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Journal of Contemporary Religion

ISSN: 1353-7903 (Print) 1469-9419 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjcr20

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To cite this article: Sarah-Jane Page & Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip (2019) The gendering of heterosexual religious young adults' imagined futures, Journal of Contemporary Religion, 34:2, 253-273, DOI: 10.1080/13537903.2019.1621542

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2019.1621542

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Published online: 08 Jul 2019.

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JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY RELIGION
2019, VOL. 34, NO. 2, 253–273
https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2019.1621542

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ABSTRACT

This article draws from a mixed-methods project that examined religion, youth, gender, and sexuality among young women and men aged between 18 and 25, from various religious traditions, and living in the UK. It charts how unmarried heterosexuals imagined their future lives in relation to marriage and parenthood. We deploy conceptual literature on 'imagined future', which is under-used in the sociology of religion, to explore what difference, if any, religious belonging makes to the futures the participants imagined. We assert that religion is part of their cultural tapestry, which broadly informed their values and actions. In other words, religion, as a component of culture, provides a 'toolkit' which they used in imagining futures that they deemed meaningful. This article contributes significantly to literature on gender and religious cultures and imagined future, highlighting the complex and interweaving role religion played in the way young adults in this study imagined their future gendered lives.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 15 September 2016
Accepted 2 October 2017

KEYWORDS
Gender equality; gender roles; marriage; parenthood; childcare; religion; imagined future

Introduction

Gender norms have significantly changed in recent decades, demonstrated by women's increased economic and sexual freedom. Historically, religious customs and edicts have contributed to the regulation of gender relations, in particular women's sexuality (Rahman and Jackson 2010, 4, 107; Weeks 2012, 18, 52). In contemporary society, religion is often constructed as a conservative force, militating against gender and sexual liberation (Inglehart and Norris 2003, 50; Stuart 2010, 430; Taylor and Snowdon 2014, 1), demonstrated recently in the UK by religious opposition to same-sex marriage and women bishops. This construction, however, ignores two important points: the continuing and often implicit regulation of gender and sexuality within liberal secular spaces and the fact that a conservative response does not comprehensively represent the multiple reactions to gender and sexuality issues in religious spaces (Page and Yip 2017a, 261; Young, Shipley, and Trothen 2015, 3–4; Shipley 2015, 110–112). Michel Foucault (1990, 33–34, 37–41, 97) has demonstrated that changing sexual

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norms do not simply result in the deregulation of sexuality or indeed gender. Feminist research has established that women's sexual lives continue to be heavily regulated, even as the choices for women's identities have seemingly increased (e.g. Budgeon 2011, 50; McRobbie 2009, 1–2). Meanwhile, associating religion exclusively with conservatism on issues of gender and sexuality not only misses the counter-narratives in evidence from liberal religious strands, but also neglects the nuances manifested in the way individuals navigate their everyday religious lives (Ammerman 2014; McGuire 2008; Nynäs and Yip 2012; Yip and Page 2013).

Although this article is based on a research project involving 693 religious young adults of different sexual identities (for more details, see e.g. Yip and Page 2013), here we focus exclusively on the 494 unmarried heterosexual participants in order to explore how they imagined living out their future gendered lives with specific regard to future marriage and parenthood, within the context of religious belonging. These participants were either single or, if partnered, had not yet married. Thus, they were *imagining* their future gender identities in relation to marriage and parenthood, by engaging with dominant but changeable gender and religious norms in the present.

What, if any, difference did religious belonging make to young adults' future imaginings? Did participants understand religion as a constraining and/or enabling influence in the way they imagined their future gendered lives? Did religious belonging give participants access to additional resources and alternative narratives? These are the questions that this article aims to address. We begin with a conceptual exploration of 'imagined future', which is followed by a methodological account. We then discuss two empirical themes on marriage and parenthood, before offering some concluding remarks.

Imagining the Future

Young adulthood is generally understood as a time when key life transitions are experienced and important decisions are made. Much research (e.g. Buckingham, Bragg, and Kehily 2014; Bois-Reymond 1998; Thomson and Holland 2002) has focused on youth transitions and anticipated future trajectories, featuring employment, education, and personal relationships. Important insights have been generated on the ways young people are situated in relation to decision-making and life planning. For example, Rachel Thomson's (2011) longitudinal research highlights the contingent and fluid nature of imagined futures, informed by various encounters, interactions with others, and significant moments.

Yet, what exactly is an imagined future? Elizabeth Grosz (2005) articulates that our relationships with time are multiple, such as remembering the past,

making sense of the present, and orienting ourselves towards the future. The symbiosis between past, present, and future occurs at a given moment, for the future "has no existence in the present, [but] is generated through the untimely reactivation of the virtuality of the past which has been unactualized in the present" (Grosz 2005, 3). Therefore, in imagining a future, individuals are drawing upon a number of reference points, including past and present experiences. From a cohort perspective, future imaginings are also undertaken with reference to the lives and experiences of those around the individual, especially people of older generations. Jackie Sanders and Robyn Munford (2008, 344), for example, found that young women did not desire a future that resembled the lives of their mothers who were sustaining multiple roles in childcare, housework, and paid work. Their participants had internalised the tensions apparent in their mothers' lives and their future orientation was about avoiding the repetition of this. However, some participants in Thomson's (2011, 68) study attempted to emulate the material successes of their parents. In this sense, their parents' lives became something to mirror rather than reject.

