NIH Public Access

Author Manuscript

Sex Res Social Policy. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2010 March 1.

Published in final edited form as:

Sex Res Social Policy. 2009 September 1; 6(3): 44–60. doi:10.1525/srsp.2009.6.3.44.

Local Impacts of Religious Discourses on Rights to Express Same-Sex Sexual Desires in Peri-Urban Rio de Janeiro[1]

Jonathan García,
Department of Sociomedical Sciences, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, 722 West 168th Street, 5th floor (c/o Mayra Pabon), New York, NY 10032

Miguel Muñoz Laboy,
Department of Sociomedical Sciences, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, 722 West 168th Street, 5th floor, New York, NY 10032

Vagner de Almeida, and
Department of Sociomedical Sciences, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, 722 West 168th Street, 5th floor, New York, NY 10032

Richard Parker
Department of Sociomedical Sciences, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, 722 West 168th Street, 5th floor, New York, NY 10032

Jonathan García: jg2320@columbia.edu; Miguel Muñoz Laboy: mam172@columbia.edu; Vagner de Almeida: va2102@columbia.edu; Richard Parker: rgp11@columbia.edu

Abstract

This article reports on a study that examined how religious discourses of inclusion and exclusion —in Roman Catholic, evangelical Protestant, and Afro-Brazilian religious traditions—affected people's rights to express same-sex sexual desires, behaviors, and identities in the socioeconomically marginalized urban periphery of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Using extended ethnographic observation of institutions and religious events over a period of 2 years, the authors identified how sexual rights were constructed within religious discourses and conducted ethnographic interviews with 45 religious leaders. In the low-income and violent urban periphery of Rio de Janeiro, religious leaders and institutions play key roles in molding community inclusion and exclusion. A comparison of the 3 major religious denominations shows a diversity of discourses about same-sex sexual desires and their impacts on community formation.

Keywords

same-sex sexualities; sexual rights; Roman Catholic; Pentecostal; evangelical; Afro-Brazilian religion

---

Religion is a central force in the configuration of reality and the conception of ethical and moral principles. As belief systems and as social institutions, religious systems shape cultural meanings and community formation. These conceptions affect both individual rights, which are expressed through mechanisms of self-understanding and self-identification, and collective rights, which are experienced as an institutional force that

[1]Original citation: Garcia, J., Muñoz-Laboy, M., de Almeida, V., and Parker, R. Local impacts of religious discourses on rights to express same-sex sexual desires in periurban Rio de Janeiro. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy.* 6(3): 44–60. 2009

NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript

creates criteria for belonging. These characteristics have been identified throughout the history of the study of religion.

Max Weber's (1993) work was central to establishing the comparative study of religion using the tools and methods of the social sciences to focus on the beliefs, practices, and organizational forms of religion. This perspective has been articulated with particular clarity by anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz (1973), who has argued that religions can be understood as systems of symbols and meanings that create powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in their believers and that provide the conceptual foundation for people's meaningful social action based on their religious beliefs. Whereas Marx (1957) emphasized the role of religion in legitimizing social and economic inequalities, for example, Durkheim (2001) focused on the positive ways in which religious belief systems contributed to the construction of social solidarity, particularly through the *collective effervescence* (i.e., unified group energy) of ritual practice.

Given these general theories of religion as a social institution, how do diverse and sometimes contradictory discourses and institutional practices shape understandings of personal integrity and communal coalescence, and how do these understandings, in turn, affect a negotiation between the religious subject and the sexual subject? In discussing our results, we will unpack this dialectic through a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and examine how such a negotiated identity affects sexual rights.

The theoretical and empirical literature on same-sex sexualities and religion is limited. With our research, we seek to extend it by examining how local religious positions could affect the expression and embodiment of same-sex desires, practices, and identities. Most of the work on religion and same-sex sexualities focuses on homosexuality and Christian religions. Yip (1997), for example, has depicted the internal negotiation that occurs with an identity disconnect stemming from differences between how individuals and their community interpret religious teachings and how such individuals experience sexual desires and practices:

> Having internalized the conventional Christian sexual ethics that do not affirm homosexuality, gay Christians often experience a substantial amount of guilt and shame when they first became aware of their sexuality. Research evidence has suggested that, compared to their non-religious counterparts, gay Christians generally demonstrate a higher degree of anxiety about the exposure of their sexuality, a greater sense of alienation, as well as a lower degree of self-esteem (p. 113).[2]

The literature also has focused on how nonheterosexuals can integrate their religious and sexual identities (e.g., Wagner, Serafiii, Remien, & Williams, 1994). Gay churches, such as the Metropolitan Community Church, are considered to be spaces where individuals can resolve the complicated internal negotiation of identity by politicizing an alternative to hegemonic readings of religious teachings (Rodriguez & Oullette, 2000; Thumma, 1991; Yip, 1994). Our critique of current literatures is that researchers have focused much more on sexual identity than on desire, even when internal religio-sexual negotiations create personal and communal revolutions. Some gay-positive institutions in Rio de Janeiro claim to make contemporary the teachings of Jesus, but these are located in the center of the municipality of Rio de Janeiro and in places, such as Copacabana, where access is limited for low-income people. Although four churches fitting these alternative Christian categories were included in our study, we have limited their inclusion in our discussion because they are not located

[2]For other studies and theoretical discussions about negotiations between same-sex identities and Christianity, see Fletcher (1990); Gigl (1970); Gonsiorek (1988); Greenberg (1973); and Wagner, Serafiii, Remien, and Williams (1994).

in the low-income metropolitan periphery of Rio de Janeiro that comprises our region of interest.

Because much of the Christian discourse has been against homosexuals as a heuristic category, the literature offers little discussion of how religious beliefs affect other types of nonheterosexual identities and practices. Additionally, the link between poverty, violence, race, health, and gender has been mostly disassociated from both empirical and theoretical debates about religion and sexuality, again not considering contextualizing factors that may influence individuals' options to express desire or adhere to religious dogma. Hence, the literature has not focused on marginalized religious groups, such as those in our field site, that are more able to maintain counterhegemonic relationships between religiousness and sexuality. To provide a counterpoint to Christian debates on homosexuality, we compared the beliefs of the predominant groups of Catholics and Evangelicals in *peri-urban* (i.e., on the urban periphery) Rio de Janeiro with the discourses of Afro-Brazilian leaders in the region, because concepts of femininity and masculinity are fluid in religious belief systems (such as the Afro-Brazilian religions) in which men and women worship and embody both female and male energies (Matory, 2003; Omari-Tunkara, 2005). Hence, our research sought to look at the ways in which gender identity, especially as affected by religious beliefs, becomes an important factor in the expression of same-sex sexuality.

Our analysis examined how religious discourses of inclusion and exclusion—in Roman Catholic, evangelical Protestant, and Afro-Brazilian religious institutions—affect the conception of rights to express same-sex sexual desires, behaviors, and identities in the socioeconomically marginalized urban periphery of Rio de Janeiro. We compared discourses between and within these three religious categories and differentiated between acceptance or rejection based on desire, behavior, and identity. Throughout our analysis of religious leaders' narratives and official discourses, we have highlighted how the different organizational structure of the aforementioned religious traditions affects discourses related to same-sex sexualities. The ways in which power is distributed and organized, whether through hierarchical, community, or family-type bonds, can determine how religious discourses affect the expression and acceptance of sexual diversity at the local level.

Method

This ethnographic study of religious discourses on same-sex sexual rights is part of a 5-year research project on religious responses to HIV/AIDS in Brazil (Parker, 2005).[3] Ethnographic data used in the current analysis were also collected during a 2-year study on the responses of Afro-Brazilian groups to HIV and AIDS (García, 2007).[4] This analysis draws on two primary data collection methods: ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews with religious leaders in peri-urban Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

[3]This article is based on data collected from the research study titled Religious Responses to HIV/AIDS in Brazil, a project sponsored by the U.S. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (grant number 1 R01 HD050118; principal investigator, Richard G. Parker). This national study is being conducted in four sites, at the following institutions and by their respective coordinators: Rio de Janeiro (Associação Brasileira Interdisciplinar de AIDS/ABIA—Veriano Terto Jr.); São Paulo (Universidade de São Paulo/USP—Vera Paiva); Porto Alegre (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul/UFRGS—Fernando Seffner); and Recife (Universidade Federal de Pernambuco/UFPE—Luís Felipe Rios). Additional information about the project can be obtained via e-mail from religiao@abiaids.org.br or at http:www.abiaids.org.br, the Associação Brasileira Interdiciplinar de AIDS website.
[4]This article is also based on data collected from the research study titled Responses of Afro-Brazilian Religious Groups to HIV/AIDS in Rio de Janeiro, sponsored by the U.S. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (grant number 1 F31 HD055153-01; principal investigator, Jonathan García).

NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript

Target Site

The peripheries of the municipality of Rio de Janeiro, the Baixada Fluminense, offer an excellent opportunity for examining how religion affects the construction and expression of same-sex sexual rights. The religious landscape of Rio de Janeiro is one of the most diverse in the country. Brazilians remain predominantly Catholic, although the number of Catholics has decreased from 83% in 1991 to 74% in 2000 (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009). This decrease in people self-identified as Catholic was accompanied by a growth in Protestant churches and followers from 9% in 1991 to 15% in 2000 (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009). The growth in Pentecostal religious institutions, including the Assembly of God, the God is Love, and the Quadrangular churches, accounted for approximately three fourths of growth in evangelical Protestant religions (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009). Membership in Pentecostal religions has grown mostly in low-income regions (Pierucci & Prandi, 2000), especially within female populations, in part because these socioeconomically marginalized communities identify better with pastors who live in their neighborhoods under similar conditions than with Catholic priests, who usually have more education and higher social status (Chesnut, 1997, 2003).

The dramatic geography in Rio de Janeiro is characterized by a group of low-income peri-urban municipalities, as well as a municipal patchwork in which rich and poor live relatively close to each other, that unequivocally illustrate the socioeconomic inequities that define the Brazilian state. Although only 0.34% of Brazilians considered themselves as belonging to Afro-Brazilian religions in 2000 (a decrease from 0.40% in 1991), researchers have found that a large section of the Brazilian population has multiple allegiances to both Catholicism and such Afro-Brazilian sects as Umbanda or Candomblé (Pierucci & Prandi, 2000; Prandi, 2004). Furthermore, the composition of Afro-Brazilian religious groups is diverse, including many people whose race is considered White—although these groups have been a major source of mobilization regarding issues related to Blackness and constructions of African culture (Pierucci & Prandi; Prandi; Telles, 2004).

The metropolis of Rio de Janeiro is marked by the consequences of these socioeconomic inequities in the form of high crime rates and the development of a drug economy that has exacerbated community and police violence (Zaluar, 2001). Violence against men who have sex with men has been recently documented by Carrara and Vianna (2004, 2006) using data from police and judicial reports from the city of Rio de Janeiro's Department of Planning of the Civil Police (Assesoria de Planejamento da Policia Civil). As of 2006, this database included 105 homicides and 108 victims of nonlethal violence, all against men who have sex with men. Notably, 48% of the men killed were identified in the newspaper as gay, 23% as transgender, and 1% as heterosexual (although they were victims of hate crimes resulting from homosexual acts). More specifically related to youth, these data show that most homicides were against men between the ages of 18 and 29 (58%), although this age group represents only 20% of the city's population (Carrara & Vianna, 2006). Of those identified as gay, 75% were murdered at home, whereas 80% of those identified as transgender were murdered in the streets (Carrara & Vianna, 2006).

The sociocultural landscape of the Baixada Fluminense is historically marked by having conditions of extreme poverty and segregation due to urbanization—creating a group of *cidades dormitório* (cities where people sleep) from which people travel for hours each day to work in the center of Rio de Janeiro. This area can also be characterized as a region with an extremely high rate of violence, relative to other Brazilian cities and metropolises, with a mean of more than 70 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants per year (Toledo, 1999).

Furthermore, the Baixada Fluminense has a dearth of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that advocate for issues related to expressing same-sex sexualities and claiming

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

sexual rights. The organizations that do—exist through long-term ethnographic mapping we could identify only three—focus primarily on organizing gay pride parades rather than advocating for rights related, for example, to decreasing violence against and finding employment opportunities for transgender women and self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals. These organizations also tend to have a close relationship with political parties, influencing their sustainability, ideological positioning, and political discretion. Despite their political ties, these organizations appear to put very little pressure on the government to address violence against those who express same-sex desires and, especially, transgender identities.

Ethnographic Observations

We conducted extended ethnographic observation of institutions and religious events over a 2-year period for three major religious traditions in peri-urban Rio de Janeiro. The ethnographers visited temples, churches, and *terreiros* (Afro-Brazilian centers of worship), as well as religious services and community events led by religious organizations, and took extensive notes on the groups' dynamics, spoken and written languages, and noted persons' responses to materials distributed during field observations. Observations focused on themes related to (allusions to) individuals' rights and responsibilities, as well as institutional actions regarding issues of sexuality, health, and community well-being. Although these data are part of an ongoing study, the observations included in this analysis cover the period between October 2006 and March 2008.

Ethnographic Interviews

We conducted ethnographic interviews (which typically ranged from one to three 1-hour interviews per participant) with 45 religious leaders from Catholic, evangelical, and Afro-Brazilian religious institutions (15 from each religion). The religious leaders included pastors, priests, *mães* and *pais de santo* (female and male priests in the Afro-Brazilian sects Candomblé and Umbanda), as well as lay religious leaders—especially from the Catholic institutions, because Catholic priests often were reluctant to give interviews. Studyinformants were recruited through *convenience sampling,* an inductive process by which informants are chosen in order to illustrate a panorama of the field of study. Individuals in the institutions under investigation were usually indicated by key informants or by the existing literature on each of the religious traditions. The religious leaders in our sample showed insights into the political positions of their respective institutions and served as gatekeepers into the inner workings of particular organizations (Bernard, 2004).

Data Analysis

The narrative data were coded and analyzed using discourse analysis and grounded theory. Discourse analysis, by nature, is contextualized by social-economic, political, and cultural factors in order to generate concepts that correspond to the realities and narratives of study participants (Albinus, 1997). Interviews were analyzed along three major axes: (a) the social and cultural construction of HIV and AIDS through the eyes of religious leaders, of which understandings of sexuality are key components; (b) the organizational structure and internal organization of ecclesiastical power, which have an impact on how discourses are affected by the organization of power; and (c) the relations with local communities and the external world as they are affected by processes of bureaucratization and the differences between official discourses and local realities.

This article focuses primarily on how inclusion into or exclusion from religious communities can affect the expression of same-sex sexualities. Throughout our analysis, we speak of forms in which same-sex sexualities are embraced, accepted, or rejected in each of the religious traditions. More specifically, our analysis focused on *acolhimento*, a word used

NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript

by all informants to mean configurations of inclusion in various forms of embracement, care, and social support, as well as conversion and curing, silencing, and looking the other way. Using discourse analysis, we were able to contextualize the aforementioned three axes in a way that allowed for understanding the implied meanings of informants' narratives through other forms of evidence, such as archival research and ethnographic observation.

Results

Catholic Responses

Structures—In order to more comprehensively understand local actions by Catholics in peri-urban Rio de Janeiro, the top-down structure of the Catholic Church must be taken into account, to allow for contrast with negotiated on-the-ground positions regarding sexual diversity and desire. Brazil has the largest Catholic population in the world—74% of its population in the 2000 census, down from 83% in 1991 (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009). Of the three religious categories discussed in this article, the Catholic Church clearly has the most structured (bureaucratized) form of national, regional, and local organization. At the top, the National Conference of the Bishops of Brazil (Conferencia Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil; CNBB) articulates a clear official discourse, identifying nonheterosexual behavior as sinful and outside of church doctrines. Regarding same-sexual practices and desires, the official discourse of the CNBB is aligned with that of the Vatican. Thus, it is worth mentioning the Vatican's (2004) position as stipulated in chapter 2 of its *Catechisms of the Catholic Church,* which states in articles 2357–2359 on chastity and homosexuality that

> 2357: Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered. [see Cf. Gen 191–29; Rom 124–27; 1 Cor 6:10; 1 Tim 1:10]. They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.
>
> 2358: The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition.
>
> 2359: Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection.

Furthermore, this official discourse is also evident in seminaries as a form of socialization and indoctrination of future Catholic religious leaders, according to the guide for vocational determinants of who can become a priest of the Roman Catholic Church (Vatican, 2005). In this document, the Vatican differentiates between homosexual actions, tendencies, and deep-seated tendencies (*tendências radicadas*). Even though the Catholic Church considers homosexual tendencies as sins, "these people should not be excluded but treated delicately,

NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript

with respect" (Vatican, 2005: 2). Those who have deep-seated tendencies—that is, men who perceive homosexuality as permanent rather than as a phase, or who are activists for homosexual rights—are not accepted as priests. More generally, the Catholic Church defines "homosexual tendencies" as "an extension of late adolescence to be overcome" (Vatican, 2005: 2). The work of priests is to turn homosexuals away from such a lifestyle; in the seminary, some responsibility is placed on the spiritual mentor if he is unable to dissuade a seminarian from these tendencies. Thus, the Catholic Church has a strongly hierarchical official position that in some ways accepts the existence of same-sex sexual desires while it absolutely rejects same-sex behaviors based on those desires.

