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PURITY CULTURE AND TRAUMATIC STRESS IN CATHOLIC WOMEN

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BY

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ABSTRACT

Ample non-academic examples exist that attest to the contributions of purity culture teachings to traumatic stress experienced by women in relation to their sexual identity and experiences. However, these stories are not captured in academic literature. In order to fill these gaps in the literature, a phenomenological approach was used to describe the lived experience of Catholic women who would self-identify as having been "traumatized" by "purity culture." Individual interviews were conducted via WebEx with participants who met inclusion criteria. Data was analyzed through thematic analysis, and six themes emerged: a culture of silence around sex, the importance of purity, the role of gender, the lasting effects of purity culture, defining the teachings as traumatic, and the path to healing. Findings indicate that purity culture messaging can be experienced as traumatic either with or without the presence of a traditionally-defined traumatic stressor, and call for future research to be done to understand this phenomenon more fully. Interviews provide preliminary direction for clinicians seeking to treat this population, and indicate the appropriateness of modalities that incorporate education, identity work, and community with others.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Devotion to "purity culture," which peaked in the 1990s, had as many as 2.5 million teenagers and young adults pledge to retain their virginity and remain "pure" until they were married (Haberman, 2021; Anderson, 2015). Purity culture involves educating young Christians, and particularly young women, into a social identity centered around physical, mental, and emotional purity, including concepts such as virginity, modesty, and heteronormativity and complementarity, and were popularized by books such as Joshua Harris' *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (1997). Although this movement emerged from and is most often associated with evangelical Protestantism, and the majority of studies about purity culture that exist focus on purity in that context, its reach exists across many denominations of Christianity, including Catholicism. While trends show that interest in purity balls and purity pledges specifically has declined (Google Trends, 2024), the ideas behind them remain and are still routinely taught to young Christians. Since its peak, many of those who were formed at the height have emerged into adulthood and have spoken about the harm that they experienced from the purity movement, including Joshua Harris, who retracted his book and apologized for the damage that his message did to so many young Christians (Hailes, 2019).

Although few academic studies have addressed this topic (Stone, 2013; Swindle, 2017), ample anecdotal evidence exists that attests to the continued psychological harm of the purity movement, even beyond the person's explicit involvement (Brashers, 2022; Haberman, 2021; Klein, 2018). Some authors have gone as far as calling their upbringing in the purity movement "trauma," and relate examples of its effects that mirror the

symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Fields, 2016; Finch, 2019; Greczyn, 2020; Klein, 2018; O'Donnell & Cross, 2020). Despite these accounts, the lack of peer-reviewed studies exploring this link means that research, and therefore treatment, are lagging behind lived experience (Ellis et al., 2022). If these ideas could be considered and treated as potentially traumatic or at least harmful, it might curb their spread and provide an additional pause to churches teaching beliefs that stem from this wave of theology. More importantly, it would provide a path for healing for survivors of this type of teaching, and offer therapists a more systematic and evidence-based way to treat the effects of purity culture.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Since purity culture is situated within the context of religion, purity culture trauma must be situated within the context of spiritual abuse and religious trauma. These concepts, like purity culture itself, have not been robustly studied, and are in their nascency both in terms of research and clinical practice.

Spiritual Abuse and Religious Trauma

While increasingly common in popular literature, academic literature on spiritual abuse and religious trauma remains scarce and uncoordinated (Stone, 2013; Swindle, 2017). A 2022 systematic literature review on religious and spiritual abuse and trauma found only 25 studies that met inclusion criteria as of February 2022 (Ellis et al., 2022), and a lack of coherence between the studies is maintained by a lack of a clear and consistent definition (Swindle, 2017). Therefore it is first necessary to arrive at a definition that can be used to ground and direct the following study.

Although previous studies had focused on coercive or high-control Christian environments, the term "spiritual abuse" only came into usage in the early 1990s (Oakley et al., 2018). Research on spiritual abuse is still in its nascency, and there remains no single agreed-upon definition (Oakley et al., 2018; Ward, 2011). Perhaps the most commonly used and accepted definition is from Johnson and VanVonderen (1991, p.20): "Spiritual abuse is the mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining or decreasing that person's spiritual empowerment."

More recently, the emphasis has begun to shift from only talking about spiritual abuse to also naming religious trauma, the lived experience of the lasting effects of spiritual abuse on a person (Ellis et al. 2022; Clark-Miller & Kelleher, 2022). Coined by Marlene Winell (2007), religious trauma syndrome denotes the long-lasting effects of being raised and existing in a high-control religious environment (Anderson & Peck 2021). Combining aspects of both PTSD and Complex PTSD, religious trauma syndrome involves "long-lasting" effects, including "intrusive thoughts, negative emotional states, impaired social functioning, and other problems" (Winell, 2011, p.17). Stone (2013, p.324) also provides a helpful definition for religious trauma: "pervasive psychological damage resulting from religious messages, beliefs, and experiences."

Unlike other forms of trauma that may represent reactions to an easily recognizable acute or chronic stressor (such as instances of neglect, or traumatic accidents), religious trauma stems from long-term exposure to messages that are harmful to healthy functioning (Stone, 2013). Almost from birth, children are raised and socialized into an environment where certain messages are ingrained into their psyche and become a part of who they are. These messages often include black and white thinking (Berry, 2010; Stone, 2013), a fear of hell (Cole, 2023; Crocker, 2021; Stone, 2013), a suppression of "negative" emotions (Bilskey, 2013; Stone, 2013), unquestioning acceptance of a leader or doctrine with undue power over a person's life (Berry, 2010; Bilskey, 2013; Gubi & Jacobs, 2009; Oakley et al., 2018), a strong in/out group dynamic (Bilskey, 2013; Crocker, 2021), a mistrust of one's own emotions and thoughts, especially if they differ from accepted doctrine or practice (Crocker, 2021), and a strong

component of responsibility and guilt as a means of control (Bilskey, 2013; Crocker, 2021).

Ultimately, this leads to the adoption of a "false self" (Garret & Langone, 2020). When the demands of a high-control, spiritually abusive church are so all-encompassing that a person cannot merely make themselves follow the rules to be accepted, they must adopt an alternative self, the kind of self that would never do, think, say, or want something other than what the church is telling them (McSkimming, 2017). Although there is no physical constraint or abuse, to succeed in such a system a person must put themselves completely under the control of the church.

Religious/spiritual abuse can include elements of physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse. However, it adds the additional layer of the belief that God is complicit in the control and abuse (Bilskey, 2013; Cashwell & Swindle, 2018; Gubi & Jacobs, 2009; Oakley et al., 2018). Because of this divine attribution, the consequences of stepping out of line are not only short-term, related to inclusion and acceptance, but also long-term, painful, and eternal (Stone, 2013).

Religious trauma can exist on its own without accompanying physical, sexual, or emotional trauma. However, it can also overlap with other forms of trauma. When accompanied by other types of abuse and trauma, it can provide a rationale for abuse and include a mandate for the victim to accept the abuse without question (Bent-Goodley and Fowler, 2006). For example, an abuser might tell a victim that God has abandoned her because of her sins and so she deserves punishment, and that to make things right with God, she must forgive at all costs. This is even further entrenched when the person

perpetuating the abuse is a stand-in for God in the victim's eyes, as in the case of abuse by clergy (Farrell, 2009).

Clients rarely seek therapy specifically for religious trauma (Griffith, 2010; Stone, 2013), and particularly when it is not accompanied by other forms of abuse and trauma, it may be difficult for mental health professionals to recognize and treat religious abuse/trauma. Additionally, the internal, subjective experience of victims of religious abuse has not been sufficiently studied (Ward, 2011), leaving open the need for further research.

Purity Culture

Purity culture, like religious trauma, has not been systematically examined or defined in academic literature (Owens et. al, 2020; Keller, 2016). For the purposes of this paper, "purity culture" will be treated as a set of Christian beliefs and teachings about sexuality that encompass the following characteristics, taken from Owen's study of purity culture (2020): an emphasis on virginity, the prohibition of physical affection, the need for modesty, sexual gatekeeping, denial of female bodily autonomy, and a lack of education on sexual consent.

Emphasis on Virginity

An emphasis on virginity is fundamental to the goals of purity culture, particularly female virginity. The consequences of "losing" one's virginity are often overblown, and include a strong likelihood of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, getting pregnant, and experiencing emotional heartbreak and a dysfunctional relationship. Many metaphors have been used to describe what a woman becomes when she "loses" her virginity, including a spat upon Oreo, a used car, a dirty piece of tape, a used tissue,

and water with food coloring, in which the tiniest drop changes all of the water forever (Klein, 2018; Gish, 2018; Wagner & Rehfuss, 2008). Virginity is taught to strengthen a person's future marriage, and sometimes engaging in sexual encounters with others before marriage is considered cheating on one's future husband, since one day a woman's body will belong to her husband. This high value placed on virginity and hyper-sensitivity to anything sexual before marriage recalls elements present in religious trauma, including black and white thinking, a fear of hell, and guilt as a means of control.

Prohibition of Physical Affection

Virginity and chastity are sometimes expanded to include almost any act of physical intimacy. Books such as *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Harris, 1997) and *Passion and Purity* (Elliot, 2002) stress the importance of not only saving sex for marriage, but also any act that might possibly lead to sex, embracing the slippery slope fallacy. In this line of thinking, touching can lead to sex, so touching should be avoided; making out can lead to touching, so making out should be avoided; long hugs can lead to making out, so long hugs should be avoided; holding hands leads to long hugs, so holding hands should be avoided, etc. (Gish, 2018).