In a context where much uncertainty exists for young people, imagining a future can be a strategy for stabilising one's identity, by giving shape to a concrete set of goals to work towards and thus allowing young people to emphasise control of their lives (Brannen and Nilsen 2002; Nilsen 1999). Ann Nilsen (1999, 178) highlights the different ways in which young people engage with their futures, in terms of dreams, hopes or plans. Dreams are distant ideas that can be considered unrealistic and idealised. Hopes are formulated more tangibly, but how they are achieved remains unclear. Meanwhile, plans are firm, goal-oriented ideas, with a set time-frame. Such forms of life-planning can be deemed a strategy of privileged young people who have specific resources to affirm their plans (Threadgold and Nilan 2009). Julia Brannen and Nilsen (2002, 516) emphasise that those unable to formulate a plan include those most marginalised, such as working-class young people experiencing precarious employment. Therefore, imagining a future is not a default option for young people; the ability to formulate plans depends on access to cultural, social, and economic capital (Bourdieu 1984). Those who are unable to see too far into the future because of their preoccupation with the immediate and overwhelming pressures of the present can be understood as living in an 'extended present', occurring "when changes happen so fast that the future never seems to arrive" (Brannen and Nilsen 2002, 517).

Religion and the imagined future

As indicated above, 'imagined future' is rarely deployed as an analytical framework in the sociology of religion. Further, although much research has

been undertaken regarding the way young people orient their future selves, few of these studies consider religion. Yet, research evidence consistently shows that religious young adults do negotiate their future orientations with reference to their religious faith, albeit to varying degrees. Thomson (2011, 67–88), who did include religion in her study of young people's multiple identities and future imaginings, convincingly shows how religious young adults, like their non-religious counterparts, construct their identities within the context of choice and constraint, with religious cultures being one set of the potential resources from which they draw (see also Page, Yip, and Keenan 2012, 268; Aune and Guest 2019). Following Ann Swidler (1986, 273, 277), we do not view religious culture as the exclusive determinant of religious adherents' choices and actions, but religion—as part of the cultural framework which they inhabit—does inform their values and actions. The notion of 'religious culture' is broad, comprising texts, rituals, symbols, buildings, religious specialists, and religious adherents, thus entailing a vast repertoire of ideas, norms, and values that can be used in various ways. Therefore, this repository can be mobilised in various ways, as a toolkit (Swidler 1986, 277) or a cultural tapestry that acts as a backdrop to young adults' decision-making, from which ideas and values can be appropriated; this in turn has an impact on the cultural repertoires themselves, meaning that 'culture' becomes co-produced (Baumann 1996, 13; Swidler 1986, 277).

Gendering the imagined future

Gender scripts have been radically rewritten over the last 40 years. Notwithstanding the variations structured by, for example, class and ethnicity, past expectations for women to become housewives and mothers have altered considerably and women's contribution in employment spheres is well-recognized (Budgeon 2011, 70; McRobbie 2009, 1–2). This reconfiguration of gender has led to alterations in the way women are symbolically perceived. Their increasing participation in education and in labour and consumer markets underpins this new positioning, with young women encouraged to "have it all" (Budgeon 2011, 61–70; Gill and Scharff 2011, 1–2; Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik 2013, 186). Specifically focusing on Christianity, Linda Woodhead (2008) has considered the religious impact of these changes and argued that these reconfigurations can have a negative impact on the religious traditions that have been sustained through adherence to traditional femininities and patriarchal norms. At the same time, women themselves may use gender-egalitarian discourses to challenge existing norms and determine for themselves new ways of living out their religious identities (Woodhead 2008, 155). However, deep-rooted gendered patterns remain in place for women, whether they are religious or not. Bois-Reymond's (1998, 72–73) research on how young people imagine their

gendered futures highlights that, while men imagine a future of full-time paid work, young women imagine combining motherhood with employment. Such choices are often framed in terms of gender equality, but this belies the complexity of choice in an environment where unpaid work (e.g. caring, housework, and emotional work) remains stubbornly within the remit of "women's work" (Gatrell 2005). As Brooke Conroy Bass (2014, 375–379) articulates, the future imagining of parenthood and paid work already curtails young women's aspirations, as they contemplate how these two dimensions of life will be managed. Firmly convinced that they will become mothers at some future point, Bass's women participants already imagined how paid work would need to be substantially reduced in order to accommodate motherhood; this leads to work-based inequalities being imagined before they are realised, thus emphasising the continuation of gender inequalities within so-called 'secular' spaces.

