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The Hallmarks of Righteous Women: Gendered Background Expectations in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

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In this article, we examine how leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormon) collaborated with some Mormon women to construct gendered background expectations. Based on LDS archival materials, we analyze how LDS leaders and their representatives embedded specific notions of what it means to be a woman into the institutional and theological structure of the religion by (1) defining womanhood and (2) teaching femininity in ways that sanctified gender inequality. In doing so, LDS leaders and Mormon women, regardless of their intentions, reproduced gender beliefs that facilitate the subordination of women while anchoring these beliefs within existing Mormon doctrine. In conclusion, we draw out implications for understanding (1) the role of gendered background expectations in the structure of conservative religions, (2) the importance of deconstructing sanctified gender beliefs, and (3) potential opportunities for making sense of apparent contradictions within religious notions of gender.

Key words: religion; femininity; gendered institutions; inequalities.

An emerging line of research examines the experiences of women in conservative religions. Seeking to understand why women participate in these traditions, researchers have argued that women comply with conservative religious demands because they experience them as both constraining and empowering (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Gallagher 2004; Hoyt 2007). Other studies suggest women adjust or subvert official dogma via partial compliance (Pevey et al. 1996) and interpretative action (Gallagher 2003; Gallagher and Smith 1999). Further, researchers have found that some women use official religious teachings for nonreligious ends, such as economic opportunities and politics (Chen 2005; Gallagher 2007). Rather than simply responding to conservative religions,

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however, recent scholarship suggests women may be actively negotiating their religious experiences in relation to a combination of individual and institutional social and religious meaning systems.

To this end, Avishai (2008) demonstrated some conservative religious women actively "do" religion within existing power relations, and often do so both with and without regard for specific religious or nonreligious goals. Her analysis revealed that conservative religious women actively interpret the institutional constructions of gender established by religious elites to make sense of and accomplish authentic religious selves. Further, research into the religious experiences of women in other countries suggests what constitutes "conservative" religion often depends upon context and tradition (Jafar 2007). As such, religious women may advance liberal causes in one tradition or country that appear conservative when viewed through the lens of another meaning system (Rinaldo 2008). While these insights reveal women's agency and move beyond questions of why women participate in conservative religions, they also suggest there may be much to learn from the ways religious leaders construct the "sacred" gender norms religious women negotiate via compliance, adjustment, subversion, or adaptation (see Bush 2010).

Understanding the ways religious leaders construct "sacred" gender norms, however, requires shifting our focus away from the way individual women interpret religious doctrine to the ways that religious leaders and their chosen representatives, regardless of intention, embed notions of gender into the institutional structure of a religion. Similar to larger patterns in the sociological tradition (Schwalbe et al. 2000), existing studies of womanhood in conservative religious traditions tend to emphasize variations and subtle nuances in the ways women negotiate existing religious doctrine. As a result, we know far more about how subordinates (e.g., religious laity) respond to religious structure, but surprisingly little about the ways that dominants (e.g., religious leaders) establish and maintain the religious structures subordinates navigate. How do religious leaders socially construct "sacred notions" of gender, and what consequences may these efforts have for the reproduction of gender inequalities?

In order to shed light upon these questions, we draw on two sets of literature. We first examine Martin's (2004) articulation of gender as a social institution, and ask what role ideal notions of gender play in religious structure. We then turn to research concerning gender as a background expectation, and ask how religious leaders and their chosen representatives construct gendered background expectations for their followers. We answer these questions by utilizing archival data from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormon). It is not our intention to generalize our findings to the larger population of conservative religions, but rather to elaborate some ways religious leaders may collaborate with selected representatives, regardless of intentions, to construct gendered background expectations that effectively sanctify—or make sacred—gender inequality. In doing so, we argue that understanding the experiences of religious women—conservative or otherwise—necessitates unpacking the ways religious

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leaders construct "sacred" beliefs regarding gender within and across varied religious structures.

To this end, we draw upon a long history of textual analyses exploring the ways religious leaders instruct their followers on prominent social issues. Examples of this type of work may be found in Fetner's (2008) study of religious and secular social movements, Robinson and Spivey's (2007) study of Ex-gay leaders' rhetoric, Rose's (2005) study of framing in abstinence only campaigns, Thomas and Olson's (2012) analysis of Evangelical elites' interpretations of homosexuality, and Kaylor's (2010) study of Southern Baptist portrayals of women. While focusing our attention on religious leaders' instructions for followers, however, it is important to note that people typically experience religion (as well as other systems of meaning and practice) as a reciprocal relationship between official norms and individual interpretations of these norms (Blumer 1969). As a result, religious individuals may interpret the official teachings of their leaders in a wide variety of ways, and through these efforts potentially change religions over time. By the same token, religious leaders constantly interpret and respond to the efforts of subordinates, and may thus reinforce existing norms throughout their teachings. While we focus on the meaning-making work of religious leaders, it is important to recognize that the overall shape of religious experience relies upon ongoing reciprocal endeavors by both dominants and subordinates within the tradition (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

GENDER AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION

Over the past four decades, feminists have demonstrated that social beings construct, enact, and signify a wide variety of gendered selves in relation to differential locations within interlocking systems of oppression and privilege as well as local, regional, and global ideals concerning what it means to be male, female, or intersex (see, e.g., Goffman 1977; Ridgeway 2011; West and Zimmerman 1987). Instead of a measurable trait implanted inside human bodies, this line of scholarship conceptualizes gender as an ongoing accomplishment wherein social beings draw upon institutionalized notions of what it means to be a woman or man to signify the possession of feminine and masculine selves (see also Martin 2003). These studies also show that "doing gender" provides the foundation for local, national, and global patterns of gender inequality (see, e.g., Connell 1987; Padavic and Reskin 2002; Ridgeway 2011), and often reproduces heterosexism (Schilt and Westbrook 2009), classism (West and Fenstermaker 1995), and racism (Collins 2005). Overall, these studies suggest understanding the ways religious leaders and their followers make sense of gender requires interrogating the construction of religious beliefs about gender.

