12-16-2015

Women, Sex, and God: Women's Sexuality and the Internalization of Religious Messages

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Women, Sex, and God: Women’s Sexuality and the Internalization of Religious Messages

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A Dissertation Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education with an emphasis in Counseling

December 2015

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Abstract

Grounded theory methodology was used to explore women’s internalization of religious messages regarding their sexuality. Two research questions served as the guide for this study: how are women’s sexual self-views informed by their religious teaching, and how are these messages, along with their experiences, lived in them sexually, psychologically, and spiritually? Eleven women (ages 30-74) were chosen who had been raised in a Western Christian tradition in the US (8 Protestant, 3 Catholic). Participants were interviewed through an in-depth three-interview process to gain an understanding of their experiences and how they resolved their concerns with sex and spirit. The findings revealed that fear, shame, and objectification served as the primary manner of regulating the women’s sexuality within their religious traditions, resulting in detriment to sexual, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing through ruptures of sexual and spiritual safety.

Complex (developmental) trauma arose as the overall impact of their religious sexual socialization, captured through seven categorical outcomes: identity conflicts, shame, self-blame, self-objectification, sexual and relationship problems with men, spiritual and sexual conflicts, and affect dysregulation. The theory of negotiating safety best captured the participants’ attempts to reclaim psychological, sexual, and spiritual wellbeing, through their ongoing efforts to secure sexual and spiritual safety. Grace was found to provide the safety needed for sexual and spiritual growth, experienced in marital and therapeutic relationships that were egalitarian, and for one woman, her egalitarian church. Grace was shown to be manifested with self, others, and God through embodiment, whole-hearted relating, and trust. Recommendations for clinicians and faith practitioners were provided.
To my minyan of women and men

_Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves._
_A cord of three strands is not quickly broken._

- Ecclesiastes 4:12
Acknowledgments

My dissertation is ultimately about grace. Yes, there is much here about what happens when grace is eroded by fear, but in the end, it’s grace that brings life. Grace cures in the most microscopic of ways, but only when we experience it. I am grateful for those who have traveled with me in this process, given of themselves, and given grace in wildly different ways so that I could finish this goal. I don’t know how to fully thank my family and friends who have given so much practical help but also unconditional love and support. This project was not done alone.

To my best friend Sara, you did a little bit of everything including periodically pointing me to the shoreline, telling me ‘you have a ½ mile to go,’ ‘you have a ¼ mile to go.’ Thank you for being my compass and teaching me how to stay.

To my parents, Ken and Deborah, thank you for your unconditional love and support, for cheering me on, making me laugh, and being a bright spot through some dark moments.

To Abi, you have been longsuffering, even in hearing out every detail of every thought I have had about this project. Thank you for your grace and companionship.

Similarly, thank you to friends and family who have loved well and kept me well. My burden has been your burden, and I am overwhelmed with gratitude – Kevin, Todd, Tonta, Laura, Tim, Doug, Kathy, Ellen and Sundeep, Lorri, Jan, Mariam, Jon and Sabrina, Steven, Mary Ellen, Leslie, Amy, and Eileen.

And to my dissertation committee, Angela Coker, Wolfgang, Susan, and Lee, thank you each for being a solid rock, an avid supporter, and knowing so well what you are doing.
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RELIGIOUS MESSAGES

Sources of Messages

Delivery of Messages
- Direct Instruction
- Metaphors
- Comments
- Modeling by Other Women
- Unwritten Curriculum
- Harmful/Redemptive Experiences

Messages on Sexuality
- Sex is a sacred union, meant only for marriage
- Talking about sex is taboo – sex is dirty
- Sex education means keeping girls virgins – intercourse/pregnancy is the bottom line
- Sexual thoughts, feelings, and attraction is lust and therefore sinful
- The spiritual and social consequences of sex are grave and different for men and women
- A man’s sexuality is God-given; a woman’s is a perversion
- Sexual assault is tolerated and defended
- Women are to blame for men’s sexual sin
- Women are morally weak temptresses and cannot be trusted
- Sexual purity will be rewarded with a great marriage, great sex, and minimal suffering

CATEGORIES

IDENTITY CONFLICTS

Fragmented Experience of Self
- Binary Identity
- Undeveloped woman – Identity as destination
- Purity and submission as identity
- Authenticity as rebelliousness

Disconnected From Self
- Self-Awareness and the underdeveloped self
- Sex as separateness from self
- Coping through suppression and denial

Hiding
- Secrecy
- Compartmentalization

Value and Self-Worth
- Less than
- Value is not inherent but earned
- Sex ruins you
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Chapter One – Introduction

“I went back to Israel that summer . . . I made friends with another American girl, Ofra, who was visiting her Orthodox relatives. When I went to get her one afternoon to hang out, I wore my dress. Her uncle intercepted me. . . ‘You can’t visit Ofra,’ he said iHebrew. ‘Don’t try to see her again. We don’t approve of you. You are dressed like a whore.’ I was stricken mute, partly by the shock of being reflected in his disapproval - no one had thought of me as a bad influence until then - but also by something in his cold eyes and voice that I had never heard before. He feared me; me, a little girl. He was shaming me because he was afraid of me. What I had considered something to be proud of – my emerging sexuality – was something to be ashamed of. Before, I had absorbed the idea that God liked sexuality; through Ofra’s uncle I saw the possibility, which I had never considered up to that point, that God hated it – and, in particular, that God localized it in women” - Naomi Wolf in Promiscuities, (Wolf, 1997, p. 47).

The study of human sexuality encompasses a broad field of investigation, including issues such as arousal, attraction, gender differences, and sexual dysfunction. Historically, debates about the basic nature of sexuality have been camped in one of two research approaches: biomedical or environmental. Feminist researchers have proposed that the study of women’s sexuality requires the inclusion of both biological and sociocultural origins of sexual development and have argued that a woman’s experience of her own sexuality consists of a multifaceted relationship between self and environment that is an interplay of biological and sociocultural factors (Tolman & Diamond, 2001). Feminist writers on sexuality claim that in most cultures women subvert their authentic sexual selves in order to maintain their position in a patriarchal society. Women therefore adopt sexual selves that are not their own in order to maintain the cultural structure (Fowers & Fowers, 2010; Szymanski, Gupta, Carr, & Stewart, 2009).

In recent years, in an effort to bridge the gulf between body and world, researchers have placed greater attention on the influence that cognitive perception has on sexual identity, specifically as it pertains to women’s sexuality and their relationship to
their environment. Cognitive theories have emerged addressing certain aspects of the perceptions, appraisals, and meaning-making a woman exhibits regarding her own sexual self. It is postulated that cultural messages become internalized as cognitive perceptions of self that are then related to sexual outcomes, primarily relationship formation and sexual behaviors and attitudes (Fowers et al., 2010; Szymanski et al., 2009). This has left researchers with many questions to pursue. How does a woman experience her sexuality or construct her sexuality? What is the relationship between a woman’s sexual identity and her environment? What impact do cultural messages have on a women’s sense of sexual self?

It was recently in my own professional work as a psychotherapist in private practice that I was struck with these questions, meeting with women coming into therapy for a variety of presenting problems; depression, marital problems, anxiety, relationship issues, etc. I gradually became aware of what periodically occurs with the mindful therapist - a revelation of what was a long-existing blind spot. I had sat face-to-face, weekly, sometimes for years, with women who have shared with me the most intimate emotional, relational, and intrapsychic details of their worlds. I have heard many stories of deep desire and longing regarding intimate experiences of loss, betrayal, and trauma, yet I came to discover, that while I felt I truly knew these women, for many of them, I knew little, if anything, about their sexuality.

I was curious and perplexed by this newly emerging discovery. It was as if their sexual identity, sexual experiences, feelings and beliefs about their sexual selves were completely irrelevant, not only to their work in therapy, but to their lives in general. They did not bring it up, and I did not ask. I was intrigued by my own silence. Was I doing
something to avoid this crucial aspect of identity and relationship? Why was I so hesitant to pursue? What was in my story that perpetuated this collusion of silence? I could ask the hard questions of my clients, yet when it came to sex, my knee-jerk reaction was to not pry and not make my client uncomfortable.

At the same time, I was curious about the distinctions between those women who shared their sexual stories and those who did not, as not all of my clients were silent regarding their sexuality. I marveled at the openness that some clients had in “putting it out there.” In my burgeoning awareness I was intrigued at the ease with which some told me of their sexual interests and experiences, as if they had been spared that silence-inducing shame. Overall, these women seemed to openly recognize and acknowledge themselves as sexual, and I needed to catch up. And so I began experimenting with this newly realized resistance by “prying” into their sexual stories. What I would dare not pursue before became the places where my curiosity would land. I asked questions about their sexual desires, experiences, and feelings. I engaged in addressing resistance to disclosure, and we would together pursue what was behind the silence.

As I began examining the avoidant resistance of many of my clients, what seemed to emerge were deeply embedded belief systems regulated by well-developed rules regarding right and wrong. Often unbeknownst to them, they carried with them first, a sense to some degree or another that they were not okay sexually, and second, a deeply ingrained cognitive rulebook for who they should be and not be and what they should do and not do.

I did not often hear women sharing with me their authentic sexual selves in what I knew to be their own voice. Instead it was as if another voice would enter the room and
speak for them. Even for those women who were more at ease with their sexuality, there still often arose an intrusive, shaming, and regulating voice about her sexual self that did not seem her own. As in the excerpt above, it was as if Ofra’s uncle - a holier, punitive, and shunning voice - took over and began speaking instead. It is here as these women shared with me their sexual self-views that I began to witness what researchers identify as the process of cognitive internalization of cultural messages.

As a therapist who was previously in a religious Christian counseling setting who then moved into private practice, many of my clients have been raised in a religious tradition. What I found in these women’s stories was something of a cultural sexual rulebook, to varying degrees and from various sources that often seemed to include religious cultural messages, even for women who did not currently identify as religious. These stories were replete with moralized messages of instruction and self-judgment that seemed to leave them embedded in shame; their ideas distorted and confused.

It is here that I began to ponder the question of relationship between sexual self-views of women and their religious cultural socialization. Further exploration then led me to question how a woman’s cognitive internalizations of her cultural messages are lived in her sexually, psychologically, and spiritually. As Naomi Wolf (1997) stated in her personal exploration of women’s sexuality and culture, I am interested in exploring my own cultural tribe – and for me, that would be women who are raised in a Western Christian tradition.

Foucault (1978) famously postulated that women’s sexuality came under great scrutiny in modernity through the regulatory nature of modern law, medicine, and religion. Weisner-Hanks (2000) in her historical analysis of Christianity and sexuality in
early modernity argued that many of the current issues on sexuality raised by scholars today are deeply rooted in a long history of religious cultural messages. She claimed “Christianity regulated the sexual lives of Europeans and colonial subjects” and that theologians and secular political authorities worked closely to ensure that citizens lived a proper sexual life (p. 9). However, the primary examination of the relationship between sexuality and cultural influences has been left in the hands of the historians and sociologists and little evaluation has occurred by psychological researchers.

Researchers have argued the need to examine the role of religious messages in the formation of women’s sexuality. In a series of six case studies on the impact of religion on women’s sexuality, Simpson and Ramberg (1992) claimed that religion plays a significant and often hidden role in women’s sexuality and urged therapists to become more informed about the nature of this relationship, even in women who do not currently identify as religious. Daniluk and Browne (2008) discovered that issues of faith history were an important theme in their work with infertile women, arguing that spirituality and faith tradition have been greatly overlooked in the study of woman’s sexual identity.

To date, the primary examination of this relationship between religious beliefs and sexuality has occurred through large survey-based studies of sexuality. Masters and Johnson (1970), in their pivotal decades-long study of 382 women and 312 men’s sexual behaviors, found that a rigid religious background in childhood is often associated with sexual dysfunction. In a large survey of 3,810 men and women (82% were women) Ogden (2002b) noted that for many respondents their sexuality was often seen in the context of their religious beliefs: women in particular found it difficult to reconcile being good with being sexual and that Christian teachings led them to feel greater shame and
guilt regarding their sexuality. Similarly, in a review of a decade of research on college
students’ sexual attitudes, Stevens, Caron, and Pratt (2003) found that religious values
played an important role in students’ sexual behaviors and attitudes.

Some research has indicated the positive impact that religion plays on sexual
experiences. In a phenomenological study of 10 men and women, Macknee (2002)
emphasized the “profound sexual and spiritual encounters” that occurred in participants
who identified as Christian (p. 234). Other authors have addressed the tremendous
negative impact that religions may have on women’s sexuality due to the patriarchal
nature of religious structure (Jung, 1958/2002), especially western religions such as
Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. There is a similar structure in each of these religious
teachings that emphasizes sexual restraint, often complicating the relationship between
sexuality and spirituality, especially for women (Daniluk & Browne, 2008). Overall,
researchers have referenced a significant relationship between women’s sexual self-
views and religious socialization, yet we know little of how this relationship occurs and the
ongoing legacy of effect that this relationship has on a woman’s evolving sexuality and
general well-being.

**Conceptual Framework**

Two current cognitive theories exist, which serve as the framework for this
current study in understanding how a woman’s sexual self-views are informed by her
culture: the sexual self-schema model and self-objectification theory. As cognitive
constructivist models of women’s sexuality, both models serve as a conceptual
framework for this current study. It will be identified, however, that as they serve as a
useful framework, standing alone, they do not essentially examine how a woman’s culture is internalized to form her sexual self-views or how this is lived in her as a whole.

**Sexual Self-Schema Model**

In an effort to bring forth the personal and private nature of sexuality, Anderson and Cyranowski (1994) developed the sexual self-schema, a construct defined as “cognitive generalizations about sexual aspects of oneself that are derived from past experience, manifest in current experience, influential in the processing of sexually relevant social information, and guide sexual behavior” (p. 1079). The authors hypothesized that women make inferences about their sexuality based on observing their sexual behaviors, experiencing their sexual emotions (i.e., arousal), and discovering their sexual beliefs and attitudes, while also learning of their sexual selves through having intimate sexual relationships. It is these four components that give a woman a sexual representation of herself. The theorists claim that the past is experienced in the present and is predictive of the future.

Anderson and Cyranowski (1994), through a series of six studies, developed a measure of sexual self-schema, identifying 26 adjectives related to what women define as “a sexual woman.” The 26 descriptors were then categorized using three factors, two deemed positive and one negative: passionate/romantic, open/direct, and embarrassed/conservative. These qualitative descriptions do not refer directly to sexual behaviors or experiences; however, Anderson and Cyranowski (1994) correlated the descriptions to certain sexual attitudes, behaviors, and experiences. Based on scoring along these three dimensions, the researchers identified four sexual self-views: positive
schematic, negative schematic, aschematic (possessing neither positive nor negative), and co-schematic (possessing both positive and negative).

Positive sexual self-schema women reported more prolific sexual experiences, including a greater frequency of sexual behaviors, and a greater number of sexual partners (Anderson et al., 1994). Positive schema women also reported higher levels of passion and romance with their partners and a greater feeling of relational attachment. To the contrary, negative schema women reported fewer partners, fewer sexual experiences, an overall aversion to sexual contact, and an avoidance of emotional intimacy. Additionally, negative schema women reported less sexual arousal and higher sexual anxiety than their positive-schema counterparts (Cyranowski & Anderson, 1998).

In their original work, Anderson and Cyranowski (1994) postulated that the possible origins of sexual self-schema are derivative of parental messages of sexuality. Was the child’s developing sexual self received well or shunned? The researchers hypothesized that this experience would develop in a positive or negative schema trajectory; however, no research has been done to investigate this hypothesis.

Limited research has been done on the sexual self-schema model, and researchers have primarily investigated possible relationships between schema and experiences in a woman’s life. Issues under investigation relate to child sexual abuse, health issues, and body image, leading to mixed findings on the hypothesized relationships between positive and negative schema and these concerns (Carpenter, Anderson, Fowler, & Maxwell, 2009; Cash, Maikkula, and Yamamiya, 2004; Niehaus, Jackson, & Davies, 2010).
**Self-Objectification Theory**

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) is a widely known approach to women’s sexuality that also attempts to build the connection between a woman’s culture and her internal cognitive states, thus informing her sexual self-view and sexual well-being. Objectification theory focuses solely on a certain aspect of a woman’s sexuality, body image, and has generated prolific research, standing as the most cited paper in the history of *Psychology of Women Quarterly’s* (Fredrickson, Hendler, Nilsen, O’Barr, & Roberts, 2011).

Specifically, in the literature on body image, self-objectification theory has been a greatly researched approach to understanding women’s internalization of cultural messages. Self-objectification theory claims that a woman’s view of her body is informed by the sexualization of women’s bodies in the media (Fredrickson et al., 1997). Researchers posit that culture-based sexual objectification of women is internalized by women, thus socializing girls to treat themselves as objects to be evaluated by culturally idealized body and appearance standards. This is manifested by increased body consciousness and body surveillance, which leads to increased body shame and anxiety. It is this self-objectifying distress that contributes to psychological experiences of depression, anxiety, disordered eating, and sexual dysfunction (Moradi, 2010).

In the first decade of investigation, the focus of study has been predominantly on Caucasian American college women. In this sample of women, self-objectification researchers have successfully shown a link between cultural objectification of women and body image problems (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Mediational studies have demonstrated that body shame is the factor that mediates the relationship between self-
objectification and eating disorders (Calogero, Davis, & Thompson, 2005) and depressive symptoms (Muehlenkamp, Swanson, & Brausch, 2005).

While the role that objectification theory has on sexuality research is significant, the scope of this theory is narrow in that it includes only media messages of body-sexualization and body image. It is a theory regarding only one aspect of women’s sexual self-views: body image. It is not a theory regarding women’s sexuality and the relationship between her sexual self-views and her culture. The theory however has been shown to consistently identify a relationship between cultural messages and body image. In this area it is significant to find that women do in fact cognitively internalize their cultural messages regarding their self-views.

The Research Problem

Sexual self-schema model and self-objectification theory have demonstrated rigor in advancing feminist constructivist theories of women’s sexuality. They propose that women’s sexual self-views and body image develop through a cognitive internalization of experiences and cultural socializations. Both models postulate that cultural messages become internalized as cognitive perceptions of self that are then related to sexual outcomes. Sexual self-schema theorists hypothesize that early parental influences shape sexual self-schema, yet no research has been done that explores this relationship. Self-objectification theory links sexualized media messages with body image; however, other cultural messages have not been explored and women’s sexuality in general has not been explored.

While many authors have acknowledged that religious teachings play a significant role in women’s sexuality, there is little research that indicates how these messages
impact a woman’s sexual self-views, including the psychological, spiritual, and sexual outcomes. The extent of the literature primarily is large survey-based studies of college men and women and focuses on sexual behavior outcomes with repeated results linking religiosity to sexual restraint and sexual dysfunction (Freitas, 2008; Stevens et al., 2003).

**Purpose of the Study**

The intent of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of how women’s sexual self-views are informed by religious teaching and how the interplay of these messages and women’s experiences are lived sexually, psychologically, and spiritually. The goal of this research was to generate a grounded theory from the data about women’s internalization of religious cultural messages and how this informs their sexual, psychological, and spiritual well-being using the following research questions:

1. How are women’s sexual self-views informed by religious teachings?
2. How is the interplay of religious messages and sexual experiences lived out in women sexually, psychologically, and spiritually?

**Significance of the Study**

As of 2012, there are an estimated 2.3 billion Christians worldwide and 230 million Christians in the United States (http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Global-Christianity-worlds-christian-population.aspx). Research consistently has shown a link between religious messages and women’s sexual dysfunction. It is estimated that 43% of women struggle with sexual dysfunction and that numerous factors such as biology, sexual experiences, and cultural influences play a role in sexual functioning (Laumann, Paik, & Rosen, 1999). Some research has also shown the value that religion and
spirituality play in sexual enrichment. Yet, we know little about how this occurs for women and how women internalize their cultural messages to form their sexuality.

The findings of this study could contribute to the field of counseling as a way of understanding the multifaceted nature of women’s sexuality that extends beyond sexual outcomes and informs us of women’s experiences. The qualitative nature of this study could bring to light the voices of women, transcending the current studies that focus solely on what they do and don’t do sexually. Feminist researchers argue the need for understanding how a woman’s sexual self-views are informed by her cultural messages, yet little research has explored this relationship.

It is proposed here that if we are to understand the essence of how women internalize their culture’s messages to inform their sexual self-views, that it is necessary to examine her experience holistically in a manner including a sexuality that is physical, psychological, and spiritual. In their study of prevalence and predictors of sexual dysfunction in the US, Laumann et al., (1999) found that especially for women, sexual dysfunction was most associated with diminished physical and emotional well-being and low feelings of happiness. Papaharitou, et al. (2005) found that women rarely seek help for sexual issues, yet sexual problems in women are a frequent therapeutic concern seen by counselors (Mintz, Balzer, Zhao, & Busch, 2012). This study could have import through advancing a constructivist perspective that a woman’s sexuality could be related to her psychological and spiritual well-being as well as developing a multi-faceted understanding of the relationship between a woman’s self-views and her culture.
Discussion of Terms

Given the phenomenological nature of this study, the following is a discussion of terms that are relevant to the study. These definitions were not given to the participants, rather, they served as a helpful guide in conducting the interviews and analyzing the data.

Sexuality

According to the World Health Organization, sexual health “is a state of physical, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality” (http://www.who.int/topics/sexual_health/en/). According to Helminiak (1998), “the sexual is a correlate of both the organism and the psyche” (p. 123) which includes physiological and psychological experience. Naus (1987) defined sexuality as “the interpenetration of personal experience and sociocultural context; of body, psyche, and social environment” (p. 37). More recent definitions elaborate on the holistic understanding of the sexual self. According to Timmerman (1992), sexuality encompasses “an entire range of feelings and behaviors which human beings have and use as embodied persons in the world, expressing relationship to themselves and others through look, touch, word, and action . . . it includes the subjective capacity for free and responsive expression of the person, always a bodily, gendered, morally significant response” (p. 9).

McMahon and Campbell (1991) accentuated the communal aspect of sexuality that serves as a conduit of growing into communion and wholeness in and through relationship. They claimed, “both our clinical as well as personal experience lead us to conclude that the key integrating factor in sexuality is not genital expression. Rather it is
the quality of presence to oneself and others, which we will describe as ‘congruence,’ that channels the energy of sexuality toward personal and communal wholeness” (p. 2).

**Sexual Self-Views and Scripts**

Two cognitive theories emerge that identify a definition of sexual self-views that were useful for this study: sexual script theory and self-schema model. A sexual self-view is seen as a cognitive view of oneself as sexual. The developers of Sexual Script Theory (SST; Gagnon & Simon, 1973) posited that a sexual script is the subjective understanding that a person has regarding his or her sexuality that then determines how that person will act on his or her sexual self-understanding. Script emerges from the interaction of three levels of human experience: the cultural scenario, interpersonal experience, and intrapsychic experience (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Sexual scripts are considered unconscious mental schemas that consist of two experiences: behavior and cognitive processing, with the latter referring to the emotions and meanings we attach to our sexual experiences. The creators of SST proposed that a sexual script is a metaphor for how we make meaning of and narrate the story of our sexuality.

Sexual self-schema model (SSSM) is similar to SST in that it is a cognitive theory; however, it differs from SST in that the primary focus is on self-evaluation. While SST includes emotional responses to and meaning making of sexual encounters, SSSM focuses on meaning making of the self as sexual. The focus of SST is on how cognitive processes affect sexual behavior, whereas in SSSM, the focus is on how cognitive processes inform sexual self-views. A sexual self-schema is defined as “cognitive generalizations about sexual aspects of oneself that are derived from past experience,
manifest in current experience, influential in the processing of sexually relevant social information and guide behavior” (Anderson et al., 1994, p. 1079).

**Spirituality**

Definitions of spirituality vary in the literature and often reflect the worldview of the author or relate specifically to the worldview of the people-group under investigation. The primary distinction in existing definitions lies largely in the inclusion or exclusion of a person’s relationship to the Divine or God-person. In reaction to the traditional definition of spirituality that included a Divine relationship, Helminiak (1998) identified a spirituality that is humanistic in nature for those who do not espouse a religious faith yet identify as being spiritual. Helminiak (1998) defined human spirituality as “that dimension of the human mind that makes us self-aware, self-transcending, open-ended, always one step beyond our explicit articulations” (p. 121).

Pargament and Mahoney (2009) captured an understanding of spirituality, which is inclusive of both fields of definition and defined the term “sanctification” as the perception of an aspect of life as having divine character and significance. Mahoney et al. (1999) identified two indices of sanctification: Manifestation of God and Sacred Qualities. Manifestation of God is a spirituality in which God is seen as an active and influential part of life, and Sacred Qualities is a nontheistic experience of spirituality in which one experiences transcendence and value within the self.

Hurding (1995) found that for those who are Christian, they are more inclined to identify their spirituality in view of God’s relational presence in all areas of life. Given the nature of this current study and the interest in understanding how women who are raised in a Western Christian culture experience their sexuality, the definition of
spirituality offered by MacKnee (1997) was useful; in his work with Christian participants, spirituality is defined as, “a core dimension of humanity that seeks to discover meaning, purpose, and connectedness with self, others, and ultimately God” (MacKnee, 1997, p. 234).

**Sex-Spirit Connection**

MacKnee (2002) identified the tendency in recent literature of integrating sexuality and spirituality to be a reflection of a current zeitgeist toward a more holistic approach to human experience. In referencing previous literature, he identified that if humans are to grow spirituality, sexual urges must become integrated with spiritual needs and that “both sexual and spiritual urges originate in the pervading human experience of incompleteness that motivate yearnings for connection and wholeness” (p. 235).

Due to the transcendent nature of sexual and spiritual experience, numerous authors have identified the link between sex and spirit (Helminiak, 1998; Mahoney, 2002; Ogden, 2002; Ogden 2008). For Helminiak (1998), the integration of sexuality and spirituality is a natural harmony of organism, psyche, and spirit, which is nothing more than the integration of the whole human being. For those who identify a faith-based belief of a Divine God, integration of sex and spirit is a union of body and spirit not only within a person and between people, but also the transcendent union of human spirit with God (MacKnee, 2002). MacMahon et al., (1991) identified the sex-spirit connection as essential to healthy development of self and claimed, “the embodied process of congruence which animates healthy sexual integration is precisely the same psychological process that provides the experiential ground of God’s loving presence in us” (p. 22).
Delimitations

The location of this research project occurred in St. Louis, MO. Data collection took place between April 2014 and October 2014. Participants in this study were women over the age of 30 who were raised in a Christian home in the United States in which they regularly heard religious teachings. The delineation of “Christian religion” included the primary Christian denominational affiliations of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox. Participants were women who were currently participating in outpatient therapy, and interviews occurred in a clinical setting in the St. Louis area.
Chapter Two – Literature Review

The story of women’s sexuality has primarily been written in modernity through the voices of historians, sociologists, feminists, and researchers. For sociologists, the focus of attention has been on the culturally based sexual mores and practices of a society and the role that women play within that structure. The principal role of the sociologist has been to describe the experiences of women in their culture (Mead, 1928). For the historian, the history of sex has been an inexhaustible area of study in which sex and sexuality are examined through the lens of political and personal power in a cultural structure (Foucault, 1978).

Psychological researchers have similarly painted a picture of women’s sexuality using large brushstrokes. Large survey-based research that focuses the attention of study on sexual satisfaction, dysfunction, and attitudes and beliefs of women is the most prolific of the research that exists today. Psychological researchers of human sexuality and specifically women’s sexuality continue to focus the lens on sexual behaviors as the indicator of sexuality.

Feminist writers have argued that women’s sexuality encompasses far more than sexual behaviors to include affective, cognitive, relational, and spiritual experiences to form a sexual identity. Sex researcher Ogden (2008) claimed,

Although some 700 sex surveys were conducted in the twentieth century, most of these focused on intercourse, orgasm, performance, and gender stereotypes. None of these surveys focused on issues such as sensitivity, love, intimacy, self-esteem, relationship, commitment, spirituality, safety, empathy, and communication (p. 108).
According to Jordan (1987), “we know next to nothing about the nature of the development of female sexuality” (p. 31).

From a sociocultural cognitive perspective, a woman is believed to construct her sexual identity through the interaction of her self with her environment. Messages from her culture become internalized in her continuing creation of her multi-faceted sexual self. The relationship between self and environment is an ongoing dynamic that not only informs a woman’s sexual self-views, but has been shown in the research to have psychological and physical outcomes (Daniluk, 1993; Fredrickson et al., 1997). To date, little research exists that examines the psychological or spiritual experiences of a woman’s sexual identity. The research that identifies the impact of a woman’s culture on her views of her sexual self is scant.

The cultural influence of religion has universally and predominantly been shown to play a significant role in the sexual attitudes of many cultures. According to Simpson and Ramberg (1992), there exists a “striking link between a highly religious upbringing and sexual dysfunction,” yet in a review of the literature, the authors find a lack of focus regarding this relationship, noting that researchers make generalized statements about how religious beliefs affect sexual attitudes (p. 511).

It has been proposed by historians and researchers alike that the three main Western religions of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism share parallel views of women’s sexuality, which emphasizes sexual restraint by women and likewise suppresses women’s sexual pleasure (Daniluk & Brown, 2008). Historians and researchers have identified that the study of the role of religion in people’s lives cannot be understood as standing alone; it is the interplay of religious teachings within a culture’s social and political order that
result in how religion plays a part in the socialization process (Foucault, 1978; Regnerus, 2007). For the purpose of this study, the Western Christian tradition was the culture under investigation. A brief review of the history of Christian teaching regarding women’s sexuality will be explored.

**Western Christian Tradition and Women’s Sexuality**

In order to understand the current Christian teachings on sexuality, it is necessary to explore the roots and history of such teachings. Christian teachings are based on a worldview that espouses the Christian scripture as spiritual authority. While Christian hermeneutics are varied, there still exists a common understanding that biblical narratives are the framework for belief and practice in the Christian tradition.

As with all religious traditions, the hermeneutical interpretations of Christian scripture are infused with culturally based interpretations. The focus of this review is to examine less the text itself but more a brief history of the religious teachings regarding women’s sexuality that emphasizes sexual restraint and diminishes sexual pleasure. While an exhaustive exploration of the Christian tradition and teachings on women’s sexuality is beyond the scope of this study, it is beneficial first to explore the religious precursors to Christian thought, including the cultural ideology that existed at the time of burgeoning Christian belief.

**Hebrew Tradition.** As Christianity is rooted in Judaism, Christians embrace the Hebrew Scripture as part of their faith. The teachings of Jesus as the Christian Messiah include the belief that he is the fulfillment of the Old Testament Hebrew law. While Christians believe that they are no longer under the rule of Hebrew laws as outlined in the
Old Testament, the laws, as well as the totality of Hebrew Scripture, remain a significant part of Christian heritage and influence.

In Hebrew teachings and tradition, the human experience is seen holistically. As compared to Greek thought in which body and spirit are divided and unrelated, in Hebrew thought, body and spirit are seen as one and each is thought to represent the other (Ranke-Heinemann, 1990). According to McMahon et al., (1991), “the felt sense of some unifying process was far more compelling within Hebrew experience than any abstract distinction between parts and whole” (p. 29). The human experience of body and spirit, in Hebrew belief, are unified, equally valued, and are lived in communion with God and others.

Seen as a natural part of creation, human sexual relations are considered good in Hebrew tradition, yet in the Old Testament Levitical law, they are also considered a source of impurity in need of cleansing rituals (e.g., nocturnal emissions in men and menstruation in women made them unclean and in need of cleansing) (Evans, 2012). Despite the requirements of cleansing, sexual relations were seen as good and sexual eroticism and pleasure were celebrated (Song of Songs, New International Version).

Similar to many ancient cultures, ancient Hebrew society was a patriarchal culture, as reflected in some of the Levitical laws. Legal protections were in place so that women were not abandoned or discriminated against (Genesis 30:1-24; Exodus 20:10); however, women were still considered property of their husbands (Exodus 20:17). Women were not allowed to exercise certain freedoms as that of man; particularly, women could not directly inherit property or pursue divorce (Deuteronomy 21:16; 24:1-
punishments for committing certain offenses, such as adultery, were also heavier for women than for men (Deuteronomy 22:22).

**Greek Culture and Philosophy.** Christianity was born out of the Hebrew tradition, yet Christian practices, beliefs, and scriptural interpretations were greatly influenced by the Greek and Roman culture of the time in which it originated. As opposed to the Hebrew communal approach to life, Greek philosophers focused attention on individualism, control, and the social hierarchical order (Wiesner-Hanks, 2000). Such thought emanated from the philosophers Plato (423bc-348bc) and Aristotle (384bc-322bc) who were particularly suspicious of the power of sexual passion as it distracted men from logic and reason. Platonic, non-sexual relationship was valued far more than the sexual, and an intellectual meeting of the minds was most esteemed.

One of the most significant philosophical contributions of Plato was that of a dualistic mind-body split. He argued that what is unseen such as the mind or spirit is far superior to the material body in which they are imprisoned. This dualistic thought held an ambivalence and even disdain for the human body and sexuality. According to Ranke-Heinemann (1990), “Sexual pessimism in Antiquity is derived, not, as it would be later in Christianity, from the curse of sin and punishment for it, but predominantly from medical considerations . . . the sexual act was thought of as dangerous, hard to control, harmful to health, and draining” (p. 9). This belief held true for men, but not for women, as it was taught that for man, their strength and vitality were spent through the loss of semen (Wiesner-Hanks, 2000).

Plato espoused a gendered view of the mind-body split: man is of spiritual nature and woman is of material nature. He suggested that the feminine refers to someone who
is connected to the world on a bodily level and masculine is someone who has risen to a higher philosophical level (Bar On, 1994). For Plato, the ultimate goal for any person is manliness and the greater one’s femininity, the greater one possesses cowardice (Bar On, 1994). Aristotle, a pupil of Plato, took on an even greater disdain for women and did not believe that women possessed any ideal masculine traits. He described women as having a lack of reason to determine goodness and therefore needed to be obedient to men in order to have virtue (Sealey, 1990). Aristotle considered women as “children who never grew up” (Sealey, 1990, p. 151.)

In his study of the history of sex, Foucault (1978) identified a significant shift regarding sexuality in the first two centuries of the Christian era, rooted in the medical philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Sexual activity, prolific in the Greek culture, became judged with increasing severity by the philosophers and physicians of the time. Based in platonic dualism, two significant philosophies of the ancient Greek world, Stoicism and Gnosticism, highly influential to Roman culture at the time of burgeoning Christianity, promoted a negative view of sex and rejected the pleasure-seeking found in Greek and Roman culture (Ranke-Heinemann, 1990). Gnostics espoused a belief that the body and all matter were wicked and that the only pure thing was the soul. “The body is for the Gnostics the ‘corpse with senses,’ the grave that you carry around with you” (Ranke-Heinemann, 1990, p. 15). Stoics, originating in the Athenian school of Stoa, taught that emotions and pleasure were destructive and needed to be controlled by the higher cognitive function of the human will. For both the Stoic and the Gnostic, sexual relationships were seen as foolish and detrimental to the individual’s intellectual pursuits and to social order. According to Ranke-Heinemann (1990), “while Greek philosophers
in general accorded pleasure-seeking considerable importance for the humane ideal of life, the Stoics, especially during the first two centuries of the Christian era, changed all that” (p. 11). Sexual abstinence became heralded as the ideal and sex within marriage was allowed for the purpose of procreation (Wiesner-Hanks, 2000).

Due to the philosophies of Stoicism and Gnosticism, women in Greek and Roman culture were less esteemed and more denigrated than in Hebrew tradition (Nelson, 1978). Women’s bodies failed to meet the masculine ideal of control and strength. In the stoic view of life, women played a role in the societal necessity of procreation; however, even as Aristotle believed, the male provided the ‘active principle’ of procreation in which women were the vessel (Wiesner-Hanks, 2000, p. 24). According to Torjesen (1995), that which was scorned in women in Greek culture was all that was considered feminine: “Through this gendering of the self, femaleness became the primary symbol for the irrational and uncontrollable. Women could then be labeled irrational, sensual, and dangerous because of the supposed dominance of their ‘lower’ female nature and the weakness of their ‘higher’ masculine self” (p. 181). Similarly, women who possessed more masculine traits of self-control and rationalism were held in higher esteem in the Greco-Roman culture (Wiesner-Hanks, 2000).

As a highly patriarchal society, Greeks and Romans exercised many similar legal dictates as that of the Hebrews, which included distinctions between men and women on what was allowable sexually (e.g., adultery was considered a sexual offense for a woman but not a man) and the level of punishment for what was considered sexual offenses (Wiesner-Hanks, 2000). Yet due to the philosophical denigration of women, Roman law relegated women to a lower class in society than in Hebrew culture. In larger society,
women were not allowed to hold public jobs outside the home and often required escorts to ensure they did not openly engage in public discourse with a man, considered to be lascivious behavior (Ranke-Heinemann, 1990).

**Early Christianity and Sexuality.** Little is mentioned in the New Testament regarding women’s sexuality (Evans, 2012). While Jesus did not speak directly about gendered roles in society, historians and theologians have argued that Jesus consistently promoted the equality of women, which was seen as both revolutionary and disruptive in both the Hebrew and Roman culture in which he taught (Torjesen, 1995). Jesus’ disciples included several women (Luke 8: 1-3), he defied the gendered roles of the time by publicly engaging women as equals (John 4:25; Matthew 9: 20-22), and he publicly criticized the Hebrew and Roman law on the death penalty for women for adultery. (John 8:1-11). The Pauline epistles in the New Testament are marked by ambivalence when it comes to women (Nelson, 1978). On the one hand, Paul proclaimed equality – “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). He revered women in ministry (Romans 16: 1-2) and promoted the work of women outside of the home (Romans 16:3-4). At the same time, in the epistles written by Paul to various new churches in the New Testament, the words of Paul on the relationship of women to men seem to adhere to the patriarchal structure in both Hebrew and Greco-Roman society: “Wives, submit to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife as Christ is 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 5:22-24).
Early Christians developed their own ideas on sexuality from a mix of the teachings of Jesus, the apostle Paul, Hebrew writings, and Greek and Roman philosophies (Wiesner-Hanks, 2000). The Greek thought of masculine superiority mixed with the stoic and gnostic disdain for sexual desire had a significant impact on the early Christian theology regarding women, which led to an openly disdainful view of women in the teachings and writings of early Church fathers (Wiesner-Hanks, 2000). On the impact of Plato’s *Theory of Eternal Forms* on early Christian thought, Holland (2006) explained,

> The very act of conception is viewed as a falling away from the perfection of God into the abysmal world of appearance, of suffering and death . . .

> This dualistic vision of reality denigrated the world of the senses, placing it in an eternal struggle with the achievement of the highest form of knowledge: the knowledge of God. This vision profoundly influenced Christian thinkers in their view of women who literally as well as figuratively embodied what is scorned, mutable, and contemptible (p. 31).

On the impact of this view on early Christianity, Torjesen (1995) claimed,

> Instead of celebrating femaleness as providing a unique avenue of access to God, or seeing in femaleness a profound expression of the divine, Christianity left the traditional cultural meanings of femaleness and female sexuality unchanged. Rationality and self-control retained their masculine cast, while passion, sexuality, and the body are particularly female . . . Woman’s body, since it was a stark proclamation of sexuality,
was not in the image of God; it represented rather the pull of those forces that drew humanity away from God (p. 211).

The intermingling of stoic individualism, gnostic dualism, and female denigration in the Roman culture slowly but inevitably influenced the sexual practices and views of women in early Christian theology. In this same time period in the Roman Empire began the philosophy of asceticism that greatly influenced society’s views on sexuality. Asceticism, originating in Greek culture as a form of rigorous athletic training, was adopted by most major religions as a form of self-denial, marked by the abstinence of material and sensual pleasures (Ranke-Heinemann, 1990). Based in platonic dualism, ascetic theology proclaims the material possessions of the world, especially the body, are in opposition to spiritual holiness and thus needed to be tamed through self-denial and sometimes severely through self-flagellation. Ascetic thought further exacerbated the rejection of women (Ranke-Heinemann, 1990). In Greek life and later in early Christianity, while marriage continued to be esteemed, what began was the high regard for celibacy, particularly the promotion of virginity in Christian women (Wiesner-Hanks, 2000).

