Symbolic Interaction

"Why Would Our Heavenly Father Do that to Anyone": Oppressive Othering through Sexual Classification Schemes in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

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In this article, we examine how leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS or LDS Church) responded to the emergence of homosexuality as a prominent social issue by engaging in "oppressive othering" (Schwalbe et al. 2000), which refers to the process whereby elites classify members of other groups as morally inferior. On the basis of LDS archival materials, we analyze how LDS elites accomplished "oppressive othering" by constructing sexual classification schemes defining homosexuality as the result of (1) familial, (2) gendered, and (3) sexual dysfunctions. In conclusion, we draw out implications for understanding (1) how elites, religious, or otherwise, construct sexual classification schemes that facilitate the ongoing subordination of sexual minorities, (2) the importance of taking an intersectional approach to oppressive othering, and (3) the ways elites revise institutional doctrines in response to shifting societal issues and concerns.
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The establishment and maintenance of mutually exclusive classifications are central to organized religion (see e.g., Berger 1967; Weber 1922). Religious institutions have rich histories of establishing and enforcing divinely inspired distinctions between, for example, acceptable and unacceptable practices, sacred and secular worlds, earthly and eternal desires, and moral and immoral people. Religious leaders seem to understand the importance of categorizing all aspects of social life for their followers. Since people act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them (see

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Blumer 1969), religious leaders maintain their claims to "eternal truth" by continuously classifying new behaviors, desires, and social phenomena within the context of their existing doctrines (see Gubrium and Holstein 2000 for a discussion concerning similar dynamics wherein individuals attempt to fashion creditable selves within the context of institutionalized systems of meaning). Thus, when religious people adopt the classification schemes of their faith, and infuse them with personal significance, they generally feel more connected to the divine as well as their religions (see also Snow and Machalek 1983).

What happens when, as part of the ongoing evolution of historical and cultural experience, social issues emerge that contradict existing religious classification schemes? How do religious leaders resolve these dilemmas? We examine these questions through content analysis of archival materials from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS or LDS Church). Specifically, we analyze how LDS leaders responded to the emergence of homosexuality as a prominent social issue by engaging in "oppressive othering" (Schwalbe et al. 2000:423), which refers to the "overt or subtle assertion of difference as deficit." In so doing, our analysis extends research on religious institutions and oppressive othering by demonstrating ways elites, religious or otherwise, socially construct sexual classification schemes. Importantly, it is not our intention to generalize our findings to the larger population of religious leaders. Rather, we use the case of LDS leaders to outline some ways institutional elites may construct sexual classification schemes that facilitate the ongoing subordination of sexual minorities (see also Becker 1990, 1998).

Additionally, our analysis outlines the social construction of a specific institutional narrative while demonstrating the elements of this narrative that allow religious adherents to accept it as credible and effective (see, e.g., Benford and Snow 2000; Gubrium and Holstein 2000; Schneider and Ingram 1993). Specifically, we examine LDS elite discourse as an institutional narrative socially constructed to meet institutional needs and provide guidance for followers (see also Gubrium and Holstein 2000). In so doing, our analysis reveals three institutional discourses that bring a particular notion of homosexuality into being, and justify the treatment of homosexual people in the LDS church. Echoing and integrating previous treatments of institutional narratives (Loseke 2007) and oppressive othering (Schwalbe et al. 2000), we thus demonstrate some ways elites define some people as sympathetic while classifying others as "morally deficient and deserving of condemnation or punishment" (Loseke 2007:668; see also Schwalbe et al. 2000), which may be examined across various institutional contexts.

OPPRESSIVE OTHERING

To better understand LDS elites' classification of homosexuality, we draw on Schwalbe and colleagues' (2000) elaboration of "Oppressive Othering." Synthesizing decades of interactionist research in search of generic processes in the reproduction of inequality, Schwalbe et al. (2000:423) conceptualized "oppressive

othering" as the process whereby elites define "another group as morally and/or intellectually inferior." Specifically, elites may mobilize their symbolic authority to create classification schemes — or ideologies that may be used to explain social differences — that depict subordinate groups as socially deficient, deviant, and negative (see also Schneider and Ingram 1993); in short, *Other*. This type of ideological maneuvering is thus not simply oppressive because it devalues people, but because it denies subordinates the institutional and symbolic resources necessary for crafting credible selves (see also Gubrium and Holstein 2000; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Oppressive othering may thus be seen as one of the generative processes that give rise to interactional and structural inequalities (see also Collins 1981).

Building on these insights, interactionists have examined how elites engage in strategies of oppressive othering by establishing and maintaining racial, classed, and gendered classification schemes. In her comparative analysis of homelessness in New York and Washington, DC, for example, Bogard (2001) demonstrates that different classifications of homeless people (the least among us versus victims of medical issues) resonated with members of each community in relation to the economic resources available to community leaders and activists. Similarly, Omi and Winant (1986) showed how white American elites classified racial minorities in derogatory ways to claim superiority over African Americans, and preempt the emergence of working-class and racial solidarity. Further, Grazian (2007), as well as many other gender scholars (see Schrock and Schwalbe 2009), found that males maintained their claims to masculine privilege by classifying women as purely sexual objects.