Building on this tradition, Martin (2004) conceptualized gender as a social institution wherein institutional leaders draw upon cultural notions of femininity and masculinity to structure and organize the social life of their followers (see

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also Connell 1987; Lorber 1994; Risman 2004). From this perspective, gender—like other social institutions—has a history and structure that may be traced, establishes expectations, internalizes identities and social processes, and is built into other social organizations throughout society. Importantly, this perspective allows researchers to examine the myriad of ways gender is used to organize a wide variety of social relations, and provide the ideological framework of other social institutions. Rather than solely evaluating why anyone would participate in a given activity or cataloguing the multitude of variations and subtle nuances in the ways individuals interpret ideal or hegemonic notions of gender, such a perspective allows researchers to examine the social construction of dominant interpretations of gender within specific institutional settings and traditions (see also Lorber 1994).

Although sociologists of religion have typically focused on interpersonal and individual conceptualizations of gender (Burke 2012; Bush 2010), findings from social movement scholars suggest gender may play an important role in structuring religion. In their analysis of the Ex-gay movement, for example, Robinson and Spivey (2007) found that movement leaders drew heavily upon existing religious beliefs about "essential gender difference" to mobilize opposition to feminism and homosexuality (see also Fetner 2008). Similarly, Rose (2005) demonstrated that abstinence only advocates utilized religious notions of passive and virginal femininity to define sexual education as sinful, frightening, and morally dangerous (see also Fields 2008). Although none of these authors conceptualized their study in terms of "gendered institutions" or sought to uncover the construction of the religious gender beliefs activists drew upon, in each case, social movement groups garnered support for policy agendas by aligning their political claims with the gender beliefs embedded within conservative religions.

In order to make sense of the gender beliefs embedded within conservative religions, we must examine the gendered background expectations—or ideal interpretations of gender—religious leaders construct and institutionalize for their followers (Bush 2010). Following Ridgeway (2011), every institutional domain—religious, gendered, or otherwise—constructs systems of meaning that define who selves and others are. Since gender may be deemed relevant in any situation (West and Zimmerman 1987) and used to organize any institutional domain (Martin 2004), it represents a primary frame for social relations, which people may be taught to use consciously or unconsciously to sort selves, others, and institutional patterns into greater or lesser categories of privilege. Further, regular and ongoing interactions between people within institutions serve to solidify gendered background expectations by transforming these beliefs into taken-for-granted truths, and providing institutional members with resources for interacting with others in both familiar and new situations. Understanding the social construction of gender within religions thus requires unpacking the ways religious leaders teach their followers about gender. After all, it will be these teachings—or gendered background expectations—that followers draw upon in order to practice their religion (see also Avishai 2008; Burke 2012).

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Seeking to further elaborate the importance of background expectations embedded within religions, we examine how LDS leaders built gendered background expectations into official Mormon doctrine as well as the ways that some Mormon women—called upon by the leadership—affirmed these expectations. In doing so, their collaborative effort created a religious context where gender became an essential ingredient in Mormonism. Before presenting our analysis, we contextualize the efforts of LDS leaders and their representatives by outlining the gendered foundations of traditional Mormon doctrine. In doing so, we discuss some ways gender inequality may represent a theological and institutional foundation of modern Mormonism, which LDS leaders have drawn upon to define gender as an essential—and thus sacred—element of being an ideal Mormon.

GENDERED BACKGROUND EXPECTATIONS IN MORMONISM

Similar to many other conservative Christian traditions (see, e.g., Bartkowski and Read 2003; Bush 2010; Gallagher and Smith 1999), Mormon conceptualizations of gender rely upon and derive from the foundational theological and institutional structure of the religion (Cragun and Phillips 2012; Miles 2008). Specifically, Mormons argue that gender is a divinely ordained essence within individuals that carries specific responsibilities, capabilities, and characteristics (Basquiat 2001; Dodwell 2003). People are sorted into male and female categories by God prior to birth, and are expected to fulfill specific God-given roles before, during, and after their earthly existence. According to official Mormon doctrine, gender is thus both fixed and eternal.

In order to make sense of Mormon interpretations of gender, one must examine the theological underpinnings of the religion. Specifically, Mormon doctrine argues that people pass through three distinct phases of existence, which carry important connotations for the cosmos. First, Mormons are created as disembodied spirits by their Heavenly Father *and* Mother (Wilcox 1992), and wait within the spirit realm for their release upon this earth. Second, they are born as divinely gendered beings, and spend a lifetime experiencing a test that will determine their status in the next realm. Finally, Mormons believe that after death they will be sorted—based on their "test results" or morality upon this earth—into multiple levels of eternity wherein the most devout enter the Celestial Kingdom while the most sinful find themselves banished to Outer Darkness. As a result, Mormons believe they are initially constructed via the efforts of heterogendered spiritual beings (Hoyt 2007) that expect them to reproduce this example to gain sought after positions in the next life (see also Ludlow 1992).

Additionally, official Mormon doctrine positions gender at the heart of their earthly test. Since the religion defines heterosexual sex as the mechanism for allowing spirit children onto earth, God's entire plan rests upon the existence of differently gendered beings that come together in sexual congress. Similarly, this doctrine asserts that the souls that enter the Celestial Kingdom—and thus the

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most faithful Mormons—are limited to people who constructed heterosexual marriages complete with biologically related children. Further, this doctrine argues that a significant part of their earthly test involves properly enacting motherhood, fatherhood, and marital unions that include rearing properly gendered boys and girls to release the next batch of spiritual children. While there are exceptions for people who are unable to accomplish these divine commands through no fault of their own, gender occupies a central place in Mormonism, and influences every other aspect of existence upon this earth and beyond.

