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Exploring Black Clergy Perspectives on Religious/Spiritual Related Domestic Violence: First Steps in Facing those Who Wield the Sword Abusively

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ABSTRACT

People who violence against their intimate partner(s) sometimes use religion as a mechanism of control. However discussion on religious/spiritual (R/S) abuse in the context of intimate partner violence and abuse (IPV/A) has been limited within the academic literature. The attack on one's spirituality or faith is unique enough to explore separately from typical psychological or emotional abuse. Because many Black women experiencing IPV/A report consistent use of religious faith and/or clergy as key sources of support, qualitative interviews were conducted with Black/African-American clergy (N = 13). The purpose of this study was to capture their perspectives on religious or spiritual related IPV/A. Using interpretative content analysis and thematic analysis, findings revealed that clergy viewed R/S abuse as a spiritual problem and characterized the behavior as a mis-interpretation of God's Word. Participants emphasized the importance of victim-survivors knowing the Word of God for themselves as a resource to counter R/S abuse. Informants highlighted a need and desire for clergy-specific training, yet data analyses also revealed that fellow clergy members perpetration of R/S abuse was a barrier to addressing the problem. Understanding religious leaders' perspectives on this specific form of abuse offers expands knowledge on how IPV/A is exerted and potential intervention strategies.

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Most commonly known by the public as domestic violence (DV), intimate partner violence (IPV) has been recognized as a devastating social and public health problem with global reach. As a multifaceted phenomenon that extends well beyond physical violence, intimate partner violence and abuse (IPV/A) is often conceptualized in four forms: physical, psychological, economic, and sexual (Stylianou et al., 2013). It may involve a single episode or chronic ongoing perpetration. Likewise, the impacts of IPV/A may be long-term or short-term with injuries both seen and unseen. However, Dehan and Levi (2009) found that even this expanded definition of IPV/A still does not fully capture women survivors' experiences of

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abuse and they note that expanding our understanding on unique forms of abuse should be an ongoing effort.

Religion, spirituality, and intimate partner violence/abuse

For many people, religion and/or spirituality offer support during distressing times. Religion is often described as an organized system of worldwide views involving formal behaviors used to assist closeness to God (Koenig et al., 2001). Spirituality involves a more individualistic quest for meaning and many times a connection to the sacred. Religion often involves spirituality; however, the reverse is not necessary. The distinction between religiosity or religious beliefs and spirituality is often clouded, making it difficult to delineate when one or another is in practice or under attack.

Although significant work has been done to understand the intersection of religious-faith and abuse (Bent-Goodley et al., 2015; Fortune et al., 2010; Nason-Clark et al., 2018), many scholars note that gaps within the literature remain, especially as it pertains to African American communities (Tedder & Smith, 2018; Valandra et al., 2019).

What is religious and spiritual related intimate partner violence/abuse?

People who act abusively toward their intimate partners may use religion against them as a controlling and abusive tactic (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Davis, 2015; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001; Miles, 2000; Popescu et al., 2009), perpetrating a specific form of abuse that aims to attack the religious or spiritual nature of a person. However, there has been a failed recognition of this form of abuse by many DV social service practitioners. A report by the World Health Organization surveying batterer intervention programs across 38 countries found that 100% of providers considered physical abuse to be a form of IPV/A, yet only 4% of the same sample considered spiritual abuse to be a form of IPV/A (Rothman et al., 2003).

Spiritual abuse has been described as the “attempt to impair ... spiritual life, spiritual self, or spiritual well-being” (Dehan & Levi, 2009, p. 1294), with various manifestations and levels of intensity that may include belittling spiritual worth, preventing religious practice, causing one to transgress spiritually, and justifying other forms of IPV/A with religious ideals (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Davis, 2015; Dehan & Levi, 2009). Bent-Goodley & Fowler (2006) note that “[spiritual abuse] speaks to the foundation of your being, the essence of who you are” (p. 289). An Australian government report recently declared that IPV/A includes spiritual abuse, defining it as “denial and/or misuse of religious beliefs or practices to force victims into subordinate roles and misusing religious or spiritual traditions to justify physical violence or other abuse” (Mitchell, 2011, p. 2). In 2015, the U.S. National Domestic Violence hotline recognized spiritual

abuse as an under-discussed, yet dangerous form of IPV/A (The National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2015). Delichte (2017) recently revealed the prevalence and incidents of religious/spiritual (R/S) abuse amongst a sample of IPV/A survivors. They found that 46% of survivors (N = 76) had been “prevented by a partner from participating in their religious community and practicing religious beliefs”, with 17% highlighting that this behavior occurred regularly. Just as those who batter may attempt to isolate their partners from friends or family, certain tactics of R/S abuse attempt to isolate those who experience abuse from God.

