

Incorporating Transgender Experience Toward a More Inclusive Gender Lens in the Sociology of Religion

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Sociologists of religion have recently started to pay more attention to the ways gender and religion are deeply interconnected. However, these analyses rarely focus their attention on transgender experiences within religious spaces. Building on research that points to the ways religions may “cisgender reality” and calls for a “gender lens” on religion, this article explores some ways transgender people experience religion. Specifically, we analyze how transgender people experience conservative Christian notions of gender predicated upon cisnormative and patriarchal norms. Our analysis offers an example of applying a transgender inclusive gender lens to the sociology of religion, and expands prior work on gender and religion by incorporating the experiences of transgender people in religious contexts.

Key words: transgender; cisnormativity; Mormonism; Christianity; gender.

In recent years, sociologists of religion have noted many ways gender serves as a foundation for many aspects of religions (e.g., [Avishai et al. 2015](#); [Burke 2012](#); [Bush 2010](#)). Implications of these studies include that “doing religion” ([Avishai 2008](#)) often requires interpreting and enacting specific patterns of gender performance, presentation, and identification in relation to existing theological and institutional structures (e.g., [Kaylor 2010](#); [Rinaldo 2008](#)).

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These studies also show religious people do not simply internalize gender demands of their leaders, but rather, that they interpret and adjust their own gendered selves by integrating official teachings and personal preferences into their lives (e.g., [Beaman 2001](#); [Burke 2016](#); [Sumerau 2012](#)). Further, these studies show that those unable or unwilling to conform to dominant notions of Godly manhood and womanhood often face significant tension, stigma, and strife (e.g., [McQueeney 2009](#); [Wilcox 2009](#); [Wolkomir 2004](#)). Synthesizing these insights, [Avishai et al. \(2015\)](#) suggest it is past time for developing a “gender lens” (i.e., an approach that incorporates and centers gender) in sociologies of religion.

At the same time, social and medical sciences are starting to confront the absence of transgender people and perspectives in their existing data, methods, and theories (e.g., [Cragun and Sumerau 2017](#); [Ivankovich et al. 2013](#); [Rodriguez and Follins 2012](#)).¹ [Sumerau et al. \(2016\)](#) illustrated the same pattern in sociologies of religion as well as sociology writ large ([Nowakowski et al. 2016](#); [Schilt and Lagos 2017](#); [Sumerau and Cragun 2015](#)). Reviewing sociology *within and beyond* sociologies of religion, they demonstrated some ways existing scholarship—as well as many religious traditions—“cisgender reality,” or create and maintain an imagined worldview wherein only cisgender people matter and exist in the promotion of official narratives (for terminology related to transgender identities and experience, see [table 1](#)). These findings support the observations by [Avishai et al. \(2015\)](#), and note the importance of transgender perspectives in the development of a “gender lens” in the sociology of religion.

In this article, we take up the call of [Avishai et al. \(2015\)](#) as well as the observations of [Sumerau et al. \(2016\)](#) by examining the ways transgender people² experience a contemporary conservative Christian tradition. We analyze the ways transgender people makes sense of and react to cisnormativity and patriarchy, which is embedded within many conservative religions. Our analysis synthesizes

¹While our focus here is on social sciences (and sociologies specifically) of religion, it is noteworthy that the incorporation of transgender perspectives has been more common to date in theology and religious studies wherein scholars (transgender or otherwise identified) have been discussing the topic for years (see, e.g., [Davies 2010](#); [Dzmura 2010](#); [Najmabadi 2011](#); [Tanis 2003](#)).

²As noted in [table 1](#) and in more detail in the methods section, here we use transgender as an umbrella term for non-cisgender people. However, this usage is currently both (1) commonly used for brevity and in relation to shared non-cisgender experience within and beyond trans, non-binary, genderqueer, agender, and other non-cisgender populations, and (2) a source of tension in such communities at the same time due to significant diversity and variation between varied non-cisgender populations. We use this term as an umbrella (and later as a personal identification for some respondents who use it), but also remind readers to be aware of significant variation between, for example, genderqueer, agender, transmen, transwomen, androgynous, ipso gender, gender nonconforming, and other non-cisgender populations and communities ([Serano 2007](#)).

TABLE 1 Conceptual Terminology^a

Term	Definition ^b
Gender binary	The social and biological classification of sex and gender into two distinct oppositional forms of masculine and feminine selfhood
Transgender ^c	An umbrella term referring to all people living within, between and/or beyond the gender binary, which may also be used to denote an individual gender identity
Cisgender	An umbrella term referring to people who conform to the gender binary by interpreting their gender identity as congruent with the sex they were assigned by society
Cissexism ^d	An ideology that assumes cisgender identities are superior to and more authentic than transgender identities
Cisnormativity ^e	An ideology that assumes and expects that all people are and should be cisgender by disallowing transgender experience and enforcing cissexism in belief and practice
Ze, Zir, Hir, Zirself	Gender neutral pronouns that allow one to refer to people without assuming their gender and/or gendering them in the process
Transman	An identity referring to people socially assigned female who transition (socially, biologically, or both) to living as men/male
Transwoman	An identity referring to people socially assigned male who transition (socially, biologically, or both) to living as women/female
Intersex	An identity referring to people whose biological credentials do not fit within binary conceptions of gendered and sexed bodies
Genderqueer/fluid/ variant	An identity referring to people who reject gender labels, and live as women, men, neither, and/or both in varied situations over the life course
Agender	An identity referring to people who reject gender labels because they do not feel or believe that they have a gender
Bigender	An identity referring to people who live as both women and men, but shift their self-presentation and identity in relation to various contexts or feelings over the life course
Trans ^f	An abbreviation used to refer to transgender people as a whole regardless of individual gender identities and/or transgender as an umbrella term for gender nonconformity

^aTable shows the terms relevant to the current discussion, but is by no means exhaustive. Further, it is important to note that (consistent with other social constructions) these terms may shift over the course of time and in relation to varied social situations and contexts.

^bFor further discussion of these terms and definitions, see, for example, [Serano \(2007\)](#); [Schilt and Westbrook \(2009\)](#); [Stryker \(2008\)](#); [Westbrook and Schilt \(2014\)](#).

