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Defining Healthy Love:
A Narrative Review of Purity Culture's Impact on Healing from Sexual Assault

by

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Dedication

This paper is for every friend who has trusted me with your story. You are loved more than you know.

Abstract

Over the last few decades, evangelical Christian teachings on sexuality have become an area of increasing interest as those who grew up in Purity Culture experience long-term effects on their world-concept. One area where the effects are particularly potent is attitudes regarding sexual assault. Research on healing from sexual assault identifies social responses to reports as a defining factor for the direction of healing. This literature review looks at how social support is negatively impacted by purity culture teachings through the endorsement of rape myth acceptance and victim blaming attitudes.

Defining Healthy Love: A Narrative Review of Purity Culture's Impact on Healing from Sexual Assault

An average of 474,040 people are sexually assaulted each year in America; this number takes into consideration the estimated 78.5% of sexual assaults (SA) that go unreported to officials (Thompson & Tapp, 2023). Each of these 474,040 people are forced to face a myriad of possible effects from the assault (RAINN, 2024). Some of these changes include, but are not limited to, symptoms of depression, such as loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities, increased substance use, or a sense of worthlessness, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as hypervigilance, flashbacks, dissociation and avoidance, or insomnia (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; RAINN, 2024). Regardless of the particulars of a survivor's internal experiences and altered worldview, their lives are permanently changed as they move forward and learn to live after assault.

Hope for Healing

Throughout the intimidating journey facing survivors, external and internal factors serve as indicators of one's ability to grapple with the experience itself and to create coping mechanisms to navigate the mental health challenges that follow and to heal the deep wounds. For example, positive appraisal of the self is associated with less depressive symptoms (Badour et al., 2020; Chang & Hirsch, 2015; Frazier & Berman, 2008). Additionally, religiosity and spirituality are correlated with post-traumatic growth (PTG) when they are related to effective coping mechanisms such as prayer and a strong sense of purpose (Bryant-Davis et al., 2011; Kirkner & Ullman, 2020). Finally, one of the strongest indicators of PTG is affirming reactions from social support systems (Frazier & Berman, 2008; Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014; Ulloa et al., 2016). Some research identifies negative social reactions as the most impactful responses

with positive reactions as effective, but only in the avoidance of negative ones (Campbell et al., 2009). Therefore, upon entrusting friends, family, or people in authority with a story of sexual assault, acceptance and comfort are vital responses in order to facilitate PTG (Campbell et al., 2009; Chivers-Wilson, 2006).

Social support being a central player in PTG following sexual assault introduces complexity, as degrees of social support vary according to internal responses and social stigma. One prevalent post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptom is avoidance of triggers, including places, people, and thoughts. This can lead to difficulty disclosing SA in the first place, as survivors may be attempting to avoid reliving such a terrifying moment (Haskell & Randall, 2019; Walsh & Bruce, 2014). Other intrapersonal factors include decreased trust of others and internalizing symptoms which may also lead to reduced interaction with previously trusted social supports (Haskell & Randall, 2019). Furthermore, religion may play either positive or negative roles in shaping responses dependent on supportive structures or increased stigma (Bryant-Davis et al., 2011; Kirkner & Ullman, 2020; Peteet, 2019). This dance between sense of self and sense of purpose, religion, and social support is interdependent, with each of the three factors influencing and drawing from the others. This relationship is the focus of this literature review, where the impact of evangelical Christian purity culture as an influence on all three of these is closely examined.

A Culture of Purity, Defined

Purity culture is a conservative white evangelical movement across the United States calling young cis-men and -women to abstinence, modesty, and whole-person resistance to sexual temptation in an attempt to create healthy relationships. Peaking in the late 1990's and early 2000's, hundreds of thousands of late Gen X and Millennials participated in purity culture

organizations such as True Love Waits (Haberman, 2021; Saywer, 2022). In its most genuine form, purity culture builds on complementarian theology and is heavily influenced by historical gender performance ideals. To properly understand this framework, there are important relevant definitions from this perspective. First, gender is binary, and necessarily and inextricably tied to sex organs. This is informed by a strict interpretation of Genesis 1:27, "... in the image of God he created them, male and female He created them" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001). Therefore, any future reference to "male" or "female" in this paper is done with efforts to reflect the frame of reference purity culture and its participants work out of. This is in contrast with current definitions of gender provided by authorities such as the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2015). Additionally, within this framework marriage occurs only between a man and woman and must be a covenant recognized by the church and its authorities. These constructs of gender and gendered relationships are foundational to the beliefs of purity culture.