Religious and spiritual abuse in the context of IPV occurs across multiple religious traditions (Jayasundara et al., 2017), through various tactics. This behavior has been cited as occurring within Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities (Jayasundara et al., 2017). R/S abuse has been noted as occurring within Orthodox Jewish communities when an abusive husband engages in *get*-refusal (e.g., refusing to grant his wife a Jewish divorce), mocks and criticizes acts of prayer, or refuses to buy necessary ingredients to prepare challah (a special kind of bread that women are required to make by religious commandment; Arowojolu, 2016; Dehan & Levi, 2009; Starr, 2017). Within the Christian community, R/S abuse may encompass acts described as “proof-texting”, which involves misinterpreting or twisting specific scriptures in order to fit a pre-conceived idea (Ross, 2013). In an Islamic context, R/S abuse may occur when Islamic marriage contracts are manipulated by abusive husbands or when “abusers cite God-given authority to discipline their wives”. Dena Hassouneh explains R/S abuse in the lives of Muslim women as “disabling their defenses and adding yet another layer of suffering to their lives” (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001, p. 944), a description that resonates across various religious traditions.

The Black Church and intimate partner violence/abuse

Although Black Americans today identify with all religious affiliations and traditions, the term the “The Black Church” is used by scholars and much of the general public as a sociological and theological shorthand reference to the variety of Black Christian churches in the United States (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Eighty percent of Black Christians in the U.S. belong to one of seven major Black denominations (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Roof & McKinney, 1987). The remaining 15 to 20 percent of Black Christians are distributed among other small Black religious sects, the Roman Catholic Church, or white Protestant denominations. However, the overwhelming majority of Blacks belonging to these denominations are still part of predominantly Black congregations, despite the denominational affiliation (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). The seven major historic Black denominations are: the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E.Z.)

Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E.) Church; the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Incorporated (NBC); the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (NBCA); the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC) and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). The Pentecostal Assemblies of The World, Inc. is one of the world's largest Apostolic Pentecostal Christian denominations, accounting for many Black Pentecostals.

Black¹ women in particular often cite religious based faith as a significant source when seeking help to deal with IPV/A (Potter, 2007; St. Vil et al., 2017). A literal and figurative place of refuge, amidst a myriad of social challenges faced by African Americans, many Black women seek comfort between the walls of “The Black Church” and hold strong connections to religious faith and spirituality, which is often complemented by the social relationships they have with clergy and other members of their faith community. Yet, few publications (for a notable exception see Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006), have investigated how R/S abuse manifests amongst those who are a part of the African-American community.

When considering who is most vulnerable to R/S abuse, this particular type of abuse likely has a unique impact on IPV/A survivors who hold religious faith as a key part of their identity. National survey data indicate that the large majority (70–80%) of African Americans hold religion as an important facet of their life (Taylor et al., 2003). Although religious women are no more likely to encounter IPV/A than those who do not hold religious faith, they are more likely to endure such abuse for longer periods of time (Nason-Clark, 2004). They may hold strong convictions about marriage that serve as internal barriers to separation or divorce, and report that abusive partners have indeed leveraged these internal beliefs against them as another mechanism of control (Popescu et al., 2009). Even though physical violence is not present in most African-American intimate relationships (Bent-Goodley, 2001; Black et al., 2011), protestant IPV/A survivors who do experience violence, will often seek God or consult religious leaders before seeking physical safety, secular support, or other forms of help (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2019).

Within the Black church, clergy play a pivotal role as spiritual guiders and religious leaders in mass settings and through personal counsel (Taylor et al., 2000). Their perspectives on IPV/A are important to examine because it is likely that they utilize these perspectives in determining how they respond to incidents of IPV/A and deal with in in their respective communities. Brade and Bent-Goodley (2009) seminal survey research revealed that most Black clergy in their sample acknowledged the existence of IPV/A within church

¹Blacks are a racial group that includes African Americans, West Indians/Caribbeans, Africans, or people from other parts of the African Diaspora; yet for the purpose of this paper, Black, Black American and African American will be used interchangeably throughout.

connected families, recognized the importance of training on the topic, and encourage the further development of resources to combat IPV/A both inside and outside of the church (N = 140). A more recent study across nine cities revealed that regardless of perspectives, Black clergy actions and inaction may be more detrimental than helpful in ending violence. Williams and Jenkins (2019) found that survey respondents usually underestimate the occurrence of IPV/A amongst church members, may suggest potentially harmful interventions (i.e. couples therapy), and infrequently address IPV/A from the pulpit (N = 112). The Black Church's response to IPV/A is ever evolving (Bent-Goodley et al., 2012) with a range of commitments across regions and denominations, yet the perspectives of Black clergy on R/S abuse within IPV/A is virtually absent from the empirical literature.