Even beyond physical purity, "true purity" also encompasses mental purity. Based on the Biblical admonition that "whoever looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Matt. 5:28), any mentally impure images, thoughts, or desires are put on par with physical impurity. Further, those teaching purity culture amplify the Biblical prohibition against lust to include not only strong feelings of sexual desire, but any feelings of attraction or desire for physical intimacy at any level (Klein, 2018).

Even beyond mental purity, purity teachings may also include emotional purity, or emotional chastity. Not only is it taught that it is sinful to engage in physical intimacy or want to engage in physical intimacy with someone in the context of a romantic relationship, but it is also a sin to preemptively imagine a future between oneself and a romantic partner (Swafford, 2014) or become overly emotionally attached to them.

Much of this is framed in a zero-sum view of romantic love. By kissing someone other than a spouse, a person wastes kisses and gives away something that belongs to their spouse, whether or not they have met yet (Evert & Evert, 2011; Gish, 2018). True purity involves saving as much as possible – physically, mentally, and emotionally – for one's future spouse.

Need for Modesty

Purity culture emphasizes the burden of being modest, which is largely or entirely put upon women. Standards for "modesty" usually encompass dress, speech, and actions. Modesty is closely policed by other women, who are quick to point out when a girl is becoming a "stumbling block" (Klein, 2018) to the boys. Girls often become preoccupied with how they are dressing, what conversation topics they are allowed to engage in, what activities they do, and how they sit or stand or carry themselves (Anderson, 2015; Claney et al., 2017; Field, 2016). This can lead to hypervigilance and shame about one's own body, and the sense that in any moment, in any way, a girl can step over the line and be in dangerous territory.

Sexual Gatekeeping

Purity culture teaches that men have stronger sexual urges than women and less self-control, and that therefore it is up to the woman to be the sexual gatekeeper (Klein,

2018; Evert & Evert, 2011). Any instance of going "too far" in intimate encounters is therefore disproportionately seen as the woman's fault. If a woman dresses and acts in a way that "inspires purity" in the men around her, men will be pure, treat her with respect, and acknowledge her dignity. If, however, she inspires lust in them, she is at least partially to blame for the consequences (Evert & Evert, 2011; Claney et al., 2020, Klement & Sagarin, 2016). The implication of this is a weakening of the concept of consent; if it is a woman's job to inspire positive action in a man, then she can never truly be a victim in an abusive situation.

These teachings are linked to the strong emphasis on heterosexuality and the erasure of the experience of gender and sexual minorities prominent in purity culture. Those who identify as a sexual or gender minority do not fit into this binary of male and female role expectations, which adds another layer of complication to consent and healthy relationships. For a description of the experience of identifying as LGBTQ in an evangelical environment, see Ganzevoort et al. (2011).

Denial of Female Bodily Autonomy

Purity culture teaches that a woman's body belongs to her future spouse – not to herself – even before they have met. A woman is meant to be a pure, spotless gift for her future husband. Any instance of impurity tarnishes her body and disrespects her future husband. Her body, mind, and emotions must be subjugated to him, even before he is in her life. Her own sexual desire is suppressed and disbelieved. "Good girls" do not want sex, they want love and affection, and sex is merely a means to that end for them (Anderson, 2015; Claney et al., 2020; Darnall, 2017; Field, 2016; Gish, 2018). This can

lead to a repression of normal and natural sexual desire, or to internalized shame for those who are unable to repress that desire.

Lack of Education on Sexual Consent

While the line between "pure" and "impure" sexual encounters is clear (namely, marriage), and it is clear that any sexual experience before marriage makes one "unclean," the line between consensual and non consensual is not drawn (Klement & Sagarin, 2016). While some blame may be placed on the perpetrator of sexual violence, a large portion of the blame is placed on the female victim – for failing to dress modestly enough, for teasing him, for being alone with him, or for enticing him in other ways to use her body (Owens et al., 2020). Thus even an unwanted and nonconsensual sexual encounter can lead to great feelings of guilt and shame, and a sense of being tarnished and forever unwhole.

Effects

The effects of purity culture, while not studied systematically, can be seen in numerous small-scale studies, interviews, and memoirs (Klein, 2018; Fahs, 2010; Wagner & Rehfuss, 2008; Fields, 2016; Finch, 2019; Greczyn, 2020; Klein, 2018; O'Donnell & Cross, 2020). While some people who grew up in the purity movement may have experienced freedom and joy in what they were taught, others experienced decidedly the opposite. These effects last after the period of "chastity" preached in purity culture – either once a woman has gotten married and can morally engage in sexual activities, or once she has decided to step out of purity culture and explore her sexuality on her own terms.

Guilt & Shame Surrounding Sex

Linda Kay Klein in her book *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Women and How I Broke Free* recounts that any time she tried to have sex with her college boyfriend, she would "find [her]self in a tearful heap in the corner of [her] boyfriend's bedroom, tormented by the same fear and anxiety that had driven [her] to break up with Dean when [she] was sixteen" (p. 7). Whether married or unmarried when they begin to explore their sexuality, women who have grown up in such a restrictive sexual environment often find their experiences to be marked by guilt, shame, and fear (Klein, 2018; Fahs, 2010; Wagner & Rehfuss, 2008).

Even beyond feeling guilt due to the sexual encounters themselves, women feel guilt and shame if anything, sexual or nonsexual, goes wrong in a relationship (O'Donnell et al., 2020). If the path to purity leads to perfectly happy and fulfilling marriages and relationships, and if women are the gatekeepers of purity, then any drama, heartache, abuse, or dysfunction is also seen to be the woman's fault.

Sexual Dysfunction

Women who grew up in purity culture can find themselves unable to articulate their own sexual wants and needs, even to themselves (Fahs, 2010; Mahoney, 2008). Since they have been coached to cut off any semblance of sexual actions, thoughts, or desires beginning from a very young age, they are often unable to access that part of themselves. This can manifest in a condition called vaginismus, a physical tightening of the vaginal muscles that precludes anything entering the vagina (O'Donnell et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2021). Sexual dysfunction and distress are known symptoms of victims of childhood sexual abuse (Gewirtz-Meydan & Lahav, 2020).

Physical Symptoms

Klein notes that the nightmares, panic attacks, and paranoia that she and others experience when thinking about or beginning to initiate sexual experiences showed her that they were "at war with ourselves, our own bodies, and our own sexual natures" (p. 8). Others also note reactions such as panic attacks, nausea, terror, fight or flight, or the compulsion to self-harm (Brashers, 2022; Wagner & Rehfuss, 2008). These symptoms mirror many of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, including recurrent distressing memories and dreams, intense distress at exposure to related cues, persistent negative emotional state, hypervigilance, and self-destructive behavior (APA, 2022).

At War with Oneself

The strong emphasis on the importance of modesty in thought, action, speech, and dress leads to obsessive cognitions about not causing others to sin. Modesty is not just one segment of life; it is a code that colors every aspect of one's being, shaping even the way that women think about themselves. Girls and women begin to view their bodies as inherently problematic, and even sinful (Daniluk, 1993). One woman described how the insistence on modesty as charity to boys and men made her feel like her "body was a crime" (O'Donnell et al., 2020). This internalized shame parallels symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder such as having persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs or expectations about oneself and having a distorted sense of self-blame (APA, 2022).

False Self

Women raised in purity culture note not only not feeling like themselves, but feeling unable to discern who their "self" really is (Mahoney, 2008). The false self that they have adopted has taken over. They do not merely deny their thoughts, desires, and needs; they are completely unable to access them (Klein, 2018). This shows potential

overlap with dissociation, which can be a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (Ginzburg et al. 2006).

Theory

Theories of stress and trauma may provide a lens from which to begin to understand the ongoing effects of purity culture on the sexual experiences and identities of Catholic women. The ABC-X model (Price et al., 2010) states that a stressor (A) interacts with a person's resources (B) and the meaning attached to the stressor (C) to produce a resulting effect of stress and/or trauma. In the case of purity culture, the chronic nature of being exposed to harmful messaging about one's own body, desires, and identity constitutes a stressor (A). While religion can sometimes be counted as a strength or resource (B), in this case God/religion may be used to justify and amplify the control. Family, friends, and religious leaders are often all involved in the purity messaging, leaving the person with reduced relational resources, or in extreme cases, no relational support at all. Additionally, the meanings given (C) to the need for purity are eternal (e.g. hell), and touch on the core of the person's being (e.g. whether they are good or bad, holy or sinful). These three components can interact with one another to produce a stress response (X) that can be experienced as traumatic and may vary between persons depending on unique individual contexts. This phenomenological qualitative study seeks to understand this stress response (X) in Catholic women influenced by purity culture.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

While ample evidence exists to the harm of purity culture teachings and even to their traumatic effects, research lags behind lived experience. Furthermore, most studies that do exist are centered on the experiences of evangelical women, and do not include Catholics. This study seeks to extend the literature and directly study the lived experience of Catholic women who would identify their purity culture experiences as traumatic.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited via social media. Recruitment information was posted in Facebook groups and disseminated on Instagram pages where participants who meet the desired criteria were likely to visit, with an effort made to post in groups of people with varied relationships with and interpretations of Catholicism. The recruitment message included a flyer and a link to an online interest/screening questionnaire. The first page of the questionnaire included an informed consent document, and prospective participants consented prior to beginning the questionnaire. The second page of the survey included demographic information, which was later used for maximum variation sampling. Demographic information included information such as marital status, sexual orientation, age, and rite of Catholicism (e.g. Roman Catholic, Byzantine Catholic). The third page included screening questions (see Appendix A). If the responses to questions 1 *or* 2 and questions 3 and 4 was "Yes," participants were directed to a page with more information about the proposed interview, a link to view a second informed consent form for the interview, and a text box where they could share their email address for further contact if they were interested in an interview. Finally, they were directed to a resources

page with information that included 24-hour national mental health resources and religious trauma support, as well as contact information for both the graduate student researcher, Megan O'Brien Crayne, and the principal investigator, Dr. Jessica Cless. If their responses to the screening questions did not meet inclusion criteria, they were sent directly to the resources page.