^cWhile we focus on gender in this table and the article, each of these terms has a corollary in relation to “sex” labels.

^dFor the relationship between cissexism and sexism in religious traditions, see Author et al. (forthcoming), and in secular settings, see [Westbrook and Schilt \(2014\)](#).

^eWhile sociologists have recently begun examining other “normative” systems—such as heteronormativity, homonormativity, and white normativity—there has been less engagement with cisnormativity in the field to date.

and extends sociologies of religion and gender by applying a gender lens to religious norms, and incorporating transgender experiences into existing scholarship about the ways people experience religious norms. It is not our intention, however, to generalize our findings to the broader transgender, cisgender, otherwise gendered, or conservative Christian publics. Rather, we use this case to reveal some ways a gender lens and the incorporation of transgender experience may enhance sociologies of religion.

In some ways, this article represents a new chapter in sociologies of religion wherein a previously ignored population becomes visible in the field. In much the same way early examinations of religious sexual minorities revealed many ways their experiences disrupted and extended sociologies of religion (e.g., [Mahaffy 1996](#); [Thumma 1991](#); [Yip 1997](#); see also [Schrock et al. 2014](#); [Wilcox 2009](#) for reviews), our analysis begins the process of allowing non-cisgender people to “talk back” ([Yip 1997](#)) to the field. As such, we see the application of a gender lens and expansion of studies of gender and religion to transgender experience as the latest example of our field moving beyond existing limitations and blind spots in the ongoing search for an ever more empirical understanding of religion and society.

GENDER AND RELIGION

Sociologists of religion have long demonstrated that people construct, enact, and experience religion in a wide variety of ways tied to specific local, regional, national, and international contexts (e.g., [Marti 2008](#); [Moon 2004](#); [Rinaldo 2008](#)). Rather than an immutable characteristic embedded in humans or a static erection of ideas unchanging throughout time, such studies have shown that people actively “do religion” ([Avishai 2008](#)) by integrating personal beliefs, official religious teachings, and community interactions with like-minded others ([Burke 2016](#)). These studies also show how religious beliefs and practices shift over time ([Cragun and Nielsen 2009](#)), and in relation to existing societal notions of race ([Marti 2009](#)), class ([McQueeney 2009](#)), gender ([Burke 2012](#)), sexuality ([Sumerau 2012](#)), interpretation of deities ([Author et al. 2017](#)), notions of sin or morality ([Sumerau et al. 2016](#)), and specific local or broader religious traditions ([Barton 2012](#)). Overall, these studies suggest understanding religion requires investigating the ways people create and enact it in their lives.

Understanding religion, however, also requires making sense of gender and the ways gender is constructed and enforced in the name of religion ([Sumerau and Cragun 2015](#)). Following [Avishai \(2008\)](#), this is because religious traditions are often built upon explicit and implicit notions of gender, and generally encourage—or force in some cases—their followers to conform to these “ideal” notions of gender or face potential stigma from others ([Sumerau et al. 2016](#)). We can conceptualize “doing religion” ([Avishai 2008](#)) as a form of “doing gender” ([West and Zimmerman 1987](#)), or engaging in ongoing processes whereby every action, appearance, and characteristic of the self and others is interpreted as evidence of

belonging in specific gender categories and revealing an essentially gendered self (Padavic and Reskin 2002). Whereas the elements of a convincing gendered-religious “doing” may vary in ways tied to time, tradition, and other factors, Avishai et al. (2015) note that all such doings ultimately demonstrate the ways people simultaneously do gender to signify religious selves and do religion to signify gendered selves.

Understanding the interrelation and reciprocal construction of gender and religion, however, also requires making sense of “cisnormativity” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Sumerau et al. 2016; Westbrook and Schilt 2014), or an ideology that assumes and requires all people to be sorted into only male-man and female-woman categories despite the existence of many other options in the empirical world throughout recorded history (Stryker 2008). To accomplish this imagined “cisgender reality” (Sumerau et al. 2016), social authorities—familial, religious, political, scientific, or otherwise—erase evidence of transgender existence from their worldviews, define transgender existence as problematic or other than the natural world it comes from, and punish any empirical transgender potential that emerges (Mathers 2017a; Pfeffer 2014). As a result, all people who are unwilling or unable to conform to cisnormativity, wrestle daily with processes and consequences of “cisgendering reality” by cisgender people whether or not such people are consciously aware of this accomplishment.

Understanding cisnormativity also requires making sense of the ways cisnormative foundations facilitate the construction and maintenance of patriarchal systems, or systems dominated by, identified with, and focused on males and men (Johnson 2005). As Westbrook and Schilt (2014) note, male-man dominated systems rely upon an initial cisnormative separation of people into male-men who lead and female-women who follow, and this initial supposed distinction between social beings feeds the articulation of differences in ability, prowess, aptitude, and worth in any social domain (Serano 2007). Further, as sociologists of religion have noted (Gerber 2011; Wolkomir 2004), cisnormative distinctions between bodies find voice in patriarchal notions of sexual, spiritual, and embodied morality within and beyond explicitly religious contexts (Barton 2012). People who promote and enforce cisgender realities—intentionally or otherwise—often also rely upon these assumptions and norms to construct and maintain patriarchal patterns that subordinate cisgender women to men, some men to others, and non-cisgender people to cisgender ones (Serano 2007).

Historically, one way populations marginalized by dominant ideologies, like the non-cisgender Christians at the heart of this study, fight back involves pointing out the artificial, imaginary, or socially constructed nature of such ideologies (e.g., Collins 2005; Martin 2004; Yip 1997). Since dominant ideologies are generally taught in ways that make them appear natural, ahistorical, and beyond critique (Johnson 2005), members of marginalized communities may accomplish this by (1) demonstrating their existence to dominant groups unaware of their presence, and (2) providing recognition of the socially constructed and harmful

nature of existing ideologies (Barton 2012). At times, such efforts rely upon the ability of marginalized communities to enter official “ways of knowing” or “beliefs about the way the world is” created and promoted by social authorities, and demonstrate the errors and omissions such “knowledge” or “fact” relies upon when a more empirical picture comes into view (Collins 2005).