Study purpose

Prior to this study, the ways in which R/S abuse play out amongst African American intimate partners has largely been based on theoretical speculation. This qualitative study aimed to elicit clergy perspectives on R/S abuse that occurs in the context of intimate partner relationships. Intending to obtain the Christian perspective of those in the African American community, the primary research question was: How do Black Christian clergy view R/S abuse that occurs in the context of intimate partner relationships? An underlying goal was also to investigate whether R/S abuse was a phenomenon that Black clergy encountered – to what extent did a small sample encounter IPV related R/S abuse?

Methods

The community based participatory research (CBPR) implementation process

This study initially began as an independent project of the first author/principal investigator (PI). After recruiting and conducting the first four interviews, the PI discovered the unique advantages of CBPR and transformed the project into one that included a community member as an equal partner. The second author was recruited for her in-depth knowledge of R/S abuse within the context of intimate relationships and her close connections to Christian Black clergy throughout the Midwest region in which the study took place. The community member agreed to join the research team as a co-investigator (Co-I) and recruited participants from her own network. The PI trained the Co-I on basic qualitative interviewing strategies so that to the best extent possible, the style of both researchers was matched across interviews. At the conclusion of the interview, study participants were provided with two lists of local DV service

providers, one for victims-survivors and one listing local partner abuse intervention programs. Data collection protocols for this study were approved by the human subjects review board of Washington University in St. Louis.

Sampling & data collection

Thirteen clergy members were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling between 2014–2016. Inclusion required that participants identified as a clergy member and were 18 years of age or older. Data for this study were obtained face-to-face through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Participants were invited to attend an interview that was expected to last approximately one hour. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 4 hours. Interviews lasting longer than one hour were done at the participants' request, upon demonstrating eagerness to provide more data on the topics discussed. No incentives for participating in the study were offered.

Interview guide development

Interview questions were developed and refined by the first author in consultation with a PhD-level social work scholar. As part of the interview, participants were read a list of IPV/A-R/S abuse tactics. This research and theory based list of tactics was initially developed by the PI and published as part of a theoretical work (Davis, 2015). The PI consulted the community member on the list of tactics a priori to that publication and her feedback was incorporated into revisions. The interview guide is available upon request. See [Appendix A](#) for the list of tactics.

Data sources

Eight interviews were audio recorded. Five interviews were not audio recorded; instead vigorously written field notes were taken during the interview, then immediately transferred into audio diaries post-interview. Key points were captured within post-interview written notes. The first four interviews were transcribed by the PI. The remaining audio recordings (diaries and live interviews) were transcribed verbatim by a professional service and double-checked for errors by the PI.

Data analysis

The interview guide was used to deductively generate a first draft codebook. The codebook was enhanced inductively during data analysis as unexpected concepts emerged. The PI and Co-I both identified the same four reoccurring broad concepts within their independent larger lists of key topics and the two researchers reached consensus on what these initial major themes

consisted of and consolidated the remaining identified concepts. Interpretative content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016) and thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) were used to extract key areas. Researchers created a codebook that consisted of 41 codes. These codes were applied 498 times to 436 excerpts of data. Her review confirmed that the findings were reflective of the raw data. This final stage was approved by the IRB of The University of Texas at Arlington.

Results

The informants predominately reported their ethnicity as Black/African-American (n=11). Two participants described their ethnicity as Human (n = 1) or Other (n = 1). The participant who offered “other” as their response to ethnicity indicated doing so because of the perception that future related research would be more likely to be funded. The researchers both independently and collectively categorized these two participants as Black/African-American based on knowledge about ancestral heritage. Age of participants ranged from 31–84 (M = 55, SD = 13.79). Majority (n = 9) were women and four were men. Most respondents reported being a part of the Pentecostal denomination (n = 7). Majority of participants reported ministering to predominantly Black/African-American congregations and communities (n = 10). All (N = 13) of the clergy members reported having been approached for professional counsel on IPV/A at some point in their position as clergy. [Table 1](#) provides a summary of participant descriptive information. Despite the diversity in personal experiences, most (n = 11) participants also verified that they had specifically encountered IPV related R/S abuse during ministerial duties or counseling. Some participants initially denied having ever encountered IPV/A-R/S at first probe, but later recognized they had indeed encountered the form of abuse once specific examples were queried (see [Appendix A](#)).

Of the clergy who reported encountering IPV related R/S abuse tactics as ministers (n = 11), the most often encountered tactic across participants was someone using a scripture to support or justify behavior toward an intimate partner (n = 11), followed by preventing/forbidding a partner from attending church or a church function (n = 6). [Appendix A](#) presents the full list of reported tactics and the number of clergy who encountered each tactic.

