Silenced Desire:
Personal Effects of the Evangelical Construction of Female Sexuality

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Abstract

Religious North Americans, and evangelical Christians in particular, have historically held a strong moral stance against pornography, masturbation, and pre-marital sexual intercourse, all of which are said to violate God's design for sex to be limited to heterosexual marriage. Although awareness of female sexuality is growing among evangelicals, a cyclical relationship of naivete produced by silence has perpetuated ignorance of sexual behaviors being practiced by females at rates similar to males. Drawing on script theory from symbolic interactionism, this article considers the psychological implications of the evangelical construction of female sexuality on the individual as she navigates her sexual development. Findings suggest that religious messages and attitudes regarding female sexuality have induced physical trauma, fear, guilt, and body and sexual shame, thus producing an impaired sense of self while diminishing sexual pleasure, and increasing feelings of separation and alienation from God.

Keywords: female sexuality, evangelicalism, psychological distress, sexual social scripts, social construction of sexuality

"It is in our bodies that we lose or begin our freedom,
in our bodies that we accept or end our slavery."
(Le Guin 2016:428)

Holding firmly to the belief that sex is a gift from God intended to be enjoyed only within heterosexual union, evangelical Christians have long maintained that sexual desires must be restrained to preserve a person's purity until marriage. To promote this belief as practice, they have in the last generation generated a purity culture focused on restraining both their

non-married males and females from any sexual expression. But purity culture impacts males and females differently. An analysis of the evangelical purity culture reveals that it cannot prevent female sexual desire; it can only silence it. While the purity ethic may be admirable and even biblical, purity culture has not significantly altered rates of sexual behavior compared to non-evangelicals, and the deep, tormenting, personal costs of that sub-cultural pressure on those faithful females are only now coming to light.

The silence around female sexuality fails to acknowledge the feelings, thoughts, and desires that arise during a female's physical maturation. Intentionally left sexually uneducated, female evangelical youths are disempowered to exercise their own individual agency. Furthermore, the limited and pejorative language about sexuality that exists in the evangelical church negatively impacts the perception many females have of their bodies and desires, inducing trauma, shame, and isolation, impacting their relationship with their future sexual partners, and ultimately, with God. An analysis of the North American evangelical construction of female sexuality reveals the high propensity of religion to induce psychological distress among Christian women who watch pornography, masturbate, and engage in premarital sexual relations. This is most pronounced in conservative evangelical circles which teach gender "complementarity," more accurately termed gender hierarchy, in contrast to progressive evangelicals, or Christians more generally.

Definitions and Theoretical Perspectives

For this analysis, sexuality will be understood as "an individual's sense of his or her own sexual desires, orientations, and preferences" (Schultz, Lavenda, and Dods 2015:114). It includes thoughts, fantasies, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles, and relationships. Sexual desire is a combination of objective physical responses and subjective psychological/emotional responses to some internal or external stimulus. Notably, while sexual activity is a privatized exchange between the individuals involved, "the sexual encounter remains a profoundly social act in its enactment, and even more so in its antecedents and consequences" (Simon and Gagnon 2003:492).

Sexuality has traditionally been viewed as the most natural of all human inclinations (Jackson and Scott 2010). Historically, the primary understanding of sexuality was rooted in biological determinism that posited sexual desire as an overpowering, instinctual drive (Stein 1989), "a kind of natural force that exists in opposition to civilization, culture, or society" (Parker 2009:253). This dominant belief framed human sexuality as a by-product of some underlying reality that functions as either a biological or psychological imperative. However, throughout the twentieth century, the "naturalness" of all human experience was increasingly questioned. Most critical thinkers today view gender and sexuality as socially constructed

realities learned, internalized, and reinforced through socialization, rather than as natural phenomena.

The theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism explores sexuality by examining the symbols, meanings, and interactions attached to sexual behaviors. While the individual retains a degree of agency, the social construction of reality impacts their perception through social experiences, contexts, and relationships (Sandstrom et al. 2014). Interactionists John Gagnon and William Simon proposed sexual script theory as an explanation of sexuality. Dissatisfied with the Kinsey Institute's model of understanding sexuality as instinctual, biological, mammalian behavior, they perceived it to be fundamentally social. As a social construction, sexuality consists of three distinct elements working together: "the agentic individual, the interactional situation, and the surrounding sociocultural order" (Jackson and Scott 2010:815), and thus is experienced at the intrapsychic, interpersonal, and cultural levels. Hence, sexual scripts are learned guidelines for sexual expression that provide individuals with a sense of appropriate sexual desires and behaviors for their culture, in other words, the social norms of when, where, with whom, why, and how it is appropriate to feel sexual desire, and express or enact it (Kimmel 2007).

The Western sex script socializes men to demonstrate high levels of desire and to initiate sexual activity (Murray 2018; Wiederman 2005). The evangelical sex script mandates that sexual behaviors, if not sexual desires themselves, are to be controlled and even denied so as to preserve purity prior to marriage, especially for females, because abstaining from sexual behaviors is often the measure of one's spirituality. While accepting and normalizing male sexual desire, the evangelical church has shrouded female sexuality in silence (Dykas 2018), neglecting to acknowledge, much less educate females about their own natural physical development, including the development of their sexual desires. The evangelical sex script therefore functions as social control over the individual agency of especially females (Joo 2015; Klein 2018). Persistent disjunct between socialized beliefs and actual practices produces a moral incongruence which is empirically predictive of an individual's perception of their behavior as addictive or compulsive, and productive of a unique anxiety and shame (Perry 2018; Grubbs et al. 2019; Brand et al. 2019; Grubbs et al. 2015).

