Your Body is Not Your Own: (Dis)embodied Sexual and Mental Health in Evangelical Purity Culture

by
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Abstract

This dissertation examines the embodied experiences of those raised as women within evangelical purity culture. Purity culture is an evangelical Christian movement that promotes strict rules around sexual abstinence before marriage, modest dress for women, and conservative gender roles. Utilizing 65 in-depth interviews, I illustrate how the structures and norms of purity culture shape embodied experiences and the body itself. First, I analyze expectations of female bodily submission to male authority and the "Kingdom of God." Women's bodies are seen as not their own, but objects to be controlled by men and the church for men's gratification, childbearing, and evangelical proselytizing. I next examine how thinness operates as a manifestation of purity culture values like bodily discipline, modesty, and whiteness. I then demonstrate purity culture as a "spiritualized rape culture," outlining how its norms foster vulnerability to assault through withholding sexual education and patriarchal power dynamics. I also examine narratives that blame women for "tempting" men and "causing" assault and abuse. Finally, I analyze embodied consequences of purity culture experiences including sexual dysfunction, disembodiment, and disordered eating. This novel focus on embodiment and health impacts within purity culture expands understanding of this influential religious movement, revealing how religious culture can profoundly impact corporeal realities, with findings relevant to scholars, practitioners, religious leaders, and those with lived experiences.

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Summary

This dissertation examines the intersection of gender, religion, and the body. Specifically, this work engages the embodied experiences of those raised as women within evangelical purity culture. In doing so, it offers insight into felt, in-the-flesh experiences of gendered expectations, roles, and obligations within a powerful and understudied religious movement. The purity culture movement is perhaps most recognizable for its early 2000s symbol of purity rings worn by Disney Channel stars and is generally understood as a religious abstinence campaign. However, its impacts go far beyond the mere discouragement of sex. In this dissertation, I examine the impacts of this movement on the lived and (dis)embodied experiences of those who were raised as women within the movement. I examine how the spiritualized structures of power and oppression live in the flesh and bones, blood and tissue of those who grew up in this environment, and how it alters how they view their bodies, what they experience in their bodies, and how they inhabit and carry their bodies through the world.

Throughout this work, I understand the body as simultaneously the experiencing-subject and the controlled-object of religious culture through explicit messaging and daily subtleties, illustrating how religious culture can be lived out in the body through sensory experience and ongoing sexual and mental health difficulties. The first chapter, the introduction, offers an introduction to the concepts and theories relevant to the dissertation. The second chapter offers detailed information on the data and methods used during the research process, describing the dynamics of the 65 in-depth interviews with participants from which this dissertation research is drawn. Following the data and methods chapter, there are four separate analytic chapters, starting with chapter 3. These chapters cover the topics of the gendered submission of the body, thinness as holiness, structures of abuse within purity culture, and how purity culture lives in the body.

In Chapter 3, the first analytic chapter of this dissertation, I center the purity culture focus on the submission of women to men, with particular attention to the submission of the body as a requirement for being a 'good' evangelical woman. This ideal is understood as conservative, feminine, and small in personality, body size, and need. Findings show that expectations of women make it such that their bodies are not their own. Instead, they are required to submit to men's constructed authority over their bodies, which is handed from father to husband and disciplined into thinness for their husband's sexual gratification. This is demonstrated through participant narratives of fatherly protection and the eventual sexual ownership of their husbands, requiring them to satisfy their husbands' sexual desires regardless of their own libido, and needing to work to be attractive to a husband or else be made responsible for his infidelity. Likewise, they are required to submit their bodies to the purposes of the Kingdom of God, a term that denotes both the imagined community of Christians in the world as well as the perceived will of God. Participants report being required to discipline their bodies to serve as an attractive example of Christianity and evangelize for the Kingdom, as well as being required to bear and raise children to continue and further the church. Utilizing these narratives, I argue that being a 'good' evangelical woman is predicated on bodily submission. This understanding of expectations of submission informs the overarching goal of this work to illustrate how purity culture shapes and impacts bodies, as well as lays a foundational understanding of bodily control within this culture that informs subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 4, I examine the phenomenon of thinness and how it operates within purity culture. Delving into the historical roots of bodily discipline within Christianity, I offer a background that illustrates the spiritualized, racialized, and gendered pursuit of thinness within Christianity that has been ongoing for hundreds of years. I then examine the new manifestations

of this long history, outlining three main functions of thinness within purity culture: thinness as bodily discipline, thinness as modesty, and thinness as whiteness. First exploring how bodily discipline and the denial of the body's needs and desires is seen as a spiritual good and how a thin body is believed to be a result of bodily discipline, I demonstrate how the pursuit of a thin body spiritualized as salvific within purity culture. Next, I examine how bodies assigned female at birth are highly sexualized and regarded as temptations. Particular sinfulness is ascribed to curvier bodies with more pronounced secondary sex characteristics. A thin body is thus perceived as a more modest body, more easily covered up and somewhat less sexualized within purity culture, thereby seen as holier. Finally, I examine associations between thinness and whiteness, highlighting the ongoing presence of white supremacy and the construction of the ideal and pure woman in this culture as both thin and white. This demeans and sexualizes those assigned female at birth who are not white, making ideal evangelical womanhood impossible for them to achieve. It thus enforces the pursuit of thinness as a means of approximating themselves to a spiritualized white supremacist ideal. Overall, I uncover clear connections between body size, sinfulness, and holiness within purity culture, portraying the pursuit of thinness as a manifestation of cultural values. I reveal the thin ideal within purity culture as transformed by spiritualization and shaped by the power dynamics of purity culture, constructing a thin body as a holy body.

In Chapter 5, I utilize embodied narrativeto explicate the structures and norms of purity culture as fertile grounds for, and passively accepting of, sexual assault and abuse. Thus, purity culture is a spiritualized rape culture. I argue for two main mechanisms that uphold this norm—vulnerability and responsibility. First, I outline how young people assigned female at birth are made vulnerable to assault and abuse through the purposeful withholding of sexual education

and through the construction of patriarchal power within purity culture and evangelical churches. The withholding of sexual knowledge, particularly regarding an understanding of consent, meant that many participants were left unable to recognize assault and abuse when they occurred and did not have the tools to try to resist those who abused them. This vulnerability was in many ways compounded by the hierarchical, patriarchal power structures within purity culture environments under which participants were meant to submit to and obey men in authority over them. Next, I demonstrate how these same young people assigned female at birth are made responsible for the assault and abuse that they experience. First, through the construction of men as hypersexual and unable to help themselves when tempted by a woman. Second, through a broader spiritualized construction of rape culture narratives. Within purity culture, the construction of men as hypersexual extends so far as to accept sexualizing language and attitudes that might be seen as predatory in interactions with young children from much older men as well as male relatives, including fathers. Likewise, ongoing constructions of women as tempting and gatekeepers for the sexual sins of men, as well as responsible for dressing modestly and desexualizing themselves rather than men as responsible for their own thoughts and actions, is a spiritualized version of broader rape culture narratives. Through participant stories, I illustrate the mechanisms, as well as embodied experience, of purity culture's spiritualized power structure, its allowance of assault and abuse, and its protection of abusers. This embodied examination of structures of assault and abuse further illustrates how purity culture shapes bodies and (dis)embodied experience.

In Chapter 6, I ask the question, "How does purity culture live in the body?" Again centering embodied knowledge and experience of participants, I examine and thickly describe three key embodied participant experiences of purity culture and its aftermath: sexual

dysfunction, disembodiment, and disordered eating. First, I examine how sexual dysfunction persists for those who grew up amidst purity culture teachings that construct sex and sexuality as grave, dangerous, and sinful. Participants share experiences with ongoing sexual and mental health consequences, including panic attacks, vaginismus, and pushing away sexual intimacy. Those consequences remained in their bodies even when they had sex in the permitted context of Christian marriage or many years after leaving their purity culture environments. I also illustrate the experience of disembodiment among participants, connecting existing literature on ties between the risk of sexual violation and disembodiment to the context of purity culture. Sexualizing and objectifying bodies assigned female at birth, purity culture environments threaten them physically and spiritually, leading many participants to distance themselves from their bodies to create a sense of safety. Finally, I examine the previously unstudied intersection of disordered eating and purity culture. Common purity culture experiences of being at risk of sexual violation and feelings of disembodiment are linked to eating disorder behaviors through participant experience. I find that participants utilize disordered eating as a means of 'desexualizing' their bodies by reducing the size of sexualized body parts, aiming to protect themselves and be seen as a good, 'pure' woman within this sexualizing and objectifying culture. I also find that the pursuit of a thin body through disordered eating allowed participants to desexualize themselves while also adhering to beauty standards, thus fulfilling their duty to be sexually attractive to their husbands. This final chapter highlights the tangible health impacts and embodied consequences of the purity culture movement in participant lives, illustrating profound impacts in the flesh and blood of those who grew up within the movement.

I conclude the dissertation with a review of the findings, highlighting the contributions of this dissertation in expanding our understanding of purity culture and its impacts. I highlight this

dissertation's novel focus on embodied knowledge and experience within purity culture, new contributions on the potential negative health impacts of religious involvement, and a previously unstudied connection between disordered eating and purity culture. I outline the novel theoretical contributions of this work and consider the impacts that this work might have for scholars, mental health practitioners, religious leaders, and those with lived experience. Finally, I put forth potential next steps for areas of further inquiry to build on this work.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This work began originally as an inquiry into the impact of purity culture socialization on eating disorders and disordered eating. This question was catalyzed by my own experience growing up in purity culture and experiencing an eating disorder. When I began to share the connections I saw between the two, it sparked many people to say, “Me too," or “That happened to my sister,” or “I saw that in youth group.” Recognizing that my experience was not a one-off occurrence but, at least anecdotally, a larger trend, I wanted to understand more about the processes and impacts of this intersection. Seeking answers, I recruited and spoke with 65 participants who grew up within the purity culture movement and self-reported experiences of disordered eating.

Through long, detailed conversations with participants, who so generously and vulnerably shared their stories and experiences with me, this project necessarily expanded in scope. The central thread across conversations was not food, eating, and body image as I had anticipated, but the body itself—how it was not participants’ own to inhabit, experience, or make decisions about. Instead, it was often controlled, manipulated, and limited by the doctrines of the purity culture movement and those in authority within it. These experiences profoundly shaped participants’ understandings of and experiences within their bodies, and this remained true even for those who had left these environments many years before speaking with me. Throughout these conversations and in the process of analyzing transcripts from these conversations, I systematically set out to understand and illustrate participants’ articulated experiences of the body. Four main aspects emerged warranting in-depth analysis: the gendered submission of the body, a thin body as a holy body, structures of assault and abuse, and how purity culture lives in the body. I devoted a chapter of this dissertation to each.

Foundational Bodies of Work

This dissertation weaves together three large intellectual bodies: the nascent scholarship on purity culture, the sociology of the body and embodiment, and the limited literature on sociocultural and religious influences on disordered eating. Understanding the broad strokes of these three disparate literatures is important for situating this dissertation and its contributions within a broader intellectual landscape. Likewise, it is important to understand the historical context of the purity culture movement, the major contours of the sociology of the body and embodiment, and the narrow existing literature at the intersection of religion and disordered eating to understand the new scholarly ground being forged through this work.

Purity Culture

This brief background on purity culture will cover the history of the movement, which is defined by its origins as white, conservative political backlash. It also covers the movement's messaging ,as well as critiques of that messaging in broader culture. Finally, it offers an overview of the academic literature on the topics central to this work. In doing so, it provides necessary context for understanding the novel contributions of this work.

Purity Culture as Political Backlash

Purity culture is a contemporary youth movement within Protestant Christian evangelicalism placing renewed emphasis on abstinence from sexual activity outside of conservative Western gender roles and cis-heterosexual marriage (Freitas 2008; Ortiz 2018). It is not specific to a particular denomination but instead functions as a guiding ideology within multiple branches of evangelicalism (Joyce 2009). In its larger sociological context, purity culture is also a white, conservative political movement with significant global influence. Following the sexual revolution and the AIDS epidemic, and alongside the national anxieties of

the Cold War era and the perceived decline of Anglo-Saxon power, conservative policymakers sought to ease constituent fears by shoring up national strength through a colloquial return to self-styled traditional and family values (Lahr 2007; Moslener 2015). Purity culture arose to foster the conservative, idealized white, nuclear, middle-class American family, which, in turn, was believed to foster a thriving white American nation (Moslener 2015). The movement obtained government funding for abstinence-only sex education (Donovan 1984) and carefully crafted rhetoric wherein conservative values were repackaged as countercultural and revolutionary, appealing to youth culture (Houser 2021; Moslener 2015). In the 1990s and 2000s, purity culture became an industry. Abstinence organizations such as *True Love Waits* and *The Silver Ring Thing* brought flashy concerts and purity media across the United States, and purity rings became important symbols of Christian identity (Moslener 2015). Purity culture transformed adolescent abstinence in the United States from a personal religious choice into something both public and political. While exact statistics on the ongoing prevalence of purity culture are difficult to come by, as of 2020, approximately 23% of Americans identify as evangelical Christians—a population where purity culture is likely present (PRRI 2021). As of March 2024, 17 of the top 50 (34%) titles in "Teen and Young Adult Nonfiction Dating" on Amazon are related to purity culture, demonstrating the ongoing presence of purity culture in mainstream conversations about dating.

Purity Culture as a Project of White Supremacy

Research has demonstrated that the evangelical movement is, at its center, a white movement wherein "racism is a feature, not a bug" of the system (Butler 2021:2). Structural white supremacy is long established within evangelicalism, which has its roots in the religious practices of white Christian slaveholders, as well as later segregationists, who used Christianity to attempt to sanctify their racism (Butler 2021; Jones 2020). White supremacist, evangelical biblical interpretation has been used by Jim Crowe apologists and the Ku Klux Klan, and evangelicalism is today "synonymous with whiteness...not only cultural whiteness but also a political whiteness" (Butler 2021:11).

Within current evangelicalism, 'color blind' messaging has created and enforced a white norm and fosters acceptance of white leadership. Purity culture is no exception, constructing the ideal as a cisgender, heterosexual white man and depreciating all others by comparison (Butler 2021; Chávez 2018; Cleveland 2022). Scholars have written on purity culture's white supremacist past and present (Herrmann 2021; Schultz 2021) as well as its impacts on women of color (Gentles-Peart 2020; Lomax 2018; Natarajan et al. 2022). Bodies that do not adhere to this cisgender, heterosexual white ideal are viewed as lesser. To be anything other than white under purity culture is to be different from the normative white ideal and therefore required to reshape the body to better reflect or serve whiteness (Lind 2019; Menakem 2017). This understanding of purity culture as a project of white supremacy, particularly in its reinforcing of white body norms and ideals, informs analysis throughout this dissertation.

Messaging and Critiques

Countering progressive attitudes toward sex and gender, purity culture promotes strict, binary gender roles and the submission and subjugation of women to men. Much of purity

culture's messaging centers on women guarding and controlling their pure, virgin bodies and avoiding temptation to sin via sexual abstinence, simultaneously spiritualizing, sexualizing, and objectifying the female body (Fahs 2010). Likewise, women are kept from positions of power, with a 2020 study noting that women constitute 56% of Protestant congregants and only 4% of evangelical congregational leaders, with white men making up the significant majority of people in power in evangelical churches (Thumma 2021). Within purity culture messaging, sex is seen as a bodily sin that changed someone—particularly women—fundamentally in ways that other sins did not and endangered eternal salvation (Klein 2018). Thus, messaging centered on total purity, mandating that adolescent adherents monitor their thoughts, desires, appearances, and actions to root out sexual urges. This messaging was often aimed particularly at young women, emphasizing the need for them to control their bodies so as not to 'cause' men to lust after them.

Though the movement has long been prominent in the United States, purity culture has also seen large-scale criticism in the late 2010s and early 2020s (Yip and Hunt 2016). Articles in popular publications such as *Cosmopolitan* and *The New York Times* (Beaty 2019; Stankorb 2019) have detailed ongoing psychological harms for those who grew up in the movement. While research is limited, recent scholarship has linked purity culture to rape-supportive messaging as well as purity culture beliefs to rape myth acceptance, indicating purity culture as a form of spiritualized rape culture (Blyth 2021; Gish 2018; Klement, Sagarin, and Skowronski 2022). Similarly, the high-traffic Twitter hashtag #ChurchToo, which first emerged as part of the #MeToo movement in 2017, brought to light years of misconduct, abuse, and inappropriate behavior within the Christian church, with many viewing purity culture as fostering an environment of sexual harassment, assault, and abuse (Allison 2021).

Academic Literature and Gaps

There has been relatively little academic research on evangelical purity culture up to this point. What research exists has been largely in the realm of religious studies and/or predominantly reliant on archival and document review research methods (Blyth 2021; Cruț 2021; Houser 2021; Schultz 2021). A few exceptions exist in the form of psychological experiment studies (Klement et al. 2022; Owens, Hall, and Anderson 2021), and limited interview-based research (Cross 2020; Natarajan et al. 2022). The majority of the literature on purity culture has centered on cisgender white women, who are in many ways constructed as the primary audience of purity culture messaging. Within this scope of literature in white spaces, scholars have examined purity culture rituals, such as purity ceremonies (Fahs 2010), and campaigns and organizations such as *True Love Waits* and *The Silver Ring Thing* (Rosenbaum and Weathersbee 2013, and often highlights their foundational gender socialization that constructs men as having social and spiritual authority over women (Cross 2020). With the spread of purity culture into broader American norms, purity culture has been examined in the context of public health and sex education, particularly abstinence-only sex education in public and private institutions (Clonan-Roy et al. 2020; Donovan 1984). Also discussing sex and sexual experience, Sellers (2017) has examined ongoing experiences of sexual shame and psychological difficulty for those who grew up within the movement, and several scholars have noted that many who grew up in this movement exhibit symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (House 2020; Klein 2018). Scholars have also noted the spiritualization of purity culture's abstinence messages, with purity constructing a countercultural social identity for young people and connecting their sexual abstinence to their piety and salvation (DeRogatis 2014; Moslener 2015). Purity, and particularly virginity, are constructed as a way to pursue piety

and achieve salvation, transforming the control of the body and bodily desires into a matter of eternal consequence.

Despite purity culture's emphasis on controlling and fostering 'pure' bodies that are examined in the literature, relatively little scholarly attention has yet been given to the visceral, felt, and embodied experiences of those who grew up within the movement. This work aims to fill that gap by forging new understandings of embodied knowledge and lived experience and examining how purity culture is mapped onto, felt, and reproduced within bodies. Likewise, it builds upon and expands the current scholarly understanding of purity culture from a religious abstinence movement to a movement more broadly focused on bodies and controlling bodies. With this goal in mind, this introduction will turn next to the body and embodiment in scholarly tradition, further contextualizing this dissertation's novel contributions.

The Body and Embodiment

While there is substantial literature on the sociology of the body, this area of study is still a relative newcomer to the core sociological tradition, only officially recognized as a section of the American Sociological Association in 2011 (ASA 2023). Somewhat limited within this newer literature is the sociological study of the body in relation to religion or religious institutions. This work firmly centers this less-tread ground in the context of purity culture. As I will argue, purity culture is a movement focused on controlling and shaping bodies, particularly those assigned female at birth. Thus, it is a highly fruitful site in which to consider the sociology of the body and the sociology of religion in congress.

A Brief History of the Sociology of the Body

As noted, this dissertation centers the body and embodiment, which remains somewhat novel within sociological tradition. Historically, much of sociological theory has hesitated to

engage with the fleshy—the blood and tissue of the body (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). The body, and particularly sensory and embodied experience, was not often central to the work of sociology's founding scholars. This historical reticence made the turn toward embodied work in the 1990s a notable turn away from more classical sociology, which focused on the public sphere, institutions, and abstract social forces (Adelman and Ruggi 2016; Boero and Mason 2020; Shilling 2016). The end of the 20th century saw an academic focus on "bringing the body back in", with the ongoing postmodern critique of dualism challenging the separation of the body from society (Radley 1995; Zola 1991:1). Sociologists further recognized the role of the body in shaping identities, social dynamics, and relationships, as well as mediating experiences of social phenomena (Adelman and Ruggi 2016). Propelled forward by the Black power, feminist, and disability movements from the 1960s through the 1980s, the 1990s saw a critical accumulation of work on the body and embodied experience, as well as its spread into other disciplines and its spin-off into new disciplines such as fat studies and queer theory (Pfeffer 2017). So too, the proliferation of medical and bodily technologies, such as advances in prosthetics, and examinations of health trends that position the body as a project, such as the 1980s focus on aerobics, begged the question of "What is the body?" in new ways (Nettleton 2021).

While this explicit focus on the body and embodiment was taken up within broader sociology in the 1990s, marginalized scholars had attended to raced and gendered bodies and the materiality of the social world much earlier. Among foundational works linking social structures and their embodied consequences, W.E.B. DuBois's scholarship is particularly notable. He begins *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) with a description of his embodied experience fielding the questions of white people about his Blackness. He describes a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in

amused contempt and pity" (1903:3). This conceptualization of the double consciousness results from the embodied experience of racism as a Black person in a white supremacist world. So too, another noteworthy example of earlier sociological work with an implicit basis in the body is the work of feminist scholars, and particularly Black feminist scholars, of the 1970s and 80s. These scholars took up work on bodily topics such as sex, beauty, and reproduction, examining bodies assigned female at birth in the process, contributing to "materially grounded accounts of corporeal knowledge" (Pitts-Taylor 2015:1). This dissertation work is situated within this intellectual tradition and aims to be one such materially grounded account, seeking to examine the body as both experiencing-subject and material-object.

Dualism and (Dis)Embodiment

As previously mentioned, postmodern critiques of dualism operated as a driver of the proliferation of the sociology of the body and embodiment. This is particularly relevant in the context of this work on purity culture, given that religion and spirituality are often constructed through their conceptual separation from the bodily and the material world. This separation is in part due to the legacy of Christian dualism, which makes embodied work on Christian religion somewhat more difficult and thereby relatively understudied (Mellor and Shilling 1997).

While this work critically examines the conceptual separation of the mind-body divide and its bearing on experiences within a Christian movement, it also seeks out and relies upon theoretical alternatives to this divide and aims to broadly embrace the sensations of the body as a source of knowledge. Williams and Bendelow (1996) argue that mind, body, and society can only be separated through a process of abstraction and that, in lived experience, these separations do not exist, rather "the body is in the mind, society is in the body, and the body is in society"

(47). Likewise, the material and fleshy are not mutually exclusive from the cognitive, or from the socially constructed or politically influenced (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987).

Some scholars have made an effort to transcend this artificial mind-body divide through embodied theorizing. For example, Hochschild's (1979) theories of emotion work and feeling rules provide emotion management as a bridge between these worlds. They offer an interactive, embodied emotional experience wherein the emotions are felt in the body and the individual works to create or inhibit emotions based on what is socially, culturally, and politically appropriate to the situation. Similarly, eating disorders, which this dissertation engages with, are often classified as biopsychosocial conditions. Combinate terms such as biopsychosocial, in their stitching together of conceptually distinct words, often reifying the separation between them. Pushing back against this widely accepted conceptual separation—the existence of which is evidenced in the mind-body divide and combinate terms such as biopsychosocial, Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) argue for a theoretical incorporation of the biological and experiential body, and the body as an actor and object in both society and political discourse. They encourage the incorporation of this multidimensional perspective—designated by the term the mindful body—into social theory, holding that the material, cognitive, socially constructed, and politically influenced are not inherently separate.

As this dissertation research examines a religious tradition deeply rooted in dualism, it is purposefully methodologically adversative. In opposition to the dualistic approach often inherent to understandings of religion, this dissertation is grounded within a sociological tradition of seeking to transcend dualism. Purity culture thus makes a particularly rich site of embodied inquiry, as there is much embodied knowledge emergent from it that is yet to be widely known given the movement's emphasis on separation from, repression, and control of the body. This

dissertation will contribute to and forge new ground within the broader sociology of the body and embodiment, offering novel contributions to the intersection of the body and religion.

Religion, Health, and Disordered Eating

The preceding sections situate this project at the nexus of the purity culture movement and embodiment literatures. However, at its inception, this dissertation was structured more narrowly as a study of the embodied experience of eating disorders in purity culture. Thus, background constructions and foundational literature on eating disorders, religion, and spirituality have necessarily influenced its creation. While the central focus of this project has expanded from eating disorders to a broader project of the body, this dissertation nonetheless contributes to the literature on this topic, and a brief background in the existing scholarly work on the topic offers useful context for readers.

Eating disorders can be defined as biopsychosocial conditions that are characterized by disturbances in eating behaviors as well as an unhealthy preoccupation with food, body weight, and body shape (Maine and Bunnell 2010). They are serious illnesses, having the highest mortality rate of all mental illnesses, high rates of comorbidity with other mental health conditions, and often leading to serious complications including organ damage, osteoporosis, and hormonal disturbances (NEDA 2021; Pisetsky et al. 2013; Smink, van Hoeken, and Hoek 2012). Much of the current literature on eating disorders focuses on clinical treatment models, disorder classification, and economic impacts of these illnesses. Within sociology, dominant topics have been variations in eating disorder symptoms across populations and risk factors correlating with eating disorder behaviors (Austin et al. 2013; Tabler and Geist 2016). Relatively less studied in the sociological literature are contributing social and systemic issues as well as investigation as

to how they are conceptualized and treated within various communities (Culbert, Racine, and Klump 2015; Stice et al. 2019).

At the intersection of contemporary religion and disordered eating, there is relatively little research, and that research narrows again when limited to Christianity. While religion and religious communities have been largely reported in the literature as having a positive impact on health and well-being through mechanisms such as social support and encouraging healthy behaviors (Ellison and Levin 1998; Koenig 2012), recent studies have shown that the positive health effects of religious involvement can be limited or reversed by sociocultural factors or theological approaches. With regard to body image, several studies have found that anxious attachment to God—often associated with fear-based theology such as that found within purity culture—can increase body dissatisfaction, while an emphasis on the unconditional love and acceptance of God can protect against the negative impacts of the thin ideal (Boyatzis, Kline, and Backof 2007; Inman, Iceberg, and McKeel 2014; Krause and Hayward 2016). In one notable example, Akrawi et al. (2015) found that while a trusting and confident relationship with God was associated with lower levels of disordered eating in adherents of both Christian and Jewish faiths, a "doubtful and anxious relationship with God" (29) was associated with greater levels of disordered eating. Additionally, Gates and Pritchard (2009), in their study among undergraduate students, found increased spiritual angst associated with an increase in disordered eating, and those identifying as Christian were more likely than adherents of other religious traditions to express disordered eating behaviors. Both evangelical Christianity and purity culture within it subscribe to a theology that emphasizes an image of God as simultaneously loving and vindictive (Dolezal 2017). This conception of God likely encourages anxiety surrounding a person's relationship to the divine. This anxiety would correlate with Gates and Pritchard's (2009) and

Akrawi et al.'s (2015) findings about spiritual angst, anxious relationship to God, and increased likelihood of disordered eating behaviors.

In terms of broader health experiences, Homan and Burdette (2021), find that structural sexism within a religious system can not only eliminate commonly-seen positive health effects of religious involvement often seen in public health and sociological studies but can, in fact, create negative health impacts of religious involvement for women, as understood through a self-rated health measure. The authors call for further research into the potential negative health impacts of structurally inequitable religious environments. Evangelicalism and purity culture are two such gender-inequitable environments, curtailing women's participation in leadership, restricting roles, and preaching the submission and subjugation of women to men (Barr 2021; Natarajan et al. 2022). Thus, the negative health consequences of religious involvement seen in the findings of this dissertation, including disordered eating, offer an important academic understanding of the potential negative health impacts of religious involvement.

Theoretical Mechanisms

Where the previous section on foundational bodies of work offered context and grounding for the major traditions and literatures that this work engages with and contributes to, this section offers specific mechanisms that will enable the reader to better understand arguments within the findings of this work. Outlining three major topics—lived and embodied religion, transformative spiritualization, and the materiality of the female body—I offer necessary context for both the sources of knowledge and the analysis of data in this dissertation. Lived and embodied religion offers a constructs the inquiry of religious knowledge in this work as centered in the everyday and the flesh and blood of adherents, tied to the corporeal and material knowledge explicated in the section on the sociology of the body and embodiment.

Transformative spiritualization offers terminology for understanding the totalizing and transformative nature of an intense religious environment such as purity culture, making clearer the high-stakes nature of this setting. The materiality of the female body offers a framework for understanding the female body as a site upon which larger cultural values are impressed and expressed. In addition to these major theories, which apply across the breadth of this dissertation, within the analytic chapters I also offer additional information on theories used in those chapters for specific analysis.

Lived and Embodied Religion

This dissertation utilizes the theoretical frameworks of lived religion (McGuire 2008) and embodied religion (Nikkel 2019) to understand how purity culture practices and beliefs are meaningfully understood in the day-to-day habits and experiences of adherents, with particular regard to the socialization of women and girls the movement emphasizes. Lived religion explores how religious experience surfaces in the routine and mundane, in how adherents "experience, rather than simply think or believe in, the reality of her or his religious world" (McGuire 2008:13). This approach focuses on the ways that religion is created and made manifest in how it is lived out and understood by its adherents, more so than in the formal structures and theologies of a religious institution. Likewise, it understands religious practice and meaning-making as embedded within a broader cultural context and shaped by the life experiences of the adherent, including their demographic and social characteristics (Orsi 1997). It also emphasizes the knowledge of the body in religious practice, giving credence to the sensory and material experience and existence of spiritual entities (Hall 2020).

In parallel, the related theory of embodied religion holds that "all meanings are bodily" and the body is a subject or "existential grounds" of culture and religion (Csordas 1994;

McGuire 1990; Nikkel 2019). It holds that religious and spiritual experiences are not simply intellectual but present in and lived out through bodily experience and expression (Ammerman 2016). This can be examined in terms of embodied rituals and gestures, such as kneeling for prayer or singing songs of praise but can also be understood through embodied sensory experience. For example, emotion is often a key part of religious experience that are experienced not only intellectually but also physically felt and expressed (Taves 2009).

Centering lived and embodied knowledge and experience, this study seeks to understand not only what participants are taught from the pulpit, in books, and in Bible studies, but what they internalize from these messages, the subtle and unspoken norms, their family experiences, the media they consume, and how they go about their day-to-day lives. Particularly, it seeks out sensory knowledge of how these things are experienced and lived out in the body, including emotion, embodied ritual, and physical manifestations of religious, social, and ideological phenomena. These theoretical foci understand that people can engage with and experience religious beliefs and practices in different ways, making space for complexity and heterogeneity of experience across participants.