How do Black Christian clergy view IPV/A related R/S abuse?

Most clergy were disapproving of beliefs that fostered endorsement of religio-spiritual abuse. They viewed the IPV related R/S abuse as a problem that had serious and harmful impacts. [Table 2](#) provides a summary of major themes that emerged during data analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive data of clergy interviewed on IPV/A related religious/spiritual abuse.

Ever encounter IPV related R/S Abuse?	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Denomination	Years as Clergy	Title	Participant #
Yes	M	38	Black	Non-denominational	20	Apostle/Prophet	P-07
Yes	W	59	Afr. Am.	Pentecostal	16	Evangelist	P-06
Yes	M	53	Afr. Am.	Pentecostal	32	Minister	P-09
Yes	M	52	Black/Cherokee, Italian	Church of God in Christ (Pentecostal)	31	Apostle/Prophet/Evangelist	P-10
Yes	W	45	Afr. Am & Native Indian	Non-denominational	10	Evangelist/Prophet	P-08
Yes	W	50	Afr. Am.	Pentecostal/ Apostolic faith	9	Assistant Pastor	P-01
No	M	31	Afr. Am.	Presbyterian	10	Outreach Director	P-02
Yes	W	58	Black	Apostolic	10	Minister	P-03
No	W	66	Black	Pentecostal	24	Fellowship Minister	P-04
Yes	W	84	Afr. Am	Pentecostal	61	Pastor	P-05
Yes	W	53	Human	7th Day Adventist	30	Evangelist	P-12
Yes	W	59	Other	Non-denominational	40	Pastor	P-11
Yes	W	71	Black Am	Pentecostal	30	Pastor	P-13

Table 2. Results summary table.

Theme	Meaning	Sample evidence from the data
#1 IPV/A related R/S abuse as a Spiritual Problem/Witchcraft/Demonic	Most participants viewed R/S abuse perpetration as a symptom of a larger spiritual problem, one that unfortunately occurred quite frequently.	"It's demonic and I'm pretty sure it is used daily just like we use toilet paper, definitely it's used – its demonic" (Participant #4)
#2 IPV/A related R/S abuse as mis-interpretations of God's Word	Clergy viewed the proposed tactics and other instances of IPV/A-R/S abuse as often being driven by patriarchal misinterpretations of biblical scripture.	"I think that when a man uses the word of God to control a woman, that he has interpreted the word of God wrong and that he uses it for his own advantage to control the woman" (Participant #3)
#3 Pastor Perpetration	Although participants revealed incidents of lay persons using R/S abuse tactics, several participants described having witnessed this type of behavior perpetrated by a man in a senior leadership position against a woman (usually their wife).	"A lot of leadership used the word to scare their wives" (Participant #10)
#4 Importance of Survivor Knowing God's Word to Combat IPV/A-R/S abuse	Participants emphasized that a key factor in mitigating the problem was through theological reeducation, particularly empowering women with the tools necessary to convey 'correct' interpretations of scriptural text.	"If you know your scriptures they cannot use it against you ... They get it from either their minister or they get it from their husband and it's hearsay ... But, if you study for yourself, then you can have your own foundation to remove yourself out of that harmful situation" (Participant # 12)

Theme (1): A spiritual problem/witchcraft/demonic

Most participants (n = 7) specifically described the perpetration of R/S abuse as a spiritual problem. One participant shared their disapproval of IPV/A-R/S abuse and perception of the source by saying “no one should ever control anyone and it is a ploy of the devil and ... religious control [has no place] in no one’s life.” (Participant #12). Clergy often referred to the issue as being driven by “witchcraft” or “demonic” spirits. For example, participant #8 described IPV/A related R/S abuse as “witchcraft, the Jezebel spirit, a controlling spirit”. She said, “It is demonic. These people operate out of their own, for their own personal gain, and God is not in this.” This interviewees’ referral to a demonic spirit driving R/S abuse perpetration was coupled alongside selfish behaviors, indicating that being subject to demonic spirits was not in insulation of personal accountability.

Participants expressed concern that perpetration of this type of abuse hampers the spiritual well-being of individuals who act abusively toward their partner. As participant #2 stated:

[I’m] concerned about the person who would use that kind of manipulation because obviously, this person already has a control problem. They are being abusive and then if they tell their spouse they are going to go to hell, it’s something in their heart where there’s just another aspect of them trying to control ... There are so many things that he is missing that is out of step with what he claims to be as a Christian. He is not recognizing the value of his wife – being made in the image of God. He’s not loving his neighbor as himself. So he’s not loving his wife, but then that points to that there’s something going on in his heart. There’s an issue with him in how he’s relating to God.