Tina Schermer Sellers dedicates her research to understanding sexual development, with the goal of helping free people from sexual shame. She explains how shame develops around one's sexuality at a young age as a by-product of adult reactions (Sellers 2019). For example, when a parent reprimands two playmates for touching and exploring each other's genitals, the parent's reaction profoundly impacts the children's understanding of themselves as sexual beings, inducing guilt and shame. Scolding followed by silence produces shame, and failure to understand of the emerging self. Talk about sex needs to be normalized to foster a safe place which allows children to grow up feeling "safe, healthy, and secure in their own bodies." Sellers' book, *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church: Erasing Shame from Sexual*

Intimacy (2017), speculates how evangelical silence about sexuality produces harmful consequences. Even in the broader, secular, sex-saturated culture that values openness, "most young people remain unable to discuss sexuality freely with their parents" (Jackson 2007:12). For conservative evangelical females to be kept an uninformed object of desire is to leave them with no agency to navigate the subtleties and vagaries of consent other than to self-objectify and fortify their own bodies. Meanwhile, healthy sexuality requires the experience of being both the object and subject of desire.

The Evangelical Construction of Female Sexuality

Sexuality in the Bible

The best way to understand sexuality is to analyze it within particular cultural, linguistic, and ideological discourses (Stockton 2017). Because religious groups constitute communities of such discourse and function as authoritative agents of socialization, they hold immense power to influence societal attitudes: religion can be "a potent gatekeeper of sexual attitudes and behaviors" (Murray, Ciarrocchi, and Murray-Swank 2007:222). One central message instilled in traditional evangelical discourse is that sexual activity is only acceptable between married heterosexual individuals. Understanding this evangelical construction of sexuality must begin by examining sexuality in the historical context of the Hebrew Bible.

In the Deuteronomic era, cultural understandings of female purity were rooted in their patriarchal socio-economic system. The ancient Hebrew culture viewed marriages as contractual, consisting of the bride's price, familial connections, and paternity rights (Matas 2013). Virginity was a security measure that ensured a proper and respectable marriage, plus financial security for young women. The patriarchal family structure regulated female sexuality under a property code, wherein family structure was intrinsically linked to economic systems of private property ownership (Reimer 2016:34). A daughter was therefore considered her father's property until she was acquired by her husband in the marriage covenant. Consequently, female virginity was not a matter of the individual female alone, but also a reflection of the men responsible for "her behavior and her virginity" (Matas 2013:37). While this culture emphasized the virginity of women before marriage, men were free to have multiple wives and concubines, thus indicating how the sexual double standard has long historical roots. The construction of female sexuality is deeply rooted in a patriarchal society that diminished female agency by creating a system in which they were owned and protected by men. The current conservative evangelical conceptualization of female sexuality and its resultant purity culture is to a large extent simply a vestige of Old Testament patriarchy.

Whereas the Old Testament conceived of the marriage covenant as two people becoming one flesh (Gen 2:24), New Testament discourse shifted focus to the evils of the flesh. Sexual desire was deemed to be a "lust of the flesh" that could get in the way of spirituality

even within the context of marriage (1 John 2:16; 1 Cor. 7:3-5). Early church formulations construed a dualistic disjunction between body and spirit (cited in Murray et al. 2007), creating a negative view of sexuality, and framing sexual desires as something to be controlled (Davidson, Darling, and Norton 1995). For example, St. Jerome believed a husband was guilty of adultery for engaging in unrestrained sexual passion with his wife. St. Augustine was convinced that sexual intercourse was a form of animal lust that should be tolerated only for reproductive purposes. Thus, celibacy was "held to be the highest spiritual state," and women were essentially labelled as "sexual temptresses for men" (Davidson et al. 1995:235).

Contemporary Purity Culture

Ancient Hebrew sexuality was "family-centered and procreation-driven," while biblical sexuality overall is "person-centered and relationship-driven," both being "other-centered and meaning-driven" (Hiebert 2013:151). But with the sexual revolution of the 1960s, Western sexuality became "body-centered and pleasure-driven," and beyond the bounds of marriage. Threatened by this cultural shift, evangelicalism fought back to protect the sacredness of sex, as it conceptualized sex. On one hand, popular culture now promotes no-strings-attached sex, while on the other, evangelical culture faithfully seeks to protect sex until marriage. "Our obsession with restraining sexual expression has led to the sex-obsessed culture of chastity" (Fahs 2010). However, and ironically, the sex-obsessed culture of chastity over-emphasizes sexual purity while it fails to educate young adolescents about their sexuality, thus creating a vicious cycle of silence and suppression of sexual desires. Recent research is revealing how religion has a high propensity to lead to psychological fragmentation and to induce emotional distress. First and foremost, it is essential to set the stage by understanding the messages profoundly embedded in the evangelical sex script.

Samantha Pugsley (2020) recalls her experience of saving herself until marriage. "For more than a decade, I wore my virginity like a badge of honor." However, once she got married, "my virginity had become such an essential part of my personality that I didn't know who I was without it." Along with many other females raised in the evangelical community, Pugsley developed a faulty perception of herself as an asexual being to the point of feeling like a stranger in their own skin. As both sexuality and spirituality are crucial aspects of humanity, when either is neglected or suppressed, human incompleteness ensues (MacKnee 2002). Sexuality is longing for completion in the other; spirituality is longing for completion in the holy, wholly Other (Hiebert 2013). The evangelical sexual script unintentionally hinders achieving human completeness by separating sexuality from spirituality to the extent that its members develop the idea that it is one or the other (Murray et al. 2007; Klein 2018; Mahoney 2008). Furthermore, it views female sexuality as all about virginity. Consequently, females pursue virginity as an integral piece of their faith to the extent it often consumes their identity.