By the fourth century, under Constantinian rule, as Christianity first became legal and began to gain political power, ascetic thought spread profusely in Christian teaching (Wiesner-Hanks, 2000). A fundamental aspect of asceticism, the renunciation of sexual desires and a fear of female sexuality, grew more pronounced over time (Ranke-Heinemann, 1990). For women, this time period marks the beginning of overt denigration of their gender and sexuality in the Judeo-Christian tradition. One of the early church fathers, Tertullian (150-240), while himself married, promoted celibacy, as marriage
involved the “commixture of the flesh” and “consists of that which is the essence of fornication” (Tertullian, trans. 1951). On women he proclaimed,

*In pain shall you bring forth children, woman, and you shall turn to your husband and he shall rule over you. And do you not know that you are Eve? God’s sentence still hangs over all your sex and His punishment weighs down upon you. You are the devil’s gateway; you are she who first violated the forbidden tree and broke the law of God. It was you who coaxed your way around him whom the devil had not the force to attack. With what ease you shattered that image of God: Man! Because of the death you merited even the Son of God had to die . . . Woman, you are the gate to hell* (p. 1).

St. Jerome (347-419), the first translator of the Bible into Latin, prized the virtue of women’s virginity by maligning their sexuality, “as long as woman is for birth and children, she is as different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man” (St. Jerome, as cited in Bullough, 1976). Stories of virginal Christian women - who cross-dressed and passed as men and were glorified as being morally superior to other women - spread throughout early Christianity (Wiesner-Hanks, 2000).

Thus, virginity became the paradigm of sanctification for women. According to Ranke-Heinemann (1990), “Christianity did not invent reverence for virginity, which in no way comes from Jesus. Rather, Christians adapted themselves to their environment, and then they dragged the ideal of virginity all the way into the twentieth century” (p. 47).
For Augustine (354-430), bishop of Hippo, whose teachings remain a fundamental influence on modern Christianity, his disdain for his own sexual desires greatly influenced his teachings on sex and women. Sexual desire was sinful and women were considered intellectually, morally, and physically inferior. He claimed, “the body of a man is as superior to that of a woman as the soul is to the body” (Augustine, as cited in Boswell, 1981). Through Jerome and Augustine, sexual rules within marriage were dictated and spiritualized in order to diminish sexual desire and thus sinfulness (Wiesner-Hanks, 2000). According to Jerome, “every too ardent lover of his own wife is an adulterer” (St. Jerome, as cited in Brundage, 1987). It is clear that the stoic and dualistic philosophies eight centuries prior remained culturally alive and well.

**Christian Teachings in the United States.** In summarizing the long-lasting effects of religious, medical, and political teachings on sexuality that continue today, Wiesner-Hanks (2000) stressed the powerful influence of institutions both secular and religious in regulating the sexuality of their people as a form of cultural preservation. Yet the burden of such regulation rests primarily on the shoulders of women. According to Wiesner-Hanks (2000), “Undisciplined sexuality in both men and women was portrayed from the pulpit and press as a threat to Christian order, but it was women’s lack of discipline that was most often punished” (p. 257). Women’s conduct and character become most scrutinized in stringent efforts to keep them pure so as to not dangerously tempt the passions of men.

In current Christian teachings in the U.S., from an early age, young women are given rigorous training on maintaining their purity as “brides of Christ” (Regnerus, 2007, p. 19). One highly influential organization, The Institute in Basic Life Principles (IBLP),
begun in the early 1970’s by Bill Gothard, has provided intensive week-long workshops (attended by thousands of youth and their parents at a time) and manuals for teens on how to find success by following biblical principles (Gothard, 1979). Often focusing on sexual practices, young girls are given prolific instructions on how to be pure and how not to entice men sexually. For girls, the burden of carrying the responsibility for men’s sexuality is overtly given to her to carry. For example, one of many directives given by the IBLP for girls is the need to wear necklaces that are no longer than 16 inches in length so as to not draw attention to her breasts (Gothard, 1979).

For young Christian men and women, the provision of sexual education rests on the promotion of abstinence to the neglect of equipping teens with sexual knowledge (Regnerus, 2007). For teens and adults who are not married much instruction is given to sexual restriction. According to Regnerus (2007), “Sexuality is the perennial subject of interest and the topic of numerous books, typically on how to resist sexual temptation, or – failing that – how to restore a sense of sexual purity. Most of these books are not educational, but rather assume readers’ extensive sexual knowledge” (p. 22).

Christian men and women find themselves carrying a burden of responsibility while lacking necessary guidance and help from their faith community for navigating the world of sexual development. The message given is that sexual desires are dangerous for men, that women do not have sexual desires as do men, and that the danger is localized in women’s power to stimulate men’s desires. One popular Christian parenting book reminds readers, “from early childhood, [girls’] fantasies are of Prince Charming and motherhood, not sex. . . a boy’s sex drive . . . may be the strongest driving force in his mind. While girls may have an increase in libido, their thoughts are about nonsexual
socialization, dating, fun, parties, holding hands, and maybe kissing . . . Every mother . . . should teach her daughter what boys are like” (Lahaye, 1998, pp. 161-170). Current Christian authors note that the emphasis on sexual abstinence, purity, and gender differences for young girls combined with the exaltation of a someday blissful sexual marriage is the making of a deeply ingrained sexual anxiety and shame regarding her sexual desires (Winner, 2005). According to McMinn (2000), “women bring inhibitions into their marriages that emerged from broken images and experiences with their sexuality. When the idea that good girls don’t like sex is combined with the commitment to say ‘No, No, No,’ before marriage, it is hard for some to say ‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’ after marriage” (p. 167).

Primarily due to the influence of the Protestant Reformation, celibacy became less the pious ideal that it once was, while the reverse mandate has taken its place in Western Christianity - to exalt heterosexual marriage in order to flee sexual sin and temptation (Wiesner-Hanks, 2000). For women, this mandate becomes particularly burdensome as it relates to her gender role expectations and sexuality. This responsibility of sexuality often becomes communicated as hers to carry, not only for herself, but for her husband. Once married, women then become instructed through teachings, sermons, and books on how to make themselves sexually available and pleasing to their husbands, lest he be tempted by another. Driscoll, an influential mega-church pastor in Seattle who has written and spoken extensively on what he refers to as a woman’s biblical mandate to please her husband sexually, has preached,

*It is not uncommon to meet pastors’ wives’ who really let themselves go; they sometimes feel that because their husband is a pastor,*
he is therefore trapped into fidelity, which gives them cause for laziness. A wife who lets herself go and is not sexually available to her husband in the ways that the Song of Songs is so frank about is not responsible for her husband’s sin, but she may not be helping him either (http://www.huffingtonpost.com).

Similarly, Peace (1995) instructs women in The Excellent Wife to make themselves sexually pleasing to their husbands, proclaiming that “the husband should be so satisfied that even if another woman entices him, he won’t be tempted” (p. 121). In sharing a number of women’s stories of harmful messages from the Church, Evans (2012) exposes the frequent misuse of biblical texts by preachers who prescribe sex and beauty mandates on women as the command of God,

Upon reaching her wedding night, a Christian woman is expected to transform from the model of chastity into a veritable sex goddess, ready to honor God by satisfying her husband’s sexual needs without fail. I was told that, according to 1 Corinthians 7:4, I had no authority over my own body, but was responsible for yielding it entirely to my husband, who needed regular sex in order to remain faithful to me (p. 103).

While the discrepancies and burdens placed on Christian women’s sexuality today have yet to be greatly disputed, the primary debate within Evangelicalism has been over the role of women in the Church and in the marriage relationship (Evans, 2012). A cornerstone of most religious teachings on women, primarily since the 1970’s in the US, has been the promotion of male authority over women. Believing Pauline instruction from the New Testament teaches that women should be under the authority of men in
Church, the home, and society and fueled by the feminist movement’s advocacy to advance women’s equality in society, the response of many Church leaders in the past five decades has been to pronounce more vocally their position on male authority. A collection of essays written by conservative Church leaders and edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (1991), *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, has served as the framework in conservative Protestantism for interpreting the New Testament passages written by the apostle Paul on the role of women in the Church and home. While the authors confront traditional teachings on the denigration of women and claim equal value of male and female gender, their position has been to promote the long-standing position of the Evangelical Church on the submission of women to men’s authority, particularly as it pertains to Church order and the marriage relationship.

Since publication of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (1991), the authors and editors have been referenced by numerous writers and pastors, advocating for gendered hierarchy in the Church and have written and spoken extensively on this topic (Evans, 2012). They have expanded their position to define in detail what is and is not appropriate leadership for women. In a recent podcast titled “Do You Use Bible Commentaries Written by Women,” Piper (2013) articulated that it is biblically okay to read a commentary written by a woman, but it is not biblically okay, as a man, to listen to her teach from it in person. He references that it is authoritatively not comfortable for his eyes to gaze upon her when she is teaching. According to Piper, the role of a city planner is appropriate for a woman because she exercises authority from behind a desk in an office, while a woman teacher stands before
him, making him aware of his own manhood and her womanhood. He endorses women’s commentaries on the Bible because they are “indirect” and “impersonal” venues of influence. “A book,” he adds, “puts [the woman] out of my sight and in a sense takes away a dimension of her female personhood,” where “she is not looking and me and confronting me and authoritatively directing me as a man.”

It has only been in recent years through the public sphere of internet blogging that women’s and men’s voices of dissent have begun to be heard and engaged (http://www.rachelheldevans.com). Piper’s podcast (2013) has received significant response and discourse in the Evangelical blogging world. One such Christian writer responded in the online article, “Hey John Piper, Is My Femininity Showing,”

    Piper's affirmation, consequently, of women who teach indirectly and impersonally shows his overt rejection of and implicit obsession with women's bodies. He makes it seem impossible that a man could listen to a woman's biblical insights in her presence without being distracted by her femininity. Although Piper would likely condemn the pervasive plastering of sexualized images of women on television, magazine covers, and billboards, his resolve to hide their bodies perpetuates, rather than challenges, their objectification. It teaches men to fixate on women's bodies (http://www.christianitytoday.com).

The dichotomous, de-sexualized thinking of stoicism and platonic dualism finds itself embedded in Western Christian culture which separates mind from body, sexuality from spirituality, and for women, the actual removal of her body from the gaze of men.
Through online blogging, articles, and organizations, women’s voices are gaining recognition within the world of evangelicalism by subverting the denial of the podium or pulpit, which had previously kept them out of the sphere of influence. There is even an online organization for those recovering from the teachings of Bill Gothard and the IBLP in which personal stories are shared exposing the destructive effects of their teachings (http://www.recoveringgrace.org). Providing a source of support and online presence, **Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE)**, offers resources, conferences, and links to ministries that promote gender equality within evangelicalism, serving as an avenue for healing and reclaiming what they believe to be a biblical view of the equality of women (http://www.cbeinternational.org).

**The Psychology of Women’s Sexuality**

“Sexuality, defined as the constitution or life of the individual as related to ‘sex’ or the possession or exercise of sexual functions, desires, etc., first appeared in English as late as 1800, and its use signaled the beginning of modern sexuality” (Wiesner-Hanks, 2000, p. 3)

It was not until the 20th century in Western culture that the study of sexuality began. It was physicians who governed the early study of sexuality and strongly connected sexuality with biology and physiology. Likewise, physicians possessed the authority as expert to regulate the moral codes of sexual practices (Bullough, 1998).

**Kinsey.** In order to gain greater understanding of sexual practices in the development of sexual education standards, Alfred Kinsey, a biologist from Harvard, was appointed by the Committee for Research in the Problems of Sex to conduct a nationwide sex-survey study in the 1940’s and 1950’s. Following a medical model of sex research,
Kinsey evaluated human sexual behavior according to the attainment of orgasm. Over 10,000 men and women were recruited nationally to participate in interviews and complete questionnaires regarding their sexual practices, attitudes and orientation.

Kinsey and his colleagues found that 75% of women in the study had experienced orgasm within the first year of marriage. While seen as concerning by today’s standards, at the time, this was considered particularly controversial and was interpreted to reveal that women were highly sexual. Seen as a contributing to the burgeoning sexual revolution, Kinsey’s reports identified that women and men were more similar in sexual behaviors and attitudes than originally believed. Kinsey also found that men and women’s sexuality seemed to be shaped by social and cultural forces more than had been considered prior. Kinsey identified that women, in particular, raised in more religious homes were negatively impacted in their ability to experience pleasure (Bullough, 1996).

Masters and Johnson. In their landmark US sex studies that spanned the course of 11 years, William Masters and Virginia Johnson (1966) studied sexual problems and developed a classification of sexual dysfunction. Based in St. Louis, MO, the researchers observed through the use of a one-way mirror, sexual intercourse and masturbation practices of 382 women and 312 men in order to understand the physiology and psychology of sexual behavior. The vast majority of participants were Caucasian, married couples who had higher levels of education.

The focus of their research rested primarily in the study of arousal and patterns of orgasm. Masters and Johnson (1966) distinguished a 4-phase sexual response cycle (excitement, plateau, orgasm, and resolution) that has remained a model for how sexual responses are believed to occur. Similar to Kinsey, the researchers promoted a heightened
sexuality in women that had not been previously recognized, even identifying that women, contrary to men, had greater capacity to achieve multiple orgasms during sexual intercourse.

While advancing the study of sexual science, it has been argued that the focus of physiological outcomes to the neglect of emotional experience in the work of Masters and Johnson (1966, 1970) is not a complete picture of human sexuality. According to Snarch (1991), “It is purely a physiological model without space for phenomenological experience. While Masters and Johnson addressed people’s feelings in their treatment approach, these are conspicuously absent from their model of human function and dysfunction” (p. 15).

In their evaluation of sexual dysfunction, Masters and Johnson (1970) analyzed the role of religious upbringing in relation to sexual arousal, orgasm, and satisfaction and proclaimed that strict religious up bringings in Judaism, Catholicism, and Protestantism were related to sexual dysfunctions, including erectile dysfunction and vaginismus. The authors identified that the severely antisexual attitudes in parenting were more to blame that the religious beliefs per se (Simpson & Ramberg, 1992).

**Current Research Studies.** In more recent literature on women’s sexuality, researchers tend to examine either women’s attitudes and beliefs about sexual issues or to focus on prevalence and predictors of sexual dysfunction experienced in women. Feminist researchers have argued that in the research, the study of women’s sexuality has been usurped through “male-dominated sex-survey data” that equates female sexuality with male sexuality (Ogden, 2008, p. 112). They claim that current research continues to center on women’s sexual behaviors, to the neglect of the myriad of complexities that
make up a women’s sexuality. There is some research, however, that is beginning to examine women’s sexual functioning in relation to their emotional and relational well-being as well as taking into account her history of experiences.

The major findings in the research of women’s sexual functioning, nevertheless, are alarming in that women, significantly more than men, often lack sexual desire, experience infrequent orgasms, and identify having significant sexual dysfunction. It is clear from the literature that there is alarm, especially as women age, that sex and sexuality impact the health and emotional concerns of women – which may account for a lower quality of life.

Based at the University of Chicago, Laumann et al., (1999) conducted a National Health and Social Life Survey on prevalence and predictors of sexual dysfunction in the US. Of the 1410 men and 1749 women between the ages of 18 and 59 years old that were surveyed, the researchers found that 43% of women – as opposed to 31 percent of men suffered from sexual dysfunction. In the study, items of sexual dysfunction were indexed in 7 categories: (1) low desire; (2) arousal problems (erection problems in men, lubrication difficulty in women); (3) inability achieving climax or ejaculation; (4) anxiety about sexual performance; (5) climaxing or ejaculating too rapidly; (6) physical pain during intercourse; and (7) not finding sex pleasurable.

Age and educational level were most associated with sexual dysfunction. Men and women with higher levels of education experienced significantly fewer sexual problems overall. Women’s increasing age was related overall to fewer sexual problems, whereas for men, older men had significantly more problems with erection and desire for sex. For women, all categories of sexual dysfunction were related to low feelings of physical and
emotional satisfaction and feelings of unhappiness. The researchers identified that “sexual dysfunction is generally associated with poor quality of life; however, these negative outcomes appear to be more extensive and possibly more severe for women than men” (p. 542). The authors gave warning that this strong association between sexual dysfunction and quality of life, especially for women, warrants recognition as a significant public health concern.

Bancroft, Loftus, and Long (2003) conducted a US national survey examining the prevalence and determinants of sexual distress in women. Sexual distress was assessed by the use of 2 questions, (a) “During the past 4 weeks, how much distress or worry has your sexual relationship caused you?” (b) “During the past 4 weeks, how much distress or worry has your sexuality caused you?” (p. 196). Using random telephone digit dialing from a national sampling frame, the authors surveyed 987 women, based on inclusionary criteria of race (White and African American women), age (20-65 years), and relationship status (living at least for the past 6 months in a heterosexual relationship), and examined predictors of distress about sex.

Approximately 25% of the women surveyed reported marked distress about their sexuality, sexual relationship, or both. Thirty-one percent indicated slight distress about either or both, and 44% reported no distress of any kind. The authors found the greatest predictor of both sexual distress measures was overall mental health and emotional well-being. Women who indicated higher levels of depression, emotional problems, and general unhappiness were found to more often identify sexual distress. For the women, other predictors of sexual distress were problems of arousal, vaginal lubrication, and orgasm. The researchers found that for age, older women reported higher levels of
distress about their own sexuality than younger women, and younger women reported
greater distress about their sexual relationship than their older counterparts.

In a mixed-methods research design to develop the Female Sexual Well-Being
Scale (FSWB Scale), Rosen et al. (2009) interviewed 332 women, aged 21-72 years, to
determine factors related to sexual well-being. From the qualitative portion of the study,
including 12 focus groups and 16 detailed interviews, the authors developed a 17-item
scale of four domains deemed to be related to sexual well-being for women: interpersonal
domain (quality of intimate relationships), cognitive-emotional domain, physical arousal
domain, and orgasm-satisfaction domain. Of interest in the findings was the effect of age
on the four domains. Women were grouped into three categories according to age: 21-
35; 36-50; and 51-72. Women in the middle age range scored lower than their younger
and older counterparts for interpersonal well-being, meaning they experienced less
satisfaction in their interpersonal relationships, which the authors suspected could be
related to perimenopause/menopause. Scores for the physical arousal domain decreased
significantly with increasing age. Cognitive-emotional well-being decreased significantly
with increasing age, while orgasm-satisfaction remained unchanged by age.

In a review of the literature since 2003 on women’s sexual dysfunction that
included arousal disorder, desire disorder, and orgasmic disorder, Brotto, Bitzer, Laan,
Leiblum, and Luria (2010) found that approximately 20-30% of women reported desire
disorder and 10-30% of women reported arousal disorder, based on the DSM-IV criteria
for both disorders. The researchers noted, however, that when sexual distress is taken into
consideration, those numbers decrease by half for both disorders, indicating that factors
of sexual satisfaction need to be considered as distinct from such disorders.
The authors acknowledged that in assessing women’s sexual complaints, it is necessary to evaluate the many factors that are related to a woman’s sexuality. They identified that a strong and clear relationship from the research exists between sexual problems for women and anxiety, depression, poor self-image, and a history of sexual trauma. Based on these findings, the authors recommended that certain factors need to be considered when evaluating a woman’s sexual well-being: biological (illness, hormones, drug treatment), psychosexual (sexual abuse, assault, attachment, coping resources, affective disorders), and contextual factors (ethnic/religious/cultural messages, socioeconomic status, social support). Of interest, the authors identified that few studies have explored the relationship between ethnic/religious/cultural messages and a woman’s sexuality, yet advocated that this relationship exists and needs to be further studied and evaluated as a predictive factor of women’s sexual well-being.

**Religion and Sexuality**

It is evident that sex researchers are beginning to recognize that a woman’s sexuality cannot be seen as isolated from her experiences, emotions, beliefs, relationships, and culture (Brotto, et al., 2010; Ogden, 2008). While researchers acknowledge a greater need to identify the many influences on a woman’s sexual well-being, the majority of the research examines how cultural messages affect attitudes and beliefs regarding sexual issues and sexual behavior. The research on the role of religion and religiosity in shaping attitudes and outcomes is profuse in the field of sexology (Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005); however, this is primarily located in studies of college-aged populations. Repeated studies are yielding similar findings of the
influence that religious messages have particularly on sexual restraint and feelings of guilt.

**College students’ behaviors and attitudes.** An abundance of literature exists that identifies the prohibitive view religiosity has on premarital sex and sexual behaviors and attitudes in the high school and college-aged populations. In a review of the literature, Murray-Swank, et al. (2005) found that 40 out of 46 studies of the relationship between religiousness and sexual attitudes and behaviors showed greater religiousness was linked with less premarital sexual activity. It appears from the literature that this connection is not limited to students in the US, since similar findings have been shown in South African students (Nicholas & Durrheim, 1995), New Zealand students (Paul, Fitzjohn, Eberhart-Phillips, Herbison, & Dickson, 2000), and Euro-Canadian and East Asian college-aged women (Woo, Morshedian, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2012).

Several studies of adolescent and college students stand out as noteworthy in that they expand the scope of study to include affective and spiritual experiences related to young adults and sexuality that go beyond behaviors. Regnerus (2007), in his in-depth mixed method study of sex and religion in the lives of American teens, claimed that, “religion – together with peers, parents, and the media – remains a primary socialization agent of children and adolescents” (p. 6). In analyzing data from four major national data sets from the 2000’s and interviewing 6 American adolescents, Regnerus (2007) has painted a picture of the overall nature of American teens, religion, and sexual activity. The major findings from his research include: (1) Religiosity, more so than religious association, influences teen sexual decision-making; (2) very religious parents talk to their children less about sex and more about morality; (3) religion affects teens sexual
attitudes more than their sexual behavior; and (4) while not ultimately successful, pledging abstinence does tend to delay sexual activity.

Similar to the examinations made by historians in the field of sexology, Regnerus (2007) asserted, religion, alone, does not capture the complexity of religious socialization of sexuality. He argued that the role of religion on sexuality must be seen in relationship to the other aspects of cultural influence and how they all work together in socialization. It is not simply the institution of the Church that has direct influence on a child’s socialization, but it is also how religious messages are used by other authorities in a child’s life that shapes the child. For example, religion has been shown to shape parenting styles (Bartkowski & Ellison, 1995), and formal governing bodies have historically adopted and instituted behavioral guidelines based on religious teachings (Foucault, 1977).

In a study of 205 college students, Leftkowitz, Gillen, Shearer, and Boone (2004) identified that religion and religious devotion was a significant predictor of sexual behavior. They found religious students who attended religious services weekly and adhered to their religion’s doctrine were more sexually abstinent and had fewer lifetime sexual partners than those who identified themselves as religious and attended services infrequently or were non-religious. Contrary to their prediction, there were no associations for age of first sexual intercourse with religiosity; for those who have engaged in sex, religious and non-religious youth engaged in first sexual encounters at similar ages.

Woo, Morshedian, Brotto, and Goorzalka (2012), in a study of 539 Euro-Canadian (EC) and East Asian (EA) college-aged women, found that sex guilt mediated
the relationship between religiosity and sexual desire. Researchers were interested in examining the role of sex guilt in explaining the relationship between religiosity and sexual desire, as well as understanding the role that ethnicity played in relation to sex guilt and desire. The authors predicted that sex guilt may mediate the relationship between religiosity and sexual desire more strongly among the East Asian group than their Euro-Canadian counterparts.

Participants were recruited from a large Canadian university, resulting in 178 Euro-Canadian women and 361 East-Asian women who participated. The predominant religious affiliation for all participants was Christian (42% EC, 35% EA). Judaism was the second most frequent for Euro-Canadians (7.6%) and Buddhism second for East Asians (19.3%). The authors identified varying domains of religiosity in their subjects to include intrinsic religiosity, spirituality, and religious fundamentalism. They identified intrinsic religiosity as the self-identified value of religion in one’s daily life, spirituality as the intrinsic experience of the divine in one’s life, and fundamentalism as the belief that there is one correct religious doctrine to be followed. East Asians were found to score higher than Euro-Canadians on all levels of religiosity and to experience greater sex guilt and less sexual desire than Euro-Canadians. For East Asians, the researchers found that sex guilt mediated the relationship between sexual desire on all three domains of religiosity (intrinsic, spirituality, and fundamentalism). For Euro-Canadians, sex guilt mediated the relationship of desire for spirituality and fundamentalism but not intrinsic religiosity. For both groups, the more religious one was, the greater she experienced sex guilt and a lack of sexual desire.
It is clear from these studies that religiosity is related to beliefs regarding premarital sexual restriction which is then related to experiences of guilt for adolescent and college-aged subjects. It is difficult though to see from these studies, if this experience would extend into adulthood. As premarital sex is shown to be taboo in Christian socialization and the college-aged students identified as unmarried, this leaves us then with the question of whether sex guilt would be experienced in the adult population of those who identify as religious.

It is also unclear from the literature if sex guilt or sexual restriction is considered a negative experience or as having negative or positive outcomes for this population, as levels of distress or sexual well-being was not examined in this literature. Researchers have shown the value of religious beliefs in this population as related to an aversion to high-risk sexual behaviors (Murray, Ciarrocchi, & Murray-Swank, 2007) and a valuing of the sacredness of sexuality compared to their non-religious counterparts (Freitas, 2008). While attitudes and beliefs are examined extensively in the literature, we are left unsure regarding the impact that such beliefs have on an individual’s sexual well-being.

**Adult behaviors and attitudes.** As compared to the magnitude of sex studies of adolescent and college-aged populations, there are fewer studies in which adult sexuality is examined, let alone the role that culture has in shaping the adult person’s sexuality. A few studies exist that specifically examine the influence of religiosity on adult sexuality. According to McFarland, Uecker, and Regnerus (2011), “studies of religion and sex among adults are rare and have tended to focus primarily on retrospective accounts of premarital or extramarital sexual behavior” (p. 298).
Based on pooled samples of the General Social Survey from 1993 – 2002, of 1,166 white and African American adults, Barken (2006) found that for never-married adults “religiosity has a consistent, fairly strong, and statistically significant deterrent effect on the number of sexual partners” (p. 414). She indicated, almost half of the effect in the study was accounted for by the belief that premarital sex is wrong.

In a study of 805 adult women, Davidson, Darling, and Norton (1995) sought to ascertain the relationship between religiosity and the sexual behaviors and sexual satisfaction of women. In this study, religiosity was measured by frequency of church attendance (ranging from none to weekly), and participants were female professional nurses recruited nationally. The researchers found no differences on sexual satisfaction and masturbation practice between groups based on church attendance. Differences were found related to age of first sexual intercourse; those women who attended church more frequently reported a later age of first sexual intercourse. Those with greater church frequency were more likely to have never had sexual intercourse, which is consistent with studies of younger populations that religiosity is related to sexual abstinence for those who are not married. Of particular interest in this study was that no difference in frequency of masturbation was found between groups, yet women who attended church more often demonstrated stronger beliefs that masturbation is a sin and experienced greater guilt regarding their practice of masturbation.

When looking at the role of religiosity in relation to sexual satisfaction, some studies have consistently found a positive and beneficial relationship between religious devotion and sexual pleasure in couples who identify as devoutly Christian. Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) identified Evangelical Protestants as reporting the
highest frequency of sex and the highest level of satisfaction with sex as compared to all other religious and non-religious affiliates. The authors also found, even after marriage, religion can shape sexual behavior and attitudes. As compared to nonreligious adults, religious adults were less likely to masturbate, think about sex, have oral and anal sex or have multiple partners.

In a study of 3,005 adults over the age of 50, McFarland et al. (2011) examined the role of religion in shaping sexual frequency and satisfaction for married and unmarried older adults. Religion was considered in two dimensions: religious attendance (ranging from never to several times a week) and religious integration in daily life (religious beliefs carrying into all areas of life). The researchers found, for married adults, both factors of religiosity were unrelated to sexual frequency, yet a positive, but weak, association was found between religious integration in daily life and pleasure from sex as compared to non-religious adults. For unmarried adults, religious integration showed a negative relationship on sexual activity for women but not men. This indicates that religiously integrated older unmarried women abstained more from sexual intercourse than religious men and their non-religious counterparts. This is consistent with other research that indicates a gender difference for adults and sexual activity; adult women are more consistently shown in the research to maintain sexual abstinence and hold more sexually conservative views than adult men (Waite, Laumann, Das, & Schumm, 2009).

In a phenomenological analysis, MacKnee (2002) explored the meaning and experience of “profound sexual and spiritual encounters” (p. 234) in 5 women and 5 men who identified as practicing Christians. Inclusionary criteria consisted of self-identification as a practicing Christian and having had a profound experience in which a
sexual and spiritual connection had occurred, defined as an event in which “sexual arousal and orgasm was simultaneously experienced with the presence of God” (p. 236). Of the participants, one was single who described her sexual encounters as alone, without self-stimulation, with God. The remaining participants were heterosexually married for an average of 17.3 years. All participants identified as having had at least three peak encounters, while six participants reported fairly regular and frequent peak sexual encounters.

The researcher found that participant sexual experiences in relationship were profoundly impacted by their Christian beliefs and contributed to peak sexual-spiritual encounters. Seventeen themes emerged from the data that were categorized into two phases: descriptive and aftereffects. For participants, predominant descriptions of their peak sexual-spiritual encounters were experiences of wonder, emotional cleansing, euphoria, intense physical arousal, transcendence, holistic involvement, sense of blessing, mystery, and sense of sacredness and worship. The aftereffects were predominantly transformation and healing, empowerment and purpose, passionate awareness and connection, affirmation of Godly beliefs, great gratefulness and sense of gender equality. According to MacKnee (2002), “God’s presence during sexual intimacy enabled the body, soul, and spirit to celebrate ecstatic union collectively in elevated responsiveness” (p. 234). The aftereffects of these experiences were reported to instill in each individual and couple relational and spiritual empowerment, affirmation, and transformation.

The role of religion and religiosity in the sexual lives of adults is not widely reported in the literature. It is clear from the research that the belief in sexual abstinence before marriage persists in the adult population and that sexual intercourse occurs less in
unmarried religious women than non-religious. There is some research indicating that in those who identify as Christian, religious beliefs can have an empowering effect on spiritual, sexual, and relational growth. It appears from the literature that the role of religious belief on sexuality can be experienced in positive and enriching ways, but can also create conflicts and difficulties within a person, yet how this occurs remains unclear.

**Studies of Women’s Sexuality and Religion/Spirituality**

The richness of the relationship between religious socialization and women’s sexuality has been found in the feminist literature on sexuality and spirituality in women who were socialized in a religious tradition. In an attempt to reconcile the conflicts and difficulties that women experience between their sexual selves and their Western Christian tradition, several feminist researchers have qualitatively examined the relationship between sexuality and spirituality in these women. The research indicates, for women raised in a Western Christian tradition, they have experienced significant difficulty in integrating sexuality and spirituality.

In a qualitative study of the interaction between Christian women’s sexuality and spirituality, Mahoney (2008) conducted semi-structured interviews with ten Caucasian, middle-aged women. Seven of the women were raised Roman Catholic and three were raised Protestant (Methodist, Congregational, and Baptist). While the researcher identified that she had conducted a study “to explore the interaction between Christian women’s sexuality and spirituality and the impact of sex-negative messages of sexual and spiritual development of 10 Caucasian, middle-aged Christian women” (p. 89), most of the women in the study did not currently identify as Christian. Interestingly, of the ten women she interviewed, four identified their sexual orientation as bi-sexual, three as
heterosexual, and three as lesbian. Nine of the women were married at least once, four were married more than once, and one was married five times. Mahoney (2008) claimed to have sought participants who self-identified as having integrated their sexuality with their spirituality in an effort by the researcher to explore how Christian beliefs influence sexual and spiritual development as well as how they integrated their sexuality and spirituality.

In the study, Mahoney (2008) was surprised to discover that none of the women had actually been able to successfully integrate their sexuality with their spirituality, finding that Christian women face difficulties in their ability to integrate their sexuality and spirituality due to the sex-negative messages inherent in religious teachings. Referring to the religious teachings of sexual restraint, Mahoney claimed, “Many Christian women have grown up with the message that they can be spiritual, but not sexual or they can be sexual, but not spiritual. They cannot be both simultaneously” (p. 91).

Mahoney found, for most of the women this dissonance between sex and spirit “created psychological discomfort, which led participants to seek different ways of reducing the conflict” (p. 96). She articulated, for the women raised in a Christian Western tradition, they felt ill-prepared for the sexual challenges of adolescence and adulthood. Similar in their upbringing was a silence about sex, an often-chaotic home environment and a history of traumatic sexual experiences. The main finding from this study was that the primary way of coping for these women was to disconnect their sexual and spiritual selves. The author found the disconnection to originate in adolescence when the women began to notice that their sexual behavior was inconsistent with their
Christian religious teachings. Most of the women had not been aware of the dissonance they experienced between sexuality and spirituality, nor could they articulate how they would be able to resolve the conflict that they experience.

Mahoney argued, there is greater need to advance the integration of spirituality and sexuality in order to bring healing to the disconnected self. From her findings, she recommended that clinicians become more aware of the role that religious teachings have in women presenting with problems of sexual dysfunction and desire.

In response to the dearth of studies that explore the spiritual meanings of sex, Ogden (2002) conducted a large national survey of the relationship between sexuality and spirituality in 3,810 adults, 82% of which were women. Women’s ages in the study ranged from 18 to 86, and most women (82%) were Caucasian. Seventy-one percent of the women were raised Catholic or Protestant; however only 37% continued to practice those religions. Two-thirds of the women had obtained a college degree, 58% identified themselves as politically liberal, and 80% identified as pro-choice.

Ogden (2002) found the primary resistance women had to integrating sex and spirit was due to the negative sexual experiences they have encountered in their lives. Negative sexual experiences with partners that were painful and humiliating and/or traumatic abusive experiences left women feeling fear, shame, and guilt regarding their sexuality. Of the women studied, 32% reported sexual desire as a source of guilt, 28% claimed their bodies had been a source of shame, and 9% deemed it sacrilegious to talk about sex and spirituality together.

Ogden (2002) identified that sex-spirit dualities found in Western culture as a whole, combined with religious teachings that predominantly focus on the sins of
sexuality, fueled their distress and led them to believe it was impossible to reconcile being ‘good’ with being sexual (p. 114). For many participants, the Christian teaching on the sacredness of sex seemed an unobtainable goal that left them feeling even greater shame, guilt and disenfranchisement. The religious dichotomous script of the Madonna who is virgin and pure and the whore who is sexually active dictated how they viewed themselves. Ogden (2002) found, for many women, they reconciled their sexual and spiritual conflicts through blaming themselves as being inadequate and dysfunctional, instead of naming their harmful experiences and their cultural messages as playing a pivotal role in their sexual shame.

Daniluk (1993), in a phenomenological analysis of women’s sexuality, interviewed ten women in a group format and included herself as a researcher-participant. Inclusion criteria was an ability by the women to articulate their sexuality and a willingness to commit to attend all group meetings. The women were recruited through word-of-mouth by the researcher, all were Caucasian, “well-educated,” and their ages ranged from 30 to 66 years. Seven of the women were not married, five women had children, and eight of the women identified as heterosexual.

The women met for 3 hours, once a week, for 11 weeks, all participating each week, save two who each missed a week. In an open format, all women shared their sexual histories with one another in response to the research question, “How do women experience their sexuality, and what meanings are associated with these experiences” (p. 55).

Daniluk (1993) identified four primary contextual sources that defined and disenabled women from constructing their experience of sexuality: the institution of
medicine, organized religion, sexual violence, and media standards of the idealized female. The author found that the negative view of women and female sexuality espoused by these influences left the women with pervasive feelings of inadequacy, shame, and self-blame that “served to impair and thwart their emotional and sexual development” (p. 65). Based on the cultural messages from these identified sources, all of the women were left feeling that “to be female, as defined by our culture, is to be unworthy, flawed, and somehow deficient” (p. 66).

Regarding the influence of religion for these women, Daniluk (1993) uncovered, “a major source of the women’s experiences of their sexuality were traditional religious attitudes and the pervasive belief underlying many religions: That of Woman Being Viewed as Undeveloped Man – defective and deficient” (p. 59). Overall, the women expressed a view of God that was punishing and shaming towards their sexual desire and expression: a view of God as an angry battering father, and a view of self as the whore who was sexual and bad in God’s eyes. Daniluk (1993) found for all of the women a belief that the antidote for their feminine shame is not a non-gendered spirituality but a female-centered spirituality in which the feminine is celebrated rather than denigrated.

**Application to Current Problem**

Researchers have begun to explore how women’s sexuality and spirituality are informed by the interplay of experiences and cultural messages in a Western culture. Western religious messages have been identified as one of the predominant influences on how a woman constructs her sexual self-views. What has emerged from the literature is a consistent finding that feminine shame is the pervasive experience in these women, resulting in self-identified feelings of low self-worth, gender inferiority, and shame for
being sexual. This has resulted in unhelpful or harmful coping mechanisms, experiences of isolation, an impaired sense of self, and a disconnected and punitive experience of God (Daniluk, 1993; Mahoney, 2008; and Ogden, 2008).

The literature that exists is scant, and this relationship has yet to be explored in depth. The purpose of this current study was to explore women’s construction of their sexual narratives based on the relationship between their sexual experiences and their religious culture. The aim of this study was to contribute to the literature in several ways. First, to date, only one study exists in which sexuality is explored in women raised in a Western Christian tradition (Mahoney, 2008). The intention of the study was to explore how Christian women “integrated their sexuality and spirituality” (p. 94), finding that there existed a dissonance between the two for each woman, creating “psychological discomfort” (p. 96). The women in the study identified that they did not know how they integrated the two and for the most part were not aware that there was a disconnection prior to the study. It appears from the literature that there is a difficulty for these women, possibly related to shame, in acknowledging and articulating their sexual narratives.

The intention of this current study was expand on the literature by exploring the meaning a woman makes of her sexual self that includes her sexuality, psychological wellbeing, and spirituality, given her religious messages and sexual experiences. The purpose at hand was to explore in depth how this relationship occurs and how it informs a woman’s self views through an extensive 3-session interview protocol and writing assignment and to recruit women, through colleague affiliations, who are able to have some level of articulation regarding their experiences. The aim of this study was to employ a methodology that promoted reflection, disclosure, articulation, and depth, so
that a clearer picture emerges of how women in this faith tradition make meaning of their sexual selves, including psychological and spiritual aspects of self.

Second, the objective of this current study was to develop a theory grounded from the data about women’s internalization of religious cultural messages and how this informs their sexual, psychological, and spiritual well-being. The intention here was to further the understanding of the complexities of women’s sexual self-views and contribute to the constructivist literature regarding a woman’s relationship between her sexual self and her culture.

A third purpose of this study was to develop, from the findings, clinical solutions for women raised in a Western Christian tradition, which fosters a sense of integration of spirituality and sexuality within their current faith tradition. Of the feminist literature that exists, recommendations have been made that include the revitalization of the Goddess religion (Mahoney, 2008; Wolf, 2012) or Eastern religious practices of Karma and Tantra (Turner, Fox, Center, Kiser, 2006). There do not exist in the literature solutions for women who continue to embrace their Western Christian tradition. Is this possible for them? Given the research of Christian teaching on sexuality that embraces an embodied spirituality and a sanctification of sexuality, could it be possible for women in this tradition to have a sexually and spiritually integrated self within their Western Christian tradition? How can a clinician engage this struggle with his or her clients in a way that is attuned to the client and does not dismiss her culture? Similarly, there would be clinical value in understanding the spiritual and sexual needs of women raised in this faith tradition that could contribute to the conversation on sexual well-being in women.
Chapter Three - Methodology
Research Design

Self-Objectification theory and Sexual Self-Schema Model are two cognitive theories that have emerged from the literature addressing certain aspects of how a woman internalizes her culture’s sexual messages, shaping her own sexual views of self. Both theories are based in the sociocultural perspective that a woman will internalize and cognitively “buy into” her culture’s messages about the ideal sexual behaviors and attitudes she should have. This internalization is proposed to result as individuals adopt for themselves the idealized expectations of self that are promoted by their culture (Thompson & Stice, 2001). Sexual Self-Schema theorists suggest that a woman creates either positive or negative sexual self views, formed through an interaction of internal feelings, her sexual encounters with others, and messages from her parents as she defines for herself her sexual self image. Self-Objectification theorists propose that a woman’s views of the goodness and value of her body are informed by her culture’s messages about the idealized female body.