Over the last few years, scholars have begun similar processes of revising sociological “knowledge” to incorporate transgender people in various subfields (see, e.g., Connell 2010; Schilt 2010; Schilt and Lagos 2017 for reviews). Researchers have demonstrated many ways transgender experience complicates existing theoretical and methodological traditions related to, for example, scientific and legal categories (Westbrook and Schilt 2014), occupational structures and interactions (Dozier 2005), families (Pfeffer 2010), social movements (Stone 2009), medical practice and “facts” (Davis 2015), health disparities and outcomes (Miller and Grollman 2015), media (Schilt and Westbrook 2009), teaching and education (Nowakowski et al. 2016), navigation of public space and restrooms (Mathers 2017a), romantic and sexual relations (Pfeffer 2014), sociological theory development (Schilt 2016), and survey design (Westbrook and Saperstein 2015). In all such cases, sociologies of various subdisciplines are beginning to recognize the importance of transgender experience for understanding society.

These processes of academic revision have begun to enter sociologies of religion as well. Examining attitudes toward sexual and gender groups in America, for example, Cragun and Sumerau (2015) found that transgender people were viewed least favorably compared to other portions of the population, and that while religiosity increased such negative views, spirituality had the opposite effect. Similarly, Sumerau and Cragun (2015) showed how recognition of intersex and transgender people complicated and/or contradicted much of the theological basis of conservative Christian traditions. Finally, building on these studies as well as transgender scholarship in other fields and limited notice of transgender people across the social sciences (e.g., Rodriguez and Follins 2012; Wilcox 2009), Sumerau et al. (2016) outlined the ways cisnormativity was embedded within much of conservative Christianity. In all such cases, the incorporation of transgender experience revealed missing pieces and complications in existing sociologies of religion.

Prior scholarship on gender and religion in the sociology of religion has also effectively demonstrated the patriarchal basis of much conservative religion in the world today (see, e.g., Bush 2010; Gerber 2011; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003 for reviews). Sociologists of religion have noted the tendency for conservative religious traditions and conservative Christian traditions specifically to adopt male dominated organizational structures, leadership hierarchies, and patterns of scriptural and political interpretation. Although rarely mentioned in such studies to date (but see Sumerau et al. 2016 for review), such patterns are generally constructed upon cisnormative assumptions about the oppositional or otherwise different “natures” and “abilities” of cisgender women and men, and without recognition of non-cisgender possibilities. Much like the examples from emerging

transgender scholarship, these studies imply that cisnormativity plays an integral role in many contemporary conservative religions by facilitating the ongoing dissemination and enforcement of patriarchal organizational and theological structures.

The current study builds on this body of literature by applying a gender lens to the sociology of religion (Avishai et al. 2015) and expanding sociology of religion to include transgender experience. While there are thousands of studies focused on the ways cisgender women and men experience or make sense of religion, religious patriarchy, and gendered religious experience to date (see, e.g., Avishai et al. 2015; Burke 2012; Bush 2010 for a few of the reviews of this massive literature), there are *almost no* studies of transgender religious experience or cisnormativity within religions (but see Mathers 2017b; Sumerau and Cragun 2015; Sumerau et al. 2016). As such, our analysis—like those early studies of gay/lesbian religious experience in prior decades—here offers a conceptual and empirical template for sociologies of religion to both apply a gender lens to their studies and incorporate transgender experience into sociologies of religion. As Sumerau et al. (2016) suggest any gender lens will necessitate the incorporation of transgender experience alongside the thousands of empirical, theoretical, and review articles focused solely on cisgender experience.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this study derive from a mixed-methodological survey of Mormon attitudes toward gender in society (see Cragun et al. 2016 for more details). The survey was collected through a snowball sampling method designed to fill in gaps in existing surveys of religion, Mormonism, and gender, and included three open-ended questions that provide the data here (table 2). The survey was posted on Mormon-related websites and social media platforms, and ultimately resulted in a sample of 61,066 current and former Mormons (after data cleaning). The survey included a question about gender that allowed respondents to identify as “Male,” “Female,” or write in their gender identities if these options did not fit. The data for this article come from the 114 respondents who chose the third option.

As table 3 shows the participants in the snowball survey who identified as cisgender men and women were very similar in their characteristics to what previous surveys have found (Phillips et al. 2011). Close to 90% were White, non-Hispanics; they were moderately well-educated (46.1% had college degrees); they were fairly affluent (76% had incomes over \$50,000), and were largely conservative, politically, with just over 50% indicating they were either very conservative, conservative, or moderate, but lean conservative. About 14% of participants in the snowball sample no longer self-identified as Mormon, and participants in the survey were younger than other surveys have found.

TABLE 2 Open-Ended Survey Questions

(1) Men and women are treated differently in the Church. Some of these differences are considered cultural, others doctrinal. Please describe these differences and why you feel they are beneficial or not beneficial.

(2) If women were to serve in more administrative and leadership roles in the LDS Church, how would that affect your religious/spiritual life? Please comment in as much detail as possible.

(3) What changes related to women, if any, do you hope the Church will implement over the next 10 or 20 years? Describe these changes in as much detail as possible. Why do you believe these changes are important?

The respondents at the heart of this study—those who selected the third option and wrote in a non-cisgender identity on the survey—were somewhat different in comparison to the cisgender respondents. In terms of religious identity, 38% of non-cisgender respondents said they were on LDS rolls and identified as LDS, 43% believed their names remained on the rolls but no longer identified as LDS, and 19% said they were no longer members. Not shown in [table 3](#) is how survey participants joined the religion; 87.2% of both cisgender and non-cisgender respondents were born into the Mormon Church and were raised in the church, whereas 12.8% converted to Mormonism later. In terms of race, class, education, political views, and age, non-cisgender respondents were overwhelmingly non-Hispanic White (75%), well educated (92% had at least some college), not particularly affluent (66% had incomes below \$75,000), fairly liberal (58% self-identified as liberal or as “leaning” liberal), and relatively young (78% were 40 years old or younger)³.

