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SOCI- 322-A: Human Behavior & the Social Environment

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December 15, 2022

Introduction

In this review I will explore the research that provides an answer to the question, “In what way is Purity Culture impacting women in Christian circles?” This question has value in the Social Work field because of the prevalence of Christianity in America and the cultural standards it produces. In a country that has “In God we Trust” on its currency, license plates, and more, it is no surprise that the Christian God has influenced every aspect of its culture. The standards Christianity has usurped onto women specifically has created a chasm in between women and their sexual expression as well as their identity. It is important to note that this review focuses on heteronormative relationships and cis-gendered people because of a lack of information or studies done on persons outside of previously mentioned people groups regarding this topic.

This topic has value in my life because I am a victim of Purity Culture. Purity culture has impacted my sexuality, wellbeing, and mental health. I have spent time, money, and energy recovering from the impact of purity culture and this research has been both informative and validating. When Social Workers conduct research on topics like these, we make a space where people can share their stories and we create a culture of understanding and intolerance of abuse.

Purity culture can be characterized as “set of ideas and beliefs about women and sex emphasizes the importance of female purity and prizes the maintenance of virginity, particularly for women, until marriage (Klement et al., 2022).” It can be tied in with Christian morals which is a bit more difficult to define, “morality consists of a very large number of overlapping and crisscrossing rules for behavior (Kollareth et al., 2022).” The ways purity culture is impacting women are through education, relationships, sexuality, sexual experiences, mixed gender relationships, and

church. Using these spaces as avenues to silence women's discussion of their trauma, abuse, and pain.

Characteristics of Purity Culture

As stated in the introduction, purity culture is predominantly characterized as emphasizing the importance of female purity and virginity. There are other aspects to purity culture that can be characterized by different events, programs, and even contracts. Some examples of these are purity balls and sexual purity contracts (Klement et al., 2022). These programs are targeted toward women and teach that women are "gatekeepers of sexual activity and that sexual exploration is a lapse on the part of the woman (Klement et al., 2022)." Purity culture and the idea of purity itself influence a large part of legislation about such topics. Research findings about moral concerns and the foundation of moral purity drive social policies and research to that morality regarding purity is associated with ideas to regulate immorality across both sexual and non- sexual areas (Silver, 2020).

Purity Cultures Impact on Collegiate Women

In a research study done in 2019, several results about an impact on college age women was done. The results are mostly neutral. This was a survey conducted online for a university. It focused on, "examining religiosity, sexual health knowledge, and behavior and sexual health information sources among undergraduate students affiliated with student religious organizations and unaffiliated students. (Davidson et al., 2019)."

One reason why I think college age women are a good demographic to focus on is because many women become sexually active in college, approximately 94% of college students are sexually active (Eisenberg et al., 2016). This is a time of sexual exploration and is

the first-time many young women are away from their homes and families. Religious affiliation impacts sexual activity one might think; however, the results of this study show that while religious affiliated students had fewer sexual partners, their condom use was the same as non-religious affiliated students (Davidson et al., 2019). Stereotypically it is thought that women that are involved in religious or Christian circles are ill-informed about birth control, but this evidence contradicts that stereotype.

The overall result of the research shows that religious affiliated women have less sexual partners as previously stated, but these women are more likely to use religious sources for information about romantic relationships (Davidson et al., 2019). This can be interpreted as their trust in secular sources regarding romantic relationships is not strong, and this may span in other areas regarding sexuality as well. There is no way to know if the religious or secular sources one uses regarding romantic relationships are factual, but state regulated sources regarding these subjects are more valid than unchecked and unregulated religious sources these women might be referring to. This information women receive from religious sources could potentially create a culture of distrust regarding secular sources, and without factual secular sources, purity culture is given room to toxically manifest itself in Christian female circles.

Cross-Sex Relationships with Collegiate Women

One of the subjects I neglected prior to my research for this review regarding purity culture are platonic relationship with the opposite sex. Because purity culture is sex focused, platonic relationships might not immediately come to mind. However, Dzubiniski's research focuses on this subject. They use the term, "stained glass partition to describe the challenges that exist in forming and maintaining cross-sex collegial relationships in the work place (Dzubiniski ., 2020)." This partition exists intentionally according to many accounts from real college students. It is fear based and the brunt of the emotional responsibility to maintain boundaries in these relationships is on women. The reason women feel the need to keep

themselves separate from men is explained in this brief testimonial from a female college student named Amelia,

“In a Christian setting, there’s these thicker lines between male and female interaction.”