While both theories have shown rigor in advancing a cognitive perspective of how a woman’s self views are developed, there are limits to each; self-schema model has not been tested in relationship to cultural messages, and self-objectification theory only links sexualized media messages with body image. Apart from issues of body image, there does not exist a sociocultural cognitive theory that examines the relationship between a woman’s sexual self-views and her culture’s ideological messages regarding her sexuality.

Religion has been shown throughout the literature to play a significant role in the shaping of sexual behaviors and attitudes, yet we know little on how this ideology is
internalized by women in the development of their sexual self-views. I was interested in understanding not only how women make sense of their sexuality, but to also build a substantive theory of how religious messages and beliefs are integrated with sexual experiences in the meaning women make of their sexual selves. Based in a sociocultural cognitive conceptual framework, two research questions served as a guide for the design of this study: (1) How are women’s sexual self-views informed by religious teachings, and (2) How is the interplay of religious messages and sexual experiences lived out in women sexually, psychologically, and spiritually?

For the purpose of building theory, grounded theory methodology, as originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was the qualitative research design chosen for this study. Corbin and Strauss (1990) posited that grounded theory, “seeks not only to uncover relevant conditions, but also to determine how the actors respond to changing conditions and to the consequences of their actions” (p. 5). Merriam (2009) stated that, “only when a substantive theory results is the study considered a grounded theory study” (p. 31).

Pragmatism and Symbolic Interactionism serve as the primary philosophical underpinnings of grounded theory. It is pragmatic in that it concerns processes of change and asks the question of “how” a phenomenon develops and changes. Similarly, the second tenet posits that we are not determined, but on the contrary, are active agents in the creation of realities, able to make choices and experience the consequences of those choices (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Grounded theory, as defined by Strauss (1987), focuses on the extensive use of interviews and other sources of information in order to better understand processes.
Strauss identified five main components of grounded theory. First, a diverse collection of materials may be gathered as primary data sources (e.g., archival data, field notes, theoretical memos). Second, there is a need for theory that is “grounded” in qualitative data collection. Third, theory should contain an adequate level of density and complexity in order to capture the full experience of study. Fourth, qualitative data analysis should follow guidelines that can be applied to a wide range of theoretical approaches. And fifth, the work process of research may be used in the qualitative analysis. Therefore, the aim of this study, and of grounded theory is to generate theory that is grounded in data collection from the participants in order to capture the complexities of their experience.

The grounded theory process consists of three basic components: theoretical sampling, the constant comparative method, and coding for core categories, which form the building blocks of theory (Merriam, 2009). Each of these components will be outlined below in detail as they pertained to the procedures of this study at hand.

**Sampling**

Theoretical sampling, the process of sampling that aids in the generation of theory, was the method of sampling used in this study. Marshall (1996) identified that theoretical sampling, “necessitates building interpretative theories from the emerging data and selecting a new sample to examine and elaborate on this theory” (p. 523). When using theoretical sampling, the researcher simultaneously collects, codes, and analyzes data, deciding what data is needed next and from whom in order to develop theory (Glaser, 1978).

Prior to sampling, several selection criteria were chosen to better capture the phenomenon of study. The first selection criterion was that of age: women aged 30 and
older. This marker was selected due to the belief that women in this age range are more likely to have formulated their beliefs regarding sexuality in the context of their faith tradition and have more to reflect on than women in younger age ranges. Since most qualitative and quantitative studies of women’s sexuality are done with college-aged young women (Freitas, 2008; Ogden, 2002b; Stevens, Caron, & Pratt, 2003), it was believed that investigating women who are developmentally older than a college-aged woman would elicit a fuller understanding of a woman’s sexuality.

It was decided that a second criterion was that participants would have been raised in a Western Christian culture in the US in which they regularly heard religious teachings. This could include any form of Protestant, Non-denominational Christian, Orthodox, or Catholic tradition. Participants were not excluded from the study if they currently did not identify as Christian, Protestant, Orthodox, or Catholic, as one intention of the study was to examine any possible spiritual/religious outcomes that occur as adults.

A third selection criterion for the study was the inclusion of only women who were participating in ongoing counseling. The reason for this is twofold. First, it was believed that participants who were already in counseling would be more open and comfortable in talking about such personal material and possibly be less overwhelmed and intimidated by the interview process in which highly personal questions of sexual experience would be asked of them. Due to the depth of inquiry in this study, counseling participation was deemed more beneficial than detrimental. Second, for the purpose of safety and emotional protection, it was believed that participants who are in counseling would receive follow-up care should this interview process elicit any emotional or psychology distress for which they need care.
Participants for this study were initially recruited through individual therapeutic practitioners and local counseling organizations (helping professionals, supervisors, educators in the helping professions) in the St. Louis area. Professionals were contacted via email in which they were 1) provided a flyer (Appendix A) announcing the study, and 2) asked to give flyers to all female clients or associates who are currently in outpatient counseling. The general recruitment of all female clients was recommended to professionals in order to avoid experiences of potential coercion on the part of the helping professional. To further ensure that participant coercion was mitigated, no contact and relationship occurred between the researcher and referring therapist regarding the participant, and as part of informed consent, participants were informed that they could terminate participating in the study at any time without penalty with their referring therapist. As a clinician and researcher, in order to protect the therapeutic relationship I have with my clients, I did not ask my clients to participate in the study. For convenience, the general St. Louis area was the primary sampling location.

Prospective participants who were interested in participating in this study were asked to complete a consent form (Appendix B) and demographic questionnaire (Appendix C) to verify personal information and eligibility for participation. The initial group of eight eligible participants were recruited via counselor colleague referrals. The first eight women who contacted the researcher met the inclusionary criteria, with ranges in age and denominational affiliation, which was in line with the desire for maximum variation sampling. Interviews were staggered over a period of 3 months, April-June 2014. Seven of the eight participants completed the entire three-interview protocol, and one participant did not complete her third interview. Several efforts were made to follow
up with this participant, yet with no response. It was decided that this participant’s first two interviews were of value to the study and thus remained as part of the data that was analyzed. Following a theoretical sampling design, the twenty-three audio-recorded interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist and analyzed by the researcher prior to selection of remaining participants.

Coyne (1997) stated that the researcher “starts the study with a sample where the phenomenon occurs and then the next stage of data collection is when theoretical sampling begins” (p. 625). Upon analysis of the initial sample, several gaps emerged that this researcher believed to be of importance for the next stage of sampling. This primarily pertained to a need to seek younger participants who were raised in more conservative evangelical homes, for several reasons. First, three of the women were not raised in Christian homes but were sent to Catholic church for their religious instruction, thus limiting some data regarding a home-life in which religiosity was practiced and overtly taught. Second, what was emerging from the data were a number of references to The Purity Movement, a highly structured national youth education movement amongst more conservative Evangelical denominations. Introduced in the 1980’s one of the primary goals of The Purity Movement was to train youth in sexual abstinence and seek written commitments (purity pledges) that, in obedience to God, they would maintain virginity until marriage. Most of the eight women interviewed were in their 40’s or older and noted that as teens, their Christian education came before The Purity Movement, which spread more widely in the early 90’s. However, they noted the significant impact this movement has had on them as adults and on their children, and the belief that The Purity Movement was a more “polished and packaged” version of the same messages some of them
received growing up. Only one of the initial eight women was young enough to be asked to sign a purity pledge. Third, with some exception, the older women had more sexual experience, had more salient knowledge regarding their sexuality, were able to communicate this, and had experienced a number of years invested in the healing process of their sexuality. It was apparent that the younger participants were either in the beginning or in the middle of “figuring it out,” with regard to their sexuality, with some having greater distress and confusion regarding their sexuality. This included greater in-the-moment distress and confusion at the time of the interviews, which the older women had discussed as being in the past tense for them developmentally. Some of the older women, while still experiencing the in-the-moment impact of their religious socialization around sexuality, they had also recounted spending many years toward greater healing.

Based on these reasons, it was decided it would be important for me to understand more about women who were still figuring it out and possibly had not had the benefit of years of healing experiences. As well, given the significant impact The Purity Movement has been shown to have on modern American Christianity (Gardner, 2011; Regnerus, 2007), I believed it was important to include some participants who had experienced the impact of this phenomenon. Therefore, sampling progressed through recruitment at a local Christian graduate school in which there would be potential participants who met these criteria in addition to the original selection criteria. An email with the flyer attached was distributed by a professional colleague at this institution, through an already-existing list-serve of current students and alumni. An immediate and tremendous response came in from this email, and selection was decided on a first-come-first-serve basis of those who met criteria and completed the initial paperwork. Through this process, two
additional participants were selected as they met the inclusionary criteria, were in their early thirties, and had in fact signed a purity pledge when they were younger. Both women completed the interview protocol, the data was transcribed and analyzed, and then a third and final woman was chosen and interviewed in order to confirm saturation of data.

**Participants**

The target sample size for this study was 8-15 participants. Glaser (1992) claimed “theoretical sampling on any category ceases when it is saturated, elaborated, and integrated into the emerging theory” (p. 102). In examining saturation levels in qualitative study, Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) discovered saturation to occur with approximately 12 participants, and so this finding served as the guide for potential saturation for this study. In this current study, from the analysis of the data in total (11 women and 32 interviews), it was believed that saturation of data had been met. Guest et al. (2006) discovered that 73% of their codes were found within the first six transcripts. In this current study, due to the thickness of the data findings and depth of the interview questions, 100% of the research findings were found through the first eight participants (23 interviews). The remaining three women provided rich data, elaborating more on the complexities of the findings; however new categories were not discovered.

Participant ages ranged from 30 years to 74 years. In order to protect identities in a sometimes small-world context of local Christian communities, it was decided that biographical descriptions listed below would be intentionally vague as a protection of individual identifiers. It should be noted that “conservative” and “Evangelical” terminology are used interchangeably to represent the same construct: a religious
theological belief system that holds to greater biblical authority and interpreting biblical text as infallible and inerrant.

*Lilly.* Lilly was a 34-year-old woman who was a professional with a Master’s degree. She had children and was married for less than 10 years to her current and only husband who was the father of her children. She was raised in a Protestant Christian home that was much more conservative and restrictive than the conservative Protestant church of which she is currently a member. From the questionnaire, she identified herself as “*both religious and spiritual*” and that her religious faith was important to her. She is a Caucasian woman who identified herself as heterosexual and in a monogamous relationship.

*Jenny.* Jenny was a 32-year-old woman who had a Bachelor’s degree, was a “*homemaker*” and mother of children, and married for under 10 years to her current and only husband who was the father of her children. She was raised in a conservative Protestant denomination. Even though she was not a member of the church in which she was raised, she participated in the same denomination throughout her life until the present. From the questionnaire, she identified herself as “*both religious and spiritual*” and that her religious faith was important to her. She is a Caucasian woman who identified herself as heterosexual and in a monogamous relationship.

*Iris.* Iris was a 74 year-old woman who was a professional with a Ph.D. She had grown children, was married for 15 years to the father of her children, and had since been divorced for over 25 years. At the time of the study, she was not in a sexual relationship, yet previously had been in a couple longer-term sexual relationships since her divorce. She was raised in a Catholic church and attended a different but similar Catholic church
### Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Denominat.-Raised</th>
<th>Denominat.-Current</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iris (I)</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Divorced, Not in a Relat.</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>No Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth (B)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Protestant (Various)</td>
<td>Conserv Prot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen (Kr)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Conserv. Prot.</td>
<td>Liberal Prot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe (C)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Single, Not in a Relat.</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl (Ch)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Cauc.</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Divorced, Not in a Relat.</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Conserv Prot.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
throughout her marriage. Since the end of her marriage, she had not attended church for over 25 years. From the questionnaire, she identified herself as “spiritual but not religious,” while signifying her faith as “very important” to her. She is a Caucasian woman who identified herself as heterosexual.

Beth. Beth was a 49-year-old woman who obtained a Bachelor’s degree, was a minister at the time of the study, and greatly involved in ministry both inside and outside the church. She had children and was married to her only husband and father of her children for over 25 years. She was raised in several Protestant denominations. As an adult, she was a member of one conservative Protestant denomination. On the demographic questionnaire, she identified herself as “both religious and spiritual” in which her faith was “very important” to her. She is a Caucasian woman who identified herself as “just to the right of bisexual” and in a monogamous relationship with her husband.

Becky. Becky was a 48-year-old woman who was a professional with a Master’s degree. She was married to her only husband for over 20 years, and they did not have children. She was raised in a conservative Protestant denomination and at the time of study was a member of a Protestant denomination that was conservative, but not as much as the one in which she was raised. She identified herself on the questionnaire as “both religious and spiritual” in which her faith was “very important” to her. She is a Caucasian woman who identified herself as heterosexual and in a monogamous relationship.

Kristen. Kristen was a 41-year-old woman who was a professional with a Master’s degree. She was married to her only husband for over 15 years, who was the
father of her children. She was raised in a conservative Protestant denomination.

Throughout her adulthood, she has been a member of the same church that is of a liberal Protestant denomination. She identified herself on the questionnaire as “both religious and spiritual” in which her faith is “very important” to her. She is a Caucasian woman who identified herself as heterosexual and in a monogamous relationship.

*Chloe.* Chloe was a 37-year-old woman who was a professional with a Master’s degree and a staff member in leadership at her Catholic church. She had not been married, did not have children, and at time of study was not in a romantic or sexual relationship. She was raised in a Catholic denomination and was a member of a Catholic church throughout her adulthood. Her parents did not practice as Catholics but had her receive the sacraments. On the questionnaire, she identified herself as “both religious and spiritual” and that her faith was “very important” to her. She is a Caucasian woman who identified herself as heterosexual.

*Cheryl.* Cheryl was a 41-year-old woman who obtained her Bachelor’s degree and was a “homeschool mom” to her children. She was divorced for over 10 years to her only husband who was the father of her children. At the time of study, she was not in a romantic or sexual relationship. She was raised in a Catholic church and received the sacraments, even though her parents were not practicing. Beginning in early adulthood, she became Protestant and has been in several different Protestant denominations. She identified herself on the questionnaire as “both religious and spiritual” in which her faith was “very important” to her. She is a Caucasian woman who identified herself as heterosexual.
Kate. Kate was a 34-year-old woman who was a professional with a Master’s degree. She did not have children. At the time of the study, she was in a monogamous and close dating relationship with a man. She was raised in a conservative Protestant denomination, and throughout her adult life was involved in a Protestant denomination that is conservative but not as much as the one in which she was raised. On the questionnaire, she identified herself as “both religious and spiritual” and that her faith was “very important” to her. She is a Caucasian woman who identified herself as heterosexual.

Jordan. Jordan was a 30-year-old woman who was a professional with a Bachelor’s degree. She had never been married and did not have children, yet at the time of the study, she was in a monogamous and close dating relationship with a man. She was raised in a conservative Protestant denomination and was a member of the same church she has been in her entire life. She identified herself as “both religious and spiritual” and noted that her faith was “important” to her. She is a Caucasian who identified as heterosexual.

Susan. Susan is a 30-year-old woman who was a professional in clergy ministry with a Master’s degree. She was not married and did not have children. At the time of the study, she was not in a romantic or sexual relationship. As a child, she attended a conservative Protestant church separately from her parents, who were not Christian. As an adult, she attended several churches of various Protestant denominations. At the time of the study, the church she attended was of a conservative Protestant denomination. On the questionnaire, she identified herself as “both religious and spiritual” with a faith that
was “important” to her. She is a Caucasian woman who identified herself as heterosexual.

**Data Collection**

Data sources for this study included a demographic questionnaire, participant interviews, a writing assignment, field notes, and theoretical memos. An optional sexual history questionnaire (Appendix E), created by the researcher, was given to participants as an aid in eliciting memory retrieval of their sexual experiences. Participants were informed that this was an optional aid and would not be collected by the researcher as a data source.

Diamond (2006), in assessing her seminal 10-year longitudinal study of sexual-minority women’s sexual identity formation, argued that when interviewing women about sexuality, at least two interviews are necessary in order to capture misperceptions, inaccuracies, or nuances of sexuality. In order to understand the lived experience of these women and the meaning they make of that experience, the interview protocol used in this study followed the in-depth three-series phenomenological interview model proposed by Seidman (2006). Based on a design developed by Dolbeare and Schuman (1982), Seidman’s three-series model of interviewing is meant to elicit a fuller understanding of the participant’s lived experience. In the first interview, the interviewer seeks to know the history of the current issue of study, the second interview is meant to know the current experience of the issue, and the third interview is focused on the meaning the participant currently makes of the issue. In arguing against the traditional one-shot interview structure incorporated in most phenomenological inquiries, the author claimed that the
interviewer treads on “thin contextual ice” by attempting to fully explore an experience in one interview with someone with whom the interviewer has never met (p.17).

Given the highly personal nature of sexuality, which is shown to be a complicated topic for women to discuss (Mahoney, 2008; Ogden, 2008), and the contextual nature of the research questions, Seidman’s three-interview protocol was deemed the best fit for this present research study. According to Seidman (2006), “people’s behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them. Without context there is little possibility of exploring the meaning of an experience” (pp. 16-17).

Following the Seidman (2006) protocol, each participant in this study was interviewed three times, and interviews were 90 minutes in length. An interview guide (Appendix D) containing three areas of questioning was employed in the study to direct each of the three interviews respectively: (1) what were the teachings you received growing up (from family, church, and other) regarding your sexuality, gender, and your body; (2) what have been your sexual experiences in the past and currently; and (3) what meaning have you made of your sexual self that includes your sexuality, psychological wellbeing, and spirituality, given those messages and experiences.

The task of the first interview was to explore the history and context of the presenting issue. I wanted to explore the religious messages that each participant received throughout her life regarding her sexual self, up until present day. This included anything each deemed relevant, such as messages about their bodies, gender, gender roles, sex education and instruction, experiences, comments, expectations, perceptions, etc. The origins of this information could have been from any source in the woman’s life,
including but not exclusively her family, friends, religious institutions, authority figures, books and resources. Non-religious cultural messages were explored to some extent to understand the relationship they had with religious messages and experiences.

The second interview was slightly different from Seidman’s protocol, as I wanted to move the focus of questions from the religious socialization of sexuality to the participant’s sexual experiences. Seidman (2006) outlined the protocol for the second interview as being an inquiry of the current presenting issue. Given that a woman’s sexuality is not a set-in-time experience but an ongoing experience, the inquiries in the second interview continued to be a combination of history and present-day sexual experience. Open-ended questions were utilized to explore not only the sexual experiences of the participant but also the reactions of her religious community to those experiences. How did she navigate between those worlds, and how was her sexuality received by her community?

The third interview explored the meaning the participant has made of her sexual self, given these experiences. According to Seidman (2006), “making sense or making meaning requires that the participants look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation” (p. 18). I was interested in understanding how a woman constructs her sexual self-views in the context of her religious socialization and experiences. Frederickson and Roberts (1997) claimed that, in part, a woman internalizes her culture’s messages to construct her own self-views and that this process of internalization has impact on a woman’s psychological wellbeing. I was interested in understanding the sexual, psychological, and spiritual meaning that a woman makes regarding her self in light of her relationship with her religious culture. I wanted to know
not only how she sees her sexual self but how she sees herself in the context of her community.

In order to accomplish such tasks, a semi-structured conversation-based interview protocol (Appendix D) was employed utilizing open-ended questions (Flick, 2006). Each interview began with an open-ended question in order to elicit narrative. The interviews ended with clarifying questions on areas in need of further elaboration or questions that might pertain to gaps in the participant’s story not yet addressed in the interview. As the third interview sought to elicit meaning-making, the interview questions were more structured (Appendix D).

It was my intention that the course of the three interviews would occur in roughly a three-week period of time. Seidman (2006) recommended that the three interviews occur within three weeks so that time can be allowed for the interviewee to “mull over the preceding interview but not enough time to lose the connection between the two” (p. 21). Most of the interviews did occur within three weeks for each women, with two exceptions, due to scheduling, that extended the data gathering another two weeks.

Prior to initiation of the interview protocol, participants were told that they were invited to participate in a study that is doing “an in-depth examination of Western Christian teachings of sexuality towards women, the sexual experiences of women socialized in this tradition, and how women make meaning of their sexuality given their religious socialization and experiences.” As well, the following recommendations provided by Taylor and Bogdan (1984) were given prior to participant agreement to the study: (1) motives, intentions, and purpose of the study; (2) the use of protective pseudonyms; (3) decisions on who has the final say over the study’s content; (4)
payment; and (5) protocol logistics with regard to time, place, and number of interviews to be scheduled. Each participant was informed of the intentions for each interview: that the first interview would address her history of sexual teachings and messages regarding her sexuality, the second interview would explore key prior and current sexual experiences, and the third interview would address the sense of meaning that she makes regarding herself, given these messages and experiences. Prior to each interview, the confidentiality of the interviews were stressed, and each participant was instructed of her right to refrain from answering any of the interview questions or to terminate the interview at any time.

I conducted all of the interviews as the primary investigator. Specific and intentional steps were made to ensure sensitivity and a level of emotional safety for the participants. First, as a Licensed Professional Counselor, traditional person-centered techniques of rapport building, attending, and questioning skills were employed throughout the interviews in order to provide a level of security that aids in the disclosure of personal sexual information. Second, interviews occurred in the professional counseling office of the researcher in order to secure privacy and emotional safety for the participants. As an additional level of security and safety, participants were given the option of having their interviews conducted in another private setting other than the researcher’s office, yet all participants were comfortable with the researcher’s office. One participant lived in the state of Missouri but not in St. Louis, therefore, the first interview occurred by phone, and the remaining interview was in the researcher’s office.

A demographic questionnaire that included items on age, race, educational level, relationship status, religious affiliation, and religious participation was given prior to the
interview protocol in order to determine eligibility to participate in the study and as a guide in the theoretical sampling process. The optional questionnaire of a history of sexual experiences was given prior to the second interview, which focused on sexual experiences, for the women to complete as an aid in memory recall. In the questionnaire of sexual experience history, participants were asked to identify whether or not they have experienced a detailed list of partnered and non-partnered sexual experiences. From feedback provided by most participants, the sexual history questionnaire proved helpful not only in memory retrieval but also in inviting them to share more openly about felt shameful sexual experiences. While none of the women gave me their questionnaires (which was not required), several of them brought them to the second interview to serve as a guide.

Freitas (2008), in a large qualitative study of college students’ sexuality and spirituality, found that participants were much more forthcoming of their sexual histories when asked to respond in writing rather than verbally. And so, following the first interview, a writing assignment (Appendix F) was given to each participant in order to elicit a greater depth of meaning she had regarding her own sexuality. Each participant was asked to write a 600-word (approximately two pages) personal narrative of a critical sexual experience she has had in her life and a 600-word personal reflection of the meaning she attributes to the story she has written. She was instructed to write a narrative of an incident that captures a significant moment in her sexual story. In the reflection assignment, she was asked to identify how this incident represents the essence of her sexual story to her and to identify the sexual, psychological, and spiritual impact that this
incident has had on her. This writing assignment was obtained from each participant before the second interview occurred.

Following the methods for data collection recommended by McLellan, MacQueen and Neidig (2003), every interview for this study was audiotaped and transcribed by a single professional transcriber and proofread by the researcher prior to analysis to ensure accuracy of transcription. After the three-week interview process, the interviews were transcribed and then coded and analyzed by the researcher. Member checks occurred as the researcher contacted the participants via telephone to ask follow-up questions, provide results of core categories, and elicit feedback regarding accuracy.

Both field notes and theoretical memos were used in the process of theoretical sampling to guide the course of data collection decisions. Field notes, which are written records of observations made by the researcher (Montgomery & Bailey, 2007), were created by the researcher throughout the study. For the purpose of this study, field notes entailed the notes taken by the researcher during the interviews. All field notes were coded throughout the course of data collection and analysis.

According to Glaser (1998), theoretical memos are a researcher’s way of documenting his or her own thoughts, feelings, and insights through the data collection process in order to help build theory. It is through the use of theoretical memos that data moves into theory. Rigid formality to structure and rules of memo taking are not viewed by Glaser as ideal and could actually impede the creative process of theory building. On the contrary, he recommended freedom of thought formation, and posited that a theoretical memo captures the “meaning and ideas for one’s growing theory at the moment they occur” (p. 178). The theoretical memos of the data collection and analysis
in this study were created throughout the research process. As the researcher, I had several notebooks that were always on hand during the research process, that proved vital to building an understanding of the data as thoughts would occur and mental connections were being made that aided in my building initial concepts into categories.

**Data Analysis**

The constant comparative data analysis method was used in this study, as suggested by Corbin and Strauss (1990) and Strauss and Corbin (1998), in their writings on grounded theory. During the process of the constant comparative method, “As an incident is noted, it should be compared against other incidents for similarities and differences. The resulting concepts are labeled as such, and over time, they are compared and grouped” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 9). Corbin and Strauss described the usefulness of the constant comparison method in grounded theory data analysis as not only “guarding against bias” (p. 9), but also in achieving “greater precision … and consistency” (p. 9). Merriam (2009) described such a method of data analysis as “inductive and comparative” (p. 175) and one that would allow us to make meaning of our data by “consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said” (p. 175-6).

The interview transcripts and the writing assignment were coded line by line (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) after the three-week interview process and transcription was completed. Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined open coding as “the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data” (p. 101). Each of the 32 interviews was coded line-by-line twice, prior to writing and arranging repetitive codes within each interview on index cards. When coding each interview and writing assignment, potential concepts were identified —“basic units of
analysis” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 7). During the open coding process, memos of potential concepts were recorded for analysis while moving through all interviews and writing assignments (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Throughout the data collection process, concepts were analyzed that were believed to have potential to become categories or group together to form categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). During this process, it was important to utilize memos to keep track of “analysis, thoughts, interpretations, [and] questions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 110) as the data was processed in an inductive manner. My memos allowed me to keep a record of my “thinking processes” (Montgomery & Bailey, 2007, p. 68). Consistent with Corbin and Strauss (1990), each concept was considered “provisional” (p. 7) as potential categories.

All data collected were triangulated and compared against each other in the decision-making process of analysis. In order to enhance objectivity and reliability of analysis, a colleague (Licensed Professional Counselor) served as a reviewer of the coded transcripts, notes, and memos. In addition to the review of data, several colleagues (Licensed Professional Counselors, specializing in women’s sexuality) provided feedback pertaining to the development of concepts and categories, considering and evaluating competing explanations.

Once the list of initial concepts was accumulated, I moved to the next phase of open coding in which “[concepts’] properties and dimensions are discovered in the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 101). In order to identify which concepts could potentially form unique categories and which concepts would best be combined to form unique categories, the concepts were analyzed, identifying their characteristics (i.e., properties)
and ranges (i.e., dimensions). Since “not all concepts become categories” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 7), I was careful while analyzing properties and dimensions to ensure that categories were not formed that were not truly unique from one another. Potential categories need to be “higher in level and more abstract than the concepts they represent” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), so much time was spent analyzing whether or not each of the concepts were unique abstractions or were related to other concepts in some manner. In line with grounded theory data analysis, I was constantly comparing and grouping the concepts in different ways while referring to the data to guide my decisions regarding category construction (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

At the same time that the properties and dimensions of potential categories were being analyzed, I was engaged in axial coding. Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined axial coding as “the act of relating categories to subcategories along the lines of their properties and dimensions” (p. 124). While comparing potential categories, subcategories emerged that I had originally listed as separate concepts and potentially separate categories. Through the comparison of data and further clarification on their properties and dimensions, the final categories and subcategories began to emerge from the data analysis process.

Once the key categories and subcategories emerged, I moved to the final stage of analysis: selective coding. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), selective coding is the “process of integrating and refining categories” (p. 143). It is through the integration and relationship-building among categories that the theory emerges. Not all of the categories necessarily remained in this final process of analysis. As remaining categories were examined, hypotheses were developed for which categories were related and truly
captured the essence of my research questions. If any of the categories did not seem to relate to the others in a consistent and meaningful manner, then they were thrown out.

The verification of hypotheses regarding relevance and relationship among categories occurs from the beginning of the analysis process. Corbin and Strauss (1990) claimed that hypotheses “are constantly revised during the research until they hold true for all of the evidence concerning the phenomena” (p. 11). It is in this final stage that I narrowed down multiple hypotheses that developed over the course of the research and integrated the categories under the umbrella of a core category.

In this final stage of analysis, a core category entailing the summation of what the research is essentially about emerged. This core category tied the research all together and was the main theme of what I believe to be the core of my research findings. The core category can be one of the categories that have already emerged from the data or it could be a new category that brings together parts of the other categories to form a unifying idea. According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), in selective coding, “the other categories will always stand in relationship to the core category as conditions, action/interactional strategies, or consequences” (p. 14). It is this ability to pull together all existing categories to form a whole theme that gives power to the core category. Techniques such as forming diagrams, writing a storyline, and sorting of memos were employed in order to aid in the discovery of the core category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

As the categories integrated and became related to one another under the umbrella of a core category, theory formed regarding the research questions. As recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998), final analysis occurred as the theoretical scheme for internal consistency and logic was reviewed. The remaining categories and the core category
were re-examined for the need to trim off excess data that was not necessarily best related
to the theory, and to fill in gaps in poorly developed categories that did not fully reach
theoretical saturation. Additionally, this core category, along with the categories and
subcategories were reviewed and analyzed by several colleagues in order to ensure
validity and reliability of the findings.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

In addressing issues of validity and reliability in the field of qualitative research,
Miles and Huberman (1994) proclaimed, “Qualitative analysis can be evocative,
illuminating, masterful – and wrong” (p. 262). In order to establish the reliability and
validity needed by qualitative researchers, Miles and Huberman (1994) proffered
standards for quality and the goodness of research findings along five domains. Each will
be addressed below, including efforts made in this current research design to promote
reliability and accuracy of findings.

Objectivity/Confirmability. In relation to objectivity, the primary task is to
prevent excesses of researcher biases, keeping them at a minimum. Guidelines for this
task are offered by the authors, primarily pertaining to procedural documentation,
including how data are collected and analyzed and how conclusions will be shown as
linked to the data. For this study, the researcher documented how procedures occurred as
well as identified explicitly how and why concepts were included or not included into
categories, moving to the level of core category. This included the use of theoretical
memos in order to protect against researcher bias and any blind spots pertaining to rival
conclusions. Member checks, used to seek clarification and elicit feedback from
participants on the emerging findings, were employed to safeguard against intrusive bias.
The use of member checks and review by colleagues, who were actively involved in the process of axial and selective coding, were employed to guard against such biases.

In my position as a woman in this age-bracket who was socialized in a Western Christian culture, I am considered to be in an insider-outsider position. With regard to the need to maintain objectivity in this position, Seidman (1991) stated, “interviewing requires interviewers to have enough distance to enable them to ask real questions and to explore, not to share, assumptions” (p. 77). In the design and methodology of this study, the above-mentioned steps were taken to enhance a certain level of objectivity.

**Reliability/Dependability/Auditability.** The focus of this task is to ensure the stability of research findings over time and across researchers and methods. Are the research questions clear and related to the research study design? Will there be member checks and peer reviews to ensure the stability of findings? This is often accomplished through the use of member checks and additional researcher input in order to provide assurance that there is greater chance of replication of findings. As mentioned above, throughout the analysis process, the inductive approach and consensual method of analysis of data was used, as suggested in Merriam (2002), to increase validity and reliability. Several colleagues served as additional “eyes” to the data in the process of axial and selective coding.

Due to practical restraints in this research, multiple researchers were not involved in the data collection and analysis, however, member checks and colleague review was incorporated. It was the intent of this researcher that not only the findings of the study but also the applicability and reliability of the interview questions and interviewing process be evaluated by researcher, colleague, and participant throughout the research protocol.
During all stages of analysis, the research questions served as the guide in the ongoing decision-making process.

**Internal validity/Credibility/Authenticity.** One of the primary focuses of internal validity is the question, “Is there convergence among data sources?” Or “Does the conclusion fit the data?” For this current study, internal validity was primarily addressed through the use of triangulation of data. The writing assignments, memos, field notes, and transcripts were triangulated as they were coded and compared as multiple sources of data. Throughout this procedure, questions regarding internal coherence and relationship among concepts and categories, leading to an emerging theory, were continually addressed.

The experiences among participants were compared and contrasted. Were they truly saying the same thing or something different? Were their experiences discrete or were they varying dimensions of the same construct? In order to ensure validity of conclusions, much effort was made to focus on the words and descriptions the participants named of their experiences as well as staying true to the conclusions of relationship that the participants themselves were drawing. This process aided in the examination of intervening variables, so that, as much as possible, research conclusions stayed true to salient correlations made by participants. Outliers and extreme cases were analyzed in the clustering of variables and considered as valid information to the conclusion-drawing process. Rival hypotheses regarding category formation and negative evidence of potential categories were discussed amongst the researcher and colleagues in order to enhance reliability of the findings. Were the variables significant enough to rise to the level of category, could they be clustered to form their own category or discrete
enough to stand apart? The research questions continually served as a guide in examining the relationships among potential categories in asking - were the findings fully answering the research questions at hand?

**External validity/Transferability/Fittingness.** The primary question at hand regarding external validity became, “How generalizable are the findings?” Due to the restraints of this study protocol, there were limitations in generalizability. This is foremost related to the limited number of participants incorporated in this study, the inclusionary criteria regarding counseling participation, and the subsequent homogeneity of participants. For this study, women were sampled from the greater St. Louis area and required to be participating in counseling, as both a safety check and an effort to elicit deeper emotional processing. In efforts to promote greater generalizability within this limitation, efforts toward maximum variation within theoretical sampling occurred. Comparisons were made with existing literature findings, and a thorough documentation of participant characteristics were included and analyzed as they compared to previous research study participants. Given that the present research findings were similar to findings of previous studies (Daniluk, 1993; Mahoney, 2008, Ogden 2002), it was believed that despite some of the limitations, the findings showed robustness in transferability to other contexts.

**Utilization/Application/Action Orientation.** As it pertains to the application of a research project, the question arises, “Is this research useful to society and to those potential users?” Several goals of this current research project were intended to benefit society: (1) to provide recommendations to clinical professionals on the sexual, spiritual, and psychological experiences and needs of women who have been socialized in a
Western religious tradition; (2) to contribute to the research on women’s sexuality by gaining a greater understanding of the role that cultural messages have on women’s sexual self-views and sexual well-being, and (3) to develop grounded theory from the data in order to aid women in their emotional, sexual, and spiritual growth and development.

In addition to the above-mentioned efforts to promote validity and reliability, the primary ethical considerations in this study pertained to the highly personal and sensitive topic of study, namely sexuality. The steps previously mentioned were intended to provide emotional safety and care that includes a licensed researcher, setting concerns, clear and repeated information provided about participant rights, and the inclusionary criterion of counseling. All were intended to promote the ethical sensitivity that is a goal of this research project. Overall, it was the researcher’s intention that the participants feel a sense of ownership and right to choice of participation throughout the research protocol.
Chapter Four – Results

The primary research question for study was, “How are women’s sexual self-views informed by religious teaching and how is the interplay of these messages and women’s experiences lived in them sexually, psychologically, and spiritually?” Prior to exploring the categorical results that answer this question, it is important to unpack the messages the women received from their religious community regarding their sexuality.

Religious Messages

Sources of Messages

The religious messages the women received regarding their sexuality originated from multiple sources in their lives, from the past up until the present. The primary sources of influence were religious institutions, family and friends, boyfriends and husbands, counselors, and religious books. Religious institutions of influence (as children and adults) were churches, schools, and para-church affiliated religious organizations. Within the church structure there were various leaders of influence and instruction such as pastors, youth leaders, Sunday school teachers, and other adults who gave direct instruction or were influential by way of modeling cultural norms and customs. Non-church religious ministries and organizations shown to have greatest influence were college campus ministry leaders, and as adults, colleagues from various para-church religious organizations, such as religious-based home-schooling organizations.

Representatives from and within educational institutions consisted of grade-school teachers, school counselors, and professors. Most of the women went to public school and mentioned their primary form of sex education came from 5th or 6th grade formalized instruction of female and male anatomy and puberty for boys and girls. A few
women mentioned a grade-school counselor or college professor as someone they went to with sexual concerns. Several women attended evangelical Protestant colleges and a few attended various evangelical seminaries around the country for their Master’s. Professors and fellow male students in both settings were mentioned as having great influence on them and their views of themselves as women.

Parents and other family members had a significant influence on religious socialization and sexuality. Most of the women had not received any education and instruction on sexual development from their parents, yet a few received some basic form of education on sexual body development from their mothers, usually via a book given to them. Instruction from parents primarily came from a quick comment that was negative in nature, such as, “Don’t get pregnant,” or “You’re too young to like boys.” Four of the 11 women were not raised by Christian parents, yet save one, there was no difference in instruction given from mothers who were Christian and mothers who were not. For one woman, her mother was extremely influential in giving regular instruction that men were head of the home, women should not work, and there should be no sexual interactions with boys. This woman was grateful for her mother’s regular instruction and believed that this alone kept her from being sexually active in high school. For the other six women raised by Christian parents, they believed their parental influence to be primarily through neglect: lack of instruction, sometimes lack of sexual protection, and the belief that sex was taboo. For some women, their grandmothers were of influence on their sexuality in a similar manner as parents, with a quick negative and shaming comment showing disapproval of their sexual development.
Siblings, both sisters and brothers, had significant influence, albeit a negative one, on their sense of sexual wellbeing. Examples of this included an older sibling regularly demeaning them with derogatory sexual/appearance comments and name-calling, an older sibling setting a negative example for what they believed to be healthy, an older sibling having pornography accessible to them, or an older sibling being sexually inappropriate with them to varying degrees.

Friends and peers provided both support and sexual information to many of the women. Information about the nature of sex, instead of coming from parents, was often obtained informally by friends or peers. Many of the women mentioned having different groups of friends: Christian friends with whom they could talk about sexuality and non-Christian friends whom they sought for advice and information. However, some women did not share any sexual information with another person until they were adults.

Christian boyfriends and husbands also proved to be highly influential in the women’s sexual development. All four of the women who were married at the time of the study shared their husbands had greatly strengthened their views of themselves as valuable and sexual. The women mentioned boyfriends as both positive and harmful for them in their self-views. If the relationship was healthy and loving, whether it was sexual in nature or not, the women experienced this as a positive formative part of her sexual development. Conversely, if a boyfriend was not a loving partner, the boyfriend proved detrimental to her sexual wellbeing.

Counseling was an inclusionary criterion in the study, and all of the women mentioned this as a positive and redemptive aspect of their healing sexually, emotionally, and spiritually. Interestingly, books were indicated as a significant source of instruction
for many of the women. As younger children, non-religious books on “the birds and the bees” or non-religious juvenile literature was a source of sexual knowledge. Beginning at dating age and up until the present, Christian non-fiction books on all varieties of religious instruction was a significant influence for the women’s views of their sexuality. A number of books were influential in their sexual development – *Lady in Waiting: Becoming God’s best while waiting for Mr. Right* (Kendall & Jones, 2005), *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Harris, 1997), *Why Wait* (McDowell, 1987), and *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Piper & Grudem, 1991). Other books mentioned as influential were *Fascinating Womanhood* (Andelin, 1963), *The Total Woman*, (Morgan, 1973) *Passion and Purity: Learning to bring your life under Christ’s control* (Elliot, 1984).