Although he received angry reactions from media and a number of respondents for including it, the third author sought to understand the ways respondents who identified as “other” than cisgender made sense of gender in Mormonism. As a result, he separated this sample from the larger data set for quantitative and qualitative analysis (for quantitative analyses, see [Cragun et al. 2016](#)), and recruited the first and second authors—both of whom primarily study LGBT experience—for the analyses. The first author then went through the entirety of the data separating out any respondents who did not explicitly identify as non-cisgender. To this end, they limited the sample to people who identified simply as transgender, and those who self-identified in ways—such as genderqueer, gender fluid, agender, and bigender—typically included in uses of transgender as an umbrella term for non-cisgender people (see [table 4](#) for gender identities of the sample). In so doing, the first author arrived at the final sample of 114 respondents.

³It is important to note that these demographics are in line with emerging surveys of transgender populations (of varied identities) showing such groups are typically well educated and at the lower ends of the economic (and healthcare access) scales in contemporary American society (see Harrison et al. 2011 for more comparative demographics of transgender populations in the United States).

TABLE 3 Demographic Characteristics of Transgender and Cisgender Survey Participants

	Transgender N = 114 (%)	Cisgender N = 60,585 (%)
Religious identity		
On roles, considers self LDS	37.7	86.4
On roles, does not consider self LDS	43.0	11.1
Not on roles, was LDS	19.3	2.5
Age		
18–25	30.7	19.6
26–30	21.9	22.2
31–40	26.3	33.5
41–50	7.0	11.6
51–60	6.1	7.6
61–70	4.4	3.7
71+	0.9	0.8
Prefer not to respond	2.6	1.4
Race		
White, non-Hispanic	75.4	89.9
Black, non-Hispanic	0.0	0.4
Hispanic	7.0	2.5
Asian	0.9	0.8
Native American	3.5	0.5
Other	8.8	2.6
Prefer not to respond	4.4	3.6
Education		
Did not finish high school	0.9	0.2
High school	2.6	3.4
Some college	29.8	25.9
College graduate	43.0	46.1
Master's degree	11.4	16.6
PhD	6.1	2.7
JD/MD	1.8	3.6
Prefer not to respond	4.4	1.4
Income		
Less than \$10,000	18.4	4.8
\$10,001–\$25,000	14.9	8.6
\$25,001–\$50,000	16.7	17.9
\$50,000–\$75,000	15.8	18.9
\$75,001–\$100,000	7.0	16.5
\$100,001–\$250,000	8.8	19.2
\$250,001+	3.5	3.5
Don't know	5.3	1.6
Prefer not to respond	9.6	9.0
Political views		
Very conservative	1.8	6.5
Conservative	2.6	22.8
Moderate, but lean conservative	9.6	25.1
Moderate	5.3	11.9
Moderate, but lean liberal	19.3	13.0
Liberal	18.4	8.7
Very liberal	20.2	3.4
Other	18.4	3.9
Don't know	1.8	2.1
Prefer not to respond	2.6	2.7

TABLE 4 Gender Self-Identifications of Respondents

Gender identification	No. of respondents
Transgender (no details)	19
Genderqueer	20
Gender fluid	18
Transwomen	15
Agender	10
Transmen	8
Nonbinary	8
Bigender	7
Gender neutral	7
Intersex	2
Total sample	114

Before proceeding, we offer a couple notes on terminology (table 1). For the purposes of this study, we recognize transgender as both an individual self-identification and a collective umbrella term for people who live as a gender different than the one assigned to them at birth and/or beyond and between male/female/man/woman categories (Serano 2007; Sumerau et al. 2016). As a result, we use the term transgender as a collective label throughout this article to refer to non-cisgender respondents while introducing respondents with the gender identities they provided in the survey (Cavanagh 2010). While we focus on the commonalities within this sample, it is important to note that much variation and tension exists within and between different labels and groups as well as in relation to the broader trans community (Serano 2007). In fact, we were initially surprised to see so much commonality within such a diverse sample of gender identities, and would suggest an important next step in this research would involve teasing out nuances between different populations within trans umbrella terms.

Similarly, we recognize the term Mormon as an identification representing active practice in the LDS Church and an identification signifying former practice and/or relation with the religion. As a result, we use the term Mormon as a collective label throughout this article while only noting current status within the religion where relevant. Like the variation in trans identities, however, we note that transgender Mormons—former or current—expressed many common sentiments, and we found little variation based on current status within the LDS Church. We focus on the commonalities while again noting the importance of remaining aware of potential variations within and between these two communities.

Following elements of “grounded theory” (Charmaz 2006) and principles of feminist fieldwork analysis (Kleinman 2007), we proceeded in a collaborative inductive fashion. While the third author explored quantitative results in the transgender sample and the second author conducted extensive literature searches on gender and religion within and beyond sociology, the first author coded all transgender responses line-by-line in search of patterns of meaning in

the data. After arriving at an initial set of codes, the first and second authors compared and contrasted codes in a back-and-forth process to refine categories of response in relation to existing transgender, cisgender, and religious scholarship. They arrived at a set of labels capturing the interpretations of LDS doctrine related to gender by transgender Mormons. After comparing their findings with the third author's analysis of demographic and other variables, we came to see our data as examples of the ways transgender Mormons experienced conventional Mormon gender teachings, and responded to such lessons.

With this in mind, we collectively went back through the data seeking to outline lessons gender, religion, and sociology scholars could learn about gender *and* religion from our transgender respondents (Kleinman 2007). Our analysis revealed many ways Mormons—and by extension other conservative Christian traditions (see Barton 2012; Sumerau et al. 2016; Wolkomir 2004 for similarities in gender teachings between conservative Christian traditions)—teach and enforce cisnormativity, patriarchal sexism, and heterosexism as well as ways our respondents suggest conservative Christianity could become more gender inclusive. In the following sections, we outline the operation of Mormonism from a transgender perspective as an example of the ways a gender lens may expand sociologies of religion.

CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIANITY AND CISNORMATIVE PATRIARCHY

Although Mormonism differs from other conservative Christian traditions in many ways, its beliefs and practices concerning gender are consistent with the vast majority of conservative Christian traditions (see, e.g., Bush 2010; Burke 2012; Sumerau et al. 2016). Like other conservative Christian traditions, Mormons believe in a world that only contains cisgender women and men who were created for oppositional or complementary purposes, roles, and responsibilities. Further, Mormonism echoes other conservative Christian traditions by postulating an origin of the world wherein a creator (usually identified as male) established this cisgender reality for *his* children/followers at the beginning of time, and expects followers to conform to this view of the world during and following their time on earth. Where Mormonism differs from many other conservative Christian religions is in holding a belief in a Heavenly Mother (a female counterpart and spouse to a Heavenly Father), allowing for the female divine. However, this belief further entrenches Mormonism into a cisgender worldview as it sacralizes gender and sex binaries, and enshrines mononormativity as an eternal part of God's plan. Ultimately, Mormons are taught that they must stand against any nonconformity related to these gender requirements and reject any empirical evidence that contradicts this cisgender worldview (Kaylor 2010; Robinson and Spivey 2007; Wilcox 2009). Mormonism—much like most other conservative Christian traditions—leaves no room for transgender existence.

As suggested by the observations above, Mormonism also mirrors other conservative Christian traditions by operating through a patriarchal arrangement between cisgender women and men (Bush 2010). The initial cisnormative requirement that all Mormons become male-men or female-women only is expressed through hierarchical relationships wherein cisgender men lead the church, obtain the role of prophet dictating the norms of the church, and are seen as representatives of God in the church and family. In an oppositional fashion, cisgender women are allotted some stations in the church that ultimately rely on the approval of men, and are expected to adopt subordinate roles in the family, marriages, and the church wherein their work services the needs and doctrines of the men. As Bush (2010) notes, this type of patriarchal arrangement—built upon cisnormative rules (Sumerau et al. 2016)—is common throughout contemporary conservative Christian traditions (Barton 2012; Wolkomir 2004).

Similar to other conservative Christian traditions (Burke 2016), however, researchers have shown that cisgender Mormon men and women may interpret such doctrine in varied ways (e.g., Beaman 2001; Hoyt 2007; Vance 2007). Rather than simply adopting official LDS doctrine, for example, they may pick and choose between the teachings they want to follow and others they find irrelevant. Similarly, some cisgender Mormon women—like their counterparts in other conservative Christian traditions (Wolkomir 2004)—rebel against existing gender norms in the Church, and establish alternative forms of Mormonism. Further, some cisgender Mormon women—like cisgender women in other conservative Christian traditions (Wilcox 2009)—have explicitly challenged official doctrine arguing that God's will could be better expressed through more egalitarian gender norms. With these similarities in mind, the following sections outline the ways transgender Mormons experience gender in Mormonism while revealing the importance of similar analyses focused on other conservative Christian traditions.

We begin with the ways respondents made sense of religion by proposing more egalitarian ways Mormonism could be arranged that might benefit all members and especially cisgender women and transgender people. They highlight the ways gendered requirements built into the faith are socially constructed and changeable, and explain some ways religions could go about accomplishing such changes. After examining their reactions to and proposals for the Church, we explore the ways they outline gender inequalities operating within the everyday functions of the Church. Respondents reveal the ways gender inequality shapes and influences every aspect of the faith. Their experiences provide a detailed account of gender inequality as a necessary component of current operations in the Church. Throughout our analysis, we highlight the experiences of transgender people in much the same way scholarship often provides accounts of cisgender people's religious experiences. As "outsiders within" (Collins 2005) conservative Christianity (i.e., members of a faith, but outside the recognized reality of the faith), their experiences reveal both possibilities for more egalitarian gender relations in religions and the ways gender shapes everyday religious operations in many cases (Barton 2012).

Proposing Gender Egalitarian Religious Possibilities

Our respondents often suggested people would be better off if given the chance to develop their full potential rather than being sorted into socially constructed gender categories. As the following example from a genderqueer respondent suggests, ze believed this type of change would benefit the Church:

Some people may feel differently as many people are comfortable with their assigned gender at birth, however, I think that if children were given the power and time to explore, understand, and choose their own identities it would help the church as a whole.

Echoing this sentiment, a transgender respondent suggested experimentation was key:

I personally believe that nature makes no mistakes and that individuals who may not fit a specific gender mold should be given the liberty to experiment and decide who they want to be, or how they want to be identified. Still, how would such a person know which bathroom or locker-room to go into? Or whether or not to be ordained a deacon? The real question comes when deciding at what point an individual is educated enough or qualified to make such a decision. I suppose it would be a case-by-case basis, in which more information and research (and/or fasting and prayer) would be needed.

In statements like these, respondents outlined possibilities for creating a gender egalitarian faith instead of one predicated upon cisnormative patriarchy.

At times, they explicitly defined existing gender norms in Mormonism as discrimination unnecessary for following God. The following statement by a transman offers an illustrative example:

I believe strongly that men and women are equal, in full gender equality. There are many excuses for why men and women are treated differently (and by that I mean excuses for why women are treated as not fully human with full agency), but they are all, in the end, the ignorance of human beings used as justification for discrimination.

Respondents often tied such excuses to specific doctrinal pronouncements. As the following illustration reveals, they pointed out that things could be different:

The gender roles taught in the family proclamation and perpetrated through our manuals and general conference talks tell us who God says we should be. I think God wants us to discover who we should be and what our roles are in life based on the spiritual gifts that He has given us. I don't think that His plan was ever to have us try to fit into a mold instead of create our own beautiful life. I think that roles within the home should be a private matter between a husband and a wife because they know each other and can have that relationship with God. I think the gender roles that have been taught to us are age-old cultural traditions. I think men in the church have been closed off by their own beliefs.

Rather than following the will of God, respondents argued LDS leaders had been blinded by cisgender and masculine privilege. They pointed out that there were other ways to organize the faith that would not require cisnormative or patriarchal hierarchies.