Although researchers have typically examined oppressive othering classification schemes in isolation, it is important to note that these systems of meaning often rely upon and reinforce other forms of social inequality (see e.g., Collins 2005; Schwalbe et al. 2000). Racial classification schemes that depict racial minorities as less worthy or capable than whites, for example, were instrumental in justifying the passage of neo-liberal welfare reform policies in the 1990s (Duggan 2004). Similarly, conservative advocates opposed to sexual education and extra-marital sexual behavior have drawn upon longstanding notions of middle-class and religious sexual restraint (see Sarracino and Scott 2009), and conventional classifications of white females as pure beings requiring white male protection while, as Collins (2005) notes, positioning African American children as sexual predators and lower-class children and sexual minorities as sexually dangerous and untrustworthy (see also Elliott 2012). Rather than isolated classifications of distinct groups, these studies suggest there may be much to learn from the ways racial, classed, gendered, sexual, and other classification schemes reproduce and give rise to one another across contemporary society.

In order to explicate both the social construction and potential intersectional dynamics of social classification schemes, interactionists may do well to return to Goffman's (1963) early observations of stigma. Examining the hierarchical relationship between women and men, for example, Goffman (1963) noted that only the "unblushing" male would be able to signify membership within many dominant social categories including but not limited to religious tradition, body type, racial

identity, family form and position, and economic status (see also Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Further, Goffman (1963) noted that occupying a devalued position within any of these classification schemes would ultimately result in harm for the individual, her or his sense of self, and his experience with the entirety of social relations. Although Goffman (1963) left the social construction of these classification schemes unexplored in his analysis of everyday interaction, these insights — coupled with the recognition of the intersectional and reproductive potential of classification schemes — reveal the significant impact minority status, however defined, may have upon individuals and entire social groups (see also Collins 2005; Loseke 2007; Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Interestingly, previous inquiry into the intersection of religion and sexuality implicitly suggests the intersectional, reproductive, and significance of stigmatization due to placement in subordinate classification schemes. Studying a group dedicated to helping gay Christian men construct evangelical identities, for example, Thumma (1991) illustrated some ways these men interactionally and narratively refashioned their religious and sexual selves to resolve cognitive dissonance. Similarly, Wolkomir (2006, 2001) found that both gay and ex-gay Christian men fashioned creditable religious and sexual identities by revising dominant notions of Christianity and homosexuality within the context of local support groups. Further, Ponticelli (1996) illustrated the efforts of ex-lesbian Christian women to resist marginalization within Christianity during support group and Ex-gay conference meetings. While each of these studies demonstrated that Christian sexual minorities were labeled as "other" within normative Christian traditions, we know far less about the processes whereby religious elites — or other institutional elites — construct some sexual identities and practices as "other" in the first place.

Our analysis extends these lines of inquiry by examining how religious elites construct sexual classification schemes. Specifically, we examine how LDS leaders constructed homosexuality as the result of social dysfunction, and in so doing, defined homosexual people as less favorable and ultimately deficient Others in relation to the Church. Before presenting our analysis, we contextualize the efforts of LDS elites by outlining traditional LDS classification schemes concerning human existence, gender, the family, and heterosexuality. In so doing, we discuss how the emergence of homosexuality as a prominent social issue created problems for these schemes, which LDS elites ultimately resolved by engaging in oppressive othering.

MORMONISM AND HOMOSEXUALITY

Over the past 70 years, religious leaders have wrestled with the emergence of homosexuality in the public sphere (see Wilcox 2001). While some religious organizations have begun to open their doors to nonheterosexuals (McQueeney 2009; Moon 2004) and some groups of sexual minorities have founded their own religious institutions (Sumerau 2012; Thumma 1991), other religious groups have responded with fierce opposition (see e.g., Erzen 2006; Pitt 2010; Robinson and Spivey 2007). Specifically,

many religious elites have drawn upon a selection of scriptural and doctrinal references to classify homosexuality as, for example, a plague; an abomination, a disorder, and a violation of God's design (see also Wolkomir 2001). Although they never addressed the subject prior to the 1950s, LDS leaders and members (often referred to as Mormons), as evidenced by their advocacy against same-sex marriage, have become an increasingly active presence in this ongoing debate (Petrey 2011; Williams 2011).

Similar to other religious institutions (see Fetner 2008), Mormon opposition to same-sex rights and recognition relies heavily upon the foundational classification schemes of their religion (see Cragun and Phillips 2012). Specifically, Mormons classify human existence as an eternal pathway, which includes passing through phases as disembodied spirits prior to birth, earthly vessels of God's will and revelation during this life, and celestial beings following death. As a result, the small time spent on earth represents a test to determine one's status in the next phase of existence. Rather than a simple pass or fail grade, however, Mormons believe the afterlife contains multiple levels wherein the most faithful may enter the Celestial Kingdom while the most egregious sinners will be banished to Outer Darkness, and everyone in between will enter different levels of status or glory. Mormons thus believe earthly experience is merely a probationary period situated between their prior and future spiritual lives (see Ludlow 1992).

Building on this classification of mortal life as a liminal phase preceding their ultimate destination, Mormon doctrine and most Mormons classify gender, heterosexuality and marriage as eternal and essential elements of moral selfhood. Since the religion defines heterosexual sex as the mechanism whereby spiritual offspring are released into earthly existence, the religion also teaches that people are assigned complimentary sexual and gender roles by the creator himself prior to their arrival on earth. Similarly, the religion teaches that only married believers may become gods in the next life, and that believers may live with their spouses eternally in the afterlife. LDS leaders thus define heterosexual marriage as a necessary condition for experiencing the entirety of God's plan and ushering in one's own spiritual offspring from the celestial realm. As a result, the Mormon eternal classification scheme contains no symbolic space for the existence of homosexuality.

