Protestants address this concern by giving little attention to sexuality and concentrating on other issues. Unlike evangelicals, who identify themselves by using theological tools to justify their moral position about sexuality, black Protestants

carve out a niche for themselves by focusing on issues that are more prominent in their community. Although issues of internal conflict and distinctiveness appear to apply to black Protestant denominations, they respond to these challenges differently from mainline and evangelical groups.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Christian Smith and colleagues (1998: 151) argue that the subcultural identity theory of religion requires us to “analyze the cultural content of religious discourse, subcultural narratives, and theological rationales.” To this end, we have examined how the largest mainline, evangelical, and black Protestant groups in the United States present their views of same-sex relationships on their websites. Unfortunately, our data do not allow us to analyze the consequences of these messages, such as how religious adherents or the general public interprets and reacts to them. We also cannot determine whether or how clergy deliver these messages to their congregations. Such issues should be addressed in future studies.

Furthermore, we show that evangelical and black Protestant groups talk about homosexuality much differently than mainline Protestants do. Mainline groups do not incorporate much religion into their discussions of these issues and tend to avoid addressing the subject of homosexuality directly. We do not doubt that these distinctions are partly based on the different theologies of these denominations. At the same time, they may also be related to the fact that mainline Protestant denominations experience much internal conflict around issues of sexuality, particularly homosexuality, while a greater degree of consensus exists within the evangelical and black Protestant communities (Ammerman 2005). It is possible that how denominations frame their discussions is partly related to the extent of internal consensus surrounding the issues. Future studies might wish to address less contentious issues within mainline Protestant communities, such as economic justice or the environment, to further examine how the degree of disagreement within communities may be related to how they discuss various issues.

Finally, our findings reveal that black Protestant denominations do not discuss sexuality much on their websites. This might be because they do not want to alienate current and potential members or because other issues, such as economic justice, are more pressing. We hope that future studies will continue to examine how religious groups use technology in their presentation of themselves. We also encourage scholars to further study differences between white and black Protestant denominations while keeping in mind their different histories and the unique roles of their churches.

In sum, we suggest that this study makes three contributions to the literature. First, in contrast to the focus in much of the existing literature on individual and clergy views or on particular congregations or denominations, we have investigated how same-sex relationships are framed on a national denominational level. Second, we extended existing literature on mainline groups' views of same-sex relationships by examining evangelical and black Protestant denominations in addition to mainline Protestant denominations. Third, through our analysis of evangelical, black, and mainline Protestant groups' websites, we investigated how sexuality is addressed by denominations that experience conflict regarding same-sex relationships compared to groups that do not experience such conflict. Because conflict and debate about sexuality, especially homosexuality, exist within mainline Protestant denominations, Cadge, Olson, and Wildeman (2008) ask whether these denominations can figure out how to disagree and live together. Our analysis may help to shed more specific light on how religious denominations' self-presentation strategies are related to the degree of disagreement within the group.

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