Our respondents also argued cisnormative and patriarchal conceptions of gender were ultimately unhealthy and dangerous for members. As the following excerpt from a gender fluid respondent suggests, they argued that such roles benefitted no one:

Women are often treated as being a man's "sidekick;" she functions either as his cheerleader (to stand in awe of the man and bow to him in deference in all things without question and without expressing her concerns, beliefs, or point of view), or as his savior (who will stand by him no matter how heinous his crimes against his priesthood, his community, or his family, and will sacrifice anything and everything of herself for him, his standing in the church, and their children, even if he does not or would not do the same). In essence, she is either to use her husband as a stand-in for the Savior, or she is to be that stand-in for him. Both of these attitudes and behaviors, though encouraged within the culture of the church (almost always in subtle ways more than overt), are contrary to the doctrines of the roles of men and women, and they are not healthy or beneficial to either party.

Echoing this sentiment, a transwoman noted:

I'm afraid I can't see these isolationist cultural divides as helpful in any way, as the men are demonized to the point that they can't even teach Primary classes by themselves or with someone other than their spouse to "avoid the very appearance of evil." Are men incapable of nurture? Or compassion? Or the ability to restrain themselves from harming innocents? NO! But we assume, since nurturing is both the doctrinal and cultural role of women, that men are ill-equipped at best, and aggressively dangerous, at worst, in these roles. It's absolutely ridiculous!

As a gender-neutral respondent noted, LDS gender teachings represent "outdated sexist bigotry" that must be "jettisoned" alongside its "homophobia and transphobia" since "there is no doctrine from God that applies the Plan of Happiness differently to different people."

Expanding on these suggestions, respondents often noted specific elements of official gender requirements that made no sense in relation to their lived experiences. As the following statement from a transwoman reveals, they suggested failure to adjust could kill the church: "When members are told to follow the prophet, regardless if he's right or wrong, that mentality is seeded into the culture, which eventually festers and rots." A gender fluid respondent added:

In a world where everyone is farmers and the person who can lift the most wins, the belief, while still not something to adhere to, makes cultural sense. In a world where nobody farms and how much you lift is irrelevant, gender is ridiculous, especially for things like carrying sacrament trays and planning meetings.

Further, respondents defined the Church as out of step with the times. According to a genderqueer respondent: "The LDS church seems to be still caught up in the eras before feminism. I think that it would be more beneficial if the leaders rewrote 'The Family: A Proclamation' to remove all the parts that describe gender." Rather than set in stone, our respondents noted that cisnormative patriarchal patterns could be changed.

Respondents also explicitly challenged the gender binary embedded within Mormonism and much of conservative Christianity. As a transwoman noted:

All gendered differences are based on a flawed social binary understanding of gender and are incredibly harmful to all, but perhaps especially to trans, queer, and gender queer youth and adults. The divine sees us without gender trappings that we force on each other and sees us before gender—humans are very short sighted. We harm each other with most of our creations.

They also often explicitly tied sexism, cisnormativity, and patriarchy to official Mormon doctrine. As a transman noted after a similar statement to the one quoted above: “Teaching there are inherent differences between men and women is inaccurate. Generally, treating half of all members like they are inferior and then pretending because they’re “holier” hurts men and women.”

Respondents also pointed out that lessening cisnormativity would make them feel more welcome and make them more willing to commit to the Church. As a genderqueer respondent noted, many of our respondents left the Church at various times (sometimes for good at this point) due to transphobia and erasure: “I would consider re-joining the church if I knew there was a chance I might be included in any capacity as I am instead of who some old, white men think I should be because of their personal prejudice.” Echoing this sentiment, a transgender respondent noted: “I would be so much more comfortable in this religion. When I go to church, I am taught what to believe, who to be, and how to be that person. I think if we abolished gender roles, there would be room for much more dialogue.” Some respondents, like the intersex member quoted next, suggested this could help the Church grow: “I think it would be easier because millenials in the church are having a crisis of faith, and if the church adopted more progressive policies then I think most young members of the church would have an easier time staying.” Another gender fluid respondent captured the consensus in our sample stating, “I would be MUCH more inclined to participate” if the LDS Church transformed its existing cisnormative patriarchal organization.

As the proceeding examples suggest, respondents became even more explicit when talking about potential changes the leadership could implement. As evidenced by the following statement from a genderqueer respondent, they wished for a different LDS Church:

I would like to see the church care about whether people treat one another, especially those they dislike or with whom they do not identify, with real kindness and compassion before they care about how someone dresses, walks, talked, or interacts with people they do like. I would like to see church members with a basic understanding of how sociohistorically, sociopolitically, and biopsychosocially racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, among others, is harmful to themselves, the Church, and others.

Alongside specific recommendations for the Church, like the above example, respondents also suggested the Church could become a beacon of hope and guidance for others in the world by having the courage to take a stand against cisnormative patriarchy:

I hope that they will come out with more descriptive instructions or guidelines for parenting individuals with ambiguous genitalia and gender-related genetic abnormalities, furthermore, I hope that they will train and instruct local leaders on how to more appropriately address/approach such situations. For example, give guidelines for bishops in determining if/when an intersexed individual could/should hold the priesthood, or help parents know how to better address gender identity crises in the home. Until the church comes out and makes a stance on the issues, I believe that our society and members of the church alike will continue to be in conflict and disagreement in knowing how to address such issues, and cultures around the globe will continue to be in denial that such cases or problems exist. The church can have a great influence/impact on society and can be an example in making such a stand.

Considering the youthful history of Mormonism and the ability of the Church to shift policies due to ongoing revelation, some respondents suggested the Church has both the potential and an opportunity to challenge existing gender inequalities in a systematic fashion.

Alongside systematic changes, they also noted the desire to see better treatment within churches and other locations frequented by the membership. As suggested by one transman, they wished for transgender members “to be seen as the gender they are” and hoped, as a transwoman noted, “transwomen will be better understood and will be able to be in full fellowship.” More explicitly, another transwoman suggested LDS leaders and members need to realize that:

Transgender women are real women, and that they and all women do hold the Priesthood. That marriages and relationships are to be completely and utterly egalitarian, with no male supremacy. That lesbian relationships and families are every bit as honorable. That a twelve-year-old boy is not superior to a grown woman. That class status has no bearing on who can serve and lead.

Stated another way, a genderqueer respondent suggested implementation of “a fully inclusive gender-neutral policy that treats everyone the same regardless of gender expression.”