In the discourses of the Catholic priests and lay leaders in our sample, this negotiation between same-sex desires and behaviors is evidenced in different forms depending on diocese, some more radical than others. The social action of the CNBB in Brazil is divided into pastorals, such as the Pastoral for Youth, the Pastoral for Children, the Pastoral for Family, the Pastoral for AIDS, and the Pastoral for Marginalized Women. The Catholic Church also acts within civil society through movements, such as the Catholic Charismatic Renovation. Each of these pastorals, as well as the more broadly based movements, has regional and local governance allowing each diocese a certain level of autonomy to decide on issues related to opinions and actions regarding sexuality.

Discourses of lay pastoral leaders and priests—In this study, 4 out of 15 Catholic religious leaders commented that talking about HIV was easier than discussing same-sex sexuality. Informants said they know that sexuality is part of the daily lives of their members, but they are always alert to what they may speak about, particularly when they are being recorded in an interview setting.

Our interviews and ethnographic observations captured more of the ground-level response, which has been little documented, regarding how people in these local communities negotiate the daily realities of dealing with what the Catholic Church's massive structural doctrine dictates. The work of the aforementioned pastorals is carried out more strongly in the urban periphery of metropolitan Rio de Janeiro than in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro itself, and the people who do this grassroots work are volunteers, predominantly young people and women.

We found that most of the informants in our study supported sexual diversity in a highly discreet way—although we also noticed a difference of opinion between the coordinators of the pastorals and the people who did the grassroots work. As one pastoral leader explained, even to speak of homosexuality is "complicated in the Church because the Church has a posture of Pontius Pilate, who washed his hands." This informant explained that the Catholic Church will include (*acolher*) people who seem homosexual, but will not accept that lifestyle choice, especially openness about same-sex sexuality within the community. In this case, as well as in other instances in Christian religions, the term *acolhimento* is used in a discursive negotiation between dogma and reality, as well as between constructions of religious tradition and modernity—in other words, the term is sometimes used as a way to qualify inclusion while evading canonic clashes in the construction of tolerance. Even the most accepting of the informants, who claimed that homosexual desire is not a disease and that Jesus would accept gays with love, admitted that they are still working within a pastoral structure, within official principles—and, by virtue of this structure, they stated that "we cannot argue openly against" the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

Nevertheless, according to one informant, same-sex sexuality at times has appeared in open discourse. The informant gave the example of a young man who had been very active in church activities but turned away from the Catholic Church when he came out as

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

homosexual—not because the priest or the congregation forced him to, but because he felt himself to be a sinner who would be a hypocrite by continuing his link with the church. In this case, the priest approached the young man and told him that he could continue his church activities, that God loves everyone; furthermore, the priest did not try to persuade the young man to cure his homosexuality. The priest also stated that the Catholic Church has always taken care of the marginalized and that this approach is no different in the case of homosexuals. Because this anecdote recounts a confidential conversation, these actions cannot be considered official practice; rather, the story provides an example of how priests and church members have autonomy and agency regarding same-sex desires and identities. We will explore this elbowroom for local-level discretion further in the Discussion section of this article, especially because a number of sociological studies (e.g., Ribeiro, 1992; Ribeiro & Lucan, 1997) have made the same types of observations about how official discourses affect sexual and reproductive health in local dioceses.

Some of the silences, lacunae, and contradictions in the narratives of pastoral coordinators were resolved through our ethnographic participation in activities of the Pastoral for Youth, particularly in two capacity building and consciousness-raising events—one for religious leaders and community members, the other for youth leadership. When working with youth, discourse on sexuality begins with an explanation of personal hygiene and affectivity as integral to sexual pleasure (*prazer sexual*). The emic word *hygiene* is used to speak of ways in which sex can be cleaner and safer—especially considering how poverty affects the body in *communities of misery,* where sexuality is often experienced in *funk parties.*[5] Speaking of sex in terms of hygiene, the priest leading the workshop explained that God made people "to feel pleasure throughout the body, to see that body, also, as a temple of the spirit, as it is written in the Bible." The priest then linked the other emic conceptualization, affectivity, first to diversity in sexual forms, then to sexual diversity.

We noted that the experience of sexuality was very much linked to gender in the discourse of the most progressive informants. That is, as one informant put it, homo-affectivity can be addressed by addressing machismo. The most audacious of the ground-level responses within our study Catholic doctrine occurred in a workshop that actually included a homo-affective dynamic. In this workshop, young men and women were divided into two groups according to gender. Then, during a discussion about affection, each person was asked to kiss the cheek of the person next to her or him. Of the 10 men, only 2 completed the activity —an outcome that was later explained and critiqued as a form of machismo. Undeniably, such machismo is directly linked to homo-affectivity and stigma related to same-sex desires and practices.

The director of this workshop, a lay religious leader, suggested that sexuality includes not just the relationship between man and woman, not only genitalia in the sexual act, but can be more broadly expressed as intersubjective affection in the various permutations of gender relations. The amplitude of affection, the workshop director said, can include "a look, a touch, a sentiment, companionship, and even friendship is included in this category…and in these dynamics we work the body, in the sense that we experience touch through caress, care through contact, through sound, sight." In this sense, the director continued, "sexuality begins at birth," through affection and through the cultural attributions given to gender roles.

[5]These parties are communal spaces where many adolescents gain sexual freedom to practice desire. Funk parties are dangerous due to violence that usually results from conflicts related to drug trafficking. Because the urban periphery of Rio de Janeiro is a conjunction of *cidades dormitories* (cities where people sleep, as opposed to where they work or partake in leisure), funk parties are one of the few places where young people can come together to dance and partake in communal enjoyment (see Dayrell, 2002; Hershmann, 1997; Taquette, Ruzany, Meirelles, & Ricardo, 2003). These spaces were criticized by several informants in our study because of the risks related to violence and HIV infection, not to mention the lack of prudent sexual behaviors.

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

In addition, the following field notes (Jonathan Garcia, 2007), taken during another pastoral workshop, reveal several arguments defending (rather than just advocating tolerance for) sexual diversity as a form that creates spaces for the autonomy and the health of youth as sexual subjects:

> The presentation about health and prevention of HIV (titled *saúde e prevenção*) was entirely about homosexuality…it framed the issue as homo-affectivity, which I thought was a creative approach…it did not compromise the position of the pastoral, considering that to get approval for such a workshop under the title would have been placed under higher scrutiny. I noted several points from the presentation as axes for thinking…about local and global discourses on violence, discrimination, and even the positive view of homosexuality, using both language that reaches youth and also quoting UNESCO and the United Nations. The main focus was on discrimination against youth in schools, ways in which teachers allow and even condone discrimination based on nonheterosexual expression or identity, and how views of colleagues contribute to low self-esteem, dropping out of school (failing of classes), irresponsible fatherhood, violence, among others. The presentation acknowledged the negative medicalization of homosexuality, how it affects the young person's psychological development as an inherently damaged person. Teachers were said to ignore physical and verbal violence—thinking, turning a blind eye, denying that sexuality is a relevant problem for youth…. The most interesting slide stated "Without sexuality, there would be no curiosity. Without curiosity the human being would be unable to learn" [*Sem a sexualidade não haveria curiosidade. Sem curiosidade o ser humano não seria capaz de aprender*]. Acknowledging and learning about discrimination and diversity, and facilitating environments for equal opportunities for formal education in schools are presented as responsibilities…. The idea of homosexuality is interlinked with other rights and responsibilities. This discourse still left a question unanswered for me: What is the presenter's position on transgender sexualities and sex work, and how these can affect education and employment opportunities?

Again, the theme of homo-affectivity was framed in terms of broader issues, such as health, HIV prevention, sexually transmitted diseases, and education. The fact that the United Nations was mentioned in the presentation must be highlighted, because a major question in the development of sexual rights has included issues of how emic language used in local settings can conflict with notions created and fought for in international settings.