Shifting expectations have also arisen regarding motherhood. Despite women's increased participation in paid work, a more demanding type of motherhood has emerged, what researchers have called 'intensive motherhood' (Hays 1996; Lee 2008; Wall 2010). This is underpinned by a child-centred approach where every decision is oriented around the child; mothers become responsible for doing everything in their power to promote enhanced child development, so that children have the best chance of succeeding in a competitive neoliberal environment (Blum 2015, 26, 29). Such commitment requires enormous amounts of time, money, and effort and acts as a radical shift in the expectations placed on mothers relative to previous generations. Religious belonging has an impact on the way intensive motherhood is managed, with religious mothers also generally being responsible for ensuring that their children maintain their religious identities (Marler 2008, 23; Page 2016, 27–29, 33). Therefore, intensive motherhood within religious settings often entails greater responsibilities and expectations of mothers. Crucially, these enhanced expectations, whether in secular or religious contexts, are demanded of mothers, rather than fathers, with much social opprobrium occurring if mothers 'fail' to meet these expectations (Gatrell 2005, 117; Jensen 2012; Lee 2008, 468, 473). Although caring expectations have increased for fathers, these are much more muted, with any involvement in childcare being highly praised. Any greater involvement in childcare has not been accompanied by fathers' increased participation in housework. Instead, their role as economic providers continues to be prioritised in broader culture (Gatrell 2005, 31).

Despite some changes to dominant gendered expectations, young people still envision their lives unfolding in relatively traditional ways. Dawn Lyon and Graham Crow (2012, 509–511) compared two cohorts, who were around 30 years apart, and found that marriage still shaped contemporary expectations. This concurs with Thomson and Janet Holland's finding that young people were

imagining a "normative pattern" (Thomson and Holland 2002, 341), underscored by marriage or long-term partnership as well as children, with the performance of responsibilities remaining highly gendered. Indeed, many religious traditions continue to promote such traditional imaginings; marriage followed by children is idealised in many contexts (Yip and Page 2013, 48, 59, 107), in what Melissa Wilcox (2009, 177) refers to as a 'straight time' account.

Methodology

This article is based on a research project entitled "Religion, Youth and Sexuality: A Multi-faith Exploration", which examined young adults aged 18–25 in the United Kingdom, of diverse religious and sexual self-identifications. Information about the project was distributed extensively in many different contexts which religiously identifying young people were likely to frequent. This included religious youth groups, places of worship, university societies as well as print and social media (e.g. Facebook). From this, a sample of young adults was generated. We adopted a mixed-method research design, generating qualitative and quantitative data through three methods: (i) questionnaires, (ii) interviews, (iii) video diaries. This article is based on the perceptions and lived experiences of 494 unmarried heterosexual participants who completed an online questionnaire. In addition, 31 of them were interviewed and 11 completed video diaries. Aiming to present 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1993, 3–30) demonstrating the nuances of negotiation, the data underpinning this article are drawn from the interviews and video diaries (unless otherwise stated, all quotes are from the interviews and pseudonyms are used throughout). Each in-depth interview used the participant's completed questionnaire and an interview guide as the basis for conversation. For the video diaries, a video camera was posted for participants to record their 'mundane' and significant reflections on everyday life over a week (for more details about the research, see Yip and Page 2013).

The religious self-identifications of the 494 unmarried heterosexual participants include: Christian (281 or 56.9%), Muslim (96 or 19.4%), Hindu (40 or 8.1%), Jewish (30 or 6.1%), Sikh (19 or 3.8%), mixed-faith (16 or 3.2%), Buddhist (12 or 2.4%) (N = 494). Women constituted just over two-thirds (343 or 69.4%) of the sample (N = 494). Furthermore, 297 participants (60.4%) self-defined as 'white' (N = 492) and 375 (78.1%) were students (N = 480). This high number reflects the challenges recognized within other research (e.g. Taylor 2017) in generating working-class responses in religion research. Given its broad remit, the project was designed in terms of generating religious and sexuality diversity, as opposed to class diversity, but this should be further examined in future research.

In terms of relationship status, 335 (68.0%) participants were single and 155 (31.4%) were in relationships, but unmarried (N = 493). Regarding religious orientation, 206 (44.8%) of the sample defined themselves as 'liberal' or 'very liberal' and 121 (26.3%) as 'conservative' or 'very conservative' (N = 460). The project also measured the degree of religious commitment and, although this is challenging to measure and should be treated with caution (e.g. attendance at a place of worship is not necessarily a strong indicator of religious commitment), 59.5% (304) of participants attended a place of worship at least once a week and 67.0% (339) said they were involved in their religious community (N = 511 and 506, respectively). Meanwhile, 71.0% (362) either strongly agreed or agreed that they made everyday decisions with reference to their religion (N = 510). Although this project is unrepresentative, its substantial sample size and the extensive and in-depth data it has generated offer significant and illuminating insights into contemporary young adults' lives. The multi-faith dimension offers a more nuanced and richer picture about contemporary religious, gender, and sexual identities.