Considering that homosexuality cannot exist within the classification schemes of traditional Mormonism, LDS leaders have classified it as a deficiency resulting from social, rather than eternal, mechanisms (see Phillips 2005; Williams 2011). Elaborating upon this classification scheme, LDS elites echoed Catholic (see Yip 1997) distinctions between homosexual desire (problematic but treatable) and activity (purely sinful), and published two official educational documents concerning the proper treatment of homosexuality — *Homosexuality* (1981) and *Understanding and Helping Those Who Have Homosexual Problems* (1992). Similar to approaches developed by Ex-gay Ministries (Erzen 2006), LDS elites thus defined homosexuality as a treatable disorder, and prescribed religious therapies for those so afflicted. In so doing, LDS elites classified homosexuality as an example of heterosexual

deviance rather than a natural or spiritual variation of human existence (see also Phillips 2005).

Building on these insights, we offer a situated analysis of this type of ideological maneuvering within a specific context (see Schwalbe et al. 2000). Specifically, we examine how LDS elites defined social and religious dysfunction as the cause of homosexuality, which allowed them to incorporate homosexuality into their existing classification schemes without having to alter these ideological foundations (see also Loseke 2007 for a similar insight concerning the use of institutional narratives to reinforce the existing beliefs and practices of individuals and groups). In so doing, they crafted a sexual classification scheme, which ultimately facilitates the ongoing subordination of sexual minorities.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Seeking to gage the ways LDS elites classified homosexuality; we collected archives of the LDS's General Conference (GC) talks (1897–2009), its monthly publication *Ensign* (1971–2012), and the two publications on homosexual treatment mentioned in the previous section. The LDS GC is a biannual meeting where members and others gather to receive instruction and inspiration from Church elites. Similarly, *Ensign* is the official adult publication of the LDS Church, which generally contains faith-promoting and proselytizing guidance for members, and the two documents mentioned in the previous section are the official treatment recommendations for homosexual people in the Church. Additionally, we examined the 2010 two volume edition of *The Church Handbook of Instructions*, an official publication of the religion that provides the leaders of the religion clear guidance on Mormon doctrine, beliefs, and policy. Since LDS elites hold editorial power over the release of all official Church documents, the combination of these materials represents a comprehensive record of official LDS teachings about homosexuality.

In order to analyze the classification of homosexuality throughout the archives, we utilized a word search program called *dtSearch*, which allowed us to index text files and rapidly search for specific terms. While we already had the two publications concerning homosexual treatment, we sought to also capture all the ways LDS elites talked about homosexuality in their major speeches and publications. Doing so allowed us to identify all usages of relevant terms, such as "homosexuality," "gay," and "same-sex," and pull the documents wherein LDS members discussed these issues. After identifying relevant documents, we sorted out articles and speeches concerning homosexuality, and loaded these into a qualitative software program for analysis. This process yielded a final sample of 57 *Ensign* Articles and 49 *GC*.

Although we utilize especially illustrative statements throughout the analysis below, our overall sample of LDS elites' statements concerning homosexuality consists of references made as early as 1954 and as late as 2012. Within this range, however, we observed a sizable spike in references to homosexuality in 1970, and noted that LDS elite references to homosexuality have remained relatively constant

throughout the end of 2012. While the spike in 1970 — as well as the continued relevance of the topic today — may be attributable to many major events throughout the 1960s including but not limited to the San Francisco (1965–1966), Los Angeles (1967–1968), and Stonewall (1969) riots, the formation of the Metropolitan Community Churches (1968), or the initial Gay Pride Events in the United States (1969), it is beyond the scope of this study to ascertain what, if any, influence these events had upon LDS elites. Despite our inability to ascertain such influence, it is noteworthy that our sample captures LDS elites' classification of homosexuality prior to the rise of the Religious Right (see Fetner 2008) or the emergence of the Ex-gay movement (see Erzen 2006), and reveals relatively stable patterns of discussion on this topic up until the end of 2012.

Considering that our overall sample allows us to witness the classification of homosexuality throughout the last 58 years, it is also important to note the similarities between the LDS and other conservative Christian traditions, such as the Religious Right (Fetner 2008), the Ex-gay Movement (Erzen 2006), and the Abstinence Only Educational Movements (Rose 2005). Specifically, as we suggest in the aforementioned review of Mormonism and note throughout our analysis, LDS elites' often equate homosexuality with other forms of "sexual deviance," appeal to notions of sexual and moral "brokenness," and make use of specifically middle-class versions of family and parenthood that each of these other groups have used throughout the last quarter century. In fact, our analysis reveals that LDS elites utilized these same narrative devices *before* the emergence of these other groups in the mid-to-late 1970s. While we are not able to explicate what, if any, influence LDS elites had on the emergence of these other — more well-known — movements, the historical record suggests that they could have done so, that they also could have later been influenced by the emergence of these groups, and that the most likely source of inspiration for LDS elites would have been the statements on homosexuality in the 1940s and 1950s by the Quaker and Catholic traditions, which initially conceptualized it as a problem or disorder that afflicted otherwise moral people (see Wilcox 2001 for a concise review of these statements). Regardless of the direction of influence, we thus utilize the LDS historical record to illustrate generic patterns of inequality reproduction that continue to influence social, political, religious, and sexual debates today.