Alongside its place in the heart of Mormon theology, gender also serves as a primary organizational tool in the LDS Church. One of the religious innovations of Joseph Smith Jr., the founder of Mormonism, was the (re)introduction of priesthood. In Mormonism, the priesthood refers to the authority of God and provides holders with the right to perform ordinances and assign responsibilities to other members (Ludlow 1992). Whereas women are called to serve the church in many ways, allowed to hold leadership positions in some mid-level church organizations, and some argue, shared in the priesthood prior to the early twentieth century (Derr 1992; Madsen 1992), only males are allowed to have the priesthood. Further, males alone occupy the highest leadership bodies of the church, which are referred to as "General Authorities." General Authorities are paid clergy who have responsibility and authority over the entire religion. As a result, their teachings—as well as member contributions in official publications they approve—are recognized as official doctrine. Although some women have fought for decades to gain access to the priesthood (Peterson 1992; Vance 2002; see also www.ordainwomen.org for current efforts) and early Mormon doctrine and practice suggests this may have been part of God's plan (Bradley 2005), Mormonism is today a religious institution wherein men hold official power and women do not.

Building on these insights, we offer a situated analysis of the gendered background expectations embedded within Mormonism. Whereas previous research has shown that individual Mormon women interpret and negotiate official LDS doctrine in a multitude of ways (see, e.g., Beaman 2001; Hoyt 2007; Vance 2007), our analysis focuses on the ways Mormon leaders construct the gendered background expectations these women must navigate (see Iannaccone and Miles 1990; Miles 2008). Specifically, we examine how LDS leaders—as well as the women allowed to publish official materials in the primary Church magazine—defined womanhood and taught femininity over the last five decades. While the last five decades may be somewhat unique as far as gender in the LDS Church is concerned (Vance 2002), this time period begins directly after the religion underwent a significant restructuring that concentrated power at the top of the all-male priesthood hierarchy (Mauss 1994). Additionally, if scholars want to understand why Mormons hold more conservative attitudes toward gender today (Cragun and Phillips 2012; Heaton et al. 2001, 2005), it makes sense to focus on recent teachings. In this article, we argue that LDS leaders have, since the 1960s, crafted a gendered institution where gender inequality has been given God's blessing.

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Before turning to our analysis, however, it is important to note that we initially began this project expecting to extend or even revise the findings of Iannaccone and Miles (1990). Stated simply, we expected that the hints of potential accommodation (despite the lack of substantive change) they found in 1990 would have evolved into substantive changes in the two decades that followed. Unfortunately, we were mistaken, and instead found no substantive changes (see also Miles 2008). As a result, we build on Iannaccone and Miles's (1990) analyses by revealing the gendered background expectations Mormon leaders (and their chosen representatives) have consistently built into the official doctrine of the Church. Considering that allowing more female speakers was the primary accommodation Iannaccone and Miles (1990) noted, we also demonstrate that potential accommodations may ultimately be used to forestall—rather than promote—substantive changes in official religious teachings about gender.

METHODS

As part of a larger study exploring the social construction of gender in Mormonism, we collected archives of the LDS Church's General Conference talks and its monthly publication *Ensign* from 1971 to 2012. The LDS General Conference is a biannual meeting where members and others gather to receive instruction and inspiration from Church leaders. *Ensign* is the official adult publication of the LDS Church, which generally contains faith-promoting and proselytizing guidance for members. Although members who do not hold elite positions often publish articles in *Ensign*, LDS leaders hold full editorial power and must approve all publications (Mould 2011). As a result, these materials represent a comprehensive record of official LDS teachings over the past five decades.

In order to analyze the social construction of gender, we utilized a word search program called *dtSearch*, which allowed us to index text files and rapidly search for specific terms. We sought to capture all the ways LDS leaders and female members talked about gender in their speeches and publications. Doing so allowed us to identify all usages of relevant terms, including but not limited to "femininity, masculinity, husband, wife, mother, father, marriage, equality, and housework," and pull the documents where LDS speakers and writers discussed or mentioned these issues. We further ran full-text searches for generic identifiers, such as male, female, man, and woman, in order to make sure we analyzed all possible teachings and discussions of gender. This process yielded a final sample of 11,622 *Ensign* articles and General Conference Talks (GC) spanning the years 1971–2012.

In order to analyze such a large sample of documents, we developed a two-pronged approach to the data. First, we enlisted the services of eight research assistants and assigned each one a section of the data to read closely and code for relevant themes. To accomplish this, we constructed a coding protocol that contained a series of questions, such as "What does womanhood mean" or "What do

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good wives do," that the assistants would answer by pasting sections of data that spoke to each of the 35 questions. These endeavors resulted in over 1,000 pages of coded, single-spaced excerpts from LDS speeches and publications.

To complement the work of our research assistants, we sought to gain as broad a view of the topic as possible, and ensure reliability in the coding process. To this end, we each undertook separate tasks to immerse ourselves in the data at hand and the topic in general. Since one of the authors was raised in Mormonism and an expert in Mormon research, we searched for academic, institutional, and media materials concerning gender and Mormonism available via online repositories, large-scale data sets, and academic journals. At the same time, the other author—raised in a different conservative Christian tradition—undertook the task of reading the entirety of the documents, and comparing zir coding results to the efforts of our research team. In doing so, we were able to closely oversee the work of our team, and judge the content of their coding sheets.

Throughout the process, our analysis developed primarily in an inductive manner. Drawing on elements of "grounded theory" (Charmaz 2006), our team read and examined the content for recurring patterns and themes, and sorted these patterns into categories. While we began our study with some expectations based on prior research (Iannaccone and Miles 1990; Miles 2008), we approached the data by asking, "what is going on here" and "what do these materials tell us about gender in Mormonism." In doing so, we captured a wide array of information, which we sorted into categories. After comparing and contrasting all the codes, we developed more specific questions (e.g., "what does it mean to be a man" or "what does it mean to be a woman"), and created labels to capture the answers to each question. For the purposes of this manuscript, we utilize the categories created to represent "what it means to be feminine" in Mormonism.