Imagining marriage: ambivalences and contestations

The data consistently show that religious norms and values offered a crucial backdrop to the way the future was imagined by participants. Many religious communities that they were involved in emphasised marriage as the 'normal' rite of passage in the life course. Thus, many participants had internalised the expectation to find the 'right' marriage partner, which could induce anxiety in the present moment:

> [M]y concept of marriage is like it's the ultimate form of commitment … you don't divorce … [But] will I be happy in a marriage? And will I have the right partner? … These things really worry me. (Jai, 23-year-old Hindu man)

Jai had absorbed the expectation that he would marry, but this became conflictual as he contemplated what could go wrong. He was therefore keen to avoid making a 'poor' choice. His understanding reflected the cultural and religious space which he inhabited, premised on a heteronormative framing which emphasises the primacy of a 'good marriage'. As Surinder Guru (2009, 286) articulates, despite Sikh and Hindu traditions not having any particular rulings on divorce, the valorisation of marriage within these religious contexts makes divorce anathema, leading to the potential marginalisation of divorcees within some of these religious communities. The costs of marital failure could, therefore, be severe. However, others argued that their religious communities were becoming more tolerant towards divorce. Rashida, a 25-year-old Muslim woman, said in her video diary, "Perhaps divorce is

something that I am accepting more. Because with the younger generation it is something that they tend to accept more." Yet the potentiality for divorce did not dilute participants' original commitment to marriage, with Tariq, a 20-year-old Muslim man, arguing that

> I see it as quite a big thing. If you are marrying someone, you are marrying them for a reason. If things don't work out, you get a divorce.

Indeed, for nearly all participants, marriage was foregrounded and only in a handful of narratives did participants dismiss marriage outright. For example, Rosie, an 18-year-old Buddhist, was the only participant to imagine explicitly single motherhood in her future life, saying "I don't see anything wrong with being a single mum … I do imagine it just me and the kids." Therefore, being married was unusually downplayed for her, signalling that Western Buddhism de-prioritises marriage and procreation, compared to other religious traditions (Page and Yip 2017b, 3, 78–79; Satha-Anand 2005, 114–115, 117). As we (Page and Yip 2017b, 75–85) have emphasised, young Buddhists' perspectives to sexuality issues are generally different from those of young adults from other religious traditions. Buddhists prioritise avoiding sexual misconduct and being mindful about the impact of their actions on others. This reasoning gave no special privilege to marriage, which could hypothetically be as harm-inducing as a relationship which does not involve marriage. For Rosie, being a single mother did not contravene any religious norms and she did not position her future children as being disadvantaged, were they to be raised in a single-parent household.

The broader emphasis on marriage meant that some families explicitly focused on the preparation needed to secure this transition, affirmed through expectations around the way young men and women spent their time in the present. Adala, a 25-year-old Muslim woman, said that her aunt discouraged her from studying for exams, saying,

> Every time I was studying she'd come over and say, "Why is she studying again when there's cooking to be learnt? When you're a married woman in a few years … your husband won't expect you to sit there studying. He'll want you to actually be cooking and cleaning."

Adala's aunt assumed that future marriage was inevitable and emphasised the learned responsibilities that required ongoing preparation to ensure future success. In other words, the competent living-out of the future required meticulous preparation in the present, enabled by perceived successful past experiences of the previous generations. Instead of encouraging proficiency in 'feminine' skills *as well as* education, Adala's aunt recognized the importance of only the former. There was no reference to religion in this account; Adala's aunt did not bolster her view with

religious arguments, but rather used women's culturally sanctioned routinised and normalised involvement in domestic tasks to argue her point, drawing on traditional gender scripts. Nonetheless, Adala drew from the alternative script of women's educational empowerment to imagine her future differently, by desiring university education. It may be perceived that this alternative script was generated in a secular way, as evident by the foregrounding of girls' educational achievements in wider society (Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik 2013, 188, 190–191). However, the commitment to girls' education was religiously endorsed, with Adala emphasising that education was strongly promoted within her Muslim faith. Indeed, time and again, Muslim women participants emphasised that the central positioning of education for girls within Islam could act as a powerful corrective to traditional attitudes such as those espoused by Adala's aunt. For example, Isma, a 20-year-old participant, said that

> we fought for our right for education, not to get married at such a young age and to [reject] those cultural traditions … That was a time when our religious or spiritual understanding grew and we were shunning that cultural background.

In such cases, inconsistencies emerged between different generations, with older relatives subscribing to a future imagining that was out of step with contemporary understandings of the relationship between religion and gender equality.

Male participants, too, were encouraged by the older generation to develop skills and competencies needed for cultivating a successful life as a married man. For Vishaal, a 21-year-old Hindu, his parents had instilled in him a strong work ethic in order for him to perform the future role as the provider of a family . He recalled a frequent narrative relayed by his mother:

> [My mother] turned around to me and she goes, "Don't get married if you haven't got a job and you can't look after a family." … She said that to me about five times now … So in that sense there was always pressure, like I'll end up lonely if I don't make it.