Last, it is worthwhile to compare the Pastoral for Youth with the Catholic Charismatic Renovation (CCR). As our results highlight, both Catholic and Pentecostal churches and community groups in Brazil have a number of programs for youth. The CCR movement focuses very much on youth, although the views of CCR leaders and its doctrinal following are very close to those stipulated by the Vatican (2004) and the CNBB. A leader from the Catholic Renovation movements told us,

> We do not work sexuality as isolated from the rest of the human experience as a child of God…who may have mutation, anguish…who have problems.…Problems from childhood can lead to repressed desires that can lead to symptoms such as homosexuality.

Throughout the narrative, this leader recounted several instances of men who supposedly had been cured of their homosexuality: one who suffered anguish because he had sexual desires that were linked to an early childhood experience when he had exchanged sexual favors with older adolescents in order to play marbles as a part of the group; another who said that he started to feel homosexual desire because he had sex with his uncle at an early age. The CCR movement considers homosexuality to be a symptom of spiritual

disequilibrium, which can be discovered, treated, and cured through therapy. The CCR movement's training to be a good father, for example, shows how sexuality is interposed onto gender; interestingly enough, the focus is always on the homosexuality of men, not of women.

Brazilian sociologists Lucia Ribeiro and Solange Lucan have observed local negations in priests' discourses and practice when religious doctrines come into contact with daily realities in Nova Iguacu, a municipality situated in the Baixada Fluminense (Ribeiro, 1992). In their work on the views and practices of priests regarding sexuality and reproductive health, they have noted contradictions and ambiguities: Local social positions and progressive priests can coexist in an almost convivial way with a conservative sexual morality—and, in other instances, can contradict that moralitywith "open and innovative attitudes" (Ribeiro & Lucan, 1997, p. 29). Ribeiro and Luçan continue:

> Sometimes even the most progressive Catholics adopt a prudent silence, given the difficulties that surround them.…In this way, the alignment of the clergy is symptomatic: in mediating between the official discourse of the Catholic Church and the concrete practices of the members [*fieis*], confronting a dilemma. On one hand, it is impossible to diverge explicitly from the official discourse of the Catholic Church, given that these priest are part of the same ecclesiastic hierarchy; but on the other hand, because they are situated among and in direct contact with the faithful…it is clear to them that the discourse does not always take into account concrete questions that the modern world possesses. (p. 29; authors' translation)

Hence, we feel it is important to highlight the nature of the dialogue between the pastorals and the archdioceses to which they are accountable, because this relationship dictates the silences and the look-the-other-way attitude that characterize the actions of the Catholic Church at the grassroots level. The silence is more apparent in the case of religious leaders such as clergy (priests); with other types of religious leaders (e.g., leaders of pastorals), our data show that the discourse on same-sex sexuality is more open to direct discussions about same-sex desires and sexual health.

Evangelical Responses

Structure—The religious landscape in most (if not all) neighborhoods in peri-urban Rio de Janeiro is strewn with Pentecostal evangelical churches, ranging from large churches such as the Assembly of God (Assembléia de Deus) to smaller churches with very unique (and often long) names. The Brazilian census showed a growth in members of evangelical churches from 9% of the population in 1991 to 15% of the population in 2000, with a concomitant decrease in the percentage of Catholics (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009). Approximately three quarters (73%) of Brazilian Protestants are Pentecostal (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009), so it is not surprising that our convenience sample of evangelical interviewees from the urban periphery consisted only of Pentecostal pastors.

Juxtaposing differences in Pentecostal organizational structure with the hierarchical Catholic Church, the most obvious difference is that organizational structure varies between churches such as the Assembly of God and other, smaller Pentecostal churches. For the Pentecostal churches included in this sample, membership ranged from 20 to 400 members. The Assembly of God is one of the most structured of the Pentecostal churches, having broad networks. Churches of the Assembly of God are governed regionally; the administration of financial support for local churches is determined by a central office that might represent 20 churches in part of a municipality, for example. One pastor from an Assembly of God church, when asked why there were two other churches of the same denomination just one block away, said:

NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript

> Before there was a rule that one Assembly of God could not exist within 200 meters from another…. That has changed…. Those that are close by do not necessarily belong to the same network as mine. Each network has its own rules—people choose to follow the pastor [who] most appeals to their beliefs.

Each of the networks of the Assembly of God has a governing body, with a president and eight counselors—the counselors having the right to vote on issues and the president having veto power. On the other hand, some of the smaller churches may meet in a small center or even rotate meetings among people's homes. Organizational structure and linkages between different churches must be considered in order to understand how discourses pertaining to same-sex desires and practices affect the community. That said, within communities with strong interpersonal ties and knowledge, the uniform rejection of so-called deviant sexuality by Pentecostal churches can be felt by the individual as a dominant cultural and structural force.

Discourses of pastors—In Pentecostal churches, sanctity in both thought (desire) and action (behavior) is considered the basis of true Christianity—a creed based on the teachings of the Bible and on following the example of Jesus Christ. All of the Pentecostal informants in our sample understood nonheterosexual desire and practice as a spiritual or psychological pathology that could be (and ought to be) cured. Across the board, we found the direct use of biblical rhetoric in Pentecostal discourses of lust in sexual desire pertaining to the flesh (*carne*), including issues related to sex and love, sex before marriage, and unwanted pregnancy—just to mention those related to heterosexual relations. Given people's "propensity to commit sins of the flesh, we must strive to fight the temptations of the secular world that enslave us," explained a female Pentecostal pastor. For heterosexual modes of sexual transgression, these churches offer some acceptance. For example, in most of the Pentecostal institutions we interviewed, pregnant young single women were cared for by the community (instead of rejected as outcasts), which provided monthly basic food baskets (*cestas básicas*) and free nursery care—although out of 15 congregations, we saw a dramatic difference in 4 communities, where unwed mothers were considered prostitutes and cast out from the church.

Discourse cited from the Bible with reference to heterosexual relationships, with strong gender norms, cannot be considered disconnected from understandings of how nonheterosexual sexualities are perceived. One young evangelical woman cited the Bible in a significant way with regard to this relationship between the spirit and the body. She commented that St. Paul affirms,

> Glorify God in your body (Corinthians 6:20). We must stay away from the treachery of sex, as Joseph left his wife in Pontifar, when she attempted to seduce him (Genesis 39). And God brings us glory through our purity, as clean sanctuaries.

One Pentecostal pastor clarified that differentiating between capital (mortal) sin and minor sins is not possible because the rapist and the prostitute are all sinners in the eyes of God—as are homosexuals, who carry an additional stigma in society apart from the gravity of their sin. Discourses of purity and understandings of how body and spirit are joined permeate language describing supposed aberrations of every kind. How, then, does the language of sexuality, albeit some of it delineating sexual relations, affect the self-control (and, more so, societal control) of the body as a spiritual conquest for men and women?

Notwithstanding, most salient and pertinent to this essay is the finding that all of the evangelical communities rejected all three aspects of same-sex sexuality: desires (sins of thought), behaviors, and identities. The most accepting of the churches agreed that in order to address issues such HIV infection or unwanted pregnancy, homosexuals should be

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

welcome and included in HIV interventions. The idea of inclusion, notably for Pentecostal pastors using the discourse of acolhimento, is strictly pragmatic and questionable in practice: Statements of inclusion were followed by the caveat that homosexual people are living aberrant lifestyles and are encouraged to convert to heterosexuality through prayer and devotion to Jesus. Young men, in particular, are encouraged to resist sins of thought and action, and missionary campaigns are directed toward youth. In fact, one pastor told a story about how he found Jesus when he was cured from homosexuality as a young man:

> To find a happy, healthy life, with my family, I confronted, with some pain, but without resentments, several barriers…to serving God.…To walk in sanctity is very difficult today, in general, especially because of the evolutions and facilities of a society that refers to sexual liberty, incentivized by our State, through the media.… These are factors to consider in changes related to affective relationships.

In fact, this focus on the sexuality of youth is very strong in evangelical discourses. At a Vocation for Youth event held by an Assembly of God church—which brought together evangelical pastors and approximately 150 young men and women from several evangelical churches, including the Quadrangular Church—we observed that one of the ills of society was illustrated by two women kissing. This image, just to reinforce the significance of the statement from the pastor quoted previously, came from the media—from MTV (Music Television).

This large-scale campaign against same-sex behaviors and identities was evident in the number of posters and signs installed throughout Pentecostal churches' physical facilities and in the surrounding communities. For example, one sign posted in front of a church delineated activities for each day of the week, including a day against homosexuality, a day against *Macumba* (a derogatory term for religions of African descent), and a day against drug use. We observed such daily-activity signs in many communities. Sexual desire and practices falling outside of religious norms, such as sex outside of marriage or between members of the same sex, were depicted and constructed in this rhetoric as social ills. Both activities were considered aberrant, an idea justified by similar interpretations of the Bible—with same-sex sexualityrequiring a cure, and sex outside of marriage requiring confession to seek forgiveness and the acceptance of Jesus.