Drawing upon this content, we searched for nuances and distinctions in the materials, outlined patterns of feminine behavior noted in the content, and compared these findings with other studies of religious women. In doing so, we came to see the speeches and publications as definitions of "ideal" or "sacred" womanhood Mormon leaders and their representatives created for women in the church. After studying previous literature, however, we realized that while Mormon women might interpret these teachings in a myriad of ways (see especially Beaman 2001), their leaders' definition of what constituted ideal Mormon womanhood remained fairly consistent throughout the time period covered in our data set. As a result, we created categories to capture the gendered background expectations that have held constant, despite the multitude of changes within and beyond the church over the last 40 years, which we labeled (1) Defining Womanhood and (2) Teaching Femininity.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that the confines of an academic journal do not allow us to share the entirety of our data analysis. As a result, we have chosen representative cases to capture the breadth and depth of official LDS conceptualizations of femininity, and recurring patterns of "meaning-making" (Blumer 1969) evidenced throughout the data set. Additionally, while

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we treat the processes of Defining Womanhood and Teaching Femininity as analytically distinct, LDS leaders and Mormon women often accomplished these efforts simultaneously. In what follows, we thus use the case of LDS leaders and their selected representatives to outline some ways that religious leaders collaborate with select members to construct "sacred" gender beliefs, which may serve as a comparison for examinations of gendered background expectations within other religious institutions.

Finally, it should be noted that we have observed the gendered background expectations presented below throughout the 40 years contained in our data set. Although there have been many shifts in Mormon gender relations and rhetoric during this time, LDS leaders' overall conceptualization of gender has remained constant (see also Iannaccone and Miles 1990; Miles 2008). In fact, the Mormon Church echoed the background expectations we outline below as recently as February 2014 by asserting the "innate and essential differences" between women and men in court filings supporting same-sex marriage bans (see *Kitchen v. Herbert 2014*). As a result, our analysis echoes longstanding feminist calls for social scientists to shed light upon the persistence of gender inequalities despite the appearance of shifting social relations (Martin 2004; Ridgeway 2011; West and Zimmerman 1987).

DEFINING MORMON WOMANHOOD

Gendered and religious systems rely heavily upon the definitions constructed and affirmed by institutional leaders (Martin 2004). In terms of gender, for example, feminists have documented the ways cultural authorities—religious or otherwise—construct and hold people accountable for ideal conceptions of femininity and masculinity (see, e.g., Connell 1987; Ridgeway 2011; West and Zimmerman 1987). Similarly, scholars have demonstrated the wide-ranging influence religious leaders have upon the ways believers interpret and respond to many social issues (see Chaves 1997). In this section, we examine how LDS leaders and the select Mormon women who published articles in *Ensign* accomplished the construction of religious and gendered ideals by defining womanhood.

LDS leaders and their representatives defined womanhood as an essential element of moral selfhood. They accomplished this by arguing their Heavenly Father imbued each woman with an essential feminine self. The following excerpt offers a typical example:

> *The divine light which you carry within your soul is inherited from God because you are His daughter. Part of the light which makes you so magnificent is the blessing of womanhood. What a wonderful thing it is for you to know that your female, feminine characteristics are an endowment from God. Our latter-day prophets teach that "gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose." (Hold High the Torch, Margaret D. Nadauld, Young Women General President,* Ensign, *May 2002)*

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Echoing this woman's articulation of womanhood as a divinely established part of females, LDS leaders, as the following example shows, often asserted that women possessed special capacities:

> *Femininity is not just lipstick, stylish hairdos, and trendy clothes. It is the divine adornment of humanity. It finds expression in your qualities of your capacity to love, your spirituality, delicacy, radiance, sensitivity, creativity, charm, graciousness, gentleness, dignity, and quiet strength. It is manifest differently in each girl or woman, but each of you possesses it. Femininity is part of your inner beauty. (Womanhood: The Highest Place of Honor, James E. Faust,* Ensign, *May 2000)*

Note that each of the "qualities" God gave women align perfectly with the "emphasized femininity" (Connell 1987) upon which much gender inequality depends. Seemingly recognizing this connection on some level, LDS leaders often explicitly suggested limits upon women's "natural" qualities. As one leader put it, "I am for protecting the rights of a woman to be a woman, a feminine, female woman; a wife and a mother" (The Equal Rights Amendment, Boyd K. Packer, Ensign, March 1977). As if reading from a patriarchal playbook (see Johnson 2005), LDS leaders defined womanhood as an essential "capacity" or set of "qualities" that reproduce patterns of gender inequality.

LDS leaders also outlined detailed lists of traits embedded within female bodies. As the following illustration suggests, these lists often replicated societal notions of subordinate femininity:

> *One of your particular gifts is your feminine intuition. Do not limit yourselves. As you seek to know the will of our Heavenly Father in your life and become more spiritual, you will be far more attractive, even irresistible. You can use your smiling loveliness to bless those you love and all you meet, and spread great joy. Femininity is part of the God-given divinity within each of you. It is your incomparable power and influence to do good. You can, through your supernal gifts, bless the lives of children, women, and men. Be proud of your womanhood. Enhance it. Use it to serve others. (Womanhood: The Highest Place of Honor, James E. Faust,* Ensign, *May 2000)*

Mirroring longstanding beliefs about women's power and influence being naturally located in their attractiveness, "loveliness," and service to others (Connell 1987), LDS leaders defined womanhood as a "gift" that could be used in the service of God. As another leader noted:

> *Of all the creations of the Almighty, there is none more beautiful, none more inspiring than a lovely daughter of God who walks in virtue with an understanding of why she should do so, who honors and respects her body as a thing sacred and divine, who cultivates her mind and constantly enlarges the horizon of her understanding, who nurtures her spirit with everlasting truth. (Our Responsibility to Our Young Women, Gordon B. Hinckley,* Ensign, *September 1988)*

Despite the almost two decades separating their articulation, these illustrations both explicitly link womanhood to longstanding notions of feminine beauty and "virtue," which facilitate patterns of gender inequality (Johnson 2005).