These quotes illustrate that it was not just the participants themselves who imagined their future. Others were imagining their future on their behalf. The future that Vishaal's mother imagined for him is firmly informed by traditional gender norms relating to a man's role as breadwinner. Education and employment success was bound up with relationship success. Again, this expectation was not couched in religious terms; the message was contextually anchored in a broader cultural and normative frame where there is still much emphasis placed on men's breadwinning abilities (Warren 2007, 322). Adala's and Vishaal's response to the futures imagined by their elders demonstrates that the constitution of an imagined future is contentious and that young adults' ideals of their own future can contradict the imagining that is undertaken by other family members. This

kind of inconsistency could engender tensions that our participants had to manage. While Adala successfully challenged her aunt's insistence on being domestically, rather than educationally, adept, Vishaal absorbed the expectation to be educationally and occupationally successful and was actively working on realising the future his mother had imagined. Both accounts were preoccupied with the centrality of marriage; marriage as an ideal and a norm remained uncontested.

Other participants showed much ambivalence about achieving the expected milestone of marriage. Through observing the marriages of others, participants articulated the anticipated problems with future married life:

> I bumped into [my cousin] after she got married … I was like, "How's married life then, how have you been?" and she was just like, "Yeah, you know how it is; it's the same thing." And I'm just like, 'You've just, this is what you've been living for, for all your life'—that's all she's ever talked about. (Uma, 22-year-old Sikh woman)

> [I]t is just this whole cooking and cleaning business that I am not fond of … I can see it in the eyes of my mother who is a cooker and a cleaner really … it is a bit boring, I think … I have friends who are married and say they have the time of their lives; they splash out on their husbands' credit cards; they go on holiday. They do all the things they couldn't do while they are [sic] single. (Isma, 20-year-old Muslim woman)

These accounts show ambivalence and contradiction regarding the anticipated outcome of marriage. While Uma referred to her cousin's dreams as not cohering with reality, Isma drew on conflicted experiential narratives about what it meant to be married. The tedium of household chores observed in her mother's life was contrasted with the potential to consume, as observed in the lives of her friends. Thus, participants were surrounded by conflictual messages about the reality of marriage. For instance, marriage was strongly endorsed within many of the participants' religious communities. Wedding ceremonies were usually experienced as a *religious* rite of passage for participants, an event which consolidated and bound the religious communities to which they belonged. The role weddings played as the 'glue' within religious communities helps explain why they were so central and why their importance was heightened. At the same time, the very nature of marriage and what it represented typically promoted the 'straight time' narrative (Wilcox 2009, 176–177), from which same-sex couples were usually excluded.

Despite the negativity that was voiced, on the whole, participants imagined their married futures in promising terms. However, in order to do so, they had to grapple with and attempt to reconcile the contradictory narratives of marriage based on their observations of others. Shalini, a 22-year-old Hindu woman, for example, had observed much negativity in her parents' marriage, having grown up with an abusive father. Thus, Shalini

knew how 'risky' marriage could be. Yet, despite this, she argued that marriage was "the right thing to do". She still wanted to believe in marriage and live the anticipated dream. Key to her narrative was the sense of security that marriage could offer:

> I'm seeing this guy who's lovely and has got everything that's correct about him, but … he doesn't massively move me … he's very straightforward about what he wants and he's very traditional as well and he wants to get married and have children and have this little Hindu life … I don't think that's what I want at the moment, but my parents would love him and that's more important sometimes.

Marriage was desirable to Shalini, allowing her to satisfy her family's culturally and religiously informed expectations and thus fulfilling the future as imagined by others. However, in reconciling the negative experiences she had observed in her parents' marriage, she emphasised her desire for a dependable husband. This stability was engendered through Hinduism, as expressed in the phrase, 'this little Hindu life'. To Shalini, her religion offered the means to provide this stability and respectability. In the same vein, Sabrina, a 21-year-old Muslim woman, said:

> [W]hat I want and what I'm looking for in this relationship would be just security and someone who is hardworking … someone [who's] going to just look after me and be there and earn money … and [who will] want to have a family.

Like Lyon and Crow's (2012) secular participants, Sabrina imagined a stable and uncomplicated path of marriage and future children; therefore, she sought a partner who was equally invested in such a future and would make her imagined future a reality. The religious context within which participants were embedded enabled a sense of continuity and certainty in their lives, offering an antidote to the various risks they encountered as young adults.

In narratives about marriage, only a minority were overtly critical about marriage or questioned whether marriage would be the best imagined future for them. The majority of participants absorbed the idea of future marriage as the ideal, even if they had encountered negative experiences which tainted this view. In the main, participants reflected on the marriages of those around them and positioned themselves accordingly. Although marriage was rarely viewed as overwhelmingly positive, it was still considered the ideal, from which benefit could be accrued. Past and present experiences and moments in time (Grosz 2005, 3) helped formulate how the future was imagined, thus emphasising the symbiosis between the past, present, and future.