In fact, recent shifts in Christian discourse concerning homosexuality — LDS generated or otherwise — demonstrate the importance of excavating the classification schemes at the heart of the issue. Whereas conservative Christian discourse has softened in the last 40 years, conservative Christian leaders continue to define sexual minorities as abnormal, distinct, and deficient beings that "might" be tolerated in certain situations, and lobby against civil rights for nonheterosexual people (see Thomas and Olson 2012). Similarly, some mainline and liberal Christian traditions have begun to welcome sexual minorities, but even within these settings, researchers have found that sexual minorities are interpreted as, treated, and expected to be inherently different from — and lesser than — heterosexual believers (see Moon 2004). As such, it would appear that shifting Christian discourses may simply represent an effort to put

a kinder, gentler face on the same old sexual classification schemes that conceptualize sexual minorities as utterly distinct, deficient, and in short, Other. Rather than focusing on the chronological shift in Christian discourses concerning homosexuality, we thus examine the themes LDS elites marshaled throughout the last five decades to classify homosexuality for their followers.

Our analysis developed in an inductive manner. Drawing on elements of "grounded theory" (Charmaz 2006), we examined the content for recurring patterns, and noted that LDS elites devoted substantial effort and time to define the supposed "causes" of homosexuality. Following this observation, we sorted the "causes" into categories, and observed that, as others have suggested (see Phillips 2005), the statements did not actually talk about homosexual experience, and instead, focused on heterosexual deviance. As a result, we created categories to capture the ways that LDS elites defined homosexuality as the result of dysfunctional (1) familial, (2) gender, and (3) sexual experience. After examining interactionist literature concerning sexual and religious meanings, we came to see these classifications as part of the process whereby LDS elites defined homosexuality — and by extension sexual minorities in general — as an unfavorable Other.

CLASSIFYING HOMOSEXUALITY

What follows is an analysis of sexual classification schemes constructed by LDS elites to make sense of homosexuality. First, we examine how LDS elites classified homosexuality as the result of dysfunctional parenting and unhealthy familial dynamics. Next, we analyze how LDS elites classified homosexuality as the result of people failing to adopt the essential gender roles given to each person by God. Finally, we demonstrate how LDS elites classified homosexuality as the result of continuous participation in immoral sexual behaviors, such as masturbation, fantasy, pornographic intake, and same-sex experimentation. Throughout our analysis, we reveal the ways that these classifications positioned homosexuality as something inherently oppositional and deficient in relation to Mormonism, and relied upon oppressive classifications of familial, gendered, and class dynamics. While we treat these classifications as analytically distinct, LDS elites often drew upon more than one at a time in practice.

Experiencing Familial Dysfunction

It would be difficult to overestimate the centrality of the family within Mormonism. As the following example from *Handbook 2* makes clear:

> The Family is a unit ordained by God. It is the most important unit in time and eternity. Even before we were born on earth, we were part of a family. Each of us is a beloved son or daughter of spiritual heavenly parents with a divine nature and destiny. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* 2010)

Since LDS familial classification schemes leave no room for homosexuality, LDS leaders classified homosexuality as the result of familial dysfunction. Specifically, this involved arguing that dysfunctional parenting and unhealthy familial dynamics caused homosexuality.

LDS elites classified homosexuality as oppositional to the family by defining it as the result of unwholesome family environments. Specifically, this tactic involved suggesting that only heterosexual-based families could serve the purposes of God, and that the heterosexual family was the only appropriate context for sexual relations. The following statement, which directly follows advice on same-sex marriage, offers a typical example:

> Sexual relations are proper only between a man and a woman who are legally and lawfully wedded as husband and wife. Any other sexual relations, including those between persons of the same gender, are sinful and undermine the divinely created institution of the family. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* 2010)

Building on this conceptualization of homosexuality as oppositional to the family, LDS leaders asserted that poor familial socialization resulted in homosexuality in children. The following explanation from a guidebook for treating homosexuality offers an illustrative case:

> A key factor in the development of both male and female homosexuality seems to be the lack of a warm, supportive, affectionate relationship between the individual and his father. Many times the father is either physically or emotionally uninvolved in his child's life or is punishing and authoritarian. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Homosexuality* 1981)

Similar to Ex-gay rhetoric concerning the importance of masculine role models in the development of properly heterosexual children (see e.g., Erzen 2006; Robinson and Spivey 2007; Wolkomir 2006), LDS elites thus defined homosexuality as the result of familial failures.

Alongside depictions of troubled families, LDS elites often placed the blame for homosexuality directly at the feet of parents. Echoing middle-class discourses defining parents' worth based on the development of their children (see Fields 2001), they thus classified homosexuality as the tragic result of parents' failure to be proper role models for their (sexually) developing children. The following example from *Ensign* captures this sentiment:

> Children learn how to love in a stable, healthy family. Parents need to know that lack of proper affection in the home can result in unnatural behavior in their children such as homosexuality or inability to be an effective parent when the time comes. (Victor Brown Jr., "Two Views of Homosexuality," *Ensign* 1975)

Similarly, the following excerpt from a pamphlet about homosexuality notes that a "Disturbed Family Background" may result in the following consequences:

> Because of inadequate parental examples in the home, the child does not learn proper masculine and feminine behavior. The relationship between mother and father is often strained, hostile, and competitive. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Homosexuality* 1981)

Echoing the concerns of many parents of lesbian women and gay men (Johnson and Best 2012) as well as Religious Right depictions of sexual minorities as inherently flawed (Fetner 2008), LDS elites classified homosexuality as a deficiency explicitly tied to faulty parenting. In so doing, they asserted that when parents deviated from divinely inspired "family values" they might receive something Other than properly heterosexual children.