The primary focus of these books was on Christian dating practices, how to live while waiting for the man God has saved for you, and instruction on being a godly wife and mother. *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Harris, 1997) was highly influential for the women in their 30’s, impacting for some their beliefs that sexual purity entailed abstaining from dating and kissing. *Lady in Waiting* (Kendall & Jones, 2005) influenced some women in believing that if she were to have a strong relationship with God, a husband would be the inevitable reward. Similar to other popular modern-day books on Christian instruction, *The Total Woman* (Morgan, 1973), taught that a good Christian wife’s focus was to make herself completely available and pleasing to her husband in order to ensure his faithfulness.

**Delivery of Messages**
All of the women were able to easily identify the religious messages they received growing up and as adults about their sexuality. They demonstrated greater difficulty in accessing the source of the messages and how the messages were delivered to them. They knew a message, for example – ‘If you had sex before marriage, you could go to hell,’ yet when probed on how this became a belief for them, some had no memory of how this was delivered. The women who had greater difficulty accessing the source of a message also had a greater tendency to attribute a belief to her interpretation of something as opposed to the result of her specific socialization. Some women had a clearer sense of the source of a message and how this made them feel. For many of the women, though, there was a mix of remembering and not remembering. Every woman in the study experienced some level of increased realization through the interview process, often indicating that they had never thought about these issues or had never talked about certain aspects of their sexuality or sexual history. As the women told their stories of sexual socialization, six primary methods of delivery emerged which will be outlined (Table 1) and briefly described.

### Table 2.
**Delivery of Religious Messages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method of Delivery</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct Instruction</td>
<td>Teaching religious sexual values directly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphors</td>
<td>A Knight rescuing a Princess used to describe romance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
<td>“Whatever you do, don’t get pregnant.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling by Other Women</td>
<td>Women influencing other women through behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwritten Curriculum</td>
<td>Masturbation is taught as only a male issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmful/Redemptive Experiences</td>
<td>How a sexual abuse disclosure is handled by leaders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Direct Instruction.** Direct instruction occurred through sermons, lectures, biblical interpretations and instructions, and books. Most often pastors, youth leaders, parents, ministry leaders, and book authors delivered the messages. Direct instruction of sexuality primarily focused on the teaching of values around dating, pre-marital sex, consequences of premarital sex, and women’s roles in the home and community.

**Metaphors.** Metaphors were found to be a significant method of delivery in the rhetoric of religious socialization, especially for those whose religious communities were more verbal and frequent in their instruction on sexual and gender values. For these women, especially in the protestant tradition in which sexual instruction was focused on purity, metaphor was often used with youth to show the damages of premarital sex. One woman shared of a youth leader before the group of youth holding a rose and extolling it’s perfection, beauty, and fragrance. He handed the rose to a youth in the front row, asking the group to pass and smell it from person to person. Once finished, the rose returned to the youth leader who then deplored it of it’s diminished value, noting the loss of fragrance with ripped and tousled petals. He concluded the comparison in proclaiming that this is what premarital sex does to a person; no one will want that rose. Several other women mentioned similar versions of the same metaphorical story on the warning of premarital sex, but primarily targeted to the consequences for women. For the one woman in particular, she mentioned, “we all know, the female is the rose!” *(S,1,16)*

A fairytale metaphor was frequently used as a form of persuasion to remain pure and virginal. For many of the women, this consisted of a marital reward for chastity, a fairytale ending for those who maintained virginity prior to marriage. Virginity was taught as a woman’s highest value and the ticket for accessing a greater “catch” of a
partner, one who would be faithful, loving, successful, and fertile. As well, embedded in the fairytale metaphor was the message that sexual purity for both men and women indicated a social and economic level of higher class. For those who were younger in particular, the language of princesses and princes was introduced into the rhetoric of a fairytale ending. One woman identified a recent article in which a Christian mother referred to her daughter as moving from “Princess to promiscuous” when she started kissing. Metaphors also came as a form of a joke or a platitude to support female chastity such as, ‘Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free.’ One woman, whose husband cheated on her despite her many efforts toward pleasing him, claimed, “I bought it hook, line, and sinker . . . I thought if I did all these things, it would work.” (Ch,1,876)

For the women raised in a Catholic tradition, the rhetoric surrounding the comparison of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdelene was preeminent. Virgin Mary was demonstrated as the ideal in feminine moral virtue, while Mary Magdelene was held up as a warning of disgrace for those who chose to be sexual. Many women referred to the “Madonna/Whore” dichotomy when talking about two types of women; you were either one or the other based on your chastity.

Comments. Often messages were conveyed through comments made to the women about their sexuality or women’s sexuality in general. The women remembered comments that were usually negative in nature and left a lasting impact. One woman remembered her grandmother yelling ‘whore’ at her once while kissing her boyfriend in a car. One single participant remembered her married bible study leader telling her that women do not desire sex. Comments were highly influential in establishing the norms for what was expected of them, such as “Whatever you do, don’t get pregnant.” They also
all reported regularly hearing sexist comments from their religious communities and families, including the ridicule of women as political leaders, evaluative comments about women’s bodies, or judgmental comments regarding women’s sexual propriety.

**Modeling by other women.** For many of the women, the modeling of beliefs and behaviors on how to live as an ideal Godly woman was more palpable to them than direct instruction in their religious socialization. Areas of modeling included ideal practices for dating and pre-marital sexual contact, how to secure a godly man, values on gender roles in the home and society, and Christian values on how to parent and be a wife. The women were often influenced by their peers and older women, particularly mothers, pastors’ wives, youth leaders, women in their congregation, and through books.

Prior to marriage, of influence was youth group leaders’ wives and college ministry wives who told stories of how they remained pure, how hard this was, and how it paid off for them in finding an ideal Christian husband. Participants read books from women sharing their own personal stories of purity and its subsequent pay-offs for them – the ideal catch of a husband and the ideal post-marriage life. Post-marriage, other women had a significant influence in modeling idealized gender roles for being a Godly wife and raising Godly children. Similarly, books written by Christian women played a significant role in shaping ideals as a wife and mother. One woman shared of her frustrations with these books:

*Here’s my problem with probably 90-something percent of Christian books. People tell an amazing story of what God has done for them, and I love that. I love to hear people’s stories of what God has done for them.*
But then they turn it around and turn it into a prescription or formula for how everyone should live in order to receive God’s blessing. (L,3,27)

**Unwritten curriculum.** One woman mentioned the “unwritten curriculum” (B,1,250) as a method of instruction and learning through picking up on what was not said in a given context. An example of this was the shaping of her belief that masturbation was something that only boys did. In reading a Christian youth periodical, the issue of masturbation was addressed repeatedly in reference to boys’ sexuality, to the neglect of mentioning girls at all. In shaping her shame regarding her own masturbation as a girl, she stated, “This taught me that girls don’t masturbate.” (B,1,255) Other examples of the unwritten curriculum from the women included the focus on pornography as a male problem and addressing sexual desire as only a male experience.

**Harmful/redemptive experiences.** All of the women mentioned numerous encounters with others in a religious context that played a role in shaping their sexuality and their sexual self-views. This included experiencing sexual relationships that were either harmful or beneficial to their sexual wellbeing, witnessing others’ sexuality, or responses by religious leaders and others to their sexuality. The most harmful experiences often came from family members, religious leaders, boyfriends or husbands, and sexual abusers. The most sexually redemptive experiences for the women came from boyfriends and husbands, friends and peers, counselors, and churches that were experienced as egalitarian and affirming of women.

**Messages on Sexuality**

Addressed here are the messages the women perceived from their communities, not necessarily the messages they were directly taught. In fact, most of the messages they
received were not directly taught to them, they were implied or were the outcomes of what they experienced from their religious communities. Despite differences in denominations and traditions, there appeared to be clear and consistent religious messages for all of the women regarding sexuality. The three women in this study who were raised in a Catholic tradition received similar messages as the Protestant women, yet the Protestant instruction on sexuality was more direct and more frequent than from a Catholic tradition.

Compared to Protestant methods, Catholic methods of delivery came primarily through pronouncements of beliefs than instruction. As Cheryl shared, “No premarital sex and no birth control would be announced from the pope . . . I don’t ever remember them saying it in a sermon. If they did, I didn’t catch it.” (Ch,1,444) Catholic delivery of messages weighed more heavily on comments, modeling, and experiences with church leaders and adults than through formal forms of instruction. For example, one Catholic woman in the study mentioned a recent incident in which congregants were handed a checklist of sins in need of repentance. One of the items was, “Have you dressed provocatively?” (C,1,154)

With regards to age of participant, it was also the method of delivery that was different between older and younger participants, not the message itself. The younger women (30’s), for the most part, received more direct verbal instruction from their faith communities on purity and experienced greater influence of the Purity Movement than the older women (40’s+). While originating in response to the Feminist movement of the early 1960’s, the Purity Movement, became widespread in the late 1980’s in American Christian culture. The primary tenet of the Purity Movement was the programmatic
religious teaching of sexual abstinence before marriage that included practices of wearing purity rings and signing purity pledges. Additionally, for girls, this included frequent instruction on modest dress, submissiveness, and male leadership over her passing from father to husband.

The four youngest women in the study were asked to sign a purity pledge, promising to stay virgins until they were married, and they received more formal and repetitive instruction for girls on remaining virgins. However, the messages were the same for the older women as they were for the younger. Beth, in her late 40’s who had been raised before the Purity Movement yet was a youth leader during the Purity Movement, stated:

*I was a youth leader for a long time in the 90’s, so I remember the True Love Waits campaign, when we started trying to convince kids that if you just wait, the sex will be awesome later. I was before that. For me, they weren’t telling us it was going to be awesome. It was just, you know, you’re kind of ruined if you don’t wait . . . It was the same message, just creatively repackaged.* (B,1,459)

All of the women identified varying levels of emotional and relational support, nurturance, and spiritual benefit as coming from their religious communities growing up. In benefit or detriment, for eight of the 11 women, their religious communities were “home” for them, an extended family that raised them together with their parents. Sadly, in the midst of this, the religious messages regarding their sexuality were primarily experienced as negative and harmful for the women. The sole teaching on sexuality seen as beneficial pertained to sexual abstinence before marriage. Eight of the 11 women
strongly believed in the benefits of abstaining from sex prior to marriage, seeing this as a biblical instruction intended for their overall health and wellbeing. Apart from this one belief, even when probed on the benefits of their religious communities to their sexual development, only three women identified some sexual benefits from their religious communities growing up. Following is an outline of the messages (Table 2) and a brief description of each.

**Table 3.**
**Messages on Sexuality**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex is a sacred union, meant only for marriage</td>
<td>Most of the women embraced this teaching, believing it was biblical truth despite variability in their own sexual practices. Some women did not agree that sex was meant for marriage only, questioning that it was biblical truth. Many women expressed gratitude for the church’s view of sacredness of sexual union in comparison to their views that the secular culture’s messages degraded and exploited sex. One woman claimed:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking about sex is taboo – sex is dirty</td>
<td>Sex is a sacred union and meant for marriage only.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex education means keeping girls virgins – intercourse/pregnancy is the bottom line</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual thoughts, feelings, and attraction is lust and therefore sinful</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The spiritual and social consequences of sex are grave and different for men and women</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A man’s sexuality is God-given; a woman’s is a perversion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual assault is tolerated and defended</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women are to blame for men’s sexual sin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women are morally weak temptresses and cannot be trusted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual purity will be rewarded with a great marriage, great sex, and minimal suffering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*One reason why I do like some of Catholic teaching, Catholic teaching talks about how sexuality is a gift and should be honored, and it should be*
respected. Although it’s skewed too, because it talks about if a woman
withholds herself from a man in marriage . . . that’s a sin. (C,3,14)

Talking about sex is taboo – sex is dirty. The women in the study repeatedly
mentioned this message as a primary one they received from both home and church. For
many it seemed to co-exist with, yet drown out, the message of the sacredness of sex.
Many mentioned the impact of the severe lack of sexual education they received coupled
with the continuous warnings about sex in their believing that sex was dirty and being
sexual made you dirty. Kristen shared:

I would say I learned next to nothing about sexuality from my faith, from
my church, from my parents . . . I swear, I feel like I was left to the wolves
on that, because it was left—it was just not talked about. It was completely
taboo. . . The only thing I ever remember was being taught was . . . that
you just don’t do it, is that it’s just all negative. It’s more of a feeling I
have than an actual specific memory . . . It always had a negative
connotation. It’s just forbidden. (K,1,148)

Cheryl claimed, “Sex was taboo – a necessary evil. Needed it to have babies, but
it wasn’t talked about - except for the fact that everybody on TV was having
affairs and half-dressed.” (Ch,1,98)

All of the women mentioned receiving inadequate or no education on sex. Most
women learned about sex from friends and from public school education programs.
Several mentioned having to pursue their mothers for help with the need for a bra,
shaving, or menstrual help. One woman did not have her period and finally approached
her mother at age 18, requesting to see a doctor. Later, a week prior to her wedding, her
mother told her she felt bad in not telling her what to expect. She stated, “I was like, ‘Hold up, you don’t need to,’ . . . She genuinely had told me nothing and thought that if she hadn’t told me anything I wouldn’t know anything.” (B,1,345) One woman shared of her parents putting her on birth control before college with no explanation. When she contracted an STD in college that made her sick, her parents said nothing to her about it. She claimed:

> It’s just that sexual taboo was so strong and the secrets were so strong and their denial that ‘no daughter of mine . . . If we don’t talk about it, it’s not there’ . . . That was the perfect chance for them to have a conversation with their daughter, a 23 year-old, about sexuality . . . It was a real failure, just nothingness. (U)

A number of women were exposed to pornography as children and developed an interest. Several had uncomfortable or abusive sexual encounters with other children or adults and felt they could not approach their parents, because talking about sex was taboo. Frequent messages from the church on the forbidden-ness of sex and the consequences of sex led to the perception of the dirtiness of sex. Kristen claimed:

> I just remember lots of sex, drugs, and rock & roll talk . . . There was never explanation or discussion about why we’re drawn to these things or what’s natural. . . and Satan was a very big part of the teaching . . . Satan’s talking to you, and it was almost a splitting of like, oh, that anxiety of ‘Is the angel gonna win or the devil gonna win today?’ . . . So sexuality became the devil winning, and the dirty. (K,1,248)
Sex education means keeping girls virgins - intercourse and pregnancy is the bottom line. The church addressed sexuality more frequently than the parents, not for the purpose of education, but for the enforcement of sexual rules and the subsequent consequences. Jordan shared:

For the most part, it was just ‘Don’t do it,’ because it’s bad . . . There were so many rules about how you were supposed to interact with the opposite sex, because everything could be construed as more than what it should be . . . I didn’t understand what the dancing problem was and the youth leaders were, ‘Well, dancing leads to sex,’ and sex is bad and you’re not going to have sex outside of marriage (Jo,1,462).

Jenny claimed:

There was no educational stuff. It was mostly about being holy and focusing on God . . . I got the chastity ring and stuff and like I pledged that I would stay abstinent until I got married . . . I was taught like even kissing was kind of crossing a line, and I didn’t necessarily abide by that . . . At the time, ‘I Kissed Dating Goodbye’ came out . . . And he didn’t kiss his wife until marriage . . . but I had a long-term boyfriend in high school.

(Je,1,96)

All of the women mentioned pregnancy as one of their greatest fears, as well as the greatest fear when it came to their sexuality. Cheryl stated, “He [father] said, this was my sex talk with him, ‘Do not come home pregnant.’ That was it.” Regarding her Catholic school upbringing, Cheryl stated:
The worst thing was to get pregnant, that was the focus, so you don’t get pregnant. Yeah, nothing about abstain, or this is a gift for your husband. None of that, just don’t get pregnant. Yeah, most of the people I knew in high school were either on the pill or using condoms. (Ch,1,666)

Also raised Catholic, Iris stated, “God forbid that you would have sex before you were married and you could get pregnant, okay . . . That was really strong in my head, very strong . . . If you do this you’ll go to hell.” (I,2,593)

**Sexual thoughts, feelings, and attraction is lust and therefore sinful.** All of the women mentioned the black-and-white severity in their Christian cultures about sexual desire. Any thought, feeling, or attraction was questioned as or deemed to be lust. Because of this, many expressed ongoing shame and confusion in their sexual history about lust and desire, whether it was having desire or being desirable. In talking about a conversation with a church leader as an adult, Beth stated, “So for him, any attraction, even just that little kind of flutter of response when you see someone that attracts you, is on par with wanting to commit adultery. And I thought, ‘man, talk about weighing people down with burdens too heavy to carry.’” (B,3,318)

Beth further added:

*The chastity culture and the modesty culture doesn’t help people, help kids, learn to sort through, you know, healthy attraction . . . You know, how many times have I heard that if a teenage boy is attracted to a girl and responds in a way, that’s lust. I’m like, ‘that’s crazy. That’s not healthy.*

(B,3,325)
For the women, this created great complications in their natural sexual
development, making development a scary, isolating, and shameful experience.

Lilly offered:

My experience of Christian upbringing is that there’s some sense that
somebody somewhere knows everything that’s right for you . . . So any
desire to explore is instantly labeled as bad, which makes all of that kind
of exploration scary, lascivious. It basically gives it over to the dark. So
for me, developing sexually was not allowed in my experience. (L,3,593)

The spiritual and social consequences of sex are grave and different for men
and women. The primary consequences of premarital sex, the women indicated, were
pregnancy, social and familial abandonment, diminished ability to marry well, and hell.

Most associated with pregnancy was the consequence of familial abandonment. For
Jenny, this served as a prevention of premarital sex in high school, “Well, not having sex
was more of a choice of not wanting to get pregnant.” On the hypothetical consequences
of a pregnancy that would “ruin the rest of my life,” she shared, “I’m pretty sure I would
have been kicked out on the street.” (Je,1,392) For Kristen, who went to a large Christian
college, pregnancy meant school expulsion:

It was the whole rule about getting kicked out if you got pregnant, which
was terrifying, and of course that’s the consequence for the girl, not the
boy . . . You don’t want to be one of those girls that is slutty or that sleeps
around or gets in trouble, but men never have that. Men are just doing
what men do, you know? (Kr,2,211).
For the eight women who did have sex prior to marriage, almost all of them hid their sexuality for years due to fears that their Christian community would abandon and shun them. For Chloe, who was raised Catholic, the history of the church served as a message for her today:

*The church teaches chastity, but there is this ugly history of the Magdalene laundries where women who became pregnant prior to marriage would go to these convents to repent by doing, like, harsh work, that inherent badness . . . boys never got punished. There was this separation, you know.* (C,1,133)

The loss of ability to marry well was frequently mentioned as a felt consequence for not being a virgin. For example, Jenny had mixed feelings about not having sex with her boyfriend in high school, yet stated that she ultimately did not regret it. She stated:

*I don’t know if my current husband would have dated me knowing I had a sexual history, and so I think that would’ve made him not even an option. He was looking for a virgin and so I think he would’ve broken up with me if he found out I had sex with someone else.* (Je,2,100)

When asked if she would have opted out of marrying him had he not been a virgin, she stated, “Oh no, that wouldn’t have made a difference for me.” (C,2,110)

Hell was mentioned as a feared consequence for having sexual desires or sexual behaviors. For Becky, “If these things were really things you wanted, then you probably weren’t saved. You were probably going to hell.” (Be,2,615) For Kristen, Satan and sexuality were synonymous:
So the Devil’s winning, because pleasure’s going to feel good, and it’s going to draw you, but pleasure is bad. Resist temptation. Resist. Resist. Well, I didn’t resist . . . There’s this idea that kind of not only an identity category, like the good girl/bad girl and the whore/Madonna, but like a ‘You’re going to hell/you’re going to heaven,’ like these are life-and-death issues. (Kr,1,251)

Kate shared of a critical experience in her sexual history:

‘Cause being the True Love Waits President of ‘the Virgin Club,’ and I was the one preaching it all, and as soon as I went to college my freshman year, I got a boyfriend in the beginning of the school year, and probably like I want to say three months in, we had sex and I wanted to do it, but as soon as it happened I rolled over and bawled my eyes out, because I was for sure going to hell. I just knew it. (Ka,1,36)

Several women shared profound stories in which they experienced consequences for something a boy did with them while he received no consequence. For example, one woman was pulled from college ministry leadership when her boyfriend, another ministry leader, gave her a peck on the lips at a ministry event. She was forced to leave her position on ministry team, while her boyfriend was not reprimanded.

The “double standard” frequently mentioned by the participants, came from the many messages that men, not women were sexual beings. Becky stated, “The men were let off the hook, so to speak, in terms of, they were just red-blooded males.” (Be,1,64) The experiences women had of being blamed often
contributed to the belief that the social and spiritual consequences of sex were
meant only for girls.

**A man’s sexuality is God-given; a woman’s is a perversion.** Coupled with the
cultural more that men are red-blooded sexual males, and therefore, not held as
responsible, was the message for the women that they did not have a sexual drive, and to
have one would be a perversion. From an early age the women reported thinking
something was wrong with them for having sexual feelings and desires. Overwhelmingly,
the greatest struggle for most women’s feelings of sexual perversion was the message
that masturbation was something only boys did. Most of the women had a normalized
view of male masturbation and just assumed it was natural for all boys and men, but
when it pertained to their masturbation as a woman, the reaction was quite opposite.
Several women mentioned it as a flaw in their character, and one woman was fearful she
was mocking the church, marriage, and Christ because of her masturbation.

Conversely, the women were taught that all men had an exceptionally high libido
and that nothing kept them from sexual desire. One woman, whose husband had severe
low sexual desire and arousal from the beginning of their marriage, shared of her
surprise, “I did not even think about this possibility. I thought it would be a struggle if the
woman wasn’t interested, but I was interested, so I figured all the bases were covered.”
(U)

**Sexual assault is tolerated and defended.** The message that sexual assault or
sexual abuse is not a great offense was demonstrated to many of the women, not in direct
teaching, but in the action of others and in Christian adults’ response to known sexual
offense. Many of the women had a friend, a family member, or they themselves were a
victim of sexual abuse. A couple of women had a family member who was a perpetrator of sexual abuse. All of the women who mentioned these situations mentioned a significant under-response by Christian adults in their lives and their churches to sexual victimization. In their religious communities, it was a common experience to allow the perpetrated adult to remain in the child’s life and to remain in positions of Church function and leadership.

**Women are to blame for men’s sexual sin.** The feeling that women were to blame for men’s sexual sin primarily arose from the rhetoric and frequency of messages for girls and women on modesty dress, coupled with the message that men were not in control of their sexual feelings and behaviors. For Becky, this rise in female instruction and chastisement came when she began to sexually mature, “*It was probably my early teen years . . . We got a lot more pressure right then in terms of, because we were starting to sexually mature . . . Then there was constant talk of sexuality as sinful. The inability for men to resist temptation and, therefore, it was put on women to not tempt.*” (Be,1,213)

Beth indicated, as an adult, frequently hearing from other mothers the need to instruct their daughters in the ways of modesty. One mother, speaking to a group of women, stated, “*just by being here, they cause our sons problems.*” (B,1,530)

Addressing the purity culture, Beth stated, “*Firstly, it makes girls responsible for boys’ sexual choices, then it tells boys they can’t control their thoughts and actions.*” (B,1,532)

She shared of another woman teaching to mothers that this was analogous to chocolate cake; if the cake is sitting out there long enough, we are going to break down and eat it. In response, Beth shared, “*It almost seems to me like it defends some sexual assault or*
rape, like you just can’t expect a boy to control himself for very long if you’re not doing your part, dressing modestly according to wildly divergent definitions.” (B,1,570)

Kate offered:

> And the women message there was, I guess you could call it shaming, but also like, they would probably couch it more as trying to educate girls on dressing appropriately, because if you show too much... You’re tempting the guys... There was that whole conversation on how women were supposed to act, because you don’t want to be the one responsible for tempting the guy beyond what they can bear, and as a good sister of Christ you’re supposed to want to help the men not tempt them or seduce them. (K,1,58)

Chloe stated:

> So they printed these brochures on what sin is, and I never take confession to be that way. I take it like, ‘What’s separating me from God?’ but it was a checklist – and, ‘Did you dress provocatively?’ I was reading that and kind of stewing in the pews, you know, because it puts the responsibility back on the woman if the man is lusting. (C,1,154)

**Women are morally weak temptresses and cannot be trusted.** The teaching that women were temptresses, were more prone to moral failure, and were in need of male covering was an overarching theme for the women about their identities as women. Almost all of the women shared this as the primary message they received about their identity. This message was delivered in various manners, depending on denomination and tradition. Most participants did not recall being directly told that they themselves were a
temptress. The method of delivery was mainly in the form of instruction on not tempting men to lust and biblical teachings on women in the Bible. For the Catholic women, teachings referencing the Virgin Mary as compared to Mary Magdalene served as a model for them of virginity or whoredom. For the Protestant women, sermons and biblical teachings on Eve’s responsibility for The Fall became internalized as an identity trait. A number of participants mentioned the reference from their church leaders that women were the “weaker vessel,” led them to feel inferior as a woman. A few women recalled disparaging messages about non-Christian women as being loose: a woman who was not in submission was a sexually depraved woman. As Lilly stated:

Everything needs put in place in order to keep the women in check. It’s so frustrating. Combine that with the secular culture, like the Victoria Secret model. Within the church, that just confirms the notion of ‘See? A women left,’ you know, ‘Women not in submission, this is what happens.’ (L,1,30)

The women mentioned various sexual policies of propriety and theological beliefs about gender roles as creating significant shame and blame, rendering women as untrustworthy and deficient. Situations in which women were “protected” by men had the result of making them feel untrustworthy and morally corrupt. Incidences where male religious leaders would not speak to them behind a closed door or counsel them had a shaming effect on the women, given that they felt responsible for men’s sexual feelings. The teaching of male headship often had the effect for many of the women that women are incompetent and morally deficient, therefore needing male oversight.

Many of the women noted frequent instruction on how to be a godly woman. This came from sermons, teachings, and books on how to be a godly and pure woman led
them to feel uniquely morally deficient and in greater need of instruction as compared to men. Much of the teaching was a how-to instruction on the feminine, godly ideal. This included how to be a godly wife, how to be “the Proverbs 31 woman,” how to be a “Mary instead of a Martha,” how to have a “quiet and gentle spirit,” or how to offer themselves sexually to their husbands like the woman from Song of Solomon.

**Sexual purity will be rewarded with a great marriage, great sex, and minimal suffering.** Most of the women indicated that they were promised rewards for their purity in the form of greater happiness and less suffering. Referencing the teachings on a woman’s role as a mother and wife, Becky shared, “If you do all these X, Y, and Z things, you know, you will be fulfilled and happy.” (Be,1,240) Kate offered, “If you do all the right things you’re supposed to be doing, then you’ll never suffer, and you just have to do the right things.” (Ka,1,369) One woman whose husband left her for another woman shared, “The whole protection, like if you don’t have premarital sex and if you stay pure. . . basically you’re adultery-protected . . . yeah, which is not necessarily true.” (Ch,3,1019)

**Categories**

Seven categories emerged from the data found to be most significant in how the interplay of religious messages and sexual experiences were internalized for these women, thus informing their sexual self-views. Incorporated into the findings was a view of sexuality seen to be holistically emotional, psychological, behavioral, relational, and spiritual. The seven categories were a) Identity Conflicts, b) Shame, c) Self-objectification, d) Self-blame, e) Sexual and Relational Problems with Men, f) Spiritual and Sexual Conflicts, and g) Affect Dysregulation.
The research questions elicited information regarding their sexuality that occurred over a period of time, from childhood to present. Sadly, the messages they reported receiving from their religious communities regarding their sexuality were overwhelmingly experienced as negative and harmful. What emerged from each of the women was a similar story arc of past and present impact and past and present coping, healing, or recovery. With a few exceptions, the older women’s stories consisted of greater time-spans of healing than the younger women. For the most part, age-wise, the 30’s for all of the women marked a period of crisis in their sexuality in which they felt powerless to cope as they had been accustomed to coping. Therefore, most participants in their early 30’s appeared to be in the middle of their crisis in sexuality at the time of the study, whereas most of the women in their 40’s and older, while certainly not complete and without further crises in sexuality, showed greater levels of healing in their sexual stories than the younger women. The exception included two of the youngest women in the study who appeared to be pre-crisis, as they demonstrated the greatest amount of identity foreclosure and the least amount of self-awareness regarding their sexuality. Additionally, two of the older women appeared to be more delayed in the healing of their sexuality, as their sexual experiences in their adult lives elicited further damage and pain, and they often relied on avoidance as a form of coping.

Consistently, the primary agents of healing for many of the women as adults included healthy relating with their husbands and counseling. While healthy relationships with their husbands helped with shame and self-blame, most found that it was not enough for them standing alone and felt the need for counseling as well. The women mentioned counseling as the most beneficial method of recovery, thus far, regarding their sexuality.
It was also clear from the interviews that the women who had been in counseling for longer periods of time proved to be further along in their healing and recovery. For one woman, going to a church as an adult that was egalitarian also proved helpful in her emotional and spiritual healing. For many of the other women, their church and religious communities as adults were a mixed bag of healing and continued injury regarding their sexuality. Many of the women identified they currently attended churches less harmful to them as women than those they grew up in, yet most stated they continued to feel injured to varying degrees by their current churches’ teachings and treatment of them as women. One woman decided to leave religious life altogether as a result of how her church leaders and members treated her as a woman.

Each of the categories will be addressed below, including subcategories. Due to the potentially identifiable personal information shared, some of the direct statements made by participants will not be referenced to a specific person but will instead be identified as undisclosed, “(U).” Below is an outline for all categories and subcategories (Figure 1).
Conflicts of identity were significant for the women, arising from morally dichotomous portrayals of women as good and not sexual or bad and sexual. Teachings of biblical women who were seductresses coupled with frequent instruction on how not to cause men to sin sexually left them with a core shame and insecure sense of self for being a woman. This conflict was not often based in sexual behaviors but more in identity. For example, the quote above was written by one of the participants who struggled with lifelong sexual shame, identifying herself as a whore, yet having had sex only once at age 24, prior to her marriage. Following is a list of words mentioned by the women to describe themselves sexually:

- Temptress
- Predator
- Pervert
- Whore
- Slut
- Vixen
Some of the terms were stated directly to them, but most pertained to how they felt others saw them as a woman in their Christian communities and how they tended to feel themselves. With the frequent instruction on how to be godly, how to be pure, and how to not be tempting, the women shared of a life-long experience of shameful sexual self-views. This led to an under-developed identity based in confusion and conflict, resulting in an experience of identity that can be categorized as, a) a fragmented experience of self, b) disconnection with self, c) hiding, and d) struggles with value and self-worth.

**Fragmented experience of self.** The conflict between who they were supposed to be and who they actually were created a fragmented sense of identity for all of the women. All spoke of a similar confusion regarding their identity, and while some expressed growth over time with identity integration and stability, all shared of current significant struggles with varying aspects of identity fragmentation. If growth was indicated in this area, it was often through years of healthy relating with their husbands and/or counseling. Fragments of identity included, a) a binary view of identity, b) a sense of identity as a destination, c) a value of purity and submission as identity, and d) a struggle with seeing authenticity as rebelliousness.

**Binary Identity.** A binary identity structure became for each of the women a manner for describing her internal views of self and the views others had of her. Self-descriptions consisted of an either/or type of person: Madonna/Whore; Good girl/Bad girl; Temptress/Helpmate; People pleaser/Rebellious; Strong/Submissive. Women were
seen as existing as one or the other - being sexual or not being sexual determined which side you were on, and for these women, being sexual was identified as having sexual thoughts and feelings. Each woman saw herself from a very early age as being “that” kind of girl, leading to high levels of emotional distress and shame.

Becky shared:

_There was very much this kind of female dichotomy. You’re either kind of this virginal, perfect kind of Madonna figure, or you were a slut. There was, like, no in-between . . . It all came back to women were ‘the weaker vessel.’ They were the Eve who tempted Adam. And so they were either the temptress or helpmate, but there was no kind of in-between._ (Be,1,30)

Kristen offered:

_It’s again that splitting idea where you’re, you know, you can’t ever be in the gray. You’re either good or bad and that always kind of tormented me . . . that Madonna/Whore split . . . I felt guilty all the time. I really was so fragmented, just I never could figure out how to merge the two . . . It took years until I came to this church where I am now where I feel like I can be . . . where I can be my whole self_ (K,1,730).

**Undeveloped woman– Identity as destination.** The pressure to suppress maturity and not develop sexually, while simultaneously being exposed to sexual material and encounters, put these women in a bind, creating shame and subsequent identity fragmentation. A few of the women noted early exposure to pornography or sexual victimization becoming internalized for being the bad girl or whore. Three women mentioned their parents’ divorce leading them to feel fragmented and sexually marred at
a young age, with one claiming it was her “scarlet letter” to be from a divorced family in her church. For most, the negative sense of identity began at a young age from having sexual feelings and for engaging in masturbation. Once puberty hit, most women described feeling pressure from church and family to suppress a strong identity and to remain a little girl, one who was not sexual. Becky described feeling the pressure growing up to be someone she was not, someone who did not develop:

> You know, there was this paradoxical conundrum of ‘Do I act weak and silly and stupid like the giggly girls over there in the corner, or do I act mature and carry myself the way I want to, but that is then deemed sexual and predatory?’ (Be,1,488)

Once married, insecure identity for not meeting the ideal included felt deficiencies in sexually pleasing her husband and conflicts over being an idealized godly wife and mother. All of the women spoke of their life-long attempts at becoming the other type of woman. For Iris it was her mother who epitomized the Madonna, a highly feminine, spiritual, and submissive woman, none of which she felt she was. For Jenny, as a wife and mother, it was the “Proverbs 31” woman who she described as hard-working, helping the poor and needy, pulling her financial weight, and being respected by everyone. In response, she claimed, “Someday I’ll get there hopefully” (Je,2,704).

Almost all of the women expressed feeling delayed in their development as women. Becky stated, “I found the messages were so conflicting and chaotic that I never really created a full identity . . . There were too many people telling me what I was supposed to be instead of letting me be me” (Be,2,37). The women shared of the life-long struggle to try and feel “whole,” or “integrated” in their identities. Kristen shared, “I
don’t think I had a stable sense of self for many years, until I met my husband. I really struggled with it up until then, blending the two. There was a dissonance there, you know, ‘Who do you want me to be?’” (Kr,1,555).

For some who were single, there was an experience of not feeling like a fully formed woman, grounded in the belief that you were not fully a woman until you got married and had sex. For the two women in the study who were virgins and in their 30’s, part of the struggle was in not feeling fully formed due to their lack of sexual experience. One of the women questioned her ability to be in the study, as she struggled with equating sexual experience with legitimacy as a woman. She stated, “There’s shame for not being sexually active . . . How does that define me as a woman? Does that allow me to qualify as a woman? I know that sounds ridiculous, but that’s how we seem to define ourselves” (C,3,425). Lilly, who married in her late 20’s expressed her experience of Christian culture, “I feel like single women are not allowed to develop.” (L,1,548) Susan, who was single and a clergywoman in a non-church ministry, claimed:

I feel like this is what I was made to do and that is really empowering to me, like, I don’t need to just wait around . . . That was hard after seminary, because I wanted to be married so that I’d have someone to take care of me . . . I needed to grow up and assume some responsibility as an adult and also as a woman, and that’s what I was taught in seminary, that men do all the hard work and women stay home and have children (S,1,148).

Purity and submission as identity. For each woman, when younger, virginity was taught and believed to be the defining virtue for her identity. All of the women, except
one, maintained virginity up to senior year of high school. While none of the women reported feeling pure in high school, their virginity became their hope for becoming that other woman, the ideal woman. Three reported not having any relationships with boys in high school and recalled feeling pride at having subverted sexual desires. Three recalled having highly sexual but non-coital sexual relationships with boyfriends in high school, which created a mix of pride for maintaining virginity but shame for not being able to control their sexual behaviors. Kristen stated, “I, for some reason, labeled my whole identity with these behaviors, so I would swing from believing I was literally a good girl to literally a bad girl. I mean, it was that extreme.” (Kr,2,326) She later stated, “They were just not the healthiest things in the world and they made me feel bad, but at that time I thought of it in extremes. That made me a bad girl.” (Kr,2,425) Jordan kept her boyfriends from everyone’s knowledge throughout high school for “fear of being thrown out of the good group – the good kids that all the parents were proud of that were going to grow up to be good Christians and, you know, not falter” (Jo,1,172).

Six of the nine women mentioned the loss of their virginity as significantly informing an identity crisis in some measure. For five of them, it occurred in college and for the sixth it occurred after college. Most mentioned that once it occurred, they felt a diminished need to remain abstinent, in part, seeing their identity as rooted in their purity, and their purity as rooted in their virginity. Once this occurred, they believed themselves to be a different “kind” of person. For Beth who had sex for the first time her freshman year in college, she tied this to her subsequent sexual experiences, “Once I made that shift, what’s the point then, because sex was just such a big deal. Once you’re not a
virgin, then nothing else matters” (B,1,703). The two women who have maintained their virginity expressed seeing their virginity as a hallmark for their identity.

Marriage was mentioned by several of the women as being a significant challenge to identity due to the sudden switch of expectation that now to be a good and pleasing woman was to be a sexual woman. Five of the seven women in the study who had been married reported a long identity struggle upon marriage, primarily in feeling like a whore for having sex with their husbands or for having sexual desires aroused, or for feeling the loss of ownership over their bodies once married. What was once so shameful for them in their identity now became something required of them.

For all 11 women, identity struggles based on gendered expectations began early in high school and have continued until the present day. From all women, this too seemed to take a binary form of comparison on which “type” of woman they in fact were. Did they want to have a career or stay home and raise children? Were they opinionated and strong or submissive and pleasing? All women mentioned the submissive woman who stayed home and raised children as being considered the ideal woman according to their religious communities. For Becky, “In my church growing up, the men were much more expressive and charismatic than the women, because if a woman was like that, she would be suspect because she might be trying to get attention . . . So I have learned to be very controlled.” (Be,3,641)

**Authenticity as rebelliousness.** A number of women identified themselves as “rebellious” in nature for not following the religious gender expectations placed on her. Rebellious often meant going against the stream in terms of wanting to have a career, desiring a boyfriend, or not following certain expectations. In reference to her desire to
have a career and to not have children, Becky claimed, “When something is forced, it creates this dichotomy where to do differently is ‘rebellious’” (Be,1,504). For Susan, “I think even still today I feel this, there’s this sort of rebellious side in me. I call it rebellious; it’s probably just normal.” (S,3,294)

Others identified themselves as “people pleasers.” Growing up, they followed all the rules and avoided doing or looking like they did anything that displeased others. Kristen stated, “I blended in everywhere, you know, fake and not authentic, because of that ‘bad girl/good girl,’ you know, kind of thing” (Kr,1,743). For many, this continued into adulthood. A number of women mentioned hiding their sexual desires in relationships for many years and not sharing with their partners what they preferred and did not prefer sexually for fear of displeasing their men. A couple of women indicated long periods of time when they would not disclose to their sexual partners the level of physical pain they experienced during intercourse, stating they did not want to “displease him.”

Disconnected from self. All of the women reported a life-long journey toward self-awareness and the struggle with internal disconnection and compartmentalization. As Susan stated:

I have these thoughts about how legalism works and how it covers the humanness in us and, you know, trying to like somehow recognize what is human in me without feeling shame . . . It’s always working and striving to be better and change and be a different, almost feeling like I need to be a different person. It’s taken a lot of work of acceptance, which I’m not fully accepting myself . . . So I’m just now exploring who I really am as a
person, the good and the bad, without having to fix everything that is bad about me . . . I always got that message that we are to become holy; I never really got that message of what I already am in Christ, whether I keep all these rules (S,1,170).