Participants were recruited who were at least 18 years old and either currently Catholic or identify that they were formerly Catholic, and that their Catholic background influenced their subsequent views or experiences of sexuality. They identified on an online interest survey that they were influenced by "purity culture," and that "purity culture" led to future experiences being subjectively "traumatic." Purity culture and trauma were not defined specifically as inclusion criteria since this study seeks to understand the lived experience of Catholic women who say that they have purity culture-induced trauma. Instead, it allowed participants to define "purity culture" and "trauma" for themselves.

Interest Survey Response and Participant Selection

A total of 233 responses were collected and filtered for inclusion criteria, resulting in 125 suitable candidates for interviews. Maximum variation sampling was utilized to select participants to interview (Creswell, 2015), with a goal of conducting approximately 8-10 interviews. Once selected, participants were emailed with further details about the proposed interview, an informed consent document to sign, and a link to schedule an interview.

15 people were invited to participate in a qualitative interview, but seven ended up either declining to interview or dropping off in the process of scheduling. Ultimately

eight interviews were conducted. Participants ranged in age from 23-50, with a median age of 29.5. Six identified as women, while two identified as "other" on the demographic survey. Three identified as heterosexual/straight, three as bisexual, one as lesbian, and one as "other." Three were single, two were currently married, one was divorced, one was in a serious relationship but not cohabitating, and one was living with a partner but unmarried. Seven were raised Catholic, and one was raised Protestant. Six currently identified as Catholic, one as Agnostic, and one as "other." Participants were invited to either choose their own pseudonym or be identified by a random number. Four chose pseudonyms (Gemma, Teresa, Joan, Rebekah), and four chose to be identified by a number (P1, P5, P6, P8). Participant demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Data Collection

Interviews ranged from 45-90 minutes and were conducted by Megan O'Brien Crayne via a HIPAA-compliant online conferencing tool, WebEx. At the time of the interviews, the interviewer was in her final year of training in a clinical therapy program, and supervision by the principal investigator was available in case of observed participant distress. While participants engaged with the interviewer with video enabled, only audio was recorded for data analysis in an effort to increase participants' level of privacy and empowerment. A particular focus on the safety of the virtual interview environment as well as strengthening participant capacity for choice and control (Alessi & Kahn, 2022) was emphasized. Details of informed consent were reiterated at the beginning of the interview, and time was available for participant questions. A phenomenological framework was used for interviews, which emphasizes the lived experience of study participants in light of their bodily experience and the meanings that they have given that

experience, and seeks to describe without interpreting (van Manen, 2016). In order to stay true to the research questions while allowing participants to share their own lived experiences and meaning-making, interviews were semi-structured (Rubin & Rubin, 2016) using the questions developed in the interview guide (see Appendix B). Interview questions were developed by breaking the larger research question down into smaller components to elicit responses that would speak to participants experiences of "purity culture" that were "traumatic." As the guide was developed, care was taken to ensure that questions were open-ended and would encompass a wide range of relevant participant experiences.

Data Analysis

This study used a descriptive phenomenological approach analyzed by thematic analysis (Sundler et al. 2019, Rubin and Rubin 2016). The thematic analysis was data-driven and inductive. First, audio recorded interview data was transcribed to text and stored in separate Word documents numbered one through eight. Audio to text transcriptions were completed either by the interviewer or by other graduate student clinical members of the research team, all whom had completed IRB training and certification. For familiarization with the data, the researcher listened to the audio recordings and read and re-read the transcripts. A process of emergent coding was used wherein themes arose from the words of the participants and were defined and marked in the text as comments. After all interviews were coded, a visual basic macro was used to extract all comments and reference text from the word documents into a single Excel spreadsheet. A pivot table was then created which sorted reference text by code and interview number, allowing all reference text related to each code to be viewed side by

side for ease of analysis. Codes were then grouped by relevance and sorted and re-sorted into themes that captured each code, compared with and related to one another to allow patterns to emerge, and ultimately organized into a pattern that captures the descriptions of study participants while remaining faithful to the research questions. Themes are summarized in Table 2.

Rigor

Following Lincoln and Guba's work (1985), the concept of trustworthiness was used to ensure rigor. Trustworthiness includes aspects of "quality, authenticity, and truthfulness" (Cypress, 2017, p. 254). Four criteria were used both during and after data collection to support trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Cypress, 2017; Forero et al., 2018). To ensure credibility, participants were offered the opportunity to receive both a copy of the transcription of their interview and a summary report identifying themes and sub-themes to confirm whether the analysis lined up with their lived experience, and a peer debriefer was used to assess transcripts, methodology, and findings. Transferability was attended to by using purposeful sampling and providing adequate contextual information about the participants. Dependability was achieved by establishing an audit trail throughout the process of analysis. Confirmability was attained by reflexivity, acknowledging that the researcher is an integral part of the data collection and analysis process, and noting where researcher biases or assumptions might be present in the research.

Reflexivity

In many ways I am an insider to the population that I am interested in researching. I am a 31-year-old cisgender, heterosexual, married white woman who was raised and

still identifies as Catholic. I have a degree and background in Catholic theology and ministry, and am seen as a trusted person with authority in Catholic circles. I worked in a university campus ministry setting for four years before beginning my clinical training, and witnessed firsthand both how purity culture can be harmful to women's self of self, confidence, and relationships, and how religion can be a conduit for healing and integration. My insider-status and direct experience with this population will offer both additional insight into this population and additional risk of imposing my own thoughts or experiences into the research analysis. I also hope that this research will inform my future practice and emerging career as a psychotherapist, and aid me in future treatment of population who have been harmed by religion.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Participant responses seemed to indicate that experiences ranged widely throughout the eight interviews conducted. While most had a distinctly negative impression of purity teachings, one participant also spoke about the practical benefits of purity teachings, including a lower risk of STDs and avoiding side effects from birth control (the use of which is traditionally prohibited in Catholic practice). Participants also spoke about several schools of thought they believed influenced the theology they were taught, including influence from evangelical theology and from American politics. Some participants also mentioned being a part of a specific subset community of Catholicism which influenced their understanding of purity culture, including the homeschool community, the Latin Mass community and a charismatic community. Two participants also mentioned Jason Evert by name as someone who had contributed to the influence of purity culture on them and in their communities, and one spoke about the clear difference in how these teachings affect Catholics from different socioeconomic levels.

Ultimately, six themes were extracted from the interviews in order to begin to develop an understanding of the lived experience of Catholic women who would say they have been traumatized by purity culture: a culture of silence around sex, the importance of purity, the role of gender, the effects of purity culture, defining the teachings as traumatic, and the path to healing. These themes are hereafter described, using key examples from interview responses.

Identified Themes

Culture of Silence Around Sex

A strong theme in the interviews was a culture of silence around sex, which included commentary on the limited sexual education participants received, the insular nature of their community, and the cisheteronormativity of teachings they received.

Limited Sexual Education

While two participants noted a positive experience of talking about sex with their parents and described their parents as "sex positive," five noted never having these discussions in their childhood homes. P1 noted, "Sex was not talked about. Like, at all." Joan said, "sexuality was always treated as something taboo, and bad and we weren't allowed to ask questions about it." P5 described limited sexual education in more detail, saying:

> Like I have no idea whatsoever what sex involves, what body parts, I never in my entire…first through 12th grade never heard the word penis. Never heard the word vagina, never ever heard the word consent. Everything was so hush hush. And any interest just made you seem like a sexual deviant.

She also described the experience of having her first menstrual cycle:

> I know I'm not peeing the blood, but you had just had no idea what other holes or things were going on down there…any sort of curiosity in that regard was perverse and dirty…It was like everything's a mystery. So, we don't need to know what it looks like down there, we don't know, we don't need to know how it works.

She shared a story about a friend of hers who, after having her first menstrual cycle and understanding what was happening, felt the need to pretend to her mother that she was confused and scared and did not know what was going on because "she was afraid that she would get in trouble for knowing."

P5 also shared how this lack of a basic sexual education impacted her later in life. In college, she was raped by a man that she was dating. Describing the experience, she said "when you have no idea what your basic anatomy is it's hard to know what's going on. I got very uncomfortable and started pushing him off of me. And he's like, "it's okay it's okay, we're not having sex." Although she was bleeding the next day and knew that "something" had happened, she did not know that she had had sex until she asked him the following day. Even after that, she did not receive a more complete sexual education until after getting married and getting pregnant with her first child:

> But just like every pre-natal appointment, I have no idea what any of this is. A cervix? Vulva vagina, this that, clitoris, orgasming, I didn't know that was a thing. And my husband, god bless his soul, he wasn't that much better. He had spent two years in seminary and went to a Catholic college.