Ultimately, while R/S abuse was viewed as being influenced by a “spiritual problem”; the consequences of engaging in such behaviors were not limited to the target, but also perceived to have negative impacts on the spiritual health of the perpetrator.

Theme (2): Mis-interpretation of God’s word

Participant #13 explained that misinterpretation was due to a lack of knowledge and proper training. Participant #5 and others noted this misinterpretation occurring amongst perpetrators who may identify as Christian. As she recounted:

He supposedly was a believer. He was faithful in church. [He told her] ‘you’re the wife and you’re supposed to be submissive to your husband. You’re supposed to do what the wife’s supposed to do. As a wife you’re supposed to make sure that my food is ready that my clothes are washed.

However, participants indicated that this behavior was not limited to Christian men involved in the church. One Evangelist noted that she had

encountered similar behavior even though the person attempting to use scripture in order to control their partner was not a Christian. She shared:

He would use that scripture saying that she was being rebellious by saying that she was not doing what he told her to ... like if he wanted her to go out to a club out drinking and partying and she didn't want to do that and walk a new path. And he would say if she really wanted to obey God, she would do what he asked her to do – like he was just using the word of God to control her ... he was using that because he knew that she believed the word of God and she was beginning to change on him. He began to see her nature and pattern change and in order to get control of her he used the word of God against her ... He was not a Christian but she was (Participant #3).

Theme (3): Dealing with leadership (pastoral) perpetration

Majority of the clergy members who described situations in which they were aware of IPV/A related R/S abuse, shared that at least one of the cases encountered involved perpetration by a religious leader. Men holding the title of 'Pastor' were reported as the most common. Three of the four men interviewed, suggested that the broader church body should hold those who perpetrated this type of abuse accountable for their actions as one strategy for dealing with the problem. After sharing his experience of encountering a fellow clergy member who was perpetrating IPV/A-R/S abuse, participant #7 suggested the following set of steps needed to occur for men of faith who engaged in these behaviors:

- 1.) Expose them for sin (stop acting like the Catholics that let them go from church to church);
- 2.) Do not accept it upon any circumstance ... because the people must be accountable;
- 3.) If they want to come back, and they say they've been delivered, they must have documentation of that, have some other pastors that can account that they've been changed, they've been delivered before they're restored back into the ministry;
- 4.) If they keep doing it, then you kick them out.

He went on to say:

It's not judging them. It's the way God has already put structure in place of how you deal with sin in the churchyou're supposed to expose them for the snakes that they are. Expose them as impostors, witchcraft, workers of iniquity.

These suggested procedures for dealing with leadership perpetration of IPV/A related R/S abuse were echoed by another interviewee (Participant #2), who gave biblical reference for why such steps were considered appropriate. He referenced 1st Corinthians 5:13, explaining that biblical scripture offers the aforementioned formal instructions for how to deal with abusive husbands who refuse to change their behavior or any person who claims to be a part of the church but refuses to address sin in their lives. In conjunction to this conversation, he noted that many churches, but especially Black churches did not seem to invoke what he described as legitimate tools of "church discipline".

Theme (4): Importance of survivor knowing God's word to combat R/S abuse

Participants described how they imagined IPV related R/S abuse could negatively impact victims. As Participant #3 noted “it can mess with her mind psychologically, confuse her, it could damage her if she stays in the relationship. It could even cause her to have a nervous breakdown.” The importance of confident interpretation of scripture as a victim’s own tool for survival was discussed upon clergy noting the damaging affects IPV related R/S abuse could have on women in particular.

Of the 10 clergy who had encountered IPV related R/S abuse, most encountered it by a woman survivor seeking counseling for the issue. Few clergy encountered IPV related R/S abuse through an abusive partner seeking help, rather clergy reported recognizing IPV related R/S abuse perpetration through witnessing or becoming aware of the actions and behaviors of men. The responses of clergy to IPV related R/S abuse varied depending on the relationship with the party. For example, one participant indicated that she had encountered IPV related R/S abusive behaviors with her own marriage, citing that “he always used ‘being the head of the household’. I just listened to him but I didn’t let it [dictate my actions]—if he was trying to abuse me, it didn’t work” (Participant #1). Another participant shared his experience in witnessing a prominent church leader boast about using religion to justify taking sex from a spouse. The interviewee recounted that according to the survivor, this particular church leader would say: ‘You are my wife, and you are to obey me. I am the head ... ‘God would shorten your life’. I told her ‘That is not the word ... that is for the children and not for the wives.’[We need to] equip the wives with the word of God, so [even] when a pastor uses the Scripture [improperly], they can [come back] with the right interpretation (Participant #10).