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Our analysis also revealed many other publications wherein Mormon women were called upon to reiterate these messages. As the following excerpt shows, this process often involved encouraging other women to celebrate their special feminine qualities and abilities: "I know, I absolutely know, that these doctrines about our divine role are true, and that when understood they bring peace and purpose to all women" (Are We Not All Mothers? Sheri L. Dew, *Ensign*, November 2001). Another woman told others to: "Have pride in our womanly traits and capacities and recognize that the home can provide the climate in which feminine virtues thrive and grow" (Being a Wife, Ann S. Reese, *Ensign*, September 1984).

Rather than relying solely on the arguments of LDS leaders, however, Mormon women, similar to some women in other conservative Christian traditions (Wolkomir 2004), bolstered their definitions by referencing biblical scripture. The following example offers a typical case:

> *Rebecca provides another example of woman's spiritual insight. Elder McConkie suggested that she understood her obligation to "engineer and . . . arrange so that things are done in a way that will result in the salvation of more of our Father's children." You will remember that Isaac, Rebecca's aged husband, was preparing, in accordance with the law, to pronounce a special blessing upon his firstborn son, Esau. Rebecca knew, however, that it was their righteous son, Jacob, who should have the blessing, for the Lord had revealed it to her before the children were born. She therefore "engineered" the situation so that her husband did indeed confer the blessings of Abraham upon Jacob. Here we have another demonstration of obedience to higher law. (Mormon Women: A Convert's Perspective, Carolyn J. Rasmus,* Ensign, *August 1980)*

There are many examples of this type of narrative device, each of which mirrored the story of Rebecca by emphasizing the importance God placed on women's obedience and service (see Charles 1992 for additional examples). At other times, Mormon women invoked Eve as the ultimate representation of Godly womanhood:

> *As daughters of our Heavenly Father, and as daughters of Eve, we are all mothers and we have always been mothers. And we each have the responsibility to love and help lead the rising generation. How will our young women learn to live as women of God unless they see what women of God look like, meaning what we wear, watch, and read; how we fill our time and our minds; how we face temptation and uncertainty; where we find true joy; and why modesty and femininity are hallmarks of righteous women. (Are We Not All Mothers? Sheri L. Dew,* Ensign, *November 2001)*

Similar to conservative Christian antifeminist campaigns like those led by the Religious Right (Fetner 2008), Mormon women linked womanhood to the submission and modesty of biblical figures. Additionally, their efforts revealed that, much like Muslim women engaged in political activism in Indonesia (Rinaldo 2008) or other Mormon women navigating institutionalized gender beliefs during their daily lives (Beaman 2001), they relied upon materials already deemed "sacred" to bolster their own efforts. In doing so, however, their definitions

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of womanhood limited women to patriarchal roles that necessitate subordinate status.

Mormon women also explicitly linked their definitions of womanhood to Mormonism. This tactic involved citing the ways "women are grouped" by previous Mormon prophets and the Book of Mormon:

> *The Prophet Joseph Smith, addressing the sisters of Relief Society in 1842, said, "It is natural for females to have feelings of charity and benevolence" (History of the Church, 4:605). We know that certain traits are not solely attributes of men, nor are certain others only attributes of women. Christlike qualities can be developed by all. But since God prepared us for our assignments on this earth, isn't it reasonable to believe that some inherited talents and characteristics are uniquely feminine. (Being a Wife, Ann S. Reese,* Ensign, *September 1984)*

Note that this type of statement accomplishes two goals for believers. First, it associates the essential, subordinate definition of womanhood with the expressed wishes of the central figure of the religion. Second, it anchors contemporary definitions of ideal or hegemonic Mormon womanhood in the legacy of the LDS Church and the prophetic capacity of its founder, despite the existence of other examples of Joseph Smith suggesting a more egalitarian view of women (see Derr 1992). The current leadership of the religion thus selectively drew upon esteemed past leaders to construct and sanctify the gendered expectations they wished to instill in today's members.

LDS leaders and Mormon women called upon to contribute to official publications also emphasized what womanhood was not: manhood. The following example offers a typical case:

> *The Lord defined some very basic differences between men and women. He gave the male what we call masculine traits and the female feminine traits. He did not intend either of the sexes to adopt the other's traits but, rather, that men should look and act like men and that women should look and act like women. When these differences are ignored, an unwholesome relationship develops, which, if not checked, can lead to the reprehensible, tragic sin of homosexuality. (The Meaning of Morality, Victor L. Brown,* Ensign, *June 1971)*

Note that despite the essential, God-given nature of femininity, LDS leaders still recognized that women and men could act, look, and be very similar. Importantly, this type of phrasing also drew upon long-standing Mormon—and wide-spread conservative Christian—opposition to homosexuality to suggest LDS women would lose their virtue if they did not protect their womanhood properly. Mormon women, on the other hand, generally stressed gender distinctions in their writings:

> *A man and a woman think differently. They see things from masculine or feminine viewpoints. While they may be poles apart in thinking about some things, yet striving to be one in all things, they have need for wisdom and for knowledge to keep marriage always a glowing promise. (Today's Family, Mabel Jones Gabbott,* Ensign, *June 1971)*

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Echoing traditional notions of masculine versus feminine qualities (West and Zimmerman 1987) as well as religious distinctions between moral and secular selves (Avishai 2008), LDS leaders and Mormon women defined womanhood in abject opposition to masculinity. Further, statements like this foreshadow the assertion of "essential" gender difference used in the Church's aforementioned court filings supporting same-sex marriage bans.