Moreover, purity culture expects men and women to fulfill contrasting roles in response to scriptures such as 1 Corinthians 11:2 & 7, Genesis 2, Genesis 3:16, and 1 Tim. 2: 11-12. Men are appointed as leaders distinguished above women in the home, the church, and in economic arenas whereas women are expected to be quiet and submissive, only being delegated responsibilities within the home as helpers to men. Sexuality is also understood as a gendered concept, with men and women having different experiences. For example, men are taught that their sexual urges are nearly impossible to control (Irby, 2014; Saywer, 2022), but women are taught that their desire for connection will override their inclinations for sexual abstinence as they are in relationships with men (Bachechi & Hall, 2015). This teaching that men are, to a certain extent, not responsible for their sexual drives while women are prone to allowing sexual

activity in relationships, delegates responsibility for sexuality to women. Resulting female sexual responsibility further influences expectations for modesty and dating practices (Blum, 2015; Owens et al., 2021; Sawyer, 2022). While the salience of these beliefs varies between churches and people, these complementarian expectations create and further develop clear power differentials between men and women.

This contrast between men and women is a meeting point of purity culture and greater cultural beliefs. It simultaneously draws from and reinforces the necessity of marriage within purity culture. Vows taken for purity include language of “saving” oneself for marriage and/or waiting until marriage (Sawyer, 2022; Living Word Christian Center International Ministries, 2020). Language here reflects education proposing that sex only belongs within a marriage, and that having sex without vows is sinful (Gardner, 2015; Harris, 1997; Owens et al., 2021). Furthermore, the abstinence-only sex education so closely tied to purity culture most commonly and consistently frames sex with vaginal-penile intercourse as the paramount action which defines virginity and, consequently, purity (Byers et al., 2009; Goodson et al., 2003; Hans & Kimberly, 2011). Because this definition of sex is so constrained, sex education often fails to give information on safe sex practices, including discussions around consent (Owens et al., 2021). A second important interaction between purity culture and greater cultural spheres is rape myth acceptance (RMA), or “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify the male sexual aggression against women” (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). This is a particularly concerning illustration of how the previously discussed gendered power dynamics interact with sexual ignorance to perpetuate false and often harmful beliefs about sexual interactions. These characteristics come together to create

a culture of purity which people must navigate as they interact with the current environment of sexual violence and injustice.

A Game of Blame and Shame

Purity culture's positions on sexuality and sexual agency create a strong connection between religious righteousness and constraining sexual activity within marriage. This could interact with the process of healing from sexual assault in a sinister way, reducing positive social reactions because of its strict expectations. There has been a recent surge of interest in this relationship over the last decade as those who grew up during purity culture's height entered adulthood and began reflecting on, healing from, and directing research on that experience. Consequently, mass amounts of information on this topic are being generated, with knowledge on the subject constantly progressing and expanding. This paper focuses specifically on the impact of purity culture on social support as an important factor in the healing journey. Based on knowledge of these two topics, this review interrogates the hypothesis that poor community support is seen in communities embracing purity culture as a result of increased rape myth acceptance and victim-blaming attitudes rooted in complementarian teachings and lack of consent education.

Methods

Much of the existing research on the relationship between purity culture and sexual assault focus on the positive correlation between purity culture endorsement and various beliefs reflecting harmful views of survivors. Articles were found using academic databases with words such as "purity culture", "religiosity", and "conservative Christianity" paired with key terms such as "sexual assault", "rape myth acceptance", "marital rape", and "social support". The included 29 articles span the last three decades of research, as the height and continuing

influence of purity culture impact studied populations. Findings of these articles and the patterns they reveal are described below.

Results

The current literature reveals that survivors of sexual assault who are members of communities embracing purity culture teachings are subject to many confounding risk factors which both stem from and promote poor community support, a crucial factor in the healing process (Rich et al., 2021). For example, purity culture teachings about and expectations for sexuality can increase stigma around SA and for SA survivors, inciting shame against those disclosing (Rich et al., 2021; Ullman, 2023). Such beliefs may be influential both as an external factor and an internal factor (Choi, 2024; Wilson & Newins, 2020). The manifestation of this stigma can be seen in the beliefs present in purity culture ideology and in the effects seen on survivors.