Importantly, there were times when LDS elites blended notions of dysfunctional parenting and unhealthy family forms in their statements about homosexuality. Specifically, these statements classified homosexuality as explicitly related to dysfunctional — rather than normal — families. The following excerpts from a GC talk about the experiences of a young homosexual offer a typical example:

> "At a very young age," this young man continues, "I became convinced that my father didn't love me. It stemmed from an encounter when one evening I went to kiss him good night and he brushed me away. I'm sure he doesn't remember, and it had no significance to him, but I was devastated: my entire sense of security and my world crumbled into ashes as I stood there. "Not knowing what else to do, I ran from this new stranger in a panic to my mother and whispered tones to her of my calamity, which she denied, but did not convince me. That night I watched my father as I stood in the shadows of my darkened bedroom. I swore to myself that I would close the door until he sought to open it. I would ignore him until he sought after me. He didn't notice. If he did, he never asked me what was wrong."

Recounting this story, the speaker emphasizes the failure of each parent to respond to the needs of their child in the "affectionate" manner prescribed by LDS doctrine. As the story continues, the speaker ties these early breakdowns in the family to homosexuality:

> Well, needless to say, through the next years I went through the motions and rebelled to get his attention, which I got in the form of anger. At any rate, I developed into a homosexual, a vitiating disease, and was soon entrenched in my prison. I didn't know myself. And I have felt for more years than I can remember that the Lord didn't love me either. From age seventeen to about twenty-three I began using drugs. (J. Richard Clarke, "Ministering to Needs through LDS Social Services," GC 1977)

Like testimonies and treatment protocols promoted by Ex-gay ministries (Erzen 2006), LDS elites thus classified homosexuality as the result of dysfunctional families, and in so doing, distinguished good Mormon people and families from dysfunctional others. Further, their efforts rested upon the belief that "optimal" or "normal" families automatically established and maintained heterosexuality in the lives of children (see also Fields 2001).

In summary, LDS elites classified homosexuality as a deficit created by improper familial socialization. To accomplish this, however, they relied upon conservative notions of family values, middle-class respectability, gender essentialism, and parental privilege that facilitate the marginalization of other religious, sexual, gender, and class subordinates as well as the stigmatization of alternative family forms within mainstream society (see also Collins 2005; McQueeney 2009). In so doing, they made room for homosexuality within their existing doctrine while maintaining a firm stance against it and reaffirming their commitment to existing gender, class, and religious hierarchies. Importantly, this tactic involved drawing upon cultural notions of nonheterosexual people as poor representations of their parents (Fields 2001), oppositional to Christian family values (Fetner 2008), and damaged people in need of repair (Robinson and Spivey 2007). As a result, the sexual classification scheme constructed by LDS elites ultimately separated homosexual others from the moral existence of real Mormons while bolstering their claim to normalcy within other social hierarchies.

Violating Divinely Inspired Gender Roles

Similar to many conservative Christian traditions (see Bartkowksi 2001), Mormons believe God created specific, complimentary, and essential gender roles for women and men. The following statement concerning the role of fathers and mothers in the Church offers a typical example of LDS elites' conceptualization of these roles:

> Fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and the protection of their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* 2010)

Considering that these essential (and eternal) gender roles provide the foundation for both heterosexuality and the family in Mormonism, it is not surprising that discussions of the centrality of gender roles are pervasive in LDS elites' statements. In relation to homosexuality, for example, LDS elites constructed a sexual classification scheme that defined homosexuality as the result of failing to properly adopt these roles.

LDS elites classified homosexuality as a violation of divinely inspired gender roles. Specifically, this tactic generally relied upon mobilizing scriptural passages to define homosexuality as oppositional to the essential masculine and feminine natures of women and men. The following talk from a GC offers a typical example:

> In the scriptures we read, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." (Gen 1:27) The Lord

> defined some very basic differences between men and women. He gave the male what we call masculine traits and the female feminine traits. He did not intend either of the sexes to adopt the other's traits but, rather, that men should look and act like men and that women should look and act like women. When these differences are ignored, an unwholesome relationship develops, which, if not checked, can lead to the reprehensible, tragic sin of homosexuality. In other words, we have a responsibility as priesthood bearers to be examples of true manhood. (Victor L. Brown, "The Meaning of Morality," GC 1971)

Similarly, LDS elites often combined popular references with scriptural passages to classify homosexuality as an emerging immorality within the hearts of modern women and men. After reading a handful of news pieces about Christian groups reaching out to homosexuals, for example, one LDS elite responded in the following manner:

> Some voices must cry out against them. Ours cannot remain silent. To the great Moses these perversions were an abomination and a defilement, worthy of death. To Paul it was unnatural, unmanly, ungodly, and a dishonorable passion of an adulterous nature and would close all the doors to the kingdom. (Spencer W. Kimball, "Voices of the Past, of the Present, of the Future," GC 1971)

Similar to some men in batterer intervention groups (Schrock and Padavic 2007), the Promise Keepers movement (Heath 2003), and supposedly enlightened men's movements (Schwalbe 1996), LDS elites appealed to cultural notions of manhood to distinguish between moral (manly) and dysfunctional (homosexual) behaviors. Importantly, LDS elites did not draw the same distinctions between homosexuality and womanhood. While this may be because, as Wolkomir (2006) notes concerning wives of ex-gay Christian men, conservative Christian femininities are built upon the affirmation and acquisition of husbands and children, and thus do not necessarily require affirmation via heterosexual prowess, it may simply reflect the masculine foundations of both Christianity and Mormonism. In either case, LDS elites' classification of homosexuality as a failure to properly adopt appropriate gender roles — and a possible attack on heterosexual manhood (see also Schrock and Schwalbe 2009) — drew symbolic distinctions between real Mormons and homosexual others (see also Sumerau 2012).