Insular Community

This limited sexual education at home was compounded by the insular nature of the communities that participants were part of. Participants spoke of the clear divide they were taught between their own community and the outside world, and the superiority of their community and way of living over anything different. Joan described being taught, "we were dressed modestly, so please notice the sinners over there were wearing pants. We were the good people." Gemma talked about not trusting those who were more

relaxed about the rules, including her own parents: “I knew that my parents weren’t as strict with stuff—and so I didn't trust them on this.” For Gemma, the consequences of being more relaxed about the rules were dire: “In the Catholic world, it's more like they're going to hell because we are the only ones who are right.” This divide between those who would go to heaven and those who would go to hell also impacted P5, who said:

> We were Catholic to our core. We didn’t know people who weren’t Catholic. Everything we did revolved around this tightknit group of Catholics. We didn’t associate with non-Catholics; we were very like paranoid of the outside world. Everything was done with the thought of the next life. Earning heaven, next life.”

Participants also talked about this rigid, insular in-group being set up to perpetuate and protect itself at all costs. Joan noted: “Because it's a rigid system that is set up to protect people in some way, and then you start realizing it's only protecting the people at the top and everyone else is just getting shit on.” Rebekah said: “Any insular requirement is gonna create the dynamic where predators will be covered up, moved, whatever, and the truth has to come from the victims and from their parents if their brave enough to do it.” Not only did the insularity enable and solidify the lack of education, it also contributed to a lack of safety by putting the needs and image of the community above the needs and safety of the victims.

Cisheteronormativity

Along with a lack of discourse about sexuality perpetuated by belonging in an insular community, participants spoke about an even greater level of mystery surrounding anything other than a cis-hetero-orientation. Gemma noted about her experience of coming out to herself as a lesbian, “I definitely feel like the things, all of the messaging

from purity culture that I absorbed, made it really, really difficult for me to just, like, figure out this very basic thing about myself." However, she noted being grateful that it had taken her so long to identify her sexual orientation:

> Because if I had known that I was a lesbian as a high schooler who was still very deep in a lot of this scrupulosity stuff... still in this incredibly conservative, traditional, high control environment. I don't know how I, what I would have done. Like, I don't I, I think I would have felt a lot of deep distress about it. And again, I think it would have brought up some suicidality, just based on other things that I felt around that time."

This level of distress for Gemma was compounded by the feeling of being trapped:

> I was like, 'I don't, this doesn't feel like a choice that I'm choosing and that doesn't feel…. I was like, 'I would rather die cause I'm just like, I just feel like trapped.' It wasn't necessarily this like, 'Oh, if I can't have sex someday I'm going to die,' but just the sense of feelings so trapped by my options for how to live my life that I just was, I felt like I was suffocating.

For Gemma, this trapped feeling, which caused great distress and even suicidal ideation, is a direct result of an initial inability recognize her own sexual orientation coupled with the singular script given to her by her community for how to live out that orientation.

Teresa was also given only a single script for how she ought to live out her orientation. She spoke in depth about her experience as a bisexual woman in the Church, and learning that heterosexuality is the ideal and any other types of sexual expression are "halfway sex. It's not ideal sex, it's not the best sex, it's not the most godly sex." Although she is in a happy and stable relationship with her longtime girlfriend, the belief

that same-sex relationships "maybe not the most beautiful or most full participation in God's creativity" was "really damaging and continues to show up for me." Despite her happiness and stability with her girlfriend, and her own conviction that same-sex relationships can also be beautiful and can honor God, she finds that a part of herself cannot let go of feeling like her relationship is in some ways deficient.

The Importance of Purity

Alongside the absence of meaningful – or even surface-level – discourse around sexuality, participants reported a strong awareness of the incredible importance of maintaining sexual purity as much as possible. For them, purity was directly tied to their value as a person, and there were severe consequences for crossing the line.

Purity is Tied to Value

Six participants were taught that a girl's purity was tied directly to her value and that once purity has been taken away and value has diminished, it is final. P1 noted being taught that, "your soul is based on your purity," and "if you have sex before marriage you're a chewed up piece of gum" or a "crinkled up napkin." Teresa likened having sex to toothpaste in a tube: "when you have sex, like toothpaste, it can't go back in, something has changed and that's it." Gemma noted being very anxious about maintaining her purity as a teen, and even now inside feeling like:

> a scared 12 year old who is in…. Who's just really, really scared that she's going to make a mistake and then she's going to go to hell or her value's going to go down or something. Like, there's just there's some kind of final like, failure to it, that is very, very dangerous.

Rebekah recalled being taught: “sex is the most important thing in a marriage and it’s the only thing important about women. So you have to guard your virginity and guard your purity.” P5 noted that in the aftermath of her rape, she thought: “Oh my god, I just lost my virginity. I’m never going to get married, I’m never gonna have children. My entire life is over. I couldn’t breathe, And I’m going to hell.” And Joan talked about growing up to believe in:

> a violent world in which God is going to punish you for having sex. That's a pretty terrifying world in which you suddenly lose the ability to relax and if you do anything sexual, you know, play it over in your mind for hours and days, and weeks and months, and it's traumatizing because you can't just make a mistake and move on. It's a mortal sin and you're going to hell.

This eternal consequence of not only premarital sex but any premarital sexual activity, consensual or not, deeply impacted participants own sense of identity.

Five participants talked about the importance not only of avoiding sex, but anything related to or that could lead to sex, including “kissing a guy” (Gemma), “having passing sexual thoughts” (Joan), “[looking] at yourself” (P5), “touching a breast” (P5), and “sexual desire” (P6). P5 recounted a story about her brother who was caught by his sister kissing his girlfriend at their house. The next day his sister went to school and told everyone, “my brother and hie girlfriend were having sex.” Highlighting the black and white nature of sexual purity, P5 notes that, in her community, “it might as well have been sex.”

Three participants also talked about how the belief that virginity is the ideal affected them. Gemma spoke about a sleepover with friends where one friend shared,

"You know, well, virginity is actually the highest calling like, it's, it's better, theologically speaking." This greatly impacted Gemma, who felt that "I always have to go all the way with my faith." P5, when she told a trusted priest that she was in a relationship, was told "You've been set apart by God, you're not supposed to be in relationships like this." P6 also talked about grappling with the belief that virginity is superior to marriage:

> And in the few months prior to that, I had been praying about when Paul says it's better to be single than to be married, and I asked a bunch of people in the church, you know, what do you think?

Consequences of Crossing the Line

Along with the emphasis on purity and the connection that it was given to a person's worth came severe consequences for stepping over the line. Participants were taught about the reality of hell from a young age, and that the results of breaking a rule were eternal. P5 said, "You really become so devoted to this because it's not just about being a good person. This is your eternal life on the line. The stakes could not be higher." Joan said:

> For children, it becomes like, oh, so I have one option or hell; great. Because like you're a child, you don't really have the capacity to unpack what they're saying, and what's wrong with it, and that is behind it. You think they're right. An adult is telling me I'll go to hell if I do this. So therefore, I'm going to wear long skirts forever.

At the developmental age when participants were taught these rules, they were unable to evaluate or refine them; they fully believed and embraced the high consequences of any misdemeanor related to purity.

Apart from eternal consequences, there were also consequences within the community for stepping over the line, including public shame (Joan), spreading rumors (P8), and loss of status within the community (P5). There was also the idea that doing anything sexual before marriage does not just affect the person and their worth, or their status within their community, but that it actually takes something away from their future spouse (Gemma, P5, P7). P5, speaking about the aftermath of her rape, said:

> When it happened, I was like, 'Oh my god I took this from my husband.' From my hypothetical future husband, Like I was so consumed with guilt and fear that it just was never really allowed to be what it was.

Reflecting on the incident later, she recounts thinking, "I must apologize to my husband because I gave away my virginity… You know I stole something from my future husband that didn't belong to me." These perceived deficits led to the felt need to make reparations for sexual impurity. P5 noted that she "became a slave to that parish" and "didn't exist except to make reparations for my sins for years."

The Role of Gender

Discourse surrounding gender held a prominent place in the interviews and in participants' emerging sense of self through childhood as they grew up and formed their identity in a female body. Participants noted clear differences in male and female roles which included the belief that women should be submissive, an emphasis on modesty paired with the over-sexualization of girls, and the idea that women are responsible for being the gatekeepers of sexual purity.

Clear Differences in Male and Female Roles

Joan talked about how the clear difference in male and female roles leads to a "transactional exchange," where "you get to stay home with the kids and I go to work and we're exchanging," instead of focusing on the unique skills of each partner and how as a team they can best serve the family. Teresa spoke about how these roles show up for her even in her same-sex relationship, where she says "Even in a same gender relationship, the internalized like 'I'm the woman in this relationship and you're the man' was really strong." She notes that her "ability to care and participate reciprocally in a relationship was stunted by the intense gender role norms that I had been conditioned to live in. So much so that I couldn't imagine caring for a partner who was pregnant."

P8 (she/they) ties her current gender dysphoria directly back to purity teachings about the roles of men and women. She feels that her lasting discomfort in her female body and with the label "woman" is rooted in the rigid roles and stereotypes that she was taught about men and women from a young age; roles and stereotypes that she was never quite able to fit into. She noted:

> I do believe a lot of my struggles to fit in to certain spaces or to not have a gag reflex as being described as a woman, stem directly from purity culture. Because if they hadn't tried to force us so strictly into those boxes, I probably would have been fine. You know? And instead, I was told that like everything I was doing was wrong growing up."

She notes, "If there's only one right way to be a woman and you're not that way, then you're not a woman, right?"