As previously discussed, it is vital to examine the discourse of sexuality in its specific context – in this case, the evangelical subculture. While evangelicals believe that sex is God's gift to humanity, any sexual thought, feeling, or behavior is labeled with language laden with negative connotations. Janice Irvine argues, "Conservatives have used volatile sexual rhetoric – rhetoric that…is often misleading and sometimes deceptive – in order to build a movement, capture the terms of public debate, and re-shape the sexual culture according to their own vision" (cited in Fahs 2010:118). Evangelicals therefore often equate sexual desire with temptation, struggle, and sin.

Christian organizations such as Proven Men Ministries, Pure Life Ministries, or Pureheart Ministries depict sexual desires as a battle that must be won, a constant struggle to find freedom. Some Christian discourse communicates the idea that sexuality is "nature's strongest competitor" against one's loyalty to Christ (Joo 2015:3942). This language purports that one's spirituality and relationship with God can be measured by ability to exercise self-control over sexual desires. The purity industry has given many adolescents the impression that sexual abstinence before marriage was "the way" for them to live their faith (Klein 2018:23). Additionally, there are endless notions of sex as dirty or contaminating, unless enjoyed in the context of marriage, where it then becomes beautiful, enjoyable, and a gift from God (Fahs 2010). However, there is a growing understanding of how this rhetoric has fractured relationships with God when individuals have failed to live up to "God's standards" of sexual purity.

A fundamental concept of the purity culture is delayed gratification. Essentially, adolescent years are marked by pursuing a lifestyle of sexual abstinence. However, "waiting" is only "temporary" until marriage, when it is acceptable to enjoy the beautiful gift of sex. Katelyn Beaty argues that the purity culture adopted the prosperity gospel to communicate that God will "reward pre-marital chastity with a good Christian spouse, great sex, and perpetual marital fulfillment" (2019). Unfortunately, this eventually creates a cycle of greed and guilt , believing that obedience is a means to a greater rewarding end. The teaching follows the "if/then" formula – if you do this, then you will be rewarded with that. Joshua Harris, known for the bestseller *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (1997), communicated the ideology that the reward of sexual purity is a happily-ever-after ending with a great marriage and a great sex life (McCammon 2018). However, twenty years later, in a TEDx Talk titled "Strong Enough to be Wrong," Harris (2017) humbly acknowledged the hurt and damage from his book. Amid his zealous faith at the age of 21, Harris wrote his book as a radical call to Christians who wanted to take their faith seriously, and the way to do so was by avoiding any situation that would lead to sexual sin. Harris's recent TEDx Talk is a clear illustration of how the previously held beliefs about purity culture are under serious re-consideration. The sexual prosperity gospel promised great sex in marriage, however, when individuals engaged in marital sex, it failed to meet their lofty expectations. Furthermore, it called into question Christian theology and ultimately

questioned the very goodness and faithfulness of God. On a personal level, it created a negative self-image and self-concept, because individuals began to question what is wrong with them that causes them not to receive the full benefits of waiting for marriage.

Some of the practices within the purity culture include purity balls, celibacy pledges, and abstinence clubs. While these practices are not exclusive to females, Fahs (2010) observed the overwhelmingly focus on appealing to the female audience. Eve Ensler criticized purity culture's emphasis on the role of the father in guarding his daughter's purity while the mother remains in the background (cited in Fahs 2010). For example, father-daughter pairs attend purity balls, and part of the ceremony involves the father signing the pledge to protect and guard his daughter's purity. This purity practice reflects the Old Testament practices of patriarchy wherein females belong to men. Fahs argued that purity culture is very oppressive of a woman's body, and reinforces the idea that her body is sexual property in a patriarchal system, guarded by her father until transferred to her husband. This ideology socializes young girls to believe that they are both powerless to defend their virginity and yet will be found guilty if they give in to sexual temptation, and furthermore will be blamed for being a stumbling block for boys (Matas 2013; Klein 2018). This system ultimately undercuts the development of young women's moral agency (Gushee 2020). It further diminishes feelings of self-competence and capability, thus degrading female self-conception.

One of the major fallouts of the conservative evangelical purity movement is that the best talk about sex is no talk about sex (Joo 2015). Purity culture aligns closely with the political and religious right, and one of its most notable efforts was implementing abstinence-only sex education (Fahs 2010). Mary Ott and John Santelli's (2007) study of the effectiveness of the abstinence-only education program revealed the possible harm resulting from medical inaccuracies and withholding health information. Essentially, this form of education assumes that adolescents will adhere to the expectation of waiting until marriage, while failing to educate and inform students on how to make wise choices if they do choose to engage in non-marital sexual relations (Ott and Santelli 2007). These programs typically withheld information on contraception and condom use, and were supported by arguments containing medical inaccuracies. Ott and Santelli reported a review conducted on the abstinence-only curricula which discovered that "11 of the 13 commonly-used curricula contained false, misleading or distorted information about reproductive health, including inaccurate information about condom and other contraceptive effectiveness" (2007:6). Carly Matas (2013) argued that the more beneficial and educational approach is to teach young people accurate knowledge about their sexuality, teach them safe sex practices, and allow them to be agentic individuals in making decisions about how they want to explore their sexuality. In sum, this method of sex education is not successful in preventing sexual intercourse, and it fails to educate students in safe sex practices. Thus, as the evangelical sex script seeks to maintain its beliefs about

sexuality, it restricts informed individual agency by pre-determining that adolescents must wait until marriage.