Imagining parenthood: gendered care

Participants were keen to emphasise the gender-egalitarian nature of their religious traditions and few supported traditional gender roles such as a gender-specific domestic division of labour (see Page and Yip 2017a, 258–260). However, despite clearly expressing that religious texts supported gender equality, when imagining future parenthood, participants tested these egalitarian views. Most participants incorporated not only marriage in their imagined future, but also children—and the associated responsibility of parenting—as indicated in the following narratives:

> I'm 18 and thinking about how many kids I want [laughs], but I definitely want to find someone who I would feel comfortable raising kids with. (Aaron, 18-year-old Christian man)

> I would like children; I haven't necessarily thought about it so much, but, yes, family life is quite an important thing in the Sikh faith as well, so, yes, [in] ten years' time I would probably think of being married with, yes, maybe not kids, but maybe yes, I'm quite open to that. (Dharam, 23-year-old Sikh man)

Although these accounts varied in the extent to which thought had been given to imagined parenthood, both female and male participants were imagining particular futures, including specific issues such as the 'ideal' number of children to have and what their names would be. Some also mentioned the importance of religion underscoring this decision-making. In the quotes above, Dharam was somewhat hesitant in firmly advocating having children in the future, but conceded that this would be part of his future, given the importance of family life within the Sikh tradition. Indeed, the promotion of pro-natalist positions is embedded within many religious traditions (e.g. Llewellyn 2016; McAvan 2016; Zairunisha 2016) and exerts a powerful influence on such decision-making. Therefore, participants drew from cultural and religious resources in imagining a future that was meaningful, not only to them, but also to their significant others. Personal and social dimensions were inextricably linked in their imagining. Although both women and men imagined a similar future in this respect, men were much less aware of the implications of parenthood and domestic responsibilities. Ranjit, a 23-year-old Hindu man, admitted that, although he wanted children, he was unsure of the practical arrangements, especially as his parents lived abroad and were thus unavailable for childcare. When asked whether he would be happy to be a full-time carer to his children, he replied:

> I want to make use of myself. I don't want to be just seated at home and doing chores and looking after the kids … I've been trained all these years [undertaking a university degree] … it's only right for me to give back this knowledge.

Ranjit strongly resisted any curtailment of his employment ambitions. His identity was bound up with employment, obtaining prestige through paid work, and his ability to be a successful provider. Being a full-time carer to children did not cohere with his understanding of his identity and self-worth within society more broadly. As Glenda Wall and Stephanie Arnold (2007, 520) acknowledge, full-time fatherhood disrupts dominant understandings of masculinity. Despite changes occurring in the way fatherhood is imagined, fathers relinquishing paid work is often deemed a step too far, interfering with constructions of contemporary masculinity. Instead, dominant forms of masculinity continue to be largely defined by the capacity to engage in paid work and the earning potential this brings. One's economic potential is linked with 'good' fatherhood. As Tracey Warren (2007, 321) articulates, "the ideology of the male breadwinner family retains a hold and impacts upon identity and expectations". There is another significant dimension that is implicit in Ranjit's narrative: if he did not imagine full-time childcare as consistent with his gender, sexual, religious, and work identity, that responsibility, by default, became that of his female partner. Indeed, it was not uncommon for traditional views of motherhood to surface among male participants:

> Any Muslim would say men and women are equal. When I get married, my wife can do everything that I can do … But ideally a woman would always leave the workplace to raise a child. It's just maternity, maternal love, and the motherly love … If the child is beyond four or five and my wife wants to go back into work … I think I would agree. But the early stages are definitely for a woman. (Tariq, 20-year-old Muslim man)

Tariq used religious reasoning for gender equality, but then articulated a clearly defined set of roles for his future wife. He placed himself in the position of the key decision-maker, tellingly, when he argued whether he would 'agree' to his wife returning to paid work. This contradicted what many Muslim women participants said; they pointed out that, from a religious perspective, this was not their husbands' decision to make and they situated themselves firmly as having agency regarding their subsequent work-based choices. Such valorisation of a particular view of motherhood—constructed as the opposite to fatherhood—was far from unusual. Male participants from various religious traditions held particularly strong views on specific types of childcare arrangements, as the following quotes indicate:

> I don't like the culture of two parents working all the time … I would feel like I'd let my children down … I don't have … any beliefs that men should work more than women or women should work more than men … [but] I can see the worth in the old, in the kind of traditional family system … there's a lot of beauty in a mother really caring for her child from birth. (James, 19-year-old Buddhist man)

> I would prefer one of the parents … to put in some time with the kids … my preference would not be to give that responsibility to some third party; hence why [sic] someone has to go part-time basically. For me, early on in the years it is more important for the child to be with their mum and kind of be nurtured by the mum, and then later on the dad comes into it. (Dharam, 23-year-old Sikh man)

Although Dharam and James started from an egalitarian position regarding mothers' and fathers' relationship to paid work, both slipped into the conclusion that the mother was the best primary caregiver.

Only a handful of men disrupted the dominant notions of women being primarily responsible for childcare. Fergus, a 19-year-old Christian–Buddhist aspiring to be an active and involved father, argued that it "would be just as much my responsibility to give up my career as it would [be] hers to give up hers". He imagined a future where both partners took maternity and paternity leave equally. Jonathan, a 22-year-old Jewish man, definitely wanted children in the future and believed men should be just as involved in housework. He emphasised that "family is going to be a very important part of my life" and he was keen to undertake this on egalitarian terms. He even supported the idea of him becoming a full-time carer for his children, but quickly added "As long as I could do what I wanted to do as well".