While LDS elites hinted at the dangers of gender transgression fairly regularly, they also explicitly classified homosexuality as an attack on manhood. The following illustration provides a typical example of this type of classification:

> Every form of homosexuality is sin. Pornography is one of the approaches to that transgression. There is no halfway. Some people are ignorant or vicious and apparently attempting to destroy the concept of masculinity and femininity. More and more girls dress, groom, and act like men. More and more men dress, groom, and act like women. The high purposes of life are damaged and destroyed by the growing unisex theory. God made man in his own image, male and female made he them. With relatively few accidents of nature, we are born male or female. The Lord knew best. Certainly, men and women who would change their sex status

> will answer to their Maker. (President Spencer W. Kimball, "God Will Not Be Mocked," General Conference 1974)

Importantly, statements like this defined homosexuality as a "vicious" attack on gender roles, and claimed that the emergence of homosexuality — as well as alternative ways of "doing gender" (see West and Zimmerman 1987) — would "damage and destroy" the Church. Similar too many reactions transsexuals face during public interactions (Schrock et al. 2009), LDS elites classified gender transgressions as ultimately dishonorable to God and society. Further, LDS elites generally followed statements like this by explaining that the "high purposes" homosexuality destroyed included, for example, marriage, family, and exemplifying God's predetermined roles for males and females. Rather than simply putting gender roles at risk, LDS elites thus classified homosexuality as a destructive force for the entirety of Mormon tradition.

Overall, LDS elites classified homosexuality as a violation of divinely inspired gender roles. In so doing, they used homosexuality to create a warning for people who sought to express their gender identities in alternative ways, and to symbolically position Mormon experience as inherently oppositional to homosexual practice. Rather than discussing possible variations in sexual and gender expression, their classification relied upon stereotypical depictions of atypically gendered homosexuality, and reproduced cultural notions conflating sex, gender, and sexualities (see also Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; West and Zimmerman 1987). Further, their efforts reinforced conventional discourses that conceptualize homosexuality as an assault on both traditional notions of gender segregation, and middle-class institutions including but not limited to monogamous marriage, nuclear family formation, and moral self-control and restraint (see also Duggan 2004). As such, LDS elites constructed a sexual classification scheme that ultimately marked homosexuality as a source of gender confusion, an assailant of the American class system, and a signifier of religious rebellion.

Practicing Sexual Immorality

In contrast to the essential and eternal conceptualizations of gender and the family by Mormon elites, homosexuality is typically classified as a learned practice confined to earthly existence. The following illustration offers a typical example of this definition:

> Homosexual behavior is learned and can be overcome. To believe that immoral behavior is inborn or hereditary is to deny that men have agency to choose between sin and righteousness. The Lord has given man the agency to make moral choices, and this agency is the cornerstone of his plan for exaltation. He has revealed that the ultimate goal for man is eternal life. It is inconceivable that — as some involved in homosexual behavior claim — he would permit some of his children to be born with desires and inclinations which would require

> behavior contrary to the eternal plan. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Homosexuality* 1981)

Rather than attempting to understand homosexuality in light of the variation of Gods' design, LDS elites, like Boyd Packer (2010), asked "Why would our Heavenly Father do that to anyone" (Boyd Packer, "Cleansing the Inner Vessel," *GC* 2010). Considering the premium Mormonism has traditionally placed on sexual purity, LDS elites' answers to such questions classified homosexuality as a problem developed in relation to other forms of sexual immorality. Specifically, this tactic involved arguing that people acquired homosexuality through prior experiences with pornography, masturbation, fornication, and sexual abuse.

LDS elites classified homosexuality as the result of previous experience with pornography. Specifically, they argued that pornographic intake corrupted sexual morals, which could lead to immersion in other forms of sexual deviance, such as homosexuality. The following excerpt provides a typical example of this sexual classification scheme:

> Pornography has become a major industry in many parts of the world. The chief psychotherapist at one of Washington's largest hospitals says, "A normal 12- or 13-year-old boy or girl exposed to pornographic literature could develop into a homosexual. You can take healthy boys or girls and by exposing them to abnormalities virtually crystallize and settle their habits." (Victor L. Brown, General Conference 1971)

Echoing traditional Christian fears concerning pornographic influence (Sarracino and Scott 2009) and middle-class fears concerning sexual knowledge and experimentation (Rose 2005), LDS elites argued that pornography could literally create homosexuality. Similarly, Victor B. Cline linked pornography and homosexuality to many other sexual immoralities:

> Scientists, R. J. McGuire, J. M. Carlisle, and D. G. Young, have noted how such sexual activity as masturbation, homosexuality, exhibitionism, and voyeurism can be prompted and reinforced by pornography. A number of studies I have reviewed suggest that persistent deviant sexual fantasies frequently lead later to deviant behavior … One's agency in this matter to a large extent has been lost. (Victor B. Cline, "Obscenity—How It Affects Us, How We Can Deal With It." *Ensign* 1984)

Echoing this sentiment, Theodore M. Burton extended the relationship between homosexuality, pornography and other sexual immoralities even further by stating:

> My special assignment for the past six years has been to assist the First Presidency in recovering people who have transgressed. In doing so, I have come to understand some of the behaviors that lead to transgression. What are they? Generally they are various personal indulgences based on selfishness. One of the greatest of these is the use of pornography. Pornography is related to such sins as self-abuse, homosexuality, fornication, adultery, child and spouse abuse, incest, rape, and cruelty. (Theodore M. Burton, "A Marriage to Last through Eternity," *Ensign* 1987).