Experiences of disconnection from self were manifested as lack of self-awareness and a splitting between the non-sexual and sexual self. These experiences of disconnection often arose as forms of coping through suppression and denial. 

**Self-Awareness and the underdeveloped self.** For many, the interview process proved a conduit for unknown aspects of themselves. Kate shared, “I just haven’t thought about what it is like to be a woman and my sexual development; Nobody talks about that” (Ka,2,14). Iris expressed difficulty in understanding how her past experiences with men have affected her struggles with trusting men. The three-interview process proved beneficial as it took awhile for the women to remember why they believed something or how they came about believing something. At first, a number of women had no idea how they developed a belief about their sexuality or spirituality but then over time, they were able to remember comments, instruction, etc., and how it made them feel.

A number of the women demonstrated difficulty in understanding how their beliefs were formed and had difficulty making connections between messages they received and their sexuality and spirituality. For example, while all women who masturbated expressed some level of shame over this, some of the women were convinced it was wrong. When questioned about why they believed this to be wrong, they had no response and demonstrated that it was not something they had ever thought through. Additionally, some of the women who signed purity pledges committing to
abstain from sex before marriage could not understand or address why they believed that sexual sin was the most horrible of sins. For those women who had a less salient understanding of these connections, there was a tendency to blame themselves for their feelings and reactions. Some of the women made comments such as, “I have no idea why I would think such things” or “I don’t know why I would feel that way; I’m very sensitive.”

Many shared experiences of the long road to finding greater self-awareness. For example, Lilly mentioned a book she read as a young adult, *Lady in Waiting* (Kendall & Jones, 2005), stating that at the time, she devoured it for the encouragement it offered, holding out the hope that she as a woman could make all kinds of achievements while she was waiting for Mr. Right. She stated,

> Back then when I read it, I thought, ’Yeah, life is not on hold until you get married, like, go live your life’ . . . Then I reread it years later, I saw there was a norm – ‘While you’re waiting, it’s ok to live’ . . . It’s just odd, the paradigm feels really odd, or disturbing actually, like, that somehow you’re not fully alive or fully complete until you get married (L,3,166).

Kate also shared of reading *Lady in Waiting* (Kendall & Jones, 2005) at a time of great depression and spiritual disillusionment after the death of her father. She claimed it commended for her, “If you’re single, basically you have to go serve God so that God can use you, and you have to make good use of your time as a single person. I was like, ‘Oh crap, well apparently since I’m single that means that I have to go be a missionary’” (Ka,1,32). From there, she went to a foreign country for a year as a missionary. She stated, “I told people I was going to fix my relationship with God, but I realize now that it
was probably just running away” (Ka,1,35). For Becky, who felt she grew up with the church telling her, “how I should be as a woman and the path I should take,” she shared of the many years it has taken her:

> to take care of my own body and that it would be okay to take care of it . . .
> and to create my own more integrated identity that wasn’t really there
> before . . . and also to be aware of my body physically and to say, you
> know, I feel good; I don’t feel good. But that did not happen until probably
> my 40’s (Be,2,134).

**Sex as separateness from self.** Lilly, who has been in therapy for many years, realized during the interview process how “non-integrated that part of me feels – sexuality, being a woman” (L,2,10). She described that even her years of treatment for her sexual abuse had been done apart from her general sexuality. She claimed the disconnection has sometimes helped her, “I feel a little good about it, because I have been able to separate it out and enjoy sex with my husband, but there are times when it does peek through” (L,3,15). Susan shared of her loneliness and unmet desires “being single and feeling lonely. I think of linking my sexuality with that; I haven’t really ever thought of it in that way. I came to a new awareness as I wrote” (S,2,14). For one woman, who was the president of her high school’s True Love Waits committee and then was in several sexual relationships beginning in college:

> When you asked to describe yourself as a sexual woman, the first thing I
> wrote was that I’m not a sexual person . . . I haven’t put much thought into
> preferences or what I like or don’t like . . . I read ‘50 Shades of Gray,’ and
> I loved it. I was fascinated, because I wanted to understand what goes on
in a sexual woman’s mind . . . so I feel as a sexual person I’m completely undeveloped and confused and conflicted and just not really at all educated or aware, just a complete lack of awareness in terms of my sexual identity (U).

Becky described how in her religious culture growing up, teenagers were “kept in a holding pen until they became adults” (Be,2,31) and not allowed to develop sexually. She mentioned how this impacted her disconnection in identity, “So, in times of transition, when I should have been exploring and figuring that out, instead it became a separate part of my identity” (Be,2,35).

Several women in the study described a disconnected experience of self, occurring during sex in various manners. Often they described this disconnection to occur due to lack of sexual arousal, physical pain, or intrusive negative thoughts of self during sex. Several women mentioned feeling disconnected from herself during sex so much, they needed to fantasize or drink alcohol in order to feel aroused. Some described hiding their difficulties from their partners and silently coping. When asked the cause of this disconnection, sexual shame was frequently mentioned for feeling she was a whore for having sex or for enjoying sex, whether or not she was married.

**Coping through suppression and denial.** All of the women indicated various methods of suppression and denial used to adapt to conflicts within them and their communities regarding their sexuality. One was to primarily not talk about experiences and feelings of sexuality with anyone, and another was to shut down desire and self-awareness. In order to avoid temptation, Susan decided in high school to not date or have
male friends, which she maintained for well over 5 years throughout college and after.

Cheryl intentionally kept her older teenage daughters from any contact with boys in order to keep them pure until marriage.

For Kate:

*I think I shut down and like I shoved all of that in a closet and closed the door . . . That was really the only way for me to be able to go this long without having sex. Just completely shut down that part of my mind, body, everything* (Ka,2,202).

For Beth, married over 20 years, she is just beginning to engage certain aspects of her sexuality:

*I feel like in this area, I’m in this sort of progressive truth telling with myself, like I can only handle it in little chunks at a time . . . I did talk to my therapist Monday - ‘How I can be at this age, forty-nine, and still be sorting out such a big piece of myself?’ - you know, fear would be the right word . . . the kind of horror over what I was letting myself acknowledge* (B,3,70).

Several of the women mentioned ongoing attempts in their dating histories to rationalize to themselves the “ok-ness” of engaging in various sexual behaviors, so that they wouldn’t be “that bad.” Often, other sexual acts, such as oral sex, occurred more frequently in order to maintain virginity and thus purity. Some shared of trying to develop more significant feelings or deluding themselves about feelings for men with whom they were sexually engaged in order to rationalize their sexual behaviors to themselves. For Kristen, she told
herself that sex with her boyfriend in college was okay, because they were in love, but with the next boyfriend, she felt like a slut because she didn’t love him. Jenny, who felt very guilty about her sexual behaviors with her high school boyfriend, shared, “Looking back I was at a teeny-weeny place. I’m feeling like there was nothing wrong with what I did after all. Like as long as there wasn’t actual penetration, there wasn’t a risk to any of those things that I was afraid of” (Je,1,611).

**Hiding.** Struggles with identity and shame often resulted in hiding parts of themselves and living compartmentalized lives, exacerbating a disconnected, shameful, and isolated experience for the women. Hiding was often exhibited through secrecy, lying, and compartmentalization.

**Secrecy.** Several mentioned secrecy and lying as a major theme in their sexual story. Several shared of having secret boyfriends due to lack of approval by friends and family. Most reported not only concealing their sexual activities, but some mentioned overtly lying to friends and family in efforts to cover up their sexual activity. Kristen, who did not have sex until college, in talking about her high school experience, shared, “I was two different people and that kind of ties in with that Madonna/whore – what if they knew what I was doing on Friday night? I kept secrets. I kept secrets” (Kr,2,308). She also mentioned a time in college when, in response to the devastation of her “bad-boy” non-Christian boyfriend breaking up with her, with whom she’d been having sex, she told a family member that he broke up with her because she wouldn’t have sex with him. She shared, “I can’t believe I said that lie, but I wanted so desperately for it to be true, because I felt so dirty” (Kr,1,519). Beth stated, “I put a lot of energy in snowing my
parents” (B,1,855). Cheryl, who had a few sexual relationships prior to her marriage, reported, “with the sex is an evil practice of necessity . . . obviously I hid my premarital sex” (Ch,2,496). Many of the women mentioned the great isolation and anxiety they felt, because they hid their sexuality from their close friends. They revealed lying to their Christian friends about having sex with their boyfriends, so they would not be rejected by their friends.

Many women mentioned their hiding as related to the lack of an emotionally safe place to process sexual feelings and experiences. Beth shared, “There was no place in my life where that was okay. Just none, you know? Certainly not in my family or my church” (B,1,803). When asked of some if they had regrets in not talking about their sexual struggles to their family or friends, they responded with an emphatic, “No, that would not have been good,” citing the consequences they would have received for their openness, primarily the end of Christian friendship and the end of reverence and respect within their Christian community.

For many of the women, the fear and shame at sharing sexual information with friends and husbands currently remains high. Many confided sexual information for the first time during the interviews, and others stated that their first sexual disclosures occurred with their counselors later in their adult life. Several women reported still having significant sexual information they had yet to tell their husbands 15+ years into their marriages or still feeling mortified if anyone knew they were not virgins when they married. While many continued to struggle in sharing their sexuality, others shared of the journey in opening up and facing the ingrained fear of rejection and abandonment for disclosing their sexual stories. For Beth, “It bothers me that it’s still a fear, just because
I’d like to be able to be more open – just generally. I’d like to be able to be more open with people” (B,1,834).

Compartmentalization. Compartmentalization about sexuality often dictated how these women experienced much of their lives as Christians. Many talked about having two types of friends growing up, Christians with whom they withheld their sexual information, and non-Christian friends they could talk to about their sexuality. For fear of rejection from their Christian community, their sexuality and sexual behaviors were separated out from the rest of their lives and kept in secret. Once married, most claimed their sexual lives with their husbands have never been shared with others and have thus been in the dark. Many, however, identified counseling as the conduit for beginning to talk about their sexuality, yet revealed that much of their sexuality had yet to be addressed in counseling, due to fear and shame - if not asked, they didn’t share.

Even during the interviews, many were surprised at how different it was for them to share sexual information. One woman, who was a prolific writer and thinker on these issues, mentioned she has managed to write quite a bit on the topic of women, religion, and sexuality but has done so without having to self-disclose. She stated, “I feel a little embarrassed that I wasn’t able to keep this academic somehow . . . women, religion, and sexuality – those are things that I’m very interested in and passionate about, but I guess I didn’t expect it to stir up so much personal stuff” (B,3,8). Almost all of the women, though, expressed gratefulness for sharing during the interviews, noting it made them feel valued that someone would be interested enough to ask.

Value and self-worth. For all of the women, a significant part of their identity conflicts comprised of feeling low value and self-worth, because they were women.
Many shared stories in which they felt mistrusted or not esteemed in their religious communities and families, even though women were often verbally touted as being prized in their community. These conflicted messages created great fragments in identity for them. They felt devalued standing on their own, but valued as an object of man’s desire, for what they could offer a man and the ability to comply with what was expected of them. For these women, being true to herself was not valued and was seen as threatening to her religious community, contributing to life-long attempts to suppress her true self and be someone else. Problems of value and self-worth were internalized as feeling less than men and feeling that sex ruins you. This was manifested through continual attempts to earn value.

**Less than.** A pervasive theme for these women was the experience of feeling “less than,” of inherently having less value than men. This was internalized through seeing themselves as morally deficient, and therefore, distrusting themselves. Like many of the women, for Becky, puberty became a time of realization regarding her gender value, “I’m coming to this time of definite dawning that I am very low on the totem pole in terms of, I don’t get to make any decisions, because I’m a girl” (Be, 2, 325). Lilly stated, “I clearly remember the Genesis passage being taught, that the woman is the temptress . . . that women should submit, because they’re temptresses, because they’re not capable of good on their own, you know?” (L, 1, 40).

Several of the women who attended a couple of seminaries around the country, claimed this environment accentuated the feeling of being “less than” men. Kate mentioned in seminary:
That was a whole new ballgame for me in terms of the way the men acted, and I really felt less than . . . You know, coming from a family that basically expects leadership and independence from women, and women are just as good as men, it was really hard for me . . . The message was pretty clear in seminary that this is a man’s world (Ka,1,138).

Lilly, who struggled similarly in seminary with diminished worth and value, shared an experience of an on-campus workshop in which there was a panel discussion of only men addressing whether or not women could serve as church deacons:

\textit{I spoke up and told them this was ridiculous . . . I was crying. It’s so painful to hear men continue to argue over the role of the women in front of the women, as though we have no worth, as though we can’t speak for ourselves (L,1,311).}

\textbf{Value is not inherent but earned.} Many mentioned the belief that as a woman, value was not inherent, it was bestowed; it was conditional, and it was accessed through sexual purity, submissiveness, and beauty. Lilly shared of feeling her seminary culture idealized a passive woman, “It makes me feel like I’m not a prime mover. I’m the one who waits. The waiting does not have to imply this. It feels a bit like not being intrinsically worthwhile. Worth feels like it’s bestowed” (L,3,300).

All of the women identified purity and submission as being what their religious community most valued for them as women. Becky claimed, “The more pure you were, the more worthy of God you were” (Be,1,835). Purity and submission to male authority was their ticket to belonging and value in their family and church. If this were not true or
not seen to be true, there would be losses to reputation and esteem. Kate stated, “Those girls who had sex were seen as weaker in their faith – you were respected and revered as a girl for your purity” (Ka,2,391).

As adult women, most assessed their value in their religious communities as weighted more on the side of submissiveness and fulfilling their roles as wife and mother. One woman shared, “I feel like before I was married, it was all about purity; now it’s all about being a submissive woman” (Ch,2,245). Becky, who believed she has resisted this expectation through her rebelliousness, stated, “I still try to placate and make amends for not being the good girl” (Be,2,134). Lilly stated:

There’s weight on a woman’s worth being a wife and mother, right? -- that being a woman’s route to redemption, right? -- the only possible context for her to be like prominent in community life or anything like that without being seen as a disrupter, lascivious, or a temptress, you know? (L,3,310)

Cheryl, who experienced a crisis when her husband left her for another woman, despite her efforts to be all that was expected of her, claimed, “What’s happening is that women appear to be valued for their mothering and everything. Really, they’re devalued, because they just have babies and take care of the house” (Ch,1,1058).

**Sex ruins you.** All of the women expressed fear over to the detrimental consequences for them having had sex. One consequence mentioned by most of the women that they internalized from their religious culture growing up was the belief that
virginity gave you value, and the loss of it ruined you. Susan shared of an experience from her youth group leader that has had a significant impact on her:

*I remember that he had a rose and he kept like pulling the petals off, and was like, ‘You can never fix that, you can never put it back together, like it’s broken. And like that’s what happens when you have sex. . . And, I don’t know, maybe I just interpreted it that way, because I’m female, but it seemed like it was more geared towards girls. Like you are the rose – like the female is the rose, and like you are not okay, you can never be put back together or whole again if you have sex. So probably a lot of like fear based teaching it seems like (S,1,12).*

Several others were taught similar metaphorical stories as teens, often through church skits proffering the same message: sex ruins you, you’re damaged goods, but only if you’re a girl. Another similar skit, interestingly mentioned by more than one woman, was one in which a girl held a paper heart, was told to hand it to a line of boys, and each boy was then told to rip a piece of the heart off, until she was left with a nub of paper. The adult leader would then share that no one was going to want just a nub of a heart. As one woman shared, “The message was, ‘You have nothing left of you after that; nothing left to give. Who would want that?’” (Je,2,452) For each who shared this vignette, the one holding the heart was always a girl, a message that did not go unmissed on the women. Kate was asked what would have happened to her if she had sex. She replied:

*I would never have been, like, loved or accepted by my husband. That I would basically be ruining my relationship with my future husband and by*
having sex that he would be ashamed of me or not want to marry me because I was not a virgin . . . Christian men only want to marry Christian women who are virgins (Ka,1,88).

Susan who has remained a virgin and has been fearful of dating for fear of sexual temptation, shared of an experience with a friend in high school who became pregnant:

*I thought, this is what will happen if you sleep around, and like maybe she was not as good as me because of that. And she didn’t have like the status in youth group. It sounds so terrible . . . I still have not had sex, and I think about if I actually did, I would be devastated of like ’I am so unworthy and like I don’t think I would be loved. I almost feel that God would shun me, and I’m like, ’Man, how do people just go from that to being married and having sex all the time? That’s crazy’ (S,1,178).

Shame

Every woman in the study mentioned shame as a predominant theme in her sexual and spiritual life. Shame was either identified or demonstrated by the women as the experience of feeling something was wrong with her, that she was deficient and perverse. Shame was distinguished from guilt, as guilt was remorse for behaviors, whereas shame was the feeling that something was uniquely wrong with who they were as people. Shame was identified in four primary categories: sexual shame, body shame, feminine shame, and spiritual shame.

Sexual shame. For the women, sexual shame was the feeling that to be sexual in any manner, including having sexual thoughts, feelings, and desires, indicated badness
and moral defectiveness. For them, good girls did not have sexual feelings - this was the bottom-line of purity. Greater shame arose from messages that sexual issues such as interest in porn and masturbation only pertained to men, not women.

Each of the women were asked in the third interview to identify words she would use to describe herself as a sexual person. Negative words were predominantly used to describe their sexual feelings, including “shame,” “guilt,” “confusion,” “fear,” “stunted,” or “inhibited.” For the eight women who had been married or were in long-term sexual relationships, they also included positive descriptions of their sexual selves, such as “adventurous,” “playful,” and “curious.” It appeared that having had some history of positive sexual relationships in which they were able to enjoy their sexuality proved, to varying degrees, affirming of their sexual self-views. Despite this, shame was the pervasive description used to describe their overall sexual self-views.

Being married and having a positive sexual relationship with their spouses proved to be a healing factor for sexual shame, as those who were divorced and single demonstrated the highest levels of sexual shame. This could be potentially through the healing factor of a healthy sexual relationship but also the protective factor of being married and seen as less threatening and more legitimate in their Christian communities than if they were single. Three of the four single women had heightened levels of sexual shame, claiming they did not see themselves as sexual people. For one woman, shame manifested due to low levels of sexual arousal in her sexual relationships. For two of the women, shame primarily prevented them from relationships with men. The two women who were divorced also revealed heightened levels of fear of intimacy, as their marriages had created greater sexual harm. For all of the women, sexual shame was most
experienced as “dirtiness” and occurred most often as shame for sexual desire, shame for masturbation, and shame for sex.

**Shame as dirtiness.** Most mentioned a deep and profound history, from an early age, of feeling sexually dirty, noting the frequent messages of the badness of sex, including thoughts and feelings, coupled with messages of women as dangerous. Beth described shame as feeling “uniquely dirty.” Chloe reflected, “It’s this gooey ugliness inside . . . just this piece that’s just so disgusting; it’s slimy, it’s gooey, it’s really ugly, black” (C,2,258).

Key developmental experiences such as having a period, first kisses, masturbation, feelings of sexual arousal, being desirable, or being attractive often triggered greater shame in confirming her moral deficiency. First menstrual cycles were often experienced as scary and shameful, and first kisses were frequently mentioned as eliciting guilt and shame over doing something sexual they were not supposed to do. For Chloe, as with many of the women, shame over sexual development played a significant part in thwarting maturity and development, “I was delayed, because of shame, you know I didn’t want . . . I wanted to be a woman, and there was a part that was excited, but I didn’t want others to know that I was becoming a woman” (C,1,693). Beth, who was relieved by her slow social and physical development in high school, claimed:

> I mean, I wanted to eventually look like a woman, but anything related to sexual development was weird and scary, so I was delayed. You know, and there were a lot of messages from my parents and church that sex was something we were not supposed to be interested in . . . which doesn’t
mean I wasn’t interested, it was just shrouded in a lot of confusion and embarrassment (B,1,385).

Kate identified her shame as arising from the teachings at her church:

*Even before I had sex, it was talked about as so bad . . . It was more a fear tactic than anything else, and I think that fear just stayed with me . . . And then when I did have sex, I wasn’t prepared for it relationally and emotionally, and I think that added onto the guilt and shame* (Ka,2,497).

Becky suppressed her sexuality for many years in her marriage due to sexual shame:

*If I’m sexual, then it could be my sexuality that’s getting me benefits. It could be used to manipulate people or for people to manipulate me . . . So if we could take it out of the equation and make interactions more asexual, then life was easier* (Be,2,641).

Some women internalized a feeling of dirtiness from being exposed to sexually explicit material or being a victim of sexual abuse. Six of the women referenced pornography as their first introduction to sexual feelings and desires. This usually occurred through finding their brother’s or father’s pornography or being introduced to it at a friend’s house. A couple of women mentioned the exposure to porn as “traumatic” and traced it to the beginning of sexual shame at a young age. One woman who discovered masturbation before pornography mentioned the effect of porn on her:

*I connected this dirtiness with the physical feeling of pleasure, or masturbation, what I figured out later what it was called . . . I used to have fantasies that were connected to that porn . . . It was the start of a mental
illness . . . I was so anxious about these thoughts as horrible, because in the religious system it was so extreme to sin like this . . . and that sin could be thoughts, not just acting it out, but the thoughts are sinful (U).

Another woman, who was first exposed to porn in elementary school, claimed:

That sparked intrigue and desire in me. I always wanted to know about sex and read about it, but then I thought, ‘That’s not okay, like am I gross?’ . . . Porn had a really deep effect on me. The more I got involved in church the more I felt like it wasn’t ok, so if it were up to me I would have just continued (U).

One woman, exposed to porn at a young age, expressed great shame for her interest in porn and her sexual desires:

I hate this, the crap they tell people; boys are visually-oriented and girls aren’t. I don’t know how many times I’ve heard it in the last year, and I’m like ‘Bull-crap, girls can be turned on by porn too . . . You’re not helping women by telling them that this is some abhorrent experience, or that in relationships the lure for boys tends to be the physical and for girls it’s the emotional . . . Well, once I experienced the physical, that was a strong lure . . . but I was told it wasn’t supposed to be, so of course it was shameful (B,2,300).

In response to this experience, she shared:

If you’re a girl like I was, you just have to go that much more underground with whatever, you know? . . . with masturbation or I would occasionally try to sneak access to porn . . . It was just really, really
important to me to keep those things hidden and secret, because I figured it was just me, or at least just me and the rest of, you know, the other perverts out there (B,2,861).

Four women identified sexual abuse as her first introduction to sexual feelings. Chloe was raised in a sexually abusive home and believed she might have been sexually abused but did not have specific memories. She reported wanting to be married but had a fear of dating, as she felt damaged. In expressing shame over her lack of sexual experience, she stated, “I feel incredibly limited in my capacity to have a healthy and intimate relationship . . . I frequently question if they could be attuned to the damaged parts of myself” (C,2,97). A couple of other women’s foray into sexuality was as a very young girl, being touched or propositioned by teenage boys; either a brother, neighbor, or friends of their brothers. Two of the women were sexually abused by adult men, both religious leaders. All of the women expressed shame as a significant outcome of their sexual abuse in feeling “dirty” for what happened to them.

Shame for masturbation. Nine of the women identified shame over masturbation. One woman denied ever being interested in masturbation, preferring only partnered sexual activity, and one women, who did not mention that she masturbated, also shared the least information about her sexual activities in general. Interestingly, most of the women expressed her greatest sexual shame was around masturbation, over and above shame for having premarital sex. This was often referenced as originating from the “unwritten curriculum,” that masturbation was something boys did, not girls, and certainly not Christian girls. Several women identified judging statements made to them
from parents and religious leaders regarding female masturbation, equating it with sexual aggression and perversion in women. One woman asserted that the church’s messages about masturbation taught that sexual desires were not allowed. She shared of her shame over masturbation as a girl, “I’m like, is there a pill, an anti-viagra pill for girls? But that’s what I always dreamed of growing up” (U).

Many of the women mentioned negative and shaming reactions from their mothers as contributing to this shame. One woman remembered asking her mother about masturbation to the response, “That’s what lonely girls do.” From then she recalled, “Loneliness is bad, it’s what bad people do. I certainly didn’t tell anyone about my little “feel good” thing that I did, because I thought then it was bad of me. I carried that secret for years and years and years, you know?” (U). She added, “I’m sure she never would have responded to my brother that way” (U).

Shame for sex. Shame over premarital sex was experienced as diminished value due to the loss of virginity; they were damaged goods, and therefore, less desirable. None of the nine women who had premarital sex identified shame as having any effect on them abstaining from premarital sex. Instead, they noted shame as what often led them to engage in premarital sex, contributing to increased sexual acting out, and impacting their choice in men as partners, often non-Christian men who mistreated them. The two women who were virgins mentioned sexual shame as being more of a deterrent from any relationship with men. For the five women who were married, three of them identified sexual shame as leading to years of difficulty with sex in marriage as shame for sex became so strongly internalized.
**Body shame.** Six women reported having disordered eating for many years. Three noted struggling with anorexia when in high school, and four disclosed long-term issues of overeating in adulthood. Kristen’s anorexia began in high school when she blossomed, became attractive, and began receiving excessive male attention. She shared:

*I started getting all of this male attention, boyfriend after boyfriend. I think that that’s what ended up leading to me craving that. I remember going on diet pills . . . I was obsessed with my body . . . I was a perfectionist; I just wanted to be thin. It was like an obsession; I wanna be better, better, better* (Kr,2,639).

She also noted:

*My body has been the hardest thing for me to love . . . I think part of the seeking sex as a young women is to seek that affirmation of your body as beautiful. I’ve never been okay with my body. Never* (Kr,2,700).

Cheryl, who was greatly influenced by body objectification in both media culture and her family, described not having her period until 16, because she was anorexic, “I would wake up at 4am to work out. Barely ate. Didn’t want to get my period. I wanted to be skinny with big boobs. Health didn’t matter” (Ch,1,142). Cheryl later disclosed, “I still get very depressed when looking at another woman . . . I will never look like that” (Ch,3,79). When asked of the feelings involved, Cheryl claimed, “I’m not good enough. Never good enough. Worth is based on sexual allure, and it’s only getting harder because I’m getting older” (Ch,3,85).
Nine women mentioned life-long struggles with feeling something was wrong with their beauty and their bodies, due to messages about the dangerousness of a woman’s body and the need to cover up. For Susan:

*I feel shame over my body. I don’t feel comfortable wearing shorts . . . I feel that same kind of pressure that is put on us in the church. Like our bodies need to be hidden, like they’re not inherently beautiful and okay and normal* (S,2,178).

Regarding her experience of menstruation, Susan continued, “It’s body shame. I know it’s this natural part of how I’m supposed to work but I don’t like it; it’s disgusting . . . and I felt like it had to be kept secret” (S,2,18). Becky, who experienced ongoing moral evaluation of her body and dress by her family and church growing up, shared:

*For many years I was very overweight, and I think some of that was self-protection. If my body is not attractive, then I don’t have to worry about it. Even my clothing was very simplistic . . . I was sort of a disembodied brain . . . I just found my body to be an annoyance. I didn’t do my hair. I didn’t do my makeup. I was clean, dry, and serviceable as they say in the military* (Be,3,220).

In suffering the consequences of body shame, Becky, who began to seek medical help and counseling in her 40’s, continued, “I became quite ill. Physically, I had really let myself go. I was pre-diabetic. I had some major health issues and I began to have serious mental health issues” (Be,2,70). One woman expressed a life-long struggle with sexual and body shame:
I think that what I'm trying to like figure out how to work through is really just the guilt and shame, not only about what I’ve done, but also just about my body. . . I’m assuming it comes from the whole feeling like this is sinful and dirty – but just feeling like my vagina is a dirty, ugly place and nobody wants to see that or touch it or you know get anywhere near it (U).

She linked messages about modesty and covering up with her life-long experience of feeling to blame for male attention and shared:

But I think for me I just connected my vagina as the place where all the dirty things happen, and because sex is bad and dirty and wrong and you shouldn’t be doing it. And that’s where it all goes down. And so it seems like – you know it’s the place, yeah, where all the bad stuff happens. It gets you in trouble . . . I feel that way about my boobs sometimes . . . I don’t want to look like a ‘ho and I don’t want people to think that’s an open invitation just because I have cleavage doesn’t mean I want you to touch me (U).

**Feminine shame.** Eight women mentioned various levels of ongoing shame for being a woman, believing they did not fit the model of an ideal feminine woman most desired by their culture. Interestingly, the three women who did not express feminine shame identified meeting the typical expectations for them as women. This included demonstrating feminine-typical qualities in their culture, such as wanting primarily to be a wife and mother and espousing traditional religious views of female submission to a husband’s authority.
Feminine shame was a significant theme for Lilly who articulated her understanding of “feminine typical” qualities:

*I don’t want to put women down, because I believe this is culturally created but feminine-typical is quieter, timid, less insight, less willingness . . . feminine typical things like meal planning, home design, crafting, arts, those things have nothing to do with me* (L,1,145).

Lilly later shared:

*It’s only in the past few months I’ve come to realize that there is no reason to apologize for being a woman and no reason to apologize that God gave me the gifts that he gave me. And just because those are not feminine-typical doesn’t mean that they’re a liability, though they feel like it sometimes* (L,1,137).

For the few women who went to Seminary, some mentioned shame for not fitting the feminine-typical woman they saw as most desired in Seminary. Susan offered:

*Married women would be over talking about their kids, and I wanted to be like with the guys who were talking about theology or more meaningful topics to me . . Oh, I need to be cautious of this, like I don’t know what this is saying about me, but I don’t want to be like too masculine I guess. If that means that I’m being like a man* (S,3,832).

Another woman who attended Seminary identified spending more time with her non-Christian friends, believing she did not belong, “*I didn’t fit the bill of a cute little seminary student; skinny, beautiful, smart, submissive, nice. I didn’t fit*, 
because of the way I looked, and because of my independence” (Ka,3,162). She later shared:

_I sometimes feel like my, we’ll call it ‘education’ or ‘indoctrination’ in church in terms of women, kind of didn’t always mesh up with what I saw in my mother who was single and strong . . . I just realized in therapy last week that I didn’t have to feel shame for being an independent and strong woman . . . It always felt like that was a negative thing, because we’re supposed to be more submissive and we need to need a man, and I’ve felt really guilty about not needing a man more (Ka,3,132)._

For many, feminine shame related to seeing the feminine as weak, for women were the “weaker vessel.” Chloe commented:

_There’s just a shame tied in of just being a woman in general. You know, it’s women are viewed as weak . . . it’s very confusing, because women are viewed as weak, yet men long for them (C,2,96)._

Iris identified strength with her father and weakness with her mother. She shared:

_Looking back, growing up in the ‘50’s and ‘60’s, to be home and cleaning a house and fixing meals? Not me. I wanted to be out in the world. I didn’t want any of that. I wanted a career . . . My mother was sweet, demure, laid back, and helpless, and my father was tough, definitive, and strong (I,1,672)._

_Spiritual shame._ Most of the women mentioned some level of spiritual shame in feeling like a great disappointment to God. It was, however, the younger women who
signed a purity pledge who spoke of a more profound spiritual shame. One woman shared extensively about the depth of this shame:

*I am a bad and dirty person for having done those things... kind of putting myself in another category... The shame says that I am less-than as a Christian woman. I am on a lower level or less than in terms of my faith or how God views me or how others would view me (U).*

When asked of what “less-than” meant to her, she continued:

*That you suck, because you can’t follow through on what you said and you made a commitment and you broke it and you’re a dirty whore for having sex with these people. And almost feeling a little slutty, because it’s not like I only did it once... I’ve had sex with four people. As long as I keep it on one hand, then I’m really not a total slut I’m just a little bit of a slut – I don’t know where I get these things (U).*

Because of shame, she has struggled greatly with low sexual arousal:

*The shame wasn’t just about my purity, it was like about my body and being and where as a person being loved you know. I was a big fat sinner. I was going to hell and I disappointed everybody – my mom, my youth leaders, my peers that we all made the promise together, and they were still holding out (U).*

Another woman, who was a virgin and has had limited relationships with men, experienced significant shame regarding masturbation:

*With God, he’s disappointed in me ’cause I’m not good enough in this area. I feel a lot of shame, because I work really hard to not be wrong –*
this is the one area where I don’t feel good enough . . . I really do believe
God is not always viewing me in a loving way depending on my sin, and I
think it makes me hate myself more because I can’t get it together and God
isn’t like helping me either, is kind of how I feel (U).

Self-Objectification

Objectification of a woman occurs when a woman’s body is treated as an object to
be evaluated by culturally idealized body and appearance standards. Self-objectification
for women occurs when women internalize the idealized messages and treat themselves
as objects, evaluating their own bodies against cultural idealizations. Essentially, in self-
objectification, a woman adopts what the culture values of her body instead of
establishing her own standard of value.

Self-objectification has traditionally been studied as it relates to a culture’s
sexualization of a woman’s body. For the women in this study, they found themselves
captured between a dualistic form of sexualization: her greater culture’s exploitation of her
body and power and her Christian culture’s subversion of her body and power. This form
of sexualization was manifested in focused attention on covering up, dressing modestly,
and not appearing too threatening or powerful. Similar to existing research, this led to
increased shame and anxiety that contributed to psychological experiences of depression,
anxiety, disordered eating, and sexual dysfunction.

Self-objectification for these women extended beyond idealizations of the body to
include the adoption of idealized gender expectations. Self-objectification arose primarily
around the need to conform to idealized gender expectations, her belief that her value as a
woman was as object of man’s desire, and the need to diminish her power through hiding
her body and subverting her strength. These issues of objectification were seen as related to their sexuality - if you were not meeting the ideal, or if you wanted something different from the idealized value, you were considered sexually suspect by your community. For example, several women mentioned if she were to desire a powerful career or desire to advance in her career, her past and/or present Christian community would see her as a sexual threat.

Power became the primary theme in their experiences of objectification; to be seen as powerful or to demonstrate personal power was considered threatening, leading the women to feel dangerous. Power was equated with sexuality, and the women feared demonstrations of personal power and strength, as this would be seen as sexually lascivious. Several women mentioned that demonstrations of their strength or attractiveness often led to fear responses in the men around them. Lilly, in sharing of her experiences with men in the church, stated, “My strengths and what I offer is not trusted. ‘Untrustworthy’ is definitely a word that I feel within my experience of gender within the church” (L,1,390). When asked if her gifts are not valued in the church, she responded, “It’s not that they’re not valued; they’re not trusted.” She continued, “Usually when I see abuse of power, I don’t usually see a man who intends harm. The more I see it, the more I see fear as the driving source for that abuse of power.” When asked what is the fear, Lilly responded, “fear of me.” When questioned, “What part of you?” she responded, “my words, my emotions, my insights, my boobs.” In describing her experience in seminary she continued, “I really felt men were even afraid to look at me. It was hurtful. It was really hurtful” (L,1,416).
Nine of the 11 women expressed significant distress in believing they were too strong and too powerful and therefore not meeting the idealized standards for them. Two of the women did not identify as much distress and shame over the idealized expectations of her, but instead espoused the idealized beliefs as fully her own. Both of the women fit more of the cultural expectations for her, in that they saw themselves as highly feminine, they preferred to be submissive to male authority, they did not have aspirations for leadership, and they preferred the gendered roles as wife and mother. One woman shared, 

_I don’t have problems with women’s submission. I’m more of a submissive type. I’m okay being led by the guy. I guess maybe it makes me feel better about reading through The Bible and seeing, ‘Oh well, the male is supposed to be the head of the household.’ So, I’m allowed to be submissive to him (Jo,3,92)._ 

**The Idealized Christian woman.** In their culture, objectification was less about the idealization of specific female body features and more about the idealization of specific feminine-typical qualities and a woman’s moral righteousness. Each woman identified similar idealized feminine and moral qualities most valued for them in their present or past Christian culture. This included a hyper-feminized view of the ideal woman, woman as wife and mother, heterosexual, and woman as morally upright and deferent to male authority. This was manifested as perfectionism and continual monitoring of moral appearance. For all of the women, if they did not fit these traditional roles and appearances, they all believed they were dangerous and threatening in their Christian communities.
The feminine woman and feminine shame. The idealized woman was an ultra-feminine type with descriptions including cute, petite, sweet, agreeable, happy, unintelligent, demure, child-like, pleasing, and non-assertive. This type of woman was seen as being highly emotional, relationally nurturing, and most concerned and passionate about relationships as opposed to ideas, accomplishments, and other non-relational goals. For all of the women, “feminine” was equated with diminished power. As some stated, a feminine-typical woman was not opinionated, intelligent, or assertive. Iris, in examining her sexual themes, shared that she is still not able to accept herself for who she is. When asked the reason, she shared:

My mother was very sweet, very ladylike, quiet voice and a flatterer . . . I can be that way when I have to be, but that’s not really who I am. And that’s what I’d like to be. . . They’re not threatening to other people. They are very soft and quiet; feminine. They’re ideal, especially in attracting men. You did not want to be smarter. My God, if you had a job, where he didn’t have a job that paid more money than you did, etcetera, etcetera (I,2,647).

In expressing the role religion played for her in this, Iris continued, “The impact of the church and religion; that I don’t fit in, because as a woman, I can think for myself” (I,3,277).

Six women referred to themselves as more like men in some ways, because they were interested in ideas and intellectual pursuits. Several women stated they liked men more than women, because they were more interested in the same “masculine” things, such as intellectual pursuits. Many of the women felt their intelligence as women was
seen as threatening to men in their Christian culture. For Lilly who experienced heightened shame in seminary:

    It was hurtful there . . . There might be some conversation but no real pursuit of, like, what I really thought or felt or things like that, that were not requirements, you know, to marry me. So there was this anemic sense of friendship. It was very lonely and very rejecting, and it felt like this temptress type thing where there’s just kind of like, ‘Maybe I’m inviting them to more than what I am supposed to, but I’m just seeking connection and conversations’ . . . I mean I can be passionate about things and ideas; that doesn’t mean that we’re going to have sex . . . This categorizes about 85% of my interactions with men inside the church (L,1,452).  

Kate shared that while in seminary, she spent most of her time with non-Christian friends, because:

    I didn’t really fit in because of the way I look and because of my independence . . . what was valued there was a typical southern girl . . . skinny, beautiful, submissive, and you know nice and genuine and all those things, but that you have to be submissive, and I couldn’t defer enough to them, because I’m just too strong of a woman (Ka,1,148).

**Woman as wife and mother.** All shared extensively that being in the role of wife and mother was the most ideal role for women in their Christian community. Cheryl stated:

    This was not with Catholic . . . at the Baptist church we moved to, that really opened my eyes for different roles for the women. As in, it seemed
more valuable to be a wife raising children. Then I was doing everything, Sunday school, nursery, VBS. I sort of enjoyed it, but it felt like, ‘we need bodies here’ but I’m a helper and people-pleaser. . . then it became, ‘why aren’t you embracing your femininity and wearing a skirt . . . Should you really be working outside the home . . . A woman’s place is nurturing the children and taking care of her house and her husband (Ch,1,796).

Lilly felt the greatest expectation placed on her was:

- to absolutely love being a mom and consider it the most fulfilling thing I could ever dream of doing in my life . . . also to be beautiful, sexy, and feminine. . . the hook is that we all want those things. Who doesn’t want to be beautiful or a good mom? (L,3,80)

For Beth:

- I think there’s sort of an image package as far as being sexually suspect.
- I’ve certainly encountered this in the homeschool world. The wife who is, the woman who sees her highest calling as being a wife and a mother and has cultivated the virtues of being meek and having a quiet spirit, will also behave responsibly sexually. You know, she’ll dress modestly, and you know she won’t do any other stuff we’re not supposed to do (B,3,645).