The evangelical discourse on sexuality in general – "a fight against the flesh" – depicts it with negative connotations. The conservative evangelical subculture also constructs a worldview that "promotes gender essentialism and a sharp divide between the construction of masculinity and femininity" (Fahs 2010:120) that includes a great divide in the portrayal of male versus female sexuality. The purity culture frames men as essentially sexual pigs, while portraying women as desiring only an emotional connection. The sex script defines men as easily sexually stimulated and constantly desiring sex (DeRogatis 2005). "Sex for women is emotional [but] for 'normal' men it is simply physical" (DeRogatis 2005:127), or in the famous words of Billy Crystal, "Women need a reason to have sex. Men just need a place." While the focus here is on female sexuality, it is important to acknowledge that the evangelical sex script also has negative implications for the conception of male sexuality. In one Q&A column on a True Love Waits website, a male wrote, "You make guys sound like real jerks, out to get what they can, however they can," to which the columnist responded, "That's not always true, but it fits for lots of guys. Many males see having sex as a chance to score and that's all, while most girls see it as an expression of love and commitment" (cited in Fahs 2010:120). Evangelical messages accept and normalize male sexuality as justifying their actions because "their libidos are natural" (Edger 2010:168). Furthermore, this ideology depicts men as incapable of controlling their sexual urges. Thus, Christian resources focused on providing help for sexual sin are aimed primarily at men (Perry 2018).

The worldview that creates a naturally dichotomous relationship between boys and girls creates narrow, limiting categories for how each gender should approach sexuality. The sexual double standard further praises and rewards males for being sexually active, whereas females are stigmatized for similar behaviors (Kreager and Staff 2009). Furthermore, the language of "pure" to measure one's sexual abstinence results in females feeling labeled as "impure" and "tarnished" when they are sexually active, whereas males are not (Fahs 2010:118). This view of females as emotional beings in constant pursuit of love and emotional intimacy results in silencing their sexual desire. As a result, in intrapsychic processing, females encounter difficulties as they attempt to navigate their sexual desires that are predominantly portrayed only in terms of male sexuality. While women not only struggle with the same sexual sin as men, they also struggle with it in silence, feeling even more isolated and alone.

Prevalence of Female Sexual Practices

Use of Pornography

Because the evangelical church has normalized men struggling with sexual desire, their resources and organizations that aim to help individuals find freedom from sexual struggles primarily target males. It also assumes that men are more visually stimulated than women, therefore erotic images presumably stimulate a more robust response in men than women. However, over the last decade, there has been an increasing awareness that strong sexual desire and visual stimulation is not gender exclusive. A study by Ekaterina Mitricheva et al. challenged common assumptions by presenting empirical evidence, based on measurable biological dimensions, that both men and women show "increased activation in many cortical and subcortical brain regions thought to be involved in response to visual sexual stimuli" (2019:15671). This finding suggests that females experience sexual arousal at similar levels as males in response to viewing sexual images. Ellen Dykas (2018) argues that the evangelical church has developed blind spots that fail to recognize that men are not alone in their sexual appetites; women are also affected and impacted by sexual struggles, including the use of pornography.

Jessica Harris is the founder of Beggar's Daughter, an organization for females struggling with pornography, conceived out of her own personal struggle as a female. Harris shares a story of when she was caught watching porn, and she was told "we know this isn't you. Women just don't have this problem." While it cannot be generalized that every church, Christian organization, and church leader would respond similarly, the unspoken reality is that Christian organizations are generally naïve to female sexual desires.

Historically, the general assumption has been that men view pornography far more than women. However, Pornhub's *2019 Year in Review* indicated that females were 32% of all users (Pornhub 2019). Significantly, the Barna Group had already documented earlier in 2016 that 33% of practicing Christian teen and young adult females reported using porn daily, weekly, or monthly, compared to 67% of practicing Christian teen and young adult males (Barna 2016). Females are indeed pursuing sexual pleasure visually at much higher rates than generally assumed, no doubt facilitated by the advancements in technology which have made porn more "accessible, affordable, and anonymous" (Perry 2018:371). The evangelical church still seems mostly oblivious to it, much less willing to help females with their sexual indulgences.

Masturbation

Although watching pornography and masturbating are two separate acts, pornography is a powerful stimulant for masturbation. Samuel Perry (2019) found that very few evangelicals report viewing pornography without it leading to masturbation. Contrarily, more individuals masturbate without pornography. The evangelical church holds a strong moral stance against

pornography, as it "violates direct commands against non-marital sexual desire, encouraging solo masturbation at best and, at worst, addicting viewers and catalyzing pedophilia, homosexuality, bestiality, and rape throughout whole societies" (Perry 2018:369). But historically, masturbation has been a more debatable topic. For many contemporary Christian ethicists, masturbation is an acceptable means of self-control when used in moderation (Sanford 1994). However, within evangelical theology, the sexual script prescribes that the only morally legitimate and appropriate time for sexual orgasm is between two heterosexually married adults (McFarland et al. 2011; Perry 2019). Therefore, solo masturbation represents a deviation from the expected standard for sexual behavior.

Some argue that the behavior of masturbation itself is not inherently sinful, but it can become sinful because of its meaning, context, and consequence. One of the meanings constructed in the evangelical community is that women only masturbate because they want to fill a void, or because they have attachment issues (Monge 2014). In other words, female masturbation is implicitly linked to coping with emotional issues, which disregards the possibility that women may masturbate for simple sexual pleasure or to relieve sexual tension, as men are said to do. Regardless, less critical attention is given to masturbation than to pornography because pornography is easier to restrict and regulate than masturbation (Perry 2019), and because masturbation does not necessarily involve second or third parties in the private moment of sexual expression.

While there are many studies on pornography and the consequences of viewing or using it, the topic of masturbation has received considerably less attention, especially in relationship to religion. Jordan Monge (2014) states that, while there is some awareness of female masturbation, the practice is mostly discussed with reference to males, and hence carries an extra level of social stigma for females. Consequently, while masturbation is a common sexual activity among females, they are subject to both more silence about it, and harsher judgment for practicing it, due to the moral double standard applied to it.