Women Should Be Submissive

Five participants (Teresa, Joan, P5, P6, P8) talked about purity culture upholding a particular power dynamic, and particularly the dynamic that men are in charge and women ought to be submissive. P6 noted:

> You know, a big part of purity culture, which I didn't realize when I was 13 is this obedience to men. Like, absolute obedience, and I think some of that comes from, like, in Catholicism, it comes from wanting to imitate the priesthood or holy orders or things like that."

This emphasis on imitating the sacramental, all-male priesthood evidences a particular power dynamic not present in evangelical Protestantism.

Joan talked about how this mandate to be submissive directly contributed to her sister's sexual assault, stating: "But one of the reasons that that situation got to the point it, it was like, having trouble standing up for yourself, because we were raised to be submissive." She also extended this submission framework past the husband/wife dynamic, noting:

> And, but I really do think it comes from the same bullshit because the husband gets his wife to submit, and then the wife wants her nanny to submit, and instead of people just like existing, we're all playing this weird fucking drama of submission.

This "drama of submission," for Joan, was woven into the fabric of every relationship, even beyond male/female, husband/wife, or clergy/laity dynamics.

Four participants spoke about how the emphasis on female submission, coupled with high levels of control by an authority figure, led to a lack of a sense of bodily autonomy. Joan said, "I mean, you're just kind of programmed to obey. Men tell you

what to do and not stand up for yourself. That's like the hallmark of purity culture." This programmed obedience often began in childhood. Joan, speaking about her mother, explained,

> But she thought because of the way that she was raised in the church, that it was her most important job to make sure her children were obedient. And that is pretty much what the Bible says 'spare the rod, spoil the child, you know, spank them into submission. To get them to submit, submit, submit, submit, submit, submit. It's in the Ten Commandments. It's all of it. Well, all you're doing when you're getting a child to submit is, you're breaking their spirit.

This obedience contributed to participants feelings of disempowerment when faced with unwanted sexual experiences. P8 noted:

> And I could not tell him no because I had previously never been given any autonomy over my body. Yeah so I feel like purity culture denied me the ability to you know because it's purity culture but also like being forced to hug people that you don't want to hug, kiss people you didn't want to kiss, and stuff you're never allowed to make choices about your own body like what you wear is dictated. I didn't know that people could tell people no. Probably didn't have my first voluntary kiss like when I actually wanted to be doing it, until much later in life.

P6 described being raped on her wedding night: "I screamed in pain and screamed for him to stop. And instead he argued with me. He said, no, I'm almost done." Rebekah also talked about the aftermath of her rape and its relation to her sense of bodily autonomy, saying, "So, whatever the opposite of bodily autonomy was, is how I was raised, and it

directly contributed to my devastating level of despair that I felt walking around in the world as a sexual abuse survivor."

Modesty and the Over-sexualization of Girls

Seven participants spoke about the emphasis placed on modesty for girls, even from a young age, and three tied that with the over-sexualization of girls. Teresa remembers that the "'policing of girls' clothing was really intense, and I remember that being a point of stress is making sure my shorts went past my fingertips." Joan connected modesty with over-sexualization, saying

> As a 10-11-year-old, you're just like consumed by that like, you start going on public thinking every man is staring at my ass…that's not realistic… [you think] you're a plaything and it's your job to protect yourself from being a plaything for these men, but you're not being, like, no one's saying, like, well, like, why don't they just not look at me like that?

She says that this led to a constant state of "hypervigilance" or her body, and:

> real paranoia that if you do anything wrong that someone's actually going to harm you, even though you didn't do anything. That if you wear the immodest outfit or like, wear the bikini, that all of a sudden someone's going to actually sexual assault you and it'll be your fault because you didn't dress modestly enough.

At the same time, she says, "you don't have a concept of why anyone would want realistically because, like, no one's explaining that sex is also pleasurable…it's something men want. What you want it's never a part of the equation so you don't really understand." Joan also talked about developing lasting tailbone, inner thigh, and pelvic floor dysfunction that she later treated with pelvic floor physical therapy due to the

constant attempt to “tuck your butt under and make it look smaller” so that “men are not lusting after you.”

Women Are the Gatekeepers of Sexual Purity

The emphasis on female modesty is part of the idea that women are the gatekeepers of sexual purity. P5 noted that she was taught:

> no sex before marriage and you know if anything happens it’s the woman’s fault. Always always always the woman’s fault. You are the gate keeper of chastity. That was something that was relentlessly harped, like men have no control in it, any of it.

The sense that women were blamed for men’s lack of control and the victim was blamed for unwanted sexual experiences was echoed across interviews. P1 noted sharing with her faith community after being molested on public transportation while studying abroad: “they completely shamed me, like, what were you wearing, why didn’t you stop it, like, um, they gave me more control than I had, and they were like well you need to go to confession for this,” and asked her, “well now you’ve been touched, what will you tell your future partner?” P5 said, “If consent doesn’t exist rape doesn’t exist. And consent does not exist in purity culture and Catholicism.” Rebekah said, “And to me that’s one of the biggest costs of the dynamic of purity culture, is that when there is an assault, there is this tendency to not believe the victim.”

Effects of Purity Culture

The stories of those interviewed are rich and diverse, and each experience is unique. Some themes that were shared among diverse stories included anxiety around sex

and dating, lack of trust in their own bodily experience, physical symptoms, and a lingering feeling that God or the church has failed them.

Anxiety around sex and dating

Participants spoke about the distress that sex and dating caused them, and the constant over-thinking and second guessing that went into romantic interactions. Gemma talked about the mental gymnastics of answering the question "how far is too far?" and the anguish that it caused her:

> So, like I had my rule was, we weren't allowed to kiss until we said, 'I love you.' And so that was something that was, so we were dating for like, six months, before we ever kissed each other. And it was, I remember just being really stressed, like after every time I hung out with him. I'm like, okay, I always… they always do talk about if you're asking how far is too far, then you're asking the wrong question, but I'm like, I don't really I really don't know. Like, 'Am I like, are we allowed to cuddle on the couch at all? Is that okay?'

Similarly, P5 talked about "being overly scrupulous and paranoid" and confessing kissing her boyfriend to a priest, who reprimanded her.

Lack of Trust in Own Bodily Experience

Six interviewees talked about the struggle that they had with identifying and accepting their own experience. Gemma described:

> It had just always been, 'Well, this is what all the Catholic people telling you to do. This is how you do it the good Catholic way'. And so I never like, stopped to like, check in with myself, and it was always a me problem, if it wasn't fitting."

Joan also talked about listening to outside sources over her own body: "you're

> constantly being told ‘this is right, and it doesn't matter how you feel. Because God said, so this is the catechism. This is what's right.’ And it becomes very traumatic because you're constantly denying that anything inside you could be real or true.’

P5 spoke about being groomed by her spiritual director:

> And even when he was my spiritual director and doing things that were making me uncomfortable, again you are robbed of your intuition and told that you are bad. So you know, you take those two things together and you create the perfect opportunity for victimization. Even when you pick up on something you’re not allowed to voice those things, think those things. It’s just me I’m just perverted, I’m just bad. And even though part of my brain is like “danger” the other part of me is like, “sinner, sinner, sinner” with this perpetual threat of eternal damnation hanging over you that sways so many of your decisions

P6 asserted, “there's no real thinking, it's all like cult thinking.” She talked about being on her way to her wedding and feeling “sort of sick,” but ignoring the feeling and thinking “well, there's not really time to think about it now.” Even though she has since left her marriage, earned her PhD, and bought her own house and car, she says, “I’m scared to trust myself now.”

Participants who identified as gender and sexual minorities had particular struggles with accepting their own experience. Gemma explained, “I definitely feel like the things, all of the messaging from purity culture that I absorbed, made it really, really difficult for me to just, like, figure out this very basic thing about myself.” She describes:

> …the lightbulb moment of realizing I've never liked men. I'm a lesbian. And I remember feeling like, I put down so much that I was carrying, I didn't realize how much I was being kind of crushed under this trying to make myself fit into like, heterosexual relationships, and, like that expectation for myself.

P1 also talked about the experiencing of hiding her sexuality from herself, and subsequently learning to "not be afraid" of her bisexuality, saying "I'm going to bring this to prayer. This is part of my experience." Four participants also talked about currently or in the past acknowledging their attraction to women, but deciding to only date men in order to align themselves with the Catholic worldview.

Physical Symptoms

This lack of trust in their own body led to physical, bodily reactions for some participants. Gemma spoke about the inability to insert a tampon because her pelvic floor was so tight. She said, "my body is just really freaked out by anything happening down there." Joan described tailbone, inner thigh, and pelvic floor dysfunction, which her physical therapist called "Catholic school girl thighs" because "they see this so commonly with religious women that they store all their tension in their inner thighs to the point to where their inner thighs are dysfunctioning all the time." P5 attributes her struggles with disordered eating to the hatred of her own body and desire to minimize herself that stemmed from purity culture, and P8 directly ties her gender dysphoria to teachings about the roles and expectations of women.

Feeling like God/the Church has failed them

Some participants distinguished purity culture from authentic Catholic theology. Rebekah called purity theology a "misrepresentation of scripture" and contrasted it with

"Theology of the Body," Pope John Paul II's teachings on human sexuality (John Paul II, 2006), which she calls "the opposite of purity culture." She says, "theology of the body talks about the dignity of the person and doesn't attach worth to shoving you into defined gender roles," and instead is "more holistic and…it accommodates for common circumstances of here's how you regain healthy sexuality after you experience something like child abuse, or sexual abuse, or rape, or sexual harassment at work." Similarly, P8 said "I guess my deconstruction period or whatever people want to call it like, when I, when first figured out that the things I was being told weren't necessarily what actually church teaching was. I started researching for myself." Although they feel they have been harmed by purity culture, they attribute that purity culture not to the Catholic church or Catholic teaching as a whole, but to either particular leaders or teachers or to the outside influence of certain groups, such as evangelical Protestantism.