Transformative Spiritualization

Purity culture and mainstream conservative values are intimately linked through cultural norms such as domestic roles for women, a high valuation of marriage, and the heterosexual, nuclear family. Likewise, the control of bodies assigned female at birth is by no means exclusive to purity culture. While there is some case to be made for the modern manifestations of these mainstream values being influenced by, and to some degree emergent from, purity culture and other evangelical norms (Matthis 2021; Moslener 2015)—exemplified by evangelicalism's political proliferation of abstinence-only sex education (Clonan-Roy et al. 2020; Donovan 1984)

or its role as a promotor of conservative values (Lahr 2007; Moslener 2015)—it is nonetheless important to understand what makes purity culture different from these larger phenomena. One key difference that will be relevant throughout this dissertation is its spiritualization.

I hold that spiritualization, understood as relating to or understanding something as a spiritual or religious practice, belief, or occurrence (Fox and Picciotto 2019; Hill et al. 2000), transforms the experience of purity culture in that its rules, strictures, and norms come not only with the social and emotional consequences of gendered oppression, sexualization, objectification, and bodily control but also with spiritual, eternal consequences that are inseparable from the rest. For example, the submission of women to men is a spiritualized gender oppression constructed as the will of God, making it sinful to go against men's perceived authority (Griffith 1997). Likewise, under purity culture men are constructed as hypersexual and 'unable to help themselves' when 'tempted' by a woman, who is then made responsible for the man's 'sin' of lust (Klement et al. 2022). This spiritually-laden messaging has been highlighted by scholars and authors such as Klein (2018) and Johnson (2018) who illustrate the power of spiritual language in social influence and control. Klein (2018) highlights how spiritualized language can abstract material harms, such as assault and abuse, into solely spiritual issues, leaving victims without material recourse. Likewise, Johnson (2018) notes how prominent evangelical pastor Mark Driscoll wielded his role as "Pastor Mark" to repackage misogynistic harms as spiritual truths. Missing from these important explanatory works, however, is a framework for understanding the transformation of material issues into spiritual ones, making, for example, purity culture not just secular rape culture with spiritual language layered on top, but a specifically spiritual rape culture.

Of use in understanding this transformative mechanism is Althusser's (2014) idea of interpolation—the process by which people are conditioned to accept and reproduce their culture's given attitudes and one's place within its hierarchy of power. Althusser's ideological apparatuses, of which religion is one, enforce a dominant ideology of the ruling class but are generally viewed by those within the culture as ideologically neutral or espousing objective truth. Through this, the ideologically created, yet purportedly inherent, norms of the culture are interpolated—internalized and reproduced such that the subjects of the ideology constitute the ideology itself. In the context of transformative spiritualization, interpolation means that the norms of purity culture—such as concepts of biblical womanhood or sexual sin—are inherently and inextricably spiritual, accepted and taught as God's truth. Thus, for example, a woman made subject and submissive in purity culture may understand her position as God's unquestionable will. Her position is not constructed as a social norm or even a product of biology and evolution, but of all-encompassing religious correctness, a biblical womanhood transformed by purity culture ideology.

Also useful in understanding the concept of transformative spiritualization is Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality. In broader culture, intersectionality is often discussed as additive, with each minoritized identity a person occupies diminishing their privilege and increasing their oppression. However, this is not what Crenshaw spoke about when she coined the term. Crenshaw pointed to a 1976 case in which a group of Black women brought a suit against General Motors. Up until 1964, GM had not hired Black women, so when GM laid off workers based on seniority in 1970, many Black women lost their jobs. They could not, however, make their case for discriminatory termination given the narrow legal definition of discrimination. As both white women and Black men had been hired before them and kept their jobs based on

seniority, these Black women were unable to claim gender or racial discrimination. Trying to separate "Black" and "woman" in the law did not account for the breadth of experience of discrimination. Through this we can see that intersectionality is not simply additive, but transformative—a confluence of experiences and discriminations that are more than the sum of their parts. Drawing on this theoretical structure, I argue that spiritualization is likewise not simply additive—putting a layer of spiritual language overtop of standard systems of gender oppression and racism—but transformative, creating an inherently and inextricably spiritual system of oppression.

Through the mechanism of transformative spiritualization, we can understand the concepts of sin, divine authority, and the looming threat of spiritual consequence as disciplining and oppressive spiritual forces. Disobedience to power or going against cultural norms is not simply a matter of social consequence, but of piety and good standing with an all-powerful God, impacting one's prospects of eternal salvation or damnation. Spiritualization transforms the experience of oppression and control into something that, while not unrelated to secular oppression or its goals, is inextricably spiritual.

The Materiality of Bodies Assigned Female at Birth

The materiality of the female body is, in this work, used to understand how cultural values—such as self-control, conservative femininity, and whiteness—are inscribed onto and experienced within the female body. It is also utilized to situate and understand the female body as a focal point for social control and the exhibition of social values through the regulation of their actions and appearances (Beauvoir 1953; Bordo 1993; Strings 2019). Douglas (1978), in Purity and Danger, argues for the concept of the social body—how bodies are shaped by surrounding culture. She argues that social evaluation based on adherence to purity standards

disproportionately affects bodies with less power in a social order. Under such systems, bodily attributes deemed valuable by the culture are cultivated, while those less valued are stigmatized. With less power under a cis-patriarchal system, bodies assigned female are stigmatized, with that stigma impacting the embodied experiences of those individuals. Also, as noted previously, the idealized bodies of purity culture conform to white standards, shaping the experiences of both white and non-white bodies. Strings (2019) illustrates how specific power dynamics rooted in white supremacist Anglo-Saxon Protestantism—direct predecessors of evangelicalism and purity culture—affect the social perception, valuation, and control of the female body. The white fear of the Black female body, racistly characterized as greedy, sexual, and unruly, is weaponized to discipline both Black and white women into conforming to white, patriarchal values of purity and submission that are constructed in opposition to depictions of Blackness. These gendered, racialized Protestant power dynamics continue to impact the lived experiences of those in bodies assigned female at birth today.

Roadmap of Chapters

This dissertation systematically examines and illustrates participants' embodied experience within purity culture, highlighting the embodied knowledge and impacts of this religious subculture and movement. Standing on the shoulders of existing scholarship in the areas of lived and embodied religion, the sociology of the body and embodiment, and work on religion and disordered eating, I lay out four distinct, yet intertwined, lenses and experiences of how this movement impacts bodies. In chapter 3, the first analytic chapter of this dissertation, I examine the gendered submission of the body, illustrating how the idealized woman within purity culture submits her body to men and patriarchal authority, as well as to the purposes of the Kingdom of God, making her small in personality, body size, and need. In the second, I look at

the ways thinness operates within this culture, offering association with the valued and spiritualized- traits of bodily discipline, modesty, and whiteness. In the third, I examine purity culture as an environment that is fertile grounds for, and passively accepting of, sexual assault and abuse through the mechanism of making individuals vulnerable to, and constructing them as responsible for, assault and abuse. Finally, in chapter 4, I ask the overarching question "How does purity culture live in the body?" and find three ongoing, flesh-and-blood consequences among participants: sexual dysfunction, disembodiment, and disordered eating. Each of these chapters points back to the profound embodied impacts of this movement. Overall, I find that purity culture holds a broad focus on controlling bodies assigned female at birth, severely limiting bodily autonomy, shaping and constraining bodies to reify the power of the evangelical ideal—a cisgender, heterosexual white man. I argue that purity culture messaging deeply impacts bodies and embodied experience, resulting in ongoing impacts in the embodied lives of participants, including physical and mental health concerns.

Chapter 2: Data and Methods

This qualitative project relies on in-depth interviews with 65 participants. In this section, I offer an overview of how I recruited participants, the demographic makeup of my sample, how I went about data collection, and what the interview process looked like. I also include an overview of how I analyzed the data from these interviews, as well as a statement on my positionality as a researcher with similar lived experience to my participants and how and why I chose to disclose my positionality to my participants. Finally, I include a note on how I utilize gendered language in this dissertation work. This chapter will offer useful grounding for understanding the findings in chapters three through six as well as offer context for the analytic process through which the grounds of this project expanded from a narrower examination of purity culture and disordered eating to a larger project of purity culture and the body.

Recruitment and Sample

I recruited participants for this study between the fall of 2019 and the spring of 2022. Participants were primarily recruited via Instagram, along with other social media platforms, as well as via snowball sampling and word-of-mouth in church groups. I posted recruitment materials to a variety of social media networks with audiences likely to be currently affiliated with evangelicalism and purity culture, as well as those likely to have left those environments. This range of experience is reflected in the data. Study participants self-screened via a Qualtrics survey. Eligible participants confirmed that they were assigned female at birth (AFAB), were socialized as a woman within the evangelical church, were within the age range of 18-45, identified as having been influenced by the purity culture movement, and experienced an eating disorder or disordered eating in their lives. The age range of 18-45 was chosen to capture individuals who would have encountered purity culture during their formative adolescent

years—an age range that the movement targets. Among those who expressed interest in participating but did not meet eligibility criteria, the predominant reason for exclusion was having been brought up in a Christian environment that was not evangelical. A total of 69 people participated in 60–90-minute in-depth interviews. I excluded four interviews from the final data due to emergent ineligibility, creating a final dataset of 65 interviews.

Demographically, the sample for this study is predominantly white, reflecting the overall racial and ethnic composition of protestant evangelicals in the United States (Mitchell 2019). 92.5% of participants identify as cisgender women, with 7.5% identifying as gender nonbinary, third gender, genderqueer, or preferring not to state their gender identity. The sample is geographically distributed across the United States, with notable concentrations in the Bible Belt region and near Colorado Springs, both of which are areas known for their significant evangelical Christian populations (Mitchell 2019; Schultz 2017). Additionally, there is a concentration of participants in the Twin Cities region of Minnesota due to the popularity and sharing of social media recruitment materials among students and alumni of an evangelical Christian university in that region. Participant ages span from 20 to 39 and the average age of participants is 27.7 years old. To protect participant privacy, all names used are pseudonyms. Further details on participant demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 – Participant Demographics

Gender	N %
Gender Identity	
Man	0 (0%)
Woman	60 (92.5%)
Gender Non-Binary/Third Gender	2 (3%)
Prefer to self-describe	1 (1.5%)
Prefer not to say	2 (3%)
Transgender Identity	
Transgender	0 (0%)
Cisgender	63 (97%)
Prefer not to say	2 (3%)

Table 1. Participant Demographics	N %
Race/Ethnicity	
Hispanic or Latinx	3 (5%)
Multiracial	6 (9%)
White	56 (86%)
Sexuality	
Gay or Lesbian	3 (4.6%)
Bisexual	18 (27.7%)
Straight or heterosexual	39 (60%)
Other	5 (7.7%)
Age	
18-24	17 (25%)
25-30	29 (42.5%)
31-35	14 (20.5%)
35-39	5 (7%)
Education	
Grade 12 or GED (High School Graduate)	3 (4.6%)
College, 1-3 years (Some college or technical school)	13 (20%)
College, 4 years (College graduate)	25 (38.4%)
Graduate school (Advanced Degree)	24 (37%)

Data Collection

Occurring alongside recruitment, participant interviews took place between the fall of 2019 and the spring of 2022. I conducted interviews via encrypted video conference (Zoom) or phone. This approach served two functions. First, this dissertation work took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and conducting interviews via video and phone offered the highest level of safety for my participants and myself as the researcher. Secondly, it allowed me to widen my recruitment in terms of geographic location, delving into regional differences in religious environments across the United States. Third, there is evidence that the sense of additional distance provided by technology allows participants to feel safer and be more open with me as a researcher (Novick 2008). These interviews provided some logistic difficulties such as occasional issues with poor signal or dropped calls, but these issues were remedied within a matter of minutes for all interviews where they emerged. Despite these few technological glitches, I found remote interviews to be an excellent method for interviewing and collecting rich

data with my participants. While I had some initial concerns that video and phone interviews would make it more difficult to establish rapport, I found it easy to establish a friendly and conversational dynamic. Only three interviews were conducted by phone, with the rest occurring over Zoom. I did not find significant differences in establishing rapport between these two methods of interviewing, and few differences overall aside from the ability to learn from participant body language on Zoom that was not available with phone participants. The frequency and ease of using Zoom is perhaps not least attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic causing many people being accustomed to establishing connections remotely. Additionally, a majority of my respondents are middle or upper class and are in a position to have regular access to the internet and a computer, making Zoom interviews generally feasible.

Throughout the interview process, I utilized Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) which emphasizes intensive interviewing and a reflexive, iterative process of interviewing and analyzing data (Charmaz 2014). Intensive interviewing is a topic-specific approach that centers participant meaning-making and interviewer interpretations. It focuses on open-ended questions and narrative stories and is inherently interactive, with the co-creation of the interview space and the emergence of a discourse between participant and interviewer (Harkess and Warren 1993). I chose CGT for its aim to "make patterns visible and understandable", serving the goal of this research to identify commonalities and patterns of lived experience across individuals within a subculture (Charmaz 2014:89).

During interviews, I left questions open-ended for participants to explore their experiences. As is consistent with CGT methodology, not all questions were asked of all participants, and unique follow-up questions may be asked as probes into what the participants shared from their lived experience in the purity culture movement. The iterative process of

Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory also allowed the addition and modification of questions as they pertain to emerging theoretical interests raised by early data analysis. This fostered the pursuit of early emerging theoretical threads and cultivated depth and detail. This enriched the data collection process, with emergent themes in early interviews of this project shaping questions in later interviews. For example, I did not initially have questions specifically about participants' experiences of puberty. After this topic arose and offered fruitful discussion in early interviews, I added a specific question about that experience, which proved to be a valuable addition to the guide (Appendix A). The interview protocol was an iterative document that responded to the data and evolved throughout and across interviews.

Throughout the data collection process, the interview guide covered three major themes: faith and church, bodies and eating, and the confluence of the two. In delving into faith and church, I first asked participants broadly about their experiences with faith and church, both now and in the past. I then followed up by asking them specifically about their experiences with the purity culture movement and their gendered experiences in faith communities. As purity culture is a movement within a religious group with a strong focus on gender and gender roles, this was a useful progression of topics. Following that, I asked participants about their relationship with food throughout their lives, as well as their relationship with their bodies. As all participants identified as having an eating disorder or disordered eating at some point in their lives, this was a rich conversation that many participants had put previous thought into and were eager to share. Having brought faith, food, and body experiences to the forefront of participants' minds, I then asked them about how these realms of experience interacted, shaped, and informed one another. Typically, these connections began forming for participants much earlier in the discussion, but I nevertheless found it useful to dedicate a section of our conversation to examining the

intersection of these phenomena after having discussed them in detail on more separate terms. While I did not explicitly ask participants about their personal relationship with and experience of sex and sexuality, all participants discussed this topic to some degree. This is not particularly surprising given the heavy focus within purity culture on abstinence from and discussion of sex and sexuality, but nonetheless remarkable given how strongly themes of sexual shame and sexual dysfunction emerged. Overall, I found that participants were eager to engage with the questions posed and were often particularly eager to share specific memories and stories of purity culture norms and rituals, such as modesty rules and object lessons. None of the topics seemed to make participants uncomfortable, despite the subject matter. This is perhaps due to the rapport established in part through my positionality as a person who also grew up in these environments and experienced an eating disorder, as will be further discussed in the later section on positionality and reflexivity.

In addition to interviews with participants, my memos serve as a source of information in this analysis, noting my reactions to and engagement with the materials and participants. I consistently memoed after interviews, often doing so verbally using an automatic transcription service so I could revisit my notes later. I also memoed throughout the analysis process, utilizing the memo function of my coding software to make notes and connections about the data as I coded it. Additionally, I took more informal fieldnotes throughout the interview process, noting non-verbal cues from participants that provided insight into their lived experiences and current perceptions and meaning-making of those experiences. This included audible cues, such as sighs and groans, and body language, such as crossed arms or rubbing one's shoulders. While body language was not always available, as some interviews were conducted by phone, these

interviews still offered much in terms of auditory cues. These in-the-moment notes allow for a rich and layered analysis.

Data Analysis

Constructivist Grounded Theory data analysis emphasizes data collection and data analysis occurring simultaneously. Each element of the process informs the other, with what is learned in data collection influencing and transforming the data analysis, and vice versa. Throughout the data collection process, I consistently revisited transcripts from already-completed interviews and revised and updated my interview guide as I went, bringing new knowledge and more nuanced questions into later interviews. In doing so, I was able to rely on my data to construct my theory, not theory to organize data. Through this analytic mechanism, this dissertation grew and expanded from an examination of purity culture and disordered eating to the larger project on purity culture and the body that it now is. I anonymized interview recordings and then transcribed them, alongside an additional transcriptionist. I coded using Dedoose, a qualitative analysis application. Analysis was conducted via Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology, with codes emerging from the data itself. I went through several rounds of data analysis, concentrating on initial and focused coding approaches (Charmaz 2014). I coded early interviews line-by-line, comparing later interviews to early interviews and adding additional codes as new themes emerged in the data. Following CGT, I coded data at different levels of analysis, first coding line-by-line to create a codebook. In the initial coding phase, I remained open to any themes that emerged, following where the data led and creating as many codes as were useful. I then used the created codebook to analyze later transcripts, assess the accuracy and detail of my codes, and generate new codes for later-emergent themes. I then engaged in focused coding, which is more conceptual than line-by-line and takes the research

toward its theoretical goals. This iterative coding process allowed a rich and layered analysis, revisiting older transcripts to identify later-emergent themes that had not yet been identified in the early stages of the project. Finally, an axial coding process brought to light prominent themes, with memos offering a means of further exploration and analysis.

Positionality and Self-Disclosure

As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, I, the researcher, grew up in the purity culture movement and experienced an eating disorder. I am thus firmly situated as an insider-outsider with a particular standpoint (Collins 1990) that shaped my view of the world, including cultural and experiential knowledge unique to purity culture. I chose CGT with this positionality in mind. The constructivist perspective is grounded in the idea that data and theory are constructed, not discovered. In this, it does not just accept that researcher biases are inevitable but embraces and utilizes them as a source of knowledge. Viewing research as constructed leads researchers to be continually reflexive about their active and passive roles in the construction process. For Charmaz, researcher biases influence not only their position and preconceptions but also "the very facts they can identify" (2014:13).

As a person with a similar lived experience to that of my participants, I possess a cultural understanding that boosted rapport with them. While there were many differences between myself and various participants, we also shared similar experiences specific to purity culture. Thus, my own experience served as a source of knowledge, allowing me to probe and seek out nuanced definitions that a researcher without this lived experience may not have been able to do. Likewise, this positionality offered a foundation of cultural context to situate participants' stories within, more easily making meaning of complex cultural phenomena in the analytic process. While this positionality was helpful in many ways, it also offered some drawbacks. My own

experience growing up within a West Coast evangelical mega-church, for example, could make it difficult to fully understand participant experiences in other regions and forms of evangelicalism, such as experiences in a Southern Baptist Church in the Bible Belt or a midwestern fundamentalist group. Additionally, there is a risk that Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) have put forward of over-identifying with participants and seeing common but still noteworthy experiences as unremarkable, focusing more so on exceptional findings.

In the context of my interviews, I chose to give a short self-disclosure to my participants about my own experience with the topics at hand. I noted that I grew up in an evangelical church and had an eating disorder. I did not offer any value judgments on the movement at large, simply noting that parts of my experience in the church were good and other parts were difficult. Many participants appeared to be relieved or more relaxed upon hearing this, with several noting that this knowledge base would make it easier to share their stories, particularly given cultural touchstones or lingo that they wished to use or reference. Other participants reacted neutrally to this information, and I did not notice any instances of visible discomfort or concern. On the few occasions that participants wanted to ask more about my experience, I offered some neutral facts, such as the kinds of churches and denominations that I grew up in. If there were further follow-up questions, I would ask the participant to save those questions until after our interview was complete. In doing so, I aimed to avoid alerting the participant to my personal feelings towards the purity culture movement or giving many details about my own experience prior to the interview. This allowed me to simultaneously be upfront about my positioning while working to minimize the influence my own story might have on what my participants would share with me via social desirability bias. I also informed participants that, while I hold cultural knowledge unique to these experiences, I would still ask them to define various terms and experiences

throughout the interview. This allowed me to probe deeper into their specific, variable experiences and subcultures. While my own 'insider' status makes me familiar with much of the cultural vocabulary, regional and individual differences are common, and exploration of these concepts allowed for rich data collection to emerge from conversations with participants.

I made this short self-disclosure about my positionality in an effort to be transparent as well as to lower the barriers between researcher and researched. In doing so, I aimed to make the research process more equitable and less extractive. This approach is informed by feminist and feminist-Indigenous methodologies and acknowledges the power imbalance assumed to be inherent in an interview process (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002; TallBear 2014). I wanted my participants to feel fully included and respected throughout the research process, and I aimed to foster the circumstances that I hoped would promote such feelings.

On Gender and Gendered Language

Participants in this work all identify as having been assigned female at birth (AFAB) and having been socialized as women within purity culture. Not all participants in this work are women. Purity culture is a heavily gendered and cisgendered subculture that only recognizes cisgender identities as legitimate. Much of its messaging is aimed at women, which the culture understands to be those assigned female at birth. Throughout this dissertation, I use both AFAB and women as descriptive terms. I utilize the terminology of women where it refers to the constructed role of woman that participants and others are expected to fill within purity culture, and AFAB where it refers to the lived and experienced reality of participants who were assigned female at birth and may or may not be women.

Chapter 3: "You've Got to Be Small to Fit in Here": The Gendered Submission of the Body in Evangelical Purity Culture

Introduction

This dissertation begins with an examination of the gendered submission of the body in purity culture. This foundational dissertation chapter offers insight into the high degree of bodily control and severe lack of bodily autonomy experienced by participants within purity culture. This chapter also provides necessary grounding for understanding how this lack of bodily autonomy, and the broader control of the body by the structures of power within purity culture, shapes participant experience, as will be relevant across the other chapters in this work.

Diving into the gendered submission of the body, we find that existing literature shows gendered expectations within evangelical environments are associated with a high degree of gendered division of labor, caretaking, and submission to the needs of men and community (Gallagher 2003; Gallagher and Smith 1999; Van Osselaer and Maurtis 2020). However, the literature does not yet provide insight into what submission to these gendered expectations looks like in the flesh, blood, and bones of those expected to fulfill such expectations. As discussed in the theoretical grounding put forward in the introduction, religious adherents practice their religion in and through their bodies. The the body serves as a material subject that religio-cultural values can be impressed upon, making the body a critical point of inquiry in understanding religious environments (Csordas 1994; McGuire 1990; Nikkel 2019). Despite this, and the broad calls for embodied work in religion (Ammerman 2016; Homan and Burdette 2021), there remains little research at the intersection of religious environments and the body. This chapter, and this dissertation more broadly, seeks to answer this scholarly call for embodied work, examining embodied experiences of gendered expectations in evangelical environments.

Within purity culture, gender and sexual education are made explicit—codified, and taught to evangelical youth—making it an excellent site of inquiry. Emergent from this investigation of gender and gender socialization is the concept of the Proverbs 31 woman. This term was directly named by fifteen participants, with all other participants making note of very similar gender expectations, even though they did not explicitly name these expectations as the Proverbs 31 woman. This term is emblematic of the idealized evangelical woman and is examined in this chapter not as a concept but as it is experienced by the living, embodied participants of this study expected to fulfill this concept. Exploring gender expectations, I utilize participant stories and narratives to illustrate the idealized evangelical woman, then trace the embodied effects of such narratives in two major facets: the submission of the body to men and the submission of the body to the Kingdom of God. Within these two structures of submission, layered expectations of smallness emerge, including quietness, thinness, and a lack of bodily need or bodily autonomy. Through embodied analysis, I argue that the gendered submission of the body and the veneration of an idealized evangelical woman serve the purposes of white, cisheteropatriarchal power within evangelicalism in the United States. This chapter points to and lays the foundation for the larger project of this dissertation, which examines and illustrates the impacts of purity culture on the gendered body.

Background

Evangelical Womanhood in History

Purity culture is a major contemporary driver of the conservative, submissive, domestic evangelical woman. It holds an intensive emphasis on long-standing Christian values of virginity and marriage and emphasizes women's role in the home, modest and feminine dress, and the control of bodies to avoid tempting men into the sin of lust (Klein 2018). Complementarianism

and submission are two key terms regularly used in purity culture discussions of women's gender roles. Complementarianism is the belief that men and women should hold separate but complementary roles, and submission is the belief that within this complementarian structure, women are to submit to and defer to men and men's authority. This is particularly true regarding their husbands and fathers. These complementarian roles are centered around Western, 19th-century social organization emerging from the Industrial Revolution and as backlash to the growing women's suffrage movement (Barr 2021). Industrialization and urbanization in the West led to a re-emphasis on the gendered division of labor, with men typically working outside the home in factories and women in the home caring for children and running domestic affairs. In the late 19th century, the women's suffrage movement began to gain momentum, sparking a countermovement emphasizing women's domesticity and submission. Historian Barbara Welter coined the term 'the cult of domesticity' to describe this emphasis and outlined four key tenants of women's gender prescription within this system of belief: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Welter 1966). These same traits are key to evangelical womanhood.

Evangelicals often quote biblical scripture to support this system of gender expectations. One of the most common passages cited within evangelical Christianity, and understood as emblematic of the ideal woman by study participants, was Proverbs 31. This scriptural reference is often used to teach young girls their gendered role in evangelical social structures, as well as to correct adult women who venture outside of their prescribed role. Proverbs 31 describes a "wife of noble character" and, in many ways, paints a picture of a woman who is financially independent, a business owner, physically strong, generous, and praised for her work (Shively 2020). Within evangelicalism, however, these verses are typically interpreted in a more gender-conservative manner. Shively (2020) highlights the complementarian, domestic, and marital

focus of many evangelical interpretations, with domestic values constructed as countercultural resistance to purported secular, unchristian values of career orientation and delay of marriage and motherhood. In a related critique, Allen-McLaurin (2023) holds that evangelical interpretations of Proverbs 31 are a tool of "white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalistic misogyny," subjugating women while utilizing their labor, and criticizing modern interpretations of the passage as rooted in Puritanical ideals.

In addition to Proverbs 31, many verses that evangelicals quote to support their gender ideology emerge from the Pauline epistles–the books of the Bible authored by the apostle Paul. These texts are often referenced by key influencers of evangelical gender ideology, such as The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), a group helmed by evangelical leaders and holding complementarianism as biblical and God-designed. The CBMW holds that men and women are "called to different roles that each glorify him," with the admonition that in order to restore God's plan that has been distorted by human sin, "wives should forsake resistance to their husbands' authority and grow in willing, joyful submission to their husbands' leadership" (CBMW 1987, n.d.). However, Barr and other religious scholars argue that Paul's writings on gender, which the CBMW and others often quote, were, in their Roman paterfamilias context, demanding respect for women (Barr 2021). Paul stresses that husbands must also submit to their wives and that they love their wives as they love their own bodies—a radical ask in a historical context where the female body was understood as a disfigured, grotesque male body (Barr 2021; Connell 2016). Other eras of Christianity have drawn feminine and feminist messages from Paul's letters, such as the medieval emphasis on maternal imagery used to describe Christ (Bynum 1982). Despite these more feminist messages, evangelical Christianity and purity culture within it have taken the position of complementarianism and women submitting to men, holding

a secondary status within the family and church. This status has notably been encoded in doctrinal statements, such as the Southern Baptist Convention's pronouncements emphasizing wives submitting to their husbands and banning women from serving as pastors (SBC 2000).

Purity culture's conservative gender focus is purportedly scriptural, despite emerging around the late 19th century. This use of scripture to back conservative, complementarian gender roles is powerful, supporting structural sexism in evangelical environments. This chapter on gendered bodily submission within purity culture asks how structural, spiritualized, falsely-scriptural sexism affects evangelical women. I argue that expected traits of complementarianism and submission have embodied, material impacts on those they repress.

The Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God is a common term used to describe both the spiritual world over which the Christian God is believed to reign as well as the realization of the perceived will of God in the world (Wenell 2017). It is also a term for the global imagined community of protestant Christians—a form of world-making (Tsing 2005) in which individuals envision global networks of people, regardless of whether they travel or establish those connections. This term is often constructed in opposition to secular culture and correlated with evangelical missionary work—an exporting of white, patriarchal, American Christian nationalism, politics, and media (McAlister 2018). This concept is intertwined with purity culture, as they share a focus on spreading and enforcing evangelical values. Likewise, young people within purity culture often go on 'mission trips' to spread their religious beliefs in non-western countries, teaching purity culture messages in non-western countries (McGrath 2024; Mercier, Warren, and Kaell 2023; Schultz 2021). In this chapter, this term is used to denote the spiritual realm and will

of God, which is constructed as needing to be actively furthered through the actions of evangelical Christians and the creation of new believers through birth or conversion.

As laid out in the introduction to this dissertation, this chapter and others rely on theoretical concepts of lived (McGuire 2008) and embodied religion (Nikkel 2019), spiritualization, and the materiality of the female body. Within lived and embodied religion, this chapter contextualizes spiritual experience within the day-to-day experiences and embodied lives of participants. It also views these lives and experiences as inherently transformed through their spiritualization, creating not only social consequences for action but also spiritual and eternal. So too, it understands the female body as material—a site upon which cultural values and social expectations are imprinted and a locus of social control. These theoretical lenses guide this chapter's exploration of interview data from 65 in-depth interviews with participants assigned female at birth and socialized as women within purity culture. My analysis of stories and experiences shared by these participants surfaced the concept of gendered bodily submission that is explored and examined in this chapter.

Findings

The Ideal Woman in the Flesh

When I asked participants who the "ideal" woman in their communities was growing up—what she looked like, what she did, who she was—many mentioned the Proverbs 31 woman. Repeatedly invoked as a platonic ideal of evangelical womanhood, this term was utilized as shorthand for the layered gender expectations that participants faced in evangelical environments. Participant stories about the Proverbs 31 woman emphasize that she is a wife, mother, and homemaker, glossing over aspects present in the source material such as business

acumen and financial independence. When I asked Tara, a 30-year-old cisgender white woman, who the ideal woman was in her community growing up, she answered,

> Obviously, the Proverbs 31 woman...when I picture her, she's got long, non-colored, non-bleached hair, doesn't wear a lot of jewelry or makeup, definitely not overweight or anything. Pretty but not like model pretty...cute to her husband, but nobody else really notices her you know…She's great with kids and handles all the household stuff… she's quiet but strong…so spiritual and a spiritual leader among her girl friends but so quiet otherwise… she's not a giant presence, but she's always there, always supporting, always in the background, holding her husband's hand or supporting him going up to the stage to pray or whatever it is…oh, and white, definitely a white woman, for sure.

