

“Oh My God, I Sound Like a Horrible Person”: Generic Processes in the Conditional Acceptance of Sexual and Gender Diversity

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This article outlines a generic process in the reproduction of inequality that we name “conditional acceptance.” Based on 20 in-depth interviews with cisgender, heterosexual Christian women who support same-sex marriage legalization, supplemented with reviews of LGBT, religious, and inequalities scholarship, we demonstrate how members of dominant groups may maintain boundaries that facilitate the persistence of social inequality by conditionally accepting members of marginalized groups. Specifically, our findings suggest that respondents both created the appearance of tolerance and maintained the devaluation of LGBT people by (1) supporting equality with a few caveats, (2) suggesting acceptance of those who cannot help being abnormal, (3) arguing that social change was not their responsibility, (4) defining sexual and gender difference as a personal choice, and (5) asserting that they could hate the sin while loving the sinner. In conclusion, we argue that examining processes of conditional acceptance may provide insight into (1) the persistence of social inequality despite social movement victories, and (2) the importance of integrating existing scholarship focused on sexual, gendered, and religious boundary maintenance.

Keywords: boundary maintenance, inequality, LGBT, religion, sexual, gender diversity.

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Religions are socially constructed patterns of belief and practice related to the supernatural (Avishai 2008). As Moon (2004) notes, they are the result of processes whereby people integrate official religious teachings into their own social experience over time (Avishai, Jafar, and Rinaldo 2015; Moon 2004). Religions, then, are not meanings in and of themselves, rather they are the result of processes of interaction and interpretation that shift in relation to varied experiences and contexts (Wolkomir 2006). Accordingly, individuals and groups can “work on” (McQueeney 2009) or “do” (Avishai 2008) religion in many ways. Such work entails the things that people do to integrate official religious teachings, personal beliefs and practices, and interactions with the secular world.

Gender and sexuality are foundational components in the social construction of both religion and society (Avishai, Jafar, and Rinaldo 2015; Barton 2012; Burke 2016; Bush 2010). Specifically, the ways people interpret, perform, and otherwise make sense of gender and sexuality dramatically shape what constitutes religion, as well as broader social norms (Moon 2004). Furthermore, gendered and sexual requirements shape who can or cannot be allowed within religions (Sumerau 2012), and who may be accepted more broadly in society (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). Studying the ways that people construct religion, gender, and sexuality, then, has the potential to yield insight into the processes that uphold large-scale patterns of inequality (McQueeney 2009). At the same time, we can learn about social change by attending to the ways people challenge and/or reproduce inequalities (Wilcox 2001).

What happens when, as part of constructing religion, gender, and sexuality, people encounter shifting attitudes about sexual and gender diversity? How do they manage potential conflict between established norms and social change? How do they depict themselves as both tolerant of diversity and oppositional to equality for others? We examine these questions through an interview study of cisgender, heterosexual, Christian women of various races, ethnicities, and denominations, levels of religiosity, who support legalized same-sex marriage. Specifically, we analyze how they, responding to increased secular (Worthen 2013) and Christian (Thomas and Olson 2012) tolerance of sexual and gender diversity, made sense of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. Rather than maintaining overt opposition previously taught throughout mainstream social institutions or fully embracing sexual and gender diversity, they seek to accept sexual and gender minorities, but only to a limited extent and only under certain conditions.

We argue that the efforts of the Christians whom we studied reveal a process of “boundary maintenance” (Schwalbe et al. 2000) missing from analyses of inequality reproduction, which we name “conditional acceptance.” By conditional acceptance, we mean the process whereby people respond to increased social tolerance of minority groups by expressing acceptance of such groups in limited or partial ways. For example, individuals may extend acceptance to members of a particular stigmatized group with certain explicit or implicit conditions, such as demanding that gay men conform to societal expectations of masculinity. In this way, our study contributes to existing scholarship on inequality reproduction, as well as on gender, sexualities,

and religion, by demonstrating some ways people may engage in conditional acceptance to maintain existing social boundaries while adjusting to broader patterns of social change. It is not our intention, however, to generalize these findings to the larger population of Christians, cisgender people, heterosexuals, and/or women. Rather, we use the data from this study to outline some of the ways people may conditionally accept marginalized others when they act — intentionally or otherwise — to maintain boundaries that facilitate inequality.

To this end, we focus on the efforts of our Christian respondents to make sense of both increasing sexual and gender diversity *and* attempts to maintain existing beliefs. It is important to note, however, the first studies comparing religious and nonreligious people's attitudes toward LGBT people reveal similarities between these groups in this case (Sumerau et al. 2017). Christian influence on dominant American notions of gender and sexuality, rather than religion itself (see also Fetner 2008), may be more important than whether people identify with a particular religion. In fact, similar variation has been demonstrated in the ways people of different sexual and gender groups respond to emerging sexual and gender diversity (Worthen 2013). As such, we focus on the shared or generic ways our respondents make sense of LGBT people in the current social context in order to, as Blumer (1969) and Lofland (1976) suggest, guide attention to generic processes in boundary maintenance that may be compared and contrasted within and between varied religious, sexual, and gendered populations.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATIONS OF GENDER AND SEXUAL DIVERSITY

In order to understand the responses of the Christians whom we interviewed, it is important to note the historical context that facilitated such reactions. In response to social movement activities by sexual and gender minorities in the 1920s, for example, American Christian traditions issued statements condemning homosexuality and gender nonconformity in the 1940s (Wilcox 2001). Despite this early opposition, movements for sexual and gender minority rights gained steam between the 1950s and 1970s, resulting in local victories related to education and housing, national victories related to scientific definitions of sexual and gender nonconformity, and the establishment of organizations seeking sexual and gender equality. As Fetner (2008) notes, these early victories facilitated the emergence of the Religious Right and the Ex-gay Movement in the 1970s (Erzen 2006). These groups responded to increased sexual and gender activism by defining homosexuality and gender equality as antithetical to America, Christianity, the family, and marriage. They further argued that sexual and gender rights efforts, if successful, would destroy the fabric of civilization.