**Perfectionism and appearance monitoring.** Most expressed varying levels of needing to perform well in many aspects of life. This included having a spirituality and identity that was based on being excellent and pleasing. For Susan:

- I learned really well how to be Godly, but I never really knew God . . . I needed to do all these things, and I’m going to devote myself to doing
them the best that I can. And I think that was really prized . . . There was a lot of scripture to back that up, becoming a woman of excellence. Sometimes these verses will still haunt me as I feel guilty . . . I now read these verses and I’m like, ‘what does that even mean? Like what is the context of that?’ I don’t know, but this is how we used it – do everything well. Then if you don’t there’s just a lot of guilt and shame associated with that (S,1,30).

When asked what the consequences were for not doing things very well, Susan continued:

Judgment. I’m a strong perfectionist . . . I try to please my parents but it’s never been good enough, so when I transfer than to church, it was like, ‘Wow, they really love me,’ and I think they did love me, but I found my identity in following all of that. I went to the True Love Waits rally and signed a card. I’m a really moral person and so I’m like, ‘Yeah that just makes sense to me.’ I think when you teach there is a stigma attached to people who do have sex and like, ‘Oh well, at least I’m not doing that. Like I’m still okay’ (S,1,34).

Becky, who grew up in a Christian culture of constant monitoring of propriety and modesty in girls and gendered role expectations, stated:

Probably my biggest thing is my perfectionism, because we just, we had to be perfect. It’s taken a very long time . . . but it’s okay to enjoy things like my job, and it’s okay to be ambitious, and I’ve had enough time in
counseling that I’m at least aware now whereas before I wasn’t even aware (Be,1,875).

Some women shared of the heightened expectation to look like they were doing everything right and were indeed the good girl. Jordan, who hid her boyfriends and her eventual sexual relationships, shared of a life-long struggle over reputation for being a good girl and the difference between the rule-breaker she felt on the inside and her appearance as the good Christian girl on the outside. Her initial fear of sex was mostly fear of getting pregnant, showing proof that she was not a good Christian. Once beginning sexual relationships, she stopped her spiritual practices, including church-going, because she could not reconcile going to church and not being a good girl. She shared:

The way I dealt with it was that I didn’t go to church. It was like I chose sin over church. Both can’t happen. I needed for everyone to still think that I was still a good girl, but because I was doing those things I didn’t feel that way internally, so I didn’t pursue God. Growing up I didn’t do anything that was outwardly rule-breaking, because I wanted others to see me as the good girl who doesn’t do that stuff. I pulled out of church, because church is for people who are doing the right things and if you’re not, then you change those things or you’re not in good standing (Jo,1,160).

Kate, who shared that girls are respected and revered for purity, opened up about her faith struggle that is based in perfectionist expectations:
With God, you have to do the right things or God’s going to be mad at you or He’s not going to love you or He’s going to punish you for not doing what He said. You’re always a disappointment, because you can’t ever do what you’re supposed to do. So if I slipped up, then you have to work extra hard to recapture the feeling of closeness with God, so it’s always a constant battle trying to get back over to the other side (Ka,1,94).

**Power and the objectified body.** For the women in this study, the objectification of their bodies and their sexuality had everything to do with power. As Lilly stated:

*I have felt at times that the only way for a woman to have power or be strong is through her sexuality, right? You know, there’s an innate power in being desirable . . . and the church feels very invested in cloaking that* (L,3,616)

Many of the women believed sex was her primary power, and she needed to cover it up. In their Christian culture, objectification of the body was more complex and nuanced, as compared to the greater culture’s objectification. While overt exploitation of a woman’s body was forbidden in their Christian culture, many women identified their religious environments, both growing up and as adults, as consisting of a sexualized obsession with a woman’s body and her sexual obligations in marriage. Sexualization of their bodies occurred through varied and conflicted methods: fixation on women covering their bodies, treating women as an object of man’s desire, and fear of women’s bodies. Self-objectification for these women was manifested as low sexual arousal, continual monitoring of body, dress, and sexual performance, and an ambivalent style of relating to men. For these women, self-objectification led to a plethora of psychological and
relational distress, including shame, depression, anxiety, disordered eating, sexual problems, suppression and regression, and relational issues with men.

Modesty and the sexualized body. Beginning in puberty, each woman indicated a shift -their bodies that were once their own, safe and protective, became something to be had by another, desirable, dangerous, and maneuverable. Male gaze occurred both outside and within the church, usually first from men, then boys their own age. Theirs was a liminal experience – the greater culture told them to exploit their assets, while their Christian culture told them to cover up the dangerous weapons which were their bodies.

For most women, their religious cultures as teenagers were highly sexualized. As one woman shared, “It seemed like all they talked about was sex” (B,1,294). In high school and college, many teachings emphasized abstaining from sex with imperatives cautioning them against dating, kissing, impure thoughts, or anything that led to sexual temptation. They were taught that boys were naturally visual, it was common for boys to masturbate and view pornography, and that it was therefore up to them to kept their attractiveness in check. For them, to be attractive and desirable was equated with “slutty;” it meant you were one of “those girls.” One woman shared, “We were constantly told not to advertise our goods . . . It’s taken me years to work through my attractiveness not being dumb and slutty” (Be,2,138).

The insistent focus on their bodies and modesty of dress felt shaming and blaming for all of the women, leading many to continual monitoring of one’s body and dress. Kate shared:

I feel like all of that was shaming for girls in particular, but they couch it as trying to educate girls on dressing appropriately, but you really become
the one responsible . . . It made me feel like my body was something I had to hide and be ashamed of” (Ka, 1,692).

Their own attractiveness and desirability triggered shame. Seven women expressed significant distress and confusion around attractiveness. Cheryl stated, “You need to look pretty, but not too pretty, you know, you couldn’t have too much make up or too much jewelry” (Ch, 1,934). This shame led to years of depression and anxiety regarding their looks and their virtue. For many, this led to disordered eating. One woman, who was overweight for many years, stated, “If my body is not attractive, then I don’t have to worry about it” (Be, 2,211). She observed:

It made me much more self-conscious and brought a sense of ambivalence about my sexuality (creepy but powerful in a way that I had never been before). This ambivalence continued into my adult years . . . I basically abandoned any thought of personal appearance . . . This shift included significant weight gain. I continued to fluctuate between sexuality as power and complete denial of my physicality for many years, including me not taking care of myself medically, until a variety of stressors, both physical and mental, led me to seek . . . counseling and medical help.

While I am much more in tune and comfortable with my body today, I still struggle with seeing mind/body dichotomies, rather than seeing myself as a fully integrated person (Be, 2,215).

A healing factor for many included creative movement and body-affirming activities. This was not described as a final “cure” for shame but was expressed as an ongoing reclamation of their bodies and their spirituality. For
Chloe, a musician at church, she endeavored to engage her spirituality and sensuality while playing music, fighting the belief that she was a threat. She claimed:

*I do think of my music as a form of sublimation, especially on a sexual piece. I do see where my music can be pretty sensual . . . Sex is supposed to be an outpouring of your soul, and that’s what music is for me . . . It’s incredibly vulnerable, and people can sense it and connect with it* (C,3,522).

Several women mentioned dancing as a healing factor. Kate stated:

*Dancing is fun. Probably the closest I would ever get to feeling like any sensual-ness in my body . . . I feel this tension about dancing – dancing makes me feel good in my body, but there’s the shame I’m figuring out* (Ka,3,126).

Lilly shared, “*Growing up, movement was so restricted, but I have felt so much joy in my body. I love to dance*” (L,1,524). Becky identified yoga as a healing practice for her body and faith. She stated, “*Yoga has been good. I’m learning that it’s okay for my body to take up space*” (Be,3,687).

**Woman as object of man’s desire.** Once married, a shift occurred for the women in how objectification was experienced. Many struggled with feeling maneuvered by their religious communities to be sexually available and pleasing to their husbands. This instruction often occurred through sermons, marriage conferences, and Christian books on sex and marriage. A number of women felt manipulated by religious instruction on the goodness of sex in marriage and how it pleased God to be sexually available to their
husbands. One woman stated, “I am tired of hearing Song of Solomon used to manipulate and control women sexually.”

Some women noted Scripture verses used in their lives, that once married, their bodies were no longer their own; their bodies belonged to their husbands, and their religious duty as a wife was to offer their bodies freely to their husbands. This created a bind for the women that to assume personal authority over their bodies was to refuse both husband and God, leading them to feel unsafe and unsure about their personal rights. To assume personal authority over their bodies often triggered sexual and spiritual shame.

Many of the women also felt their religious communities pressured married women sexually by making them responsible for their husbands’ fidelity. A predominant theme found in Christian literature on marriage was that a Christian woman needed to keep herself attractive and sexually available to her husband or he will have no other choice but to meet his needs through an affair. Cheryl, whose husband cheated on her throughout dating and marriage, stated:

I remember a book about marriage telling to not refuse a man sexually, because it rejects the man, and it kind of piles up these rejections, and then he’ll feel unaccepted and rejected by you. Well aren’t one of our deepest needs is to be accepted and not rejected? So then he’ll go look somewhere else for some kind of fulfillment to deaden the pain of the rejection. So I never did that, because I’m an obedience girl. One time in marriage I said no to him; I was really sick (Ch,3, 127).
Chloe, who was not married, referred to her hesitation about marriage, believing sex was power, and that marriage would necessitate the loss of her power.

Referring to a common interpretation of scripture, she shared:

> It talks about if a woman withholds herself from a man in marriage, that’s sin because she is not offering herself freely . . . Sometimes I think of it as kind of powerful in a way or to have the potential to be powerful, which makes it a little bit scary, you know? (C,3,323).

Some women mentioned feeling their bodies were objectified when it came to a need to hide their bodies in roles of religious leadership or influence. Four of the women in the study were actively involved in part-time or full-time ministry. In their experiences, they believed the influence of their voice came primarily through the written word but not in person. For them, to express their voice became a disembodied experience. One woman shared, “I don’t understand, it’s like they’re afraid of our bodies. I can write anything I want, but my body cannot be present, or it becomes theologically problematic for them.” When asked how this felt, she continued, “shame, that something is wrong, threatening with my body, that I have to hide it.”

**Power and the subversion of self.** Confusion and shame regarding personal power and strength was a primary theme for the women. The resulting self-objectification came as a felt need to subvert her power and strength in order to maintain approval, right- standing, and minimal suspicion of threat as a woman. This subversion was primarily regarding her strength and gifts and abilities. Within this framework, most of the women referenced beliefs and teachings around the theology of women’s submission to men, including an understanding of submission that was unilateral towards men and indicating
a lack of agency for women. Finally, included in these beliefs was the feeling that relationship with a man was less of a mutual experience and more of a rescue.

**Subversion of strength.** All of the women interviewed demonstrated significant levels of personal strength. What created the greatest problem for them was in how they subverted their strength or experienced shame and confusion in asserting strength. All shared of past and/or present religious cultures marked by teachings that women were “the weaker vessels,” were not as strong morally or physically as men, and thus needed to not push against male power or demonstrate greater strength than men. For all of them, to do so would be seen as rebelling against God’s creation order. They all demonstrated varying levels of conforming to or resisting this teaching.

Several women mentioned the subversion of strength as the primary theme for their sexual stories. This occurred through feeling the need to suppress their identities as strong women, so as to not lose their good standing. This included access to ministry and service in the church. Lilly extensively addressed her conflicted experiences in expressing strength:

*I have found in church that if you don’t mind being dismissed you can get a lot done. So if you can accept the insult and keep going, don’t demand to be taken seriously, you can say whatever you want to and if, you know, cry your whole way through it, then you’re forgiven because you couldn’t hold it in. This is horrible! This has been my strategy! Tears come easily to me so it’s not fake . . . but a sincere desperation that in some ways you’re forgiven for even the most audacious things you say because you were desperate. But I have moved to a new place in my life where I’m saying*
that I don’t want to . . . I don’t wanna just be allowed when I’m desperate.

I would like to be taken seriously as a human being (L,1,633).

Lilly continued:

A woman who’s crying is not someone who’s holding you accountable.

She’s the damsel in distress you’re going through for, right? Whereas if I were saying things just straight, because this is really what I think is best, and I’m not crying, I’m not yelling, but I’m just talking and expecting to be heard for something, some kind of response to be made, then that’s a level of accountability or authority (L,1,655).

When Lilly was asked what becomes internalized for her in this experience, she shared:

That I am weak or needy . . . The quickest way to be labeled, dismissed is when I show up angry with men . . . Coming with strength and asking to be heard is much more vulnerable than weak and needy, because I could be rejected or shut down . . . My strength is labeled as not feminine. My experience has been that my strength is distrusted . . . and I don’t know what it is (L,1,710).

Kate identified one of her primary themes as “don’t be strong,” and shared of her cultural expectation of the esteemed woman:

She depends on her husband to meet her needs and you know looks to him for almost for fulfillment and provision and that you make that man feel needed and you fill that role of being the submissive wife there to care for that person . . . instead of showing strength and taking care of your own
needs or – even the fact that my mom was a single mom, that was looked down upon . . . She wanted to teach Sunday school and be involved in many ways, and I know that there were things that kept her out, because she was a single mom. You’re obviously lesser than the men (Ka,3,132).

Kate continued:

Yeah, strong is definitely not a good thing, and if you have it, it should be tempered . . . In a woman, it’s not necessarily a desirable quality, and definitely not sexual. Women are not to be sexual beings. You’re not to enjoy those things or talk about them (Ka,3,145).

Beth, who is a teacher in her church that ordains women, mentioned several experiences of contention with a former head pastor, who would become angry with her for correcting him on some of his factual errors. She stated:

Things like that would make him angry . . . I could be smart and studious and all that, if I would just be docile and submissive. And I never felt like I was trying to usurp authority. There’s another pastor, and he’ll hear things from him . . . I really think a lot of this has to do with me being a woman, because somehow there’s something a little bit more inherently dangerous about a woman with ideas in leadership (B,3,698).

**Subversion of gifts and abilities.** Many of the women shared extensively of familial and church experiences in which they felt diminished in their gifts and abilities, especially in leadership and profession. Most mentioned varying levels of difficulty in finding career paths, as they felt they were not encouraged to pursue careers nor guided on what their interests and abilities were professionally. Despite this, all of the women
had college degrees, and six of the women had graduate degrees. Three of the women were in part or full time ministry positions. Most of the women demonstrated passion for their work and a driving desire to have impact through their work.

Most expressed their church culture past and/or present as being the place where they felt most diminished. One woman shared of telling her husband, “It’s maddening to me that everywhere else, like, I can go have a conversation on my own, but as soon as we enter church somehow I have, it’s like I have to be your wife” (L,3,368). All three women who served in ministry shared of experiences in their churches of not being recognized or of being judged as suspect because they were women. In Beth’s church where ordination of women is acceptable, she told of a church leadership meeting in which the pastor pointed to every other minister around the table as being pastor material except for her. She also shared of receiving critical messages from others when she would teach. She stated, “You know, it’s this idea that women are more prone to deception and false teaching” (B,3,710). Susan, who is a minister in a non-church ministry, mentioned not being invited to be on the pastoral team at her previous church and stated, “That always felt kind of hurtful or like, ‘Well, you’re not recognizing really who I am’” (S,2,140). She later told of her appreciation at her current church for being invited to pray with the pastors. When asked, though, how she felt about her current church not allowing women elders or pastors, she expressed some reticence about her work, “Well I’m okay with that. The idea of being ordained sounds a little scary to me, like, I don’t want to be ordained and all that responsibility. I see my job as more of mercy ministry” (S,2,152).

Lilly sees her leadership gifts as pastoral and serves voluntarily in her church, yet is limited in her denomination as it excludes women from serving as deacons, elders, or
pastors. She shared of a poignant moment for her in which she demonstrated leadership in her church around a specific issue, yet the pastor touted her husband as being elder material instead of her. Her husband later told her, ‘The only reason he’s saying that is because my wife is here . . she has done all the work that has gone into this’ (L,3,422). To her he then stated, ‘Unfortunately, you are only going to hear it from me that you, in fact, are elder material.’ From this, Lilly shared with her husband:

‘You don’t know how much that feels like a liability to me, to hear that and to feel like there’s a big target on my back - that anyone could throw me under the bus as being controlling or out there, you know? I see those gifts in me too, and I’m sorry that I happened to be born a woman. This is who God has made me. And I don’t want to overshadow you, but I’m also not going to continue to pretend like this is not me’ (L,3,445).

Similarly, seminary was an environment in which some of the women felt most diminished. Susan shared:

*The culture there was very much like the role of women is in the home, and you are to care for the home and have babies and serve your husband, whatever he does. There were classes for women only that were dumbed down compared to what the men were getting. I’m like, ‘what are we doing? I feel like I’m missing, like I’m here to study. I don’t want to just sit around because we’re women. We can’t study the same things men study’* (S,1,84).

Kate shared of her experience in seminary:
Biblically, they have some ground to stand on in terms of women not preaching . . . It just felt like some of the men took it a little beyond preaching. You know it wasn’t just women aren’t allowed to preach, it’s that you have nothing valuable to offer or you don’t know what you’re talking about or you can’t grasp information; for me there was definitely a feeling of being less than men (Ka,3,162).

Lilly stated, “At seminary I was undesirable because I was bright and outspoken. I think I felt wrong, out of place, not sure what to do with all of me, like I should be smaller” (L,3,367).

Many mentioned that women in their culture, to varying degrees, were not encouraged to have careers, but to have children. Three of the women expressed a desire to not have a career, but to get married and raise children instead. One woman felt thwarted in this goal, as she had not found a husband. She shared of the struggle to find direction professionally, but once she did, expressed satisfaction in her ministry profession. The other two women expressed frustration in not feeling prepared for life after their children had grown and frustration in feeling desire to have a profession, but sensing they were ill equipped. Four of the six women with children did not work outside the home while raising children. Some women from smaller churches indicated most of the women in their churches did not work outside the home, while those from larger churches had more women working outside the home, who were often socially grouped according to working inside or outside the home.

Some of the women indicated their parents and churches did not discourage them professionally but also took no interest in encouraging them professionally or in
leadership. Raised in a traditional home where women were nurturing mothers and men were the “King of the castle,” Kristen remembered her older brother being pressured to succeed in school and athletics, whereas she was not pushed at all to succeed. She shared, “Now I look back, and it kind of went along with my brother being more successful as the male in the family and my kind of tagging along with my mom and being the more emotional one” (Kr,1,324). Others were pressured to varying degrees to refrain from work, citing belief of their community that women should not work outside the home.

Becky shared of a significant event in her life growing up in which she was greatly chastised by mother and pastor for expressing an interest in being an attorney. She was later teased by classmates in her church’s school and then rejected by her boyfriend, as he feared she would grow up to make more money than he would. From this experience she shared, “I came to see that my sexuality is going to impinge on my opportunities” (Be,2,51).

Jenny, who believed women should not work outside the home while raising children, expressed struggle over her mother’s emphatic disapproval of her desire to work after raising children. She shared feeling caught trying to please her parents, between her father who is not a Christian and doesn’t understand why she doesn’t work outside the home, and her mother who believes women who work are in sin. She stated, “It’s tough, like I can’t please anybody ‘cause it’s like if I please my mom, my dad thinks I’m worthless, and if I please my dad, my mom thinks I’m worthless” (Je,1,189).

Submission as unilateral and without agency. These women felt a greater sense of objectification in how their community defined and taught female submission. All of the women identified a similar teaching of submission from their religious communities: that it is for women only, indicates male authority in all decision-making, and is equated
with godliness in women. This included the belief that women did not teach men religiously, women did not hold decision-making positions of leadership over men in the church, and women deferred to their husbands as the final decision-maker in the family.

In the religious context and in a marriage, a woman was not to challenge a man, and to do so was considered sin. Some women indicated that to do so was seen as sexually suspect. Beth stated, “As a woman, if you are not quiet and submissive, then you are the wanton woman, brazen. You know, is brazen in every way. She’s outspoken and opinionated and you know probably sleeps around or wants to sleep around” (Be,2,361).

All of the women were raised in communities that held this view of submission. Six of the 11 women did not feel congruent with this traditional teaching of submission. However, eight of the 11 women were still in religious communities at the time of the study that held this traditional belief. Three of the 8 women did not feel congruent with this teaching and belief. While this teaching troubled them, they indicated they coped with this by ignoring this teaching at their churches, but that it still felt shaming and limiting to them. Two women felt somewhat congruent with their churches’ traditional teaching of submission, indicating they had some mixed feelings about how this has been demonstrated in their church. Three of the women felt fully congruent with this understanding of female submission, believing they were naturally submissive, but also saw this as the religious ideal for them. One woman clarified this belief in explaining that male headship indicated God was over the man, and man was over the woman. If she contradicted her husband, she contradicted God and was not doing God’s will. She gave an example of the benefit of female submission and shared of an experience in which she and her husband had conflict over buying a house. Reluctantly she deferred to his
decision as the leader, and reported that soon after, the real estate market crashed. She expressed affirmation that submission was best, because she trusted that her husband knew better, and she was blessed for that.

Many of the women felt this teaching of submission had been detrimental to them as women, as well as to Christian men. They claimed it dismisses a woman’s power to hold a man accountable and to expect respectful and non-harming treatment from men. Several women believed this teaching had trained women to not respond effectively to or challenge sexual abuse, as women were expected to be “submissive and docile.” A number of women described experiences of being blamed for challenging a man’s behavior when they brought problems to male religious leaders. One woman mentioned a recent crisis in her marriage in which she and her husband were on the verge of separation. After three years of difficulty, she felt desperate and brought this to her pastor, who blamed her for mentioning separation as a way of helping to repair their marriage. Her pastor told her she was trying to control and abandon her husband. She stated, “The message to me was, the real work of loving people, that the hard stuff of challenging another cannot be done by a woman without being perceived as controlling, right?” (U) She continued, “Accountability is liked, but when it’s from a woman to a man, it’s so easily and quickly misinterpreted as nagging or being controlling or all of those kind of things that feel very dismissive of the heart” (U).

A number of women identified the single woman as more threatening in the eyes of the Church. In their Christian cultures, being married gave them legitimacy in the eyes of others. Some mentioned the threat of the single woman stemming from lack of male headship over them, as women were not morally trustworthy on their own. Subsequently,
once married, some felt they were treated as more accessible and were given more opportunities for leadership in the church. One married woman stated, “There is no way I would be allowed to do the ministry that I do if I were single” (B,3,705). On the flip-side, some felt that once married, they were also viewed as less powerful, because they were seen as less threatening.

Shame was a heightened experience for single women in the study, because of this suspiciousness of them. Similarly, it was tempting for them to question their own dangerousness and to suppress their own influence for being seen as morally suspect. Despite this, the single women in the study were strong women who pushed through these obstacles. Two of the single women were in full-time ministry, and all of them were in professions of influence. However, for them, this came with a price. As a single woman in ministry in the Catholic Church, Chloe has felt pressure for years to be a nun. She stated:

I’m like this free agent; I’m not the bride of Christ, I’m not the bride of an earthly man . . . nuns don’t have power . . . they’ve lost their identity; they really have no place in the church now . . . so it feels like this veiled sense that I’m a threat (C,3,547).

Several women indicated the need to suppress their strengths and accomplishments for fear as a single woman of being too powerful, that a man would not want them. Lilly shared, “Single women are not allowed to grow up in the church.” One single woman mentioned hesitation in telling men her profession for fear it might turn them off. Another woman stated:
Also in this culture, if you’ve already become a woman and put down
roots, a man won’t want you. There’s this idea that you still need to be
pliable. Men would be intimidated. There’s no room for a woman to be the
smarter one, leader, good job (L,3,351).

A woman’s need for rescuing. Six of the women believed being in a relationship
was critical in making them feel more stable as women. Describing their own
insecurities, they were drawn to relationships with men in order to feel better about
themselves. Two of the married women shared of such significant insecurity in college
and afterwards that they admitted to dating anyone who would take them, that being in a
relationship made them feel more secure. Both mentioned they were lucky to have
married good husbands, as they would have married “anyone” out of need for
relationship. Four of the six women who were single or divorced identified meeting a
man as what would most help them feel more valuable and more secure as a woman. All
of the women indicated they were taught that the end-goal for them was to find a man.
Combined with the shame they experienced for being “sexually loose,” if left to their
own devices, many women either explicitly stated or implied that finding a man was
loaded for them with desperate feelings of wanting to be “made right.” Several stated
directly that being married either had or would make them feel more legitimate in their
churches.

Self-Blame

In addition to shame, self-blame seemed to mediate the distress and psychological
impact their cultural messages had on the women. Throughout the interviews, they shared
of multiple encounters with adults and leaders in their lives who blamed them for their
sexuality or the sexual harm that was done to them, or dismissed sexual harm that was done to them. They mentioned numerous experiences from their Christian culture, both growing up and as adults, of negative reactions to their sexuality, blame for the sexual harm done to them, and blame or responsibility for the sexual actions of men. For the women, these experiences became internalized as self-blame, which took two forms: behavioral self-blame and characterological self-blame. Behavioral self-blame meant attributing the sexual harm done to them to their behavior. Characterological self-blame was attributing the sexual harm done to them to their character.

Healing of self-blame came from positive relationships with their husbands and extensive years of counseling. Four of the five married women identified significant levels of healing arising from healthy relating with their husbands. This included healthy sexual relationships, character affirmation, and validation by their husbands. Despite this, they continued to identify ongoing levels of sexual self-blame and shame from past and current interactions with religious leaders. The two divorced women revealed their troubled marriages greatly increased their levels of self-blame and sexual shame due to sexual harm perpetrated by their husbands. Similar to the divorced women, three of the four women who have never married showed higher levels of sexual self-blame, confusion, and shame.

All but one woman identified counseling as a significant corrective and validating experience around her sexuality. Similar to a healthy marriage, they mentioned counseling as directly helping in correcting some of their struggles with self-blame and harmful sexual experiences. One woman identified her current egalitarian church as bringing healing for sexual self-blame as they have actively helped her with the spiritual
harm from her previous church, and focused more on God’s love for her and less on blame for sin. While it was clear from most of the women that these corrective factors were transformative for them, all demonstrated in their interviews continued heightened levels of self-blame regarding their sexuality and a desire for that to be alleviated, noting they have never talked directly about many of these issues before.

Overall, demonstrations of self-blame for the women were primarily related to seduction, safety and danger, and sexual responsibility. Behavioral self-blame often took the form of blaming themselves for harmful situations. Characterological self-blame often was connected to seeing themselves as temptresses, feeling less than men, and having lesser capability to make healthy and moral decisions. Harmful situations that would occur ended up confirming fears that their characters were in fact deficient.

**Seduction.** Seven women spoke extensively of the shame and confusion they have experienced regarding seduction, and how much attention their Christian communities have given to women not seducing men. Six of the 11 women expressed having acute anxiety for most of their lives over fear of seductiveness. This included continual monitoring of dress and behavior. Chloe’s Catholic grandmother and mother were hyper-vigilant about her sexuality, telling her to not look too pretty. She noted a life-long struggle with self-blame and fear regarding her beauty. For Chloe, to be attractive equated to seducing a man to lust. As a child she chose Mary Magdalene as her saint, “*I chose her because I saw my beauty as a sin and maybe God will protect me*” (C,1,693). She shared of feeling like “*a modern-day Mary Magdalene,*” for being single and a threat. She claimed:
Even at 23 or 24, nuns would say to me, ‘You’re not married? You should become a nun.’ I know becoming a nun would be to shelter myself from sexuality . . . It’s kind of like there’s this lesser piece, if you’re not married or you’re not in a religious order. If you’re single . . . to me, it almost feels like this dangerousness. It’s threatening. If you’re married or a nun, then men won’t lust after you (C,1,792).

As a musician at church, she fears being the seductress if a man looks at her, “Am I portraying something that’s just like really seductive that’s getting him to stare. It’s like some of that responsibility is back on me” (C,2,867). On her struggle, she shared:

> Did you bat your eyes? Did you do your hair a certain way? You know, that’s something personally I’ve always struggled with, because I’ll be friendly to men, not friendly in a sexual way, but just friendly like I am to women. But just saying, ‘Hi, how was your day’ is, can be construed as flirting and trying to lure him in. So, there’s like, this dangerousness to your femininity that’s inherent (C,1,168).

Similarly, Becky shared of a life-long struggle in fearing her attractability. She stated:

> If I’m wearing a scoop neck, I’m immediately aware of ‘Am I going to be flashing somebody at the reference desk’ or ‘If I’m teaching, am I going to be leaning over.’ It’s much more conscientious, whereas, most people would be like, ‘Oh yeah, that’s cute.’ So there is much more of a ‘ok, is this sexualized? Is this appropriate for the workplace?’” (Be,3,231).

For many of the women, Christian men who acted overly cautious around them conveyed a highly shaming and blaming message. Several women mentioned heightened
self-blame from experiences where male religious leaders would not be alone with them, out of a self-induced policy of propriety. One woman in ministry mentioned distress over an experience with a fellow pastor who wanted her to ask her husband if they could go to a day-workshop together and ride alone in a car. She stated, “It’s not like because we’re in a car – I’m not like suddenly this dangerous vixen, you know” (B,2,990). Another mentioned distress over her seminary’s policy that male professors (all of which were male) not meet alone with women due to heightened temptation and the image of inappropriateness. Several women indicated significant levels of self-blame and emotional pain over dating situations in which a man would show great sexual attraction, interest, and even engage in some level of sexual activity, only to then shun her as a temptation that he needed to avoid. Several women mentioned being in serious Christian relationships or marriages in which their partners either broke up with them or had highly aversive reactions to their having engaged in sex prior to them, even though they themselves had been previously sexually active.

Responsibility. Apart from the aforementioned experiences of feeling responsible for male lust, the women identified a number of experiences occurring directly to them, causing them to feel blamed for the sexual harm done by others. Eight of the 11 women identified at least one significant experience in their sexual story in which they were blamed by religious leaders for something sexual that was done to them or they were made to feel responsible for something sexual committed against them. Many of the situations were identified by the women as traumatic and as one of the most defining critical events in their sexual lives. Part of the trauma experienced by the women involved responses by their religious leaders, which led the women to blame themselves
for what was done to them. A few of the situations identified included direct sexual harm committed by religious leaders. Six of the women’s situations will be briefly addressed.

One woman shared of sexual abuse in her home perpetrated by an adult youth leader who was a friend of the family. After the first incident, she told her father, who was also a religious leader; he did nothing about it, and the abuse continued. She disclosed to her school counselor who taught her how to say “no,” and nothing happened legally. She stated:

*My take-away is that girls are more responsible than boys; it’s kind of girls’ responsibility to fill in . . . I remember getting ready in the morning saying ’no’ to myself in the mirror over and over again, practicing . . . like learning what that feels like, because, you know, saying ’no’ to adults was not allowed in our family . . . Yeah, it made me feel like there was some kind of deficiency in me that I needed to learn how to do this* (U).

Shortly after her disclosure, her older brother disclosed to her father that he had been sexually abusing her sister, and her father said to him, ’*I forgive you. Don’t do it again,*’ (U) and allowed him to be alone with her sister and continue abusing her.

Because she was not protected, she believed she had to be in control of the situation at all times. Sexually, she had no serious boyfriends in high school or college and very limited physical contact with boys, stating she was not interested. She is especially angry at how she sees the Christian culture’s response to sexual abuse, “*forgive, don’t be angry, and no protection . . . I’m angry that Matthew 18 is used to silence victims of sexual abuse. The whole message is, if there was any anger, you weren’t being loving or forgiving*” (U). She later discovered that her abuser, as a youth
leader, was arrested for raping a girl. She also found out that the school counselor’s husband was later imprisoned for child molestation.

Another woman had one incident of sexual abuse by her older brother when she was age 9. As an adult, her brother, who was a pastor, was imprisoned for child pornography. She felt guilt and responsibility, as she did not tell her parents about her abuse. She stated, “If I had said something, maybe he wouldn’t be in this situation now” (U). She revealed she never thought about her abuse and minimized its impact on her, because she always felt “ashamed, embarrassed, and uncomfortable, just kind of creepy.” She stated:

> When you have a memory that you’ve never dealt with . . . you get stuck where you were when it happened; the way you think about it or the way you feel about it. I had to think out loud, ‘Okay I have a 15-year-old son and a 9-year-old daughter. If this happened between them, would I think it was her fault? Of course not’ (U).

She stated that after his imprisonment, “I found myself feeling a lot angrier about it” (U). Prior to his imprisonment, he was asked to step down from his ministry position due to pornography. It was later revealed that he had been hiring prostitutes, and the pornography included child porn. She expressed anger that her family has not talked about it, but when it has been mentioned, it was only addressed as a pornography problem.

Another woman shared that in college she had reread I Kissed Dating Goodbye (Harris, 1997) and determined that she was no longer going to kiss before marriage. She then shared of an incident that occurred soon after, in which she was riding on a bus with
her college ministry group to go to a leader’s retreat. She and her boyfriend were both on their campus ministry’s leadership team. They were sitting next to each other on the bus, and he spontaneously reached over and gave her a quick kiss. From this incident, she was kicked off of ministry team, but he wasn’t. She had to meet in front of a panel of 6 adult leaders. She stated:

_They told me I was no longer going to be part of the team. I don’t know. It was embarrassing. It was like six people on the panel looking at me telling me I was a ‘ho’ . . . Looking back, I feel like if I was going to leave, kicked off the ministry team, I thought that then he should’ve been too. That’s not really cool. I guess that was definitely a sexist moment (Je,1,681)._

While telling of this story, she demonstrated significant self-blame. She denied feeling anger at them or her boyfriend. She stated, “I was pretty overwhelmed with my role in leadership team anyway, so I was okay with it, because I was into my studies . . . so when it happened, I kind of felt like it was meant to be” (Je,1,715). When asked what all of this meant to her, she stated:

_Yeah, you can glean all kinds of meanings out of it, I’m sure. Mostly I feel like I should have defended myself; but at that time, I was too immature to think of doing that. That’s more my personality than anything . . . I’ve never been a good self-defender (Je,1,749)._

One woman, in her writing assignment of a critical incident in her sexual story, wrote of a meeting with a religious leader who was a speaker at her Christian college. She met with him because she was feeling guilty about having sex with her boyfriend and yet desired to reconnect with God. She had additional guilt, because the man with whom
she had sex was a virgin, but she wasn’t, and she wondered if she had caused this. His response was to ask her, ‘Do you masturbate?’ She was horrified but honest and told him that she had masturbated, something she had never told anyone before. He proceeded to tell her that in his experience of counseling college students, he had uncovered an important truth:

‘In relationships in which the girl was the sexual aggressor or leader, she almost always had a history of masturbation. A young woman who had indulged in sexual sin alone, who had never learned to control her sexual desires, would never be able to control them in a relationship’ (U).

She stated that for the rest of the school year, he took a specific interest in her, calling her often, wanting to know details about her masturbation and sexual behaviors with her boyfriend. She would honestly tell him, and then after that, she never heard from him again. On the impact of this experience, she wrote:

It is, even now, a painful, confusing, and humiliating memory. I have never shared it with anyone before, not even my husband. As I thought about this assignment and found myself getting more upset, I tried to talk to my therapist about it. I couldn’t do it (U).

She further wrote of numerous reasons why this was so significant to her, including great shame over her sexuality, as well as shame for freely sharing so much with him. She continued:

I was hungry for male attention and would get it almost any way possible.

. . . I think I also experienced some excitement from talking to an older man
about such sex. It was taboo, it was thrilling, and we were both pretending that it was nothing but spiritual accountability (U).

She also shared of feeling to blame:

*The assumption made by [him] was that female sexual desires were uniquely dangerous and that I was responsible for my boyfriend’s sexual behavior. Girls were supposed to keep boys’ lust in check, so a girl with her own strong desires was a problem (this was, in retrospect, especially hurtful, because I’d felt ‘pushed’ by my boyfriend sexually. It wasn’t the other way around) (U).*

She concluded, writing:

*This episode was not the only one in which a Christian ‘authority’ showed inappropriate interest in me. I find it difficult to trust the motives of male Christian leaders in relation to young women. What strikes me most is how ashamed I feel when I think of this episode: how quickly the feelings of being disgusting, dirty, and perverted return, how afraid I am to have anyone know (U).*

Another women revealed that her youth leader, with whom she was very close, was re-assigned to another church for, *“some inappropriate interactions between him and some of the girls.”* For her, the frequent focus of modesty for girls was experienced as permission for sexual harm:

*It almost seems like the guys, especially in sexuality or even attraction or anything is out of their control, and it’s just accepted that that’s how they are and that’s what you expect out of them . . . We’re expected to cover*
ourselves up and hide and you know, not express any kind of sexual interest or attraction or anything like that because then we’re tempting and the weaker sex (Ka,1,62).

When asked the ramifications of tempting a man, she shared, “You’re a horrible sinner and you need to repent for a) acting that way, and b) tempting your brothers in Christ” (Ka,1,66).

The “inappropriate interactions” by her youth leader were revealed through whispers in the church and never addressed directly. Instead the church’s primary response was to increase the teachings of modesty to girls and to “increase the message in terms of girls being responsible for what they’re wearing and how they act, not flirting” (Ka,1,70). She continues to question if she was one of the girls, since she was close to him. She shared:

It was a big deal; really hurt, but for me I ate all that up hook, line, and sinker. I felt really abandoned by him. That’s the theme of my life – abandoned by men . . . the True Love Waits happened the next year, and I got fully on board with the message that purity will right all wrongs (Ka,1,80).

She remembered a situation later, in which a boy in her youth group was sitting close to her:

My immediate connection is, ‘Well I shouldn’t be wearing this dress, or it’s too short, or you can see my chest too much’ . . . you know, and you feel guilty and you feel like a whore, because you didn’t cover yourself up and you were tempting these men and it’s your fault for not covering up your body more, for you know wanting to be comfortable or cute or
whatever. Like just, everything fell on you for the responsibility in terms of keeping everybody pure (Ka,1,60).

She continues to struggle with lack of sexual arousal and desire and experiencing her body as dirty. From how this was handled, she believed:

*What I took away from that was it’s the girl’s fault, it’s the girl’s responsibility to do all those things . . . and the guys, it was just like, ‘Oh yeah, that’s what guys do . . . They don’t have control over what their penis is doing,’ . . . ‘Well, I can’t help it if you turn me on’ . . . So it kind of seems a little bit more scary . . . It’s the girl’s fault; we’re expected to cover ourselves up and hide and you know, not express any kind of sexual interest or attraction, because then we’re tempting and the weaker sex (Ka,2,172).*

For one woman, the end of religion and church for her culminated in her experience of how the religious leaders handled her divorce. Her husband, who had been cheating on her even before they were married, left her for another woman after over 20 years of marriage and three children. As he wanted to remarry in the church, he forced the situation of an annulment. The Archdiocese asked him to have people write letters as to why the marriage was invalid, and she was able to read them. She stated, “*When I actually saw the papers, I was very, very angry. It just reminded me again of all the things in the Catholic Church that I thought was so hypocritical. This was the ultimate one, saying you’ve never been married. What are all the children, bastards?*” (1,2,94). She has no recollection of what was said about her, but stated that the one she does
remember was penned by her husband’s sister, accusing her of poor house-cleaning skills and of never having family over. She continued:

Well I’m obsessive compulsive about cleaning . . . It was the ultimate lie . . . I wrote them, writing about why I had dropped out of the church and the hypocrisy and that it was like going through another divorce . . . After everything, making me feel like something was wrong with me (I,2,104).

Deficiency. In speaking of their experiences, many of the women spoke negatively of their reactions as if they had something wrong with them. This type of reaction was expressed as characterological self-blame. In sharing, they interspersed comments such as, “Something must be wrong with my brain for thinking that,” (I,2,361) or “I’m just really sensitive, so those things affect me,” (Kr,2,324) or “I don’t know why I would think that,” (Ch,1,62) when it was clear that it would be natural to feel or think what they did in the situation they were addressing.

Often, how they responded to or felt about their sexual development and sexual experiences were often first deemed as a deficiency on their part. For some women who had low sexual desire or arousal, the frequent belief was that something was defective with their bodies, as opposed to this being a symptom of their sexual history. Several women believed something was wrong with their bodies when they began their periods, and felt significant shame for lacking knowledge about menstruation, even though no one had explained it to them. A common response for many of the women was to blame themselves as deficient for not defending or protecting themselves more when it came to harmful and hurtful sexual experiences, even though they were much younger and were taught to subvert personal authority and refrain from speaking up. Shame was commonly
experienced when feeling hurt, harmed or angered in situations that naturally elicited those emotions.