Here we see the evangelical ideal woman, explicitly denoted as the conceptual Proverbs 31 woman, described as a homemaker, mother, and wife, with scripture selectively interpreted to uphold the conservative, American femininity the church values. These expectations are not only of her words or her faith but also of her body. In Tara's description, the ideal woman is pretty but not so pretty as to be tempting to men. She doesn't put too much effort into her appearance, lest she be considered vain. Her appearance is carefully curated to appeal to the ideals of those in power. Likewise, she isn't a prominent presence. Her own embodied experience is not centered, instead it is suppressed to uphold the goals and roles of her husband and family. Also, Tara explicitly notes that this idealized woman is white, as did 24 other participants, indicating white supremacist understanding of the ideal and holy body within evangelical Christianity. These expectations are likely familiar to those knowledgeable of common white American gender roles, with these double-binding expectations and specific, subjugating standards common in broader culture. What sets evangelical expectations apart is their spiritualization. These gender roles and their required manifestations are not taught as social standards but as spiritual standards with the eternal consequences of sin at stake.

Also sharing about the idealized woman in her community, Emma, a 30-year-old cisgender white woman, shared, that "*The Proverbs 31 Woman is there for her family, she works*

hard for her family, she takes care of her family. And she's also, in James where it's like, 'Slow to speak, quick to listen, slow to become angry', that was incorporated." Caretaking, domesticity, and being a quiet presence are again highlighted, with expectations of submission and support. Additionally, a verse from James that is addressed to "brothers and sisters" in the original Biblical text is, in this evangelical context, applied specifically to women (James 1:19), emphasizing women's prescribed, unobtrusive, supporting role. Using scripture, gender expectations are spiritualized, conflating social expectations of quietness and emotional management to God's expectations, casting nonconformity as sin.

Elissa, a 24-year-old cisgender white woman, when asked about women's roles, shared this same expectation of quietness and being a non-disruptive presence.

> Some of the more conservative [views were] that women should be at home taking care of the kids and a woman's role is in the house. It was very Proverbs 31…just being gentle, calm, and nice, and not causing any conflict…That was what I heard the most as a kid and put on myself. Like, I have to be perfect and quiet and have a family someday. "I'm going to get married and have kids" is like kind of the big goal.

Again, we see that being a wife and a mother is inherent to the understanding of womanhood. So too, both of those roles are understood as quiet, helpful, and nurturing. References to this woman as gentle, calm, nice, and not causing conflict point to emotion management—the embodied requirement for women in these environments to make their emotions acceptable to those around them and those in power (Hochschild 1979).

Further illustrating embodied gender expectations within evangelicalism, Maia, a 33-year-old cisgender white woman, spoke about the idealized woman in her church community.

> Someone that covers up, doesn't wear makeup, doesn't have sexual desires or needs. Someone that gives everything to others without needing a single thing in return. In terms of looks, gosh, I don't know [of] someone that exists that the Church wants…just a wholesome, natural woman who is reserved in showing the curves of her body so that men don't stumble. A woman that gives everything to everyone else without needing a single thing in return…like, I don't enjoy hosting all the time, but I'm told, as a woman in

> the church and as a woman in the South, that's my job…I think a wholesome reserved, respectful, welcoming, accommodating woman that is conservative in her dress and gives men exactly what they want, all the time, and happily does it.

Here, Maia speaks to this ideal woman's appearance, echoing earlier participant descriptions that she is modestly dressed, naturally beautiful, and certainly not causing men to stumble into the sin of lust. She also calls out that this ideal woman does not have sexual desires or needs, nor needs or desires more generally. We see this expectation of giving to others without reciprocity illustrated in Maia's perceived, explicitly Christian and gendered duty of hosting. It is a part of her prescribed, spiritualized role as a woman in the church to give up her own embodied needs and desires to meet those of others, particularly men.

Across interviews, participants illustrate the platonic ideal of a biblical, 'Proverbs 31' woman as quiet, helpful, domestically skilled, and a wife and mother who is pleasing to men without threatening their authority. She is submissive, calm, and restrained, not causing conflict or taking up too much space. Likewise, she does not have needs or desires, existing to serve the needs and desires of others, whether sexually, socially, or otherwise. These gender roles are explicitly taught within purity culture, handed down from theologians, historical figures, and contemporary right-wing political beliefs to enforce a model of womanhood that is submissive to and secondary to men and community. Many of these expectations are predicated on a foundation of submission of the body—to quiet the voice, to submit one's bodily appearance to the desires of those in power, and to do away with one's own embodied needs and desires to meet the needs of others.

Women Are to Submit

Your Body Belongs to Your Husband (Or Your Dad)

A clear message of idealized gender roles in evangelical environments is that women's bodies, particularly young girls' bodies, do not belong to themselves but are subject to the rule of

the men in their lives. Many participants, reflecting on their childhood and adolescent experiences in faith communities, called out these purportedly God-given ideals of how men and women should behave. For many, these norms centered on a *"connotation of subjugation…talked a lot about submission of women"* (Leif, 28-year-old white genderqueer person). Many described the ideal evangelical woman as dependent on and submissive to a designated man in her life—either her husband or, if unmarried, her father. Discussing a marriage context, Melissa, a 31-year-old cisgender white woman, shared,

> A lot of femininity [centered] around being submissive, being a helper. I definitely picked up on this sense of women being the weaker sex…to be feminine you have to be, not totally helpless, but dependent on a man and submissive to a man. He is the strong one in the relationship.

As noted in this quote from Melissa, evangelical femininity and idealized womanhood are dependent on a lack of authority, autonomy, and self-efficacy. While this quote refers to the context of marriage—an often-discussed dynamic within purity culture, as will be elaborated on later in this section—this lack of autonomy and prescribed reliance on men is applied to young women and girls long before they entered into marriage. Before marriage, a woman is expected to depend on her father. Narratives of dependence and bodily submission are perhaps demonstrated most clearly in the relatively common purity culture practice of purity ceremonies. Such events typically resemble weddings, with girls in white dresses and fathers in suits. Daughters pledge their virginity to their fathers and promise to remain abstinent until marriage, and fathers promise to protect their daughter's virginity until she is married (Fahs 2010). Grace, a 32-year-old cisgender multiracial woman, spoke about her experience participating in one of these ceremonies saying,

> I did, in fact, have a purity ceremony…walking down this church aisle as a 15-year-old …promising my dad and male youth pastor that I wouldn't have sex until some man that I was meant to have sex with came along…I remember in the moment being fully on

> board…like, 'Yeah, this is like what I'm supposed to do'… standing in front of all these people promising my body to someone that didn't yet exist in my life, to my father, to my male youth pastor and to this male version of God.

Demonstrated and ritualized is the purity culture understanding that Grace's body did not belong to her, but to the men in her life. To be a good evangelical woman, she was required to submit to men's authority, surrendering her bodily autonomy to their role as her protector in order to be perceived as pure by her religious community. While this example makes apparent the narrative of women's bodily submission to men, these narratives are not always so explicit or symbolically laden. For many, it was simply a regular part of how their family structures operated. Holly, a 24-year-old cisgender white woman, noted that a main lesson she learned in purity culture growing up was that:

> The father is the head of the household. So, women are second to men… Especially as a woman, specifically coming from my dad, [the message was that] my feelings and my wants and needs are not to be trusted. My dad would legit stalk me on dates to find out who I was dating, even though I was like, "Hey, I'm not ready for you to meet them yet, this is still very new.: A lot of messaging of I'm a second-class citizen. I don't know what's best for me, someone else does. I need to defer to a man to know what's best for me…[for my parents], whenever they have a big decision to make, my mom can obviously give her opinion but my dad has the final say… just a lot of "Your opinion and your idea is not enough." You have to get approval from someone else, and it has to be male approval, but it can't be any male approval, it has to be your father or a good partner that your father has chosen.

Holly felt that she—and all women—came second to men and did not hold authority within the family, which translated into feeling that she could not trust herself, particularly when it came to romance, dating, and sexual desire. Growing up, her decision-making was not her own, and her body and being belonged to her father. Additionally, the narrative that Holly presents of needing to seek the approval of a father, or a husband that a father has chosen, speaks to the transfer of women's submission from father to husband upon marriage. These traditions—which stem from the patriarchal, economically-based trading of women as property and a

woman's virginity as part of her market value (Mariani 2012)—are often considered a scriptural practice within purity culture. Just as this submission was modeled for Holly in her parent's marriage, it was also explicitly taught in many sermons and lessons participants' received about their futures as wives, mothers, and women. The submission of the body to one's husband was, within these environments, a clear, concrete message.

Many participants demonstrated this expected submission of the body via modesty. Kelly, a 34-year-old cisgender white woman, spoke about her experience with modesty in the church, feeling that her body was the property of her future husband and that the rules around modesty were constructed with that 'ownership' in mind, saying,

> [The message about women's bodies was] cover it up for your husband…You don't want to give that away because then you're gonna have to tell your husband everybody who's been with you, and that's gonna be hard for you to talk about, because it's really his [body] at the end of the day, because you become one. Which, you know, makes sense, because that's a picture of the Lord and the church, and it's really beautiful that you become one. But, it was like, cover up for that reason.

Kelly shares that she was required to cover her body so that it could not be seen by men who were not her husband. In other words, her body was something that her husband owned, and she couldn't show other men her future husband's property. Kelly also refers to the Christian allegory of the church as Christ's bride, drawn from the book of Ephesians. In this letter, the author—generally believed to be the apostle Paul—states, "The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything" (Ephesians 5:23-24). This passage is sometimes interpreted within evangelical purity culture to support an argument that women are to be submissive to their husbands in the same way that Christians are submissive to God, which is to say, completely. While many scholars have refuted this interpretation, and even the translation of the biblical text (Archer and Archer 2019; Barr 2021),

it remains true that many evangelical households and purity culture marriage teachings operate on an understanding of womanhood that requires submission to a husband. Throughout this chapter, and others in this dissertation, we see that many allegedly scriptural gender norms may be more dependent on 19th and 20th-century cultural norms, such as the cult of domesticity and interpretations of scripture, than scripture itself.

Many participants also spoke about how they demonstrated their submission and adherence to gender expectations by embodying both physical and social smallness. For those who did not, there was often some degree of social censure. Ginny, a 23-year-old cisgender white woman, spoke about her experience being a woman with both a larger personality and body in church, along with her sister, saying,

> Women were supposed to be small and quiet. I was neither of those. Neither was my sister. She was skinnier than me, but she was louder than me in her stubbornness…One of the things I think of when I think of [women's roles] is… that my youth minister used to constantly tease—I say that with quotation marks—my sister that she intimidated boys…But she had opinions about things, and it was never defined how she intimidated boys, but she just did. And that was that…[The two of us were] not seen as viable mating options, basically. I wasn't one of the girls that people had crushes on, and neither was my sister. We were, I guess, too manly in terms of our desire to learn and teach.

Here, Ginny highlights expectations of thinness and quietness, both indications of the expectation of submission placed on women in church. Disobeying these expectations and foregoing common symbols of submission made Ginny and her sister "intimidating" to boys in their church, too powerful and perhaps threatening the assumed authority of men. She notes that these traits made them manly within the church, veering too far from the idealized, submissive woman. In this way, Ginny reports that she and her sister were not attractive to young Christian men seeking the dynamics of complementarianism and submission prescribed by the church for heterosexual relationships.

In a similar vein, Deanna, a 24-year-old cisgender white woman, noted that the idealized woman in her community growing up was small in both personality and size, submitting the shape of her body and the volume of her voice to defer to men. Sharing reflections on the relationship between women's roles, her eating disorder, and the church, she said,

> If purity culture is teaching me that my end goal is marriage, and within that marriage to be quiet and submissive, and my eating disorder is related to my self-worth, then, the only thing I can accomplish to achieve that self-worth is marriage...[My eating disorder] was me trying to be an entirely different person than who I am and trying to fit this mold of this submissive, pretty girl that I had in my head that must be the only thing guys wanted…She was small, and not just small in size…because that complements and uplifts the stereotypical masculine and allows the boys to be the strong, whatever ones...If you've got this much space for two people, boys are gonna take this much and you've got to be small to fit in here…You were prepping for the rest of your life [as] that small submissive wife.

To be married is a prerequisite to being a good woman. To be married, you had to submit—to be small, quiet, nurturing, and supportive, putting others' needs before your own. For Deanna, this bodily submission meant thinness, which she pursued through disordered eating, aiming to fulfill her prescribed gender role. Smallness was a key trait required of the evangelical ideal woman, making more physical and social space for men and masculinity.

In addition to more general expectations of submission, such as thinness, quietness, and nurturing, another expectation of bodily submission commonly reported by participants was that wives were to have sex with their husbands whenever they wanted, regardless of their own desires. As Briar, a 32-year-old cisgender white woman, shared, *"[There were] a lot of weird [messages that] you are for your husband. Your body isn't yours. If he wants to have sex, you better do it.*" Gemma, a 33-year-old cisgender white woman, shared a similar story, saying,

> The pastor who married [me and my husband] said that as his gift he would offer premarital counseling. I said, "Oh, that's very generous but we've already had all the conversations that we need to have"… So, he said, "Okay, well, let's meet to discuss the ceremony at such and such time." That meeting was apparently his way of slipping in a premarital counseling session where he told me that it was my duty as a wife to provide

> for my husband in whatever sexual way that he wanted and that he required...it's important that you keep up [sexually] and that you provide for your husband.

Both Molly and Gemma were explicitly told that they were responsible for their husband's sexual satisfaction and that they needed to provide for him sexually, regardless of their own sexual desire. This explicit submission of the body to the desires of men makes clear gendered expectations within the purity culture movement—a woman must submit her needs, desires, and the flesh of her body to the needs and desires of her husband.

Along similar lines, many participants also shared stories of being told to work—through the bodily labor of dieting, exercising, and otherwise keeping up their appearance—to ensure that their husbands found them sexually attractive. As Nicole, a 33-year-old cisgender white woman, noted,

> For women…it was your responsibility to look nice. I remember, growing up, it was like a scripture a quote that my mom had hanging on her mirror, it [said] it's your responsibility to represent God and to look your best and to be pleasing to other people. I think that made it even harder for my mom and for some other women in my family who really struggled with their weight, because it was very much like, "Well, if you don't please your husband then it's not his fault if he tries to find something better."

In this quote, Nicole speaks to the spiritualization of thinness and attractiveness in her world growing up, as indicated by her mother's scriptural self-admonition to look her best. So too, her mother was also held responsible for dieting, as she would be constructed as at fault if she was in a larger body and her husband left her or cheated on her. Other physical and sexual expectations shared by participants included similar things, such as Cecily, a 29-year-old cisgender white woman, who shared that it was explicitly stated in her church that "*you should work on your body…because your husband deserves that*." So too, Beth, a 35-year-old white cisgender woman, shared, "*I remember reading an article…that said women couldn't even be on top when they were having sex because that was to assume spiritual authority over a man."* In

terms of sexual availability, physical appearance, and even sexual position, women were meant to be submissive to their husbands. The lived, embodied experience of attempting to fulfill the concept of an ideal Proverbs 31 woman required the surrender of bodily autonomy to the needs, desires, and control of men.

Your Body Belongs to the Kingdom of God

In addition to submitting to their fathers and husbands, participants noted that they were also expected to submit their bodies to the needs and expectations of the Kingdom of God. As discussed in the background, the Kingdom of God is constructed as the will and realm of God that needs to be actively furthered by the actions of evangelical Christians. Many participants felt their bodies were not their own to experience or enjoy but used as tools to fulfill idealized expectations and further evangelical Christianity. In some ways, this meant, as Leif, a 28-year-old genderqueer white person, put it, "*wanting to display an image that would make Christianity attractive*." Tara, a 30-year-old white cisgender woman who we heard from earlier, spoke to this phenomenon of making the Kingdom of God attractive, saying,

> Every word I said, every step I took, I wanted to be perfect… I wanted to be sanctified, beautiful in the eyes of God, beautiful to the world around me. I remember one of the things that people would always say is that you are so filled with the Lord that you just glow, like, people can tell. You don't even have to say you're a Christian, they just know. And, so, I think I was always striving to glow, and for me, that was my being perfect… [trying to lose weight was] I think just like it was a constant process of sanctification of trying to become like Christ or be the best representation of him in my body that I could.

Desiring to be beautiful in Christ, Tara sought to lose weight. Her experience held that being beautiful to those around her and being the best representation of Christ that she could be required losing weight as a process of sanctification. This overt spiritualization of weight loss and attractiveness further points to the idea that participants' bodies did not belong to them but

were meant for the purposes of God and God's will. Also commenting on the idea of using one's body for God's purposes, Siobhan, a 27-year-old cisgender white woman, noted,

> There was very much a sense of, basically, ableism. Like, "Well, God can only use you if you are thin and attractive and able-bodied."…if you were going to be a missionary, there was a size limit, and to be able to do this activity or that, you had to weigh under a certain amount. So, if God was going to use you, if you were going to be prepared to be used by God, then you had to meet those weight criteria. And part of your goal as a Christian woman was to land a husband, and if you wanted to land a husband, then you needed to be attractive, and attractiveness was limited to thinness.

For Siobhan, there was a clear message that one could only be useful to God if one was thin and attractive, as well as able-bodied. The work of enacting God's perceived will in the world came with a size limit, as did finding a husband—a key requirement for Christian women. Also speaking about the way that her body and the bodies of others were constructed within purity culture and evangelicalism, Lindsay, a 30-year-old cisgender white woman, shared,

> [It was] this temple of God mentality… that seems to be kind of like the kernel of it all. You can probably flesh it out or say it different ways, but really it's about how do you live the best life as a Christian—it's by being healthy, or being pure… food conversations would be around what is healthy, in order to like have the best body, or even like, something that I'm kind of thinking about, is like having the best body for evangelism, like being able-bodied to like go out and spread the word and that sort of thing.

In Lindsay's community, she felt that her body and her health were spiritualized using ideas of the Kingdom of God. The common evangelical Christian scriptural motif of a "temple of God" that Lindsay references refers to the common belief that the Holy Spirit, a manifestation of God, lives within those who believe in God and are saved. Often used as a motivation for weight loss and exercise is the idea of making one's body a more suitable home for that spirit, with the implication that a fat body is an unsuitable home. For Lindsay, expectations were such that to honor God by creating her body as a temple and to create the body best suited for evangelism, she had to pursue a particular definition of a healthy body. Her appearance and the state of her

body were made subject to the constructed goal of building the Kingdom of God and being a good Christian through having a narrowly-defined pure and healthy body.

In addition to this expectation of building the Kingdom of God through evangelism, women were also expected to further the Kingdom of God through childbearing, with motherhood a key role for the evangelical ideal woman. For some participants, this responsibility was preached as a matter of Christian nationalism and the need to increase the strength and reach of evangelical Christians. Audrey, a 38-year-old cisgender multiracial woman, shared about her experience becoming a mother in an evangelical, purity culture environment, saying,

> Before I got pregnant, I remember going to this marriage retreat. The speakers were saying it's our job and duty to have babies because Christianity is becoming less of the dominant faith and the Muslims—this is literally what they said—the Muslims are having babies on babies on babies and raising them in that, and we are in competition with that. We need to have babies, and raise them up, and homeschool them…we're solely responsible for bearing all these babies so we can keep the Christian faith alive…They told us to get off birth control if we were on birth control…then there was a wave of pregnancies and I was part of that first wave of pregnancies.

To bear, raise, and homeschool Christian children was constructed as a matter of competition with people of Islamic faith. The bodily, biological experience and reality of pregnancy became, for Audrey, a religious requirement. Her body was constructed as a vessel meant to further Christianity. Evangelical women are expected to be mothers, a social requirement that can be understood as embodied submission to the perceived needs of the kingdom, not only through pregnancy but also through feminized tasks such as childcare and food preparation. Many participants spoke of an emphasis on caretaking for girls and women, with care work an expected contribution to the kingdom by way of their families and communities. When asked how the attributes of an idealized woman were communicated to her, Anya, a 23-year-old cisgender white woman, shared,

> It was communicated to me directly because I was the eldest daughter. I had a very hands-on role in caretaking for my siblings and for other people's families. It was normal for my family to volunteer us to go take care of other people's kids…like, "Oh, today you're going to be at this family's house taking care of their newborn for six hours"…a lot of babysitting, daycare, and nursery stuff. The moms would be dropping their kids off to me and saying, "You need to be like this, you need to be like that. Is that how you're going to talk to your child, when you're a mother of your own?" I was 10 years old, snapping at a kid. Then, when I was 16 [they said], "Oh, you're going to be such a good mom because you do XYZ," or, "You look tired, are you going to let your husband see that you're so tired when you're married?"

In Anya's story, bodily submission through the physical labor of caretaking, feeding, and educating young children is an expected, gendered community contribution. This quote also points to embodied emotion management (Hochschild 1979) expected of women within Christianity, as she faced correction from other women who enforced community gender expectations. She was meant to present a positive, patient, and energetic self, and when she did not—being short with a child she was watching or appearing tired—she was corrected. Her embodied tasks, emotions, and reactions were shaped and controlled through gendered correction and socialization and the explicit communication of how a good woman within purity culture was supposed to appear and behave.

Laura, a 22-year-old cisgender white woman, also spoke of an expectation of positivity in service of the kingdom of God. When asked to describe the 'ideal' woman in her purity culture environment growing up, she described a "sunshiny" presence.

> [The ideal woman was] Proverbs 31, totally selfless, just the giver. And, it was really, really very, very important to be sunshiny all the time…One of the pastors, the one that I liked the least, he was one of those "Why aren't you smiling?" [men], [saying] "You need to smile." He would frequently reference that women—or, he would call us God's ladies—God's ladies are Little Miss Sunshines and we're supposed to smile and show God's light, and that's why [God] makes women prettier than men…we're like accouterments, basically…that it's important to not leave the house in your pajamas and you need to take pride in yourself for your husband, you need to be available to your husband, and you're in a supporting role. You're quiet, subservient, in the back, and—I don't know, June Cleaver, that would be the ideal?

Here, Laura focuses on expectations of positivity for the Proverbs 31 woman. Women are meant to serve as an attractive buoy for their communities and husbands. Laura's emotion management to create the expected sunshiny demeanor was constructed as an important way to show "God's light", used metaphorically to mean embodying godly attributes and spreading evangelical teachings. In this story, Laura's pastor constructs women smiling, managing their emotions, and looking pretty for their husbands as important to God's will and presence in the world. To embody the conceptual Proverbs 31 woman, Laura had to submit her embodied emotional experience to rules of appropriate behavior for the benefit of her community, and particularly the men within it.

Discussion

In exploring the embodied experience of the roles and expectations of women within purity culture, this chapter centers the gendered submission of the body. Surfacing the concept of the Proverbs 31 woman, we find that the evangelical interpretation of this scriptural concept emphasizes a spiritualized version of traditional American femininity, including thinness, quietness, and caretaking. We also find that the submission of the body is key to participants' gendered experiences. Focusing on purity culture as a microcosm of broader evangelical culture, submission is demonstrated through two major pathways: the submission of the body to men, and the submission of the body to the Kingdom of God. Centering the body in a religious movement, this chapter understands the body as a materiality upon which cultural values are impressed, examining gender expectations within evangelicalism not as concepts but as embodied experiences in the flesh, blood, and bones of those expected to fulfill these concepts.

The ideal woman, as she is conceptualized within purity culture, is portrayed as a homemaker, mother, and wife. So too, she is expected to be a quiet presence with few, if any,

needs or desires and a feminine appearance that is pleasing to others. Expectations of physical and social smallness, maternal and domestic behavior, unobtrusiveness, and personal needlessness are supported by selective and culturally interpreted scripture meant to uphold conservative American femininity. These gendered expectations are understood as predicated on submission of the body, and the use of scripture creates spiritual consequences for failing to adhere to them.

Bodily submission is first examined in the context of men—both fathers and husbands. Through participant narratives, we find that, as young girls, participants were expected to submit to their fathers' patriarchal authority over their bodies. This was demonstrated through parent expectations, purity ceremonies, and the influence fathers have over who their daughters marry. Such fatherly control is coded within purity culture as protection of purity and virginity. At marriage, that submission transfers to a woman's husband, to whom she is perceived to owe the bodily submission of sexual availability, a thin and attractive body that she keeps from other men's eyes, and a quiet, helpful presence. Such expectations meant limits on participants' decision-making power and their ability to trust their own thoughts and instincts.

We next examine the submission of the body to the conceptual kingdom of God, a missional, proselytizing outlook on the expansion of evangelical beliefs. We find that bodies of women within purity culture are socially required to be submitted to the furtherance of the kingdom of God, whether through dieting and exercise, childbearing and childcare, or emotion management. Tasked with furthering the reign of the evangelical interpretation of God, women's bodies become objects to be used for childbearing, childrearing, and boosting the morale of those around them. They are subject to standards of body size and fitness, with fatness painted as a sin and fat bodies as of no use to God's purposes. This clear example of the materiality of the female

body in religious culture shows the evangelical value of proselyting and increasing group size by utilizing female bodies as attractive messengers and biological reproducers to further the cause.

Throughout this chapter, I argue that the expectation to fulfill the concept of the ideal, Proverbs 31 woman, and the embodied reality of submission inherent within that expectation, is used to serve the purposes of white, patriarchal power. Participant narratives show that those understood as women in evangelical purity culture have little bodily autonomy but are instead subject to the goals and purposes of those in power. As noted, those in power are, almost exclusively, white men, and a major goal of power is to further the kingdom of God through the spread of evangelical and purity culture values. Findings indicate that concepts of evangelical womanhood are rooted in white, conservative American values, the cult of domesticity, and the subjugation of women to men. Submitting to men and the Kingdom of God are thus complementary, as the Kingdom of God is a concept interpreted through American, white supremacist Christian values and patriarchy. This chapter offers key understandings and a foundation for the broader project of this work to understand the impacts of purity culture on bodies and the knowledge that comes from bodies with lived experience in this environment.

Chapter 4: A Thin Body is a Holy Body: Thinness as Bodily Discipline, Modesty, and Whiteness in Evangelical Purity Culture

Introduction

Building off the previous chapter's examination of the submission of the body, this chapter explores the manifestations and purposes of thinness for those assigned female at birth within purity culture. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the female body is often considered untrustworthy, requiring discipline. Correspondingly, disciplining the body has been commonplace in Christianity since its early days. Many devout adherents throughout the years have renounced all earthly pleasures, eschewing bodily comfort or enjoyment in favor of spiritual pursuits, with the two believed to be opposed. Mainstream Christian doctrines hold that the body is fallen, a source of sin, and that spirituality is entirely separate from it, often quoting the Bible verse that "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Griffith 2004; Matthew 26:41). Much of Christian creed has viewed the body as a burden to be borne until such a day as one could shed it and enter the spiritual world free from the flesh (Williams and Bendelow 1996; Lister 2020). While on earth, disciplining the body is believed to allow one to free oneself from the animalistic world of physical needs, ostensibly offering spiritual gains. One way this value of bodily control has manifested, particularly for those assigned female at birth, is through food. Gluttony, or overindulgence, is considered a sin and, while applicable to many areas of potential overindulgence, is most attached to food. Inversely, fasting, or ritualized abstinence from food, is upheld as an important part of Christian practice.

While emergent in early Christianity, this thread of spiritualized bodily discipline and eschewing pleasure has extended through time to purity culture. A purported lack of self-control or self-denial is a common root in many of the sins emphasized in purity culture, particularly for women. Common examples include giving into a sexual thought or action or wearing immodest

clothing and causing a man to lose self-control and enter sexual sin (Klement et al. 2022; Owens, Lewis Hall and Anderson 2021). As such, the purity culture movement is generally discussed as an abstinence movement, with the discipline and denial of sexual desire is made an explicit expectation. Recent literature, however, has begun to expand the examination of discipline within purity culture, going beyond its central messaging of prohibiting sex outside of the context of heterosexual Christian marriage and into areas such as its enforcement of white leadership, ideals, and cultural norms (Natarajan et al. 2022; Schultz 2021) and heterosexuality (Cronan 2023; Sawyer 2022).

Joining this wave of critical work in expanding our understanding of the goals and bounds of the purity culture movement, I expand the concept of bodily discipline within purity culture to examine food and the body, particularly regarding a gendered pursuit of thinness and how thinness becomes entangled with valuations of holiness. While such associations have been well-examined in historical context, less research has focused on contemporary times, and even less still within purity culture. Aiming to fill this gap, I first trace the history of bodily discipline, as well as whiteness and white supremacy, and their entanglement with thinness and body ideals throughout Christian history. Utilizing theoretical lenses of lived and embodied religion, the materiality of the female body, Foucauldian biopower, and an iteration of Goffman's stigma, I explicate how spiritualized thin ideals are shaped by power. In examining thinness, I describe purity culture as a movement broadly focused on the control of bodies, including their size and shape. I examine three key mechanisms of thinness for AFAB people within purity culture: Thinness as bodily discipline, thinness as modesty, and thinness as whiteness. I relate each of these to the overarching spiritualization of thinness, wherein thinness, through these mechanisms, is associated with holiness. These findings offer an analysis of the spiritualized thin

ideal in the context of purity culture, updating and expanding the literature on the intersection of bodily discipline and Christianity.

Background

A Brief History of Bodily Discipline in Christianity

Contextualizing the work of this chapter on thinness, we must first understand the history and valuation of bodily discipline that precedes purity culture. Evangelical ethos, like much of Western Christianity before it, holds that the body must be disciplined to keep away from its instinctual, inherent immorality, desiring a perfect, or perfectible, body. This discipline can be seen in a long tradition of suffering for Christ, which has included common practices of celibacy and fasting, as well as more extreme examples such as that of St. Benedict throwing himself into a thorny bush and thrashing around to combat his libido (Peters-Custot 2018). As emblematized in the doctrine of total depravity, put forward by Augustine of Hippo in the 5th century, Christian creed holds that all aspects of humanity were corrupted through the first sin of Adam and Eve, and their earthly flesh was thus spiritually dead, "worthy only of eternal damnation" (Dally 2009:3). With the body so condemned and the spiritual so elevated, fasting and, as I will argue in this chapter, other forms of spiritualized food restriction such as dieting can be seen as an extension of the ascetic, hyper-spiritualized tendencies of Western Christianity, wherein the mind-body divide makes possible the spiritual conquering and control of the body. To understand this connection, we must first trace its roots in Western philosophical thought and Christian history.