Majority of the participants indicated using or intentions of using a religious-spiritual perspective to address IPV related R/S abuse. This was often done by using the Bible as a resource to condemn abusive behaviors and reject erroneous interpretations. Participants reported first inquiring what biblical scriptures were being used to justify or endorse abuse and secondarily providing reeducation or corrections on the misinterpretations of that text. Although actual and anticipated responses varied, this approach was the most frequently discussed technique clergy referenced. When responding to survivors, this approach was used as a mechanism for building confidence in their independent interpretation of biblical text. Participant #12 described this by saying

When [a survivor] comes I ask them, ‘When [your partner] say the scriptures ask them where they got it from, bible verse and scripture text. That way if they’re not quoting it right then you can just tell them that they don’t have the basic of saying what they’re saying is not true. You have to know your word’. I tell them, ‘know what you believe. That way they cannot have that stronghold over you when it comes to scriptures’.

Discussion

Religious and spiritual relationships with God or the sacred are supposed to be spaces of safety, not harm. Clergy indicated that IPV related R/S abuse was most often expressed or emboldened by a misinterpretation of scriptures, which they attributed (in part) to a broader spiritual problem. One-way clergy envisioned combating this problem was to equip those being attacked with feminist theological interpretations of scripture. Although participants did not use the term “feminist”, most described an understanding of biblical scripture that viewed women as partners to men, made in the image of God, not subservient to men, aligning with other theological perspectives that condemn abuse (Gernet, 2000). Participant #4 summarized many of the previously discussed themes quite succinctly and highlighted their relationship to one another by sharing:

Yea making you feel guilty – its witchcraft – its demonic. That’s why you gotta be wise as a serpent and gentle as a dove. Everything we done talked about is witchcraft, but the same people go to church go to the market, go to work. So you gonna take the thing I use most – more than anything in the world [my faith] to manipulate me – to [condemn] me for not putting up with your crap? [No], and most Black women ain’t going for it. That’s one thing about Black women – most of us ain’t going for it.

According to her, even though Black women experienced IPV related R/S abuse, they were more likely to challenge attempts to manipulate their faith against them than other groups. To some degree this sentiment echoed findings of previous scholars indicating that Black women are more likely than white women to “fight back” using force when they are physically abused or assaulted (Goodmark, 2008). This “fight back” could theoretically also occur within a spiritual realm, using prayer or feminist interpretations of scripture and biblical knowledge to challenge attempts of ongoing spiritual or religious abuse.

Christian religious leaders work with survivors who seek advice on IPV/A, even though they may not have had specialized training to do so (Zust et al., 2017). One barrier to bringing DV service providers and clergy together is the existence of stereotypes that lead to severe pessimism about how each will treat those who experience or use violence. The results of this study undercut the stereotype that religious leaders are resistant to IPV/A training. The findings in this study echo previous research indicating that Black clergy desire training on IPV/A (Brade & Bent-Goodley, 2009; Dyer, 2016; Tedder & Smith, 2018). Consistent with Tedder and Smith (2018) findings, the Black clergy in this study, regardless of often times being unprepared, perceived IPV/A as immoral. Given participants’ requests of training and desire to build collaborative partnerships with secular IPV/A service providers, our findings indicate that some Black clergy may be more open and less reluctant than other Christian religious leaders in building bridges to providing religious and IPV/A specific

services (McMullin et al., 2015). However, as previous research indicates for longevity and the greatest impact, these relationships must be built carefully (Dyer, 2016).

Research studies examining R/S abuse within the family are scarce (Simonic et al., 2013) even though its perpetration has harmful consequences (Novsak et al., 2012). The findings of this study underscore the perceived negative impact of IPV related R/S abuse through the lenses of clergy members who have witnessed, been approached for counsel, and/or have personally endured the behaviors discussed.

Abuse involving the sacred is difficult to dismantle and confront. Knowing when a line has been crossed from practicing religion and self-interpretation of faith texts to abuse is a difficult task. Even though many religious studies scholars and pastors have highlighted the notion of healthy bi-directional submission in marriage and intimate relationships, the misuse of scripture remains a problem in the lives of many who survive IPV/A. While recognizing the occurrence of R/S abuse is a first step, much more work is needed to understand the prevalence, incidence and related risk and protective factors to develop or support effective prevention and intervention efforts. Engaging in R/S abuse tactics may occur in conjunction with other forms of abuse, but may also be a precursor to other forms of violence. Some scholars have offered empowering survivors of abuse with interpretations of religious text that serve as liberating praxes for resisting all IPV/A, especially that which is religio-spiritual in nature (Desai & Haffajee, 2011). While this may be helpful for combating R/S abuse, the degree of impact may vary across stages in the intimate relationship. For example, empowering survivors who are experiencing abuse early in their relationships may result in differing outcomes than empowering survivors who have experienced R/S abuse for decades.