They also suggested the Church could become, as one respondent put it, “a safe haven for all people” by addressing other problems. As a gender fluid member noted:

“I want Rape Culture decreased, I want men to wake up to their privilege. I want more people of color in positions. I want sex education and women’s sexuality talked about and respected more. I want women to be respected more for having careers. I want giant changes made for LGBT members. I want a lot of things and I think things are gonna have to change or my demographic will continue to leave in large numbers.”

Another genderqueer member stated: “I hope that the LDS church will no longer send hate after those who proudly proclaim that they are feminist. Unfortunately, many students have been kicked out of BYU schools for being openly supportive of feminism.” Respondents expressed a desire to see “religious institutions just drop the whole gender role expectations and let people be and act and feel just as persons, as who they are without feeling confined to strict expectations of what a woman (or man) should be.”

In expressing these perspectives, respondents regularly specified issues of both universal and specifically transgender concern. In terms of issues facing transgender members specifically, for example, respondents wanted “non-binary people to be equal and free to express their true selves without fear.” As a transwoman noted, our respondents dreamed of a day when: “Transgendered women are allowed to use female bathrooms in the church. Transgendered women are allowed to attend Relief society meetings. The church accepted Transgendered women as equals with love and respect, and that they would be able to still be sealed to their spouses.” Further, many sought, as the following illustration shows, remedies for issues within the Church that went well beyond transgender members only:

Consistent anti-racist critique and interpretation of scripture, no condescending, paternalistic doctrine and treatment of those with disabilities, non-punitive structure of encouraging and learning from each other's spirituality, queer and polyamorous family structures given love, thinking of gender and race in non-binary ways and that reflected from the pulpit. These changes are important because this is what our spiritual family looks like. What good is a faith that denies the existence of others?

Overall, our respondents experienced religion, like cisgender people in other studies (see [Burke 2012](#); [Sumerau 2012](#) for reviews), as a deeply gendered context. At the same time, they pointed out that religion did not have to be this way, and suggested many ways Mormonism—and by extension other conservative Christian traditions—could leave behind cisnormative patriarchy for more equitable relations and opportunities within the faith.

Outlining Gender Inequalities within Everyday Religious Operations

Although our respondents proposed many ways cisnormative patriarchal religious traditions could be transformed into more egalitarian systems, they also expressed considerable frustration with their experiences—as well as the experiences of cisgender women and LGB people—in the Church. As a transgender respondent noted:

Quoting from a friend because they said it best—Priesthood teacher: “women are more loving and kind than we men are. We need their guidance.” Me: cringe “I don’t agree. I think that representation of women is used too often to put them on a pedestal and is actually harmful to them.” Priesthood teacher: “Well, I know my wife is more righteous than I am! Right brethren?” All laugh, me: why am I here.

A bigender respondent offered a similar take when explaining what LDS leaders say God decreed in the creation of women and men: “It’s so bad! They say men are leaders while women are supportive; women are nurturers while men are providers, men are in charge while women submit, men run the home and wards and the church while women follow their orders.”

Elaborating on experiences with LDS lessons concerning “doing difference” ([West and Fenstermaker 1995](#)), respondents shared negative ways these teachings

affected members. As an agender respondent noted, these lessons justified the removal of power from women:

Women are expected to be child-bearing housekeepers whose sole purpose is to uphold their household priesthood holders. Men, on the other hand, are the noble priesthood holders. It seems like men are the only ones who can receive any personal revelation when it comes to important decision-making. Sometimes it appears as though men are the only ones who are spiritually important and independent, whereas women appear to be spiritually dependent on their husbands and are judged on their ability to fulfill the role of a stay-at-home mom.

Similarly, a genderqueer respondent pointed out the authority granted to even boys over the women in the Church during meetings, social activities, and worship services:

Like the fact that I as a 16-year-old was “the presiding priesthood member” at some relief society functions because the bishop who was there had to leave (he was helping someone to the hospital) and we were running the nursery so the Young women could attend. This experience jarred me because I KNEW the relief society president was the one really in charge, but the bishop still felt the need to pull me out and send me to sit in on the lesson so there was a “priesthood authority” there. Once his councilor arrived I returned to the nursery, but the fact that a child was “in charge” was one of the experiences that led me from the church.

In statements like these, respondents outline gender inequalities embedded within everyday LDS operations, and suggest that such teachings may lie at the heart of departures from the religion.

Respondents also outlined doctrinal decisions that facilitated gender inequalities. As the following excerpt from a genderqueer respondent suggests, they called into question the entire (cisnormative and patriarchal) doctrinal basis of Mormonism:

LDS Cosmology talks about Mother and Father God, but reading both Pratt and Snow, suggests these positions were egalitarian, and that Mother God being subjugated to Father God was a recent development. I think doctrinally, that we should return to the radical egalitarian quality of Early Mormon history. I also think the recent changes in encouraging fathers to be active parents, could be considered a model for women to be active leaders. Lastly, I wonder about the genderless quality of the spirits in heaven, and the problems of transgendered discourse within LDS contexts.

They, as illustrated by the following observation from an agender Mormon, argued the existence of gender (and sexual) inequality in Mormonism was due to cultural, rather than Godly, influence polluting the way humanity was supposed to be:

Gender. All of its cultural. The reason Doctrine was written the way it was is BECAUSE of culture. The whole reason why people are so angry over [gay/lesbian people] is because that’s the way it’s been for years, so that’s what we believe. I am pretty sure Jesus would NOT want us splitting apart families simply based on orientation.

Considering that researchers have shown that Mormon definitions of homosexuality and other social practices have shifted over time in relation to transforming cultural understandings (e.g., [Sumerau et al. 2016](#)), respondents' outline of sexual and gender inequality origins fit the historical record, and suggests the gender egalitarianism they propose could simply become the next stage in the shifting notions of what it means to be Mormon—or other conservative Christian—in the future since much has already changed over time.