Modern Christian values of bodily discipline are, in part, attributable to the longstanding separation of mind and body in Western thought stretching back to Plato and Aristotle, who believed that body and soul were separate entities (Williams and Bendelow 1996). Within this

divide, the mind, considered rational, has long reigned supreme. Since this classical Greek and Roman period, the Western philosopher's task has been seen as "'freeing' and 'separating' the soul from the body in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom" (Williams and Bendelow 1996:25). On the other hand, Judaic tradition that Christianity emerged from has, in many ways, rejected dualism in favor of holistic knowledge and an appreciation of physical pleasures (Ross 2022). Much of early Christianity, emerging from a confluence of Greek and Judaic thought, held the body in tension—a vessel for God's power, yet corrupt in itself (Vasquez 2011). Other prominent early Christian groups focused on the corruption of the body and heavily emphasized dualism and spiritualized control of the body, such as the gnostic tradition, which held a "radically dualistic worldview", sometimes describing the "divine self" as imprisoned in a mortal body (Marjanen 2008:206).

Dualism is also historically linked to the intersection of Christianity and food. This intersection can be traced to the medieval period, in which Catherine of Siena, who died of self-starvation in 1380, held that true nourishment came from God and that relying on earthly foods was gluttonous (Brumberg 2000). Also emerging from medieval Christian Europe was the first documented eating disorder, anorexia mirabalis. Also called "holy anorexia" and colloquially known as 'fasting girls', anorexia mirabilis was a form of self-starvation used to imitate the suffering of Christ on his journey to the cross in Medieval Europe (Espi Forcen 2013). While fasting was a common religious practice for all within this medieval context, this more extreme form of fasting was a gendered phenomenon, with many women and very few men noted to engage in such long and intensive fasts (Bynum 1987). Medieval scholars note that this is perhaps a result of the limited agency of women in this time—while subject to the patriarchal authority of their husbands, priests, and kings, women were still able to control what they ate or

did not eat (Sukkar, Gagan, and Kealy-Bateman 2017). Continuing the connection between bodily self-denial and spirituality, fasting has also been a common spiritual practice in Christianity for hundreds of years. Prominent religious figures, such as Martin Luther, who was responsible for the birth of the Reformation era, encouraged regular fasting to curb physical desire and to create a fit body that could be used to do God's ministry (1520).

A century after Martin Luther, as the Enlightenment era took hold in the 1600s, this rule of the mind over the body began to manifest as a trend for thinness among men. A thin male figure was seen as a representation of great reason and restraint, the reasoned mind more powerful than the unreasoned body (Strings 2019). The body hungered, but the mind did not give in and provide the body with food, thus exerting dominance over it. Bordo (1986) and Lloyd (1986) have critiqued these gendered narratives wherein the body and the bodily are often associated with the feminine, tied to ideas of the hysterical, and seen as an unreliable source of knowledge. The mind is, in opposition, constructed as masculine and associated with clear rationality, advanced philosophy, and control over an unruly nature. This Cartesian dualism—ever-present in the white, American evangelical Christianity from which purity culture emerged—sees the feminine body and its sensations and emotions as something to be regulated and managed by the masculine mind (Williams and Bendelow 1996).

Later on, in the late 1800s, John Kellogg—famous for his sanitarium and later, by association, for the cereal company his brother built—aimed to foster physically fit bodies among Anglo-Saxon American women of childbearing age, with the explicit goal of reproducing what he saw as white racial superiority through eugenics. Viewing all forms of excess as sinful, he prescribed daily exercise and fresh air, as well as a diet of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and milk (Strings 2019). In an era that associated rich foods with increased libido, he believed this

diet would strengthen the body, yet not spark the appetite for food or sex, thereby not endangering Christian souls that were meant to abstain (Gardella 2016). Highly valuing the control of sexual appetite, he promoted applying carbolic acid to the clitoris, burning and blistering it such that it could not offer pleasure, to combat women's sexual desire (Gross 2022). Sylvester Graham of the eponymous Graham crackers also feared an excess of food and sex and developed his snack as a key part of his plan to combat the purported disease of masturbation and the spiritual evil of sexual desire (Strings 2019).

Examining more modern manifestations of these beliefs in evangelical Christianity, we find that while the body is discussed as a temple for the Holy Spirit—the manifestation of the Christian God that is said to reside within people—it is also seen as a bastion of sin and temptation. One of these sins is gluttony, which in its most neutral form is described as overconsumption of something, generally food. Heavily spiritualized within purity culture and correlated to the false idea that body size is a direct result of a lack of dietary willpower, not only is overeating seen as sinful, but so too are the fat bodies falsely believed to be a direct result of overeating. Gluttony is presumed to be present in the fat body, and holy discipline in the thin body. A holy body is, in this framework, a disciplined body, able to be conquered and endure suffering and, in some cases, able to sustain itself without sustenance. Scholars have studied this phenomenon in the context of broader evangelical communities of the 1980s and 1990s. For example, Griffith's (2004) work on Christian diets highlights an evangelical belief that not paying strict attention to one's food and fitness might result in God's disapproval. And, inversely, there is the belief that a fit and healthy body "signif[ies] ostensibly fitter souls" with a tie between the strength of one's body and the strength of one's faith (Griffith 2004:6). Studying links between Christian weight loss groups and conversion therapy groups in the early 2000s,

Gerber highlights the evangelical, and broader American, fascination with controlling and altering strong bodily desires (Gerber 2011). While highlighted in the broader context of evangelicalism, these phenomena remain yet unstudied in the context of purity culture.

Throughout this history of bodily discipline, the control of the female body has been of import to Christian culture. The discipline of fasting has often been feminized, with the allegedly unruly female body controlled through fasting, and the construction of gender-normative womanhood as passive and oriented toward the needs of others and not themselves (Jovanovski 2022). Likewise, much of the eugenic focus of 1800s American health reform focused on the female body and its childbearing capacity for reproducing white supremacist social hierarchies. Many Christian groups, historical and modern, have held that not only are women categorically unfit for church leadership given that the authority of men is viewed as God ordained, but they are also bodily unfit—too emotional, not rational enough—to lead others. For example, Matt Walsh, a prominent evangelical figure and right-wing political commentator, holds that the church is "too soft, too focused on feelings and emotions, and being welcoming and inclusive," and that this is a problem resultant from women being in leadership (Walsh 2023). So too, the female body is believed to endanger the souls of all—of the men who might find themselves lusting after an immodestly dressed woman, and the woman who might then be sexually assaulted by such men and thus be considered impure. Through this narrative, purity culture fabricates an idea of the female body as inherently dangerous, needing to be controlled in presentation and behavior (Fahs 2010). Modest, conservative dress, heavily emphasized in purity culture, covers up the maligned female body, making that body more amenable to the culture that objectifies and endangers it. Within the context of purity culture, modesty rules can range from high necklines and long skirts to a more liberal standard of wide-strap tank tops and hemlines no

more than an inch or two above the knee. These rules and regulations around dress are often constructed as being for the benefit of both the wearer and the observer, protecting both from sexual sin.

A Brief History of White Supremacy, Thinness, and Christianity

While purity culture as a project of white supremacy was discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, this section offers an extension of this background to examine the conceptual intertwining of thinness, whiteness, and Christianity. The roots of this linkage lie in the increase in the number of Black people being enslaved and brought to Europe in the Enlightenment era, wherein European powers otherized Black bodies and their supposed labor potential and animalistic nature, racistly characterizing African people as greedy in terms of food and sexuality as a means of dehumanizing those they enslaved (Strings 2019). Through this characterization of greed, fatness and Blackness came to be linked in cultural understandings common among Europeans (Strings 2019). This narrative, combined with religious ideals of bodily denial as holy, created a matrix within which disciplining the body into pious, spiritualized thinness was also disciplining the body away from constructed Blackness. Thus, a fear of the Black body, and of being seen as similar to it, spurred on religious diets and spiritualized thinness, weaponizing racism to discipline the body. The Christian diet industry, which emerged in the later Reformation era of the early 1700s, combined these beliefs with the additional Enlightenment-era belief that a thin body represented the prominence of the intellectual mind over the body, and tied it up with the belief that their strict Protestant morals should be reflected in aesthetic ideals (Grabill 2006; Mellor and Shilling 1997) Through the powerful, colonial British valuation of restraint and bodily discipline as a perceived representation of the reasoned mind of Anglo-

Saxonism—which were constructed in opposition to the fabricated dehumanization of Black people—whiteness, thinness, and Protestantism became conceptually inextricable (Strings 2019).

Later Christian health reformers, such as the aforementioned Kellogg and Graham, took these beliefs even further, believing a fit body was not only essential for both piety and garnering a more enjoyable afterlife but also the continued domination of the Anglo-Saxon race (Griffith 2004; Strings 2019). Medicalizing white supremacist narratives of the caricaturized, societally maligned Black body, Kellogg and other racist scientists of the time simultaneously feared the fatness associated with Black bodies and feared that the healthy childbearing of supposedly inferior Black people would lead to the demise of the Anglo-Saxon race. With thinness so tied to whiteness, Celtic and Eastern European people were deemed too fat, and thus not white enough, to continue their lineage by many eugenicists of the era. So too, fatness was, for many Protestant health reformers, seen as punishment from God, with the fat body and bodies of color thus constructed as spiritually unfit. The only acceptable body was a white body whose desires were controlled, and that control was reflected in a thin, fit body that was primed to reproduce white supremacist racial dominance.

Today, this legacy of white supremacist definitions of health continues in the form of the Body Mass Index (BMI), a metric shown to be medically unsound and discriminatory. Originally developed by Lambert Adolph Jacque Quetelet, an astronomer and statistician, to describe the average man in 1830s Europe, it was not adopted as a measure of individual standard weight until 1972 (Nuttall 2015). This adoption of white, male average as a health standard wrongly designates many bodies—especially Black women's bodies, which are, on average, larger—as unhealthy, even though Black women have been found to have the lowest mortality and morbidity rates of any demographic group at those BMIs (Jackson et al. 2014). Many aspects of

insurance coverage are, to this day, based on BMI, with charts used to determine who could be considered overweight. Insurance companies are then able to use the constructed status of overweight or obese as a pre-existing condition to refuse coverage (Strings 2019). Black women were thus re-associated with fat, and fat was re-associated with disease. Racism and fear of fatness, tied into Christian understandings through the shared thread of white supremacy, were reified through the popularization of the BMI.

As noted in the introduction, evangelicalism and purity culture within it, are embedded in the United States, a nation built on white supremacy. American Christianity both emerged from and is responsible for the creation and maintenance of a dominant culture of white supremacy and racial exclusion in the United States (Jones 2020). Emergent from political backlash, purity culture is tied to anxieties of the so-called white nation around preserving their status as a dominant group (Moslener 2015). This central messaging of whiteness and white supremacy within evangelicalism does not preclude the fact there are many evangelical Christians who are people of color, as well as theological and eschatological movements within the larger entity of evangelical Christianity that are made by and for people of color. For example, Natarajan et al. (2022) highlight the "gendered racism and white idealization" (316) of purity culture messaging and the negative impacts that it had on a qualitative sample of women of color. Additionally, Moultrie's (2017) examination of Black evangelical ministries around sexuality as emergent from, and promoting, a different, understanding of sex and sexuality that is not meant to reproduce white social dominance. While there is certainly a diversity of experience within purity culture spaces, this work also recognizes that purity culture is transformed by its white supremacist foundations.

Seeking to be aware of and responsive to experiences of oppression via intersecting systems of power and racial oppression in white religious spaces, I focus on the contours of whiteness, its cultural and political power, and the experience of white Christian nationalist environments in a movement where the majority of people are white (Mitchell 2019). I examine the structural norm of whiteness as a "strategy of authority" and social construct more than a particularly salient personal identity given its constructed nature as the default race (Bhabha 1998:n.p.; Guess 2006). Racist and white supremacist thought is entrenched within evangelical culture (Chang 2012; Jones 2020), and this understanding contextualizes the intertwined concepts of bodies, gender, health, beauty, piety, and purity that this work examines. Given this context, I seek to understand both how white supremacy manifests itself in the lives and embodied experiences of white people—the oppressing group—who compose 86% of the sample in this work, as well as the people of color who are subject to this oppression, often within predominantly white religious spaces.

Theoretical Grounding

In line with this dissertation work as a whole, this chapter on the roles and mechanisms of thinness within purity culture relies on overarching theoretical grounding in lived and embodied religion, transformative spiritualization, and the materiality of the female body. I use lived (McGuire 2008) and embodied (Nikkel 2019) to emphasize and understand how purity culture practices and beliefs are lived out in the daily routines and experiences of participants. Thus, I contend that religious and spiritual experiences are not solely intellectual or metaphysical but are lived out through everyday bodily experiences and expressions (Ammerman 2016) and offer particular attention to both the explicit and implicit teachings of purity culture. These cultural values and their manifestations are also seen as spiritualized, inherently transformed, and made

different by their perceived spiritual and eternal consequences. So too, I understand the materiality of the female body to understand how cultural values are etched onto shape and experiences within the female body. In addition to these overarching theoretical groundings, I utilize two additional theoretical lenses to understand and analyze the data in this chapter in particular: biopower, and sin and stigma as a disciplining force on the female body.

Biopower

Within this chapter, I seek to understand the historical and operational facets of the social management of bodies under purity culture. To do so, I utilize the Foucauldian concept of biopower, particularly its body-centered branch of anatomo-politics (Foucault 1978). The management of bodies by structures of power is by no means a novel concept nor exclusive to purity culture, but has long been a concern for governing authorities. Biopower is understood as productive in addition to repressive. Repressive juridical power, wherein those in authority impose restrictions on behavior and penalize disobedient parties, was particularly relevant in a feudal landscape. Following this era, biopower emerged to shape the actions and ideas of its subjects' bodies to advance the interests of those in authority. Anatomo-politics centers on the flesh, utilizing knowledge to regulate and control individuals' lives, establishing norms and ideals that marginalize alternative ways of being. By establishing this norm, it also establishes a framework wherein individuals are incentivized to revolve around that particular way of being, aiming to conform to the norm or be appealing to those in authority. Within the purity culture movement, anatomo-politics manifests in the regulation of sexual activity, emphasis on internal control of sexual thoughts, enforcement of modest dress, explicit education on gender roles, and, as I argue, the dictation of body shape and size. Concepts of sin and stigma, further discussed in

the following section, contribute to the creation of an otherized sinner versus a fabricated normal, holy body, allowing those in power to shape bodies deemed suitable for the faith.

Portraying itself as advantageous to both the individual and the collective, this form of productive power is often difficult to see as something that serves the interests of authority (Foucault 1978). Purity culture practices align with this paradigm. They present abstinence practices and purity-centered framings of body and sin as beneficial, often employing therapeutic language to support their assertions (Klein 2018; Moslener 2015). Likewise, abstinence until marriage is presented as the best and only way to achieve a fulfilling sexual and romantic life in marriage, in addition to the spiritual imperative of purity. Modesty rules for women are portrayed as protective, shielding women from men whose sex drive is believed to be uncontrollable, and men from having to face the temptation of seeing a woman's body (Natarajan et al. 2022). In the context of this chapter, the construction of thinness as inherently healthy and as keeping a religious adherent away from the sin of gluttony are additional examples of purportedly beneficial inducements toward compliance with the ideals of power. Pressure to conform to the interests of power is diffuse, emanating from those in authority, peers, and self-imposed expectations. In the evangelical context, the belief in an all-seeing and all-knowing God adds an element of omnipresent policing, encouraging self-surveillance to avoid that which is constructed as sin. In this chapter on thinness, this theoretical mechanism of biopower and anatamo-politics will be used to understand the mechanisms of power at work that enforce thin body ideals and norms and to understand the goals of that enforcement.

Sin and Stigma as a Disciplining Force on the Female Body

Goffman's term, stigma, originates from the Greek, which referred to bodily signs meant to expose something bad about the morality of the person bearing that sign. Such signs were

often physically imposed, such as a branding mark, and would denote traits viewed as negative that might cause that person to be otherized and ostracized (Goffman 1963). Goffman argues that the current use of the term is similar, if more socially constructed and not always so directly indicated. When a person fails to meet group expectations or demonstrates traits that are not expected of a person's social category, those traits become stigmatized. Stigma only exists in the social world in which these social categories and expectations exist to begin with. Goffman argues for three kinds of stigma—of the body, of one's character or behavior, and of one's group (i.e., race, religion). Regardless of the type, a stigmatized person is identified as possessing an undesired differentness according to the categorical idea of what that person ought to be and is often ostracized for it. Goffman holds that many stigmatized individuals may internalize this ostracization and condemn themselves as worthy of the discrimination experienced.

In the context of this work examining purity culture and its messaging about the female body, the Christian concept of sin can be seen as a disciplining force on the female body. Used as a spiritualized term for stigma, it creates not only social but also spiritual ostracization for those who exhibit traits outside of normative expectations that are constructed to best serve those in power. Bodies assigned female at birth and their relative state of covering are critiqued by religious leaders, peers, and wider culture, standing as symbols of sinful sexuality (Miles 2006). Stigmatized as inherently tempting, the female body is seen as a spiritual risk to the purity of those around them, needing to be disciplined and controlled (Klein 2018; O'Donnell and Cross 2020). This is particularly true of a soft and large body—often seen as particularly feminine—that is not perceived as ruled by the rational and masculine mind and is associated with the stigmatized sin of gluttony. Likewise, fat is historically associated with Blackness and thus racially stigmatized in white supremacist spaces.

This framework of sin and stigma as a disciplining force on the female body will be used in this chapter to understand the creation and enforcement of thin norms within purity culture. Utilizing data from 65 in-depth interviews with participants assigned female at birth and socialized as women within purity culture, I harness constructivist grounded theory to surface and examine three pivotal mechanisms of thinness for individuals assigned female at birth within purity culture. These are: thinness as spiritualized bodily discipline, thinness as modesty, and thinness as whiteness.

Findings

Thinness takes up three mechanisms in this chapter: thinness as spiritualized bodily discipline, thinness as modesty, and thinness as whiteness. In discussing thinness as spiritualized bodily discipline, I find that participants connect denying oneself food to denying other bodily needs and desires, such as sex drive, under a valuation of asceticism in purity culture. I also explore the operation of thinness as modesty, the double standards of modesty according to body shape and size, and the ways in which larger bodies were constructed as more sinful than thin bodies. Finally, I explore and examine the intertwined associations between thinness, whiteness, and piety within these purity culture environments. Each of these aspects is linked to the overarching spiritualization of thinness, where thinness is, through these mechanisms, intertwined with holiness. These findings provide a nuanced analysis of the spiritualized thin ideal within the context of purity culture, contributing to the advancement of literature on the intersection of gender, the body, and Christianity.

Thinness as Spiritualized Bodily Discipline

Self-control, self-denial, and asceticism are integral to the lived religious experience of many evangelical people. To suffer for Christ is to be righteous, and that suffering is often

interpreted as self-denial. Many participants noted the connections made between depriving oneself of one's embodied desires or needs and purported spirituality. Specifically speaking of food and fasting, Christina, a 22-year-old cisgender white woman, said,

> It was told to us that when you're fasting you pray, when you're doing Lent you pray. When your physical body wants these things, you need to have a strong mind and pray and not give in to these physical desires for food or physical wants but instead be in mind of your spiritual well-being…when your body wants something that you're depriving it of, this is your reminder that you're more than your body, so to speak. Your mind or your relationship with God is what you're drawing attention to, and so you should pray.

For this participant and others, there was an explicit tie between self-denial, particularly self-starvation, and spiritual practice. Calling out the foundation of the mind-body divide in Christian doctrine, Christina notes that her "strong mind" denying her bodily desire would support her spiritual well-being. Her phrasing of being "more than your body" indicates a hierarchy wherein the mind and spirit exist over and above the body, and that the body is not that which is spiritual or in spiritual relationship with God. Christina here speaks of the teaching to replace her body's need for food with prayer, directly tying self-starvation and piety together. Thus, the cultural value of restraint is made manifest in the materiality of the female body.

Connecting broader purity culture practices of discipline and a high valuation of bodily control to her own experience of disordered eating, Emma, a 32-year-old cisgender white woman, said,

> With sexual education and purity culture, it's like, denying yourself is good, right?…"Oh, this is your urge, but you have to deny that." You know? So, I guess it is easy to translate that to food, right?…[That] is, definitely, I think, a part of Christian upbringing [is] that you don't act on your impulses. Self-control. I guess that makes sense though, you know, you can justify denying yourself food because [it] kind of falls under the same category of like, "Oh, just because this feels good now."

Here, Emma notes that her Christian upbringing taught her to deny embodied signals of need and desire. This skill served her well in adhering to purity culture's emphasis on sexual

abstinence and translated to her disordered eating. Her existing schema of self-denial made it easier for her to engage in restrictive eating behavior. Taught that the gratification of a current desire would lead to long-term negative consequences and that, in the case of sexuality, giving into that desire was sinful, she learned to turn away from embodied desire and pleasure.

The denial of pleasure in the form of food is perhaps best seen in the construction of the Christian sin of gluttony. Gluttony was discussed by many participants surrounding the topics of fasting, food, and disordered eating. As Bailey, a 27-year-old cisgender white woman, noted, purity culture theology held that "*You're disrespecting God by not being healthy or being overweight."* This internalization of spiritualized messaging demonstrates the diffusion of power under anatamo-politics. The ideal body has been constructed such that it is spiritually laden, disrespectful to the all-seeing evangelical God to exist outside of that ideal.

Similarly, discussions around the sin of gluttony sometimes directly connect food and sex. One participant, Sydney, a 20-year-old white cisgender woman, noted that her pastor "*once did a sermon on the sin of gluttony and eating too much being just as bad a sin as having sex before marriage,*" which is, in the current evangelical schema of sin, quite dramatic. Here, both overeating and sexual activity are positioned as an embodied failure of will, with the body not properly disciplined.

Another participant, Audrey, a 38-year-old multiracial cisgender woman, also spoke to this idea of gluttony and body size within her Christian community, saying

> I had a friend who did Weight Watchers and was, like, wildly successful, "successful", at it. I watched her get paraded around the church… she spoke at all the women's events about weight loss and how it made her feel more connected to God and she got that part of her life under control, and she wasn't in the sin of gluttony and all that and as soon as she started gaining weight back, we heard nothing from her.

In this story from Audrey, we see that not only was fatness constructed as sinful, but weight loss was positioned as salvific. Her friend spoke of gluttony as opposite of control, and control was something that increased her piety. Her social value and her perceived worthiness to share about her faith and, by extension, the perceived strength of her faith, in this church environment were directly tied to her body size. Thus, the concept of sin is projected onto body size, utilized as a disciplining force on the female body, pushing it toward thinness.

Other participants also felt that diet and body size were spiritualized as honoring God with what one ate and the (small) size of one's body. Food had a moral and spiritual value, as did body size. To be a good Christian one had to pursue a proper Christian diet. In the purity culture era, a popular Christian diet was the Daniel Fast. This diet, ostensibly modeled after what the biblical character Daniel ate to show the glory of God in his eponymous book of the Bible, eschews animal products, sugar and other sweeteners, yeasted bread, refined grains, and all processed foods, as well as alcohol and some other beverages. Tara, a 30-year-old cisgender white woman, spoke about her experience with this diet and fasting, saying,

> In the [Christian] girls' house that I lived in, some of them went on the Daniel Fast, which once I learned about it, I'm like this is stupid…I don't think it was necessarily for weight loss, maybe it was and, again, that wasn't really spoken of because they never really talked about that. They were just trying to pray that they could, you know get by with these certain foods which was probably their way to say, "I'm doing this for weight loss but I'm going to say God's having me do it."

This spiritualized diet ties weight loss to prayer and a purportedly God-ordained diet, allowing the young Christian women in Tara's house to pursue weight loss while also prioritizing their faith. They aimed to "get by on" a limited set of foods and prayed about that goal, heavily spiritualizing their diet and their dietary restraint. Interestingly, this pursuit of a holy and God-ordained diet required cutting out entire groups of food, which is a phenomenon correlated with the onset of eating disorders (Bardone-Cone et al. 2012; Jafri et al. 2021).

Even outside of specific programs and meal plans, the valuation of a non-fattening diet and a thin body was pervasive. Talking about her experience with a Christian group in college, Jessica, a 36-year-old cisgender white woman, said,

> We ate healthy and all my friends exercised. They would go hike the mountains and it was just, like, this hyper-awareness of exercising and our bodies. Every year around New Year's, resolutions were getting more fit, making our body more of a temple, using our bodies for God's goodness and God's glory. And, somehow, the smaller it was, the more important your body was, the more holy your body was.

For Jessica, like many other participants, a thin body was a holy body, and she had to discipline her body into a particular state of being to be valuable to her Christian community. Again we see evangelical Christian scriptural motif of "your body is a temple" used as a motivation for weight loss. Likewise, Jessica also touches on the idea of using her body for God's glory, which is commonly constructed through evangelical narratives and ideals as using one's body to do God's work in the world through missions work and proselytizing, as well as a more general and aesthetic concept of using one's attractiveness to make attractive the Christian faith. Thus, a thin body offered greater piety, spirituality, and evangelical achievement through proselytizing and was, thereby, more valuable to the social power of evangelicalism.

Thinness as Modesty

One of the most common constructions of the female body under purity culture is that it is primarily a temptation that leads men into the sin of lust. Positioned as inherently sexual, and sexuality as sinful, the female body is thus socially required to be made less tempting and attractive to men through modest clothing. Modest dress was discussed by many participants, who noted that they were allowed little agency in what they wore. They learned through church and familial messaging that the most important thing about their body was how it was perceived by others, and that they had to do their best to make sure it was not perceived sexually. Some

participants reported that this perception varied by body size. When asked about the narratives surrounding women's appearances in their church growing up, Leif, a 28-year-old genderqueer white person, said,

> I definitely thought there was a double standard in modesty when it came to body shape and size, also…just the other day, there's a woman that I went to youth group with, and she still goes to church, and she posted this video of her doing a yoga workout. And she was wearing a sports bra and hot pants, basically, like, little short-shorts. And I just sat there, like, imagine if me or someone in a body like mine posted that. That would not be okay with church people. But because she's skinny and doesn't have a lot in the chest area, she can get away with that, which is weird. Because if I did it, it would be too sexual, probably.

The sexually desirable body, and therefore the most tempting, debauched, and sinful body, is often constructed as a particularly curvy body. Thus, curves carry a stigma under purity culture. So too, by contrast, a thin body offers a lessening of stigma and a related sense of freedom—such as the ability to post a video of oneself doing yoga in short shorts without censure. Alongside these unspoken, yet apparent, norms and standards of acceptability in body size and modesty that Leif mentions, some participants noted that being in a larger body alters the explicit, written rules of modesty. Holly, a 27-year-old cisgender white woman, shared her experience of following modesty rules at her evangelical college, saying,

> I had this one top I loved…sometimes if I moved around a lot, it fell off the shoulders, but I had a tank top on underneath that was the three-finger or whatever the rule is, and they came up to me and they're like, "You can't wear this shirt on campus anymore…it's just too inappropriate." And it's like my shoulder? I'm meeting all the dress code standards and still inappropriate and it's because I was in a larger body. I saw smaller girls wearing similar shirts…So, there was also fatphobia in the Christian community.

For Holly, following the letter of the law regarding modest clothing, such as wearing a thick-strapped, regulation-width (three fingers wide) tank top underneath her favorite shirt did not absolve her of her tempting, curvy body. Holly's experience held that being in a larger body fundamentally altered the rules of modesty, making it such that the standard rules only applied to

thin women. Being in a larger body, she was set apart and held to a standard of higher coverage clothing than the written rules.

While modesty was often required because a curvy body was considered tempting, several participants also noted that they utilized modesty to cover up their bodies because they or others found their bodies unattractive due to their larger size. Ginny, a 23-year-old cisgender white woman, noted her experience of this dichotomy, saying,

> I was into modesty because I hated my body, and I wished I could get away with being un-modest. I thought about it as "I have to cover up my body because no one would want it," or "If they saw my thighs or my belly they would immediately be put off." So, I was very modest growing up, because I really hated myself, but also because I like being a good girl.

While seemingly contradictory—in that modesty, purportedly meant to cover a tempting body, is here used to cover a body that Ginny believed would be off-putting—this experience and expectations of modesty make sense in the context of stigma and sin. Purity culture constructs both sexuality and fatness as sinful and shameful. Thus, both are required to be covered so as not to put one's sin on display. Thinness, then, offers modesty and thereby a sense of freedom in what one can wear, both in terms of making a body less sexualized by reducing the size of sexualized body parts, as well as through not being socially required to cover up a fat body that may be seen as sinful or unattractive.

For many participants, the double standards of modesty by body size were highly related to the size of secondary sex characteristics—particularly breasts. More than two-thirds of participants in this study mentioned the hypersexualization and subsequent repression of cleavage, sometimes referring to this phenomenon as "boob sin". Katie, a 30-year-old cisgender white woman, spoke about this saying that there was a common cultural message of "*You're Christian and you shouldn't have big boobs… if you have big boobs, you definitely don't show*

them, you definitely keep that a secret." Simply having breasts, and particularly larger breasts, was seen as sexual and therefore a detriment to one's piety. Taylor, a 35-year-old cisgender white woman, spoke about this also, saying,

> We were told, "Well, if you have bigger boobs, you absolutely have to wear bigger things. They can't be tight to your body"…no concept around how things fit differently on different bodies and that that's okay. If you connect all that to diet culture, and like the 90s and early 2000s thin ideal, it all comes back to, "Well, they should lose weight anyway." Like, "She shouldn't be eating so much and if she would just lose weight that shirt wouldn't look so alluring on her."

Here Taylor draws a connection between her experience of modesty expectations and diet culture. If someone had a larger chest, they were considered more "alluring"—which translates under this dynamic as tempting to men and endangering their piety. They were thus required to cover their bodies to a greater degree than thinner people to protect men from their tempting curves. Connecting this to the thin ideal, she notes that weight loss was constructed as something that might make a person less tempting and potentially thereby offer a greater degree of freedom in what one wore. Many participants noted their pursuit of weight loss and the development of disordered eating in their lives in pursuit of a less sexualized body, aiming to leave the spiritualized stigma of a larger, curvier body behind. The protection of men from the purported temptation of a body assigned female at birth in this manner highlights how bodies that are less valued are stigmatized and their goals are shaped by this construction of an ideal body. Through anatamo-politics and the use of sin and stigma, a thin, holy norm is established and enforced on the bodies of those assigned female at birth.

Sydney, the 20-year-old cisgender white woman we heard from earlier, also spoke about her relationship with modesty, her body, and the construction of temptation, saying,

> I wanted to be able to wear clothes that I physically couldn't wear because I thought they drew too much attention to my boobs. So, in an effort to make my boobs less prominent, I wanted to not eat as much and lose weight. But then I would end up feeling sad because

> of just existing in an environment that's so problematic. I would try to make myself feel better by eating, and then I would feel guilty…then I'd go without food for a while, eat the bare minimum, work out a lot. All because I wanted to look less sexual.