Pre-marital Sexual Encounters

Ambiguity surrounds sex, from determining what constitutes a sexual encounter to its meanings as "an expression of intimacy, a route to physical pleasure, or a sacred part of marriage" (Carpenter 2001). The evangelical subculture emphasizes the latter as the critical meaning of sexual intercourse. To remain a technical virgin, many young individuals engage in alternative activities such as oral sex and genital massage as substitutes for penetrative sex (Bersamin et al. 2005). The National Survey of Family Growth 2015 revealed that among evangelical Protestants, 65% of both females and males reported having premarital sexual intercourse (Ayers 2019), and many females who have taken purity vows are nevertheless sexually active before marriage (Bersamin et al. 2005).

David Ayers (2019) observes that many spiritual leaders, educators, and parents in the evangelical world do not grasp the extent of premarital sexual activity among unmarried young people. The reality is that many young evangelical females are viewing pornography, masturbating, and engaging in non-marital sexual relations. By turning a blind eye toward the prevalence of these non-marital sexual activities, the church has created a culture of silence and ignorance that leaves young women to their own devices to figure out their sexuality. Unbeknownst to them, engaging in these prohibited practices can induce psychological distress that impacts their perception of self, their belief system, and their faith in God.

Coping with Incongruence between Beliefs and Behaviors

Individuals raised in conservative North American evangelical faith communities find themselves in a belief system that opposes their cultural context. Despite these communities withholding outside information from their members and "sheltering them from the world," adolescents are nevertheless exposed to alternative social realities of sexuality outside their Christian worldview, whether via sex education in schools, their peers, or the internet (Klein 2018). It is crucial to note that moral beliefs implemented by one's faith community "reflect group membership more than they reflect private behaviors" (Perry 2018:371). That said, discrepancy between individual beliefs and behaviors constitutes not just cognitive dissonance, but moral incongruence (Perry 2018). Research studies increasingly find that moralistic influences such as religious beliefs play a crucial role in how someone interprets their behaviors, and moral incongruence can induce profound guilt, anxiety, and shame around practicing the condemned behavior (Grubbs et al. 2015, Abramowitz et al. 2002, Perry 2018). For example, belonging to a religious community with a strong moral stance against pornography can lead to "pathological interpretations" (Grubbs et al. 2015:127) of behaviors that are deemed "normal" in the secular context. Despite its rigid beliefs which seek to preserve sex for the marriage union, the evangelical sex script fails to prevent many individuals from viewing pornography, masturbating, or sexual activity with another person.

How then do these individuals cope when they engage in behaviors that confront sexual purity? Petra Blum's (2015) research explores how the internalization of religious messages about female sexuality impacts an individual's self-concept sexually, psychologically, and spiritually. Based on interviews with eleven women raised in evangelicalism, the findings reveal multifaceted trauma due to their religious sexual socialization, creating "identity conflicts, shame, self-blame, self-objectification, sexual and relationship problems with men, spiritual and sexual conflicts, and affect dysregulation" (Blum 2015:iii). Similarly, in her book, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free*, Linda Klein (2018) interviewed females raised in the evangelical purity movement and documented the harmful effects of this worldview on sexuality, creating significant trauma and shame

around females' bodies while impacting their own self-concept. Although the interview case study approach used to collect these data cannot be generalized to the rates at which these effects occur in the general population, these data do reveal the process when such effects do occur. Along with other research, these two studies indicate three common coping mechanisms used to deal with incongruence: 1) suppression and denial; 2) isolation and living a compartmentalized life; and 3) self-blame – an impaired sense of self.

Denial of the Sexual Self: Suppression and Repression

A fundamental concept of evangelical doctrine depicts the flesh as worldly and sinful, followed by Paul's exhortation to "flee sexual immorality" (1 Cor. 6:18) which suggests the need to suppress or repress sexual desires. Suppression constitutes deliberately blocking or denying a desire, while repression is doing so unconsciously (Cherry 2021). The sexual stories of many females indicate that both suppression and repression occur as defense mechanisms. In some cases, they consciously, intentionally try to "flee sexual temptation," and in others they unconsciously block their sexual thoughts (Sellers 2017; Blum 2015). Klein (2018) shares her own story of when she broke up with her boyfriend because she felt sexually aroused, and justified the break-up as therefore God's will. Her feelings of guilt and shame about arousal caused her to eliminate its relational source. Marlene Winell (2013) shares a similar story about tremendous guilt in discovering her sexuality, leading her to also believe that God wanted her to break up with her boyfriend. In other words, to avoid incongruence between behaviors and beliefs, women suppress their sexual selves to ensure that they are upholding the sexual script they have internalized. The sexual and non-sexual self are consequently effectively severed. Those females who fail to do so are labelled "damaged goods" (Anderson 2015). Klein also shares how she too felt when "turned on" for the first time, horrified by wondering "have I turned into a slut? I feel dirty and worthless" (2018:6).

By citing Jesus saying "everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt 5:28), the purity movement communicates that engaging in sexual activity is not even the problem, desire itself is. The problem here is the conflation of lust with sexual desire, because lust is desire out of control, just as rage is anger out of control. Just as we can be angry without sinning (Eph 4:26), so too we can desire without sinning, but when desire is out of control, it becomes sinful lust.

Regardless, for purity culture, living for God is equated with radically fleeing all sexual desire. The conservative evangelical subculture socializes its members to suppress their natural desires to the point of an unconscious denial of their sexual self. But whether the denial is conscious or even unconscious, the fundamental fact is that females raised in the evangelical community align with their belief system by denying their sexual self. For example, Blum (2015) shares that some women report simply not talking with their peers about any sexual experience or feeling as a way of suppressing or denying it. Of course, by females not talking about their

sexuality, it further reinforces the culture of silence about their sexuality. In sum, females never learn about their own bodies; they never truly know themselves in human completeness. The internalization of "dirty," "impure," "damaged goods," and other stigmatic labels illustrates how this worldview micro-manages their self-concept as a sexual being.