Gemma agreed that "Catholics do kind of have a different approach to these things" than evangelical Protestants. However, she says there is a "particular Catholic flavor of purity culture," that Catholics "have almost all of the same things that evangelical churches do with it, but we also add this fun little layer of…very high theological reasons, we're going to still kind of demonize sexuality, especially for women." Although she views Catholic purity culture as distinct from evangelical purity culture, she still situates purity culture squarely within Catholicism itself, and as distinct from evangelical purity culture primarily in its sophisticated theology.

A number of participants talked about feeling betrayed by the Church or by leaders that they once loved. Describing an experience of an unwanted sexual interaction with her boyfriend, P8 said, "And I remember sitting there frozen and thinking like, fuck,

I was set up for failure. And just feeling so betrayed by the people that were supposed to teach me things." Rebekah said of her abuser:

> that man was part of the Christian community and my dad at the time was a head coordinator and was heavily invested in keeping the appearance that this group as being separate from the world, not having the same problems as the world and even being better than regular Catholics. He was heavily invested in protecting that image. And it left me holding the bag again.

P5 said of the Church, "I gave you everything. Everything. And I trusted you so completely the outcome was that I was trash to you." She explained, "You know what I mean? That guy didn't do that, the church did, my parents, my teachers. But it's also very much church sanctioned. So even now it is like the most… difficult betrayal." Rebekah does not think her experience is unique: "In every instance that I have talked to someone with a similar situation there's an attacker, the abuser, the rapist, but you know the church is the real source of pain there."

The "trauma" of purity culture

When speaking about the "trauma" of purity culture, some participants spoke about direct experience of physical or sexual abuse that they would attribute to the purity messaging that they received and that was present in their community. Others spoke about the lasting harm that the messaging and environment itself had on them, even in the absence of direct physical or sexual abuse. The thread between each type of story, and in participant's own self-identification with the word "trauma," is that the reactions to these teachings continue to exist even when the teachings are no longer espoused, and the participant is no longer in the purity culture environment.

Purity teachings led to physical/sexual abuse

For some participants, the trauma from purity culture was the way in which purity culture paved the way for their experience of sexual assault or rape. P5 spoke about her experience being raped by her date, who had explicitly agreed with her that they would not have sex before marriage. The rape was traumatizing, but even more traumatic for her was the way that purity culture had paved the way for that situation to occur. She says,

> …realizing that you're just a lamb led to the slaughter. You know. Honestly it was so much harder to come to the realization that the church delivered me up to this guy than it was for me to say he raped me… But the church groomed me for years. Groomed me for years and years and years. This guy took, you know…Invaded and took advantage of me physically and certainly like mentally and emotionally but the church broke me. You know. The church had access to parts of me that this man didn't have…the church had access to every part of me and I devoted so much of my life to being on the straight and narrow and trying to do the right thing. And to come to that realization that every step along the way they have made this environment and they have made this environment for me. They have made me so afraid of my own body, so afraid of my own intuitions, so afraid of my own survival instincts. That even that moment where I was uncomfortable and wanted to get out of that moment, I allowed that moment to keep happening because it was my fault. It was like they took away all of that.

P6 spoke about screaming in pain and asking for her husband to stop while he raped her on their wedding night. Her reaction, instead of recognizing the abuse for what it was, was "I didn't think that was how this worked. I thought there were rules. I must have

misunderstood." Like P5, she blames purity culture for setting up an environment where this could occur: "purity culture is almost a means of grooming and making women comfortable, used to, or associating it with holiness the whole idea of not like, like, suppressing their will, suppressing their desire, suppressing all of their rationality."

Likewise, Rebekah linked her experience of sexual assault from ages five to six with her purity culture upbringing. She says:

> if I had ever known or thought that I had bodily autonomy…I totally would have gone to my parents…But I didn't have bodily autonomy… It was this ongoing constant onslaught of what it takes to be a proper girl and being inappropriately touched by an adult was on the negative side of that equation.

So, she says, "I directly connect purity culture and bodily autonomy and the lack of it, based on what my parents had already told me at the age of 5." For these participants, growing up with purity culture messaging and expectations led directly to experiences of being physically harmed and sexually assaulted.

Purity culture messaging itself is "traumatic"

For others, the "trauma" of purity culture stems solely from the messaging they received in a purity culture environment. Teresa outlines, "It wasn't so much one traumatic incident as it was the trauma of being conditioned in this toxic, hostile environment for so long that generates in my learned responses or conditioning that is bodily also." Similarly, Gemma defined trauma as the "kind of pain that the body holds on to. And, or the kind of harm that…that's kind of housed in your body, that kind of continues to inform how you go about your life and exist in the world." She spoke about her body's resistance to using a tampon and her intense anxiety surrounding kissing, dating, and

relationships with men or women, even though her "personal theology is now affirming." Joan was formally diagnosed with complex post-traumatic stress disorder, and said that it comes from "being traumatized being raised in a very Catholic household where we had to follow all of these rules all of the time and there is always someone ready to punish to you, if you didn't follow everything perfectly." She went on to say, "it becomes very traumatic because you're constantly denying that anything inside you could be real or true as to what the church is saying."

Lasting effects constitute "trauma"

At the point of being interviewed, most participants had begun a process of religious deconstruction and had rejected aspects of the teachings that they considered harmful. However, these participants still felt the effects of those teachings in their bodies and in their lives, which constituted the basis for them defining them as "traumatic." Gemma noted, even though she is:

> mentally past that, there's still this huge disconnect I find around sexuality, in particular, and things around sexuality, between how I think about them rationally and, like, what I believe to be true, and…on a gut level, I'm still very scared.

Teresa, who is in a committed relationship with her longtime girlfriend, talked about the "anxieties," "hypervigilance," and feelings of being "always on alert" that she felt in high school recently returning when she brought her girlfriend to a Catholic college where she was taking classes, and telling her girlfriend "don't touch me while we're here." Rebekah likened her trauma response to "programming," saying:

> there was something about my brain that both had the running ticker tape parade of what purity culture had tried to instill in me and my own value system

> constantly fighting against that. Yeah, and that's why I call it programming. If you have a thought that is not natural to you and does not match your values as you know them, it's definitely programming.

The Path to Healing

Although not explicitly included in the research questions, dialogue surrounding healing from this purity culture trauma came up in multiple interviews. Factors that contributed to healing included the importance of faith, the need to learn to trust one's own experience, and solidarity with others.

Personal Faith

Two participants spoke about how their perception of God has changed since beginning their journey of healing. Teresa spoke about developing

> a new theology that's less of an institutional God, and a God that is not only not tied to cisheteropatriarchy, but perhaps actively working against cisheteropatriarchy, and thinking what if God actually would be really disappointed if I didn't date [my girlfriend]?

Rebekah talked about her relationship with scripture, saying:

> how we talk and what kind of language we use to talk about biblical stories and about women who have been hurt and assaulted has been very freeing for me. It's like taking back the bible from what I was taught growing up.

For these two participants, reformulating their image of God and their reading of scripture has been foundational to their healing.

P8 talked about the resilience that her personal relationship with God gave to her, which she developed throughout childhood. She said, "I like who I am, and that's a direct

result of my relationship with God." She spoke about the importance of being "able to find God anywhere and everywhere," and knowing that "God is so much bigger than I was ever taught. Our religion was designed to meet everyone where they are at." Despite how religion has hurt her, she is able to find God in all places, and feels that her identity is tied up in her relationship God in a healthy way. She has been able to lean on this relationship with God as an aid in moving from a more toxic religion environment into a more freeing one. P5, on the other hand, spoke about the need to step back from her faith life and from going to church in order to create space for healing.

Learning to Trust Their Own Experience

P1 spoke of the importance of learning to accept and integrate her experience with her identity: "There's no need to kind of change your experience, its more about integration and acceptance." Gemma spoke about the need to "take a step back" from "letting the Catholic church tell me what sexuality is, and does, and needs to look like," and instead "letting myself dwell in possibilities" and knowing that "I need to give myself some space to be a human person and that God's okay with that." Teresa talked about coming to accept her relationship with her girlfriend:

> looking at all the varied fruits and growth and tenderness that has emerged from my relationship with [my girlfriend], and thinking, you know, trying to reformulate the ideal that was taught to me in Catholic high school, like what if the ideal for me is to love and be in a relationship exactly as I am?

Rebekah has been focusing on teaching her children to ask, "well what do you think about that message? Does it seem to fit for you? Does it fit your values?"

Solidarity With Others

When interviewees could find common ground with others, their healing process was deepened. Teresa talked about feeling like she was on the margins of the Church, but then coming to the realization that

> I'm not actually alone at all, and this liberative charism of Catholicism that I feel, that's actually just Catholicism. And a lot of people are living into that in ways far more radical than the way I live. So I kind of became okay with not having – with being on the margins, and then I realized that actually there is a home.