Here, Sydney describes a process of cycling through restrictive eating behaviors and exercise trying to shape her body into something less sexualized. She notes that she wanted to wear clothing that was perhaps more revealing but that she "physically" couldn't wear. Here, "physically" does not denote a practical incompatibility, but an indication that it was her physicality—her body—that made these clothes socially unwearable. Her body was seen as too sexual and thereby it was sinful to draw attention to it. Rose, a 30-year-old cisgender white woman, shared a very similar story, saying,

> For me, it was this process in my mind of needing to reduce what is seen. I would limit what I was eating, and then I would get so hungry that I would overeat and then I would feel horrible about it and make myself sick, and then that progressed. Through high school it was that cycle, and then when I was in college that progressed into an obsession with working out. I was keeping ridiculous track of how many calories were going in so that I could make sure that I was working out enough to cover those calories and more. It just seemed like I needed to be a certain way, and I needed to have a certain body to not be ashamed of what I was wearing or to not be seen as trying to be seductive.

Both Sydney and Rose felt that their bodies were highly sexualized, and this sexuality was deemed sinful and thereby stigmatized, making modesty and acceptance in their communities harder to achieve. Wanting to adhere to community expectations and be able to live and operate without the spiritualized burden of being seen as a temptation, they both sought modesty. In seeking modesty, they pursued thinness through disordered eating behaviors. The cultural valuation of modesty and discipline created the thin bodies that it desired through the anatamo-political construction of the ideal, thin, modest body.

Thinness as Whiteness

Nearly all participants, both white and non-white, noted that they grew up in highly segregated, predominantly white churches, likely resulting from the legacy of white supremacy

in evangelicalism (Butler 2021). Within these segregated spaces, white norms, which are also often thin norms, are socially enforced. When asked to describe the woman their faith environments constructed as ideal growing up—a question in which I was careful to not explicitly ask about race—38% of all participants explicitly stated that this idealized woman was white. Among participants of color, 85% explicitly named this white ideal.

One participant, Audrey, the 38-year-old cisgender multiracial woman who we heard from earlier, also spoke about her racialized experience of purity culture. Here, she speaks about dressing as modestly as she was able to and still receiving criticism from the leaders of her predominantly white church.

> I'd be so confused as to how other girls could get away with [wearing more revealing clothing] and I couldn't. I would be so flabbergasted. I don't know if it was because I had bigger boobs, if, I don't know if it's because I was brown, I don't know if it's because [of] institutional racism and stereotypes and all that prejudice and policing of my body. I don't know. I didn't have any women of color mentors; they were all white women. And none of my friends were women of color, they were all white. And, so, yeah, I think that probably had a lot to do with it, but not seeing it for what it was then because I didn't have the knowledge.

The institutionalization of white supremacy in Audrey's church environment combined with evangelical color-blind ideology such that the monitoring of her body was not openly tied to her racial identity. However, she did see a double standard between herself and the other, predominantly white, young women in her church. The message conveyed to Audrey by the ongoing monitoring of her body and modesty was that she was not the ideal woman, and this was due—at least in part—to her body shape and size. Audrey also points to institutional racism and the stereotypes of women of color, which often hold that women of color are curvier and more sexual. In retrospect, she feels that it was likely a racialized narrative about her body that strongly contributed to its unacceptability to those in authority in her church.

Another participant, Ana, a 21-year-old Latina woman, spoke about her experience with expectations of modesty in her Brazilian church.

> It might have been a little bit different because we're all Brazilian. So, our figures are kind of prominent. I think that does look different, especially you know, if…somebody is skinnier, then it's a little less scandalous if they're wearing tight fitting clothing. I think cleavage, in society in general, it is a big deal if you have big boobs…There's definitely a double standard there with them, just kind of like the shape of your figure and if it's deemed scandalous or not.

In her experience, the shape of her body did not conform to cultural expectations of bodily piety. Even while attending a predominantly Brazilian church alongside other churchgoers with "prominent" figures, her curviness was still considered "scandalous". Whiteness, as associated with thinness, in many ways sets the standard expectations for a pious body even in non-white Christian environments. Interestingly, as Ana also share, feminine dress in church was able to act as a guard against criticism of her body.

> In church, I feel like I haven't [had] so much experience with that because, I mean, if you're wearing a dress…what are they gonna say, you know? You're wearing a dress… you did what they asked.

By adhering closely to traditional gender expectations, Ana was able to exist in a curvier body that was sexualized by her church with little censure. Dresses allowed her to clothe herself in a more traditionally feminine way as social compensation for the perceived sinfulness of her body. In this way she negotiates with power, using feminine clothing as a way to allow cultural values to be impressed upon her body while also asserting some degree of bodily autonomy simply by having a curvy body and not actively seeking to disguise that fact.

Another participant, Jo, a 26-year-old Black and Filipinx nonbinary person, shared,

> I think I was doing a lot of comparison to myself and all the other Christian girls around me that were little skinny minis and I had a tummy, and people viewing them as desirable and holy...but I when I was seeing those specific comparisons, it was at [college] and if people were evaluating these women over me I was viewing it more as racist than appearance.

Jo grew up in a primarily Black religious environment where thinness had been broadly valued, but it was when they moved to a predominantly white evangelical college that thinness and whiteness were spiritualized as holy. For Jo, racism and the evaluation of piety, particularly regarding bodies, were to some degree inextricable from one another. In this environment, Jo's body was subject to white body supremacy—which includes interlocking fatphobia and white supremacy—and, due to the powerful inscription of racism within evangelical Christianity and purity culture, Jo interpreted these valuations of their thin, white peers over them as racist, not necessarily a reflection on their larger body. Where thinness is associated with whiteness, so too is Blackness dissociated from thinness and thereby holiness.

When asked about who the ideal woman in her church communities was, Grace, a 32-year-old cisgender multiracial woman, also designated this ideal as a white woman.

> I can't remember ever being in a church where the pastor's wife was not a very thin, blonde woman. I do think that was definitely there, that that culture reinforced that if you are the model wife, if you are honoring God and these ways, if you are honoring God and what you put in your body…It also includes being thin or being, you know, conventionally attractive or things like that.

Here we see white—particularly, blonde—and thin are put forward as key traits of the ideal woman. Grace's description of blonde hair highlights the value of lightness even within whiteness. She also highlights that being a wife—the ultimate role for evangelical women—required thinness as a way of "honoring God". Through this, the physical and the spiritual are closely tied, indicating spiritualized bodily ideals, including thinness and holiness, alongside a simultaneous association with whiteness and white body supremacy.

When asked about the bodily expectations for women in her predominantly white church growing up, Natalie, a 29-year-old cisgender white woman, noted:

> I think, for the women of color at our church who naturally had more curves, it was, like, double for them, for having a certain, natural body size and shape. So, I think when we think of the modest woman, this 'ideal' modest woman, it's a white woman. And if your body naturally is a different shape it's, like, you're screwed in a sense, from the very beginning. A lot of times when you would see kids adopted from overseas who then grew up and went through puberty… you know, women, girls who are adopted from Africa. And they grow up and their parents don't know how to do their hair. Basic things. And there's a lot of shame of being different. And then body shame, because, like 'I'm beautiful, but I look completely different, and I want to conform.' I would say that I have the privilege of not having to deal with that kind of thing.

Here, Natalie speaks to what she observed about the treatment of women of color at her church, noting that purity culture values uphold the ideal woman as a white woman, and that those who are not white are, as she puts it, "screwed" from the start. When the standards for being a good woman are constructed around whiteness, those who are not white cannot ever be that ideal, excluded by definition. Beyond this, they are also excluded by the racialized construction of their bodies as curvier and thereby more sexual. They are thus set back in the competition to adhere to thin, modest whiteness due to their construction as inherently sexual, a construction which cannot necessarily be overcome by a literal lack of curves (Gentles-Peart 2020; Lomax 2018; Strings 2019). Where anatamo-politics creates an ideal body to aspire to, it also places limits on who can achieve that ideal. Women of color, excluded from this white ideal, are best able to pursue proximity to that ideal through things associated with it, such as thinness.

Natalie also brings up the phenomenon of interracial, international adoption. This popular evangelical Christian practice, particularly widespread in the early 2000s, saw many wealthy, white Christian families adopting children from non-western, particularly African, countries. Many did so in the name of child-saving missional efforts that have been critiqued as extensions of colonialism and white supremacy (McKee 2021). These children of African ancestry often grew up in starkly white environments. Also of note is that these adopted young women, as Natalie notes, often lacked access to the feminization of doing one's hair or other beautifying

acts that, for young women such as Ana, who we heard from earlier discussing her use of feminine dress, made modesty expectations and the policing of her body less stringent. This is another example of how women of color in environments structured by white evangelical ideals are limited in how they can adhere to or serve the purposes of power, and thereby limited in their ability to negotiate with power. With such limits in place, body manipulation, such as the pursuit of thinness, becomes one of few tools available to navigate these spiritualized environments and pursue piety.

Discussion

This chapter examines how thinness operates in purity culture—particularly, the gendered pursuit of thinness and the intricate ways in which thinness becomes intertwined with notions of holiness. This exploration begins with a historical tracing of bodily discipline, considering its connections to whiteness, white supremacy, and their interweaving with thinness and body ideals throughout Christian history. Employing theoretical frameworks of lived and embodied religion, the materiality of the female body, Foucauldian biopower, and Goffman's stigma, I elucidate how spiritualized thin ideals are shaped by power dynamics. In the examination of thinness, purity culture emerges as a movement with a broad focus on controlling bodies, including their size and shape. While the intersection of thinness and holiness has been examined in broader Christianity and studied in historical context, this association has, up to this point, been overlooked within the purity culture movement. This chapter brings this important association into this powerful movement, expanding understandings of purity culture to include its impacts on food and the body.

First exploring thinness as a form of spiritualized discipline, I highlight the connection between self-denial and purported spirituality, with mastery over bodily desires seen as evidence

of a strong spirituality. This valuation of mastery is tied to a condemnation of its relative opposite, overindulgence, which is constructed as the sin of gluttony, wherein overeating is seen as a lack of willpower and as sinful. Fat bodies are constructed as evidence of gluttony and thus associated with sin and spiritually stigmatized. Thin bodies are then reassociated with the absence of the sin of gluttony and seen as holier, a superior dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. By this metric, weight loss is often presented as salvific, and the pursuit of a thin body is seen as a means of reaching greater spirituality within purity culture.

Next, I examine the intersection of modesty and thinness in purity culture, which highly values and spiritualizes modesty. Purity culture constructs female bodies as temptations for men, leading them into the sin of lust, and modesty is utilized to make the female body less tempting to men. Participants share that the perception of modesty greatly varies according to body shape and size, with curvier bodies deemed less modest. Participants shared stories of using modesty to cover up their tempting curves, as well as to cover larger bodies that were considered unattractive due to their larger size. Thin bodies are seen as more modest and offer greater freedom in clothing choices. Participants also share about their pursuit of a thin body, desiring to be seen as less sexual and more spiritual through the shape and size of their bodies. Heavily influenced by cultural expectations of modesty and the construction of an ideal, thin body, pursuing a less sexualized appearance can become a cycle of guilt, obsession with body image, and disordered eating.

Finally, I center whiteness and white supremacy and its association with thinness. Many participants made explicit purity culture's valuation of whiteness, and the construction of the idealized woman in their religious environments growing up as white. Several participants of color noted the differential treatment that they received because of the racist construction of their

bodies as inherently curvier and more sexual, making it difficult to be seen as modest or pious. Even in non-white churches, the white-centric construction of the ideal body as thin and thereby less sexual appears to be present. These associations are perhaps clearer in predominantly white environments. Through these participant experiences, we see that women of color, when evaluated according to this conceptual intertwine of thinness and whiteness, cannot truly be regarded as thin. Thinness and whiteness are requisites for embodying an ideal Christian woman within this culture, so regardless of how thin a woman of color may become, she cannot be that ideal woman.

Across these findings, participants noted that there were clear, explicit connections between body, body size, and the constructed dichotomy of sinfulness and holiness. To be holy was to be thin. To be curvy was to be tempting and sinful. To be fat was to be unattractive and sinful. Many participants pursued thinness as a means of pursuing purity and piety. Purity culture values particular bodies, setting them up as ideal and encouraging adherents to shape their bodies in accordance to this ideal. This expression of anatamo-politics is facilitated through the utilization of the concept of 'sin' as stigma and a disciplining force on the female body, engaging with the materiality of the body to make manifest cultural values. In the context of the larger project of this dissertation, which examines lived and embodied experiences and impacts of purity culture on bodies, this chapter outlines clear and powerful ways through which purity culture and its power structures control and, quite literally, shape bodies.

Chapter 5: "Afraid of My Body, Afraid for My Body": Structures of Abuse Within Purity Culture

Introduction

Offering another lens to the overarching project of this dissertation to understand and illustrate the impact and experience of the body in evangelical purity culture, this chapter examines purity culture structures that allow for and, in some ways, foster abuse. Abuse, and the upholding of abuse, within purity culture came to the forefront in 2017 during the #MeToo movement. Author Emily Joy Allison started the high-traffic hashtag #ChurchToo, sharing an experience of abuse and sparking a social media conversation that brought to light years of misconduct, abuse, and inappropriate behavior within the Christian church. Many contributions to the hashtag specifically point to purity culture as perpetuating and allowing abuse, sexual harassment, assault, and inappropriate behavior (Allison 2021). Surrounding this backlash to purity culture, critical literature has demonstrated purity culture as a form of rape culture, with both implicit and explicit acceptance of assault and abuse (Blyth 2021; Klement et al. 2022). Rape culture is defined as a "complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women" (Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth 1993:7). In cultural use, this term denotes the normalization of aggressive sexual approaches, including harassment and violence, along with a lack of accountability for the aggressor and the potential for blame falling to the victim of such aggression (Bhuptani and Messman-Moore 2019). While the concept of purity may seem at odds with the violence of rape culture, I will argue in this chapter that evangelical purity culture is a spiritualized manifestation of rape culture that weaponizes Christian language toward the same ends.

Existing literature has offered some insights and examples of how purity culture upholds and fosters sexual assault and abuse (Allison 2021; Blyth 2021; Klement et al. 2022), yet it

currently lacks the rich knowledge of lived and embodied experiences within these structures. This chapter aims to fill that gap, using participant narrative to outline structures of assault and abuse. First tracing the longstanding history of assault and abuse within the church, I lay out narratives of sex and gender, the state of sexual education, and the construction of patriarchy and hierarchy within purity culture. Highlighting the structures and norms that enable and tolerate assault and abuse, this chapter identifies two key mechanisms at work—vulnerability and responsibility. Centering participant stories, I highlight how young people assigned female at birth are made vulnerable to assault and abuse through the purposeful withholding of sexual education, the sexualization, fetishization, and objectification of young girls, and the construction of spiritualized patriarchal power and obedience. Next, I examine the ways that these same young people are held responsible for the assault and abuse that happens to them through highly gendered narratives of responsibility, wherein they are constructed as stumbling blocks and temptations for men as well as made into gatekeepers of men's sexuality. Grounding these findings in the lived experiences of participants, I connect the matrix of power that is enacted upon and made manifest through embodied lives, highlighting in this chapter—as in others—the impacts of purity culture on bodies.

Background

The structures of abuse within purity culture are complex, and are also, to some extent, new manifestations of longstanding issues of patriarchal authority and its abuses within Christianity. To understand the forms that abuse takes within purity culture, and particularly participants' experiences of these structures, it is important to understand the existing literature and history of sex and sexuality in purity culture. This section will offer important information about existing narratives of gendered sexual responsibility in purity culture, the social standards

that normalize the objectification and sexualization of young children and family members, the recent history of withholding sexual education, and how church hierarchies have been found to foster abuse. This background will lay the foundation necessary for understanding participant narratives and experiences within structures of abuse, as well as descriptions of structures of abuse themselves, as will be explored in the findings section.

Gendered Narratives of Sexual Responsibility in Purity Culture

Purity culture is documented within the literature as upholding and accepting sexual violence, assault, and abuse. Blyth, in an examination of Bibles aimed at teenage girls within purity culture, found that these printings of the Bible "reinforce various evangelical discourses that scaffold rape cultures," equating sexual violence with consensual sex and equating true consent with sexual coercion, all under the blanket terminology of sexual sin (Blyth 2021:10). Blyth also found that some of these Bibles explicitly include rape supportive messaging, eroticizing sexual assault and abuse as a supposed natural consequence of the alleged, and allegedly appealing, hypersexual nature of men (Blyth 2021). Likewise, a focus on conservative cisheteropatriarchal gender roles, such as those prominent within purity culture, is linked to sexually aggressive behaviors such as harassment and assault (Phillips 2016). Addressing attitudes of the evangelical population toward sexual violence more broadly, Klement, Sagarin, and Skowronski (2022) have found that the more purity beliefs a person holds, the more likely they are to accept rape myths—such as the belief that "if a girl goes to a room alone with a guy at a party, it is her own fault if she is raped" or "rape happens when a guy's sex drive goes out of control"—as true (2071). Existent research on purity culture identifies narratives of women guarding and controlling their pure, virgin bodies and avoiding temptation to sin via sexual abstinence (Fahs 2010). Within evangelicalism, women are seen as accountable for protecting

their virginity because men "cannot help themselves" when a woman "tempts" them, which women are seen to do simply by existing in a female body (Klement et al. 2022:221,213). This nascent literature offers insight into these common narratives through document and archival research, as well as some experimental work, leaving a gap in research on the lived experience of persons within these structures—a gap which this chapter will fill.

The Sexualization of Youth and Family

While purity culture purports to protect young people and their sexuality by taking a stand against mainstream culture's embrace of hypersexualization, it often falls into the same sexualizing patterns and habits of mainstream culture. These patterns are not always easily recognized, however, as they utilize spiritual language of "modesty, purity, and protection" (Valenti 2009:65). Much of the symbolism surrounding these narratives of protection is familial, creating a pseudo-incestuous dynamic. One major example of this dynamic is purity ceremonies, mentioned in the first chapter of this dissertation on the gendered submission of the body. These events, a popular feature of early adolescence for many evangelical girls, are ritualized ceremonies wherein young women pledge their virginity to their fathers until marriage, and fathers pledge to protect their daughter and be a guardian for her virginity until she is married. These ceremonies typically resemble weddings, with young girls in white dresses and fathers in suits. These ceremonies clearly demonstrate the ownership fathers are believed to have over their daughters' bodies, until such a time as they are married, and that ownership passes to their husbands. Through this process, it fetishizes and sexualizes girls, their control by older men, and their pre-pubescent bodies (Valenti 2009:72). Within this dynamic, women's sexuality is "an object to be traded between men," never their own (Fahs 2010).

Other examples of pseudo-incestuous dynamics include encouragement for young women to ask their fathers if their clothing is modest enough, and an often-repeated requirement for young women to dress modestly so their "brothers in Christ" do not stumble (Fahs 2010; Harris 1997). While incest is widely understood as inappropriate and abusive within the United States today, allusions to incest are relatively common within purity culture, potentially contributing to higher rates of childhood sexual abuse among those families with extrinsic conservative Christian beliefs, such as biblical literalism, that are common in evangelicalism (Elliott 1994; Rodriguez and Henderson 2010). Such dynamics are commonly seen in participants' embodied narratives and are key contributors to the structures of assault and abuse outlined in this chapter.

Withholding Sexual Education

Much as language of purity and piety is employed in sexualizing and objectifying dynamics within purity culture, it is also employed as a justification for the intentional withholding of sexual education. Purity culture takes up an abstinence-only model of sexual education and does not often address sex and sexuality outside of warning against them. Among the few evangelical dating books that do address sex, Moon and Reger (2014) have found that they ignore the factors of "autonomy and consent" and blur the lines between consensual sex and sexual assault. Discussions around consent, even beyond evangelicalism, tend to suppose gendered models in which a man desires and initiates sex with a woman, and she allows him to do as he wishes. This has meant, in historical legal terms, that consent occurs when a woman does not persistently verbally or physically reject a man's advances and sexual actions upon her body (Anderson 2011). Within this narrative is the understanding that a woman's body belongs just as much, if not more so, to a man and his desire for her body than it does to herself. As

conversations regarding consent have evolved, broader culture is more apt to recognize that silence is not consent, and phrases such as "enthusiastic verbal consent" are more common in sexual education than they once were (Coy et al. 2016). However, consent remains rarely discussed in evangelical purity culture. Such lack of education around consent, including the conflation of consensual sexual activity and sexual assault, has been shown to contribute to assault, abuse, and rape culture at large (Cerise 2011).

Also of note is that the abstinence-only sex education movement of the 1980s onward was driven by right-wing, Christian nationalist politicians. Conservative, evangelical officials capitalized on growing white, evangelical anxiety following the cold war and apparent moral degradation of the United States via the women's liberation movement, sexual revolution, and AIDS epidemic. Positioning sexual purity as key to national strength, federal funding was allocated for abstinence-only sex education, first in 1981 and then in 1996, expanding the influence of evangelical purity culture to even those students who had never set foot in a church (Donovan 1984). As of 2019, 29 states required sexual education to be taught in schools, and 31 states required that any sexual education that was offered had to focus on abstinence (Sneen 2019). Even when sex education curriculums are not abstinence-only, they tend to include "gender stereotypes with strong undertones of female responsibility… hinting that male sex drives are uncontrollable, and women need to be the gatekeepers of chastity (Schwarz 2007:5; Sneen 2019). These stereotypes continue the muddying of the lines between consensual sexual activity and sexual assault, as well as further the idea that women should be held responsible for the consequences of sexuality while having very limited sexual agency. Such highly gendered narratives are at the center of both purity culture and broader rape culture and are found throughout participant narratives in this chapter.

Church Hierarchy and Abuse

Sexual abuse is common in the United States, and religious communities are no exception. Ongoing high-profile abuse scandals within the Catholic Church are well known, and many cases of sexual assault and abuse have been brought against protestant denominations, including well-known names such as the Assemblies of God, Seventh-day Adventists, and Episcopal churches (Anglican Watch 2022; O'Reilly and Chalmers 2014; Paseggi 2020; Sillman 2021). A review of three major insurance companies that serve around 160,000 churches reports an average of 260 claims of sexual abuse in churches per year from 1987 to 2007, which is likely an underestimation given that only a small percentage of sexual assault and abuse cases are reported to authorities of any kind (Denney and Orleans 2023; The Associated Press 2022). The protestant denomination with the most well-documented abuse is the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) which was investigated by the US Department of Justice following an almost 300-page report highlighting rampant sexual abuse, consistent mishandling of abuse claims by church leaders, and many accounts of ongoing abuse and coverups (Downen, Olsen, and Tedesco 2019; The Associated Press 2022). Beyond the SBC, anecdotal evidence and evidence in various lawsuits point to widespread abuse in many denominations (Anglican Watch 2022; Paseggi 2020; Sillman 2021).

With abuse well documented as widespread, researchers have sought to better understand the mechanisms for such abuse. Spröber et al. (2014) have found that religious communities can facilitate grooming children for sexual abuse in particular ways, often utilizing religious authority, strong patriarchal structures, and attempted spiritual and scriptural justifications for sexual abuse. Grooming, defined as the process of utilizing power, persuasion, convincing, or coercion to initiate and continue sexual abuse, is a common thread across multiple forms of

abuse (Raine and Kent 2019). Evidence supports that having a position of power within a church may lead to a greater likelihood of committing sexual abuse, both in its fostering of a felt sense of importance and in the opportunities for exploitation it creates through social hierarchy and power (Denney and Orleans 2023). Position within church hierarchy is linked to rates of sexual abuse, with church leaders who abuse children most commonly being mid- and upper-level priests and pastors, and those who have ten or more victims most likely to be head or senior pastors (Denney and Orleans 2023; Thoburn and Whitman 2004).

Evangelical environments often have clear power structures wherein spiritual authority lies with powerful men. Those men are often considered to be particularly spiritual and able to speak God's truth, and obedience to God is often stressed. Within church settings, leaders have not only the social power of their position within their community but also the presumed backing of an omniscient, omnipotent God, making their ability to groom and abuse distinctive. Christian scripture is often used to attempt to justify various forms of abuse. Touted as the direct word of God, to argue against scripture or an interpretation of it, or to disobey or displease a religious authority figure, is to some congregants akin to disobeying or displeasing God and thereby endangering one's eternal soul. With one's soul and eternal life on the line, many are left highly vulnerable to manipulation and abuse. Common across participant stories, these strong and highly spiritualized narratives emerge as an important facet of abuse.

Theoretical Grounding

Like other chapters in this dissertation, this chapter on structures of abuse utilizes overarching theories of lived and embodied religion, spiritualization, and the materiality of the female body. Lived (McGuire 2008) and embodied (Nikkel 2019) religion are leveraged to center the mundane, day-to-day experience of participants as an expression of and an influence

on faith and spirituality. Similarly, I see these day-to-day experiences as transformed through their spiritualization. Finally, I see the materiality of the female body as a means to understand cultural values as they are impressed upon the body. In this chapter, I also utilize three additional theoretical lenses: Foucauldian power/knowledge, the evangelical male gaze, and the concept of spiritual abuse.

Foucauldian Power/Knowledge and the Body

In *History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault holds that power and knowledge are inextricably linked. Knowledge is an expression of power, and power is a result of knowledge—constructed as the combinate entity of power/knowledge. One example of this extraction of knowledge and use of power is the practice of Catholic confession, a tradition through which people were bound to confess their 'sinful' desires to a member of the clergy. Confession offered the power of knowledge to the church—people's desires were now known and could be controlled or corrected in accordance with religious values. Sexual desires were a common topic of confession, and one which Foucault examines closely. Knowledge of a persons' sexuality offers a means by which to regulate and exert control over their sexuality and intimate life (Foucault 1978). In the inverse, a lack of knowledge creates a lack of power, and withholding knowledge from a person gives one power over them. This theoretical framing is highly useful in studying purity culture, a movement in which sexuality and the regulation of said sexuality by the church is the major focus (Ehrlich 2015).

Within this examination of the regulation of sex, Foucault also offers analytics of power. Holding that power controls sex by making rules and regulations around it, demanding obedience through various tactics of subjugation to the rules. This power also disguises its dominance by presenting itself and its rules as beneficial to both the individual and the group (Foucault 1978;

Foucault and Gordon 1980). For example, within purity culture, the control of the female body through modesty rules and the control and purported protection of men is similarly held to be beneficial. Women are seen as protected by these regulations and the ways in which they are required to control and cover up their bodies, seen as shielding them from men who are believed unable to control themselves. Men are, on the other hand, seen to be protected from the temptation of a woman's body.

Power/knowledge also offers a framework for understanding the creation and acceptance of norms. Those in power can create norms and define what is "true" within a society, shaping the knowledge people have about themselves and their world (Foucault 1978; Foucault and Gordon 1980). Examples of these created norms in the context of purity culture include narratives of gender and power, wherein women are meant to submit to men and men are largely incapable of regulating their own sexuality, as well as constructs of the female body as inherently sexual and tempting. In this way, and others that will be discussed throughout this chapter, power/knowledge is used to shape and control gendered social dynamics and, thereby, the body and embodied experience.

The Evangelical Male Gaze

Another useful tool in understanding the findings of this chapter is the concept of the evangelical male gaze. Feminist theory argues that women are aware of men's lives—their activities, attitudes, and behaviors—as well as their own. Men, however, being members of the dominant group, are less likely to be attuned to women's activities, attitudes, and behaviors (Brooks 2007). AFAB people often see themselves and their bodies through what is popularly referred to as the male gaze. The male gaze, a term coined by film theorist Laura Mulvey (1989), indicates the way in which media, advertising, and other sectors reproduce a view of the world

from the dominant male perspective. The masculine perspective is seen as the neutral or objective gaze from which all other viewpoints are differentiated. Haraway (1988) pushes back against this, holding that knowledge is always situated. She critiques those who attempt or claim to have an objective viewpoint and notes that it is only the powerful who seem able to claim objectivity. This theoretical focus on standpoint acknowledges that there is no view from nowhere. In doing so, it acknowledges power, highlighting how different viewpoints are treated and how those in power can create a dominant perspective, forcing the creation of a double consciousness (Du Bois 1903) for those who do not already possess the dominant viewpoint. Women are not only subjects in their own lives, but also objects in someone else's gaze.

For women in purity culture, the male gaze is spiritualized. Viewed primarily as sinful temptations to men, evangelical women must understand that perspective, molding their bodies and behavior to fit the desires of those in power and avoid sin, seeking safety within an oppressive system (Gallagher and Smith 1999). By focusing on the specific, spiritualized perspective-taking that evangelical women regularly partake in, we can conceptualize oppression as centering around, and mapped onto, bodies—where they are, what they are doing, and who gets to decide what happens to them. The evangelical male gaze contributes to the spiritualized objectification of women and is a prominent force in the abuse structures put forward and described by in this chapter.

Spiritual Abuse

This examination of assault and abuse in the church focuses primarily on sexual abuse, which is in part a result of purity culture's focus on sex. In discussing these issues in the context of Christianity, however, it is impossible not to also address spiritual abuse. While there is no singular definition for this form of abuse, Ellis et al. (2022) found in their meta-analysis of the

research on religious and spiritual abuse that all scholarly definitions for religious and spiritual abuse and trauma involved "misuse of power", such as using the concept of God to control others, "psychological harm", such as a negative distortion of one's view of self, and "spiritual harm", such as a loss of trust in God (Ellis et al. 2022). In purity culture, sexual and spiritual abuse are commonly intertwined. This is seen throughout participants' embodied narratives of abuse in a religious environment and is necessary for understanding the sexual abuse discussed in this chapter as situated in purity culture. Participants independently brought up experiences of assault and abuse, and I, as the researcher, never asked directly about experiences of this kind. The findings in this chapter draw on 65 in-depth interviews with participants who were assigned female at birth and socialized as women within the purity culture movement.

Findings

21 participants—nearly a third of my sample—spoke explicitly about their experiences with abuse, and nearly all participants spoke about the misuse of power in one way or another within their purity culture environments. This study traces the contours of these experiences, examining the two major mechanisms by which purity culture upholds and tolerates this assault and abuse: vulnerability and responsibility. First, it examines vulnerability and how people assigned female at birth are made vulnerable to assault and abuse through the withholding of sexual education and emphasis on patriarchal systems of authority and obedience, as well as the specific construction of young girls as sexual and tempting to older men, both in their families and outside of them. Next, it examines responsibility and how purity culture operates as spiritualized rape culture, first through narratives of being a stumbling block and second through ideas of women as gatekeepers of sexuality. Centering participant narrative, these findings highlight visceral experiences within a spiritualized culture of assault and abuse. Findings offer

an important lens for understanding how purity culture impacts bodies, in this case through a mechanism of assault and abuse, structured by vulnerability and responsibility.