In response, many lesbian and gay (LG) activists retreated from oppositional politics in favor of a politics of similarity (Duggan 2004; Ghaziani 2011; Warner 1999). Specifically, they began emphasizing LG conformity to Christian notions of

marriage, monogamy, monosexuality, family, reproduction, domesticity, cisnormativity, whiteness, essentialized sexuality (i.e., determined and fixed by God and/or biology), and middle-class respectability (Bryant 2008; McQueeney 2009; Sumerau, Padavic, and Schrock 2015). Termed “homonormativity” (Duggan 2004), such tactics sought to redefine some LG people as congruent with Christian morality and respectability (Barton 2012). This did not mean that all LG people became Christian, but rather that assimilating to Christian norms became the emphasis of the movement (Barton 2012). As a result, some LG people, mostly white, cisgender, religious, monogamous, and middle-class, were deemed potentially moral (Ward 2008) at the expense of others who were unable or unwilling to conform to such expectations (Sumerau, Padavic, and Schrock 2015).

Researchers noted that such tactics produced varied results for sexual and gender minorities. On the one hand, LG people capable of and willing to approximate Christian norms of race, class, gender, sexuality, and family gained much greater recognition and incorporation into media, social institutions, and political debates. In fact, surveys noted increasing (at least) tolerance of LG people throughout the past 20 years (Worthen 2013), and many LG movement groups established collaborative efforts with mainstream (and some explicitly LGBT) Christian groups (Moon 2004). In many ways, tolerance, and the potential acceptance, of sexual and gender diversity became prominent aspects of mainstream religious and secular politics, media, and scholarship.

At the same time, a growing body of scholarship noted that gains for LG people willing and able to approximate Christian expectations did not seem to translate into greater tolerance (much less acceptance) for other LG people or for bisexual and transgender (BT) people of varied identifications (Eisner 2013). As recently as 2017, surveys find that attitudes toward BT people lag far behind increasingly positive responses to LG people (Cragun and Sumerau 2015). Furthermore, the explosion of scholarship investigating intersections between homosexuality and Christianity over the last two decades (Rodriguez 2010; Wilcox 2009) did not tend to include considerations of BT or other sexual and gender minority experience (but see Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016). These divergent patterns suggest shifts in Christian reactions to some LG people may be predicated upon the continued marginalization of other sexual and gender minorities.

Analyses of shifting Christian articulations of homosexuality reveal another example of continuity in the midst of change. Examining the ways Evangelicals defined homosexuality over the past four decades, for example, Thomas and Olson (2012) showed a shift from viewing homosexuality as an abomination to seeing it as a potentially tolerable aspect of social life. In a similar fashion, Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams (2015) noted the ways Mormon official teachings about homosexuality shifted from overt damnation to depictions of LG people as “sympathetic victims” over the past six decades. While these studies reveal shifting Christian constructions of homosexuality, they maintain belief in heterosexuality as morally supreme, and homosexuality as lesser in the eyes of God.

Like many young Americans, our respondents grew up in the midst of such continuity and change. Specifically, they were born into or became active in Christianity when overt opposition to gender and sexual diversity was common and widespread, but have become adults at a time when Christian leaders — like their counterparts in secular and other religious traditions — are shifting away from overt condemnation (at least in relation to homosexuality). As Cragun and Nielsen (2009) note, such shifts are common for social institutions as they seek to both remain consistent enough with mainstream society to avoid scorn, and different enough to offer a distinct worldview. While this pattern plays out for many contemporary Americans, sociologists have yet to explore how people make sense of such conflicts. This article uses the case of heterosexual, cisgender Christians to outline some ways people may navigate such tensions through boundary maintenance (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

BOUNDARY MAINTENANCE AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF CHRISTIANITY, GENDER, AND SEXUALITIES

We draw on and extend Schwalbe et al.' (2000) theoretical articulation of *boundary maintenance*. Synthesizing decades of qualitative research in search of “generic processes” — or common ways of achieving similar goals (Blumer 1969) — in the reproduction of inequality, Schwalbe et al. (2000:430) conceptualized boundary maintenance as the preservation of symbolic, spatial, or other boundaries between dominants and subordinates. Specifically, members of dominant groups — such as Christians, heterosexuals, and cisgender people — may mobilize their resources to maintain distinctions between who is and is not normal, legitimate, or respectable. They may also act in ways that deny marginalized groups access to the resources necessary for full personhood and rights. Alongside generic processes of othering, emotional management, and subordinate adaptation, boundary maintenance may be seen as one of the generative processes that preserves interactional and structural inequalities and can be examined in a wide variety of settings and contexts (Collins 1981).