Considering the discourses of pastors from evangelical churches that were more radically against nonheterosexual desire (and, of course, lifestyles), ostensibly curing this sick behavior was imperative in order to avoid damnation to hell. For some churches, incurring damnation due to homosexual desire is considered an option because people have free will; for other churches, renouncing Satan through sexual conversion is a strong requisite for membership. All pastors linked homosexuality to temptation (and sometimes possession) from the devil. Some even claimed that a *session of discharge* (*sessão de descarrego*) could exorcise the individual from the demons causing this illness of the spirit and flesh. Several pastors claimed that AIDS is a punishment from God for homosexual acts, a curse that then infected innocent women[6]; one particular pastor anachronistically responded by saying that AIDS began in Sodom and Gomorrah.[7]

To illustrate a different position, one Pentecostal pastor said that he first started working on issues related to HIV and AIDS when his brother died—at the same time that the family

[6]It is important to highlight the significant role of women in the evangelical movement, as well as the extent to which the rise of evangelical Protestant movements has been linked to the movements' ability to confront gendered pathogens of poverty, such as domestic abuse, the alcoholism of their men, and so forth (Burdick, 1990; Matory, 2003). At some level, interpreting HIV as another evil for which men are responsible fits neatly within this framework.

[7]Christianity frequently associates sexual deviance, and especially homosexual behavior, with the biblical story of why God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. The word *sodomy* originates from the name of the city Sodom. See Genesis 19:24–25 for the biblical story.

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

found out that his brother was homosexual.[8] The pastor's brother repented and returned to religion after having accepted Jesus Christ. This same pastor blamed the "type of sex men have with each other," meaning that "two men touch each other's penises…they have anal sex," as a cause for the propagation of HIV, not considering that anal sex also occurs in heterosexual relationships. In this case, the pastor's life history colored his perception of same-sex desires, because their expression can lead to disease. The pastor also felt self-blame because, according to him, his family might have caused the so-called psychological disturbance that led to his brother's homosexual lifestyle.

These aforementioned discourses evidence two forms in which nonheterosexual desires and practices are portrayed as curable (or preventable) pathologies of the spirit or of the psyche. Another Pentecostal pastor, a woman, acknowledged that in her service (*culto*), she cannot speak about birth control or condoms, but in her capacity as president of an HIV/AIDS NGO, she acts quite differently than she does in the pulpit:

> Of course! In reality, I live a paradox, a living and constant war because I preach resocialization, I preach for you to stop being a prostitute, but I do not deny a condom to a prostitute when she comes to the NGO; I don't deny it, it is what she learned. I cannot preach the gospel for whom does not know the gospel.…She can accept to be a prostitute or not. If you do not accept him [referring to the same transgender sex worker], you cannot understand his reality, bring it closer to my reality and try to help in his reality without imposing mine. That is respecting the other.

Thus, even this woman pastor's identity reflects the rift between religious dogma and on-the-ground action: She seems to be divided between her religious subjectivity and her experience with the realitythat surrounds her. This identity compartmentalization was also evident in some Catholic religious leaders and in one Afro-Brazilian leader. According to the Afro-Brazilian leader, who condemned homosexuality as a *pai de santo* (male priest) but did not reject sexual diversity in his identity as a human being, making such a distinction sets the role of religious leader apart from the man himself. This distinction offers some insight into the types of negotiations that occur regarding acolhimento, as they are shaped by the self-understanding and identity of each individual religious leader.

In contrast to Pentecostal discourses on same-sex sexualities, the Catholic Church has more *infrastructural capital* regarding such issues, through formation instruction in seminaries and formal education of Catholic priests—whereas Pentecostal pastors tend to come from the same social class as their flock, without much formal education. As Pierucci and Prandi (2000) have noted, Catholicism is "more and more disinterested in offering guidance for everyday life, thereby suffering a deep axiological emptying" for an "immense number of men and women who have become marginalized in the course of social changes and who have been disinherited of their traditional religion" (p. 635). In fact, the differential education level and the formal indoctrination found among Catholic priests may sometimes make Catholic views seem more enlightened—but those views also can be more officially dogmatic and tied to the Vatican, and therefore more distant from on-the-ground reality. At the same time, the variation in discourse and practice that we found from Catholic diocese to diocese may result in a greater disconnect between doctrinaire positions and community practices. As for the Pentecostal churches, the Assembly of God, which has formal networks, does offer seminary-type indoctrination (unlike other, smaller churches), creating

[8]The language used by the pastor was *homem-sexual* (literally, sexual-man). Notably, beyond the fact that the words *homem-sexual* and *homosexual* are phonetically similar, this association may be interpreted as an acknowledgment that a male being (perhaps overly) sexual is sinful and primitive. This linguistic error is relatively common when the scientific category of homosexuality is reinterpreted in popular language (see Parker, 1999).

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

official discourses depending on the network to which the church belongs. That said, the shorter distance between official discourses and local realities (and the greater variation among evangelical churches compared with that among Catholic churches) may, in part, explain the growth in evangelical movements (and the decrease in Catholicism) in Brazil.

Most important, this more direct connection between evangelical religious leaders and their congregations means that the discourses of evangelical pastors may have a great impact on the community's views on same-sex sexualities. The growth in numbers of Pentecostal churches in the last decade is a critical issue when analyzing social changes within Brazilian society, especially those related to sexuality. Some of the Pentecostal churches have communities with hundreds of members, and together with the growing number of smaller (more radically conservative) churches, they are in a position to mold the social ecology of neighborhoods in the Baixada Fluminense of Rio de Janeiro. Pentecostal church leaders and pastors have surprisingly similar discourses against same-sex sexualities, creating a sense of vigilance over the body. Although organizationally any particular evangelical church has no official discourse coming from a top-down structure, as in the Catholic Church, the uniformity in public position on the issue of homosexuality creates an atmosphere of ostracism or conformity, especially for nonheterosexual youth living in Pentecostal families.

Religions of African Descent

Structure—First, as we did for Catholic and evangelical churches, we will briefly describe how religions of African descent are organized. According to the 2000 census, Candomble and Umbanda members made up 0.34% of the Brazilian population (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009); however, this number may not reflect actual membership because, due to persecution and syncretism (i.e., fusion of beliefs) with Catholicism, many Afro-Brazilian religious leaders probably mark their religion as "Catholic" or "other" on census forms. Ethnographically, we have observed that the number of Afro-Brazilian religious institutions is high in the periphery of Rio de Janeiro. Although constraints on members due to initiation criteria may limit official membership in these religious organizations, noninitiates may participate in parties and consult Afro-Brazilian leaders for advice on concerns ranging from sexual relations to financial problems.

Our sample included 13 leaders representing Candomblé institutions and 2 leaders from Umbanda institutions. The Candomblé terreiro (a house or compound for worship resembling a small village) has a clear internal hierarchy, with the mãe de santo or pai de santo (literally, mother or father of the terreiro) as the main figurehead of the religious organization. Secondary authority is held by the second mother (or, literally translated from *mãe pequena,* small mother) or second father. Farther down in the hierarchy, each terreiro has *ekedes*, women who take care of the saints, and *ogans*, men with a charge of prestige, such as drumming during ceremonies. The terreiro also has *ebami* (female) *and ebomi* (male), members who have completed their 7th year (when they can opt to open their own terreiro) and *iawos* (members with less than 7 years of initiation). The term *abia* is used to describe those who frequent the terreiro but who are not initiated. Most notable in this structure are its origins in family and communal regulation, as well as its basis on seniority.

Like pastors of evangelical churches, mães and pais de santo of Candomblé and Umbanda have little formal schooling and, like the members of their terreiros, often live in poverty. In contrast to evangelical pastors, mães and pais de santo experience higher levels of stigma for representing Black (African) culture and for being perceived as involved in witchcraft. Some Afro-Brazilian religious leaders in our study were involved with recently formed civil networks, such as Assoçiacões de Moradores (organizations of community members and leaders that address local issues), the Network for Afro-Brazilian Religions and Health (Rede Nacional Afro-Brasileira de Saúde) and Umbanda Federations, as well as NGOs

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

focused on HIV, race, and women. Notably, 2 of the 3 informants who expressed negative attitudes toward same-sex sexualities were not part of any network. These connections show that articulation exists between these religious leaders and other communityorganizations, one of them even receiving government funding to carry out social interventions related to HIV.