While it is important to note that research has linked the consumption of pornographic (especially violent versions) materials to social problems including child and spousal abuse, incest, and rape (see Ezzell 2008 for a review), it has also shown that men's consumption of pornographic material may encourage such behaviors by affirming beliefs regarding the same traditional gender roles promoted by the Mormon Church. Further, it is intriguing that LDS elites associate completely voluntary sexual behaviors — such as homosexuality — with violent encounters, such as domestic abuse and rape. In so doing, LDS elites classify homosexuality as one step in a long line of immoral practices created through the consumption of pornographic materials, and echo middle-class notions of a "slippery slope" of moral decay overtaking contemporary American society (Rose 2005).

Alongside pornography and sexual crimes, LDS elites also suggested that homosexuality may arise through experiences with, for example, adultery, fornication, sexual fantasy, and masturbation. As Spencer W. Kimball explained:

> Sometimes masturbation is the introduction to the more serious sins of exhibitionism and the gross sin of homosexuality. (Spencer W. Kimball, "President Kimball Speaks Out on Morality," GC 1980)

Echoing statements linking homosexuality and pornography, LDS elites thus classified homosexuality as a side effect of other sexual immoralities. Similarly, Richard G. Scott explained how fornication (e.g., extra-marital sex) could lead to homosexual behavior:

> Within the sacred covenant of marriage, such relationships are according to His plan. When experienced any other way, they are against His will. They cause serious emotional and spiritual harm … It causes powerful physical and emotional stimulation. In time, that creates an unquenchable appetite that drives the offender to ever more serious sin. It engenders selfishness and can produce aggressive acts such as brutality, abortion, sexual abuse, and violent crime. Such stimulation can lead to acts of homosexuality, and they are evil and absolutely wrong. (Richard G. Scott, "Making the Right Choices," *Ensign* 1994)

Similar to statements concerning pornographic consumption, sexual violence, and masturbation, LDS elites cautioned against overstimulation that could lead to homosexuality. Importantly, these classifications constructed homosexuality as both sexually immoral and explicitly linked to many other sexual vices long opposed in Mormon doctrine. In so doing, LDS elites grounded their sexual classification schemes concerning homosexuality within the theological and institutional history LDS members were already accustomed to. As a result, their efforts simultaneously marginalized homosexuality while easing the process of othering for their membership and bolstering their potential claims to normalcy and middle-class respectability (see also Collins 2005).

LDS elites also classified homosexuality as the result of previous sexual abuse. Specifically, this tactic involved LDS elites — as well as "supposedly" homosexual

Mormons writing anonymously — asserting that childhood sexual abuse created inclinations for same-sex affection later in life. The following illustration provides a typical example:

> I don't know all the reasons for this weakness of mine, but I'm certain that some experiences I had beginning at age six contributed. I had a young uncle who was very kind to me, but he taught me some activities that were inappropriate. Sensing that those activities were wrong, when I turned eight and was baptized I vowed to stay away from my uncle — and I succeeded. However, I longed for my uncle's attention and sometimes tried to seek a substitute with childhood friends. Usually they would no longer be my friends, and often I felt very guilty, bad, and unloved. (Name withheld, "Becoming Whole Again," *Ensign* 1997)

Expanding this line of reasoning, LDS elites also invited A. Dean Byrd — a prominent conversion therapy advocate associated with the Ex-gay Movement and President of the National Association for Research & Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH) — to contribute to an *Ensign* issue in 1999. Discussing the primary causes of homosexuality and advocating conversion therapies, Byrd offered the following statement:

> What is clear is that homosexuality results from an interaction of social, biological, and psychological factors. These factors may include temperament, personality traits, sexual abuse, familial factors, and treatment by one's peers. (A. Dean Byrd, "When a Loved One Struggles with Same-Sex Attraction," *Ensign* 1999)

Importantly, Byrd's classification scheme incorporates both Mormon emphasis on sexual immorality and family dynamics and Ex-gay Movement rhetoric concerning flawed personality development and interpersonal treatment (see Erzen 2006) to define homosexuality as an affliction requiring a cure. Echoing treatment strategies and concerns about sexual abuse featured in their *Homosexuality* pamphlet (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1981), LDS elites — as well as their chosen guest advocates — thus classified homosexuality as an unfortunate reaction to emotional, physical, and psychological trauma.

All told, LDS elites classified homosexuality as a deficit created through previous experiences with other sexually immoral activities and desires. Interestingly, each of the other sexually immoral practices mentioned echo the fears used to affirm and promote longstanding middle-class values campaigns and neo-liberal policy agendas (see e.g., Collins 2005; Duggan 2004; Rose 2005). As such, their efforts symbolically equate homosexuality with other sexual immoralities that had long been banned and discouraged in both Mormonism and respectable middle-class society. Importantly, this tactic allowed them to simultaneously rally opposition to homosexuality as a social issue, and provide already established moral codes to members seeking to understand how to respond to homosexuality in general and homosexual people in particular. As a result, LDS elites ultimately placed homosexuality within already established sexual and classed classification schemes that defined any sexual activity

other than marital heterosexuality as inherently unsatisfactory, socially dangerous, frightening, and morally inferior.