These male participants displayed revealing portraits of their imagined futures. Most assumed that they would get married and have children, but they were quite conflicted about where their own responsibilities would begin and end. They were keener to emphasise their role as breadwinner rather than full-time carer and many upheld traditional ideas about motherhood. This traditionalism emerged across religious traditions, whether participants were liberal or conservative, and was buttressed by secular and religious norms. Therefore, despite verbally committing to gender equality that was usually seen as religiously endorsed, when presented with real-life scenarios, participants promoted a particular version of motherhood—that was sacrificial and constantly being available. This coheres with contemporary constructions of motherhood which emphasise it as an intensive child-focused endeavour (Hays 1996, 6–9). A minority of women endorsed a similar vision of motherhood and were willing to relinquish careers in the future, such as Jenny, a 22-year-old Christian woman, who said: "I think if my career ever got in the way of me supporting or looking after my family in any way, then that would have to go. Your family come first." However, the majority of female participants were very ambivalent about the personal costs of motherhood, as these quotes indicate:

> I would like kids and I really do want to get married—I really want a family, but it's not a desperation kind of want … I would actually want to have a life when I have kids. So I think that in itself is a big enough sign that I'm not ready for kids. (Clare, 20-year-old Christian woman)

> I see a lot of women struggle and a lot of women who sacrifice a lot more and I don't want to be one of those women … maybe [in] ten years or something, but definitely not now. (Shalini, 22-year-old Hindu woman)

> I would like to say that in my ideal world when I get married and, you know, we are both ready to have children … [I] want to make sure that he's a hands-on dad as well and it's equal; it's not me doing everything … if I've been through education and I've got a degree, I've obviously got it for a reason. (Parminder, 20-year-old Sikh woman)

These participants wanted to have children but were aware of the potential costs. It was the all-consuming, self-sacrificial, and constantly available version of motherhood that was imagined—a type of motherhood valorised in both religious and secular contexts. In fact, Shalini and Clare were postponing their imagined futures for as long as possible so that they could enjoy the most of the present, as the future, in this respect, was constructed as freedom-restricting. In this way, the future came to be realised in terms of a distant dream rather than a firm plan with a clear timeline in place (Nilsen 1999, 178–179), enabling them to relocate the anticipated responsibility to a future far-off point.

Meanwhile, others even pondered whether they really wanted to have a future that featured children, with Uma, a Sikh, saying, "I don't even know if I want kids." Similarly, we have already noted that Isma, a Muslim woman, rejected her mother's life which featured endless cooking and cleaning, but then faced difficulties in imagining her future within a religious and cultural context where motherhood was valorised:

> The religion says you can be who you want as long as you recognize that you have a role … in motherhood and as a wife … traditionally Asian families are quite large, aren't they; there are a lot of children, but one would be sufficient I think. I don't really know about stuff like that. I am really too busy trying to pursue my career and do what I like … I quite like who I am, being single and stuff like that.

Isma was grappling with a context where getting married and having children was expected and where these roles were endorsed by religion. She was trying to rein in these expectations, firstly by imagining having an only child and secondly by stating her preference for singleness. Yet imagining singleness contrasted with the future imagined for her by others. Therefore, not only does singleness have no place in the imagined future within certain religious traditions that hegemonise married relationships (see also Aune 2002, 20, 24, 39, 110, 127; Yip and Page 2013, 48, 57, 59, 66), but Isma's story also underscores the clashes that can occur between the participants' own imagined future and that imagined by others. In order to manage these tensions, Isma resisted making a decision and, tellingly, was unable to formulate a clear plan about the way her future would unfold in this regard (Brannen and Nilsen 2002, 517).

Conclusion

Applying the literature on 'imagined future' as an analytical framework, which is under-developed within the sociology of religion, this article has presented the narratives of unmarried heterosexual young adults of diverse religious backgrounds on the specific issues of marriage and parenthood. Our main finding is that, despite participants' enormous support for gender equality in principle, with this commitment to equality being endorsed by religion (Page and Yip 2017a, 261), in practice, imagined futures are underscored by recourse to traditional gender norms. While the core of religious teaching was deemed to convey a strong endorsement of gender equality, in practice, this was militated against by both religious and secular practices which promoted and envisaged a traditional gendered division of labour. In terms of imagining marriage, the participants generally acknowledged that marriage was a culturally and religiously sanctioned rite of passage. This had an impact on participants' actions in the present, with many of them (and their family members) investing in marriage as being highly desirable, even in contexts where the disadvantages of married life were noted. In terms of parenthood, young men were generally reluctant to imagine themselves as full-time carers for children and young women imagined how they would manage the demands placed on them in the context of paid work and intensive motherhood (Hays 1996). It is not simply the case that participants were imagining a traditional future *because of* their religious tradition. Indeed, the endorsement of marriage and parenthood can be located within both secular and religious spaces. However, religious contexts in and of themselves rarely challenged such expectations—indeed, there was much coherence between secular and religious norms in this regard. On occasion, however, religious challenges did prevail, such as the endorsement of girls' education within Islam or the de-prioritisation of marriage within Buddhism.