**Sexual and Relationship Problems with Men**

Of the 11 women, five were married, two were divorced and single, and four were single and never married. Ten of the 11 women identified themselves as heterosexual, and one woman identified herself as “just to the right of bisexual.” All five married women reported marital satisfaction with their husbands, and four of the five reported sexual satisfaction in their relationships at the time of the study. Of the single women, two were in significant monogamous relationships with men and four were not in a relationship at the time of the study. While all held differing religious beliefs about sex, each held the value of the sacredness of sex from their religious socialization. Despite incongruence of practice, six of the 11 women valued the teaching of sex as only viable in the context of marriage.

While all of the women had their unique sexual stories, each one told hers with a similar trajectory. Each woman entered puberty believing they were damaged goods, whether it was shame for having sexual desires, for masturbation, or for sexual harm. None of the women felt their mothers prepared them adequately for puberty, nor did they feel guided sexually by their mothers. Mothers responded to their sexuality with a mix of neglect, anxiety, and negative comments. All identified having distant or abusive relationships with their fathers, becoming exacerbated at puberty and leaving them feeling unwanted, unattractive, and needy of male attention.

Many entered puberty both nervous and excited of their newfound power in their burgeoning sexuality, but also felt sexually alone, ashamed, and vulnerable. For the most
part, their religious communities, that once accepted and embraced them as little girls, began treating them differently - more wary, more suspicious, more uneasy of their developing sexuality. Comments were made; warnings began, increasing with repetition and focus: how to keep men from lust and what the repercussions would be for them should they kiss, make out, have sex, or wear something alluring. They began to feel dangerous and untrustworthy. All of the sexual feelings that were developing in them served as proof that they were in fact dangerous and untrustworthy. Men began noticing them first, then boys their own age. They were whores, and a good man wasn’t going to want them. Their bodies suddenly meant something different: not something of their own but something to be had. Some who had been previously teased and were insecure regarding their looks, began to develop, transform, and draw in attention from men and boys. They began to realize their power, their allure, but it was dangerous and despised. They were told, repeatedly, what they needed to do in order to redeem this fallen state: purity, virginity, and the cultivation of a quiet and submissive spirit. This would rescue them and make them clean again. And when the time would come, eventually, their purity would be rewarded; a man would rescue them, redeem them, and protect them from this danger within. Some became glad that purity was pleasing - as good girls who were able to stave off sexuality, like they could, were revered. For others, the sexual ones, the ones who enjoyed the attention from boys, who felt the power that a boy’s affection had in making them feel better, they began to split, began a double life, one of holiness and one of sexuality. Eventually, many of the good girls, they too entered the world of split experiences. For all of them, that which was holy and that which was
sexual were opposite experiences. None of them felt safe sexually, and this emotional and spiritual distress became most expressed in their sexual relationships.

Each woman identified religious messages and experiences with religious leaders as having one of the greatest influences on their sexual problems (along with parental abuse and neglect, sexual abuse, and negative sexual experiences). Their religious socialization, from their understanding, directly contributed to a) arousal and desire dysfunction, b) a distorted understanding of sex and relationship, c) dysregulated sexual relating with men, vacillating between sexual suppression, sexual manipulation, and sexual acting out, d) mistrust of men, and e) lack of sexual and spiritual safety.

**Arousal, desire, and sexual dysfunction.** All of the women indicated problems of arousal, desire, or sexual dysfunction at various points of time in their lives which were manifested in multiple ways: lack of arousal, lack of interest, or avoidance or fear of men sexually.

**Problems of arousal and desire.** Each woman identified various levels of sexual arousal and interest. Seven women indicated they liked sex and saw themselves as a sexual person. For some, they distinguished the enjoyment of sex with difficulty in arousal or interest, often claiming that shame interfered with problems of arousal or interest.

Ten of the 11 women identified significantly low levels of arousal and desire for periods of time in early adulthood, in their marriages, or for most of their adult lives. In addition to shame and self-blame, fear of lust was linked to sexual suppression for them. As Susan stated:
I don’t know if I know how to separate lust and desire . . . it’s a whole big mess in my mind about how that works . . . how its lust now but then desire when I’m married . . . I’ve always been surrounded by women who don’t have sexual desire, especially the married ones (S,2,108).

Three of the five married women noted arousal and desire problems in their marriage for some or many years, due to shame for sex and emotional distress around sex. While all three described their marriages and current sexual relationships with their husbands as positive, it has taken years for them to feel sexually and spiritually safe, each of them stating that they continue to work through this.

One woman stated that for years in her marriage, “During sex, I would just ball up and freeze up and cry . . . ‘I can’t be that with you – the whore,’ you know . . . sex was dirty and you were going to hell for it” (U). She shared that it took her many years in her marriage to feel safe with her husband for fear he would leave or shun her regarding her sexuality. She mentioned that healing, for a long time, entailed her husband holding her and telling her he loved her. Arousal for her continues to be problematic, as she is bothered by her need for pornography and alcohol to help her feel sexual arousal.

Another woman described difficulty adjusting to sex in marriage; for her, prior to marriage, arousal was based in the forbidden-ness of sex, but in marriage, sexual boredom and lack of arousal became a problem, once the forbidden was now expected. She stated, “So as soon as I got married, it was like, ‘Okay if that piece is gone, it’s not the same.’ I had to sort of develop an ability to see sex as pleasurable in the context of marriage” (U). Noting that shame for sexual pleasure has been problematic for her, she
stated, after 20+ years of marriage, “I’ve just started to become free of that shame for enjoying sex” (U).

Two women, who were still single but had been in sexual relationships, expressed significant lack of sexual interest or arousal. For one, lack of arousal was a primary theme in her sexual story. She mentioned diminished interest and aversion to romantic relationships at an early age. She kissed a boy in high school, thinking it was “gross,” and later attributed this to her internalization of the teachings she received that sexual feelings were bad. She stated:

*Lack of desire grew even more and more, so the longer I abstained, I just lost all desire, which can be good and bad you know. It definitely helped me regain abstinence but also made me wonder if I was becoming asexual*(U).

Her shame and lack of desire did not keep her from maintaining her virginity, as she had sex with her first boyfriend in college. She has had multiple sexual partners since, but her lack of arousal has remained:

*Well, I feel like my body is broken, because I cannot or do not know if I’ve had an orgasm . . . I think it’s really just about my guilt and lack of ability to even feel sexual or turned on or whatever, because it felt so wrong (U).*

**Sexual avoidance, suppression, or fear of men sexually.** Nine women noted periods of time of extreme suppression of sexual feelings out of fear and shame. Three had such great shame and fear regarding arousal and desire (one divorced and two never married) that they have stayed away from relationships with men for most of their adult lives. One woman in her 30’s, who was a virgin, expressed a great desire to marry, but
has resolved her sexual fear and shame by avoiding men and not dating for many years, instead experiencing her sexuality through masturbation. This has led her to further shame and fear, as she claimed, “Sometimes I feel like a man wouldn’t want to marry me because of it [masturbation]” (U). Of the religious messages she received about purity for girls, she stated:

Really, it’s like you’re a robot. You just do these things whether you feel like it or not, you’ve got to praise the Lord and not sin. I feel like the expectation there is to be a robot, that I should not desire sex . . . In high school it was, ‘Well, we need to dress modestly because the boys will stumble or they will be tempted so we need to protect them from that, or we need to not make it so easy for them to be led astray’ (U).

She stated, “I have often kind of felt more of a masculine presence in me. Like just because I do desire sex pretty intensely . . . but I’m female, so I don’t know, like, that’s confusing to me” (U). She linked her struggle to the impact of signing the purity pledge:

That’s crazy to me how much that has shaped me and how I view myself.

Yeah, like I view myself pretty negatively most of the time because of that . . . It makes me think, like, I’m not okay or the system is flawed, like I’m just subhuman because I want what I shouldn’t want (U).

In working through her struggle with desire, she stated:

I’ve been trying to think of it that way, like, the desire itself is not wrong, but I think that I really believe that the desire is wrong and impure. Like I’m having impure thoughts, I want to have sex . . . It kind of sets you up for failure, I think. Because like the reality is that we’re all not pure . . .
I’m holding up this standard that I have to be attaining to this like ‘I’m God’ kind of purity and holiness that I feel like it’s impossible. Like this human experience, it doesn’t mean that I am less than or need to have shame. It’s hard for me to get out of kind of the old way of thinking that I am impure and undesirable because of that, like to a man, but also to God (U).

Another woman has, out of fear, kept distance from men since her divorce 12 years ago. She stated:

*I fall into fear because I don’t want to sin, and I know that slippery slope is easy to slide on so I get paralyzed . . . I don’t want to step too far, so I don’t take any steps towards sexuality or about sexuality, because I don’t want to sin or displease God (U).*

**Dysregulated sexual relating with men.** Sexual harm, lack of positive male attention, and girl-negative purity messages most related to a low and distorted view of their worth as women. Sexually, this was manifested as a mix of sexual suppression, sexual manipulation, and sexual acting out, save the two women whose sexuality has been primarily suppressed thus far. Recovery for the women was varied and gradual over many years. Greater healing was found to occur when the women came to the realization that there was a problem and sought help. Help primarily occurred through counseling and/or honest, healthy relating with their husbands. Hindrances to healing were shown to occur through avoidance of healthy relating with men, denial of sexual problems, avoidance of help, such as counseling, or continued unhealthy relating with men.
Fathers, lovers, and attention seeking with men. All women identified their fathers were distant. None noted physical or sexual abuse by their fathers. Five women identified their fathers as emotionally abusive, and two stated their fathers had mental illness. Each woman linked this lack of attention and affection to their low self-esteem and subsequent vulnerability to male attention.

Six of the women indicated craving positive male attention so strongly that by the time they reached college, even though they worked hard to maintain their virginity in high school, they had sex easily with their first boyfriend there. Four of the six women reported being mistreated by these initial boyfriends, pressured into sex, and cheated on throughout their relationship. All six women stated their self-views were so low that the positive attention from these men greatly, albeit temporarily, increased their self-esteem and made them feel better. As Kristen stated, “I had such a poor self-image, that male attention, a male wanting me was so addictive. It felt so good to be wanted, to be found attractive . . . I felt like I owed sex to them for giving this attention” (Kr, 2, 398). Three of the women claimed their self-esteem was so low, that they would have married the first man who wanted to marry them. Cheryl, who married at a young age, and later divorced, claimed, “I married him because he gave me flowers. That was the thing. I was ugly, and he gave me flowers” (Ch, 2, 496).

Dating as sexual acting out. Two key messages were internalized that influenced how they entered the dating world: a woman’s sexuality was her power, and if she were to engage this power, she would not be wanted by a good man. As Becky recalled:
I realized at a young age . . . I’m coming to this time of definite dawning that I am very low in the totem pole . . . but that my sexuality was a trump card. And so there was a great deal of power involved (Be,2,325).

She continued, “I was essentially told that I had no power, but that I could bring down a kingdom by showing a little clavicle” (Be,2,341).

Nine of the women indicated their dating relationships comprised mostly of sexual acting out (the remaining two were virgins and also had fears of relating with men). Interestingly, for all nine women in the study, all of their dating relationships (save their marriages) were with non-Christian boys and men who did not share their faith and were not men they would marry. One slight exception included a woman whose first sexual experience was with her first boyfriend in college, whom she loved; however, after this, all of her subsequent sexual relationships were mostly sex-driven and with non-Christian men. Another exception included one woman whose first sexual partner was a Christian boy her senior year in high school in a brief relationship.

Once they became physically involved with boys, they believed they were damaged goods, no longer desirable to good men. The women recalled numerous shaming comments of their lack of desirability once they were sexual. Beth remembered a Christian sports coach present a talk at her Christian college, giving a weighted indictment. She stated, “He was talking about sexual purity for some reason, and he said something about how he wouldn’t want any of his sons marrying a girl who wasn’t a virgin” (B,1,481). 

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Instead of preventing sexual behaviors, this shaming actually perpetuated them towards more sexual acting out, and with boys and men who were not good for them. Kate linked this teaching with past poor choices in men, “out of the eligible pool and in with the heathens . . . You just end up dating the wrong guys who aren’t Christian and bad boys are your option” (Ka, 2,524). For Cheryl, when asked how she felt after losing her virginity as a young adult, “It made me sad. I really think for the next relationships, the effect it had was, ‘Oh too bad, I’ve ruined it, so whatever now’” (Ch, 2,432). Shame, self-blame, and self-objectification seemed to mediate the relationship between the messages and their sexual outcomes, leaving them feeling unsafe sexually or spiritually. Several stories will be shared to illustrate these findings.

One woman maintained her virginity in high school, even though she engaged in numerous highly sexual relationships. She was emotionally and spiritually “terrified,” as she had been taught that sexuality was equated to the devil winning, the road to hell. Having gone from an ugly duckling to a prom queen, she found her value in attractiveness to men, which led her to feel even more like a “whore” over how she related to men. Her emotional and spiritual struggles caught up with her in college; she became depressed and suicidal. In college, she felt God had abandoned her because of her sexual behaviors, and when she met her first boyfriend in college, she found sex with him to be easy. His affection and affirmation “cured” her depression and low self-esteem, and she was in love. She was devastated after their break-up, which led her into a long-term relationship with a man who cheated on her, gave her an STD and introduced her to alcohol. This then progressed to one-night-stands that would sometimes turn into
relationships, as she hoped to redeem the situation by trying to develop feelings for the men she was with.

She fell in love with and married a Christian man a few years after college. It has taken her years to heal spiritually, emotionally, and sexually from her shame and self-blame, as sexuality became fused with the belief that she was a whore and not a Christian. It took years to feel safe in her sexual relationship with her husband, for fear he would leave her for being the whore she thought she was. While she now feels safe in her relationship, she has difficulty being present during sex. She feels bad for relying on porn and alcohol for arousal during sex with her husband and admits that she has no idea how to integrate her sexuality with her spirituality.

One woman, who was sexually abused at age 11, by a youth leader (not her own), disclosed to her father but remained unprotected, thus continuing her abuse. She disclosed to a school counselor, nothing was done, but she taught her to say ‘no’ in a mirror to practice resisting men sexually. She stated that she did not have boyfriends in high school or college due to “lack of interest . . . A big theme for me is ‘No thanks, that’s not really interesting for me,’ which gets me into trouble later in my story” (U). She added that her lack of protection was formative for her in shaping “my ‘can’t-nail-me-down’-ness . . . I’m gonna keep moving and a moving target is harder to hit. ‘I’ll flirt or engage with you a little bit, but don’t ask for real trust’” (U).

It was when she went to seminary in her mid 20’s that her sexual story caught up with her. Seminary was especially hard for her due to objectifying experiences with men, feeling they were arrogant, afraid of her strength, and liked talking about women instead
of to women. For her, this experience unleashed all that she had pent up sexually for years. She stated:

*In seminary, we got so much of that shit . . . I was suicidal . . . I was really in despair and a huge part of it was my sexuality. Yes, the fact that I had been abused, that was coming to the top; it was this sense that nothing was different in my surroundings. Like this feeling, like, I was still somehow supposed to be an object, still kind of there for someone else’s enjoyment . . . you know if you start a conversation with a man, like, he’s a ‘deer in headlights’ (U).*

She identified her first sexual experience was at this time and with a married man:

*It was a gift from God, and it was sin. It was horrible, and there were pieces that were tricky and abusive. It wasn’t entirely healthy, but nonetheless, I am so thankful I walked through that door . . . because I was suicidal, and a friendly voice said it was the relationship with him that kept me alive that year (U).*

She continued her explanation:

*When I was scary to everyone else I encountered, when my sexuality was something to be shunned and chained and all of that, and that man found me desirable, and he pursed me, and yes, he was married . . . There was sickness and perversion on his end, but there was beauty and truth on his end too (U).*

It has been her sexual relationship with her husband, and the affirmation she receives from him that has been healing for her, but this has been a recent
development, “I’m 34 years old, and for the first time, my strength feels sexy. That’s piss poor. I mean, that’s an awesome thing to celebrate, but that’s piss poor. I’m 34 years old” (U).

Another woman, who had shared that her church growing up was highly sexualized and oppressive to women, which included ongoing sexual abuse around her, as well as frequent chastisement for what she wore and how mature she acted, she described a life-long sexual anxiety and depression that greatly impacted her sexual relating. At age 14, out of “rebelliousness” she began a sexual relationship with a 19-year-old. Even though this is considered sexual abuse, she believed this was a consensual relationship in which they both mutually used each other for several years until the relationship naturally died out.

At age 20, she married a man whom she loved. While this was a good relationship, she realized she had no sexual desire, becoming a “disembodied brain” due to her sexual trauma growing up at her church. Prior to going into counseling, she and her husband almost divorced, due to her lack of arousal and desire. She stated, “He felt like we were just sort of roommates.” She believed her lack of arousal was born from a life-long lack of sexual safety in which she felt a pawn in a sexual and spiritual power struggle. She continued, “I struggled with the difference between true sexual desire and using sexuality for gaining attention of getting what I wanted, which is very much what we were taught” (U). She continued, “It wasn’t until my 30’s that I began asking for things that I wanted. At best, sexuality was a gift to him rather than something that I should be able to kind of request pleasures from” (U).
Mistrust of men. All of the women mentioned liking and enjoying men, but also had varying levels of mistrusting men. Most mentioned the sexual behaviors of male religious leaders, including the frequent focus by male religious leaders on female modesty and female submission, as greatly hindering their ability to see men as sexually safe, especially religious leaders. For many, the ongoing teaching of male sexual appetite led them, at best, to question the intentions of men, but also to see men as creepy and sex-obsessed. Becky, who has come to trust her husband after years of marriage, stated that she still has to work through the “men-are-pigs mentality” (Be,3,301) regarding male sexuality. A number of women mentioned the struggle over seeing men as hypersexualized and incapable of controlling their sexual urges.

For many, it was the perpetration of sexual harm by male religious leaders, coupled with the minimization or cover up of sexual harm by male religious leaders that greatly hindered trust. While none of the women identified being directly sexually abused by their youth leader or pastor, one was sexually abused by a youth leader, not her own, and one was sexually abused by her teacher at her church’s school. Of notable significance, seven of the 11 women revealed that one or more religious leaders close to them sexually abused one, or more than one girl, often in the youth group at their church. Five of the leaders went to prison, and three did not. One woman stated about her youth leader, “He and his wife did such a good job of drilling all of this into us, how far is too far, and how you respond when a boy says this. He’s now in prison for several counts of sexual assault of minors” (U). Jenny, in discovering in college that her youth leader left his wife for one of the girls in her youth group, stated:
It freaked me out . . . and it made me kind of mistrust men in general to think that he had the perfect wife and five kids . . . for that to happen. It just kind of made me scared of the commitment of marriage (Je,1,273).

Most stated religious leaders protected the perpetrators and minimized the offenses, calling them an “inappropriate relationship,” as opposed to abuse.

Several women, primarily the younger ones, identified the segregation in their youth group of boys and girls as creating a lack of trust and relate-ability with men. For the younger women, church leaders discouraged friendships across genders, and teachings on sexuality were heavy laden with gender differences. This was especially true after influential books came out such as, I Kissed Dating Goodbye (Harris, 1997), in which personal relating between genders was discouraged in favor of group activities, prior to finding “the one.” Susan, who was raised in such culture, decided to not date throughout college and in her 20’s, but now in her early 30’s feels unsure relating with men. She stated, “Gender was always pretty divided in church . . . That’s been fairly isolating for me” (S,2,168). It wasn’t until recently that she has had a boyfriend, the first man with whom she has had personal conversations. She shared, “It was very new, very good for me to be able to have sensitive conversations about such personal feelings” (S,2,175).

Of the women who were married or divorced, several mentioned the continuation of this theme in Christian marriage instruction that women and men have vastly different and gendered needs. Often the variation focuses on male sexual appetite and female responsibility to keep him satisfied lest he stray into an affair. Several mentioned Christian marriage books, such as His Needs, Her Needs: Building an affair-proof
marriage (Harley, 2001), and Real Marriage: The truth about sex, friendship, and life together (Driscoll, 2013), as examples. The effects of such teachings increased lack of trust in men sexually as well as feelings of diminished safety and security in their marriages. A number of the women in the study rejected these teachings, indicating that, while popular and influential, they would have nothing to do with them, yet many continued to internalize these messages on sex and marriage.

Lacking sexual knowledge and awareness. Most of the women mentioned a significant lack of sexual self-awareness, knowledge of sexual development, and sexual knowledge in general. All noted the absence of sex education and felt undermined and discouraged from pursuing sexual knowledge, even about their own bodies and development. Beth, who witnessed parental avoidance of sexual education in her homeschooling community, believed that the non-existence of sex education in Christian culture was due to a fear that talking about sex might awaken interest in having sex. She refuted this by stating, “Nobody talked to me about it, and it woke up anyway . . . generation after generation, I think we’ve gotta fight that fear” (B,3,250).

Most received no sex education at home, and a few women received minimal education on body development from their mothers. One woman did not know she had a vagina until 5th grade, as her mother had informed her that the man “puts his penis in a woman’s butt” (U). A number of women mentioned they had no idea what was happening to them when they started their periods. Several women were not allowed to use tampons, because their mothers told them nothing was supposed to “go up there.” Several were put on the pill by their parents or a doctor and told that it was for regulating their periods, even though they had no menstrual difficulties.
Many mentioned great embarrassment, shame, and sadness for not having knowledge of their bodies and sexuality in general. One woman was shocked when she became pregnant on her honeymoon, believing at the time that she could not get pregnant if she did not want to be. She expressed continued embarrassment and shame in sharing this for the study. Another woman who thought that masturbation only occurred when men looked at pornography, stated, “I feel shame for having clearly had such a lack of knowledge in that area myself . . . I feel naïve and that makes me embarrassed and sad that that’s true” (U). Another woman, as a virgin on her wedding night, was angry and disappointed for not being prepared to be in a sexual relationship. She had assumed that everything would be as great as she had imagined, as she had maintained her virginity. However, the reality was that her husband had diminished sexual interest and arousal. She stated, “I waited my whole life for married sex, but I’m still going solo 90% of the time” (U).

Several women believed avoidance and lack of sexual awareness and knowledge also contributed to sexual harm in their lives and the lives of others. Beth, who is angered at how much abuse and discrimination there is in Christian culture, along with the cover-up of abuse, stated, “People and pastors in the church are not equipped to deal with sexual abuse” (B,3,542). She stated specifically, “Women are ill-equipped to know how to respond, because we’ve been told that we should be docile and submissive” (B,3,561).

**Spiritual and Sexual Conflicts**

Each woman in the study described a Christian faith that varied according to practice, belief, and religiosity. Three of the 11 women maintained the same denomination as their childhood. Seven remained religious, yet changed denominations
as adults from that of their childhood. One woman, raised Catholic, identified herself as Christian but no longer religious. Each woman demonstrated a life-long meaningful Christian faith, including a view of God as relational and personal. For all of the women, practices of prayer and scripture were highly valued dialectical methods of relating with God. While exhibiting varying views on the authoritative nature of Christian scripture, each woman identified The Bible as an inspired and instructive guide to their lives as Christians. As Iris stated, “For me, The Bible helps me to be a better, more loving, merciful person” (I,3,231).

All of the women addressed the conflicts of faith and sexuality in doubting, to varying degrees and lengths of time, God’s goodness to them and God’s favor. The teaching most internalized on sex and faith was two-fold: God did not like their sexuality, and to please God meant to suppress their sexuality. For all, the spiritual consequences were grave: at best, inaccessibility to God, at worst, eternal punishment for disobedience. What resulted was a paradoxical experience of faith in which relationship with God and church felt both threatening and like “home.” The need to foreclose on sexuality in order to live their faith created a life-long struggle. The struggle led to the experience of feeling unsafe sexually and spiritually, marked by depression, anxiety, and sexual and relationship problems. This was manifested as an insecure attachment to God, years of negotiating their sexuality with God, difficulty integrating their sexuality and spirituality, and mistrust of the Church.

Spiritual healing has come, ironically, through the steadfastness of their faith and profound experiences of God’s love. As Lilly stated, “Knowing God for myself has been the biggest buffer . . . just his love, his redemption, forgiveness . . . I felt lost, lonely, and
meaningless as a child, but I feel like I made it through because of God” (L, 3740). Becky shared, “Growing up, God was very dictatorial, quick to punish . . . But Unfortunately for them, they also made us memorize a whole bunch of scripture on loving people and humility” (Be, 3452). Similarly, for some, engaging in a committed and loving marital relationship has helped them feel safer sexually and spiritually. Many mentioned counseling as helpful in increasing a greater awareness of the impact their experiences and socialization have had on their self-views, including sexual and spiritual shame and self-blame.

Their experiences with church as adults have overall been the most complex. Nine of the 11 women indicated mixed feelings about their current churches, experiencing more grace from those churches than the ones in which they were raised, yet also continuing to experience varying levels of discrimination and injury as a woman. One woman withdrew from religious life altogether, and another woman reported her egalitarian church has greatly lessened her sexual and spiritual shame and self-blame.

Insecure Attachment with God. Each described a long history of Christian faith marked with profound experiences of God, but also varying levels of insecurity and mistrust of God. Most of the women shared a similar trajectory of their views of God. They were taught from a young age of a loving God who was creator, friend, father, and was quick to forgive, gracious and loving to everyone. They were also taught of a God who most despised sexual sin, a wickedness He would not tolerate. The slippery slope of sexuality was the road to hell, and the suppression of sexual desire was the road to God. For some women, the messages were heavy-handed, for others it was subtler. For all, in order to enjoy God’s goodness, purity was required. Purity related not only to sex, but
modest dress, lack of sexual desire, and a submissive spirit. For those who were younger, they signed purity pledges, promising purity to both God and their future husbands: to keep this vow meant future reward of happiness and wellbeing; to break this vow equated to cheating on God, turning your back on Him, and then suffering the consequences. What resulted was an ambivalent and compartmentalized relationship with God that was, on the one hand trusting, loving, and profound, and on the other full of fear, shame, and mistrust. This led them in a life-long struggle to negotiate their faith and sexuality with God. For all of the women, a great fear of God’s punishment and the threat of God’s abandonment marked their teenage and early adult years. As adults, each woman shared of an ongoing dialectic with God in pursuit of grace and spiritual understanding of their sexuality. Several stories will be shared to illustrate.

Almost all of the women had a history of believing that God either punished you or neglected and abandoned you over sexual sin. One woman, who identified a strong and enduring Christian faith, grew up in a small conservative church that was an “overall good experience” (U) for her with “nice people” (U). Her church was a safe haven for her as she had a painful home life; her parents divorced when she was young, and her father was almost non-existent. She also recalled feeling “less than” (U) at church for having a divorced mother. She stated it took her a long time to realize the impact her church had on her sexuality and self-views, claiming the teachings she received did not match what she believes. She shared, “They taught, ‘If you do all the things you are supposed to do, then you will not suffer. If you’re having problems, then you are doing something wrong’” (U). She remembered a specific sermon from a pastor comparing sin to a brick wall, that God would not hear you if you were guilty of unrepented sin. God
would not even know you were trying to pray, as sin was in the way. Even though she
was taught that “once saved, always saved,” she grew up fearing she wasn’t a Christian.
She often “rededicated” her life to Christ for fear that God would abandon her due to sin.
She was a committed virgin in high school, and had sex with her first boyfriend in
college. Her father, who had life-long depression, committed suicide her sophomore year
in college. She interpreted this as God’s punishment for her inability to do “the right
thing.” She shared:

I had this horrible thing happen and those teachings messed up my
understanding of God and my relationship with Him and even his
existence . . . I grew apathetic . . . I was convinced God was punishing me
for having sex. I thought my dad’s suicide was God was displeased with
me . . . and I was done with him. I was angry and hurt . . . which is part of
the reason I went to Mexico. It was just like, whatever, maybe if I do
something good like dedicate my life to working with orphans, then God
will come back to me (U).

She has continued to struggle with God’s care for her regarding her sexuality. In her
sexual experiences, she suffers arousal problems and has never had an orgasm. She
shared:

I still think God has purposely withheld an orgasm from me, because I was
not having sex in the right context. It’s hard to actually fully enjoy the
physical sensations when you’re standing there feeling like you’re a sinner
and going to hell (U).

When asked, ‘Do you think God loves your sexual story?’ she shared:
I would say no. I don’t feel like God loves my sexual story, because I didn’t do what I was supposed to do. And I wrote the fact that I have a sexual story and I am single is bad because I failed. The way I think of it, God doesn’t want me to have a sexual story, because I’m not supposed to have had sex. I have experienced grace in a lot of areas in my life but not sexuality. I still think if I didn’t get my act together, then God would never bring me a partner, and I was going to be single forever (U).

Another woman was taught that “the more content you are, content in the Lord, that’s when He’ll bring your husband – you just need to press into God and He will send you the right person” (U). She also seriously questioned if her singleness was a result of God’s punishment for masturbation. She shared, “I’m always trying to figure out why – is it something about me, or am I undesirable or am I being punished because I’ve had this struggle for so long and I like can’t be pure?” (U). She too longs to experience more grace in her understanding of God, “I think I’m being able to move forward to a place where I can allow myself to fail in order to experience God’s grace as opposed to working really hard to never fail” (U).

Chloe, who is in ministry in her church, was raised going through the Catholic sacraments and recalled a deeply profound personal relationship with God from an early age. As her parents were alcoholics, she learned to love God from her church’s education for children, and believed that “God parented me” (C,1,47). She came to know God not through the sacraments but through prayer. While her family environment was highly sexualized, abusive, and traumatic for her, she believed that her relationship with God taught her “to be drawn to true intimate connections” (C,1,55). She also recalled her
cousins teaching her she needed to pray every night “to keep the bad away,” (C,2,334) or God would get mad at her.

As an adult, she has been angry with God for feeling neglected and abandoned by Him, because of her trauma, it’s affect on her sexuality, and the difficulty she finds in healing. She shared, “I’ve done a lot of counseling around sexual trauma, and it’s really hard to see God in those places . . . in those dark places. It’s kind of hard to see God there, I don’t know if He just sits back” (C,3,810). When asked if she believes God loves her sexual story, she responded, “I just see him as indifferent . . . logically, I can say he comes in with the healing piece, but that’s really hard to see . . . I get really angry with God; there’s just a lot of sexual degradation everywhere” (C,3,847).

For many, the spiritual conditionality of sexual sin led to yo-yo’ing experiences with God that began at a very young age. Kristen, like many of the others, she grew up praying the prayer to receive Christ as Savior many times, hoping each time it would stick and work out for her. Like others, she denied being taught you could lose your salvation over sexuality, but that having these desires were indications you might not have been a true believer all along. Sexual desires only validated that you wanted something different from God. In high school, she had highly sexual relationships but maintained her virginity due to “terror” of going to hell. Having had an eating disorder, she felt like her relationship with God mirrored her dieting patterns. She claimed, “I would say, ‘I’ll be good tomorrow,’ and I’ll fail again. ‘I’ll be good tomorrow.’ You know, falling off the wagon, like, ‘See, there you go again’” (Kr,3,580).
In high school, her church’s teaching on God’s punitive approach to sexual sin led her to see God as, “a good God with a bad temper” (Kr,3,560). She added that her view of God shifted from high school to college:

*The paradigm shifted from, ‘God is continually angry with me’ to ‘God is perpetually disappointed in me,’ because I could never be good. I can never be good enough. You know, ‘be perfect, like I am perfect,’ you know this message that we’re always to be striving to be like Christ. And I can never get there* (Kr,3,565).

She has greatly pursued healing both spiritually and sexually, including going to “a grace filled church that is egalitarian” (Kr,3,595). When asked if God loved her sexual story, she shared, “My immediate reaction is ‘no.’ God is saddened by my sexual story. God loves me, but is saddened by my sexual story . . . I think God loves my present tense sexual story because I’m acting sexually deliberately” (Kr,3,663). Kristen shared she has yet to understand what it would look like for her sexuality and spirituality to be integrated.

Another woman shared of fearing God’s punishment because of her sexuality. She engaged in highly sexual relationships in high school, but maintained her virginity until the end of her senior year. She had sex with her first serious boyfriend in college, and struggled with significant pain during sex. She did not mention this to her boyfriend or to seek medical help for a long time, feeling this was God’s way of punishing her for having sex. She wondered if signing the purity pledge informed her beliefs that sex was a sin too much for God to tolerate. While she has continued to be sexually active with her boyfriends since college, she fears she will be incapable of bearing children due to the
“deserved” consequences of her sin. She stated, “I have to rationally talk through that other people have sex before marriage and have children, but it’s still a struggle” (U).

**Difficulty integrating sex and spirit.** All of the women internalized the belief growing up that to be sexual was to not be spiritual, and to be spiritual was to not be sexual. This expectation required the women to compartmentalize and foreclose on sexuality and spirituality by suppressing one in order to experience the other. For a woman to be close to God, to enjoy Him and feel His pleasure, she had to suppress her sexuality, including any sexual desire or feeling she experienced. Sexuality became defined in black and white terms; all of sexuality was reduced to sexual behaviors and lust, dismissing identity, attraction, feelings, etc. Kate demonstrated this understanding on the integration of sexuality and spirituality:

> It’s just incompatible. It just seems like sexuality and spirituality don’t go together. They have pretty much compartmentalized those things. Because it’s bad, and it sucks. Most especially because I’m not married and sexuality feels sinful and wrong . . . I hope some of my guilt and shame and my thoughts about spirituality and sex will ease after I’m married . . . Right now, I have it stuck in my head that it can’t happen until I’m married (Ka,3,186).

None of the women were able to suppress their sexuality. What resulted was a withdrawal from God and Christian community. In reaction to severe suppression of their sexuality, they found themselves acting out sexually. They attributed this to the oppressive nature of their religious instruction. Seven of the 11 women mentioned enduring many years without having a sense of God’s
presence. During this time they abstained from attending church as they were dating, usually men who were not Christian, who expected a sexual relationship with them. Throughout high school, college, and young adulthood, several women told themselves it was either “God or the guy.” Beth addressed her experience upon having sex in college:

_Spiritually, I felt completely altered. That was the beginning of four years of having no relationship with God. It was that extreme, of kind of going through these cycles where ‘Okay, I’m gonna get back into right relationship with God,’ and it would never take (B,1,730)._

Beth continued:

*I can remember walking around campus thinking, ‘It’s God or the guy.’ I’m sure God cared . . . But I felt like as soon as I engaged in sex, I had lost him completely. There was no way forward. If we could be a little more open in the Church, then we wouldn’t just lose people as soon as they feel like they haven’t lived up to the standards we have set for them (B,3,288).*

Over the course of adulthood attempts to integrate sexuality and spirituality became a conflict resolution process, one in which resolution required them to engage the inconsistencies and dissonance between their faith and their humanity, as it was taught them. Becky demonstrated:

_This was in my early 20’s, one of a number of crises, and I told my husband, ‘I’m just not going to church anymore. I’m tired of it. I’m tired of the rules. I’m tired of the pressure. I’m just fed up. I’m sick of it. It’s not_
that I don’t believe in God; I’m just really frustrated right now and need space. You know, I need to see a different way here. This is not working for me (Be,3,361).

She continued:

I learned to be able to express myself and see for myself what I really believed. If I wanted to wear pants to the gym, I’m wearing pants to the gym. I had to step back and say, ‘What piece of this is God and what piece of this is some man pretending or thinking he’s God?’ (Be,3,421).

None of the women felt they had come to a place of integrating spirituality and sexuality, primarily because they had no guidance. As one woman shared, “We don’t talk about sexuality in the church, let alone from a perspective of faith that is more than just ‘believe, believe, believe’ . . . there is no conversation” (Kr,2,530). Kristen continues to feel disconnected during sex with her husband and likens this struggle, in part, to a difficulty with integrating her sexuality and spirituality. However, she expressed growth in not feeling such great shame and guilt around her sexuality. She stated, “I mean, I’ve been married 16 years, and I just now kind of don’t feel guilty about sex. Isn’t that ridiculous?” (Kr,2,540). When asked what has helped her to come to this place, she listed various factors: age, maturity, life with God, her new church, and growth as a person - “not wanting to live the rest of my life hung up” (Kr,2,546).

One woman, who has been married for over 20 years and has just started counseling, is coming to terms with mutual attraction to men and women. She shared:

I’m just realizing how deeply embedded these messages are. It’s like uncovering racism in yourself when you think you have no racism –
uncovering my own demeaning attitudes toward my sexuality . . . I definitely struggle with feeling like my sexuality is dangerous . . . I still catch myself using words like ‘whore’ (U).

When asked if she believed God loves her sexual story, she shared:

I would like to believe that He does. That’s a very raw question . . . I mean, what does it mean for God to love me while admitting that I masturbate or can God love me if I’m not completely heterosexual . . . I would like to have it all integrated in a way that I could answer that question affirmatively . . . I’m trying to reconcile God’s holiness with the most human parts of myself (U).

Problems with the church. Eight of the 11 women recalled varying levels of fondness and gratefulness for their formative religious communities, identifying church as a vehicle through which they arrived at their Christian faith. Growing up, church was home, family. At the time of the study, nine of the 11 women regularly attended church, with eight expressing ambivalence towards their current church. For all of the women, it was not the parishioners who created the greatest difficulty for them, it was the church leaders. The primary reasons for struggling and not feeling safe in church were hypocrisy, discrimination, and shaming messages to women. These painful experiences with the church throughout their lives manifested as mistrust of church leaders and withdrawal from a reliance upon church leaders. Kate recalled her early church experiences:

And the church part, my view of the church is that it totally failed me . . .

That’s supposed to be a place where you learn grace and love and yes
also law and the Bible and good things. But it should be a balance . . . they set me up in terms of creating messages that stuck with me and still do affect the way I think and feel (Ka,3,146).

She continued:

*It makes me much more hesitant to trust a church, and I think I’m much more skeptical in terms of who I let teach me and be over me . . . I remember in high school and college feeling like church was kind of like home. Like a sense of home base of safety but I definitely don’t feel that as much anymore* (Ka,3,154).

Eight of the nine women who went to church continued to attend conservative, evangelical churches that included male-only leadership, but were not as conservative as their formative churches. The benefits of community and worship outweighed the continuing struggle many had in trusting church leadership.

Most of the women felt anger towards church leadership, and most used disregard as their primary method of coping and reconciling their beliefs with their church attendance. In order to enjoy the benefits they received from religious life, they often tried to ignore or stay away from involvement with church leaders. From her experiences Becky offered, “*I think the biggest thing is that I am very sensitive to any kind of misogyny in the church*” (Be,3,544). Becky now attends a conservative church, not as conservative as hers growing up. She values that her church is large and well educated, believing that she is not the only one who feels the way she does. When asked if she feels congruent with her current church, she continued, “*No, I don’t feel congruent with the leadership, but in the*
congregation, there are some congruent thinkers. It’s a large congregation” (Be,3,564). She does not always favorably view the male leadership, believing they come across as “patriarchal” over their teachings on women and women’s issues. She handles her anger primarily through disregard, stating, “I think he [pastor] might have mommy issues . . . These are middle-aged men who have really no lines in the play, you know?” (Be,3,581). Lilly similarly used disregard as a form of coping with her pastor, for whom she cares as a person, but from whom she has experienced discrimination and injury. While she is highly involved in her church, she has felt quite protective of her sexuality and her marriage, fearing any negative influence the church might have. She stated, “I feel like I just need to protect my little marriage and we just need to do our thing, right?” (L,3,564). She added, “I only have to deal with my husband about my sexuality. Like, the church can say what they want to, but it’s between me and him . . . a real sense of freedom” (L,3,600).