Limitations & strengths

Despite the growth of women clergy in recent years, the overwhelming majority of clergy (approximately 78%) in the U.S. are men and most paid clergy (approximately 77%) are white (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Even though we did not seek participants based on their gender, a particular strength of the study is the representation of Black women cleric voices, as few previous studies have sought their perspectives on R/S abuse. Additionally, over half of participants interviewed highlighted the voices of Pentecostal clergy, a denomination that few IPV/A studies have examined. Our specific findings may be reflective of having a sample that was majority women; however we found no stark differences between the men's and women's perspectives on IPV related R/S abuse.

One limitation of the study design is that participants were not consulted on the accuracy of the audio transcripts. However, in the interviews in which audio

was replaced with rigorous note taking and reflective memos, the notes were reviewed by some participants for confirmation of accuracy. Across all interviews, only one participant indicated having attended any DV training, and this was described as “one class [session]” which was organized by a senior pastoral leader. Even though clergy were not asked specifically if they had or had not received IPV/A training, based on the content of the interviews and the participants request for more training on IPV/A, the authors inferred that most participants had not been formally trained in this area. The results within this study may differ significantly, if clergy had been formally trained on IPV/A prior to the interview. Furthermore, religious life amongst African Americans, including participation and perspectives varies across age, socioeconomic status and geographical region (Taylor et al., 2003), factors that were not able to be teased out with this exploratory sample.

As with all qualitative research, the findings are not intended to be generalizable to an entire population, but rather shed light on an under-explored area in the IPV/A literature in order to gain better understanding. The conversations were limited to heterosexual, marital relationships. The probes used within interviews often utilized examples highlighting mixed-gender spouses. Same-gender examples were not offered by interviewers and no clergy member referred to providing counsel to same-gender spouses or couples, limiting the inference of clergy perspectives to heterosexual couples (most often those who were married). Additionally, a limitation of time and resources precluded us from reaching saturation before closing the study.

At times, we noticed that some participants seemed uneasy in discussing the topics. Some clergy or laypersons may feel restricted in what they can say about the behaviors of fellow ministers, citing interpretations of scripture that discourage speaking negatively about clergy members. For example,

Don't bad-mouth your leaders, not even under your breathe, and don't abuse your betters, even in the privacy of your home. Loose talk has a way of getting picked up and spread around. Little birds drop the crumbs of your gossip far and wide (Ecclesiastes 10: 20 MSG).

Or Psalm 105:15 KJV “Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm” could be interpreted as forbidding one from disclosing details about abuse perpetrated by religious leaders. This offers one plausible explanation for the appearance of hesitation or discomfort, however this was not addressed during any interview and therefore the source of some participants unease cannot be determined.

Implications & future research

The significance of the first theme (clergy view of IPV related R/S as demonic/spiritual problem/witchcraft) cannot be minimized, especially in

consideration of Pentecostal denominations, which explicitly attribute some human behaviors in everyday life as being driven by demonic influence. By indicating that IPV related R/S abuse tactics were in part due to supernatural forces or evil spirits, clergy indirectly asserted that a 'spiritual warfare' or cleansing might be necessary to combat this type of violence and abuse (Warren, 2012). Future research is needed to understand Pentecostal views on the convergence of spiritual based deliverance, secular, or mixed approaches to IPV related R/S abuse intervention.

Despite the reluctance of some congregants and church leaders to define IPV/A related R/S abuse because of its complexity (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006), the implications for forming a more cohesive understanding of this type of abuse and its manifestation has the potential of informing social work and therapeutic practice in unique ways. With a richer understanding of IPV related R/S abuse, clinicians, researchers, and clergy can work together in developing new interventions to address this issue, while improving existing program strategies. Partner abuse intervention program curriculum could be expanded to discuss this form of abuse and group facilitators could be trained on how to challenge participant's justifications for perpetrating IPV related R/S abuse. Victim-survivor services could use the related research to further their understanding of survivor's experiences and prepare themselves for responding to those who have been subjected to this type of abuse.

Few participants discussed safety at all and no one identified safety as a first step in protecting survivor's lives, indicating that more specific training is needed. Raising awareness amongst Black clergy could break down misunderstanding, misuse of scripture, and unhealthy fraternity-like protection of perpetrators behavior if training is accepted and widespread.

Advancing culturally sensitive understandings of IPV/A involves recognizing that current definitions or descriptions of IPV/A may be incomplete and need updating. The impacts of IPV related R/S abuse remain unknown. Failure to investigate this problem more deeply may have far-reaching consequences, such as isolation of victims, abandonment of faith, mistrust in clergy leadership, or more. Greater awareness and acknowledgment of R/S abuse as a form of IPV/A may provide survivors with a sense of support in knowing they are not alone and free them from suffering in silence. With more discussion of this issue, education and training, resources may be updated to include the manifestations and harms of IPV related R/S abuse as a distinct form of violence.