Previous research indicates that this focus on gendered distinctions existed from the inception of the religion, but was heavily emphasized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Derr 1992). Given our focus on the years following 1970, it is clear that LDS leaders were well aware of current societal changes in gender (Miles 2008), and often expressed concerns about these changes:

> *The roles of men and women are becoming confused. Girls are dressing like boys and the boys are looking more and more like girls. We have a great need in the Church today to develop masculinity in our boys and femininity in our girls. This is counter to much of what is happening in the world. (Insights from June Conference, Victor B. Brown,* Ensign*, October 1975)*

As the previous example suggests and the following illustration explicitly argues, LDS leaders were very concerned about changing gender norms:

> *There are some voices in our society who would demean some of the attributes of masculinity. A few of these are women who mistakenly believe that they build their own feminine causes by tearing down the image of manhood. (Happiness Is Having a Father Who Cares, James E. Faust, Ensign, January 1974)*

Further, as the following excerpt reveals, this concern remains 30 years later: "Either partner who diminishes the divine role of the other in the presence of the children demeans the budding femininity within the daughters" (Fathers, Mothers, and Marriage, James E. Faust, August 2004). Similar to the arguments promoted by some conservative Christian movements, such as the Promise Keepers (Heath 2003), LDS leaders defined outside forces as agents capable of corrupting Godly womanhood. In doing so, however, their statements granted credence to the notion that gender itself was a social, rather than a Godly, construction. In fact, it is quite possible that statements like this may provide inspiration for Mormon women seeking to subvert official definitions of gender (see Beaman 2001 for examples of such women's experiences).

In sum, LDS leaders and their female representatives defined womanhood as an essential element of moral personhood that was utterly distinct from masculinity. In doing so, they echoed cultural discourses promoted by secular (Connell 1987) and religious (Robinson and Spivey 2007) elites and subordinates that facilitate the ongoing marginalization of women. While Mormon women could—like some Orthodox Jewish women negotiating *niddah* (Avishai 2008), some Muslim women negotiating political activism (Rinaldo 2008), some conservative Protestant wives negotiating their husband's homosexuality (Wolkomir 2004), or other Mormon women subverting official dogma (Beaman 2001)—interpret

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these lessons in many ways spanning a spectrum from full acceptance to outright rejection, they could also be held accountable (see, e.g., Martin 2004; Ridgeway 2011; West and Zimmerman 1987) for these sacred gender beliefs at any point in their ongoing religious lives.

TEACHING MORMON FEMININITY

Although religious (Fetner 2008) leaders have generally, like LDS leaders, defined gender in essential terms and feminists have typically conceptualized gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) as the result of ongoing processes of interaction and interpretation shaped by societal norms, these perspectives converge upon the notion that gender socialization is a central social process (Robinson and Spivey 2007). Religious leaders, for example, advocate specific "practices" women (and men) should and should not engage in despite their apparent belief in essential gender (Wolkomir 2004), while feminists have devoted substantial effort to challenging taken-for-granted lessons about femininity and masculinity taught to people in various settings (Ridgeway 2011). Similarly, LDS leaders and Mormon women—despite the fact that they believed women were naturally imbued with femininity—devoted significant time throughout the last 40 years to teaching Mormon femininity.

Although they argued that women contained a natural feminine essence, LDS leaders taught femininity by encouraging women to develop and celebrate feminine habits and gifts. As the following illustration makes clear, these lessons typically involved casting secularism as an unsavory force that could steal femininity:

> *Elder Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve told mothers and daughters that "we now move into a generation when the challenge will center on the role of women." Counseling parents to "keep their girls feminine," and women leaders to provide the girls some activities that are "exclusively feminine," he said: "It is against their nature to be like men." He explained that "there are some things that women by nature can do so much better than men" and that "there are some spiritual virtues that women must protect for men, or grave will be the cost." He urged the mothers and daughters to develop "the delicate, tender, quiet, reverent, soft things in life that are more a part of the feminine nature." (Madison Area Conference Uplifts Midwestern U.S. Saints, Marvin K. Gardner,* Ensign, *October 1979)*

Statements like this reveal that while LDS leaders believed femininity was God-given, they also believed, as the next example shows, women needed to develop their inner essence via action:

> *Women are not only described through adjectives but also through their many actions and behaviors. They plead, mourn, suffer, praise, show faith, pray, complain, bear children, fear, cry, convert, summon, make merry, are comforted, murmur, sin, run, are overcome, love, mother, hide, flee, are slain, believe, have broken hearts, toil, spin cloth, sing, dance, charm, are rude, escape, fight, are captured, etc. (My Book of Mormon Sisters, Marjorie Meads Spencer,* Ensign, *September 1977)*

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Echoing feminist conceptualizations of both gender (Martin 2003) and religion (Avishai 2008) as socially constructed distinctions dependent upon interpersonal performances and practices, LDS leaders—and Mormon women like the ones cited above and below—taught their followers proper ways to do femininity (see also Wolkomir 2004). Further, they argued that women were required to "Never belittle the gifts God has given you," and to develop the "kind, nurturing nature" God endowed them with from the start (Hold High the Torch, Margaret D. Nadauld Young Women General President, *Ensign*, May 2002).

LDS leaders also linked women's obedience to the institutional and theological underpinning of the Mormon faith, and in doing so, argued that the divine sanctioned the Church's rules for femininity. The following excerpt provides a typical example:

> *Must we be told, "Thou shalt not wear miniskirts"? The Prophet Joseph Smith stated, "I teach the people correct principles, and they govern themselves." Listen to the correct principles taught by some of our prophets: "Have your dresses neat and comely, and conduct yourselves, in the strictest sense of the word, in chastity" (Brigham Young). "It is surprising that many young women adopt extreme methods of dressing, under the mistaken impression that such will add to their attractiveness. Good men the world over admire the decently dressed girl or woman" (President Joseph F. Smith). "Girls should dress to enhance their natural beauty and femininity" (President David O. McKay). (Editorial: The Dimensions of Morality,* Ensign, *March 1972)*

LDS leaders also defined campaigns for women's rights as distractions leading women away from sacred duties:

> *This cultural motion, and emotion, pushed some women from being overly selfless to being overly selfish—causing them to miss the personal growth that can come only from self-chosen sacrifice, which makes possible a woman's ability to thrive from nurturing all within her circle (see John 17:19). (Crossing Thresholds and Becoming Equal Partners, Elder Bruce C. Hafen,* Ensign, *August 2007)*

LDS leaders, whether speaking in the 1970s or 2000s, thus argued that women's obedience—whether in terms of dress, Church service, or in relationships—represented a mandate delivered unto the people by the prophets. In doing so, they taught women (and men) one element of God's eternal plan required doing femininity.