Rape Myth Acceptance

The ascription to rape myths, which excuse and rationalize sexual assault, is a primary component of the adverse relationship between purity culture and inhibited healing following SA. RMA is prevalent throughout purity culture rhetoric. For example, common myths present in purity culture literature, such as books, say that victims are “asking for it” and dismiss marital rape as legitimate assault (Bachechi & Hall, 2015; Klement & Sagarin, 2017). Similarly, Edwards et al. (2011) provide examples of scripture and Biblical vignettes that are often interpreted to be consistent with myths such as “women asked to be raped” and “Husbands cannot rape their wives”. Additionally, Blum (2015) found that some Christian teachings create narratives defending and excusing male offenders. Moreover, Campbell et al. (2009) found that these rape myths may be internalized by survivors, inciting self-blame alongside the external

accusations. These myths present in purity culture explicitly reject the validity of survivors' stories before they can even be told.

In addition to purity culture endorsement, RMA has been further linked to two beliefs commonly seen in conservative Christian circles: Just World Belief (JWB) and Extrinsic Religiosity (Owens et al., 2021). JWB is the idea that people get what they deserve, which is associated with victim-blaming attitudes (VBA) (Heath & Sperry, 2020). Generally, these beliefs are positively correlated with how religious a person is (Barnett et al., 2018; Prina & Schatz-Stevens, 2020). Within that, however, there are more variables that identify the populations most likely to endorse these thoughts. Ensz & Janowski (2020) found that these beliefs are also associated with more conservative and strict interpretations of the Bible. Furthermore, there are correlations with an external motivation for one's participation in the church (Ensz & Janowski, 2020; Piggott & Anderson, 2023). Such Extrinsic Religiosity looks like the use of church for social fulfillment and identity assimilation within those groups in contrast with a motivation rooted in the spiritual fulfillment of practices. These definitive distinctions among believers call for and create a definite sense of who is "good" and who is "in", simultaneously including and strengthening the associated belief in a just world and VBA.

Poor Social Support

Reactions to SA disclosure are often correlated with the receiving individual's acceptance of stigma and personal shame surrounding sexual assault (Canan et al., 2018; Rich et al., 2021; Ullman, 2023). This means that the greater ideology of a survivor's group influences the responses they receive following vulnerable sharing of assault(s). Furthermore, research has revealed that increased RMA and JWB are directly associated with decreased social support (Feldman et al., 1998; Rich et al., 2021). Inversely, decreased RMA has been correlated with

increased social support (Grandgenett et al., 2022; Holland et al., 2020). The previously discussed distinction between the impact of negative social reaction and positive social reaction is important to recall here, as the detrimental effects of negative reactions are especially wounding for already injured survivors (Campbell et al., 2009). This identifies some markers of conservative Christian communities which put survivors at risk for impeded healing.

Discussion

Purity culture's teachings, based on complementarian gender expectations and a strict definition of moral sexuality, influence ascriptions of blame. Research shows that purity culture-related conservative religious beliefs, including RMA and JWB, are associated with victim-blaming attitudes (Bachechi & Hall, 2015; Owens et al., 2021). The more prevalent these attitudes, the more likely people are to react negatively to survivors seeking help (Campbell et al., 2009). This ideology could be especially concerning for female survivors considering the confounding power differentials between genders present in purity culture and the higher prevalence of female victimization. These patterns of dysfunctional beliefs and resulting reactions exist in opposition to the Church's mission to love others.

However, religiosity, when an internal anchor for identity and strength, can be an especially helpful tool for many survivors' coping journeys. Spirituality is a common positive coping mechanism for many survivors, indicating the importance of spaces for spirituality to be practiced (Frazier & Berman, 2008). Furthermore, several studies have found a survivor's use of religion as a coping mechanism to positively predict PTG (Kirkner & Ullman, 2020; Kleim & Ehlers, 2009; Ritholtz, 2018). For people who use their faith in these ways, the contrasting blame and shame from church communities complicate their ability to rely on it as a tool. To provide