Schwalbe et al. (2000) outline three common strategies of boundary maintenance that facilitate the continuation of social inequalities. The first process involves the transmission of cultural capital. By defining who can and cannot access, for example, education, moral standing, political rights, and other valuable social goods, dominants limit the chance for marginalized groups to grasp social equality. Tied to the transmission of cultural capital, dominants may also limit access to valuable social networks and, in so doing, stall efforts by marginalized groups to access valued social positions, resources, and opportunities for advancement. While these first two strategies effectively preserve inequalities through symbolic or spatial segregation, dominants may also turn to the threat or use of violence when segregation is not enough to maintain unequal systems. In such cases, members of marginalized groups become targets of violence because they violate established boundaries.

Although left unmentioned by Schwalbe et al. (2000), survey research suggests that Christianity and religion more broadly may represent one of the ultimate

boundaries in contemporary American society (see Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). In fact, this is not surprising when we consider the ways religion has been used historically and at present to define and shape other boundaries including but not limited to racial (Collins 2005), classed (Heath 2012), gendered (Sumerau, Padavic, and Schrock 2015), sexual (Fetner 2008), and educational (Rose 2005) disparities. Studies integrating these fields suggest Christianity plays a powerful role in boundary maintenance.

For example, research has demonstrated many ways Christian individuals and groups accomplish all three generic processes of boundary maintenance (Barton 2012; Dunn and Creek 2015; Rohlinger 2006). Researchers have examined the ways Christian-backed legislation shapes who can and cannot achieve financial assistance from the US government (Heath 2012), what can and cannot be taught in schools (Rose 2005), and who is or is not considered a “real” American (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). Researchers have also noted examples wherein Christian groups banish people who disagree on political and social policies (Wilcox 2009), financially fund some ideological groups while advocating against others (Heath 2012), and limit what types of people may speak for God or serve as moral leaders (Bush 2010). Finally, researchers have demonstrated that Christian disapproval of a given social group often finds voice in secular and religious justifications of violence against marginalized communities (Cunningham 2012). In all such cases, Christians may transmit cultural capital, control access to networks, and contribute to the threat and use of violence (regardless of their intentions) in ways that preserve inequality.

These observations suggest there may be much to learn by incorporating Christianity (and religion more broadly) into scholarship exploring boundary maintenance. Especially at a time when foundational Christian and secular teachings about gender and sexuality are continuously challenged by sexual and gender minority groups (Barton 2012), as well as some nonreligious people (Mathers 2017) and Christians themselves (Burke 2016), it may be imperative to understand the ways people, within and between religious and nonreligious groups, maintain boundaries related to moral and immoral sexual and gender selfhood (Sumerau 2012). Additionally, recent shifts in rhetoric about homosexuality (i.e., from abominations to potential tolerance in the early 2000s) combined with emerging legislative efforts to marginalize sexual and gender minorities in public spaces (i.e., bathroom bills and attempts to overturn same-sex marriage throughout 2016) suggest that we may be entering the next phase of ongoing struggles between sexual and gender diversity on the one hand and Christian-based sexual and gender norms on the other. To this end, Schwalbe and associates’ elaboration of boundary maintenance strategies may become especially useful for understanding continuity and change in contemporary American religious, sexual, and gendered politics.

Scholarship examining the rise of “difference-blind” inequalities, however, suggests there may be more to the story than the three processes Schwalbe et al. (2000) provided over a decade ago (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Ghaziani 2011; McQueeney 2009). Successful social movements often result in efforts by dominants to reinstall existing

inequalities in a more marketable package (Collins 2005; Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams 2015). In so doing, dominants may preserve existing systems of inequality by (1) accepting or tolerating some minorities but not others, (2) using examples of past changes to define inequalities as unworthy of attention, and/or (3) sympathizing with marginalized groups personally while leaving the structural mechanisms that maintain inequality firmly in place. In such cases, inequalities are maintained through partial adjustment of cultural capital transmission, limited network access, and the reclassification of marginalized people as a threat to the established social order (Bonilla-Silva 2003).

Strategies of this type of nuanced boundary maintenance are what we outline in this study. Rather than withholding morality from sexual and gender minorities, our respondents suggest such people may be moral under certain conditions (McQueeney 2009). Likewise, instead of banning gender and sexual minorities from America, God's world, or places of worship, such people are admitted if they conform to other norms (Moon 2004). Furthermore, our respondents rarely suggest that gender and sexual minorities will violently overthrow the world, but rather, they argue that such people may be damaging their own souls and salvation (Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams 2015). In place of overt strategies of boundary maintenance or the pursuit of full equality, their meaning making strategically maintains sexual, gender, and religious boundaries by suggesting marginalized groups may be tolerable and potentially moral under certain conditions — a generic process we call “conditional acceptance.”

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Data for this study derive from in-depth, in-person interviews conducted with college students who identified themselves as cisgender heterosexual Christian women. Respondents were sampled from a mid-sized university in the southeastern United States. Cisgender Christian women college students were selected because research shows that (1) cisgender women tend to participate in organized Christianity at higher rates than other populations (Bush 2010), and (2) both college attendance and identifying as a cisgender woman on surveys are highly correlated with more accepting attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities (Worthen 2013). We sought to find out what people most likely to be active Christians and more likely to be accepting of sexual and gender diversity thought about contemporary political issues.