Although religious belonging was significant in terms of participants navigating the emphasis which is often placed on marriage and parenthood within religious contexts, religious *rationalisations* did not predominate the participants' imagining of their futures. Like their secular counterparts, they accorded much salience to marriage and parenthood in the futures they imagined for themselves. In this respect, we see an alignment between their imagining and broader dominant cultural norms and practices, in that, despite the increasing number of children born outside marriage, marriage still remains an ideal for both secular and religious young adults (Lyon and Crow 2012, 509). Therefore, in this specific case, participants did not need to articulate their imagined futures in religious terms, as they were very much in line with the norms in other

cultural spheres. The narratives we have presented highlight that it is too simplistic to construct religion as either enabling or constraining. Instead, the young adults we studied often perceived religious belonging and other cultural scripts as overlapping resources for their navigation of everyday life and future imagining. The strong commitment to religious equality emerged from teachings they sourced within their religious traditions. Yet, in practice, religious and secular norms contributed to them endorsing a more traditional gendered pathway. As Swidler (1986, 277) articulates, while always inhabiting a cultural frame, people appropriate their ideas and values from various cultural toolkits, with religious cultures intersecting with many other elements of cultural life in this choice-making. Participants used varying scripts to make sense of their present lives and imagine their future, with religion operating as a context for decision-making and part of that navigational toolkit. The ways in which 'religion' itself was imagined was very broad: participants referred to numerous elements such as spaces, people, and texts. For example, when they stated their commitment to gender equality, religious texts were an important reference point. However, when they imaged how gender roles would be negotiated, the religious community—imagined as a collective of individuals coalescing in a particular space—was foregrounded. For instance, some participants became more confident about asserting their imagining of marriage with children and downplaying any uncertainty this generated, given that their future lives would be aided by support from the religious community. However, equally, being religious could heighten certain relationship expectations, in the sense of potentially 'failing' one's religious community if, for instance, a marriage broke down or if one did not have children.

In terms of the specific futures that participants imagined, heterosexuality enabled them, compared to their non-heterosexual counterparts, to benefit from a privileged status. Wilcox refers to this as 'straight time', explained as

> an ethos in which generations are supposed to succeed each other in clearly marked, uncomplicated ways, in which there are expected life courses for all humans … in which reproduction … is ultimately about *pro*duction and therefore about progress (Wilcox 2009, 177, emphasis in original).

Embedded in the very idea of imagining a future is imagining the 'straight time' narrative, where any deviation from this path (e.g. eschewing marriage) becomes a problem. Imagining a future in some sense, therefore, enables the 'progress' narrative to be conceptualised before the events take place, indicating how imagined futures come to hold such resonance and importance in young adults' narratives. Crucially, the 'straight time' narrative is cultivated not only through various cultural contexts such as religion, but is also buttressed by significant others,

such as family members, whose expectations and actions could also be informed by religion. Therefore, the imagined future not only holds resonance for participants, but also others imagine the future on their behalf and this imagining nearly always follows the heteronormative 'straight time' path, thus embedding the broader expectations of young adults to get married and have children. Articulating a different vision becomes fraught with difficulty.

Therefore, uncertainty in participants' narratives was palpable. Their imagined future was premised on their past and present experiences and the realisation that they could 'fail' at performing heterosexuality. They were not simplistically seduced by the image of a fairy-tale marriage, an image which was often consolidated by weddings being placed at the heart of religious communities; indeed, participants were extremely articulate and knowledgeable about potential negative outcomes emanating from heterosexual expectations. However, they still wanted to believe in—and dream of—the fairy-tale, due to the way in which 'straight time' patterned their cultural toolkits (embedded in both secular and sacred contexts). Individuals managed this in various ways. Some participants were desperate to make the right choice, believing that selecting the right future partner would curtail the risks of performing heterosexuality unsuccessfully (e.g. divorce) and thereby engaged in a planned approach to their future. Other participants questioned whether they could embrace the 'straight time' narrative (e.g. endorsing singleness and careers rather than marriage and children). Such difficulties in imagining a future relate to Brannen and Nilsen's (2002, 517) concept of the 'extended present', where decisions are put off and individuals are unable to imagine a future that does not entail major conflict, so future planning is downplayed. While both men and women expressed anxieties about the imagined future, it was women participants who emphasised greater burdens and were more likely to eschew a full imagining of their future lives.

Acknowledgements

The research team is grateful for the *Religion and Society Programme* funding for this project and the invaluable contributions from the respondents, individuals, and groups who helped with the recruitment of the sample and the members of the advisory committee. The research team consisted of Prof. Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip (Principal Investigator), Dr. Michael Keenan (Co-investigator), and Dr. Sarah-Jane Page (Research Fellow).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) within the *Religion and Society Programme* (grant number AH/G014051/1).

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