safe spaces for survivors, churches should directly address rape myths and combat implications of just world theology within their attempts to define healthy sexual and romantic relationships.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current literature gives valuable insight into the factors related to purity culture which have negative impacts on survivor's healing journeys. However, there are some concerns about the scope of accuracy within this research. Firstly, because purity culture is so closely tied to the conservative and white American Christian church, this body of research largely misses the experience of survivors and their support systems who hold marginalized identities. The establishment of the sexual ideals discussed in this paper was greatly influenced by a long history of deep systemic racism. Women of color are subjected to contrasting sexual expectations as seen in the "Jezebel" stereotype for black women (Nuamah, 2021; Pilgrim, 2023; Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). Furthermore, the strict ascription to a gender binary and complementarianism fundamentally excludes queer individuals. A second problem consistent across all research on survivors of SA is report hesitancy. The refusal to share assaults with either informal or formal supports can be attributed in part to the expectation of not being believed; however, avoidance behaviors and internalized beliefs contribute to this as well (Haskell & Randall, 2019; Walsh & Bruce, 2014; Wilson & Newins, 2020). One major factor is ignorance of the definition of consent. Survivors may never acknowledge themselves as victims in the first place because they cannot recognize SA (Valdespino-Hayden et al., 2022; Wilson & Newins, 2020). This could serve as a protective factor, preventing survivors from facing the reality of being violated (Clements & Ogle, 2009; Wilson et al., 2017, 2018; Wilson & Scarpa, 2017). However, unacknowledged rape is dangerous, as it has been associated with increased revictimization

(Littleton et al., 2017). These factors should be considered when contemplating increasing consent education as a preventative measure for combating rape myths.

Other internalized messages impacting one's ability to access support are also related to beliefs within conservative Christian communities. Generally, these spaces have high mental health help and help-seeking stigma, which is an influential factor especially in cases of sexual assault (Lloyd et al., 2022; McGuire & Pace, 2018; Peteet, 2019; Rife, 2009). Additionally, marital rape is an experience that is especially under recognized (Whatley, 1993, 2005). Given the close relationship between marriage and sex within purity culture teachings, it may be an important route for future research. One final area that is missing within the current literature is research on male-victim scenarios, especially considering the subversion of expected power differences often depicted in purity culture sexuality and gender dynamics. Moving forward, research should increase efforts to explore the experiences of these populations following sexual assault experiences and implications for consequent healing.

Conclusion

In attempts to define what healthy love is, churches may be unintentionally creating bias against a vulnerable group of people who are desperate for a safe space. Support for survivors of sexual assault is a vital part of the healing process (Campbell et al., 2009; Chivers-Wilson, 2006). This support is determined by a listener's ability to offer acceptance of and help for the reporter. However, the amount of support one gives is often related to the ideas that underlie and inform gendered expectations and blame for assaults (Campbell et al., 2009; Canan et al., 2018; Feldman et al., 1998). The power imbalance present in the construction of gender identity and sexuality within purity culture is associated with such patterns of misinformed beliefs. This intricate picture of agency and accountability is directly related to the degree of rape myth

acceptance, just world belief, and extrinsic religiosity (Ensz & Jankowski, 2020; Heath & Sperry, 2020; Owens et al., 2021). Indicative of victim-blaming attitudes, these beliefs are associated with harmful reactions to disclosures and therefore the further injury of survivors as they attempt to heal from traumatic experiences. Institutions endorsing purity culture ideals should be aware of the dangers involved with the ways that current teachings are impacting a desperate population and consider alternative ways of engaging with these topics which may better join alongside survivors as they heal.

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Appendix A

Symposium Panel Title: “Loving the Other: Working towards flourishing community”, presented May 18, 2024

Welcome to panel one, “Loving the Other: Working towards flourishing community”. I’d like to begin by thanking each of you for being here; whether you are friends or family or if this was simply the most interesting panel to you, it means the world to my fellow panelists and I to have your support as we share what we’ve worked on the last year and a half. Before I begin my presentation, I’d like to take a moment to give a content warning. My thesis discusses sexual assault and the following healing process. I acknowledge this is a heavy topic for all and may be triggering for some. If at any time and for any reason you feel unable to sit in this space and listen, please step out into the hall. We will have someone open the door at the end of my presentation so you know when it is safe to return. Having worked on this thesis for so long, I have learned when I need to take a deep breath or have a drink of water as you may see me do. Please check in with yourself similarly throughout the next 10-15 minutes.

An average of 474,040 people are sexually assaulted each year in America. Each of these 474,040 people are forced to face a myriad of possible effects from the assault. Some of these changes include, but are not limited to, symptoms of depression, such as loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities, increased substance use, or a sense of worthlessness, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder such as hypervigilance, flashbacks, dissociation and avoidance, or insomnia. Regardless of the particulars of a survivor’s internal experiences and altered worldview, their lives are permanently changed as they move forward and learn to live after assault.