We also specifically sought to form our sample in relation to religious and activity levels that prior research suggests may be important to understanding the attitudes of Christians within and between many denominational groups (Barton 2012). We selected our sample from the Bible Belt, for example, because this is the region where research would suggest people are more likely to, despite shifting national patterns, explicitly condemn sexual and gender diversity when given the chance to speak freely. Furthermore, we only selected respondents who were active Christians in terms of

TABLE 1. Characteristics of the Sample

Overall Demographic	Specific Grouping	Number of Respondents
Race	Black	4
	White	10
	Hispanic	4
	Multi-racial	2
Religion	Catholic	9
	Protestant	11
Protestant tradition	Nondenominational	5
	Baptist	2
	Pentecostal	1
	7th day adventist	1
	Lutheran	1
	Messianic Jew	1
Attitudes on abortion	Abortion should be illegal	6
	Abortion should only be legal in some cases	7
	Abortion should be legal	7

All characteristics obtained through participants' self identification. All respondents identified as cisgender women (i.e., assigned female at birth and currently identify as women), as heterosexual, and as Christian. All respondents were between the ages of 18 and 22, and supported legalization of same-sex marriage even if they did not explicitly approve of homosexuality.

participation (i.e., all reported attending church at least once a week, and all but two were also part of campus ministry efforts). In this way, we sought to learn how those most committed to a given belief system responded to potential changes that could change or otherwise influence sexual and gender beliefs related to their faith.

To this end, respondents were recruited through word of mouth, posted flyers, and snowball sampling over 12 months. The sample consists of 20 cisgender, heterosexual Christian women who reported regularly attending services within a variety of Christian traditions. We chose not to focus on one denomination because we wanted to see what processes or strategies emerged regardless of individual tastes and beliefs (see also Lofland 1976 for discussion of examining shared or group meanings that transcend individual differences within groups). As such, all respondents regularly engage in religious activities individually and in groups when able, and define Christianity as a core part of their identities. Table 1 contains the demographic profile of the sample in terms of age, race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. The sample was evenly split between respondents who believed the Bible was the literal word of God and those who believed it contained stories and metaphors created by writers inspired by God. It was also split evenly between respondents who identified as politically and religiously pro- and antiabortion.

The interviews were conducted by the first author, and lasted between one and two hours each. Following elements of grounded theory (Charmaz 2013), interviews took a conversational form wherein the first author asked about a wide variety of topics including but not limited to abortion, same-sex marriage, polyamory, homosexuality, bisexuality, transgender experience, heterosexuality, religion, nonreligion,

the Affordable Care Act, poverty, and the definition of marriage. For example, the analyses below come from responses to the following prompts: “What do you think of same-sex marriage”; “What do you think of homosexuality”; “What do you think of bisexuality”; and “What are your thoughts on transgender people?” Respondents had complete latitude to talk as much or as little as they wished, and the first author asked follow-up questions to clarify or gain more detail on respondents’ statements.

Interestingly, our respondents’ overall responses to LGBT people mirrored those found in recent surveys (Worthen 2013). They demonstrated much more negative attitudes toward BT people in comparison to relatively positive attitudes toward cisgender LG people (Cragun and Sumerau 2015). In fact, even though our analyses reveal processes of conditional acceptance in relation to LGBT people, all of our respondents supported the legalization of same-sex marriage. Our respondents’ opinions mirror broader social patterns concerning emerging societal tolerance for homosexuality (Thomas and Olson 2012). As a result, they may provide an ideal case for outlining generic processes of religious, sexual, and gender boundary maintenance.

While we focus on generic processes of conditional acceptance in this case, respondents’ reactions to BT people included both conditional acceptance (though this was less common) and more overt demonization commonly targeted at LG people in the past (see Eisner 2013 for similar patterns in other contexts). In this article, we illustrate generic processes or common strategies whereby people may respond to social movement victories for LG people (i.e., familial rights, marital rights, and the right to serve openly in the military) while also noting that (despite ongoing demonization of BT experiences) respondents may, at times, extend conditional acceptance to BT people, as well. Rather than the clean-cut framework outlined by Schwalbe et al. (2000), such complexity further reveals the importance of exploring nuances of generic processes in the reproduction and/or challenging of inequality.

To make sense of the complexity of contemporary religious, sexual, and gender intersections, our analyses developed in an inductive fashion (Charmaz 2013; Lofland 1976). Respondents’ statements about LGBT people were separated out from the larger dataset, and open coded for recurring themes and patterns. After arriving at initial codes, we reread the transcripts seeking demographic patterns and other contextual elements and how respondents balanced defining LG people as different from them and viewing them as potentially legitimate at the same time. We also noted that such patterns of tolerance existed for BT people. Following grounded theory notions of constant comparison between strategies, processes, and statements (see Charmaz 2013), we separated out overt marginalization statements targeted at BT people from the dataset for further analysis elsewhere, and focused the following analysis on the similarities in reactions to LGBT people as a whole.

In so doing, we noted a pattern wherein respondents would, as Bonilla-Silva (2003) noted in relation to some racial topics and Lamont (2004) noted in relation to religious issues, symbolically suggest acceptance while also defining LGBT people

as not necessarily the same as them in terms of morals or worth. Recognizing this pattern, we went back through each set of statements and sorted similar ways or strategies respondents used into thematic categories (Lofland 1976). Through this process, we identified five interrelated generic processes whereby people constructed limited acceptance of others (Lamont 2004) while also maintaining boundaries between potential acceptance and ongoing disapproval (Schwalbe et al. 2000). We named these efforts “conditional acceptance” because they suggest the eradication of boundaries under certain conditions while maintaining those boundaries overall. In the following analyses, we outline five strategies of conditional acceptance.