Living an Isolated, Compartmentalized Life

Evangelical judgmental perceptions of non-marital sexual behaviors subsequently result in isolated and compartmentalized lives of secrecy, lying, and disconnection from religious communities (Blum 2015). Religious groups act as normative reference groups which provide both behavioral guidelines and group belonging for their members, and when individuals fail to adhere to those guidelines, fear of isolation easily prompts isolation. One of the individuals in Blum's study described how secrecy was related to the lack of an emotionally safe place to process sexual feelings and experiences – shame leads to fear of abandonment, which ironically resorts to isolation. "We want to hide those aspects of ourselves we are ashamed of, so we may emotionally withdraw from those close to us, lash out at them to keep them at bay, or isolate ourselves in self-blame" (Klein 2018:15). Moral disapproval of sexual behaviors implicitly creates a fear of condemnation that pushes individuals to hide their sexuality, thus inducing profound isolation and shame (Efrati 2019; Nelson 2003).

The more isolated an individual becomes, the easier it is to maintain a secret life. Blum (2015) notes that a common theme among the women interviewed was lying to or withholding information about their sex lives from peers in the faith community. Females perceived that these types of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors would elicit judgment from their Christian peers, which simply reinforced their continued silence and secrecy. Blum further found that women would associate with two distinct friend groups: friends with whom they would talk openly about their sexuality, and others from whom they would withhold that information. This tendency of compartmentalizing their sex life was not confined to pre-marital sexual relations. Even sex lives with their husbands were never discussed openly with their peers. In other words, living a compartmentalized life allows individuals to maintain their performative innocence, presenting a particular image of purity to anyone in their church network. This coping mechanism reflects a perfectionist model where individuals feel the pressure to work hard at pretense, always presenting themselves at their best while avoiding candid honesty about struggles (Nelson 2003).

However, "pretense leads eventually to spiritual death – both for pastors and for congregations" (cited in Nelson 2003:182). Based on the stories shared by Blum (2015) and Klein (2018), there is strong evidence of the perfectionist paradigm contributing to female experience of sexual confusion. It ultimately leads to individuals coping by isolating themselves from their faith community, actively exploring their sexuality in secret from their Christian

peers, and feeling extra pressure to present themselves as adhering to the rules of the evangelical sex script.

Self-Blame: Impaired Sense of Self

Every adolescent female undergoes sexual development, including the emergence of sexual desires. Sellers (2019) identified common sexual curiosities and behaviors in childhood, including mimicking behaviors, talking about genitals, and even exploring their genitals with playmates. However, closer to the age of 12, awareness of social rules increases, and children come to understand sexuality as a private matter, creating a greater desire for privacy in their own sexual experiences. Despite the naturalness of sexual development, many families in the evangelical community are averse to sex talk, leaving many females to navigate a very pivotal aspect of their lives on their own (Sellers 2017). Guided by rigid assertions of sexual purity as God's expectation of humans, adolescents feel unique pressure to adhere to these expectations (Edger 2012). Gina Ogden (2008) found that one form of coping with failure to do so was self-blame, believing themselves to be inadequate and dysfunctional. Thus, the self becomes the problem; the self is blamed for failing to achieve purity culture's rigid goal.

Another contributing factor to self-blame stems from internalizing external messages that create a negative perception of female bodies as stumbling blocks. A common misconception of Paul's concept of the stumbling block in Romans 14 is that he was referring to sexuality, when his reference was actuality food. Church communities twist the verse to suggest female bodies are stumbling blocks for men who cannot control their desires (Klein 2018), thereby placing the responsibility on females to care for and protect their brothers in Christ. Alongside the purity movement, conservative evangelicalism also promotes a modesty culture that materializes the immaterial female soul as measured by her dress (Michael 2019). Females learn that how they dress is "the clearest reflection of our personal priorities and our openness to letting God's Word alter our lives" (Masonheimer 2014). As Rachel Held Evans (2013) wrote, "When I caught a male classmate's eye on [my breasts], a wave of guilt would rise over me – Oh no, he noticed me! I've made him stumble." Young females internalize the message that when their body is admired or even noticed, it is their fault. Thus, the evangelical worldview unfortunately creates a negative conception of females' bodies, which in turn increases pressure for girls to dress modestly, and (un)intentionally elicits self-blame.

Consequent Psychological Distress

While the evangelical woman's agency is severely constrained by her community's silence about non-marital sexuality, her intrapsychic processing remains alive and active, constantly internalizing the messages filled with sex-negative connotations (Rossetto and Tollison 2017). Klein reports that the "whispered stories" of many women raised in the

conservative evangelical purity movement are filled with distress "haunted by sexual and gender-based anxiety, fear, and physical experiences that sometimes mimic the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder" (2018:8). The evangelical social construction of female sexuality is capable of inducing psychological trauma in North American females, from feelings of guilt and shame, to consequent physical manifestations, to diminished sexual satisfaction. However, it may not end there. It can also affect the formation of self-concept and identity, and further fracture relationships with the evangelical faith and God.

Trauma – Guilt and Shame

The primary way to understand religious abstractions is to use concrete metaphors to grasp meanings (Beck 2016), including those of religious belief systems. Richard Beck (2016) provides a list of sin and grace metaphors used in the Christian faith, one example being Hebrews 10:22: "let us approach [God] with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." The metaphor of purity is the polar opposite of contamination and dirty, and the solution to the latter is the process of being made clean or pure. While metaphors are extremely useful in illuminating a larger phenomenon, they are equally powerful in creating harmful distortions. Consequently, while the metaphor of purity illustrates the phenomenon of grace, moral failings of an individual depict them as "fundamentally unable to become 'clean'" (Beck 2016:40). The conservative evangelical community characterizes any sexual desire and behavior outside marriage as a moral failing. The solution requires the individual to delve more deeply into faith and take radical actions to pursue a life of purity and holiness (Winell 2013; Harris 1997).