However, unlike the networks of the large Pentecostal churches, the networks with which Afro-Brazilian religious leaders are involved do not govern how terreiros function; hierarchies apply only to the internal structure within each institution, not between institutions—although all institutions may follow similar traditional values. The elders often comment that younger leaders in Afro-Brazilian religions are straying from their African heritage, which is based on transmission of knowledge through oral tradition. This concept of African heritage can be interpreted as a social construct of resistance. Although Pentecostal and Catholic identities are also socially constructed, Afro-Brazilian religions are less institutionalized and could be perceived as less legitimate than religious traditions that are based on a written Bible and that have more historical and economic power.

The Umbanda belief system is rooted in a combination of African, indigenous, and European Kardecist (i.e., spiritist) traditions; Candomblé derives from polytheistic African beliefs and has incorporated aspects of Christianity. Umbanda houses of worship have a social structure different from Candomblé terreiros; whereas in Umbanda, members visit but do not inhabit the center, Camdomblé terreiros have a family-like structure, where some of the children of the house live with the mãe or pai de santo. In both religions, seniority after initiation is an important element of hierarchy. Thus, these two religious traditions with African origins (Candomblé more so than Umbanda) have strong hierarchical structures within each institution (unlike larger formal hierarchies, such as that of the Catholic Church); in order to become a member of the family, a person must follow a long period of initiation, a process that creates boundaries for inclusion—although initiation and participation in rituals is more open to noninitiates in Umbanda than in Candomblé.

In both Umbanda and Candomblé, the norms that shape how sexual desire in general is ruled vary by how each terreiro is organized. Children of the Saint (those who have been officially initiated through a series of rituals and respond to the mãe or pai de santo) are not to have amorous or sexual relationships with each other, a tradition similar to the rules against incest followed in a conventional family. Within this structure, however, negotiations are possible. If one member of a terreiro falls in love with another, one informant explained, the pai or mãe de santo has discretion to decide what is acceptable. Thus, the sexuality of the initiated is shaped by the will of the head of the terreiro to a certain degree. Furthermore, members of Umbanda and Candomblé are encouraged to marry within the religion in order to preserve the tradition.

Discourses of mães or pais de santo—Most informants (12 out of 15 in the sample) were entirely accepting and embracing of same-sex relationships, desires, and identities. In Umbanda and Candomblé houses, same-sex couples can have sexual relationships and marriages that are blessed by the mother or the father. One mãe de santo recalled a story about two men of the religion (but not of the same family, she stressed) who were in a relationship characterized by domestic violence:

> First, one came to the house because he was being beaten by the other, so we placed him in the room upstairs…because we do not leave any member of the religion out in the streets. Then the other one came over looking for him—but he also needed a place to stay because he was part of our house. So we put one the top floor and the other one on the bottom floor, separated.

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

This anecdote serves to illustrate elements of inclusion within the Candomblé religion. The mãe de santo's story made clear the acceptance of the couple as homosexual—who were treated as any heterosexual couple would be treated in the religion—and the acknowledgment of the same types of domestic problems that any relationship could have. It is worth mentioning that this mae de santo also was leading an NGO with an HIV/AIDS prevention project for men who have sex with men and women who have sex with women.

One pai de santo we interviewed explained his sexual formation and how it had affected his position in favor of the free expression of sexual diversity. He said that during the military dictatorship, he "had sex within the squadron…Why? …because at the same time I had a strip show in the Praca Maua. …I was a big guy, and I went to many clubs in Copacabana." Thus, this pai de santo recalled being young and expressing his homosexuality freely—after he had already been initiated as a member of a Candomblé community—in spaces where he, as a self-identified homosexual, had sex with straight men in the army. He obviously had enjoyed this time of his life, because he told this story with a certain nostalgia.

In fact, the majority of the leaders from Candomblé cited free will and found no problem with same-sex relationships, desires, or identities. A mãe de santo explained, "In other religions gays have to wear ties and stay quiet; in this house they can talk freely about sex… have limp wrists. …There are many gay men with many years in the religion in this house." One ogan spoke about general discrimination against the terreiros because of poverty and race, as well as others' belief that these religions are "of the devil." He explained:

> Because historically the terreiro was always a place of inclusion (acolhimento), perhaps even because our proper experience of nonacceptance…then there was an experience of discrimination, and because of this an identification. In other words, those who perceive themselves as excluded accept the excluded. I understand myself in this way.…As I am excluded, I identify with those who suffer from social exclusion.

This anecdote illustrates a form of solidarity between excluded groups—the other accepting the othered. One particular terreiro, which has a male leader, includes a large group of transgender sex workers who are members (children) of the terreiro. In religious ceremonies, the transgender women follow the rules of the religion: they wear white, and show respect for the elders and their ancestors, for example. However, they go out at night to do their job (i.e., sex work), a fact that is openly known within the Umbanda center to which they belong.

In this sample, only 3 religious leaders expressed negative attitudes toward same-sex relationships, but not against same-sex desires. One mae de santo, for example, stated that she was entirely accepting of gay men, saying that they were even sweeter than straight men; she then explained that butch dykes (*sapatão*) tended to be physically violent with their partners, like straight men. This religious leader's perception highlights another interaction between gender and sexuality: In her eyes, a gay man is like to a docile woman and a lesbian is more like what she called a *machista* (macho) man.

As a counterpoint, the nonacceptance of an outward homosexual identity is evident in the narrative of a female Umbanda leader, who said she thinks that "they are welcome, but that they must be discreet within the religious space, and act like men." In general, men can receive female energies in religious ceremonies, but this leader emphasized that when the female energy enters the body of a man, "it does not mean he has to wear a skirt." In contrast, the Candomblé tradition allows men to wear the gendered clothing that corresponds to the particular energythey receive. In fact, this same informant criticized (a common

NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript

practice of gossip) the prevalence of homosexual men in Candomblé because, as she put it, "They sleep in the terreiro, and you see many gay men having sex in the place of worship."

The last example of nonacceptance came from a pai de santo of the Candomblé religion who expressed the most negative responses to same-sex behaviors and identities, basing his beliefs on heteronormative gender sexual roles. He maintained that there is no prejudice against homosexuality in his religion, but propounded that God created man and woman to serve particular roles in the act of reproduction. Although these findings elaborate Afro-Brazilian religious discourses about same-sex sexualities, we also found instances of heterosexualities that were outside of the hegemonic norms of the religion.[9] The aforementioned pai de santo, for example, is married to one of his female initiates—his *filha* (daughter)—a sexual relationship that is highly controversial within the Candomble and Umbanda communities and, therefore, contrasts with this pai de santo's conservative views about same-sex sexualities. For example, he said that if a male has the propensity to receive a female energy during states of trance, "He cannot be mounted by this energy in trance." He also mentioned transgender women as aberrant, stating that "these are individuals who should take on the role of males," and said that he "values the woman as mother and wife." This pai de santo finds it acceptable to break religious norms in heterosexual instances, but he is stricter in the case of same-sex relationships.

In contrast to the other religious traditions in the Baixada Fluminense, then, Candomble and Umbanda generally have more respect for sexual diversity and for free will in desire, behavior, and identities—albeit, 3 of the informants in this group showed some negative attitudes toward sexual diversity. Unlike the Catholic Church, Afro-Brazilian religions have no national or international governing body that creates an official discourse. Moreover, despite some uniformity in ritualistic practice, terreiros are independent of each other and practice the religion as they interpret it. Like many Pentecostal churches, terreiros are also fractionalized to some extent, but the more well-known Afro-Brazilian religious leaders are involved in a number of social movements, including the women's movement, the HIV/AIDS movement, the LGBT movement, the black movement, and the sickle cell anemia movement.

Even though only 0.34% of the Brazilian population has reported belonging to a terreiro, this low number can be explained first by the fact that membership in these religious communities requires a long process of initiation. Second, most people who interact with Afro-Brazilian religions consult mães and pais de santo about issues in their daily lives but still consider themselves Catholic; according to Velho (2000), "syncretism and double-affiliations have also been characteristic" (p. 1). Despite the seemingly small number of people practicing Candomblé and Umbanda in Brazil, "The influence of these Afro-Brazilian religions is widespread throughout Brazilian culture" giving "this group great visibility on the national religious scene" (Pierucci & Prandi, 2000, p. 633). Judging by Afro-Brazilian religious leaders' general openness to diversity in sexual desires, behaviors, and identities (as well as their sometimes proactive fight for the rights of nonheterosexuals), the following statement of one pai de santo makes sense: "We have always been the psychologists of the poor and marginalized."