STRATEGIES OF CONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE

Recent social movement victories and ongoing debates have created a social context wherein overt demonization of people who do not conform to cisgender or heterosexual assumptions may be met with either affirmation or scorn (Burke 2016; Pfeffer 2014; Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016). As a result, many people experience contemporary social life (like the cisgender, heterosexual, Christian women we interviewed) without knowing whether explicitly homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic statements will be interpreted in positive or negative ways. Within this context, the ability to appear at least tolerant of sexual and gender diversity becomes important for maintaining both a positive view of one’s self and the affirmation of unfamiliar others (McQueeney 2009). To manage this dilemma, people may engage in strategies of conditional acceptance.

In the following sections, we outline five generic processes whereby people may accomplish conditional acceptance. While we treat each of the five as analytically distinct (Kleinman 2007), people may utilize multiple processes or strategies collaboratively in their accomplishment of conditional acceptance. Furthermore, due to space limitations, we utilize illustrative examples of common themes to capture the overall patterns in the data instead of attempting to illustrate every single example (Blumer 1969). In this way, we show some ways that people may conditionally accept (or accept people but only under certain conditions and in certain cases) LGBT people in ways that ultimately facilitate patterns of social inequality.

We’re All Equal, but ...

The first way respondents conditionally accepted LGBT people involved stating that everyone is or should be equal, yet adding caveats or conditions to this proposed equality. In so doing, they claimed a positive social stance (i.e., support for equality) while making excuses for the absence of this stance in the broader society. This is illustrated in the following excerpt from a white Protestant respondent: “Politically, we’re all equals. We all have the same rights and we’re all made in God’s image, no one is better than anyone else. But the act of homosexuality is a sin and the people

who fall into that tendency will run into trouble.” Speaking about lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people as a whole, a Hispanic Catholic noted: “This is the hardest part because they don’t line up right with Catholic thoughts, but my personal viewpoint is just because you identify as gay, bisexual or lesbian, I don’t know if that should hurt your rights.” Similar to the ways white people often speak against racism in the abstract at the same time they repeat racist stereotypes (Bonilla-Silva 2003), our respondents voiced both opposition to and abstract support of LGBT people within the same statement.

As the following excerpt from a white Protestant notes, our respondents, like religious leaders and politicians in prior studies (Barton 2012), were well aware that they were walking a tightrope between increasing tolerance of sexual diversity and maintaining opposition to homosexuality:

At the end of the day, we’re all people and everybody should have the right to do what is going to make them happy long term. Even though the Bible literally says man and woman get married and have sex to produce offspring and get a family, in society now I wonder if it’s kind of a psychological thing that some people just can’t control it.

A Black Protestant offered a similar take:

Gay rights is like a weird thing for me because I have a lot of gay friends and I have no problem with gay people personally. I don’t think I should be able to take rights away from them, like being able to get married, but I also know it’s something God is not okay with at the same time.

Similar to white people with Black friends who are “not racist, but. . .” (Bonilla-Silva 2003), our respondents sought to *both* conform to social expectations of tolerance *and* maintain condemnations of homosexuality.

While the aforementioned examples come from discussions about homosexuality and LG people, respondents sometimes extended these techniques to other sexual and gender minorities, as well. A multiracial Protestant noted:

I would say that just because somebody is bisexual, I wouldn’t look down on them as a person. I think we really need to focus on equality, but also on what God would want us to do. We should not treat them any less as a person because of our views on that bi stuff.

Speaking about transgender people, a Hispanic Protestant noted:

Transgender is just not how God works. He states it, the Bible is his word. He verbatim said he made man to be man and woman to be woman. It could be a contradiction, but you have to take the time to understand God. So, they should get the help they need because that’s not how it is supposed to be.

Echoing discussions of how “real” women and men “should be” (Bartkowski and Read 2003), respondents defined nonconformity as a problem rather than an example of diversity. A white Catholic added:

This is such a hard thing — to be like “I am neither really male or female. I am this other sex, I want to change my sex — please respect that.” It sucks that people have to feel that way and change how they’re biologically made. Why do you have to change the way God made you?

Rather than defining LGBT people as automatically problematic, respondents engaged in what Bonilla-Silva (2003) referred to as “abstract liberalism” by suggesting LGBT people *should* be equal while also defining them as inherently different, not normal, and oppositional to their worldview. In so doing, as Ridgeway (2013) notes in relation to cisgender patterns of interaction and speech, they claimed the positive benefits of sounding as though they wanted equality while maintaining the beliefs that leave the status quo firmly in place.

They Can’t Help Being That Way

In the second strategy of conditional acceptance, respondents adopted religious (Wilcox 2009) and secular (Barton 2012) notions of sexuality as a biologically predetermined aspect of selfhood. As such, they suggested that LGB people should be tolerated because they cannot “help” being nonheterosexual. In so doing, they conditionally accepted LGB people by reinforcing long-standing social constructions of LGB existence as not just different but also deficient in comparison to heterosexuality (Burke 2016). The following excerpt from a white Protestant provides a typical example:

I think people are born that way. They cannot help it, but I don’t base what is right on that because if someone desires to break the law that doesn’t make it right. They have that desire and it’s a legitimate desire, I’m not one to say you don’t feel that way. We can’t control who we love, but gay and lesbian relationships that’s not in the best interests or what God intends for people.

Although the respondent above focused on LG people, respondents used similar tactics concerning bisexuality. A Hispanic Catholic said:

People are born that way — they can’t help it and that is sad. I remember one night it came to me arguing with friends that I wasn’t bisexual because I made out with a girl when I was drunk. They were like, well are you sure you’re not? To have to argue that was the weirdest conversation I probably ever had. For someone to have that conversation on a daily basis is just sad because they are who they are, it’s not their fault they are like that.