Throughout this intimidating journey facing survivors, external and internal factors serve as indicators of one's ability to grapple with the experience itself and to create coping mechanisms to navigate the mental health challenges that follow and to heal the deep wounds. For example, positive appraisal of the self is associated with less depressive symptoms. Additionally, religiosity and spirituality are correlated with post-traumatic growth when they are related to effective coping mechanisms such as prayer and a strong sense of purpose. Finally, one of the strongest indicators of post-traumatic growth is affirming reactions from social support systems. Some research identifies negative social reactions as the most impactful responses with positive reactions as effective, but only in the avoidance of negative ones. Therefore, upon entrusting friends, family, or people in authority with a story of sexual assault, acceptance and comfort are vital responses in order to facilitate post-traumatic growth.

Social support being a central player in post-traumatic growth following sexual assault introduces complexity, as degrees of social support vary according to internal responses and social stigma. One prevalent post-traumatic stress disorder symptom is avoidance of triggers, including places, people, and thoughts. This can lead to difficulty disclosing sexual assault in the first place, as survivors may be attempting to avoid reliving such a terrifying moment. Other intrapersonal factors include decreased trust of others and internalizing symptoms which may also lead to reduced interaction with previously trusted social supports. Furthermore, religion may play either positive or negative roles in shaping responses dependent on supportive structures or increased stigma. This dance between sense of self and sense of purpose, religion, and social support is interdependent, with each of the three factors influencing and drawing from the others. This relationship is the focus of my thesis, where the impact of evangelical Christian purity culture as an influence on all three of these is closely examined.

Purity culture is a conservative white evangelical movement across the United States calling young cis-men and cis-women to abstinence, modesty, and whole-person resistance to sexual temptation in an attempt to create healthy relationships. Peaking in the late 1990's and early 2000's, hundreds of thousands of late Gen X and Millennials participated in purity culture organizations such as True Love Waits or the Silver Ring Thing. In its most genuine form, purity culture builds on complementarian theology and is heavily influenced by historical gender performance ideals. To properly understand this framework, there are important relevant definitions from this perspective. First, gender is binary, and necessarily and inextricably tied to sex organs. Therefore, any future reference to "male" or "female" in this paper is done with efforts to reflect the frame of reference purity culture and its participants work out of. This is in contrast with current definitions of gender provided by authorities such as the American Psychological Association. Additionally, within this framework marriage occurs only between a man and woman and must be a covenant recognized by the church and its authorities. These constructs of gender and gendered relationships are foundational to the beliefs of purity culture.

Moreover, purity culture expects men and women to fulfill contrasting roles in response to scriptures such as 1 Corinthians 11:2 & 7, Genesis 2, Genesis 3:16, and 1 Tim. 2: 11-12. Men are appointed as leaders distinguished above women in the home, the church, and in economic arenas whereas women are expected to be quiet and submissive, only being delegated responsibilities within the home as helpers to men. Sexuality is also understood as a gendered concept, with men and women having different experiences. For example, men are taught that their sexual urges are nearly impossible to control, but women are taught that their desire for connection will override their inclinations for sexual abstinence as they are in relationships with men. This teaching that men are, to a certain extent, not responsible for their sexual drives while

women are prone to allowing sexual activity in relationships, delegates responsibility for sexuality to women. Resulting female sexual responsibility further influences expectations for modesty and dating practices. While the salience of these beliefs varies between churches and people, these complementarian expectations create and further develop clear power differentials between men and women.

This contrast between men and women is a meeting point of purity culture and greater cultural beliefs. It simultaneously draws from and reinforces the necessity of marriage within purity culture. Vows taken for purity include language of “saving” oneself for marriage and/or waiting until marriage. Language here reflects education proposing that sex only belongs within a marriage, and that having sex without vows is sinful. Furthermore, the abstinence-only sex education so closely tied to purity culture most commonly and consistently frames sex with vaginal-penile intercourse as the paramount action which defines virginity and, consequently, purity. Because this definition of sex is so constrained, sex education often fails to give information on safe sex practices, including discussions around consent. A second important interaction between purity culture and greater cultural spheres is rape myth acceptance, or “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify the male sexual aggression against women”. This is a particularly concerning illustration of how the previously discussed gendered power dynamics interact with sexual ignorance to perpetuate false and often harmful beliefs about sexual interactions. These characteristics come together to create a culture of purity which people must navigate as they interact with the current environment of sexual violence and injustice.

Purity culture’s positions on sexuality and sexual agency create a strong connection between religious righteousness and constraining sexual activity within marriage. This could

interact with the process of healing from sexual assault in a sinister way, reducing positive social reactions because of its strict expectations. There has been a recent surge of interest in this relationship over the last decade as those who grew up during purity culture's height entered adulthood and began reflecting on, healing from, and directing research on that experience. Consequently, mass amounts of information on this topic are being generated, with knowledge on the subject constantly progressing and expanding. My literature review set out to identify these findings, synthesizing their information to create a clearer picture of the impact of purity culture on social support as an important factor in the healing journey. My analysis of the current literature revealed several themes, which I will now discuss.