The findings of this study underscore previous scholars' encouragement that collaboration with clergy regarding IPV/A is critical for improving social service responses (Dyer, 2016). Expanded partnership and discussions with service providers and clergy may need to involve educating the body of the church about IPV/A through training events on how the broader church (i.e. lay people) can recognize abuse, respond effectively and refer individuals to

IPV/A-specific services when needed. Educating the broader church body may also encourage the development of DV ministries that continue raising awareness throughout the year, and not limited to a particular month. Culturally and religiously sensitive online IPV/A training has recently been designed for Korean American faith leaders and preliminary testing suggests promising outcomes, indicating that basic training may be implemented widely in a cost-effective manner (Choi et al., 2018). Similarly, projects like RAVE, spearheaded by Dr. Nancy Nason-Clark, offer a wealth of easily accessible training materials and resources online that are built specifically for Christian clergy (The Rave Project, 2019).

Clergy hold a wealth of knowledge that could be useful to help secular service providers combat IPV/A. The information obtained in this study was a necessary precursor to survey research, as it confirmed the existence of theoretical tactics of R/S abuse to be queried for prevalence. Bidirectional training is needed in order to prepare religious and secular first responders to adequately address those who seek or need help. Creation and dissemination of resources that are targeted to the Black church like those prepared by The Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community (IDVAAC) (Williams, 2011) and the African American Domestic Peace Project (AADPP) are vital in demonstrating how impactful clergy can be in procuring family peace. Improved understanding of IPV related R/S abuse and stronger relationships between clergy and service providers may improve the ability of providers to deliver culturally relevant services, instead of the usual “one size fits all” approach that tends to be colorblind, for men who batter (Williams & Becker, 1994). For example, in partnership with Bishop (Dr.) Roderick Mitchell, a group of men in Mississippi harnessed the power of fine arts, theology, and feminist values to create and record a song specifically designed to condemn IPV related R/S abuse perpetration, offering a tool could be used as an educational or motivational resource across a wide variety of settings.

Future research should examine how Black Christian clergy who have been formally trained to deal with IPV/A perceive and respond to R/S abuse. Future work should also investigate barriers and facilitators of Black clergy engagement in IPV/A training. It is also important to reiterate that this form of abuse has been documented as occurring across racial/ethnic and religious groups (Jayasundara et al., 2017) and our work is not intended to imply that IPV related R/S abuse is isolated to the African American Christian community. Without further research we cannot confirm or deny that the purpose of using R/S abuse tactics is to prevent survivors from building a strong self-confidence and knowing who they are. At this stage, we can only hypothesize that such motives may drive these behaviors as a way of tightening control and preventing a survivor from pursuing freedom.

Finally, the Black community nor the Black church are monolithic groups. Even though most Black Americans search for refuge through faith or faith-communities, many do not lean on the Black church for such support or guidance, therefore secular avenues for addressing IPV/A in the African American community must also continue to be pursued in order to meet the needs of a very diverse population.

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Disclosure of interest

The authors declare they have no conflicts to report.

Ethical standards and informed consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with the institutional review boards of Washington University in St. Louis and The University of Texas at Arlington. Informed consent was obtained from all persons included in the study.

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Appendix A.

Sample List of IPV Related Religious Abuse Tactics and Frequency Encountered by Clergy

Section 1: Theological explanation and reasoning as grounds for control/maltreatment of a partner

- Used a scripture to support or justify abusive behavior toward your partner (n = 11)
- Pressured, demanded or took sex from your partner on the basis of religious ideals (n = 3)
- Told your partner God would not condone divorce or separation when they tried to leave the relationship because of abuse (n = 4)

Section 2: Spreading fear of moral failure

- Told your partner they would go to Hell or Heaven based on making a decision about your relationship (n = 4)
- Pressured your partner to forgive you on the basis of religion (n = 5)
- Told your partner they were being a bad Christian or hypocritical for not following your orders (n = 3)
- Blamed your partner for *your own* spiritual or religious deficiency (i.e. for being a bad Christian) (n = 3)

Section 3: Specific intention of diminishing one's relationship with God or religious practices

- Purposely destroyed or damaged your partners religious material (i.e. taped sermons, Christian books or pamphlets, Bible, etc.) (n = 0)
- Told your partner to not read scripture or pray (n = 1)
- Accused your partner or implied they were having an affair with a church member or minister (n = 5)
- Prevented/forbid your partner from attending church or a church function (n = 6)

Adapted from (Davis, 2015)