While LDS leaders taught women to properly do femininity in all aspects of life, Mormon women especially linked the home to women's moral development. As the following excerpt shows, this lesson generally involved associating the home with inherent femininity:

> *Homemaking promotes feminine virtues. A friend, Donna Hilton Gardner of Bountiful, Utah, writes, "Homemaking is a bulwark of femininity! It has been my experience that a hardening process takes place in many women as they join the competitive, masculine, workaday world. In order to compete, they often have to become a little tough. I am in no way advocating a mealy-mouthed model of servitude or frivolous ineptitude. But as some of my friends have joined the work force, I've seen subtle changes which have resulted in a loss of gentleness, gentility,*

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tenderness, and sweetness . . . virtues which have been traditionally and, I feel, innately attributed to women." (Wife and Mother: A Valid Career Option for the College-Educated Woman, Sydney Smith Reynolds, Ensign, *October 1979)*

Another Mormon woman noted: "Many women are motivated to make something beautiful and peaceful of their lives. Home is precious to such women. Their husbands are honored, and their children are cherished" (Being a Wife, Ann S. Reese, Ensign, September 1984). Further, Mormon women emphasized the "sacred" nature of motherhood:

Women today are told they need a thriving career, organizations to belong to, and, if they have resources, children. The honored role of mother is increasingly out of fashion. Let me make it clear: we must not allow the world to compromise what we know is given to us by divine design. (Parents Have a Sacred Duty, Relief Society General President Bonnie D. Parkin, Ensign, *June 2006)*

Similar to media campaigns, educational programs, and political policies used to deny women occupational opportunities, and associate feminine value with the health of the home and masculinity with paid work (Padavic and Reskin 2002), Mormon women symbolically located women's—and their own—"place" in the home.

LDS leaders and Mormon women also taught women that feminine value rested upon their ability to care for and support their husbands. Echoing long-standing divisions of labor in families (Hochschild 1989), they advised women to "draw closer" to their husbands in order to "appreciate their virtues, acknowledge our dependence on them, and be thankful for their love and protection" (Being a Wife, Ann S. Reese, *Ensign*, September 1984). Similarly, as the following excerpt shows, Mormon women taught that the source of familial happiness could be found in women's acceptance of and submission to their husbands:

The wife plays a supportive role when it comes to encouraging and sustaining her husband in his Church responsibilities. Each partner has the challenge to be unselfish and to reinforce the other in his or her Church assignments. Nothing will bring more blessings to a home than a husband living worthy of his priesthood and honoring his wife as she supports him in every needful thing. (Being a Wife, Ann S. Reese, Ensign, *September 1984)*

LDS leaders echoed this sentiment by noting that women were charged with both the accomplishment of femininity and the protection of both their husband's masculinity and their children's gender socialization:

Let every mother understand that if she does anything to diminish her children's father or the father's image in the eyes of the children, it may injure and do irreparable damage to the self-esteem and personal security of the children themselves. How infinitely more productive and satisfying it is for a woman to build up her husband rather than tear him down. You women are so superior to men in so many ways that you demean yourselves by posturing or belittling masculinity and manhood. (Happiness Is Having a Father Who Cares, James E. Faust, Ensign, *January 1974)*

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Whereas LDS leaders often referred to marriages as separate but equal units where men and women accomplished specific tasks (for problems with "separate but equal" relations see Collins 2005), they teach their followers that women should play "supportive" and "dependent" roles, which ultimately reproduce women's subordination.

Although the aforementioned statements by Mormon women mirror patterns of internalized oppression (Collins 2005), some of their statements (and even a couple by LDS leaders) suggest that—on some level—they may be aware of the contradictions noted above as well as the counterintuitive claim that femininity may be both performative and innate. While they often address these complexities in their lessons, they generally teach that women may separate themselves from femininity while continuously asserting the essential location of femininity in women's bodies. The following example provides typical cases of these lessons:

> *The world has divided up personality traits that should be characteristic of both men and women, and has labeled some of them "masculine" and some of them "feminine." Latter-day prophets do teach that men and women have biological, emotional, and other differences, but we should be careful about assigning mutually exclusive traits to one sex or the other. (The Lord as a Role Model for Men and Women, Ida Smith,* Ensign, *August 1980)*

While statements like this appear to blur distinctions between essential and constructed notions of gender, Mormon women argue that navigating such issues allows them to achieve their God-given "nurturing role."

At other times, Mormon women directly followed nuanced lessons about gender with denunciations of "perceived" similarities between women and men, which reiterate LDS leaders' definition of what womanhood is not. The following examples offer typical cases:

> *While we oppose assigning gender to Christlike personality traits—believing that both men and women should possess them—we also oppose the current movement toward making men and women exactly alike. . . . The Lord's plan is for men and women to become "like" each other only as we truly take upon ourselves the Savior's characteristics. If we are true to our natures as the Lord has outlined them for us, our basic masculinity and femininity will not come into question. (The Lord as a Role Model for Men and Women, Ida Smith,* Ensign, *August 1980)*

Among LDS leaders, however, the affirmation of fixed feminine and masculine natures, as the following example reveals, became more explicit: "He has convinced many of the lie that they are third-class citizens in the kingdom of God. That falsehood has led some to trade their divinely given femininity for male coarseness" (The Sanctity of Womanhood, Richard G. Scott, April General Conference, 2000). Note that the "He" in question refers to Satan while the "many" are women, which automatically links efforts to do femininity in nontraditional ways with immorality. LDS leaders and Mormon women thus negotiate complicated gender politics, but ultimately affirm essential and subordinate femininity.