CONCLUSION

Schwalbe et al. (2000) note that the placement of people into differently valued social categories is a central element in the reproduction of social inequalities (see also Collins 1981; Schneider and Ingram 1993; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; West and Zimmerman 1987). In an effort to further illuminate this process, we examined the construction of sexual classification schemes by religious elites as a form of oppressive othering. Central to oppressive othering is the institutional capacity and authority to define the origin and characteristics of social groups in ways that followers will accept and affirm in their ongoing interactions (see also Loseke 2007). Mobilizing other institutionalized classification schemes, such as those rooted in classed, familial, gendered, and familial hierarchies, allows elites to anchor their interpretations of homosexuality in the established traditions of their faith as well as the larger society, and provides a universal language or "discursive environment" (Gubrium and Holstein 2000) for responding to the "issue" within the Church. As a result, LDS elites' classification of homosexuality as the result of moral deficiencies simultaneously distinguishes homosexual people from moral Mormons, and establishes a treatment protocol followers may employ whenever they chance to encounter homosexual persons or ideas in their daily lives, which may ultimately influence social policy. Similar to racial, classed, and gendered classification schemes, sexual classification schemes thus serve the dual purpose of defining social groups as inherently flawed others and denying members of these marginalized groups access to the resources necessary for signifying fully creditable selves (see also Duggan 2004).

Focusing in on LDS elites' construction of sexual classification schemas allows us to see the intersectional quality of dominant classification schemes (see also Collins 2005). Rather than limiting their focus to an elaboration of sexual behaviors and desires, for example, LDS elites mobilized existing societal classification schemes that define the moral development of children as the ultimate responsibility of parents (Fields 2001; Johnson and Best 2012), the sexual and cultural practices of sexual minorities as oppositional to "family values" (Broad, Crawley, and Foley 2004; Fetner 2008), and the depiction of sexual minorities as wholly distinguishable from religious and moral people (Erzen 2006; Wolkomir 2006). Similarly, LDS elites built their sexual classification scheme upon the authority and affirmation of existing gendered (Robinson and Spivey 2007), religious (Bartkowksi 2001), sexual (Sarracino and Scott 2009), classed (Duggan 2004), and familial (Fields 2001) classification schemes that both assume and enforce essential and inherent heterosexual natures. Although researchers have typically examined dominant classification schemes in isolation from one another, these findings suggest there is much to learn about the ways some dominant classification schemes rely upon and reinforce others.

Our examination of LDS elites' construction of sexual classification schemes also reveals the importance of evaluating the meaning-making work of elites. Importantly, researchers conducting theoretical, methodological, and thematic reviews of our field have noted the overwhelming focus on the actions of subordinates (see e.g., Kleinman 2007; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Schwalbe et al. 2000). Lending weight to these arguments, our analysis reveals some ways elites, religious or otherwise, may socially construct systems of meaning capable of impacting the social experiences and outcomes of millions of people scattered throughout the world. Further, our analysis helps illustrate how elites craft effective classification schemes or institutional narratives (Loseke 2007) by relying heavily upon the foundational doctrines of their own institution as well as intersecting systems of oppression and privilege active in the larger social world. Considering that elites — especially those working in religious, political, and mass media institutions — typically elicit powerful feelings of trust, awe, pride, fear, and respect from both followers and opponents (see Fields, Copp, and Kleinman 2006), their collective meaning making, such as the construction of sexual classification schemes by LDS elites and other types of institutional narratives in a wide variety of social contexts (Gubrium and Holstein 2000), holds the potential to shift entire societal debates in both negative and positive ways.

The ability of LDS elites to shift societal debates is not just theoretical; the LDS Church was instrumental in the passage of Proposition 8 in California, outlawing same-sex marriage (Mckinley and Johnson 2008). Most estimates suggest that Mormons, strongly encouraged by the leadership of the religion, contributed as much as $20 million toward the Proposition 8 campaign, providing clear evidence of the power of religious elites to *other* homosexuals both rhetorically and legally. The resulting backlash against the LDS Church — in the form of protests and negative publicity (Garrison and Lin 2008) — has seemingly changed the degree to which the LDS Church is involved in efforts to restrict same-sex marriage. In recent campaigns to legalize same-sex marriage, the LDS Church has filed *amicus curiae* briefs, but has not openly requested that members of the religion donate money for political campaigns. While this shift in tactic has been interpreted by some to suggest the LDS Church is no longer engaged in an active campaign to restrict gay marriage (Mencimer 2013), it is likely more an effort on the part of the LDS Church to avoid the negative publicity that accompanied the religion's involvement in Proposition 8, as the religion's views on homosexuality have not shifted since 2008. Our findings thus suggest that interactionists seeking to better understand the reproduction of social inequalities must dig deeper into the multitude of ways elites, implicitly or explicitly and regardless of their intentions, shape societal patterns of oppression and privilege.

Finally, our analysis of LDS elites demonstrates the importance of investigating how religious leaders construct, maintain, and adapt institutional classification schemes. Although religious traditions rest upon the assertion of eternal truths, interactionists have long recognized religious institutions, like all other social institutions, rely upon patterns of joint action, collective meaning making, and ongoing processes of interaction and interpretation tied to shifting cultural and historical

social patterns (i.e., "going concerns"; see e.g., Blumer 1969; Gubrium and Holstein 2000; Mead 1938; Snow and Machalek 1983). Although recent interactionist research has convincingly demonstrated some ways gay and ex-gay Christian men (Wolkomir 2001), Evangelical college students (Wilkins 2008), prison chaplains (Hicks 2008), and belly dancers (Kraus 2009) adjust dominant religious meanings in order to fashion desirable selves, our analysis reveals there may also be much to learn from the interactional processes whereby elites construct and sustain the dominant religious ideologies these and their millions of followers draw upon in the course of their ongoing social interactions.

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