P5 spoke about connection with other Catholic women from her Catholic college who had gone through similar experiences:

> The witness from all those women from [college] has been so huge. They grew up in the same environment, they grew up with the same fear of hell hanging over them. If they can overcome that fear, I can. And truly truly truly, they have been their witness and their stories have been the single most influential thing in that regard because it's allowed me to see there's life on the other side.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

This study sought to fill a gap in existing research by diving into the experience that Catholic women have with purity culture teachings that they would define as traumatic. Participants were recruited who identified in an online interest survey that they were influenced by "purity culture," and that "purity culture" led to future experiences being subjectively "traumatic." Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted using a phenomenological framework, and results were analyzed by thematic analysis. Six themes were extracted from the interviews: a culture of silence around sex, the importance of purity, the role of gender, the ways that purity teachings maintain influence, defining the teachings as traumatic, and the path to healing. These findings support what has been found in previous studies that largely focus on the experience of evangelical women, and extends their relevance to women raised in Catholicism. This study supports the idea that purity culture can be experienced as "trauma," raising hope for the possibility of more widespread treatment of this phenomenon as trauma. For the eight participants who were interviewed, the culture of silence around sex coupled with the high value placed on purity, and the particular role given to women led to bodily effects and the inability to trust their own experience, and they would describe those effects as traumatic. The path to healing, while ongoing, has included reformulation their relationship with their faith, learning to trust their own experience, and solidarity with others.

Discussion of Findings

Much of previous literature discussing the traumatic nature of purity culture has come from non-academic sources such as memoirs and blogs (Brashers, 2022; Haberman, 2021; Klein, 2018l Stone, 2013; Swindle, 2017). This study supports the preliminary findings of previous research, reinforces anecdotal accounts of the experiences of purity culture, and extends the discussion to include women raised in a Catholic context.

The first theme that emerged from this study was a culture of silence around sex, including lack of sexual education, the creation of an insular community, and a lack of acknowledgment of sexual diversity. Purity culture goes hand-in-hand with abstinence-only education (Fahs, 2010), and interview participants noted that the lack of a basic sexual education directly impacted their ability to enjoy their sexuality safely and joyfully throughout their life. This limited sexual education affected not only comfort and openness to sexuality, but, for some participants, directly contributed to a lack of physical safety and increased the experience of confusion and shame.

The insular nature of the communities that these participants were raised in compounded the abstinence-only education that they received – not only were they not receiving a sexual education from their parents or school systems, everyone they interacted with had the same limited access to knowledge. This insular community and in/out group dynamic, a hallmark of high-control religion (Bilskey, 2013; Crocker, 2021), helped to keep study participants in line and in the dark about sexuality. Participants also noted that not only did the insularity enable and solidify the lack of education, it also contributed to a lack of safety by putting the needs and image of the community above the needs and safety of the victims.

Interview participants also noted the lack of education or acknowledgment of gender and sexual minorities, and attributed this lack of education to their delay in discovering their own identity and their ensuing distress and shame at this newfound identity. For more on the correlation between sexual minorities and suicidal ideation in Unspecified Christian and Catholic young adults, see Blosnich et al. (2020).

The second theme was the high value placed on purity, and its tie to a person's worth or value. Previously cited studies have included metaphors that paint vivid pictures of what happens to a woman when she "loses" her virginity, becomes impure, and is irrevocably changed: she becomes a spat upon Oreo, a used car, a dirty piece of tape, a used tissue, or water with food coloring, in which the tiniest drop changes all of the water forever (Klein, 2018; Gish, 2018; Wagner & Rehfuss, 2008). Likewise, two participants in this study used similarly striking metaphors: a chewed up piece of gum, a crinkled up napkin, or toothpaste that can never go back in the tube once squeezed out.

Interview responses also supported the idea that not only sex, but anything related to sex should be avoided, and that engaging in a sexual relationship before marriage is taking something away from one's future spouse (Gish, 2018). For participants, the decision to engage in sex or any remotely sexual activity, either before or in marriage, was more than a decision stemming from their own values and judgments. Instead, it touched on their worth as a person, their eternal future, and their potential for maximum holiness. Interviews confirmed that this high value placed on virginity and purity led to future sexual experiences being marked by guilt, shame, and fear, whether they were consensual or not (Klein, 2018; Fahs, 2010; Wagner & Rehfuss, 2008). This presence of

guilt, fear, and shame supports previous research that high-control religion uses guilt and fear as a means of control (Bilskey, 2013; Crocker, 2021).

The third theme encompassed the role of gender in purity culture teachings, which held a prominent role across interviews and included the belief that women should be submissive, an emphasis on modesty paired with the over-sexualization of girls, and the idea that women are responsible for being the gatekeepers of sexual purity. For interview participants, the emphasis on female submission led to a lack of a sense of bodily autonomy, which in turn caused them to accept, justify, and even take responsibility for their violent and coercive sexual experiences.

The role of gender, and particularly the emphasis placed on the particular role of women, is very prevalent in existing literature. Previous literature emphasizes the importance of modesty not only in dress, but also in speech, dress, and thoughts (Anderson, 2015; Claney et al., 2017; Field, 2016). Interview responses also supported the idea that women are more to blame for any sexual transgressions (Evert & Evert, 2011; Claney et al., 2020, Klement & Sagarin, 2016), and that therefore even a non-consensual encounter is at least partially the woman's fault (Klement & Sagarin, 2016; Owens et al., 2020). Interview participants reported that, in purity culture, women are the gatekeepers of sexual purity, and that therefore any crossing of the line, whether consensual or not, is seen as a failure of the woman to successfully hold that line. Findings also supported the idea that female pleasure and desire was dismissed or looked down at and therefore difficult for participants to access (Fahs, 2010; Mahoney, 2008), and it was widely accepted that sex is a male need and want that women merely comply with (Anderson, 2015; Claney et al., 2020; Darnall, 2017; Field, 2016; Gish, 2018).

The fourth theme centered around the lasting effects that participants found that purity culture had on their life even after ceasing participation in the environment that they were raised. The continued anxiety that participants felt around sex and dating echoed existing literature that suggested that women raised in a restrictive sexual environment like purity culture found future sexual experiences to be marked by shame, guilt, and fear (Klein, 2018; Fahs, 2010; Wagner & Rehfuss, 2008). Interview participants reported getting the message that their own experiences could not be trusted, that they needed to deny their intuition, that feelings did not tell the whole story, and that what authority was saying mattered more than what their own bodies were saying. This lack of trust in their own bodily experience recalled previous literature that showed women raised in purity culture have difficulty accessing their true "self" (Mahoney, 2008) and are unable to access their own thoughts, desires, and needs (Klein, 2018). Interviews also supported previous researched that showed that pelvic floor dysfunction and vaginismus could result from purity culture messaging (O'Donnell et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2021), with one participant describing difficulty with inserting a tampon, and another who engaged in pelvic floor physical therapy to heal her inner thigh dysfunction. Previous literature also suggested that women experienced nightmares, panic attacks, nausea, terror, fight or flight, or the compulsion to self-harm (Brashers, 2022; Klein, 2018; Wagner & Rehfuss, 2008) as the result of this harmful messaging. Interviews participants mentioned overlapping physical symptoms such as suicidal ideation, gender dysphoria, disordered eating, paranoia, and anxiety.

Participants also reported that the pain from the feeling that the Church, or Church leadership, had betrayed them and set them up for unsafety was at least as great as the

pain from the traumatic event. This can be seen as a form of betrayal trauma, which studies show is associated with greater mental and physical health difficulties than traumas that do not include betrayal, and increases anxiety, depression, dissociation, trauma-specific sexual symptoms, problematic sexual functioning, alexithymia, and physical health difficulties (Goldsmith et al., 2012; Smith & Freyd, 2013).

The fifth theme focused on the experience of identifying purity culture as "traumatic." For some participants, a background in purity culture led directly to what would standardly be described as a traumatic stressor, that is, "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence" (APA, 2022). These participants described experiences of physical or sexual abuse that they attributed to the purity culture environment. An event that fits this definition and would therefore qualify under the Criterion A for post-traumatic stress disorder is sometimes referred to as "Big 'T' Trauma" (Nicholas, 2022). This supports literature that suggests that certain types of religious messaging can encourage the victim to accept abuse without question (Bent-Goodley and Fowler, 2006).

For others, it was the environment and purity culture messaging itself that caused harm, not only specific traumatic experiences or specific teachings. While these participants did not have a specific traumatic stressor as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA, 2022), they would identify their own experiences as traumatic, and can point to the lasting impact of the "traumatic" teachings even beyond involvement in their religious community. Experiences such as these, which would not fit the technical definition for a traumatic stressor yet cause significant ongoing distress, are sometimes written about as "little 't' trauma" (Nicholas, 2022). This

supports studies that suggest that even in the absence of a traumatic stressor, people experience long-term exposure to certain types of messaging as traumatic (Stone, 2013).

In both groups, when identifying the experience of purity culture as "traumatic," participants described the lasting effects of their involvement as the thing that constitutes trauma. Whether or not their experiences included a traumatic stressor as defined by Criterion A, the effects were similar to a traumatic stress response in the diagnosis for post-traumatic stress disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (APA, 2022). Criteria B1, B4, and B5 intrusion symptoms can be seen in interview responses. Participants described avoiding both distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings and external reminders (Criteria C). Negative alterations in cognition and mood (Criteria D) are seen widely across interviews, particularly Criteria D2, D3 and D4. Criteria E is less apparent, especially for those who are further removed from the purity culture environment, but evidence of E1 and E3 can be found in some interviews. For all participants involved, the experience of purity culture as "traumatic" involved "impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning" that continued to exist "more than 1 month" after the traumatic incident has occurred (APA, 2022). Although they had deconstructed their experience and held different beliefs than the ones they were taught, even years later participants still find that feelings of fear and anxiety return for them even in the present day when they take actions or hold values that purity culture would not espouse. This finding is key, as stress responses which outlast the presence of the stressor is one of the hallmarks of traumatic experiences described in the clinical literature.