Echoing homonormative assertions originally promoted by LG churches in the 1960s (Wilcox 2001), respondents suggested that people who could not help being different might be okay, which also suggested anyone who could would (and perhaps should) choose to be heterosexual (Warner 1999). In so doing, they tolerated LGB existence by framing it as an uncontrollable defect from heterosexual nature or supremacy (Schrock, Sumerau, and Ueno 2014).

Additionally, essentialism (or being born a certain way; Wolkomir 2006) found voice in the conditional acceptance of transgender people. Like the examples above, however, such acceptance was offered while defining transgender people in ways that maintained boundaries between cisgender people and deficient others. A white Protestant offered a typical example:

I've read stories of people who they're like trapped in a guy's body, but want to be a girl. I would absolutely hate that — if you want to be a girl, be a girl. That one's gotta be tough, but it's their choice if they want to do that. I won't judge them, but I'm not going to talk to them because it's just a guy who really looks like a girl.

Another white Protestant offered a similar take: “I guess that’s the way God made you, and if you really feel that way okay. I feel sorry for those people because they’re lost, and like any other person who doesn’t feel that they belong, it’s kind of sad.” In such cases, transgender experience was defined as “sad,” but the marginalization that leads to difficulties for transgender people remained beyond the awareness and/or interpretations of our respondents. In this way, our respondents engaged in what Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers (2016) call “cisgendering reality” by marking transgender existence as inherently negative even if it could be tolerated.

It's Not My Problem

Despite their own professed belief in equality and support for legal same-sex marriage, respondents suggested that social change was not their responsibility. As a white Catholic claimed, “You do hear stories about them getting bullied, but I think they should take what they have now because no one is used to it right now. They should really just be happy with what they have right now.” A white Protestant sounded a similar note:

I don't have anything against them. I know they're fighting for their rights and I don't agree with all those hate crimes that happened, but they're fighting for so much in one small period of time. They can't expect everyone to just jump onboard with them. That's you, go ahead, but don't make such a big deal about it and draw so much attention because that causes more people to not agree with them.

Similar to cisgender men who benefit from gender inequality while arguing it is not their problem (Ridgeway 2013) and white people who benefit from racial inequality that they argue is not their problem (Collins 2005), respondents who benefit from *cis*-mono-hetero normativities (Schrock, Sumerau, and Ueno 2014) ignored their privileged position by defining the problems their privilege creates as not their responsibility to do anything about. In so doing, they symbolically claim to care, but stop short of taking any concrete responsibility for changing patterns they admit are unequal. Furthermore, they suggest that LGBT people should settle for any small changes, and be patient rather than outlining ways they could be more active in creating more broad changes.

These patterns showed up in respondents' interpretations of both LG and BT people. A white Catholic illustrated this after defining LG people as "perfectly normal": "I need to be morally superior so I would just pick one, don't cheat. That's the way I'd leave it because taking more is just too much and people won't like it." Similarly, a white Protestant offered the following interpretation of transgender movement activities:

It might be too much too soon. I mean, I wouldn't block them from having rights, but I'm not really sure I'd be standing in the front of that parade marching with them. I'd probably be on the side lines trying to figure out what's going on, but I wouldn't openly say, "No, you don't know what you are or you don't like what you are or you want to change what you are, no you're not a human." No, they're human. They can get rights, I wouldn't stop them, but I wouldn't necessarily help them. Oh my God, I sound like a horrible person.

In sum, our respondents recognized ongoing marginalization of LGBT people, but like members of other dominant groups (Collins 2005; Ridgeway 2013), they also suggested that there was no need for them to become involved in pro-LGBT advocacy. In so doing, as summarized by a Hispanic Protestant (below), they conditionally accepted LGBT existence without seeking to challenge sexual and gender inequality:

LGBT people, I mean, again, my initial judgment is that personally I don't think it's right and God doesn't like it. But then I'm like, oh no, they're still people — you're still a person — there is just something wrong with them. So, do you, you know, figure it out or not, change or don't — you should still have rights, you're still a human. It's hard for me because I don't get it, I never had that kind of problem you know, but they're still people. They still deserve love and rights. Just because I don't get it, I mean, that just means I'm luckier than them.

It's a Personal Thing

Bolstering their assertions that social change was not their responsibility and maybe too much, too soon, respondents' fourth process of conditional acceptance involved defining LGBT experience as the result of personal choice. Rather than focusing on the ways LGBT people are marginalized by existing assumptions and norms, such statements suggested that LGBT people decided to be different, and would only face marginalization as a result of their own actions. The following excerpt from a white Catholic offers an illustrative example:

If that is what makes you happy, then that is what makes you happy, and as long as you're not harming someone else it is your choice. I think it's a personal choice, you know, a personal identifier or lifestyle, and they just have to accept that it comes with some shitty things like having to justify yourself.

A Black Protestant added:

I am one of those Christians that believes you're not born that way, but I do believe the things you've gone through helps you pick your sexuality. I am okay with

lesbian and gay people because I feel they are still humans, but I do not approve of the lifestyle or just having sex with someone of the same sex because it's wrong.