Vulnerability

Withholding of Sexual Education

As noted in the literature, purity culture emphasizes abstinence-only, highly limited sexual education, and rarely differentiates between sexual assault and consensual sexual activity. This was reflected in participant stories about their sexual experiences and encounters, as well as experiences of sexual education (or lack thereof). As Amy, a 27-year-old cisgender white woman, stated,

> There's a purity culture book I was reading…she was talking about how she didn't learn consent. I was thinking about that, and I was like, "Oh my god, I never learned consent until after I got married"…I think I started realizing it about other people around college like, "Oh, men shouldn't force themselves on women, that's consent." But I never thought that I had the ability to say yes or no, all the way through years of marriage.

This lack of education around consent was very present in participants' stories. Many noted that it was a common assumption among church leaders and Christian parents that their children would remain abstinent until marriage and therefore did not need to know about things such as consent, protection from STIs, or contraception. As Amy later shared, *"Safe sex was never taught to me because…when you're married, there's "no point" in being safe…it was basically just STDs and save it for marriage."* For Amy, conservative expectations of marriage and childbearing meant that consent and safe sex practices were not taught either, as they were considered unnecessary for a Christian marriage. A minority of participants reported receiving education about puberty, but very few received any useful education on sex and sexuality. When asked if they felt that they were well educated about sex, puberty, and their bodies, a significant

majority of participants responded that they had not been. Briar, a 32-year-old cisgender white woman, shared,

> Sex was just something that was not talked about, off limits, very taboo…I didn't even know I had a vagina until the tampon pamphlet told me so. I was like, wait, there's like another hole? I had no idea! So, things like…not learning about my body until like, some kind of infographic told me about a body…It was not really very fun to grow up that way and have a lot of questions…as a kid I was like, I just know it's not safe to ask anyone because it's gonna be weird.

For Taylor, her family's avoidance of talking about sex and sexuality went so far as to result in her not even knowing that she had a vagina. Basic reproductive anatomy was too close to sexuality to be talked about, so she was left with a lack of knowledge and a clear feeling that it would not be safe to ask questions about these things.

Outside of family and church, some participants reported receiving basic sexual education in school. However, abstinence-only sexual education was common in both public and private schools. Megan, a 23-year-old cisgender white and Latina woman, shared her experience in a public-school setting, saying,

> My parents opt[ed] me out of the health classes that taught about sex. So, in our district, that was an option where you could opt out [of standard health class], and [opt] for abstinence-only…my good friend's mom was the one who fought our school board really hard to get abstinence-only classes…I was always told abstinence is your only option... But, yeah, we were the group that everybody just kind of knew and labeled like, 'Oh, those are the Christian kids because they're not getting the regular health class.'

We see here that Megan's parents specifically and actively prevented her from receiving sexual education when it was offered. Not only that, but a member of her community fought the school board for abstinence-only education classes, and those classes were heavily associated with the "Christian kids", tying a lack of sexual education and Christianity together in her school's social understanding. With such limited access to sexual education, several participants told stories of taking it upon themselves to learn the basics of human sexuality. One example,

Steph, a 20-year-old white person who preferred not to state their gender, talked about their experience seeking out their own sexual education, saying,

> When I was in fourth or fifth grade, my mom sat me down and we went through like the 'your body's changing' books…but my mom skipped the last book about sex. I knew nothing until I was probably, I would say, 16…[when] my parents were out doing something…I found the last book that my mom skipped, and I flipped through it while they weren't home so I could actually learn what some of it was.

For Steph, learning the basics of sex and sexuality was an act of rebellion and something to be done in secret. Anya, a 23-year-old cisgender white woman, shared a somewhat similar experience, stating that while her parents did give her a talk about what sex was, she *"walked away with a very incorrect understanding of what happened"* and largely learned about sex from porn because *"there was literally not one single adult that wouldn't flip out if you brought up sex because, what are you trying to have sex?"* Many participants' parents or adult authority figures seemed to believe that knowledge about sex would lead to having sex, which would endanger their spiritual salvation. Audrey, a 38-year-old multiracial cisgender woman, spoke about her experience, saying:

> The things that educated me were obviously church, and then porn, and then my experience as a survivor, right? And so, I think all those three were really confusing for me…Tons of shame over even wanting to talk about things…There's no normalizing hormones, normalizing attraction, your body's changing… No education.

This story from Audrey highlights the combination of a lack of education with a climate of guilt and fear surrounding sex, sexuality, and human development within purity culture. This lack of information and the shaming of questions about sexuality meant that she did not receive useful sexual education outside of pornography and the information she learned from her experience of sexual abuse. Again, this gave those who wished to control her sexuality some power over her and her body, fostering fear and preventing informed sexual autonomy. Also

speaking to abuse, Sydney, a 20-year-old white cisgender woman, noted that the lack of sexual education in purity culture was detrimental to her and those around her, saying,

> It doesn't properly teach you how to properly enter into a relationship, how to communicate with other people about problems in that relationship. It gave a lot of room for abuse in different areas, whether it was emotional abuse, physical or sexual abuse…it really shut down some very necessary conversations that have to happen in just development, like, growing up in purity culture as a teen.

Here, Sydney notes the vacuum left by a lack of sexual and relational education. The taboo of discussing sex and sexuality meant that those who grew up in this environment lacked the tools to navigate relationships, to understand assault and abuse, and to understand themselves and their own sexuality. This lack of education left them vulnerable to abuse. This is seen clearly in a story from Jenna, a 35-year-old cisgender white woman, who shared that a lack of education around sex and consent made her more vulnerable to abuse.

> There was a time when I went down to live for a month and a half with my stepsister. I ended up spending a lot of time with her husband, and he was very unhappy in his own marriage, and I was 17 at the time and he was, you know, in his mid 20s. The power dynamic in that…There was some grooming happening. I was also groomed by my sister's husband through high school, and I didn't know, I didn't understand, [didn't] really have a firm grasp on what consent was. So, even though I was not comfortable with what he was doing, and doing to me, I didn't have a way to say no or distance myself from that.

Jenna's lack of understanding about what consent was meant that she did not have the knowledge or ability to say no to her brother-in-law's abusive behavior. Without the power/knowledge of sexual autonomy and consent, she was left unequipped and vulnerable to an abuser. This example also alludes to the patriarchal power dynamics that make young women particularly vulnerable, as will be discussed in a later subsection of this section on vulnerability.

Charlotte, a 35-year-old cisgender white woman, spoke about her current understanding of purity culture and its intentional withholding of sexual and biological education.

> It took me a long time to come to grips with the fact that that was sexual abuse—the fact that I wasn't given a healthy understanding of basic human anatomy, and given it in a way that was presented as normal and totally good…You have this, basically, void, of, "I don't know what this is, but it's bad." And that's what you're taught all these years through teens and 20s. There's this void, you have no idea what this is, you have no idea what sex is, you have no idea what the male body is, you have no idea what rape is. You have no idea what these terms really mean, but they're bad. And then you're supposed to get married and have sex in marriage, but you don't even know what that is… Yeah, definitely a very twisted way to teach anyone about sexuality or their own body.

Here, Charlotte explains how the withholding of education led to distress in her life and harmed her relationship with her sexuality and her body. She was taught to fear sex while also being told that she was required to engage in it when she was married. Charlotte specifically names this withholding of information, combined with an instilled sense of fear and danger, and a looming obligation to engage with that danger, as a form of sexual abuse in itself.

In the matrix of power/knowledge put forward by Foucault, the withholding of sexual education robbed Charlotte and others of the power to autonomously determine their sexual self. This engendered outside bodily control and the construction of sex as a looming threat clearly felt in Charlotte's body. A lack of knowledge meant increased vulnerability to assault and abuse for many participants, leaving them to seek out information on their own, often finding less-than-reliable sources of information. Likewise, it left them without an understanding of consent and thereby without the ability to differentiate consensual sexual activity from assault and abuse.

The Sexualization and Objectification of Girlhood

While young women are regularly made responsible for the sexual thoughts and actions of men and treated as sexualized objects within purity culture, as will be further discussed in the next section on responsibility, much of the language of purity culture is, paradoxically, that of maintaining and protecting youthful innocence. When asked about narratives around women's roles and bodies in purity culture, Jane, a 34-year-old cisgender white woman, noted,

> It really comes back to, for me, trying to maintain this almost girlhood level of youth. For, like, eternity. Like, if you are growing up you are disappointing God, you are disappointing the people in your life, you're disappointing your church.

Girlhood innocence was, for Jane, the primary thing that made her valuable to her Christian community. Innocence is associated with virginity, which is highly valued in purity culture. As Jane later noted, purity culture constructs sexual development as negative. "*Instead of painting it as normal sexual development, normal hormonal changes, normal desire for pleasure or for sex with another person, it is all painted in a distinctly negative light."* Sexual development, particularly for young women, was seen as something that caused them to lose innocence, becoming womanly and thus dangerous in terms of their sexuality. Modest, girlish dress was emphasized in opposition to the purportedly defiling effects of sexuality. Discussing familial expectations of feminine dress, Erin, a 27-year-old cisgender white woman, shared,

> You just couldn't be female—no breasts, no butt, no nothing. But then you're supposed to be pretty and girly. So, we had to wear pink dresses, purple dresses, flower dresses, stuff with lace, stuff with ribbons, stuff with bows. It was a really weird combination of, you have to look girly, but you're not allowed to be female.

For Erin, having a sexually developed body was seen as a detriment, tempting to men, and needing to be controlled. Femininity, however, was still highly emphasized, resulting in an enforced aesthetic of girlish, child-like clothing. This emphasis on innocence for young girls had the inverse effect of its purported goal for many participants, constructing them as sexual objects well before they hit puberty, as well as sexualizing and fetishizing the trappings of youth.

In another example of this phenomenon, Gemma, a 33-year-old white cisgender woman, spoke about her own experience of early sexualization within purity culture, saying,

> When I was about 10, our church took a group to a local Christian camp. And while we were there, the girls…had to wear t-shirts over their bathing suits, but the boys had no rules about their swimwear…I have on a one-piece bathing suit underneath this t-shirt… at age 10, I looked just like any other boy. If you put my hair up and put on some swim trunks nobody would notice…the shame of purity culture and of the evangelical churches

> [contributes to] this forced sexualization on young children…forcing these sets of rules on these kids who are not ready for it, don't know what to do with it…they're just being set up for the society that's been created for them.

Here, Gemma highlights how her perceived sexual attractiveness was being regulated, and she was taught to regulate it herself, even before she reached puberty. At age 10, having not yet developed secondary sex characteristics, she was nonetheless constructed as sexual by the church and required to cover her body. While purity culture holds that such action protects young girls and women, in many ways it projects sexuality onto children who are not yet prepared to navigate that sexualization and begins enforcing narratives of women as temptations before young people understand their own sexuality. Having sexualized young people's bodies, purity culture constructs those bodies as needing to be controlled and protected due to that sexuality. This sexual objectification and control of young girls' bodies is evident in the proscribed role of fathers under purity culture. Grace, a 32-year-old cisgender multiracial woman, shared her experience with a purity ceremony. This quote, also analyzed in the earlier chapter on the submission of the body, is repeated here in relation to purported fatherly control and protection and the construction of the sexuality of young girls within it.

> I did in fact have a purity ceremony…walking down this church aisle as a 15-year-old, to my male youth pastor, with my dad…promising my dad and my male youth pastor that I wouldn't have sex until some man that I was I was meant to have sex with came along…I remember, in the moment being fully on board…[yet] I felt embarrassed. Like, standing in front of all these people promising my body to someone that didn't yet exist in my life, to my father, to my male youth pastor, and to this male version of God.

In a ceremony resembling a wedding, control over Grace's girlhood sexuality was objectified and formally claimed by her father, witnessed by a male religious leader and a patriarchal construction of God. Such narratives of the value of sexual innocence and fatherly protection of girls' virginity position girlhood sexuality and virginity as good and worthy of protection. This, along with the circumstances of monogamous, heterosexual, and conservative

marriage, are the only circumstances in which female sexuality is seen in a positive light within purity culture. Elsewhere, it is primarily constructed as sinful and tempting. Thus, it seems that female sexuality is only seen as positive when it is perceived as being under the control of a man—whether husband or father. This is a clear example of power/knowledge wherein gender norms are constructed and enforced such that the control of young girls' sexuality is accepted as the purview of men, and that is seen as positive.

Natalie, a 29-year-old cisgender white woman, also highlighted this emphasis on fatherly sexual control within purity culture, saying,

> There's this tradition of dads protecting their daughters that totally creeps me out, honestly. Like, purity rings can be given by dads, for daughters…I remember hearing like, "Yeah, my dad won't let me wear leggings as pants…if I do, I'm grounded"… And I was like, "Oh my gosh,"… even in high school, I was like, "That's ridiculous."

Here we see Natalie illustrate the purity culture norm of fathers prohibiting daughters from wearing things that are 'seen as sexual or revealing, such as leggings, because it might be too attractive to men and cause them to stumble. This norm "creeps out" Natalie, potentially due to the pseudo-incestuous nature of these interactions, predicated on fathers viewing their daughters' bodies in a sexual way. While this sexualizing gaze of male family members could, by some counts, be constructed as a provision of a man's perspective from a protective adult, some participants were directly told to police their appearance so that their male family members did not lust after them sexually. As Holly, a 27-year-old cisgender white woman, explained, "*There was a huge emphasis on modesty. And I had six brothers…it was like…make sure you wear a bra, even around your brothers, even around your dad."* Within Holly's family narrative, the sexualization of young girls was so normalized, and men were constructed as so hypersexual that incest was seemingly considered a real possibility. Young girls' bodies were viewed as so inherently sexual and were so objectified that young girls could be detached from their humanity.

In some cases, so alienated from their roles as daughters and sisters to be seen as sex objects by their male family members.

While young people are sexualized and objectified within purity culture, much of the language surrounding these narratives is that of protection and innocence. Young girls are regarded as having a sexuality that is good and worthy of protection and simultaneously lusted after by much older men, sexualizing, fetishizing, and objectifying girlhood and virginity, which is perceived as a normative truth about the world, not an enacted fabrication. This constructed power/knowledge "truth" of young children's bodies as sexual and tempting makes them vulnerable to abuse in that it encourages the objectification and sexualization of children who are not educated on sex and sexuality and are conditioned to obey the adults in authority over them, who might misuse that power.

Patriarchal Hierarchies

Many participants spoke about assault and abuse of many kinds within their churches and religious organizations. Speaking to incidences of sexual assault in her community, Natalie, the 29-year-old cisgender white woman we heard from earlier, also noted her belief that the lack of sexual education surrounding consent and authority, combined with the enforced gender hierarchy of purity culture, contributed to incidents of sexual assault and abuse in her church. When asked more generally what she would change about her experiences in church growing up if she could, she noted,

> Having an honest conversation about consent would have been really important. Including, you know, having a conversation at a young age and not trusting all adults, especially adult men that you're supposed to obey or whatnot. I didn't experience sexual abuse but people in my church did. The whole obedience thing. It's just like, ugh.

The structure of Natalie's church hierarchy and gender roles, as well as those of many evangelical church environments, meant that there was an emphasis on women, particularly

young women, being obedient to men. These power dynamics, combined with a lack of education around consent, meant that in Natalie's church, young women and girls were highly vulnerable to the authority of men and their desires. When men so chose to abuse that power, there was a structure of normative obedience in place to enable that abuse.

The emphasis placed on women's obedience in these environments was brought up by other participants as well, often in connection with abuse. Jenna, the 35-year-old cisgender white woman we heard from earlier sharing her experience of being groomed as a young person, spoke about the intersection of obedience and abuse in her evangelical Christian high school.

> You did what you were told, and that becomes very problematic when someone is preying on—and that did happen when I was in high school. One of the Bible teachers, he groomed one of my classmates. Everyone noticed that he was spending a lot of time with her, and people were questioning it. After a couple months he announced that he and his wife were divorcing, she was moving out of town, and he left the school. Then a month or two later [my classmate] announced to her friend group that she was getting married to him. And they got married…The school didn't really know how to handle that and did a poor job of handling it…She was in a vulnerable place and [it was expected that] you respect authority, and it ended up being that he was preying on her…Her parents signed off on her being married underage. I don't know what was going on with the parents, but maybe they had sex and they thought it was better for them to be having sex in the confines of marriage.

Similar to the previous example, this quote from Jenna illustrates patriarchal and abusive power dynamics present within Christian systems. Young women are taught to obey broadly constructed authority, and few if any conversations are had regarding consent. This creates circumstances ripe for abuse and mistreatment. We also see that the formal system in place, the school, did not react appropriately and condemn this abuse. In a secular environment, a former teacher marrying his teenage student would likely be quickly labeled as abuse and critically examined as a misuse of power and sexual predation. Under the system of evangelical Christianity, however, the constructed power/knowledge "truth" of men's authority and women's submission muddies the perception of such abuses of power. We see also the power of the sexual

sin narrative, wherein this young woman's parents signed off on her marrying her former teacher at a very young age, perhaps due to their belief that the sexual sin of sexual activity outside of marriage—which in this case would have been grooming, sexual abuse, and statutory rape—could be remedied through marriage.

Molly, a 23-year-old cisgender white woman, shared another example of abuse from a figure of spiritual authority, describing an inappropriate relationship that she had with her youth pastor when she was a teenager.

> I was definitely heavily involved in high school and youth group…unfortunately, it's hard to describe, but I developed what was probably an inappropriate relationship with my youth minister. And he and I, thankfully, never, like, tried to have sex with me, so that's good. But just a lot of like, we spent way too much time together. He would take me out to dinner, those kinds of things. And, of course, I was in love with him. And so that was a really crappy dynamic that has definitely kind of made me really question a lot of stuff about church.

Molly was in a vulnerable position wherein someone with spiritual authority over her, by virtue of his being a man as well as her pastor, demonstrated a great deal of interest in her. While she notes that this pastor did not try to have sex with her, he does demonstrate signs of grooming Molly by building an inappropriately intimate emotional relationship. As Molly notes, this abuse of power and the circumstances surrounding it, such as the fact that the other adults in her life did not address this problematic behavior, caused her to question the church and, presumably, its trustworthiness. The seemingly broad acceptance of this behavior is perhaps due to the construction of abuses of power as normal through the creation of the "truth" in which men's authority and the spiritual righteousness of pastors are largely unquestioned.

While many participants in this study spoke about abuse at the hands of church or religious institution authority figures, others spoke about abuse at the hands of parents, siblings, and partners. Often, this abuse was shrouded in religious and scriptural language, with church

theology and understandings of power, gender, and obedience wielded to justify it. As such, spiritual abuse and sexual abuse were deeply intertwined for many who shared their stories. Leif, a 28-year-old genderqueer white person, shared an illustrative example from their family, particularly focusing on their mom's experience of abuse at the hands of their father.

> At one point my mom had had a number of ectopic pregnancies [which] can be really dangerous for women, so there was a point when her doctor was basically like "If you get pregnant again, chances are you're not going to survive that pregnancy," so it was super dangerous. My parents didn't believe in using birth control because they took the perspective that if you use birth control you weren't trusting God. So, the doctor had talked to my mom and convinced her she needed to either not have sex or my dad needed a vasectomy so that it would be safe for her to have sex because of this medical condition…So, she and my dad had a conversation, and she was like, "I don't know, the doctor was saying you have to have a procedure. I'm not sure what else we can do." And he was basically like, "Well, I don't think that that's what God wants, but you still have to have sex with me because I'm your husband." [He used] the language of a verse in Corinthians about someone's body not being their own if they're married. So, there was a period of time where I knew my mom didn't want to be having sex with my dad, but felt like she had to, and at any point she could get pregnant and die… so I think that sent a message, really, really strongly that women are less than human, that not even a woman's life is worth someone not having sex with her…Like, a part of what I'm trying to communicate is not only were there these messages, but the intensity on them was turned up really high.

In this example, we clearly see the abuse of spiritualized power. Leif's father uses biblical text and the purported will of God, wielding their accepted "truth" to coerce his wife's sexual submission even while endangering her life. This dissertation's titular saying of "your body is not your own" makes an appearance here, used to grant this husband control over his wife's body so that he might use it for his own purposes, not only against her wishes but also her safety. Similarly, the authority of men is highlighted here. Leif's mother's viable options for saying no to sexual acts were highly limited, lest she be considered disobedient to her husband and, by extension, to God. This ongoing marital rape communicated to Leif that women—a group that, as a person assigned female at birth, they were assumed to be a part of at the time—

were less than human. Their safety, well-being, or right to say no did not matter as much as their role as a sexual object, and this hierarchy of human value was made intense and visceral.

As seen throughout the examples in this section, sexual assault and abuse are common within the evangelical church. Within many evangelical denominations, and particularly within purity culture, structures of spiritual and patriarchal power are set up to provide fertile ground for abuse and assault. Purity culture and other evangelical structures enforce the power/knowledge "truth" of gender norms and hierarchies wherein men are dominant leaders and women are submissive and obedient. These hierarchies, whether formal in church organizational structures or informal in family structures, also come with spiritual ties. As it is ordained by God that men are in leadership over women, to disobey men is to disobey God. As such, men at all levels of authority—whether head pastors, school principals, or husbands—can wield the perceived authority of God and use it to manipulate and abuse those who are conditioned to obey them.

Responsibility

Being a Stumbling Block

Experiences of purity culture as rape culture were commonly reported throughout data collection. Among those reports, 25 participants made specific reference to the evangelical concept of a stumbling block. A stumbling block is an evangelical Christian term for someone who causes another to sin (Sharp 2009). While commonly used in purity culture to describe a woman's body tempting a man into lust, this Hebrew term is only found once in connection to sexuality in the Bible. In this verse, Jesus says that if a man's eye causes him to stumble and look lustfully at a woman, he should tear his eye out—a very different use of the phrase than commonly seen in purity culture. Rose, a 30-year-old cisgender, white woman, illustrated her

experiences with the evangelical, spiritualized version of this language used to perpetuate harmful, gendered sexual dynamics, saying,

> All the things that we were told in church is literally what they describe as rape culture. It's, you know, "She was asking for it because she was wearing that," but instead, "You're making him stumble by wearing that." So, it's slightly different wording but it's saying the exact same thing, that a woman, based on what she wears or how she presents herself, is gonna attract a certain type of attention.

Here, Rose draws a one-to-one comparison between purity culture and rape culture, noting the difference of spiritualized language. In this quote, she references the common evangelical use of this phrase wherein the responsibility for the sexual sin of a man's lust is placed on the woman—it is she who trips him up and causes him to fall (Klein 2018; Matthew 5:29). The language of modesty and the culture surrounding it is similarly utilized. The spiritualized rules and regulations around modest dress label more revealing dress as a sin of the wearer for causing the observer to lust after them. Within purity culture, this shifted locus of responsibility goes beyond the morality or holiness of Rose's own body to how it purportedly impacts the bodies and minds of others, namely men. She is constructed as inviting their lustful thoughts, bearing the responsibility of causing their sin simply through her appearance.

Jessica, a 29-year-old cisgender white woman, also shared about the stress placed on what she wore, particularly with regard to modesty. She described her experience, saying, *"I was constantly worrying about what I was wearing. Like, 'Is this appropriate?', 'Is this modest?', 'Am I going to make some stumble?' I felt like I was dressing for other people."* Many participants expressed a high degree of self-consciousness and hyperawareness of their bodies, continually thinking about how their bodies were being perceived. They took the perspective of men in power to evaluate their clothing through the evangelical male gaze and its authority over them. Also sharing her experience with a spiritualized version of the male gaze, Amanda, a 26-

year-old cisgender white woman, spoke about her experience in purity culture and her later experiences of sexuality, saying,

> I need to be attractive to the male gaze, but also I'm supposed to keep everything away from the male gaze…just like the overall message that your body is bad… I can't figure out how I'm supposed to relate in my body, and now [I'm older] and I don't know how to have a relationship. I don't know what my sexuality is, I don't know how to say no…I do online dating stuff and things get like sexual and I'm like, "Okay, I guess this is what's happening."…[In purity culture] you're groomed to think you're asking for whatever action you get against you… because [young women are] taught not to question authority, and just to follow the rules. And it's their fault.

Amanda felt specifically subject to an evangelical male gaze under which she had to be attractive to the male gaze but was also taught to avoid tempting men into sin through her appearance. This gave her the message that her body was bad, making it difficult to relate to, and exist in, her body. So too, she was also taught to obey and do what she was told within purity culture. Both of these things contributed to a feeling of disembodiment and a lack of capacity to set boundaries in sexual relationships and caused her to feel that she was "asking for it"—that what happened to her, or to other young women, sexually was their responsibility, even if it was a situation of assault or abuse.

The internalization of the evangelical male gaze is well demonstrated in this story from Beth, a 25-year-old cisgender white woman. Beth shared her experience of being sexually assaulted and how purity culture impacted how she viewed and interpreted that event in her life. When asked how the concept of modesty was addressed in her church and her evangelical family, she said:

> It took years for me to get to a place where I was like, "Oh, my god, purity culture and rape culture use very similar tactics, like, this is really sick."…like if a woman is dressed a certain way, and she's sexually assaulted, then, "Well, she shouldn't have been wearing that." I was sexually assaulted at a pool when I was 15 and wearing a tank top, I think. I remember questioning myself like, "Oh my god, this is something that I drew in, I'm at fault here because of I didn't have enough clothes on," or whatever. So, that was certainly part of what was communicated…With my private [Christian] school experiences, we

> had to have certain lengths of skirts and shorts… I remember getting sent home from school or work, even when I was 23, because my dress was too short or something ridiculous. So, [laughs] it's like there's no part of your body that can be trusted.

For Beth, purity culture messaging was spiritualized rape culture messaging and contributed to her feelings of shame and guilt following her sexual assault as a teenager. Highlighted in this participant story is the depth to which purity culture messaging and acceptance of rape myths such as the victim-blaming axiom "What was she wearing?" becomes internalized by those who grow up within it. She also demonstrates one of the more immediate consequences for women who do not adhere to modesty standards—being sent home due to their clothing. This is, of course, a form of bodily control. Additionally, the meaning that she makes of these messages that "there's no part of your body that can be trusted," highlights how these messages about her body and the control of religious authorities alienated her from her body, causing its knowledge and embodied sensory perception of the world to be cast in suspicion. Her body was untrustworthy in that it was tempting, unable to be seen and also safe, understood as being at fault when it came to questions of purity and piety.

Also discussing the male gaze and its role in sexualization and the narrative of a stumbling block, Jenna, a 35-year-old cisgender white woman, shared,

> I experienced being sexualized at a young age… I remember at a church event someone came in and taught—and I had to be pre-pubescent—and instructed the girls how they should be sitting…kind of how to act ladylike. And at that point, I was a kid. I just kind of existed in the world. [Suddenly,] I was like, "Oh." There was a sense that my body is like meant for something else than what I had thought it was meant for and it's meant as an object of the male gaze but also not the male gaze because if you caused someone to stumble, that's on you. So, there was a lot of a lot of anxiety that went into that.

Here Jenna speaks to her experience of purity culture messaging sexualizing her before she has a sense of her own sexuality. This caused her to look at herself and her body differently and to take on the evangelical male gaze. Having previously 'just kind of existed' in her body,

she found that this instruction in taking on the evangelical male gaze caused her to develop a new self-consciousness and to see her body more as a sexualized object than an experienced reality. She also highlights the contradiction of the evangelical male gaze, wherein women are required to view themselves as sexual objects to try to desexualize their appearance, as opposed to the broader male gaze, wherein the impetus is often predominantly to be sexually attractive and appealing to men.

One of the most common ways to pursue a less sexual and less tempting appearance was through modest dress. Women wearing clothing deemed immodest were regularly chastised. First, through being verbally reprimanded or told to change. Second, by their clothing choices being spiritualized as sinful. Lindsay, a 30-year-old cisgender white woman, spoke about her experience of trying to dress modestly.

> [Conversations were about] why we cover up—it's to make men not stumble; why would we be modest—it's so hat we don't invite temptation, so that we don't ask for like sexual relations with someone when we don't really want to, or when we shouldn't. So, I think it's very much like women's bodies were seen as an object of sex, and that's why you had to cover up, to be modest, because otherwise, you were causing people to stumble.

Through Lindsay's experience, we again see the spiritual and moral responsibility for the thoughts and actions of men placed on women. A woman is a stumbling block, seen as inviting assault and abuse, tempting men into sexual thoughts. So too, dressing immodestly was seen to lead to having sex one did not want, highlighting a severe lack of autonomy and lack of ability to say no for women in this environment. This narrative is similar in many ways to wider rape culture. Spiritualization, however, transforms this responsibility to impact not only a woman's fault, or lack thereof, for the sexual aggression of men, but also her spiritual responsibility for men's lust. The constructed, spiritualized "truth" of lust as sexual sin meant that it could impact someone's spiritual standing, making women responsible for men's piety.

Being a Gatekeeper

Within purity culture, not only are people assigned female at birth constructed as responsible for purportedly inviting sexual assault and abuse through their percieved inherent sexuality, but they are also constructed as responsible for preventing sexual activity from occurring when sexual circumstances—whether consensual or not—arose. Leif, the 28-year-old, white, genderqueer person we heard from earlier, shared their experience with the metaphor of being a stumbling block, saying,

> I was both afraid of and afraid for my body. Not only was it my responsibility to keep someone from being sexually attracted to me…like "being a stumbling block" or those kinds of things, but also it was my responsibility to preserve my virtue, which explicitly would have been my virginity.

Here, Leif points out two different sides of this spiritualized rape culture. Not only was it their responsibility to make sure others did not lust after them, but it was also their responsibility to preserve their virginity. Virginity was spiritualized through the language of "virtue", ascribing moral and spiritual weight to their sexual debut. They were held accountable for preventing the act of sex—consensual or abusive—from happening. Leif also speaks to the impact that this cultural norm had on their relationship to their body. Their body did not feel safe or secure in that environment where it was constantly under threat of sexual sin by sexual experience or sexual abuse, and it was their responsibility to preserve their value by preserving their virginity.

Molly, a 23-year-old cisgender white woman, shared a similar sentiment in a story about her experience of a highly limited sexual education in a Bible class at her Christian school.

> In Bible class in my freshman year, our Bible teacher talked to us at length about how it was the girl's job to keep sex from happening. Because boys aren't—boys are just not in control of themselves enough to do that. And so, the girl has to be the one to do that, and it was our responsibility, and so if we [a couple] had sex, it was our [the girl's] problem.

The construction of men as hypersexual, and women as hyposexual, meant that in sexual situations women were seen to have more self-control and tasked with preventing sexual activity This narrative was constructed as an inherent "truth" about the apparent sexual nature of men and women, not as a social dynamic. As such, if a heterosexual couple did have sex, the woman held responsible for sexual sin because she did not adequately gatekeep their sexual virtue and led them into sin. This dynamic of women having to prevent sex came up across participants, with, for example, Jenna, a 35-year-old cisgender white woman, sharing parallel messages that she received regarding sexual boundaries in a heterosexual dynamic.