The reason, she believed, was because “there’s such an emphasis on sexual purity in American Christianity.” The emphasis on sexual purity, which was partly the source of the Billy Graham Rule, resulted in “thicker lines” keeping males and females from interacting at work (Dzubinski ., 2020).”

Women interviewed also referred to a rule dubbed the “Billy Graham” or “Mike Pence” rule which is a principle focused on never being alone with the opposite gender. Women had a name for these rules whereas men described it as an unwritten principle. It can easily be seen how women suffer the burden of this rule in professional scenarios as well as personal.

Purity and Pop-Culture

In a secular culture where being sexually inactive is unlikely, in Christianity it can be seen as an act of heroism or martyrdom, defeating the status quo. Alongside being a martyr for morality, there comes isolation and a desire for being included. From a personal standpoint, as a conservative Christian female, I held my sexuality close to me. It was as if I were holding a rare and precious gemstone. I was given books titled “Before You Meet Prince Charming”, and “Kissing Toads”. These books were seen as a right of passage on how to keep your purity untouched. These books are just a few examples of literature written for multiple different age groups regarding purity. I used these books as a basis for my own self-hatred and how I metaphorically pushed myself above the sexually deviant clouds. While I felt purity culture deep inside of my mind, I also desperately wanted to be like the girls I saw in the early 2000’s chic-flicks I indulged in. I wanted to be sexy like Megan Fox and sweet and desirable like Aquamarine in Aquamarine. However, one cannot remain pure and abstinent while emulating the lifestyle these beauty queens possessed. However, I desperately tried to be sexually

desirable and sweet and innocent simultaneously. The results were disastrous! Leading to a several years long struggle of me grappling with my sexuality and self-expression which have resulted in depression, anxiety, and borderline eating-disorders.

Purity Culture depicts women who do not have sex, unlike popstars, as having control of their lifestyles. While this can be true for some women, it is simply not a comprehensive or relevant way to measure someone's self-control.

"Purity presents young women and girls as innocent and pure. Then presumed displeasure makes women who have had sexual intercourse and are active as "injured". Piety presents those women who don't choose to have sex at all as in control of their life (Bachechi, K., et al 2013)."

This is an incredibly harmful way to depict sexuality, and as I mentioned in my personal experience with purity and pop-culture, there are two extremes for sexuality. You are either a porn-star or a chaste-virgin (Becechi, K., et al 2013). Purity Culture and pop-culture do a good job of not showing the different levels of sexuality and identity that are in between the two extremes. As a teen I tried to merge the two extremes instead of becoming comfortable in my own sexuality and settling somewhere in the middle.

Testimonials Regarding Purity Culture

In the book called Pure by Klein, original research and interviews were done regarding the topic of purity culture. A personal story by someone called Scarlet is told in this book. In this interview she recalls her body's reaction after having a series of monogamous oral sexual relations with Evangelical men.

"Then I remember I tried to stand up and I fell on the ground. I thought I was having a heart attack. I really thought that I might be having a heart attack. I called one of my closest friends. He ran over to my apartment and took me to-I can't remember. But I ended up at the hospital. A doctor gave me Valium which made my body be like-_' Scarlet made the sound of a robot shut-

ting down, collapsing her body into a heap in her lap (Klein ., et al 2018).”

After these comments are made, Scarlet goes into more detail about how the doctor asks if she had a sexual relationship for the first time. Scarlet confirms and the doctor tells Scarlet she had an anxiety attack because of her sexual experience. Scarlet is shocked by this because she saw her sexual experience as miniscule in comparison to her peers.

Conclusion

Purity Culture is a broad topic that has many different sub-topics within itself. I was only able to cover a few here, but what was discussed had the most factual evidence and research to support the information presented. I attempted to explore the positive effect of purity culture on women, but there were no resources online that I could find regarding this perspective.

Women are impacted immensely in their college-age years specifically by purity culture. Pressures from literature, unwritten rules such as the “Billy Graham” rule, pop-culture, religion, family, and even themselves create a harmful environment for women’s sexual experience and expression. While ways to combat this issue were not explored, information to combat this in the future exists. With plentiful research and personal testimonies that have been shared in this review, there can be change encouraged by proof of negative impact found by scientific research.

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