Echoing white assertions of black deficiency based on “culture of poverty” arguments that ignore the systematic ways Black people face marginalization in America (Bonilla-Silva 2003) and similar attempts to blame cisgender women for negative outcomes facilitated by social patterns of sexism and misogyny (Ridgeway 2013), respondents argued that LGBT people were to blame for the problems created by systemic patterns of heterosexism, cissexism, and monosexism. As noted in the cases of cisgender women and racial minorities, this allowed respondents to ignore any role that their own privileges played in the continued subordination of LGBT people.

In contrast to statements by other respondents who suggested sexual and gender minorities were okay because they could not help being “that way,” this tactic suggested people chose to be LGBT, and that choice was acceptable to them, even if they thought it was the wrong choice. As a white Catholic noted in relation to bisexuality:

I feel like people need to know individuals because if they think of them as a whole, they think of them as deviant and negative. But individually, they're nice, he's nice, she's nice. It's just a personal thing and it's okay I guess if they love God unconditionally and treat other people fairly.

Whether as a personal preference or simply a choice people made, respondents suggested that LGBT people could be accepted under certain conditions, but like other marginalized groups (see Collins 2005), such conditions ignored the empirical circumstances of LGBT people in society.

These types of statements also emerged specifically in relation to transgender people. In such cases, respondents again defined the issue in individual or personal terms. The following excerpt from a white Protestant offers a typical illustration:

I mean, for transgenders, if you're comfortable with, if that's the way you want to be, more power to you, it's your choice. I just feel bad for those people because they know they are supposed to fit in a certain hole, but they feel like they don't. It is hard to understand that choice, and I think that's why people don't like the whole trans thing. It might take 50 years, maybe 100, but it might become a more acceptable thing.

Echoing the idea that it will take time and demonstrating patterns of transgender erasure noted in Christianity (Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016) and in secular contexts (Sumerau et al. 2017), another white Protestant added: “I think it's a personal thing, but it's shunned upon to have that. So, it's not taught, you're never told. I was never told about that growing up.” Rather than the result of humans creating and maintaining systems privileging heterosexual and cisgender people, our respondents (some who did and some who did not also suggest people were born LGBT) defined sexual and gender diversity as a matter of personal choice and, as such, suggested that LGBT people should be more patient in their desire to achieve equality.

Love the Sinner, Not the Sin

In the fifth strategy, respondents conditionally accepted LGBT people by suggesting that they would embrace the people while disapproving of their actions. That is, they symbolically distinguished between behaviors associated with LGBT people and individual LGBT people to suggest they accepted the people even if their (sexual) behaviors were problematic. For example, a Black Protestant noted: “Bisexuals are tricky because I’m okay with them when they’re with the opposite sex until they decide to be with someone of the same sex. I’m cool with bisexuals as people, but again, sex should be with opposite sex even if you’re attracted to the same sex.” Similar to some Christian groups that promote celibacy as a moral pathway for LG people (Creek 2013), this respondent suggested bisexual people are acceptable, but bisexual activities are not. Another Black Protestant noted:

I pretty much just take the whole “love the sinner, not the sin” thing. Like my friend, he is gay, and I’ve told him all the time, you are the same person since when we were six. You didn’t change, your sexuality changed. Now, I don’t agree with it, but I’m okay with it because I still feel like he is a person, and you shouldn’t be treated like an alien. You’re still human, you just have a different sexuality.

Respondents regularly attempted to separate the (sexual and/or romantic) behavior from the person when talking about their LGBT friends. As a Hispanic Catholic noted, friendships with LGBT people complicated their efforts:

It’s been interesting and complicated because I do have a good friend like that, but I was the last person he told out of the friend group because he felt I would disown him. That really hurt my feelings because I love him to death, despite how he identifies, but I don’t understand how he can be really into a guy, enjoy him, have a connection, and then the next day be hitting on some girl. I don’t understand where the line is and what psychologically makes that happen to him, but I still love him anyway.

In relation to transgender people, a white Protestant added: “I guess if they aren’t Christian I would say ‘Great, you be who you want and I’m going to love you anyway.’ If they are Christian, well, then I guess they could live a life for God, never get married, renounce their sin, and that would be okay.” Rather than accepting LGBT people as whole beings, respondents sought to express acceptance for the people on the condition that they could continue to judge what the people did. Similar to religious and secular reactions to other activities and groups historically labeled “deviant” (Warner 1999), they maintained their negative opinions and rejection of same- and multiple-sex attraction and gender nonconformity. At the same time, however, they, echoing recent shifts from overt to discrete methods of prejudice and discrimination throughout American society (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Collins 2005; Ridgeway 2013), suggested people who felt such attractions could be acceptable or tolerable in some cases. In fact, it is telling that they only offered conditional acceptance of LGBT people even when talking about their own LGBT friends.

CONCLUSIONS

The cisgender, heterosexual, Christian women whom we interviewed grew up in a social and religious context where overt demonization of LGBT people was common and celebrated. However, social movement victories by some LG people, as well as increased attention to tolerance for sexual and gender diversity more broadly, created a new context wherein overt demonstrations of sexual and gender prejudice might be frowned upon. While they could have rejected past demonization of sexual and gender diversity in pursuit of LGBT equality, the emergence of kinder ways of marginalizing LGBT people within religious and secular communities provided an alternative option. As a result, they worked to maintain boundaries between cisgender, heterosexual Christianity and LGBT people by conditionally accepting sexual and gender diversity, expressing limited tolerance for minorities while maintaining symbolic distinctions between wholly moral people and lesser others. They did so by (1) expressing desire for equality with certain caveats, (2) arguing LGBT people could not help being lesser, (3) suggesting LGBT marginalization was not their problem, (4) defining LGBT experience as a personal problem, and (5) suggesting they could love the person while maintaining disapproval and judgment of the activity or desire.