> It was always on the woman. If you were in a relationship, it's always on the woman, making sure that you were holding the boundaries, and it was never the guy. The guy never had the responsibility to be a part of that. If you got raped, it was your own fault. You got harassed, you were asking for it. Rape culture is very much ingrained, very much in my mind, in purity culture and you begin to internalize that.

Here, Jenna highlights the responsibility of women to keep and enforce sexual boundaries within a romantic relationship—responsibilities not shared with "the guy". Expanding on this, she ties this dynamic back to the broader spiritualized rape culture messages of "asking for it" and being at fault when you experienced assault or abuse. This narrative indicates that fault can be placed on a woman because was responsible for preventing sexual sin. However, as discussed in the earlier sections of this paper, purity culture is an environment in which the obedience of women to men is highly stressed and consent is rarely discussed. While rendered vulnerable by these dynamics, women are also made responsible for stopping sex from occurring.

Speaking to another facet of women's responsibility for the sexual actions of men, Bailey, a 27-year-old cisgender white woman, shared that women in her church community were also made responsible for the actions of men, particularly their husbands, even if they were not the target of lust.

> The women in my community were very aware that men, their middle-aged husbands, couldn't be expected to not look at the young girls [in an inappropriate way], and that was [not] talked about, nothing us girls were warned about…but, they knew that they wanted [to] limit access. So, I can't think of anything that I felt about myself and my body that wasn't connected to that. And, yeah, I mean that still affects me, really.

The sexualization of young women and girls and the culturally accepted power of men extend so far that adult men are less often condemned for sexualizing young girls than young girls are condemned for purportedly tempting men in ways they do not yet understand. While boys will be boys, and men will be men—rarely held accountable for inappropriate or reprehensible sexual behavior, with little change as they age—young girls are made responsible for their own assault or the way that a man looks at them. Also, as we see in this quote, adult women are responsible for policing young girls and "limit[ing]" their husbands' "access" to these young girls. Whether a child or an adult, the responsibility for preventing sexual sin falls to girls and women. This created power/knowledge norm of the responsibility of women for the hypersexuality and sexual sins of men remains true regardless of age.

One participant, Erin, a 27-year-old cisgender white woman, reflected on her experience of sexual abuse within her family, particularly noting how she and her siblings were made responsible for trying to prevent their own abuse.

> My mom was always policing us, making sure that my dad didn't have reason to come after his children, which happened anyway…There was this, "You have to keep your dad from lusting after you…you can't be well endowed and can't be female, because your dad will come after you." That was definitely preached to us in all kinds of ways. I never connected that thought of "My mom is policing us so that my dad won't come after us," but that's what was happening. So, a ton of purity culture on that. You're at fault for men lusting after you. You were at fault. So, you need to dress this way.

For Erin, her childhood responsibility for the lust and actions of men extended to her family and her father. The man often positioned within evangelicalism as the protector of her virginity was her sexual predator. Both she and her mother took up the responsibility of seeking

to make her appear less well-endowed, attempting to utilize purity and modesty to protect her from her abusive father. Erin learned that she had to be as modest and non-sexual as possible to keep men, including her own father, from lusting after her, and that men's lust and the abuse that happened to her was thus her responsibility. This message was reinforced by her father, who, she said, "*Would make comments like, 'Thank you for dressing modestly because it helps me not to struggle.*" While Erin's experience of abuse is not universal, the messages that she received throughout her abuse—the language that made her father's lust her responsibility, the regulation of her modesty by a protective mother, and the responsibility of her child-self for the thoughts and actions of adult men—are not, in the abstract, uncommon for people who grow up within purity culture environments. These norms constructed a world in which women and children were responsible for the abuses of men. Additionally, men, including the men in her family, were seen as so incapable of reining themselves in from inappropriate sexual thoughts and behaviors that it became her responsibility as a young child in the situation to try to prevent assault and abuse through dressing modestly to avoid tempting her family members. Whether the target of abuse or in some form of relationship, such as marriage, with an abuser, women were made responsible for gatekeeping access to sex and to the bodies of young women.

Bringing these dynamics together, Gemma, the 33-year-old white cisgender woman we heard from earlier, shared her perspective on the interlocking dynamics of assault and abuse within purity culture that, she says, sets women up as "scapegoats."

> [There was] a big emphasis on this idea of protecting yourself by dressing modestly, by not inviting male gaze, but also being responsible for drawing that in. So, suddenly your body becomes weaponized, and you are given this big responsibility because you're being told that your body has the power to affect someone else, to make a man stumble or to invite a man to rape you…so this big responsibility is put on you, but you're not given any agency over it, and no agency over your body because you can't express it in any way, you certainly can't use it as an instrument of your will, because it's an instrument of God's will….it seems that that's the best way to set up a scapegoat, is to give someone a

> big responsibility but no agency. You're setting someone up to be blamed for something in the future.

As Gemma so clearly synthesizes, and as we see throughout the examples in this chapter, persons assigned female at birth bear a disproportionate amount of responsibility for what is constructed as sexual sin while also being deprived of the agency to alter circumstances of assault and abuse. Young people are constructed as tempting and 'inviting' abuse, and then made responsible for stopping that abuse, without the tools or agency to do so. This responsibility for the sexual sins of men remains true whether it is a situation of consensual sex or assault. This is an environment where, as Leif so aptly stated, young people assigned female at birth were brought up to believe and accept a reality in which they had to be afraid of their bodies and afraid for their bodies, constantly at risk of tempting men, of being assaulted or abused, and of being made responsible for it.

Discussion

Purity culture is a climate under which those assigned female at birth are constantly under threat, made vulnerable targets for sexual aggression in an environment without accountability for aggressors. Utilizing the umbrella term of sexual sin, purity culture muddies the lines between consensual sexual activity and assault and places responsibility for sexual sin on the spiritual shoulders of the person assigned female at birth within the encounter. In other words, AFAB people are not granted the bodily autonomy to decide for themselves what happens to their bodies sexually, but they are held responsible for what happens to it.

As seen in participant stories, sexual education is highly limited in evangelical purity culture. Consent is rarely discussed, and there is little semantic difference between sexual assault and consensual sex. Parents and religious authority figures seemed to fear that knowledge about

sex and sexuality—even, in some cases, basic knowledge of reproductive anatomy—would lead young people to have sex, thus endangering their eternal salvation. This barring of knowledge, however, simply left participants in the dark about their own bodies and fostered the belief that sexuality was so sinful and shameful that they couldn't know anything about it, and yet they were expected to engage with it when they got married. Where knowledge is power, a lack of sexual knowledge is disempowering and makes young people assigned female at birth particularly vulnerable to those who possess sexual knowledge. A lack of understanding of sex and consent meant that participants were often unable to recognize abusive situations when they occurred or, if they were, did not have the tools or capacity to say no or navigate their way out of sexually abusive situations.

Additionally, participants were made vulnerable to assault and abuse through the objectification and sexualization of children. Through language of protection and rituals such as purity ceremonies, young girls' virginity and bodies are made into objects to be traded from fathers to husbands. The movement's purported attempt to protect children and preserve innocence, in fact, furthers sexual objectification, positioning girlhood virginity and sexuality as good and worthy of the protection of men, and adult women's autonomous sexuality as bad and sinful. So too, young girls' bodies are treated as sexually attractive before they reach puberty, often required to be covered through modest dress even before there are any signs of sexual development in their bodies. This apparent need for young girls to dress modestly normalized an idea that men of all ages, and even male relatives, will find these child bodies sexually tempting. This also normalizes the hypersexuality of men and also makes prepubescent girls into sexual targets before they have a chance to understand sex and sexuality for themselves. By this process, it fetishizes and sexualizes girls, their control by older men, and their pre-pubescent

bodies. This sexualization is accepted as normal, and a view of young girls' bodies as inherently sexual is constructed as a "truth" through the wielding of power/knowledge.

In addition to the combination of the sexualization of youth and disempowerment through the withholding of sexual education, participants were also made vulnerable through the construction of patriarchal authority in their purity culture environments. Purity culture emphasizes the submission of women, creating unbalanced power dynamics and ingraining strong patterns of obedience to men among participants. Many were explicitly taught not to trust their bodies or instincts but to instead entrust their regulation to those in authority, who are almost exclusively men. Evangelical institutions often reinforce these narratives of male authority and allow for its exploitation, often failing to condemn abuses of power and reifying patriarchal power dynamics. Scripture and theology are regularly used to attempt to justify such abuses, resulting in a conflation of spiritual and organizational power, tying obedience to authority figures with obedience to God.

While participants were made vulnerable to abuse, they were also held spiritually and socially responsible for that abuse. First, AFAB people are viewed as stumbling blocks, inviting and tempting men via their inherent sexual nature and making them responsible for the lustful thoughts of men. This sexual objectification, as well as the social power of men, extends so far as to more often blame young girls for supposedly tempting adult men into sexual sin than to blame adult men for sexualizing young girls. Women and girls are held responsible and often portrayed as tempting, seductive, or immodest, and men as helpless in the face of their sexual urges. Related to this construction of men as hypersexual, young women are also held responsible for gatekeeping sexuality and stopping sexual situations. This was true whether they were in the

sexual situation themselves or were viewed as responsible for the sexual thoughts and actions of a man in relation to them, such as their husband.

Purity culture positions women and girls such that they are simultaneously made a target of sexuality, required to gatekeep their sexuality, and yet are not seen as having an active role in the decision-making and consent process. It is a woman's job to dress modestly and act in a demure manner, thereby seen as desexualizing herself in order to prevent sexual sin, not a man's job to address his own lust or 'sexual sin', to prevent sexual abuse and assault. This is, of course, analogous to the wider rape culture narrative that it is a woman's job to prevent herself from being raped, not a man's job to not rape women. This patriarchal power structure enforces the message that women's and girls' bodies do not belong to them.

This examination of the structures and "truths" within purity culture that enable and accept assault and abuse offers insight into how a web of power and knowledge are wielded to make young people assigned female at birth in these environments both vulnerable to and responsible for assault and abuse. In centering participants' lived experiences, it offers rich and visceral knowledge of lived and embodied experiences within these structures. Highlighting the withholding of sexual knowledge and the creation and enforcement of gendered hierarchies and responsibilities, I demonstrate the network of power/knowledge that is exerted upon and made material through lived, physical experience. These findings may help to inform broader understandings of power and rape culture, particularly within highly patriarchal or religious environments. In terms of the broader project of this dissertation, this chapter offers profound insight into lived and embodied knowledge of sexual assault and abuse and the structures that enable them within purity culture.

Chapter 6: How Purity Culture Lives in the Body: Sexual Dysfunction, Disembodiment, and Disordered Eating

Introduction

As previously noted, scholars have called for further investigation into embodied impacts of religious movements, health impacts of structural sexism in religious institutions, and the day-to-day materiality of the female body in religious spaces (Ammerman 2016; Homan and Burdette 2021; Vasquez 2011). This dissertation as a whole aims to fill this gap, using participant narrative to highlight visceral, fleshly experiences, including negative health impacts of this religious movement, centering knowledge not only about bodies but also from bodies. Here, in the final analytic chapter of this work, I utilize frameworks of lived and embodied religion (Ammerman 2016; Vasquez 2011) to ask a direct and important question of my data: How does purity culture live in the body?

In this culminating chapter, I draw on participant narratives of physical, embodied experience to argue that purity culture lives in the body in ways that both align with and expand on predominant understandings of purity culture as a religious abstinence movement, describing a movement more broadly focused on controlling bodies and impressing cultural values onto the female body. In asking this question of how purity culture lives in the body, three key embodied experiences emerge: sexual dysfunction, disembodiment, and disordered eating. These findings across interviews strengthen the small yet impactful existing literature that examines evangelical purity culture as a form of rape culture, with participants reporting symptoms that are shared between purity culture and sexual assault and abuse. This study demonstrates purity culture's spiritualized objectification and sexualization of the female body, alongside simultaneous spiritualized condemnation of its sexuality, and how these narratives can physiologically impact those who experience them.

Background

Revisiting Dualism in Christianity

While previously discussed in Chapter 4, it is important to revisit the topic of dualism within Western Christianity and evangelicalism. This philosophical history, here incorporating additional context relevant to this particular chapter, will offer grounding through which to trace the roots of emergent, embodied consequences of purity culture, as illustrated in this chapter's findings. Sexual dysfunction, disembodiment, and disordered eating are all, in some way, related to philosophical dualism.

Since the Apostle Paul wrote to new Christians in Rome around 57 C.E. (Tobin 2010), western Christianity has held the body with suspicion and separated it from the spiritual; such bodily distrust laid the foundation for the body theology of modern purity culture. While some later Western Christian traditions, such as Celtic Christianity in the fifth century (Herren and Brown 2002; Trousdale 2013) and mystic groups such as the Beguines in the 14th century (Cusack 2014; Marin 2010), viewed the body as a means to connect with God, more Augustinian beliefs have dominated modern Western Christianity. Augustine, a theologian and bishop of the late 300s and early 400s C.E., theologized body and spirit as separate, the body as sinful and the spirit as holy. Augustine believed that denying bodily desires fostered piety, particularly regarding sexuality and sexual pleasure (Bynum 1987; Lister 2020). Such dualism went on to become a hallmark of broader Western philosophy, with enlightenment scholars such as Descartes (1637) holding the rational consciousness as the true self, existing over and above the body and controlling the gratification or withholding of its desires.

Within this discipline of and distaste for the body, the female body has been particularly maligned. Bordo (1986:439) has referred to the ongoing extrapolation of mind/body dualism as

the “Cartesian masculinization of thought.” The body is often associated with the feminine, tied to ideas of emotionality and the ‘hysterical’, an unreliable source of knowledge, and the mind is, in opposition, constructed as masculine and associated with clear rationality, advanced philosophy, and control of unruly nature (Lloyd 1986). This Western dualism, ever-present in evangelicalism and purity culture within it, sees the feminized body, its sensations and emotions, as something to be regulated and managed by the masculinized mind (Williams and Bendelow 1996). The mind-body divide makes possible the spiritual conquering and control of the body. Asceticism and self-denial are often seen as a means by which to overcome sin and are therefore emphasized as a way to seek salvation (Weber and Kalberg 2009). Importantly, this dualism is also racialized, with white, male enlightenment thinkers fabricating an idea of a primitive and animalistic Black body, slandered as greedy in terms of both food and sex, in an attempt to justify the enslavement of African peoples (Strings 2019). Asceticism, and the piety and purity associated with it, was constructed in opposition to Blackness and in congress with whiteness, racializing the concept of a pure, holy body.

In the current era, and for participants in this dissertation project, morality and asceticism remain tied. Cognitive links have been shown between ascetic activities, such as restrictive dieting and celibacy, and a pious, moral, and white body (Hoverd and Sibley 2007; Moultrie 2017). Under this philosophy, the closest one might get to a holy body is a body controlled, denied its desires, and subjected to the power of a strong spiritual and mental self. This tradition of asceticism and the moral good of suffering, girded by a stalwart belief in the separation of mind and body and disfavor for the feminized, racialized body, translate easily to the three major ways that purity culture lives in the body in this analysis: disembodiment, sexual dysfunction, and disordered eating.

Purity Culture, the Body, and Sexual Trauma

As discussed at length in the previous chapter, purity culture is a form of rape culture, well-documented as upholding and accepting sexual violence, assault, and abuse (Blyth 2021; Klement et al. 2022; Minister 2018). This background section focuses on the physiological impacts of related sexual trauma as well as the known physiological impacts of purity culture. Additionally, it provides a brief review of the literature on the links between religion and sexual trauma, and the thematic findings of this chapter—sexual dysfunction, disembodiment, and disordered eating.

Previous work has found that people who grew up in purity culture often exhibit symptoms akin to those who have experienced sexual assault or abuse. Many develop chronic sexual dysfunction and high levels of shame and self-loathing (Sellers 2017). Cross's (2020) examination of purity culture has found significant evidence for sexual trauma, including symptoms of PTSD, emergent from both sexual assault and the harmful messaging and environment of purity culture. A frequent physical manifestation of sexual trauma is vaginismus, a condition in which persons with a vagina have great difficulty or inability to allow vaginal entry of any object despite a desire to do so, often partially due to "involuntary pelvic muscle contraction" and associated with significant anxiety (Crowley, Goldmeier, and Hiller 2009:225). Tetik and Alchar's (2021) meta-analysis found a significant relationship between a history of sexual and emotional abuse and vaginismus. Additionally, while the statistical relationship between vaginismus and religiosity overall is inconsistent, persons with vaginismus are more likely to come from backgrounds with negative views of sex and a strong emphasis on bridal virginity, regardless of previous experience of assault and abuse (Atallah et al. 2016; McEvoy 2021; Reissing et al. 2003). Purity culture is, of course, one such background.

Disembodiment is another symptom of having experienced sexual assault and abuse. Disembodiment's two core experiences, "feeling extraneous from one's own body and…feeling oneself through objective measures," are generally fostered by feeling unsafe within one's body and disconnecting from it as a form of self-protection (Poletti, Preti, and Raballo 2022:189). As McBride and Kwee (2018:12) state, there is an inherent sense of fear women feel "because of the likelihood of violation to her body simply because she is born female," making disembodiment a useful coping mechanism in the face of the risk of further violation. Within purity culture, not only are such violations likely, but often theological messaging explicitly encourages disembodiment and fosters bodily distrust (Lelwica 2017).

Sexual assault and abuse are also linked, partially by the mechanism of disembodiment, to disordered eating. Recent research has shown that disembodiment is likely an etiopathogenic mechanism, or underlying contributor, of eating disorders, particularly Anorexia Nervosa (Castellini et al. 2022; Levine and Piran 2004; Piran 2017). Scholarly research has provided evidence that survivors of sexual assault and abuse sometimes engage in disordered eating behaviors as a "flight from sexuality" to "desexualize" their bodies, thereby hoping to protect themselves from further sexual assault (Bordo 1993:46). Rates of sexual trauma are higher among eating disorder populations than the general public, with varying relationships between the age of the individual at the time of the trauma and the time that it has been since the trauma occurred (Madowitz, Matheson, and Liang 2015). Faravelli and colleagues (2004) found that women who experienced sexual trauma were more likely to develop an eating disorder than women who experienced only non-sexual trauma. Similarly, Rayworth, Wise, and Harlow (2004) found that women who experienced childhood physical abuse were twice as likely to develop clinical or subclinical eating disorder symptoms, while women who experienced both

physical and sexual abuse had three times the likelihood of developing subclinical symptoms and four times the likelihood of meeting clinical criteria for an eating disorder. As laid out in the previous chapter, purity culture is spiritualized rape culture, likely to foster circumstances for abuse, encourage disembodiment, and expose women and those assigned female at birth to objectification and sexualization, all of which are linked to disordered eating.

Theoretical Frameworks

Much as the last three chapters have relied on theoretical concepts of lived (McGuire 2008) and embodied religion (Nikkel 2019), spiritualization, and the materiality of the female body, so too does this investigation into how purity culture lives in the body. Centering experience beyond and outside of the church building, much of this chapter looks at the sexual and mental health experiences of participants. These experiences are also transformed through their relationship to spirituality, and the bodies of participants exist as material, physiological evidence of purity culture values and social control. I use these theoretical lenses to ground this analysis of 65 in-depth interviews with participants assigned female at birth and socialized as women within purity culture. Through these conversations I surface three embodied consequences of disembodiment, sexual dysfunction, and disordered eating, each of which is discussed in this chapter.

Findings

This chapter asks: How does purity culture live in the body? Respondents articulated three main bodily manifestations of purity culture. Many spoke about ongoing vaginismus, sexual shame, and discomfort (*sexual dysfunction*) connected to experiences in purity culture. Participants also spoke of disconnection or distance from their body (*disembodiment*), as well as

difficult relationships with food and body (*disordered eating*) fostered within purity culture environments and impacting their day-to-day lives. Such findings are consistent across demographic categories, though, given the identities of participants, this study primarily describes the experiences of cisgender white women. I explore these axes of experience, further broadening academic views of purity culture to include the body outside of monitoring sexual behavior. This chapter centers the body not only as a locus of social control but also as a lived and experienced reality.

Sexual dysfunction: "I couldn't even have sex"

Many participants discussed ongoing impacts of purity culture on their sexuality and sex lives, with many reporting being unable to engage as they wanted to sexually. Jessica, a 29-year-old white cisgender woman, spoke about how her body reacted to her sexual desires and how she engaged with those desires.

> I think now, I'm a lot more aware and can name, like…this is purity culture trauma affecting me. When I first started dating my fiancé, sex was very, very difficult and traumatic because I didn't believe that my body was good, and I've always felt like I was sinning by having sex. But it was what I wanted, so, I just felt really trapped and I would have panic attacks after we would have sex. It was a constant thing.

Jessica's story is reflective of many participant experiences wherein sexual desire and the body's reaction to sexual engagement were at odds with one another. Her conditioning within purity culture was so strongly encoded in her body that although her conscious mind desired sex, her body reacted with profound fear. Such a strong physiological response is indicative of a high degree of fear-based conditioning within purity culture. Others also discussed mentally and emotionally dysfunctional relationships to their sexuality, including experiences of intense shame, anxiety, and fear. For example, Molly, a 23-year-old cisgender white woman, shared, *"I feel guilty for having sex, I feel guilty for not having sex…even though I know it's not my job to*

keep my husband happy, I still have this guilt I'm not doing it right, but then I also feel dirty and guilty for having sex." Similarly, Jenna, a 35-year-old cisgender white woman, shared *"There's still always some guilt. Dating through college, and then even my relationship with my husband…you have to talk yourself through [sex]…you have to coax yourself through that a little bit."* Another form of sexual dysfunction, vaginismus, was experienced and discussed by multiple participants. Vaginismus, as noted, is a condition in which persons with a vagina are physically unable to or find it very difficult and painful to allow vaginal entry of any object despite a desire to do so (Crowley et al. 2009). Norah, a 28-year-old cisgender white woman, shared her experience of vaginismus as an ongoing effect of her socialization in purity culture.

> I had a significant pelvic floor disorder, vaginismus, that was very much connected, I think, to evangelical purity culture and tons of trauma related to sex in general. Feeling, you know, shame around [sex].

Speaking again about the condition and its impact on her marriage, she said,

> I had this condition, vaginismus, which I knew [before getting married]. I couldn't use tampons. I could not tolerate anything in that area. So, I knew that we were going to struggle, and I was doing pelvic floor PT [physical therapy] prior to marriage. And then after [getting married], I was so hopeless because it was so painful, and I was having huge breakdowns…I ended up having surgery…with a women's clinic that specialized in vaginismus and women's sexual health. And so, at that point, everyone, you know, when you're a newlywed, everyone asks you, "When are you having babies?" and I couldn't even have sex, so that was obviously a very painful question.

Norah connected her inability to have sex with her husband to the sexual shame embedded in purity culture rhetoric. Though marital sex is permissible, and sometimes extolled, under purity culture, the years of conditioning she received before marriage that sex was shameful and to be feared meant that even when those religious and spiritual restrictions on sex outside of marriage were lifted, her body was unable to engage as she wanted it to engage. Purity culture lived in her body in the form of vaginismus, confiscating some of her bodily autonomy. Also of note is that her evangelical community expected her and her husband to have biological

children shortly after getting married. The promotion and expectation of the nuclear family within purity culture, which relies on sexual reproduction and childbearing, contradict the impact of purity culture on the body. Although purity culture aims to safeguard and uplift the nuclear family, its messaging had the opposite effect for Norah. Her ability to engage in sexual activity, and thereby her ability to bear children, was severely hindered by purity culture.

Another participant, Kate, a 31-year-old cisgender white woman, also connected her experience in purity culture to ongoing sexual difficulty.

> [Someone on a podcast] was talking about sexual issues, specifically with women in the church because of purity culture, and I basically went into a grieving period where everything clicked for me…I've been pushing my husband away for nine years and I thought something was wrong with me. When I first started going to therapy a couple years ago, I [said], "I feel like I've been sexually abused, and I don't know it."… My therapist was like, "Do you think you've been abused?" And I was like, "No, I can remember so far back, and I'm so sensitive…if it did happen, I would know."…[listening to that podcast] was the big aha moment for me… then I happened to Google purity culture, or religious trauma symptoms, in women. Then I just wept for a full day because for the first time in my life I'm not the only one…there's not something wrong with me.

Here Kate voices her experience of feeling sexually abused by the rhetoric and conditioning of purity culture, experiencing symptoms similar to those of persons who have experienced sexual abuse and/or assault. She dealt with ongoing sexual difficulty in her relationship with her husband and her own sexuality but was unable to understand why until she began to learn about purity culture and its impacts. In this way, her body was making her aware of the embodied and psychological effects of the messaging she received.

Disembodiment: "It doesn't feel safe to be in my body"

Another manifestation of purity culture in the body is, paradoxically, disembodiment. Disembodiment, which was discussed by nearly all participants, taught young people socialized as women to be constantly aware of their bodies and how they were being perceived and

sexualized by the outside gaze, while simultaneously fostering disconnect from bodily sensations and emotions. Leif, a 28-year-old genderqueer white person, spoke on this topic when they said,

> If I walk around feeling like men are always looking at me to have sex with me, from that purity culture message, then it doesn't feel safe to be in my body, particularly because it was paired with not feeling like I was an active agent in making decisions in those situations—that it wasn't up to me if that would happen or not, but I was responsible for it if it did.

Here we see that the sexualization and objectification of young people assigned female at birth, paired with a continually reinforced lack of sexual agency and education around consent and autonomy, created a deep-seated feeling of threat and vulnerability within the body. This lived, felt experience that the body was not a safe place contributed to participants feeling alienated from their own bodies. To create a sense of safety for themselves, they had to retreat from bodily sensation and engagement.

Many participants also spoke about being explicitly taught to distrust their bodily sensations and instincts, and to trust the religious community and those appointed with spiritual authority instead. Those with authority—pastors, deacons, and leaders—were, statistically, men. Jasmine, a 22-year-old cisgender white woman, spoke about this masculinized bodily control in her evangelical community, saying, *"You're not in control of your body—God is or pastors or people who are in authority over you… because [your] body is sinful on its own."* Jasmine was taught that her body was inherently sinful, and for that reason it had to be controlled by those with spiritual authority, limiting Jasmine's bodily autonomy. Another participant, Beth, a 35-year-old cisgender white woman, when asked how she felt about her body in purity culture environments such as youth group and church camps, shared a related sentiment, noting,

> I don't think I thought about my body because I was taught to hate my body, to distrust my body. I didn't even consider myself an embodied person. I saw the body as separate and the soul as the essence of who I was. So, tending to the body, listening to the wisdom of the body [wasn't taught]. I just did everything I could to make my body be

> compliant…I can't get loud. My voice has to be contained and small and polite. I'm still undoing like the well-mannered, polite, pretty, whatever.

Beth shares her perception that she was taught to hate and distrust her body, that her body was separate from her soul and from who she truly was. Her body was not valued in her evangelical culture growing up, not offered as a source of knowledge or wisdom but as something explicitly distrusted. She states that she worked to make her body compliant with the external expectations of her religious environment, which, in the context of purity culture, were submissive and feminized values of being pretty and quiet. For Beth, and others, adhering to these expectations relied on disembodiment. As Deanna, a 24-year-old white woman, said, "*Purity culture enforces a lack of embodiment…a lack of connection with your body…because [it preaches that the] desires of your body will just bring you closer to sin.*" Purity culture constructs the body as inherently sinful, its desires at odds with Christian spirituality and conservative Christian gender roles. The bodily desire to eat might cause one to become physically larger and, thereby, less pretty and virtuous within the culture. The desire to have sex might cause one to become sexually impure. To be connected to the body and its desires is to increase the temptation to sin.

Disordered Eating: "Maybe I should just not eat"

Briar, a 32-year-old cisgender white woman, spoke about disembodiment as it impacted her disordered relationship with food and eating. When asked about how she felt about her body in purity culture environments, she shared that she felt—

> Very dangerous. It took me years to even have good posture… [because] if I stand up straight…my boobs are gonna poke out…and a guy might think I'm hot. I had so many feelings about my body…but my Christian upbringing was so disembodied. Like, don't think about your body, don't pay attention to it…I remember having a lot of body sensitivities as a kid and not knowing what to do with that, which eventually led to binging and purging as a high schooler because I was like, 'Well, I like eating this food, this feels good, but I'm also told I have to be 120 pounds.'… So, it was a lot of not even

> thinking about the body until [it] gave a lot of warning signs…and then I didn't know how to cognitively process that, or I would just feel really bad about it. I'd be like, 'Oh, I failed' or 'I didn't hold up my end of the bargain. I messed up again.' So, that's kind of how some of that also played into…purity culture, bodies, yeah. All very tangled.

Briar shares how her body was objectified in purity culture, noting that she felt her body was dangerous, always at risk of being tempting to a man and being seen as causing him to sin. This produced a hyperawareness of her body alongside paradoxical disconnection from her body, impacting her relationship with food. The enjoyment she found in food was at odds with physical expectations of her body and the purity culture expectation that she not be preoccupied with bodily desires. For Briar, binging and purging was a way out of this dilemma, allowing her to eat and enjoy food, pursue non-tempting thinness, and account for simultaneous disembodiment and hyperawareness of how her body was being perceived, all at the same time. Her experiences in purity culture provided fertile ground for binging and purging behaviors as she got older. When she did engage in binging behavior, she felt that she "hadn't held up her end of the bargain", implying a social contract to be thin or restrained in her eating within her culture. She also notes that these experiences of disembodiment, hyperawareness of her body, food, and purity are all highly entangled for her. For Briar and other participants, these experiences are complexly interwoven—each impacting and being impacted by other things in their sphere of experience.

Rose, a 30-year-old cisgender white woman, expressed a similar pattern of thought regarding how she understood and related to her body in purity culture.

> For me, as a more curvy woman, it became a big problem trying to find clothes and consistently trying to suppress and cover up my body and being ashamed of how my body looked…being told I was too curvy…specifically, not wanting to be voluptuous in clothes. I always thought, if I can lose weight, I will lose weight in my chest, and this will take care of a problem… especially for somebody like me.

Rose shares her experience as a self-described curvy woman in purity culture, noting she aimed to suppress her body and make it less sexually appealing to men by reducing the size of a

sexualized body part—her chest. Pursuing weight loss allowed her to address the culturally problematized nature of her curvy, tempting body. For Rose, this led to disordered eating and an ongoing difficult relationship with food and her body. She engaged in disordered eating behaviors to discipline her body into compliance with purity culture messaging—to create a holy body that would not be regarded as sinful by her community.