Discussion

We found variation in discourses about same-sex desire, behaviors, and identities within and between the three religious traditions that we examined in peri-urban Rio de Janiero. These

[9]It is important to note that the religion of Candomble has significant variations. One house is apt to gossip about another at parties or religious events, especially about sexuality within a family, which can be considered scandalous.

variations were due in part to the social organization of the religious institutions, which determines local religious leaders' level of agency and their closeness to the lived experience of their followers. Poverty and various forms of stigma contextualized religious leaders' discourses. Religious leaders expressed the juxtaposition of church doctrine and real life in their sometimes conflicting identities: as religious leaders, they are compelled to adhere to dogma, and as community leaders, they interact daily with socially excluded people at risk for a variety of social ills, including HIV infection, violence, sex work, lack of access to health care, and low employment rates. Some leaders resolved these internal struggles by acting one way behind the pulpit and another way when interacting with civil society organizations.

Two factors are important when considering how structural organization affects discourses about sexuality: accountability and legitimacy. Religious discourses are shaped by their relationship with both hierarchies and traditions, necessitating accountability to doctrine, to higher-power structure, and to local realities. A religious leader and his or her discourses are legitimate if they follow the rules of accountability.

In the Catholic tradition, some legitimacy is drawn from adherence to the rules of the Vatican (2004) and the CNBB, but in local settings, contradictions between social problems, such as HIV infection and adolescent pregnancy, and church doctrine require accountability to parishioners. This impact is most apparent when speaking about condoms, which are rejected by Catholic doctrine but necessary for prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. At the same time, the creation of pastorals that address marginalized populations allows for a type of decentralization of responsibility between priests and lay religious leaders. While priests articulate the gospel and the doctrine of the Vatican behind the pulpit, lay religious leaders form groups including the Charismatic Catholic Renovation and the Pastoral for Youth address sensitive issues such as sexual diversity.

In contrast, Pentecostal churches and Afro-Brazilian terreiros do not have the same type of accountability issues related to broader networks, thus creating more accountability to their local followers' needs (such as curing disease and discussing complex personal issues, including homosexuality). Accountability in evangelical churches is to the Bible, according to several informants, whereas religions of African descent have an internal hierarchy that creates accountability to community elders.

The ways in which accountability and legitimacy of leaders and structures are negotiated have implications for the sexual integrity of individuals, especially as they negotiate between their religious selves and their sexual selves (Yip, 2002). Some of the biblical discourses in both Catholic and Pentecostal narratives differentiate the sinner from the sin, thereby leaving a gap between the subject and the act. The Bible says that people should "love the sinner, hate the sin."[10] This attitude creates a sense of acolhimento for homosexuals, who desire, behave, or identify as vulnerable and supposedly weaker individuals within the church—who are "walking in darkness," as one pastor put it. Is there a trade-off between following one's religious beliefs and exercising sexual autonomy? Rodriguez and Oullette (2000) have outlined a heuristic differentiation that can describe this negotiation, in which individuals can (a) reject the religious identity by establishing it as an unimportant part of their lives, (b) reject the homosexual identity by suppressing longings and not practicing sex outside their religious parameters, (c) compartmentalize both identities with the risk of identity dissonance, and (d) reach identity integration through assuming the identity of a gay or lesbian Christian.

[10]See Biblical passages such as John 4: 8–9 and Peter 3:9 for the descriptions of God's forgiveness of sinners that often are used to make this argument.

NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript

Chesnut (2003) has maintained that the choices of leaders and followers are driven by a type of religious economy, in which individuals can move from one church or tradition to another, depending on their needs. As mentioned previously, some literature (e.g., Rodriguez & Oullette, 2000; Thumma, 1991; Yip, 1994), has addressed how alternative or gay-positive churches can provide spaces that allow individuals to integrate religious and sexual identity, but our sample did not include any churches of this type because they are located in the center of Rio de Janeiro and in Copacabana, not in the low-income peri-urban Baixada Fluminense, on which we are focusing here. Similarly, NGOs that address issues of same-sex sexuality, with which Afro-Brazilian religious leaders have been known to collaborate in several movements, likewise are located in the center of Rio de Janeiro and thus are not very accessible to people on the urban periphery. Our research shows that the Catholic Church in Brazil has provided some spaces for diverse sexuality through pastorals, especially in the Pastoral for Youth. Finally, because Pentecostal evangelical leaders typically are socioeconomically closer to their congregants than are Catholic priests, a Pentecostal pastor's position on same-sex issues can strongly affect how each individual in that particular church expresses sexual desire, behaves, or identifies with a community of so-called outsiders.

Moreover, regarding inclusion, it is notable that Afro-Brazilian religious groups are organized in a family-like fashion that, in a way, can provide church members with an alternative family. The family has a definitive role in the religious formation and affirmation of an individual's notion of rights and responsibilities. Families often use religious narrative and teachings to condemn the behavior of family members who are not conforming to cultural values, such as heteronormativity. The family is often the strongest social institution through which sexualities are regulated, especially because the home is a space for human development and support. Rights are often thought of as belonging only to the public sphere, not to such private spaces as the family—but the home is a sphere where power over sexuality can lead to violations of sexual rights. Such violations can foment violence and other forms of coercion, not only related to the expression of same-sex desires, behaviors, or identities but also pertinent to domestic violence that occurs between sexual partners.

Last, considering the ways in which nonheterosexual desires are pathologized by some religious leaders, it is clear that physical health and spiritual health are dialectically experienced and understood when religious leaders address same-sex sexualities. According to Chesnut (1997), the religious and the sexual subject can be said to come together at the moment of physical ecstasy—that is, in Pentecostal and Afro-Brazilian religious ceremonies and episodes of trance. In the same way, ecstasy could be interpreted as a heightened state of physical and spiritual well-being that can cure homosexuality. Some Catholic informants considered same-sex sexuality a symptom of childhood trauma, and most Evangelicals thought it was caused by possession by demons; both of these Christian religions maintain that the religious subject can be cured of sexually deviant thoughts or actions (as cancer can be cured, they claim). Afro-Brazilian religions consider the body to be a vessel for possession by higher spirits or deities—but, unlike in evangelical discourse, this possession involves a joining of identities in which the sexual subject and the religious subject are one, just as men can be possessed by masculine or feminine deities. For all three religious traditions, same-sex sexual desires, identities, and behaviors involve a connection between the body and the spirit.

Conclusion

This article has considered the discourses of religious leaders from three major religious traditions in the impoverished peri-urban areas of Rio de Janeiro, as contextualized by structural factors. We have not addressed narratives from the religious followers who

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

experience these structures, nor how they negotiate their sexualities and religiousness if they do not conform to religious teachings or discourses. However, using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we conjecture that the power of the pulpit, so to speak, creates an environment in which the sexual rights and citizenship of those who have nonheteronormative desires, behaviors, or identities are considered illegitimate. The emergence of sexual rights as a framework for understanding citizenship has highlighted the significance of considering culture and religion, for example, to be as important as government policy or the judicial system as areas of contention and targets for social and public health intervention (García & Parker, 2006).

Mechanisms such as tolerance, care, and belonging—as opposed to shame, stigma, and social exclusion—offer several ways to frame respect for the human integrity and dignity of individuals and groups who do not abide by local rules governing the body. In linking sexual rights and citizenship, we are highlighting more than the significance of how sexual self-understanding and identity can affect claims to other rights—especially rights that are granted, not by the state, but by other spheres of power. Even more difficult to defend within religious circles is the right to sexual pleasure, which is denied when same-sex desires are considered sins of thought, much less of action. According to García and Parker (2006),

> the idea of sexual pleasure, its definitions, its language, its expression, all typically come from below, from the local context where people experience life. These interpretations emerge from cultural systems of meaning and significance that are a mélange of popular culture intersecting with elite culture, mechanically reproduced and ideologically mediated. (p. 24)

Therefore, religious leaders and institutions are sometimes in contention with depictions of sex in the media and so attempt to respond to the influence of spaces where sexuality is framed by violence and the governance of drug trafficking.