While their efforts allowed them to suggest that they were tolerant people who had no personal issues with LGBT people, they also maintained boundaries between normal, acceptable, and natural cisgender, Christian-based heterosexuality, and abnormal, potentially unacceptable, and deviant LGBT others. By characterizing equality as something that should exist, but not something they were responsible for creating, for example, they *both* expressed symbolic support for minorities *and* avoided effort that might change such conditions in a concrete way (Collins 2005). Similarly, their promotion of *both* essential or immutable sexual and gender statuses *and* notions of sexual and gender choice reproduced rhetoric (Moon 2004) used to allow some LG people into mainstream social institutions while maintaining their subordination to heterosexual norms (McQueeney 2009). Whereas researchers have begun examining shifting religious and nonreligious depictions and reactions to homosexuality in recent years (Cragun and Sumerau 2017), these findings reveal that such shifts may not necessarily lead to equality. Rather, they may represent the next stage in an ongoing battle about sexual and gender diversity wherein overt anti-LGBT statements shift into more nuanced forms of marginalization.

These findings also support research on continuity and change in Christian interpretations of homosexuality (see, e.g., Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams 2015; Thomas and Olson 2012), and transgender experience (see, e.g., Rodriguez and Follins 2012; Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016; Wilcox 2009). Yet, the present study also extends this research by revealing how Christians may conform to broader social patterns of tolerance while, at the same time, maintaining negative appraisals of sexual and gender diversity. Furthermore, our analysis begins the process of bringing bisexuality into such scholarship, and ascertaining the ways Christians interpret sexual fluidity. The Christian women we interviewed recognize that overt

marginalization of LGBT people may be no longer acceptable. At the same time, they adopted constructions of LGBT people as sympathetic victims rather than fully equal beings (Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams 2015). As such, their efforts demonstrate strategies whereby people (whether Christian or not) may accomplish both continuity (i.e., the maintenance of existing boundaries) and change (i.e., adjustments in the ways they express judgment of others) at the same time. These findings reveal the importance of examining and comparing the social construction of gender and sexuality in varied religious and nonreligious settings as well as within and between different Christian spaces and traditions. While the generic processes we outline may take many forms, as Schwalbe et al. (2000) note, only systematic empirical attention to generic process can tease out the nuances and variations of its use within and across concrete settings (Blumer 1969). This type of examination, as well as the processes outlined here, may be increasingly important amidst ongoing shifts in societal notions of gender, sexualities, and religion.

These findings also extend previous treatments of boundary maintenance by drawing our attention to the ways it may be accomplished in more nuanced, partial, and limited forms. Whereas previous studies have shown how dominants explicitly and overtly limit the opportunities of minorities to maintain symbolic, spatial, and structural boundaries (Schwalbe et al. 2000; see also Lamont 2004), they have generally focused on the two mutually exclusive categories of acceptance and exclusion, tolerance and intolerance. Our respondents, however, maintained boundaries in ways that partially accepted others while maintaining some conditions of exclusion. While these actions did, in fact, reproduce patterns at the heart of LGBT marginalization, they did so by creating the impression that such people were somewhat or potentially welcome in society. Affirming emerging studies in difference-blind inequality reproduction mechanisms (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Ridgeway 2013), these findings reveal the importance of addressing not only overt mechanisms of boundary maintenance, but also implicit processes of boundary maintenance wherein dominants conditionally accept minorities.

Following Lamont (2004; see also Avishai, Jafar, and Rinaldo 2015; Burke 2016), these findings also reveal the necessity of integrating studies of inequalities, boundaries, and religion. Whereas scholars typically focus on race, class, gender, and at times, sexualities, without much regard for religious and nonreligious influences on such patterns (but see, Barton 2012; Lamont 2004; McQueeney 2009), our case reveals intersections of gender, sexualities, and religion rarely explicitly examined in inequalities work (Avishai, Jafar, and Rinaldo 2015). Likewise, whereas scholars often focus on religion and boundaries without much discussion of inequalities (but see Lamont 2004), our analysis reveals ways religious people engage in sexual, gendered, and religious boundary maintenance at the same time (Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016). Taken together with recent calls for more integration of religious, sexual, and gendered scholarship (Burke 2016), our elaboration of generic processes people (in varied religious, gendered, or sexual social locations) may engage in to make sense of shifting norms and inequalities may prove useful

for unraveling the complexities of contemporary sexual, religious, and gendered intersections.

To this end, our elaboration of generic processes of conditional acceptance may be used as a “sensitizing concept” (Blumer 1969) for scholars seeking to explore sexual, gendered, and religious intersections in varied settings. Such studies could, for example, compare and contrast different articulations of acceptance or tolerance within and between (1) varied religious and religious groups, (2) different Christian traditions, denominations, and congregations, and (3) distinct nonreligious organizations, traditions, and ideologies. In so doing, we may tease out nuances in the ways generic processes of conditional acceptance, as well as challenges to such processes, arise in concrete settings across the nation (or planet). Furthermore, such studies could outline variations related to race, class, gender, sexualities, age, and other social factors that may influence who engages in conditional acceptance of this or that group, and how these strategies (like other difference-blind processes) are accomplished in different settings. These future studies may increasingly broaden our understanding of the myriad ways gender, sexualities, and religion shape and are shaped by continuity and change in the political standing and socially constructed interpretations of different social groups.

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