Madison, a 25-year-old cisgender white woman, discussed the relationships she sees between expectations of women and marriage within purity culture, broader cultural expectations of women, and her experience with disordered eating.

> It gets back to that pressure, [that] expectation I would get married, and a belief about what sex within marriage would look like… as a result of purity culture...I believed I had to be perfect to make my future husband happy, and being perfect meant having a super sexy body, which was probably influenced by general media portrayals of what the ideal woman was, mixed with the ideal concept of a woman in marriage who's confident but...very modest, very meek, able to please her husband. It all mixed to make this intense pressure I put on myself, and the only way to deal with that was to try to control my body and have this perfect body...and the only way to do that was through food.

For Madison, purity culture's high valuation and expectation of cis-heterosexual marriage and the belief that women submit to their husbands, mixed with general Western cultural ideals for women, impacted her relationship with her body and with food. It was assumed within purity culture that she would marry a man and be a wife, and her body would be for his enjoyment; its purpose was to please him. Pursuing a perfect body allowed her to pursue the lauded goal of marriageability and the expectation that she would be perfect for her future husband. Disordered eating operated as a tool for Madison to pursue an idealized body and thereby fulfill one of purity culture's high expectations of women in marriage.

Discussion

In exploring the question of how purity culture lives in the body, this chapter centers embodied knowledge to reveal three major embodied manifestations of purity culture among participants—sexual dysfunction, disembodiment, and disordered eating. Each of these affirms the purity culture understanding that those in bodies assigned female at birth do not have bodily autonomy but are instead subject to various forms of external valuation and control, as demonstrated by these internalized enforcements of those external valuations. These bodily manifestations of purity culture point back to purity culture as a rape culture, with sexual dysfunction, disembodiment, and disordered eating as embodied outcomes of both purity culture upbringings and experiences of sexual assault and abuse.

This final analytic chapter of this dissertation examines how sexual dysfunction persists for persons conditioned by purity culture teachings that highlight sex and sexuality as sinful, to be feared, and of great consequence. In line with prior research indicating a shared symptomology between purity culture and sexual assault and abuse, findings indicate that purity culture-related sexual dysfunction takes multiple forms, including panic attacks, vaginismus, and pushing away sexual intimacy (Cross 2020; Sellers 2017). This analysis also offers an exemplar of experiences of vaginismus among persons with sex-negative backgrounds from cultures with an emphasis on bridal virginity, which previous research has found may be a more common background among those with this diagnosis (Atallah et al. 2016; McEvoy 2021; Reissing et al. 2003). Many participants found they were not able to engage as they wanted to sexually, their bodies not fully their own but feeling as though they belonged to purity culture teachings from their adolescence, even if they were engaging in sex within the sanctioned bounds of marriage or after having left purity culture environments.

This chapter also examined the experience of disembodiment among participants, many of whom explicitly connected this phenomenon to their conditioning in purity culture. Previous studies have indicated that disembodiment is a potential symptom of sexual assault and abuse, offering psychological protection from a body that has been violated and is at risk of further violation within their culture (McBride and Kwee 2018; Poletti et al. 2022). This analysis furthers this literature by connecting this experience of sexual violation risk and disembodiment to purity culture, as articulated through participant stories. Purity culture objectifies and sexualizes bodies assigned female at birth, fostering an environment that is physically and spiritually threatening to bodies assigned female at birth, stripping away bodily agency and autonomy. Disembodiment also serves patriarchal purposes within this culture, teaching those assigned female at birth to distrust bodies and bodily sensations and externalize that authority to community leaders, who are typically men.

Lastly, this chapter examined a previously unstudied intersection of disordered eating and purity culture. Experiences of disembodiment, such as those emergent among participants and connected to purity culture, can foster disordered eating behaviors (Castellini et al. 2022; Levine and Piran 2004; Piran 2017). Women within purity culture may also utilize disordered eating as a means of desexualizing the body with the hope of protecting themselves within a sexualizing, objectifying rape culture (Bordo 1993). At the same time that women are expected to desexualize themselves, they are also told to be sexually attractive to their husbands and may pursue disordered eating to fulfill expectations of a Christian wife. Thus, disordered eating behavior can be seen as a way in which purity culture lives in the body.

Findings in this chapter exemplify the bodily consequences of this movement that impact the health and wellbeing of participants, confiscating some of their bodily autonomy. In this

chapter, as in others, I found that participants' bodies were not their own to inhabit, experience, or make decisions about. Instead, they were profoundly shaped and limited by harmful purity culture messaging.

Chapter 7: Discussion

What began as a cautious sharing of my own experiences of purity culture and disordered eating eventually became this work of gender, the body, religion, and health. Realizing that I was not alone in my matrix of compounding experiences of gendered bodily control led me to recognize that the marks that purity culture imparted into my life and understanding of self were present and mirrored in other lives. I pursued this research to better understand those marks and to make sense of the ways that purity culture lives on in my own body and the bodies of others. Specifically seeking to understand what this movement does to bodies, and particularly the bodies of those assigned female at birth, which it oppresses, I asked questions from one body to another: How did it feel? What did you experience? What was missing? Participants shared stories with me of hurt, harm, and forced limitations on who they could be, what they could feel, and who got to decide.

Utilizing a constructivist grounded theory lens, I sought out patterns and themes, aiming to recognize the similar marks that purity culture left across many embodied lives. Overarching themes of a lack of bodily autonomy, a constraining of the physical, social, and spiritual space those assigned female at birth are allowed to inhabit in the world, and long-lasting sexual and mental health consequences of this movement emerged. Throughout this pursuit, I also aimed to make legible the power structures of this pervasive and understudied movement that have greatly impacted many in the United States and internationally, through purity rhetoric, abstinence-only sexual education, the reification of conservative gender roles, and its entanglement with right-wing politics and white supremacy.

In this dissertation, I systematically set out to understand and illustrate participants' articulated experiences of the body. Through this embodied exploration, this work contributes to

the redefinition of purity culture, identifying its reach as going far beyond its typical discussion as an abstinence movement. This dissertation views purity culture as more broadly oriented toward controlling bodies and creating the bodies that serve its interests as a religious movement rooted in patriarchy and white supremacy. This orientation of control is revealed through clear connections between body size, sinfulness, and holiness in participant stories. These connections are tied to larger structures, with thinness operating as a physical manifestation of white supremacist, patriarchal cultural values. Likewise, it is seen in the necessitation of physical, social, and spiritual smallness and the submission of the body to men and the goals of the Kingdom of God, orienting body norms toward ideals that serve the purposes of power within purity culture. The lack of bodily autonomy and requirements of submission and smallness uphold systems of assault and abuse, fostering circumstances of vulnerability and an application of responsibility for persons assigned female at birth in this culture.

Offering knowledge not only about bodies but also from bodies, this work brings new dimensions to the scholarly discussion of the purity culture movement. With previous literature focusing on written records of the movement, its explicit messaging, and its larger political ties, there has been relatively little embodied work on the topic of purity culture up to this point. Addressing this gap, this dissertation centers first-hand, felt, flesh-and-blood experiences of the purity culture movement and its orientation toward controlling bodies. Participants share visceral physiological and emotional experiences, including the material alteration of bodies as made manifest in ongoing, embodied sexual and mental health consequences, even long after their primary inundation with these messages. This work thus offers insight into how the messaging of this movement is mapped onto and felt within bodies, shaping and constraining their physical, social, and spiritual existence.

Broadening the Lens on Purity Culture: Summary of Key Findings

Through listening to the lived, embodied experiences of 65 people assigned female at birth and raised within the purity culture movement, I surface a set of key findings on the embodied consequences of this movement. Across chapters and across participant interviews, the central throughline of this dissertation is the body, the limits placed on it, and the control exerted over it. I highlight four major way that the titular adage of "your body is not your own" is seen in participant lives: bodily submission, spiritualized thinness, assault and abuse, and ongoing sexual and mental health effects.

My dissertation reveals that bodily submission, and an enforced lack of bodily autonomy is key to being considered a good woman in purity culture. This finding, centered in chapter 3, highlights the concept of the Proverbs 31 woman, finding that the ideal evangelical woman is predicated on the submission of the body, with clear expectations of physical, social, and spiritual smallness that are upheld by evangelical interpretations of scripture. Centering the materiality of the body and its role as an entity on which cultural values are impressed, as well as drawing from the lived, embodied experiences of participants, this work brings spiritual and social concepts into the visceral context of the bodies expected to fulfill these concepts and submit their bodies. I highlight participants' required bodily submission to men—most commonly fathers and husbands, but also to men more broadly. The material control of men over women's bodies necessarily limits participant autonomy and requires that women be sexually pure until marriage and thereafter sexually available for their husbands, as well as thin and attractive. Likewise, they are required to serve as a quiet and helpful presence, limiting the social and spiritual space they take up. I also examine the submission of the body to the broader construct of the Kingdom of God and its purposes, which are by and large aligned with white

supremacist, patriarchal power. This is made manifest in requirements of attractiveness to make appealing Christian beliefs and be fit for the work of the Kingdom, as well as to submit the body to the physiological process of childbearing and rearing. Bodies must be submitted to the furthering of Christianity in social, spiritual, and biological ways. I argue that the submission of the body in these ways is supportive of American, white supremacist Christian values and patriarchy, and offer an analysis of power documenting the ways in which constructions of the ideal woman require a lack of bodily autonomy and reinforce patriarchal structures.

In this dissertation, I also demonstrate the ways in which thinness is spiritualized as holy under purity culture, transforming a thin body into a spiritual obligation. To do so, I lay out the construction of the ideal evangelical woman, enforced through the theoretical paradigm of Foucauldian anatamo-politics and the spiritualization of Goffman's stigma as sin. I bring historical associations of Christianity and thinness into the purity culture era within evangelicalism, offering a contemporary lens to spiritualized understanding and operation of thinness as: bodily discipline, modesty, and whiteness. I explore thinness as a form of spiritualized bodily discipline, highlighting purity culture's valuation of a mastery over the body and a denial of its desires. This valued trait is believed to be manifest in the thin body and not in the fat body, thus stigmatizing the fat body with associations of sin and weight loss is considered salvific. Examining thinness's operation as a form of modesty, I reveal how modesty rules and perceptions varied by body size and shape, with larger bodies considered less modest and thereby again stigmatized as sinful. Surfacing associations of thinness and whiteness within this particular white supremacist religious structure, I analyze stories from participants of color which reveal differential treatment based on racist construction of their bodies as curvier and more sexual. I find that women of color are evaluated according to an interlocked idea of

thinness and whiteness, meaning that they cannot be regarded as thin nor ideal. Purity culture values thin bodies, setting them up as ideal and encouraging adherents to shape their bodies to this ideal. The anatamo-political construction of the ideal woman in evangelicalism as thin is engendered through descriptions of non-thin bodies as sinful in various ways, stigmatizing and disciplining the female body to make it align with dominant cultural values.

Participant accounts also revealed norms and structures that make purity culture fertile grounds for and passively accepting of assault and abuse. I highlight the spiritualized nature of these dangerous norms, arguing that this environment is fostered via mechanisms of constructed vulnerability and responsibility for young women. I hold that vulnerability is created through the withholding of sexual education, the sexualization of youth, and the enforcement of spiritualized, patriarchal power structures. Purity culture often withholds sexual information, leaving young people unequipped to deal with sexualized, abusive situations. Likewise, the lack of education surrounding consent muddies assault and abuse with consensual sex under the umbrella of sexual sin. Participants were also made vulnerable through the sexualization of youth, with children narrativized as sexually tempting even before reaching puberty and a cultural assumption that much older men and even male relatives would lust after young children. These vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by the construction of patriarchal authority, which emphasizes the submission and obedience of women to men. I then argue that young people assigned female at birth are made responsible for assault and abuse through spiritualized narratives of those assigned female at birth as tempting and a stumbling block, as well as constructed as the gatekeepers of men's sexuality. Young people are considered stumbling blocks for those who lust after, abuse, and assault them, more commonly blamed for their apparent tempting nature than men are blamed for sexualizing and objectifying them. Women and girls are also made

responsible for gatekeeping sexuality, required to dress modestly or limit the access of men to their bodies and the bodies of other women and girls. Likewise, it is seen as a young woman's job to dress modestly and desexualize her appearance in an attempt to prevent assault and abuse. I argue that these strong, normative narratives indicate purity culture as spiritualized rape culture, accepting and enabling assault and abuse, and that the creation and enforcement of vulnerability and responsibility on young women is key to understanding this acceptance of abuse.

Tracing the lived experience of purity culture in the visceral flesh and bones of participants, I examine embodied manifestations of purity culture messaging through sexual dysfunction, disembodiment, and disordered eating. I argue that these symptoms further point to purity culture as a form of rape culture, with all three also documented as symptoms of sexual assault and abuse. I found that participants struggled with sexual dysfunction, including mental health impacts such as panic attacks, physiological issues such as vaginismus, and a broader pushing away of sexual intimacy even when it was something that they desired. I also found disembodiment as a common experience across many participants, which I connect to parallel experiences of existing at risk of sexual violation within purity culture, as well as purity culture's broader distrust of bodies. Finally, I put forward a previously unstudied connection between purity culture and disordered eating, which is also symptomatically connected to experiences of disembodiment and potentially used as a means of desexualizing the body to protect oneself in a spiritualized rape culture while also remaining attractive by cultural standards in order to gain or keep a husband. Findings make clear and tangible the bodily consequences of this movement in terms of health and wellbeing, highlighting the flesh-and-blood impacts of purity culture.

Theoretical Contributions

This dissertation makes a number of theoretical contributions, including its additions to the argument for a broadened definition of purity culture, and a theory of disordered eating as connected to purity culture. In addition to these more grounded concepts, however, this work also builds on and contributes to concepts of 'big T' theories. The following sections outline the innovative perspectives put forward in this work as theoretical mechanisms.

Transformative Spiritualization

Drawing from the theoretical concepts of Althusser's (2014) interpolation and ideological apparatuses, the structure of Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality, and scholars of purity culture and evangelicalism such as Klein (2018) and Johnson (2018), I highlight the transformative nature of spiritualization in purity culture. This spiritualization, understood as relating to or understanding something as a spiritual or religious practice, belief, or occurrence (Fox and Picciotto 2019; Hill et al. 2000), in the context of purity culture, intertwines eternal, spiritual repercussions with sexualization, objectification, gendered oppression, and bodily control. This produces inherently spiritual purity culture norms. Through this transformative spiritualization, feminine gender norms are constructed as biblical womanhood, consensual sex and assault are conflated under the term of sexual sin, and "She was asking for it" is, instead, "She caused him to stumble." Throughout this dissertation, I demonstrate how social norms and narratives are transformed and given eternal and deific consequence through this mechanism of transformative spiritualization, making the experience of oppression and control into something that, while not unrelated to secular oppression or its goals, is inextricably spiritual.

Sin as a Disciplining Force on the Female Body

In a similar vein, this work puts forth a theoretical conception of sin as a disciplining force on the female body. Building on Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma, I argue that failure to meet gendered expectations within purity culture is so heavily spiritualized as to be considered sinful, creating a consequence of spiritual condemnation. Bodies assigned female at birth—their size, shape, dress, and behavior—are scrutinized by religious leaders and peers, stigmatized as inherently tempting and sinful, and perceived as a spiritual threat to the purity of those around them. As spiritual threats, these sinful bodies are disciplined and controlled. In the exemplar of body size, prominently discussed in this dissertation, the body is believed to be most sinful is a soft, curvy, feminized body that is not believed to be disciplined by the purportedly rational and masculine mind. Apparent immodesty and an association with gluttony seen to be present in the curvy female body are condemned as sinful, creating spiritual motivation to discipline the body into compliance with purity culture norms and desires. Likewise, disobedience to those seen to be in spiritual authority over a woman—namely, men, and particularly husbands, fathers, and pastors—can be seen as sinful. This narrative of disobedience as sin can give men remarkable influence over a woman's behavior, including her sexual behavior and bodily autonomy. This, again, constructs sin as a disciplining force on the female body.

The Evangelical Male Gaze

Expanding on the concept of the male gaze, a term coined by film theorist Laura Mulvey (1989), I put forward the concept of the evangelical male gaze—a specifically spiritualized version of this lens. The original definition of the male gaze refers to the male viewpoint as default across many forms of media and has been utilized to understand the perspective taking that women must often do to view themselves through the lens of the dominant male group,

making women not only subjects in their own lives but also objects in the gaze of men. Where women are regularly cognizant of men's lives, men are often less attuned to the activities, attitudes, and behaviors of women (Brooks 2007). The evangelical male gaze builds on this understanding, referring to the spiritualized version of this perspective women must take up within purity culture. Constructed as sinful temptations for hypersexual men, women within purity culture are socially conditioned to internalize this perspective, altering their bodies and behavior to align with the interests of men and their spiritual authority while avoiding 'sin'. The internalization of this evangelical male gaze is made manifest in participant stories through self-monitoring for modest dress and a thin, modest body, as well as self-monitoring for feminine behavior and restricting the amount of social and spiritual space that participants took up in their evangelical worlds.

Implications

Implications for Sociology and Religious Studies

This work holds several potential impacts for academic scholars. Here, I lay out three major points of consideration: greater understandings of religion and the body, negative health impacts of religion, and the connection between purity culture and disordered eating. I frame these contributions as impacting the academic fields of sociology and religious studies, though they may also be useful to scholars in psychology and public health.

Greater Understandings of Religion and the Body

Where once studies of religion heavily centered on organizational and theological examinations, recent years have seen a broader understanding of religion, increasingly incorporating and examining the everyday spiritual experiences of religious people (McGuire 2008). Still, relatively little attention has been given to bodies and embodied experience within

religious contexts. Answering a call from scholars to center the body, such as Vasquez (2011) and Ammerman's (2016) recommendations for further research to delve into understanding the experiences and materiality of bodies in religious spaces, this dissertation centers the body as both experiencing-subject and material-object. It offers rich, material, embodied knowledge of lived experiences within purity culture, offering insights for religious scholars into this movement and its impacts. Outlining how bodies not only experience but can be mentally and physically altered by religious and spiritual messaging and culture, this work contributes to evolving understandings of the material and embodied realities of religion.

Potential Negative Health Impacts of Religion

As noted, in much of the sociological and public health literature, religion and religious participation have been associated with positive health impacts. These positive impacts are often seen through mechanisms of social support, stress-reducing activities, and spiritual coping mechanisms (Ellison and Levin 1998; Koenig 2012). However, some recent research has begun to challenge this unidirectional influence, demonstrating that the health benefits of participating in religious communities can be diminished or reversed via subcultural social factors and theological approaches. This includes the negative impacts of fear-based theology on body image (Boyatzis et al. 2007; Inman et al. 2014; Krause and Hayward 2016) and the negative impacts of structural sexism in religious environments on overall self-rated health (Homan and Burdette 2021). These authors issue a clear call for further investigation into potential adverse health effects stemming from structurally inequitable religious environments.

Answering this call, I identify embodied health consequences of purity culture rhetoric, including sexual dysfunction, disembodiment, and disordered eating. This work contributes to a necessary complication of the understanding of the role of religion in health outcomes.

Understanding nuanced interactions such as those demonstrated in this dissertation between religious contexts, gender dynamics, and health outcomes—not simply assuming that religion has a uniformly positive impact on health—is crucial for comprehensively assessing impacts of religious environments on individual well-being, particularly for those assigned female at birth.

Purity Culture and Disordered Eating

In this work, I lay out a previously unstudied connection between purity culture and disordered eating. I highlight its association with disembodiment, its links to attempting to desexualize and protect the body within a spiritualized rape culture, and its association with purity culture's emphasis on a particular kind of physical attractiveness deemed necessary to gain, keep, and please a husband in heterosexual Christian marriage. Key to the association of disordered eating and purity culture is the association of disembodiment and purity culture. Disembodiment, established as a stand-alone symptom of purity culture in participant experiences, can also contribute to disordered eating. Outside of the context of purity culture, disembodiment has been identified in the literature as a potential catalyst for, as well as a consequence of, disordered eating behaviors (Castellini et al. 2022; Levine and Piran 2004; Piran 2017). For example, a lack of connection with bodily cues of hunger and fullness (disembodiment) can contribute to patterns of food restriction or binging (disordered eating), and the body dysmorphia associated with disordered eating can also be associated with a desire to disconnect from the body.

Participants also employed disordered eating practices as a strategy to desexualize their bodies, aiming to reduce the size of sexualized body parts and not be seen as tempting and sinful, often in hopes of gaining social approval and pursuing holiness and right standing with God. So too, participants aimed to desexualize their bodies as a bid to shield themselves from assault,

abuse, and objectification in the context of a sexualizing and objectifying spiritualized rape culture. This phenomenon of disordered eating as a means of desexualizing oneself in hopes of mitigating the risk of assault and abuse has been documented among survivors of assault and abuse (Bordo 1993).

Paradoxically, while women are expected to desexualize their bodies within purity culture to be seen as holy and to minimize risk of being seen as sexually sinful and tempting, they are also instructed to be sexually attractive so that they might find a husband and be sexually pleasing to him. This double-binding requirement of bodies led some to engage in disordered eating as a 'way out' of this double bind, with pursuit of the thin ideal allowing them to desexualize their bodies through the reduction of the size of sexualized body parts while also being seen as attractive and able to meet the expectations of being a Christian wife. This novel contribution of purity culture as an environment that fosters disordered eating offers a foundation for further research on the topic of religion and disordered eating in the current era.

Implications for Mental Health Clinicians and Practitioners

This research highlights the importance of considering religious and spiritual upbringing and the potential ongoing impacts of such experiences in addressing mental health issues. Many participants, including those who had long since left purity culture environments, reported continuing impacts in their daily lives and mental health experiences. Going beyond acknowledging these effects, this work also lays the groundwork for potential strategies and therapeutic approaches to address mental and physical health issues associated with experiences of purity culture.

Potential Religious Roots of Sexual Dysfunction, Disembodiment, and Disordered Eating

This work demonstrates that people who grew up in purity culture can exhibit symptoms similar to those who have experienced sexual assault or abuse. Where Sellers (2017) has noted sexual dysfunction and high levels of shame and self-loathing and Cross (2020) highlights symptoms of PTSD, this work offers a deeper understanding of sexual dysfunction in this context and two novel considerations—disembodiment and disordered eating. With clear, embodied narratives across many participants, this linking of sexual dysfunction, disembodiment, and disordered eating to purity culture demonstrates the profound and ongoing mental health impacts that religious and spiritual experiences can have. In light of this, mental health practitioners and their clients may benefit from investigating the potential religious and spiritual roots of these symptoms when they emerge.

Embodiment as a Path Forward

This study also offers a potential foundation to build toward strategies for healing from the mental and physical health issues participants connect to their eating disorder experiences. For example, interventions around increasing embodiment and sensory engagement for those who grew up in purity culture might offer a healing countermeasure to some of the difficult effects of disembodiment. Disembodiment was a prominent experience for many participants in this study, both as a symptom in and of itself as well as through its connection to sexual dysfunction and disordered eating. Other work has also found links between disembodiment and sexual dysfunction (Madowitz et al. 2015; Reissing et al. 2003) and disordered eating (Castellini et al. 2022; Levine and Piran 2004; Piran 2017). So too, existing literature has linked embodiment practices, the effective inverse of disembodiment, to improvements in mental health and wellbeing regarding sexual dysfunction and disordered eating. For example, studies have

found that embodiment-focused interventions have supported improved sexual health among those who experience pain with sex (Danielsen et al. 2024; Darnell 2023), as well as improved outcomes in eating disorder recovery (Cook-Cottone et al. 2022; Williams and Files 2018). Given the strong connections between disembodiment, sexual dysfunction, and disordered eating, it follows that embodied practices for the treatment and prevention of these symptoms would offer healing and support for these same symptoms emergent from purity culture contexts. Thus, I propose that interventions aiming to increase embodiment and sensory engagement might promote healing, health, and wellbeing for those who grew up in purity culture.

For Religious Leaders

There are many potential implications of this dissertation's findings for spiritual and religious leaders. This work is drawn from the experiences of those who grew up in purity culture, and purity culture is still ongoing today. For the pastors, youth pastors, and small group leaders interacting with and preaching to young people in the evangelical church, this work can provide important information and awareness of the lived, ongoing, embodied consequences of messages that may seem standard, innocuous, or beneficial within church environments and norms. Religious leaders may reconsider language that echoes rape culture narratives, such as referring to women as stumbling blocks and temptations, making efforts to be more cognizant of how such terms can negatively influence people's self-image. Likewise, many participants noted that useful sexual education, including explicit and thorough education on the topic of consent and the differentiation of consensual sex and sexual assault and abuse, would have been particularly useful for them in their youth. Leaders might consider providing this information, seeking to set up structures that allow young people to ask questions about sex and sexuality without shame or fear.

For Those With Lived Experience

For those with lived experience, one major implication of this work is the fact that you are not alone. Many people share your experiences in one way or another, and I hope that reading the stories of participants in this dissertation may itself act as a resource for you as you process your own experiences. I hope that reading the stories of others with similar experiences offers a light on the path toward connecting with your senses and healing your relationships with your body, your emotions, food, sex, and pleasure. In terms of more tangible outcomes from this work, the implication for mental health practitioners of embodiment as a path forward is equally, if not more, relevant to those with lived experience. While enormously beneficial for many, therapy can be cost prohibitive and stigmatized. Embodied exercises, however, are often highly accessible. Practices such as yoga, meditation, mindfulness, and somatic sensing may offer a useful starting point in reconnecting with your body and its sensations.

Directions for Future Research

Healing and Embodiment

Further research might investigate therapeutic possibilities. This work opens the door for considerations of embodiment as a path forward, as seen in the implications for mental health practitioners and those with lived experience. While there is evidence of symptoms including sexual dysfunction, disembodiment, and disordered eating being aided by embodiment-focused interventions and therapeutic approaches, there is not yet specific interventional research on embodiment practices in healing from purity culture-centered issues. Purity culture remains prevalent, with approximately 23% of Americans identifying as evangelical Christians in 2020 (PRRI 2021) and the strong ongoing presence of purity culture related dating books in the top-seller charts on Amazon as evidence. As such, there are likely many people impacted by this

movement and many people who might seek healing from some of its negative impacts. Investigating this promising set of interventions has the potential to offer a healing resource to a large group of people dealing with negative mental health experiences tied to this prominent and powerful religious movement.

Other Bodies

This study focused on the experiences of those who have experienced an eating disorder or disordered eating and had a sample consisting predominantly of cisgender white women. This was partly due to the intentional limiting of the sample for this study to those assigned female at birth, many of whom are cisgender women. Additionally, it makes sense that this sample was predominantly white, given the predominantly white makeup of evangelical Christianity in the United States (Mitchell 2019). However, there is much yet to be learned about the experiences of other bodies in purity culture. Little research has yet investigated the experiences of women of color, though that work is beginning to be seen (Lomax 2018; Natarajan et al. 2022). Additionally, little work has investigated the experiences of those assigned male at birth in these environments and their experiences on the opposite side of highly gendered narratives, for example, being characterized as hypersexual and unable to control oneself. Further research might identify more populations within purity culture that could benefit from therapeutic attention to such experiences. Future studies might investigate the embodied impacts of purity culture for those assigned male at birth and socialized as men, conduct representative quantitative research to understand the prevalence of disordered eating as a manifestation of purity culture, or offer a particular focus on the experiences of people of color in these environments, furthering scholarly understanding of the purity culture movement.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Main Question	Probes
Tell me about your experience with faith and church growing up?	How involved were you? What emotions come to mind when you think of your experience in that space? How involved was your family in church? What did that look like? Did you have more than one faith community? (i.e. religious school, youth or small group, church, etc. – homeschooled??). What were they like? Was there anything about your church experience that felt specific to the place (region, state, city) you were in? Do any particularly good memories from church come to mind? Do any particularly hard memories from church come to mind? What were denominational affiliations of the religious environment(s) you grew up in? What were the demographics of church like? On a continuum between liberal and conservative, where would you place your religious environments? Why? In what ways? What was your personal faith like? What do faith and church mean to you now? If you put yourself in the shoes of your teenage self (or whenever ED stuff started), how would you have described God at that point in your life?
What do you think of when you hear the term “purity culture”?	How would you define purity culture? Do you consider yourself to have been a part of the purity movement? What did that look like?

	Do you remember getting any big "purity talks" growing up? What messages did you receive about sex and sexuality growing up? Did you feel like you were well-educated about sex, your body, puberty, etc.? What was the process and time period of puberty like for you?
In what ways did your faith community talk about women, women's roles, women's bodies, etc.?	What narratives surrounded women's appearances in your faith community? What was an "ideal woman" in your faith community? What did she look like? How did she dress? How were those ideals communicated to you? Church friendships -- other women and girls enforcing narratives What roles and expectations do you feel that your parents played in communicating those roles and expectations to you? How did your faith community address/not address the idea of "modesty"? Do you think modesty and purity rules and standards were different for different people? (i.e. on race, class, body size?) What did you think about and consider when you got dressed as a teenager (or other age)? Did those considerations change as your body changed with ED stuff?
What has your relationship with food been like over the course of your life?	Were there any kinds of dress codes for how women should dress in certain situations, such as youth camps or church events?

	How did you feel about your body in that space? What were social norms about bodies and dressing? Did that change situationally?
	What was your mom's relationship with her body like? How did she feel about modesty?
	What comes to mind when you think about food?
	Have you ever been on a diet or dieted? Made a significant change to what you were eating in an effort to be healthier or lose weight?
	Have you ever tried to control your relationship with food – i.e. restricting intake, binging, purging, etc. – at any point in your life?
	Did you see significant change in your body?
	What was it like for you coming to realize it was a problem? What led to that?
	What did your eating disorder provide for you? What needs was it meeting during that time?
	What did you eat as a family, when you were a kid? Income - did you have access to food as a kid? Did you ever go on any diets with parents/family?
	How did people react to your relationship with food when it wasn't disordered? When it was? How did they react to changes in your body? Particularly folks in your family/faith community?
What sorts of messages have you received about food, implicitly or explicitly, in your life?	Did you receive any moral/values-based messages about food?
	Did your faith community ever talk about food, diets, bodies, etc.?
	Was food ever a big part of church, with things like potlucks or BBQs, or fasting events, that kind of thing? Daniel fast?
	Have you ever prayed or asked God about your body, food intake, how you look?

How do you see faith, food, and your body interacting in your life?

How do you see ideas of purity, modesty, and women's roles impacting or shaping your experience of your eating disorder/disordered eating?

How do you see these conversations in church about purity and modesty and women's bodies affecting how you see and relate to your body either now or in the past?

Considering all these things we talked about: women's roles and bodies, your relationships with food, and faith and church, what else comes to mind?

What could have been different in a best-case scenario for you growing up?

Is there anything else you would like me to know or want to talk about?

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