The symptoms described by participants do not map perfectly onto the criteria for PTSD, but there is enough overlap to justify further research into how exposure to messaging in the absence of a traumatic stressor can be experienced as trauma, and can even cause PTSD. The issue of what can clinically be defined as trauma remains relevant for clinicians and has implications for clinical treatment and insurance reimbursement. This research study, which supports the idea that symptoms of traumatic stress may arise even in the absence of what is technically defined as a traumatic stressor (Criterion A), may indicate that the current definition of "traumatic stressor" is limiting or even problematic to clinical treatment.

The final theme that emerged was the theme of healing. While this was not directly part of the interview questions, this section is perhaps the most relevant for future clinical direction. Participants shared that their personal belief system, learning to trust their own bodily experience, and solidarity with others who had been through similar ordeals have been immensely helpful to their healing process. Rather than wholly rejecting the faith that hurt them, some were able to re-imagine and re-integrate it into a new worldview that aligns with their current values system in a way that feels healing and supportive. Many participants also spoke about the healing nature of learning to trust themselves after leaving the purity culture environment, honing the ability to listen to and honor their own experience regardless of what others think or teach. Finally, those who were able to go from feeling alone in their experience to finding validation in the overlap with others' stories lent strength and conviction to the healing journey and helped them to more deeply identify with their own stories as they press forward toward wholeness. These can be seen as antidotes to what high-control religion and purity culture messaging

instill, namely an institutional and authoritative belief system, a lack of trust in one's own body and experiences, and growth in an isolated community that is pitted against anyone who is different.

Connection to Theory

The results of this study support the relevance of Hill's ABCX Theory of Stress (Price et al., 2010) discussed previously in this paper. Participants defined the stressor (A) as the purity messaging that either compounded a traumatic experience or created the totality of the traumatic experience for them. They also spoke about identifiable resources, such as their faith in God, the church, leadership, and their parents, which once would have been a source of strength, being shattered or diminished by their experiences and becoming instead a conduit of pain and brokenness (B). Additionally, the meaning given to the stressor was that a person's purity affected their worth as a person, and that their identity was diminished due to voluntary or involuntary "impure" experiences (C). These three components interacted with one another to produce a stress response (X) that was described as traumatic for these eight participants.

Preliminary Implications for Clinical Practice

While research is still in its nascency, some insights can be gleaned from this study that might be useful in clinical practice. First, clinicians should accept clients' own definitions of trauma, and take purity culture messaging seriously whether or not accompanied by a traumatic stressor. This approach becomes complicated as an official diagnosis is needed for insurance purposes when treating a client, and calls into question the usefulness of treating based on a diagnosis as opposed to symptoms (Timimi, 2015). At the same time, it is important to honor clients own lived experiences, and it may be

useful to use trauma-specific therapeutic modalities and techniques to help clients improve symptoms.

Clients raised in such a sheltered environment may find it useful to spend time on education with their therapists around sex and sexuality, female pleasure, and LGBTQ topics. This could occur in session or could entail the therapist recommending books or other resources to a client. If a couple presents for treatment, it would be useful to include both partners in this education, regardless of whether or not the partner was raised in a similar environment.

Clients in therapy may benefit from a strong emphasis on identity, particularly in receiving support to form their own identity independent apart from the authoritative religious community. This might include narrative techniques and identity exploration exercises, and permission to go out of the bounds of what clients have been taught as part of the journey of self-discovery. As part of this identity exploration, therapy can also support clients as they begin reformulating their own belief systems and reconnect with aspects of their faith that might still be lifegiving. This may include collaboration with faith leaders in the community or encouragement to visit religious communities that are different than the one that they were raised in.

Therapists may find it helpful to incorporate somatic techniques in the therapy process to help clients connect with and trust their own bodily experiences. Especially for clients who report feeling disconnected from their bodies, their experiences, or pleasure, increasing trust in and connection with the body will be crucial. Ultimately, increasing a client's identification with and trust in their own intuition will be paramount to their healing.

Finally, for those who feel isolated in their experience, anything that helps connect them to those who have gone through something similar will be fruitful. This might encompass sharing accounts of similar stories, encouraging clients to seek out social media groups or message boards where people are sharing overlapping experiences, or helping them make a plan to reach out to people from their own community who might be feeling something similar. They might also benefit from a support group or group therapy, or even a more intensive retreat experience to connect and process as a group.

Study Limitations and Future Research

The generalizability of these findings are limited in a number of ways. Though many meaningful insights can be gleaned from the stories of these women, the sample size of eight is not large enough to draw any universal conclusions. Racial demographics were not collected and were excluded from maximum variation sampling, which limits our ability to understand how various racial and ethnic identities may affect the findings.

Despite these limitations, these findings highlight the validity of associating symptoms of traumatic stress with purity culture messaging and provide the basis for a need for future study of Catholic women on this topic. While this study focused on the experience of women who had been raised in purity culture, more research could focus on whether there is a generational effect of purity culture, or what the experience of the children of these women is in relation to purity culture and sexuality. Future studies could include more participants by using a mixed-methods approach, and use a trauma symptoms scale to see if purity cultures symptoms align with typical trauma responses. The impact of identifying as a sexual or gender minority on perceived trauma also

deserved to be researched more thoroughly. Future research may also benefit from including people who had similar experiences to those interviewed but did not find them traumatic in order to see what differentiates either the people or the experiences in each case.

In order to be useful clinically and support victims on the road to healing, future research could dive more specifically into how these experiences are related to different mental health symptoms (such as anxiety or depression), and could focus on which modalities of therapy are most helpful in treating this particular type of trauma. Finally, research focused on the healing process after leaving a purity culture environment could be useful in helping victims on their path of healing, and potentially be informative to religious communities who seek to teach in a way that minimizes trauma. Ideally this research and future research can aid therapists, clergy, and other helping professionals in treating women with the experience of purity culture trauma, and can offer strength and comfort to women who have had this experience, who can now know that they are not alone.

Appendix A

Screening Survey Questions

Question	Must answer
1. Do you currently identify as Catholic?	Yes *OR* Yes to *Question 2*
2. If you were raised Catholic and no longer identify as Catholic, would you say that your Catholic upbringing influenced your understanding of sexuality/sexual experiences?	Yes *OR* Yes to *Question 1*
3. Would you say that "purity culture" influenced your understanding of sexuality/sexual experiences?	Yes
4. Would you, or have you ever, used the word "trauma" or "traumatic" to describe the impacts that purity culture had on you?	Yes
5. If there is anything else that you would like me to know, feel free to share it here.	N/A

Appendix B

Interview Guide

1.	What were you taught about sexuality growing up? Follow up: - What different messages did you hear from your parents/faith community/friends? - Which messages did you most internalize?
2.	What does "purity culture" mean to you? Do you think that fits with what you were taught?
3.	Tell me a little bit about your sexual experiences - not necessarily all of them, but whichever are significant for you. Follow up: - How did your beliefs about sexuality and the messages that you internalized influence those experiences?
4.	In the initial questionnaire that you took, you marked the box that said you would use the word "trauma" to describe the impact purity culture had on your sexual experiences. Can you tell me more about what you meant by that? Follow up: - What does "trauma" mean to you?

	- Can you say more about the connection that you see between your understanding of “purity culture” and “trauma”?
5.	Is there anything else that you want to share with me before we finish our conversation?

Table 1

Demographics of Interview Participants

Participant ID*	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation	Relationship status	Religion raised in	Current religious identity
P1	25	Woman/ Female	Bisexual	Single (never married)	Christian – Roman Catholic	Christian – Roman Catholic
Gemma	23	Other - Genderqueer	Gay or lesbian	Single (never married)	Christian – Roman Catholic	Christian – Roman Catholic
Teresa	25	Woman/ Female	Bisexual	In a serious relationship, not living together	Christian – Roman Catholic	Christian – Roman Catholic
Joan	29	Woman/ Female	Bisexual	Living with a partner	Christian – Roman Catholic	Other
P5	37	Woman/ Female	Heterosexual/straight	Married	Christian – Roman Catholic	Agnostic
P6	43	Woman/ Female	Heterosexual/straight	Divorced	Christian - Protestant	Christian – Roman Catholic

Rebekah	50	Woman/ Female	Heterosexu al/straight	Married	Christian – Roman Catholic	Christian – Roman Catholic
P8	30	Other – they/she	Other – bisexual/ asexual/ aromantic	Single (never married)	Christian – Roman Catholic	Christian – Roman Catholic

*****Interview participants were given the choice to self-identify with a chosen pseudonym as an alternative to being assigned a participant number.

Table 2

Identified Themes

Theme	Subtheme(s)
Theme 1: Culture of silence around sex	Limited sexual education Insular community Cisheteronormativity
Theme 2: Importance of purity	Purity is tied to value Consequences of crossing the line
Theme 3: The importance of gender	Clear difference in male and female roles Women should be submissive Modesty and over-sexualization Women are the gatekeepers of sexual purity
Theme 4: Effects of purity culture	Anxiety around sex and dating Lack of trust in own bodily experience Physical symptoms Feelings as though God/the Church has failed them
Theme 5: The "trauma" of purity culture	Purity teachings led to physical/sexual abuse Purity culture messaging itself is "traumatic" Lasting effects constitute "trauma"

Theme 6: Healing	Personal faith Learning to trust their own experience Solidarity with others

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