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All told, LDS official publications taught women (and men) that femininity could be achieved by developing essential feminine characteristics and obedience, and taking care of homes and husbands in ways that necessitated the adoption of subordinate status. In doing so, however, they demonstrated potential awareness of—if not belief in—gender fluidity by teaching women about the dangers of not living up to these standards, and emphasizing the significance of developing femininity. Rather than possessing the capability to establish feminine—or masculine or trans—selves in relation to social or personal desires, LDS leaders collaborated with Mormon women to define achieving femininity—and by extension subordination—as an essential element of Mormonism.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that LDS leaders embed gendered background expectations—ideal or hegemonic beliefs about gender—within the institutional and theological structures of Mormonism, and that Mormon women featured in official publications since 1971 affirm these expectations by describing the "hallmarks of righteous women." Specifically, both groups defined womanhood as an essential, God-given element of female personhood, and taught Mormon women (and men) that doing femininity required the development of feminine traits and obedience while taking care of house and husband. In doing so, however, their efforts suggested awareness that gender might not be innate. Rather than giving this possibility credence, they argued that secular forces could stain the inherent virtue of women, and used this assertion to grant gender eternal power. As a result, their efforts ultimately sanctified gender inequalities by granting God's blessing to women's subordination.

Some reviewers of this manuscript wondered whether there are alternative views on gender expressed in the LDS Church. Given that we examined the official discourse of the religion found in General Conference talks and the official adult publication, we can assert that there are not alternative views expressed in official outlets by the leadership of the religion. However, as previous studies have noted, there are members of the LDS Church who hold differing views (Beaman 2001; Derr 1992). As of 2013, at least one formal group advocating for changes to gender norms in the LDS Church exists, Ordain Women. This group, per its web site, is "committed to work for equality and the ordination of Mormon women to the priesthood" (http://ordainwomen.org/mission/). To date, Ordain Women has received scant attention from the LDS Church, and what little attention it has received has been negative. In response to actions taken by Ordain Women to raise the issue of gender inequality in the religion, the LDS Church has said, "such divisive actions are not the kind of behavior that is expected from Latter-day Saints and will be as disappointing to our members as it is to church leaders" (Evans 2014), and "Women in the church, by a very large majority, do not share your advocacy for priesthood ordination for women and

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consider that position to be extreme" (Walch 2014). Describing advocacy for gender equality as "extreme" supports our findings that the official position of the religion remains one of gendered background expectations for men and women.

These findings support calls for more thorough examinations of gendered institutions and the ways gender may be used to structure social relations (see, e.g., Connell 1987; Martin 2004; Ridgeway 2011), and extend this call by revealing some ways religious leaders and their chosen representatives construct gendered background expectations. Specifically, LDS leaders and women writing in official publications utilized their authority, the scriptures their followers deemed sacred, and the examples of their prophets to construct a "sacred" version of womanhood. Similar to leaders of some conservative religious movements (Robinson and Spivey's 2007), they constructed women's subordination as a Godly command, and anchored this assertion in the foundation of their institutional and theological traditions. Whereas previous research has focused on the ways women in conservative religions interpret and respond to official constructions of gender (Avishai 2008; Beaman 2001; Wolkomir 2004), the case of Mormon leaders and their official representatives suggests there may also be much to learn from the processes whereby religious leaders and their followers articulate gendered background expectations. These findings thus reveal the importance of examining and comparing the construction of gendered background expectations within and between religions to ascertain the interrelation of gendered and religious institutions.

These findings also support and extend Ridgeway's (2011) conceptualization of gender as a primary frame for social relations by demonstrating some ways cultural leaders make use of this frame within religions. Following Ridgeway (2011), taken-for-granted institutional beliefs facilitate the ongoing reproduction of gender inequalities by hiding the socially constructed nature of femininity and masculinity, and transforming artificial distinctions between women and men into deeply held beliefs. In the case of Mormonism, LDS leaders and their female representatives ultimately sanctified notions of gender that justify and maintain the subordination of women. Since the maintenance of gender inequality relies upon the interpersonal repetition of institutionalized beliefs about the capabilities of women and men (see, e.g., Martin 2004; Ridgeway 2011; West and Zimmerman 1987), religious leaders and their selected representatives wield the power to "frame" (Ridgeway 2011) gender in ways that provide the ultimate—even divine—justification for men's dominance in the Church, the home, and other social arenas. These findings thus reveal the necessity of deconstructing the social construction of "sacred" gender beliefs.

These findings also draw our attention to contradictions within official religious notions of gender. Rather than focusing on the contradictions, however, we would echo others in calling for exploration of the many ways religious people might make sense of or remain oblivious to such contradictions (see also Avishai 2008; Sumerau 2012). Although inconsistency may be readily apparent to outsiders, it is entirely possible that religious elites and their followers see no

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contradiction—much less oppression—in the construction of gender as both essential and accomplished (Hoyt 2007). Even if they become aware of such incongruity, they may ignore or accept it to maintain their faith. We would thus suggest that the appearance of apparent contradictions could provide researchers with an opportunity to put aside our own assumptions, and, in the tradition of analytic induction (Blumer 1969), utilize interviews, observations, and/or longitudinal surveys to explicate the ways religious people make sense of the official notions of gender constructed by their leaders and interpreted throughout their ongoing religious lives.

To this end, our analysis provides a framework for exploring the ways religious leaders socially construct gendered background expectations. While our analysis of the LDS Church may appear unique, as "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer 1969), defining womanhood and teaching femininity can shed light upon the social construction of gendered background expectations in other religious and gendered institutions. In the LDS Church, the social construction of gendered background expectations ultimately defined gender inequalities as an essential element of God's plan. To what extent this is the case in other religions should be investigated, as it is only through understanding the interrelation of gendered and religious institutions (see Martin 2004) that gender inequality in religion can be brought to light and potentially changed.

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