Thus, "the purity message is not about sex. Rather, it is about us: who we are, who we are expected to be, and who it is said we will become if we fail to meet those expectations. This is the language of shame" (Klein 2018:14). While shame and guilt are often used interchangeably, shame is an experience or attribution of the whole self, whereas guilt is associated with a particular action (Sellers 2017; Klein 2018). Shame is "I am bad," and guilt is "I did something bad" (Klein 2018:14). Therefore, the concept of sexual shame is related to an individual's self-concept of their bodies, which contributes to feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy. It is an "intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging due to our current or past sexual thoughts, experiences, or behaviors" (cited in Marchinechova and Zahorcova 2020:1917). The metaphor of purity consequently distorts human sexuality with a focal point on the flesh, and sexuality as being sinful outside of marriage. It induces intense shame in individuals that severely damages their self-concept, takes away feelings of empowerment, and places them on a podium to be judged in the Christian community (Sellers 2017). While men are also prone to experiencing sexual guilt and shame, Lutwak, Panish, and Ferrari (2003) noted that women in general tend to

experience much higher levels. Countless stories reveal the trauma that females experience due to this narrow, rigid construction of their sexuality.

Consolidating the stories of female sexual shame only touches the surface of deeply embedded paradigms in the evangelical faith community, profoundly internalized in the intrapsychic. Sellers (2017) argues that sexual shame begins in the early formative years of sexual development. Sexuality as an "off limits" topic creates a reactive approach, such that when a child is caught touching themselves, they are shut down immediately with an authoritarian response, "don't do that!" The silence of the evangelical subculture about sexual development suggests that "eroticism is dirty, inherently embarrassing, dangerous, inappropriate, or vulgar" (Sellers 2017:106). Females develop a negative association to their bodies, specifically their genitals, which further damages their understanding of themselves, including their sexual self. Klein (2018) describes shame as beginning in childhood, but an ongoing process that gradually deepens over time; the shamed individual develops a sense of powerlessness and even worthlessness. Silence combined with shame leads to isolation and burying these experiences "deep in our bodies, where they are held similarly to trauma" (Klein 2018:15). Essentially, the silence reinforces sexual shame, which leaves young people embarrassed and alone to navigate their sexuality. An adolescent who constantly hears condemnation of masturbation and pornography will undoubtedly develop shame when sexually aroused. Then what happens when they find enjoyment from pleasuring themselves by engaging in sexually immoral practices? The women interviewed in Mahoney (2008), Blum (2015), Burke (2016), and Klein (2018) all have one thing in common. In a culture of silence, the discrepancy between Christian messages of sexual purity and their adolescent sexual curiosity causes dissonance. Dissonance subsequently induces psychological distress that manifests itself psychically, physically, and spiritually.

Psychic Manifestations

Klein (2018) tells stories of women recounting the nightmares, panic attacks, and paranoia they experienced due to sexual shame. Even after going for therapy and attempting to reconstruct their sexual stories, the connection between shame and sex was so ingrained in their intrapsychic that their "brains fire those shame neurons when the subject of our sexuality arises, with or without our permission, trapping us in a shame spiral" (Klein 2018:189). "Jo" described experiencing intense panic attacks, especially shortness of breath and intense stomach pain, whenever she would talk to a pastor in her church about anything. Counselors would tell Jo that it sounded like she had post-traumatic stress disorder, yet there was no specific trigger or trauma. Rather, it resulted from her whole life raised in the church.

Sexual Satisfaction

Shame also impacts the physical experience of sexual intercourse even in marriage. Young girls hear constant messages that sex will be painful, not enjoyable, and they spend their formative years suppressing their sexuality. Then when they get married, they are expected to flip the "on switch" (Klein 2018). Kelsy Burke (2016) found that married evangelical females are less likely to expect sex to be pleasurable, and frequently report that sexual pleasure did not come "naturally" to them; they had to persuade their bodies that sex should be enjoyable. She provides several accounts of females describing their experiences as "their bodies were 'getting in the way' of the sexual satisfaction they desired" (2016:108).

Unfortunately, some of them also develop vaginismus, "an involuntary physical tightening of the vagina that makes sex painful and sometimes even impossible" (Klein 2018:141). It is frequently believed to be connected to religious upbringing due to internalizing messages that induce "an overriding fear of penetrative sex" (Klein 2018:141). Blogger Jenna Birch (2019) describes how, despite being raised in the evangelical community, she ultimately chose to embrace sexuality as part of long-term love. However, she spent nearly a decade dealing with issues related to her pelvic floor that affected both sexual enjoyment and urination. This reveals a deep connection between an individual's internal thought-processing and their biology, more precisely, the fear of sex which causes their body to respond in a defensive mode; intrapsychic internalization of the evangelical sexual script manifests itself through physical defense mechanisms. Hence, healing from sexual shame is more than simply reconstructing an individual's view of sexuality. It requires healing from the deeply embedded messages that have elicited a physical response in their very biological being.

This finding is supported by the countless stories recorded by LeGall, Mullet, and Shafighi (2002), Blum (2015), Burke (2016), and Klein (2018) of females who report a difficult road to recovery in regaining their sexuality after years of internalizing messages that condemn all sexual thoughts, fantasies, feelings, and behaviors as shameful (Daniluk and Browne 2008). Essentially, purity culture imposes the belief that sexuality is a constant fight with sin, and mandates not only pure behavior, but also pure thoughts (Efrati 2019). Yet sexual satisfaction is important for more reasons than achieving sexual pleasure; Marcinechova and Zahorcova (2020) posited that sexual satisfaction is an integral part of healthy sexuality, and is a key factor in quality of life and well-being. Therefore, Winell pleads, "Let's stop fighting with 'sin' and allow our own goodness to permeate our lives, leaving room for imperfection, mistakes, and forgiveness" (2013:7). One possible explanation for evangelical females experiencing lower levels of sexual pleasure is that they perceive that sex is for their husband's pleasure (LeGall et al. 2002), not their own. Yet, contrary to 19th century Victorian sexuality in which the ideal female was asexual, in contemporary culture, "Desire desires desire" (Hiebert 2013:140).