Finally, respondents outlined the ways LDS gender teachings facilitated harm against cisgender women and transgender people (Author et al. 2017). They noted that the current gender structure of the Church ultimately serves to devalue and subordinate many members who could otherwise be seeking their full potential in God's creation. The following statement by a genderqueer respondent offers a typical case:

This is an organization with exclusively male leadership—token female figureheads at lower levels notwithstanding—an organization where men are both implicitly and explicitly granted rights denied women and where the only rights denied men are those physically impossible; an organization with ritual affirming the subservient nature of women in high religious ceremonies. How could such an organization NOT be considered sexist? It is a deep and pervasive sexism, deleterious even when “benevolent.”

An agender respondent sounds a similar warning call:

Now there is science PROVING that it is harmful for men and women to conform to gender norms, let alone the gender binary. Guys are ridiculed for being like girls, while girls can just never measure up. Here's an example in church: Girls are constantly pressured about marriage as if it's the only goal they should aspire to, while stay at home dads are ridiculed by other church members for not “manning up” and getting a job. It doesn't matter if his wife makes more than enough for their family, or that they are both consenting adults and have agreed upon this on their own accord.

In statements like these, respondents outline gender inequalities embedded in everyday Mormon experience and point out just how important their proposal of more egalitarian religious norms might be for many cisgender women and transgender people.

CONCLUSIONS

Most sociology of religion focused on gender *and* religion—mirroring sociology more broadly to date—limits its focus to cisgender experiences with religion, religious constructions of cisgender roles and responsibilities, and religious teachings about ideal notions of cisgender womanhood and manhood ([Avishai et al. 2015](#); [Burke 2012](#); [Bush 2010](#)). Such research has invigorated understandings of the interrelation of gender and religion and cisgender religious experience,

but leaves unexplored transgender religious experiences (but see [Mathers 2017b](#); [Sumerau and Cragun 2015](#); [Sumerau et al. 2016](#); [Wilcox 2009](#) for exceptions). Looking back over this history, [Avishai et al. \(2015\)](#) importantly called for developing a gender lens in sociologies of religion to tease out the many ways doing religion is doing gender *and* doing gender is doing religion. We have followed these insights by applying a gender lens to religious experiences, and examining the appearance of conservative Christianity for non-cisgender people. Our analysis demonstrates the usefulness of both developing a gender lens and incorporating transgender experience in sociologies of religion.

This is especially important because, although it may be tempting to wish the findings articulated in this article may be limited to Mormonism specifically, previous research suggests otherwise. Considering that most Jewish ([Avishai 2008](#)), Christian ([Bush 2010](#)), and Islamic ([Rinaldo 2008](#)) traditions conceptualize the origin of the world via a similar gendered narrative to that found in Mormonism and define their worlds—earthly and eternal—in gendered terms, it is likely that these traditions share many of the same cisnormative and patriarchal elements. In fact, conservative versions of each of these faiths regularly promote immutable differences between cisgender women and men, and fail to acknowledge even the existence of people of other gender identities ([Rodriguez and Follins 2012](#); [Sumerau et al. 2016](#)). It seems likely that each of these faiths would likely contain their own features that become visible once *both a gender lens and transgender perspectives* are taken into account. In much the same way, the incorporation of sexual minorities into sociologies of religion spurred mountains of new findings over the past couple decades, a gender lens coupled with the incorporation of transgender religious experience may dramatically expand the field.

Our articulation of the cisnormative patriarchal operation of Mormonism and our application and expansion of a gender lens in sociologies of religion have implications for understanding the relationship between gender and religion in many contexts. While scholars have importantly noted the tendency for conservative religious traditions to adopt patriarchal patterns of organization and belief (e.g., [Bush 2010](#); [Kaylor 2010](#); [Sumerau and Cragun 2014](#)), our analysis suggests that even these patriarchal arrangements rely upon a foundational belief in cisnormativity articulated via religious articulations of God's creation. Further, our findings suggest efforts to utilize religious frameworks to adjust existing gender norms will ultimately result in the continuation of gender inequalities—though maybe in different forms ([Butler 1999](#))—if the new ways remain predicated upon cisnormativity (see also [Stryker 2008](#)). Our analysis compliments [Avishai et al. \(2015\)](#) call for a gender lens in sociologies of religion while also asking what insights transgender experience may reveal in such studies.

Transgender perspectives on religion could—as they have in workplace ([Connell 2010](#)), familial ([Pfeffer 2010](#)), historical ([Schilt 2010](#)), scientific ([Westbrook and Schilt 2014](#)), political ([Stryker 2008](#)), and public ([Cavanagh 2010](#)) contexts to name a few—expand our understanding of the variety of ways gender operates within and between different religions. Further, transgender

religious experiences could expose the socially constructed nature of religion by forcing religious people, scholars, and traditions to make sense of social realities missing from many versions of God's creations, many religious leaders' explanations of the origin and nature of life, and many religious promises of life after death.

Specifically, incorporating transgender perspectives into the systematic study of religious doctrine and practices, broadly and in relation to LDS traditions, may shed light on the ways that religion facilitates—or could be used to challenge—ongoing processes of cisgendering reality (Sumerau et al. 2016), and how such processes vary within and between faiths. Importantly, scholars of sociology, gender, and religion should be attentive to the fact that transgender is a broad umbrella term denoting varied lived experience. As such, we should anticipate a great deal of complexity and nuance currently missing from the literature that incorporating various transgender perspectives can offer the study of religion. For example, as Mathers (2017b) suggests, future scholars should explore how transgender peoples' perspectives on religion may be influenced by past experiences in religious and/or nonreligious contexts, family experiences and connectedness, and community relationships.

Although some critiques of religion offered by transgender individuals may be similar to those offered by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and feminist work on the subject (McQueeney 2009; Sumerau 2012; Yip 1997), the diversity of transgender communities suggests there may also be a great deal of new insight to be gained from these perspectives. While incorporating transgender inclusive gender lenses into studies of religion may be difficult or controversial for many believers and especially for conservative religious traditions, they may also encourage people to reflect upon—and potentially strengthen—their faith while removing religious barriers to full gender equality over time. To unlock these and other possibilities in sociologies of religion, however, our field will first have to apply a gender lens to religious life and incorporate transgender religious experiences into our studies as part of this process.

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