Survivors of sexual assault who are members of communities embracing purity culture teachings are subject to many confounding risk factors which both stem from and promote poor community support, a crucial factor in the healing process. For example, purity culture teachings about and expectations for sexuality can increase stigma around sexual assault and for sexual assault survivors, inciting shame against those disclosing. Such beliefs may be influential both as an external factor and an internal factor. The manifestation of this stigma can be seen in the beliefs present in purity culture ideology and in the effects seen on survivors.

The ascription to rape myths, which excuse and rationalize sexual assault, is a primary component of the adverse relationship between purity culture and inhibited healing following sexual assault. Rape myth acceptance is prevalent throughout purity culture rhetoric. For example, common myths present in purity culture literature, such as books, say that victims are "asking for it" and dismiss marital rape as legitimate assault. Similarly, there are many examples of scripture and Biblical vignettes that are often interpreted to be consistent with myths such as "women asked to be raped" and "Husbands cannot rape their wives". Additionally, some

Christian teachings create narratives defending and excusing male offenders. Moreover, these rape myths may be internalized by survivors, inciting self-blame alongside the external accusations. These myths present in purity culture explicitly reject the validity of survivors' stories before they can even be told.

In addition to purity culture endorsement, rape myth acceptance has been further linked to two beliefs commonly seen in conservative Christian circles: Just World Belief and Extrinsic Religiosity. Just World Belief is the idea that people get what they deserve, which is associated with victim-blaming attitudes. Generally, these beliefs are positively correlated with how religious a person is. Within that, however, there are more variables that identify the populations most likely to endorse these thoughts. These beliefs are also associated with more conservative and strict interpretations of the Bible. Furthermore, there are correlations with an external motivation for one's participation in the church. Such Extrinsic Religiosity looks like the use of church for social fulfillment and identity assimilation within those groups in contrast with a motivation rooted in the spiritual fulfillment of practices. These definitive distinctions among believers call for and create a definite sense of who is "good" and who is "in", simultaneously including and strengthening the associated belief in a just world and victim-blaming attitudes.

Reactions to sexual assault disclosure are often correlated with the receiving individual's acceptance of stigma and personal shame surrounding sexual assault. This means that the greater ideology of a survivor's group influences the responses they receive following vulnerable sharing of assault. Furthermore, research has revealed that increased rape myth acceptance and Just World Belief are directly associated with decreased social support. Inversely, decreased rape myth acceptance has been correlated with increased social support. The previously discussed distinction between the impact of negative social reaction and positive social reaction is

important to recall here, as the detrimental effects of negative reactions are especially wounding for already injured survivors. This identifies some markers of conservative Christian communities which put survivors at risk for impeded healing.

Purity culture's teachings, based on complementarian gender expectations and a strict definition of moral sexuality, influence ascriptions of blame. Research shows that purity culture-related conservative religious beliefs, including rape myth acceptance and Just World Belief, are associated with victim-blaming attitudes. The more prevalent these attitudes, the more likely people are to react negatively to survivors seeking help. This ideology could be especially concerning for female survivors considering the confounding power differentials between genders present in purity culture and the higher prevalence of female victimization. These patterns of dysfunctional beliefs and resulting reactions exist in opposition to the Church's mission to love others.

However, I do not set out to villainize the churches engaging with purity culture. Instead, I'd like to encourage them to re-examine its purpose. Religiosity, when an internal anchor for identity and strength, can actually be an especially helpful tool for many survivors' coping journeys. Spirituality is a common positive coping mechanism for many survivors, indicating the importance of spaces for spirituality to be practiced. Furthermore, a survivor's use of religion as a coping mechanism positively predicts post-traumatic growth. But, for people who use their faith in these ways, the contrasting blame and shame from church communities complicate their ability to rely on it as a tool.

Behind purity culture teachings is a desire to be obedient to God and to have healthy, loving relationships. But to better love survivors of sexual assault, churches should consider alternative ways of defining healthy sexual and romantic relationships, directly addressing rape

myths and combatting implications of just world theology. In acknowledging the injustice and recognizing the hurt, churches may better join alongside survivors as they heal, and we may all learn a healthier way of loving our neighbor. Thank you.