Religious Implications

The purity movement's constraints on sexual desire suggest that failure to adhere to them is equivalent to failing God (Anderson 2015). Therefore, females are susceptible to believing that their spirituality is measured by what they do or do not do with their bodies.

The opening line of Dannah Gresh's book, *And the Bride Wore White: Seven Secrets to Sexual Purity*, quotes Titus 2:12-13: "[God's grace] teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (2012:15). Her book is a guide to help young girls develop skills in saying no to worldly passions, including their sexual desires. The text suggests that, by spending time in God's presence and experiencing the grace of God, young individuals will be empowered to say no. Gresh further asks, "What choices will you make to build a great love story? Will they be choices governed by your heart and your feelings, which can lead to tremendous heartbreak and humiliation? . . . or will you make choices governed by your head and the knowledge that you are valued as a princess in God's eyes?" (2012:88). Sexual desire is thus portrayed as a failure to believe God's truth, leading only to heartbreak. What then are the implications of these messages on the individual's perception of themselves in relation to God?

The conservative evangelical purity culture stance on female sexuality is frequently experienced as two-fold: "God did not like their sexuality and to please God meant to suppress their sexuality" (Blum 2015:198). In other words, the sex-negative discourse, the emphasis on complete abstinence, and the silence about female sexual desires all contribute to a deep fear of rejection and abandonment by God and their faith communities. The consequences of sexual immorality range from disappointing God (Gresh 2012), to feeling alienated from God (Murray et al. 2007), to a belief that God will punish them for their past sexual actions (Marcinechova and Zahorcova 2020). In sum, young conservative evangelical females often take on "the physical, mental, and emotional task of avoiding sex" at all costs to the point that it dominates their life and becomes the focus of their identity (Nelson 2003:184). This view of sexuality essentially uses a rhetoric of fear to micro-manage female sexuality in the name of protecting sex according to God's design.

Furthermore, the conservative evangelical culture dichotomizes sexuality and spirituality to the point of women believing that "they can be spiritual but not sexual, or they can be sexual but not spiritual. They cannot be both simultaneously. They must give up one in order to be the other" (Mahoney 2008:91). This dualistic belief system "promotes the alienation of the sexual body and the eternal spirit" (MacKnee 2002:234). However, Chuck MacKnee proposed that both sexuality and spirituality are essential dimensions of human life, both are motivated by "yearnings for connection and wholeness" (2002:235). Therefore, the dismissal and even denial of sexual urges in concert with spiritual needs leads to human incompleteness, which is evident in numerous stories of females leaving the church. For Puglsey (2020), despite waiting until her

wedding night, the trauma was already deeply embedded in her psyche. She noted that, "as I started to heal, I realized that I couldn't figure out how to be both religious and sexual at the same time. I chose sex." The conservative evangelical social construction of female sexuality not only silences and suppresses their sexual desires, it fails them spiritually by equating their sexuality with their allegiance to God.

Leaving conservative evangelical paradigms behind is frequently a confusing and dire experience, because it is a complete upheaval of a person's construction of reality, including the perception of oneself, other people, and the future; a woman's understanding of reality is completely shattered. Winell coined the term Religious Trauma Syndrome as "the condition experienced by people who are struggling with leaving an authoritarian, dogmatic religion, and coping with the damage of indoctrination" (Klein 2018:171). Symptoms range from depression to sexual difficulty to negative beliefs about the self. While Winell's concept focuses on authoritarian religious settings, she works primarily with individuals who are leaving the evangelical faith.

Conclusions

The intention here has not been to question or challenge the moralities of conservative evangelical Christian culture. Instead, it has been to confront realities of female sexual practices and bring to fuller light the personal consequences of conservative evangelicalism's construction of female sexuality, and its method of managing it. Amid the fight to protect its beliefs, conservative evangelicalism unintentionally created a culture that suppressed female sexuality. The use of script theory as a framework to evaluate the evangelical sex script shows how individual agency is diminished in the practices of purity culture. From patriarchal practices of the father guarding his daughter's purity to the expectation to please her husband's sexual desires, adolescent females develop the belief that they need their father, and their bodies belong to their husbands. Thus, it produces silence and ignorance around female sexual desires and pleasure. This silence and lack of education about their bodies leave females unequipped to make wise and safe choices about their sexuality. Many young women remain haunted by years of internalizing sex-negative messages, the denial of their sexuality having compromised their identity, induced psychological distress, and shattered their perception of God.

Pastors, counselors, and ministry leaders would do well to consider these matters and make more informed effort to normalize female sexuality. This could begin as simply as providing a safe place for females to talk about their sexual desires and arousal, and what they are experiencing inside themselves. Furthermore, providing adolescent females with a comprehensive understanding of their sexuality would allow them to exercise agency, making the potential choice to abstain uniquely their own. The church needs to consider ways to empower individuals to choose what they want, rather than dictate what they should do.

Finally, it is recommended that faith practitioners examine the double standards regarding sexuality. Countless resources and organizations target men as the only ones dealing with sexual sin, and females seeking help usually find aid targeted predominantly at men. The irony of modesty culture is that men are treated as less sexually responsible, and women are given too much responsibility for male sexual desires. As Sellers concluded, "the culture of silence, confusion, and ignorance leads people to isolate, and they often find themselves trapped in pain with nowhere to turn" (2017:10). Change begins by breaking the silence.

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