In places where few community organizations include advocacy for the right to express same-sex sexualities, desires, and identities, religious institutions have greater power over individuals' sexual autonomy. One way individuals express this autonomy is by moving from one religion to another—a possible explanation for why so many nonheterosexuals seek inclusion in Afro-Brazilian terreiros. For most, however, the disjunction between what they desire and what they are taught to consider demon possession or psychological trauma likely leads to a loss of self-understanding. The scarcity of secure space for community building for nonheterosexuals is alarming because it compromises sexual liberties for generations to come—especially in peri-urban and low-income regions of Rio de Janeiro, where access to healthcare is very limited and violence is highly prevalent. This situation is especially alarming considering that campaigns against nonheterosexual sexualities are mainly targeting youth, and that the HIV epidemic is expanding rapidly among young people.

Moreover, young men in Brazil have been particularly vulnerable to the HIV epidemic, especially if the categories of homosexual and bisexual are aggregated and compared with incidence in heterosexual men (Brazilian Ministry of Health, 2007). Because epidemiological data show incidence based on self-reported identity and practice, they do not capture the entire picture, especially considering that identities and practices are negotiated within religious belief systems. In fact, intervening in the landscape of HIV risk in Brazil, especially among youth, is affected greatly by inaccuracy in categorizing groups. Those who are not self-categorized as homosexual or bisexual because of their socially constructed (both cognitive and public) identities may fall within the category termed *men who have sex with men* (MSM).

NIH-PA Author Manuscript

Brazilian MSM are part of a recent larger trend toward increasing levels of infection among males that is even more pronounced when looking at certain subpopulations of men (Brazilian Ministry of Health, 2007). The statistics describing the epidemic in Brazil within the groups of men between 13 and 24 years of age, for example, show a progressive growth in incidence between 1982 and 2006, a growth disproportionate to the epidemic as a whole in Brazil (Brazilian Ministry of Health). Underreporting is partly due to the stigma and the social exclusion that link HIV with same-sex sexual behaviors. Furthermore, young men often experience violence and are more at risk due to less proximity to health services, factors resulting from socioeconomic marginalization.

In this article, we have highlighted the importance of religious communities and leaders in shaping individuals' sexual identity and behavior in peri-urban Rio de Janiero. A better understanding of ideas about religious cures for homosexuality may certainly be crucial in addressing the HIV epidemic in Brazilian young people, especially because youth are a particular focus of religious indoctrination. The HIV epidemic has been an undeniable force in opening discourses about sexuality in religious institutions, particularly when these organizations have been responsible for responding to social problems.

References

Albinus L. Discourse analysis within the study of religion: Processes of change in ancient Greece. Method & Theory in the Study of Religion 1997;9:203–232.

Bernard, HR. Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 2004.

Brazilian Ministry of Health. [Epidemiological AIDS bulletin]. Brasilia, Brazil: Author; 2007. Boletim epidemiologico AIDS.

Burdick J. Gossip and secrecy: Women's articulation of domestic conflict in three religions of urban Brazil. Sociological Analysis 1990;50:153–170.

Carrara, S.; Vianna, A. A violência letal contra homossexuais no município do Rio de Janeiro: Caracteristicas gerais [Lethal violence against homosexuals in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro: General characteristics]. 2004. Retrieved March 6, 2008, from www.ciudadaniasexual.org/publicaciones/1b.pdf

Carrara S, Vianna A. "Tá lá o corpo estendido no chão…": a violência letal contra travestis no município do Rio de Janeiro ["His body is lying over there on the floor…": Lethal violence against transvestites in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro]. Physis 2006;16:233–249.

Chesnut, RA. Born again in Brazil: The Pentecostal boom and the pathogens of poverty. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press; 1997.

Chesnut, RA. Competitive spirits: Latin America's new religious economy. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press; 2003.

Dayrell J. O rap e o funk na socialização da juventude [Rap and funk in socialization of youth]. Educação e Pesquisa 2002;28:117–136.

Durkheim, E. The elementary forms of religious life. New York: Oxford University Press; 2001.

Fletcher, BC. Clergy under stress: A study of homosexual and heterosexual clergy in the Church of England. London: Mowbray; 2000.

García J. Responses of Afro-Brazilian religious groups to HIV/AIDS in Rio de Janeiro. 2007 Unpublished raw data.

García J, Parker R. From global discourses to local action: The makings of a sexual rights movement? Horizontes Antropológicos 2006;12(26):13–41.

Geertz, C. Interpretation of cultures: Selected essays. New York: Basic Books; 1973.

Gigl, JL. The overt male homosexual: A primary description of a self-selected population. University of Oregon; Eugene: 1970. Unpublished doctoral dissertation

Glaser, BG.; Strauss, A. Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research. Chicago: Aldine; 1967.

NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript

Gonsiorek J. Mental health issues of gay and lesbian adolescents. Journal of Adolescent Health Care 1988;9:114–122. [PubMed: 3283088]

Greenberg JS. A study of the self-esteem and alienation of male homosexuals. The Journal of Psychology 1973;83:137–143. [PubMed: 4688193]

Herschmann, M. Globalization, violence and cultural style: Breaking it down through the ’90s, funk and hip hop. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Rocco; 1997. Globalização, violência e estilo cultural: Abalando os anos 90, funk e hip hop.

Marx, K. Marx and Engels on religion. Moscow: Progress Publishers; 1957.

Matory JL. Gendered agendas: The secrets scholars keep about Yorùbá-Atlantic religion. Gender & History 2003;15:409–439.

Omai-Tunkara, MS. Manipulating the sacred: Yorúba art, ritual and resistance in Brazilian Candomble. Detroit, MI: Wayne University Press; 2005.

Parker, R. Beneath the equator: Cultures of desire, male homosexuality, and emerging gay communities in Brazil. New York: Routledge; 1999.

Parker RG. Religious responses to HIV/AIDS in Brazil. 2005 Unpublished raw data.

Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. Religious demographic profile; Brazil: 2009. Retrieved May 13, 2009, from http://pewforum.org/world-affairs/countries/?CountryID=29

Pierucci AF, Prandi R. Religious diversity in Brazil: Numbers and perspectives in a sociological evaluation. International Sociology 2000;15:629–639.

Ribeiro, L. [Sexuality and reproduction: The lives of women in eclesiastic base communities of the Catholic Church]. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Projeto PRODIR; 1992. Sexualidade e reprodução: As vivências de mulheres das communidads eclesias de case da igreja Católica.

Ribeiro, L.; Lucan, S. [Between (un)certainties and contradictions]. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Instituto de Estudos da Religião; 1997. Entre (in)centezas e contradições.

Rodriguez EM, Ouellette SC. Gay and lesbian Christians: Homosexual and religious identity integration in the members and participants of a gay-positive church. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 2000;39:333–347.

Taquette SR, Ruzany MH, Meirelles Z, Ricardo I. Relacionamento violento na adolescencia e risco de DST/AIDS [Violent relationships and STD/AIDS risk in adolescents]. Cadernos de Saúde Pública 2003;19:1437–1444.

Thumma S. Negotiating a religious identity: The case of the gay Evangelical. Sociological Analysis 1991;52:333–347.

Vatican. Catechism of the Catholic Church [Electronic version]. 2004. Retrieved July 17, 2008, from http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/ccc_toc.htm

Vatican. Instrução sobre os Critérios de Discernimento Vocacional acerca das Pessoas com Tendências Homossexuais da sua Admissão ao Seminário e às Ordens. Instruction about the Criteria for Vocational Discernment related to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies for Admission into the Seminary and Sacred Orders. 2005. Retrieved June 20, 2009 at Sacrasttp://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20051104_istruzione_po.html

Velho, O. An assessment of the interreligious situation in Brazil [Electronic version]. Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches; 2000. Retrieved March 15, 2008, from http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/cd36-03.html

Wagner G, Serafiii J, Remien R, Williams J. Integration of one’s religion and homosexuality: A weapon against internalized homophobia? Journal of Homosexuality 1994;24(4):91–110. [PubMed: 8006423]

Weber, M. Sociology of religion. Boston: Beacon Press; 1993.

Yip, AKT. The gay dialectic: The development of lesbian and gay rights movement within the Christian community in Britain. Paper presented at the Organizing Sexuality Conference; Amsterdam, the Netherlands. 1994 Jun.

Yip AKT. Attacking the attacker: Gay Christians talk back. British Journal of Sociology 1997;48:113–127. [PubMed: 9178598]

Yip AKT. The persistence of faith among nonheterosexual Christians: Evidence for the neosecularization thesis of religious transformation. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 2002;41:199–212.

Zaluar A. Violence in Rio de Janeiro: Styles of leisure, drug use, and trafficking. International Social Science Journal 2001;53:369–378. [PubMed: 19192497]

NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript NIH-PA Author Manuscript