Many noted hypocrisy and sexual corruption as highly aversive for them in trusting church leadership, primarily in the context of how marital conflicts, divorce, and sexual violations were handled, in ways that favored and protected men at the expense of women. Several women mentioned these experiences as “traumatic” for them, leaving them with heightened mistrust of male church leadership.

Many mentioned a history with church leaders who either did not understand women or discriminated against or were demeaning to women. A number mentioned confusion and mistrust, believing it to be hypocritical when male church leaders spoke frequently of the value of women, but demonstrated benevolent discrimination by relating
in a “Father knows best” manner, as well as not allowing women equal lay leadership in the church as men. Some women mentioned more overt misogyny in their experiences with church leaders. Chloe shared of an experience with one pastor who “was very demeaning and just awful and didn’t like women in general” (C,1,590). She began to struggle in her relationship with God, stating, “I followed the religion piece but I started losing that connection with God” (C,1,600). When asked how this happened, she shared, “I started to believe that God doesn’t want anything to do with me, because I’m a woman, not necessarily because I sinned, but . . . I’m not what he created me to be or something” (C,1,632).

For all of the women, the one single factor they believed would make a difference, that made church safer for them, was when there was leadership that recognized their strength, respected them as women, and took a stand against abuse. As four of the women had served full or part time in the church, several mentioned different points of time in their lives, going to a church or having a church leader who respected them and advocated for them as women. This proved to have a significant impact on their spiritual and psychological wellbeing. Kristen, who sought an egalitarian church, has felt no ambivalence regarding church leadership, and has experienced great healing through her church. She shared:

*Spiritually, I think that church and those people have helped me more than anything. So that’s been for the past 17 years. I’ve come to this whole new view of God as love first, instead of so much of ‘we’re just worms and don’t deserve God,’ that I was brought up with. We’re these loved, amazing loved, beautiful creatures, is the way I feel now and what I’m*
teaching my children. It’s a whole new, a whole different way of viewing God (Kr,3,672).

Affect Dysregulation

All of the women demonstrated a high level of strength and fortitude, showing significant courage and steadfastness in their pursuit of truth and healing. The six women who had children indicated a similar determination and accomplishment in parenting their children differently from what they had received. At the same time, it was apparent that these women had been on an oftentimes painful journey sexually and spiritually, having emotionally felt the scars. Nine of the 11 women indicated a history of depression and/or anxiety, with most stating it was depression and anxiety around their sexuality that led them to pursue counseling. Overall, this was a group of women who have been on a long road of emotional recovery.

A complex interaction of factors from an early age contributed to their distress, consisting of various levels of difficult experiences inside and outside their homes growing up, including abuse and neglect, parental divorce, and early death of a parent. An additional significant factor in their emotional distress pertained to their sexuality. This included difficult sexual experiences and feelings as well as a punitive cultural socialization of their sexuality and spirituality by their family and religious community.

What emerged in the study were two paradoxical emotional processes occurring in their Christian environments. One was the explicit use of emotional incitement (fear and shame) from their religious communities to create and regulate sexual and spiritual beliefs and behaviors. The other was the use of emotional suppression from their religious communities to create and regulate those same beliefs and behaviors. This left
the women in an emotional double-bind, creating in them a state of emotional alarm while requiring them to then foreclose their emotions. Emotional dysregulation resulted, a difficulty identifying and regulating their emotions that required a reliance on behavioral and emotional expressions as a form of coping. As previously mentioned, the most used behavioral expressions for these women included sexual engagement, avoidance of sexual engagement, perfectionism, hiding, people pleasing, and disordered eating. Emotionally, regulation consisted of emotional suppression and avoidance, seemingly mediated by shame and self-blame. The primary emotional states that emerged were fear, shame, anxiety, depression, confusion, and anger.

As the women shared their sexual and spiritual stories, emotionally, they seemed to take a similar developmental path. In earlier life, fear, shame, and anxiety were most roused regarding their sexuality and spirituality. In teen and early adult years, depression and confusion grew, primarily resulting from the need to suppress and avoid those emotionally aroused states. Anger, for most, is what evolved for the women in middle to later adult years, as they felt no longer able to maintain the emotional burden of shame and self-blame. For many, what had been internalized was becoming externalized.

**Fear, shame, and anxiety.** Fear and shame were the primary emotions used to regulate the women’s sexuality by their religious communities. All of the women internalized the fear of hell as a consequence of sexuality. Sexual sin was taught as an indicator of questionable faith. When younger, a person’s faith was acutely in question if they were engaging in sexual behaviors. The warning of the “slippery slope” that included desire, kissing, or being alone with someone, created an alarmed state of fear and shame over normal developmental stages. As Chloe, raised Catholic, stated, “I don’t
remember all the ways this fear was instilled but I grew up with the definite feeling of 'one wrong move’” (C,1,435).

All of the women mentioned her sexual and spiritual socialization began with her feeling great fear, shame, and anxiety. Kate, like many of the women, believed her church growing up used shame as a “fear tactic” (Ka,2,6) in focusing on the badness of sexuality and desire, as opposed to telling her of the goodness of sexuality. Many women grew up feeling “terrified” of God’s anger over their burgeoning sexuality. Several mentioned feeling “traumatized” by how their sexuality was handled by their religious communities. Referring to her anxiety, Kristen mentioned her sexual socialization as “the beginning of my mental illness” (Kr,1,229). Her sexual desires were triggered at a young age due to exposure to porn. She stated:

I used to have thoughts connected to that porn . . . I was so anxious about these thoughts, these horrible thoughts . . . In a religious system, it was so extreme to sin, this idea of sin and the sinful nature . . . not just acting it out, but the thoughts are sinful. I used to imagine that those sinful thoughts were displayed on a billboard and everybody could see them. That would be my fear . . . This was 3rd or 4th grade . . . I was terrified (Kr,1,235).

Three of the 11 reported recent alleviation of heightened sexual and spiritual anxiety, due to counseling. Four of the 11 women identified still struggling greatly with heightened fear and anxiety regarding their sexuality. Cheryl, who has been divorced for 12 years, has stayed away from men for fear of sinning sexually. She stated:
I fall into fear because I don’t want to sin, and I know that the slippery slope is easy . . . so I get paralyzed . . . I become afraid to take any steps towards sexuality or about sexuality, because I don’t want to sin and displease God (Ch.3,31)

**Depression and confusion.** In addition to fear and shame, emotional suppression and avoidance was used to regulate sexuality. Often, emotional suppression and denial was spiritualized as a form of godliness. To feel fear, sorrow, or anger was to not trust God. For many of the women, mistrust of emotions was a core religious tenet. Emotions were what led you astray and led you to sin and away from God, not toward God. For many, this contributed to a dysregulated emotional state of depression and confusion, often requiring them to dissociate, to detach from self-awareness and emotions in order to cope. Susan, whose fear regarding sexual sin and desire to please has kept her from dating her adult life, shared:

*The whole ‘guarding your heart,’ which I don’t know what that means, but that was something I bought into as well with dating, like girls, you have to guard your heart. I don’t even know what that means . . . and you can’t trust your desires, like, we can really be led astray by our desires* (S,1,128).

Developmentally, many mentioned college as a beginning point for depression; a mixture of emotional dysregulation and sexual acting out that often resulted in a spiritual crisis of despair. Throughout their lives, some shared they felt blamed by their religious leaders for their depression. Cheryl felt great confusion and shame when her pastor told her she was not praying enough and trusting God enough, stating, “*Don’t let anybody
tell you that you need medication for depression’” (Ch,2,897). It was this experience that led her to seek another church. Cheryl has used suppression to stay away from men since her divorce for fear of sexual sin and continues to feel “confusion over my sexual desires and what to do with them after marriage” (Ch,2,11) She stated that talking to her friends has helped her learn to normalize her sexual feelings and emotions.

Ministry, for Susan, served as a form of emotional and sexual regulation but then encountered a negative church planting experience that, instead of helping, further exacerbated her feelings of depression. She stated, “It was very judgmental there . . . I got really depressed, and people didn’t know what to do with me . . . They would tell me, ‘You can’t trust your feelings. Most of the time we have to do what we don’t feel like doing when it comes to our relationship with the Lord’” (S,1,68). She added that the Pastor’s wife tried to guide her into regulating her emotions through suppression, telling her she tried not to let her husband see her cry. At the time of the study, Susan acknowledged she was just beginning:

to allow myself to remove that judgment for a minute long enough to just be in the emotion and not have to say it’s right or it’s wrong, but that’s so engrained in me, needing to be right . . . This is like put on me, this theology, and I have to figure out how to align myself and my behaviors and my thoughts and feelings with it, which feels oppressive, by the way (S,2,116).

Eight of the 11 women reported some level of depression at the time of the study. For one woman, her church has been the most healing for her. Counseling for many has been helpful in normalizing their sexual feelings and emotions in general. Beth stated that
she had just begun working through these deeper feelings, believing much to be related to her sexuality. She shared:

*I’ve been in counseling since June. And I went to counseling, because I was very depressed, and I have issues with anxiety anyway, but I feel like a lot of the last year has been like being a burn patient, you know, when they’re constantly scraping off dead tissue, and I just haven’t hit the healthy tissue yet, I don’t think.*

**Anger.** Most women shared that anger was not allowed or highly discouraged in their religious communities growing up and as adults. All of the women, save the youngest two, expressed feelings of outrage regarding their religious community’s handling of their sexuality. Becky shared, “for a long time, it was just a big ball of anger, emotions, frustrations . . . To untangle all of that has taken me a very long time” *(Be,3,327).* Currently she acknowledged those who anger her the most are religious leaders who are “patriarchal” and “misogynists,” as well as her parents and her church leaders growing up. She shared, “I definitely have continued anger at the adults and resentment for creating really, really big problems for me” *(Be,3,330).* Kate, when asked how she currently feels regarding her religious socialization of her sexuality, offered:

*The feeling is anger. There’s so much false and unfair indoctrination I’ve had, like all these things in me that aren’t true but emotionally they feel just as true as anything . . . I feel angry that I was not taught grace, to live all these years with guilt and shame . . . I also feel like I was set up for failure; I wasn’t equipped well to do what they wanted me to do, which was to be abstinent* *(Ka,3,112).*
In feeling her voice is silenced in her current church, Lilly stated:

*Maybe once a year seems like the pattern for me – the rubber really hits the road, like the tension really collides . . . I feel it and it looks like rage . . . really, it’s an impossible task . . . you see what needs to be done, but you can’t have a voice. You shouldn’t be angry. You should never be angry . . . find soft words to express yourself (L,3,673).*

In still feeling the need to suppress her anger, she continued:

*It comes out more as tears of desperation . . . I think anger for me often it has been more effective in my life to express anger as desperation. I don’t always do that . . . my anger is not heard (L,1,686).*

For a number of the women, especially as they became older, their outrage was a vehicle for transformation and change in their lives. Many expressed a passionate advocacy for women and men in their Christian cultures to heal sexually and spiritually. For those who were parents, they were determined to parent their children’s sexuality and faith with more grace and openness and less fear and shame. Of the 11 women, seven were in a helping profession themselves: four having become counselors and three in paid ministry positions. Most of the women mentioned their interest in the study as stemming from a passion for change, not only in their own lives but in the lives of others.

**Summary**

Two research questions served as the guide for this study: *how are women’s sexual self-views informed by religious teaching, and how is the interplay of these messages and women’s experiences lived in them sexually, psychologically, and*
Eleven women were interviewed three times each in order to gain understanding of their experiences and how they resolved their concerns with sex and spirit. Essentially asked: *how did their religious socialization “show up” in them and what did they do about this?* In response to the research questions, seven categories emerged capturing the overall outcomes for women: identity conflicts, shame, self-blame, self-objectification, sexual and relationship problems with men, sexual and spiritual conflicts, and affect dysregulation. In the next chapter is a discussion of their main concern, how they resolved this concern, and clinical implications of sexual and spiritual wellbeing for women raised in a Western religious tradition.
Chapter 5 – Discussion

Although economic disparity is a great and growing problem, I have become convinced that the most serious and unaddressed worldwide challenge is the deprivation and abuse of women and girls, largely caused by a false interpretation of carefully selected religious texts and a growing tolerance of violence and warfare, unfortunately following the example set during my lifetime by the United States. – Jimmy Carter in A Call to Action (Carter, 2014, p. 3)

It has been suggested that a woman’s construction of her sexual self is not a solitary process but one in which she co-authors her sexual script with her culture. Cultural institutions of religion, medicine, and media are shown to play a significant role in a woman’s sexuality (Foucault, 1978). Specifically, researchers have identified Western religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to play a key role in women’s constructions of sexual identity, beliefs, practices, and overall emotional wellbeing. Yet, only a few studies exist in which this relationship is explored.

To date, several phenomenological studies exist in which the relationship between a woman’s sexuality and her Western Christian tradition is explored. Using large brushstrokes, researchers identify a shame-based religious sexual socialization deemed detrimental to women’s sexual, spiritual, and psychological wellbeing, resulting in significant sexual dysfunction, a negative self-identity as a woman, and broken/injured relationship with God. Mahoney (2008) discovered women disconnect their sexual and spiritual selves as a primary manner of coping within their sexual religious socialization, leading to overall “psychological discomfort, which led participants to seek different ways of reducing the conflict” (p. 96). Ogden (2002) found women reconciled these conflicts of sex and spirit through blaming themselves as inadequate and dysfunctional in
order to remain in their faith communities. Daniluk (1993) identified organized religion as one of four sources of cultural impact on a woman’s sexuality (in addition to medicine, sexual violence, and media portrayals of women), finding it left women with a punitive view of God and pervasive feelings of inadequacy, shame, and self-blame. All three studies discovered women had significant life-long difficulty in finding healing and integrating sex and spirit as a result. Daniluk (1993) and Mahoney (2008) concluded the women’s greatest chance of reclaiming sexual and spiritual safety and wellbeing was when women left their religious affiliation and embraced a feminine-positive spirituality.

This current study set to examine the relationship of women’s sexuality within her Western Christian tradition with greater depth, seeking to understand how this break occurs, what is its impact, and how, if at all, the women resolve this break. Eleven women were interviewed three times each in an extensive interview protocol to gain an in-depth understanding of these processes. The research questions guiding this current study sought to understand how a woman’s sexual self-views were informed by her religious socialization, thus impacting her sexually, psychologically, and spiritually. Seven categories emerged which best captured their outcomes: conflicts of identity, shame, self-blame, self-objectification, sexual and relational problems with men, sexual and spiritual conflicts, and affect dysregulation.

The findings of this study revealed that fear, shame, and objectification served as the primary manner of regulating women’s sexuality within their religious traditions. Similar to existing literature, religious socialization became internalized as sexual and spiritual shame and self-blame; however, self-objectification was also found in this study as a significant outcome. Altogether, shame, self-blame, and self-objectification seemed
to mediate the relationship between religious socialization and their life-long difficulties of identity, affect dysregulation, sexual/relational difficulties, and ruptures of spirit and faith in God. In this chapter, a theory regarding this internalization process will be developed and discussed, grounded in the primary concern (core category) of these women and how they resolved this concern.

Of particular interest in the discussion is the path many took in healing body and soul. Given the familial nature of their religious culture and the value, for many, of their communal faith practices and beliefs, was it possible for those women who wished to remain in their faith tradition to heal sex and spirit? Two primary questions emerged that will be addressed – (1) What, if any, are the possible factors needed for women to heal sex and spirit while remaining in their faith culture, and (2) How can culturally sensitive counselors assess and engage the role of women’s religious values/religious history when presenting in counseling with sexual, relationship, and emotional difficulties? Recommendations for clinicians and faith practitioners will be provided.

**Core Category Development**

The primary goal of grounded theory is to discover the main problem within an area of study as well as the resolution to that problem. In the analytic course of building theory, this main concern is depicted through a core category. The core category represents the integration of the main categories of a study, capturing the overall process at hand in which the other categories serve as its actions, conditions, or consequences (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). In grounded theory analysis, the task of moving from category development into core category development is accomplished through conceptualization -
a process of moving from substantive data to theoretical data, from descriptive methods
to theoretical methods, from fact to impression. According to Glaser (2001):

Grounded theory boils down to generating a theory of continually
resolving the main concern, which explains most of the behavior in an
area of interest . . . The main concern is not the voice of the participants.
It is a conceptualization of it based on a theoretical coding and conceptual
saturation of interchangeable indices. It is a perspective and
conceptualization of their voice loud and clear in many indicators (p.
102).

My attempts to uncover a main concern began descriptively with the development
of categories as I employed the constant comparative method of challenging inchoate
subcategories and categories. As categories emerged, so did rivaling hypotheses as to a
core category from which the others would hang. Once the seven categories became more
solidified, I began asking myself a series of questions:

(a) What are they most concerned about?
(b) How have they attempted to resolve these concerns?
(c) How has this occurred over time?
(d) How are their individual and situational differences accounted for?
(e) What, for them, would make it better?

In response to these questions, several factors emerged. First, I was
immediately struck by the detriment of their sexual religious socialization, leaving
them to carry a great emotional pain up until present day. Second, It was not
difficult to find significant elements of abuse and trauma in their stories. Sexual,
emotional, and spiritual abuse was evident, not only in their experiences, but in their presenting sequelae. Third, their overall journey in healing was in finding safety. From the analysis, the main concern emerged as complex trauma.

The Core Category: Complex Trauma

Complex trauma is a term used to describe both a series of events as well as the psychological outcomes one can potentially experience from enduring such events. Complex trauma differs from Post-Traumatic Stress as it describes an experience of enduring long-term exposure to emotionally or physically threatening environments, as opposed to one-time traumatic incidents (Herman, 1997). Complex trauma includes exposure to various types of abusive, emotionally manipulative, harassing, or bullying environments. The term “developmental trauma” is often used interchangeably with complex trauma in capturing the developmental nature of children raised in such environments over a period of time. Emotional harm within a caregiving environment is the hallmark of complex trauma.

In recognizing issues of complex trauma in the findings, I reviewed the literature and uncovered similarity between the categories in this current study and the six primary clusters of complex trauma symptoms suggested by Pelcovitz et. al (1997):

(a) Difficulties regulating emotions (e.g. depressive and anxious symptoms, compulsive or inhibited sexuality)

(b) Variations in consciousness (e.g. struggles with identity, lack of self-awareness)
(c) Alterations in self-perception (e.g. shame, self-blame)

(d) Difficulties in relations with others (e.g. withdrawal, distrust, in search of a rescuer)

(e) Somatization (e.g. somatic illness, disordered eating)

(f) Alterations in systems of meaning (e.g. loss of faith, hope, or meaning)

Once discovering congruence between complex trauma and the findings of this study, the relatedness amongst the categories illuminated the participants’ experiences. Complex trauma was not a diagnosis of these women but was instead a systematic representation of impact. It was not difficult to see that each of the 11 women, to varying degrees, demonstrated a life-long emotional and spiritual traumatic distress as a result of their sexual religious socialization. Following are phrases the women used to describe the effects of their sexual religious socialization:

- *It traumatized me.*
- *It made me hate my body.*
- *It terrified me.*
- *God doesn’t like women.*
- *It caused me to be depressed and anxious for many years.*
- *God is punishing me.*
- *After all these years, I’m still so ashamed.*
- *I’ve had to learn to heal.*
- *It’s hard trusting religious leaders.*
- *It made me suicidal.*
- *Church can be painful as a woman.*
- *It has paralyzed me.*

The women identified, prior to any treatment, significant distress they considered to be a result of their religious sexual socialization. Sexually and physically, their reported traumatic distress appeared as sexual dysfunction (arousal and desire disorders (4 of 11 women)), sexual dysregulation (sexual acting out (7) or severe sexual inhibition
(3)), mistrust of men’s sexuality (6), disordered eating (6), and somatic illnesses (5).

Emotionally/psychologically most of the women reported life-long struggles with anxiety and depression (9), religious sexual shame (10), and difficulty recognizing sexual/relational harm (11). Reported identity struggles consisted of significant shame (11), dissociation of body and spirit (10), feminine shame (6), difficulty with self-awareness (9), and perfectionism (5). Spiritually, most of the women expressed a long history of seeing God as chronically punitive/disappointed in her (8), a mistrust of religious leaders (8), and ambivalence with church culture as discriminating/hypocritical (8).

Schermer-Sellers (2015), Professor of Sexuality at Seattle Pacific University, became convinced of the harm produced by modern America’s Christian socialization of sexuality from hearing hundreds of Christian students’ sexual stories, and recently posted an online article entitled, “How the Purity Movement Causes Symptoms of Sexual Abuse.” She concluded:

This combination of Fear, Shame and Silence wrapped in a religious context of “This is of God” is what produces religious sexual shame that can manifest as symptoms of childhood sexual abuse in adults. The Purity Movement delivered this in spades ... and we have a generation of young adults now trying to heal from levels of shame, depression, anxiety and sexual dysfunction, unlike we have seen in recent history.

(tinaschermersellers.com)

The results of this current study supported this conclusion, uncovering that such presenting problems, as well as the shaming religious culture from which they are
related, existed well before the event of the Purity Movement. As mentioned by one participant, it is probable that the Purity Movement’s extreme culture presented a “creatively repackaged” message, one that has, in essence, existed prior. As frequently noted in analytical histories of religion and sexuality, a distorted view of purity has long served as a tool for sexual regulation and economic benefit (Ranke-Heinemann 1990; Weisner-Henke, 2000). As well, these harmful structures for women did not end once she reached adulthood but continued on throughout her adult life, morphing into various shapes and forms.

The current findings indicate that not only has this socialization manifested itself as childhood sexual abuse in adults, but the actual socialization itself could be considered abusive, through the use of fear and shame as the underlying manner of regulating sexuality. *It is suggested here that the traumatic distress participants experienced stemmed from systemic violations of sexual and spiritual safety, in which (a) sexual abuse went unprotected and, (b) sexuality was regulated through threats of danger and threats to attachment.*

Unlike environments that are overtly aggressive and threatening, such violations occurred in a caretaking environment in which the women were made to believe that they were, in fact, the danger and the one to abandon – the doer as opposed to the done-to. This type of projection, through shame, served to perpetuate their religious affiliation as well as keep violations hidden from immediate awareness. Following is a brief discussion for understanding this system and its subsequent outcomes of traumatic distress.
Sexual and Spiritual Abuse

Many have written on the nature of religious culture in which sexuality is split off from spiritual life. Walker (2004) argued that the neo-platonic Christian culture since the 3rd century, in which the baseness of the body and its practices became localized in women and dissociated from faith and its practices, has led to a culture of misogyny: the inferiority of women (whose very sensuality was experienced as spiritual threat) and the idolatry of male spiritual authority. In the splitting of sex and spirit, a woman’s sexuality is split off from the mother (Mary) and represented instead by the reformed prostitute (Mary, the Magdalene), while a man’s holiness is in cutting himself off from the sexual woman. It is this position, she argued, which has become the breeding grounds of sexual abuse and its supporting structures within the Church.

Sexually abusive actions, or environments that foster sexual and spiritual abuse, do not necessarily entail physical contact, as sexual harm can occur verbally or emotionally. For the women in this study, the nature of these actions ranged from discrimination to sexual abuse specific, altogether equating to an environment and impact of sexual and spiritual abuse, often stemming from a conjoint response from church and family. In total, four women had experienced at least one incident of child sexual abuse. Two of the women were sexually abused by religious leaders, which were physical in nature. Five other women discovered they had at least one church leader commit child sexual abuse with another young adolescent. Several of the women were sexually abused by a family member or someone known to them, or had a family member or friend who was sexually abused. All of the women felt religious leaders did not protect them (or others) from abuse or take sexual offenses against them seriously, choosing instead to
protect and support the offenders. This collusion with offenders and portrayal of men as sexually out of control, along with increased objectifying regulations for female modesty, contributed greatly to the sexual and spiritual harm of men and women, providing a foundation upon which further discriminations and offenses could occur, remiss of any accountability.

All of the women encountered sexual and spiritual harm through the deleterious narration of their sexuality. Though couched with a motivational enthusiasm, the rhetoric of purity was built on the use of threat - the threat of lost value, threat of a lost future, and ultimately threat of cut-off if purity was compromised. Shaming messages, creatively presented through metaphorical analogies (e.g. – a girl who’s had sex is equated with some type of used good no one would want) or through direct communication (e.g. – a religious leader announces he would never allow his sons to marry non-virgins) very clearly sent the message of destitution and abandonment for loss of virginity. All participants identified a greater focus of devaluation placed on girls for loss of purity than boys. Central to the threat underlying these purity messages was the inferred danger of a woman’s body. The women were schooled in the belief that their own bodies (that they enjoyed and trusted to serve them well as little girls) became, in puberty, dangerous (yet lovely) weapons in need of commando-like regulations. Being too attractive, while garnishing desirability on the one hand, created a stigma, often propelling one to the outside of the purity group. Likewise, anxiety and shame increased at the realization that the purity bar had no ceiling - showing romantic interest, expressing strong opinions, non-traditional styles of dress, behavior, and interests, or non-traditional family-of-origin structures were found to create a stigma of non-purity standing on their own. If a young
woman or her family did not fit the structure, there was stigma; if she did fit, hers was a high expectation to maintain the ideal or an appearance of the ideal.

Similarly, sexual and spiritual harm was prolific according to woman-negative responses to their sexuality by religious leaders, based in fear, shame, and blame. Sexual and spiritual harm often occurred in how families and church leaders engaged existing sexual stress. Opportunities to protect women’s sexuality, when brought to adult attention by young women, were instead handled through blame of women, threat of cut-off, and protection of the men involved, frequently bringing into question doubts on the veracity of the women’s faith. For example, a young girl is sexually abused and, as a result, might become sexually promiscuous as a teenager. Instead of responding to her sexuality with care, curiosity, or understanding (in which they might uncover her trauma and provide the help she needs) she is identified by family and church leaders as seductive, dangerous and told she is not a Christian for engaging in such behaviors. Or a college girl becomes pregnant and she, not her boyfriend, is expelled from their Christian school (as opposed to embraced and cared for by her community at a vulnerable time in her life). Many of the double standards and spiritually threatening responses, such as these, were internalized as shame, thus disguising for them the actual experience of sexual and spiritual harm.

As adults, blame and objectification occurred more through religious leaders’ handling of marital conflicts, placing sexual expectations on women in marriage, and in discriminating treatment of women in general. All of the women in the study who brought marital conflicts to their pastors experienced blame and lack of protection. For example, a woman brings to her pastor that her husband is addicted to pornography, and
she is consoled but also advised she could show him more attention and affection. If she is considering separation, she is told she is trying to control the situation and would be abandoning him. For those women in the study who served in ministry positions or attended seminary, gender discrimination and objectification were experienced more acutely (occurring regardless of ideology around female ordination). All of the women in ministry positions (paid or volunteer) had many experiences of religious leaders treating them as threatening or dangerous. This typically came across to the women as overtly dismissive or suspicious. Dismissal often occurred through ignoring and not utilizing their strengths and abilities or treating them in a parental, condescending manner. Suspiciousness came through questioning their competency, motives, or moral integrity. In these experiences they felt most objectified as their abilities, strengths, and even their attractiveness triggered avoidant fear reactions in male ministers, students, and faculty.

**Systemic Traumatic Stress and Threats to Attachment**

Similar to the findings of Mahoney (2008), many of the women in this study described unsafe, chaotic, or lonely families of origin and found safety and comfort in both the community and regulations of a high-authority Church as a “well-organized and reliable ‘family’ where authority lines were clearly defined and stable” (p. 98). About half of the women in this study experienced church life growing up as a warm and loving community, especially appreciating the sibling-like relationships with other youth and adult attention given them during their teen years from youth leaders and other adults. However, as Mahoney (2008) discovered, the safe sanctuary of Church included its own violations of security and safety, as trusted caregivers, those responsible for providing needed protection and security, became those who instilled in them sexual fear and
shame. For the women, such breaches of care impacted their sense of trust in themselves, in others, and in God, manifesting itself as the multifaceted distress outlined in complex trauma.

Most of the women identified significant attachment to religious leaders and their religious community as extended family. According to Cook et al. (2005), complex trauma is set in the relational context of family or community, often interfering with the development of secure attachments within a caregiving system. In addressing the relationship between child, church, and priest amidst the Catholic Church’s sexual abuse epidemic, Walker (2004) identified church as family and God as Father for a child raised in an intimate religious community. This held true for participants in this study, as male religious leaders amalgamated to both Father and God, inhabiting power to shape their sexual scripts. As is the complex nature of family dynamics, for these 11 women, both blessing and injury originated from the same ecclesiastical hand, leading to an insecure attachment with church leaders and God. Sadly, when it pertained to sexuality the predominant experience was deleterious and incurred enduring emotional, sexual, and spiritual difficulties.

**The Impact of Traumatic Distress**

Several overarching outcomes captured the participants’ experiences of distress – the role of shame, self-blame, and self-objectification, the developmental path of distress, and the core feature of their distress; loss of safety. For the women in this study, their traumatic distress stemmed from a system that fostered abuse, looked the other way at their sexual abuse, and regulated their sexuality through threat. Shame, self-blame, and self-objectification were found to mediate the relationship between their socialization and
traumatic distress. The women who were most distressed exhibited the greatest amount of shame, self-blame, and self-objectification regarding their own sexual self-views and their relationships with their religious communities and God. Similarly, those who exhibited greater shame, self-blame, and self-objectification were the women who had greater difficulty identifying harm and holding those who caused harm responsible. It also appeared the closer the attachment to religious leaders the greater difficulty the women had in identifying harm and holding those responsible for it. Shame and the projection of blame by religious leaders (including parents), coupled with an otherwise often-positive relationship with religious leaders, all served to mask an awareness of threat, as they were taught the threat was within them - in their desires, their bodies, or their contradictory opinions.

Their traumatic distress was found to extend throughout their lives on a developmental path of impact and healing. The three youngest participants demonstrated greater levels of sexual and spiritual self-blame and shame and less awareness of outside harm. The older women (late 30’s+), on the other hand, attributed their traumatic distress more to their religious socialization than to their own sin and shortcomings, many identifying this turn of awareness to their long-term and healing marital and therapeutic relationships. Exceptions were found to occur with women who were older but had not experienced satisfying relationships that were healing. They exhibited similar distress as those who were younger, suggesting that the developmental process could relate to a combination of healing factors and chronological age.

At its core, complex trauma is born from loss of safety. This held true for participants as their socialization created significant ruptures in sexual and spiritual
safety. Safety has long been considered a foundational need in order for one to experience psychological wellbeing (Maslow, 1943). The experience of safety provides one with a sense of security and protection from danger (physical, relational, emotional, spiritual), essentially, freedom from fear of threat. Violations of security and safety through abuse and neglect serve as the bedrock of complex trauma.

Spiritually, the greatest distress for participants was loss of spiritual safety. As people of faith in this study, loss of spiritual safety indicated loss of trust in a loving God who does not abandon. For the women, this was keenly tied to her sense of internal wellbeing – if God does not feel safe, she does not feel safe; if she does not feel safe, God does not feel safe. For some, their socialization turned them permanently away from church and God. For most, it created an insecure attachment with God, a relationship centered around performance, leading to an inability to feel free and an inability to integrate her faith with her identity in a manner in which one did not threaten the other.

**Building Theory**

Complex trauma emerged as the overall experience of the women when their sexuality met their religious socialization, but how did the women resolve this concern? When moving from a core category to building a grounded theory, one proceeds from the substantive lens of primary concern to the transactional lens of resolution. The question evolved from, “what were they experiencing,” to “what were they doing about it?” From initial analysis, a conflict resolution process surfaced as the women engaged their sexuality with their religious community.

Conflict resolution began as soon as they first recognized the existence of their sexuality or the disadvantage of their gender. No matter how good they were, these
women were never able to feel good enough in a world where sexuality was a threat to spirituality or where women were a threat to men, yet this world was their family. And so, the women emerged as actors living in a liminal space between what was personal and what was communal, continuously negotiating opposing realities: authenticity vs. belonging; belonging vs. abandonment; desire vs. security; shame vs. integrity; the God who loves vs. the God who rejects. Given their main concern of complex trauma, I questioned, within these paired opposites what they were primarily negotiating for themselves.

Through weeks of reviewing the findings and consulting with participants and colleagues, several factors emerged. First, I began to see the participants not as passive receptacles of their sexual religious socialization, but as co-authors, continuously making choices and negotiating out their sexual stories and faith stories within their religious community. Second, the women were taught to see their sexual selves and to make sexual choices based out of fear, but what they most longed for was grace. And third, their problem was not one of desire, as they have been told, but one of safety. Whether it was through gender discrimination or sexual or spiritual abuse, the greatest rupture to their sexual and spiritual selves was ultimately their sense of safety - with God, within themselves, or with others. And what they most desired was spiritual security – a faith and a faith community in which their sexuality and their gender were not seen as threatening. It is from these considerations that the theory of negotiating safety emerged to capture the transactional experience between a woman’s sexuality and her religious culture.
A Grounded Theory – Negotiating Safety

While the literature on women’s sexuality and religious socialization is scant, feminist qualitative researchers have most recently explored the concept of sexual and spiritual integration in women raised in a Christian tradition. Mahoney (2008) indicated that women raised in this tradition were locked in a conflict resolution process in which they had not been able to integrate their sexuality and spirituality, requiring them to foreclose on one in order to experience the other, thus incurring significant psychological, sexual, and spiritual distress. The framework offered in this study proposed that: a) complex trauma best captured this distress, and b) most ruptured was their sense of spiritual and sexual safety. *It is suggested here that the relationship between a woman’s sexuality and her religious culture (including her very own faith) is an ongoing negotiation process in which she attempts to reclaim a sense of psychological, sexual, and spiritual safety and wellbeing.*

The term *negotiating safety* was chosen as it most accurately depicted the women’s greatest longings related to their sexuality and faith, as well as the actions they took to resolve conflicts between their sexual selves and their religious culture - broad enough to hold variations amongst the women in their sexual and spiritual views and choices they have made. For example, despite the conflicts within them, some of the women chose to maintain the sexual and spiritual views and practices from which they were raised; others abandoned their religiosity altogether, while others maintained their religious affiliation yet made significant changes in their beliefs and practices. Despite these differences, all of the women’s feelings, beliefs, and actions were motivated by a
need for psychological, sexual, and spiritual safety and wellbeing. Likewise, sexual and spiritual safety was paramount for those who found greatest healing.

Within the framework of negotiating safety, two types of safety are proposed here; two paths, if you will, the women predominantly took. It will be shown that one path was fueled by fear and the other by grace, each leading to subsequent outcomes in relation to self, others, and God. *I will suggest that when the women enacted or experienced their sexuality and faith through the path of grace, they found the greatest healing and greatest potential to reclaim the sexual and spiritual security needed to integrate their sexuality and faith. I will also suggest that the fear taught them kept them from growing spiritually, whereas grace brought spiritual growth and maturity.*

**Safety**

The process of reclaiming safety has been a significant area of study as it pertains to sexual harm. Safety recovery is a well-documented initial stage in the process of complex trauma treatment (Hermann, 1992; Courtois, 1997), which includes repairing violations of security and rebuilding trust within oneself, in relationship with others, and with God. Extensive research has been developed detailing the long road of healing for one whose sense of wellbeing and safety has been violated through abuse or neglect; however, there is little research on the traumatic outcomes of those who have experienced sexual or spiritual violations within their religious culture.

Often, safety can be an ambiguous concept. Many see relational safety as some sense of a benign, warm and cozy place of relational holding in which comfort trumps excitement. While this was certainly true for what the women found to be healing and trusting in their sexual and therapeutic relationships, this version of safety did not
sufficiently capture all of the women’s sexual, emotional, and spiritual longings. These were active, determined women who longed for excitement in their relationships. Some were daring risk-takers, wanting to challenge the status quo and push the proverbial envelope. My initial idea of safety was too limiting.

**Flaccid and Dynamic Safety**

Researchers in the study of sexual desire have written extensively on the mechanisms of eroticism, attachment, and safety in long-term relationships. Goldner (2006) proffered two types of safety when addressing attachment and desire in marital relationships: dynamic safety and flaccid safety. Flaccid safety she referred to as a “**tepid cohabitation**,” in which two people share an unconscious agreement to live in a comfortable, predictable, avoidant space (p. 626). Mitchell (2001) has argued this type of defensive safety in couples kills sexual desire over the long term, leaving them oppressively cozy. Perel (2006) further elaborated on the stability rut in which couples can become entrenched when, for the pursuit of safety and stability, relationship becomes predictable, comfortable, and habitual through the force of avoidance and suppression. At its core, it is the fear of losing security and safety that can propel couples to suppress authenticity and vulnerability in their intimate relationships, ultimately rendering flaccid safety a pseudo safety, an illusion of safety (Goldner, 2006; Mitchell, 2001; Perel, 2006).

Goldner (2006) identified dynamic safety, on the contrary, as a robust intimate attachment established through a couples’ lived history of risk-taking and its resolution – an alive, non-coercive relationship in which there exists a never-ending cycle of breakdown and repair, of separation and reunion. Goldner argued that in long-term relationships “**sexy**” is not because danger is involved, but because partners make danger
safe, as “they make good on their promise to love over and over again, despite the hurt they inevitably cause one another” (p. 626). Outlining the courage involved in dynamic safety, Goldner stated, “Relational safety is not primarily an unconscious evasion or retreat from engagement, it is a profound interpersonal accomplishment” (p. 626).

The choices the participants in this study made in their romantic relationships, with God, and with their religious communities were best reflected via the interpersonal framework of flaccid and dynamic safety. Embedded in their sexual stories was a transaction occurring between themselves and their intimate relationships. The other actors in their sexual stories - the partners, family, and religious leaders - were likewise fueled by the same need for safety, informing their own choices in how they engaged and narrated the women’s sexuality. The question became, was it fueled by an avoidant or shaming fear that promoted suppression or through a life-giving courage that could not be ultimately threatened by the messiness of sexuality.

Some of the women primarily chose the path of flaccid safety, explicitly describing the motivation of fear. For one woman, she chose to remain sexually engaged but emotionally detached by dating only married men, and yet she longed for a trusting relationship in which she could be known. Likewise, in response to her spiritual abuse, she reserved her faith for herself and detached from religion altogether, yet she longed to experience her faith in a trusting faith community. For another woman, she chose to avoid any contact with men for most of her adult life; preventing her daughters any contact with boys. Having been burned by a husband who left her, she pursued safety by following her church’s strict purity rules in which sexual safety equated to fleeing
temptation. Yet she felt paralyzed: ashamed, afraid, and alone in her longing for sexual and relational connection and for grace and freedom with God.

For some women, out of safety they chose to remain in a religious context with highly regulated rules of what women should and should not do in their marriages, in their churches, and in their homes. As one participant described, the structured regulations of her religion introduced by her mother felt much more secure to her than her father’s non-religious and chaotic home life with her stepmother. However, these choices also left her stuck, feeling voiceless in a sexless, passionless marriage, frustrated and alone with her longing to have a career, and tepid in her desire to go to church.

Many of the women detailed a journey out of flaccid safety and toward dynamic safety, out of fear and toward grace. I was particularly interested in how these women pursued healing, stepping out of the fear that shaped their sexuality and faith and taking risks to reclaim a faith and sexuality that was secure. For these women, healing came within their religion, not necessarily through their churches, but through their intimate marital and therapeutic relationships that were both religious and egalitarian in nature. And for one woman, it was her egalitarian church. In these sacred intimate spaces, they were recognized. Here they were encouraged to flourish, to be who God made them to be, and to fight to see their reflection in God’s image as a woman. This type of safety brought out something active and alive in them - redemption.

**Negotiating Safety Systemically**

Impairment to sexual and spiritual safety led the participants to resolve their sexual and spiritual concerns by negotiating safety within themselves and between themselves and their culture. Below is a model for how the women negotiated safety
within themselves, with others, and with God, from a place of fear (flaccid safety) which occurred through disembodiment, relational complementarity, and hiding, or grace (dynamic safety) occurring through embodiment, whole-hearted relating, and trust (Table 4).

Table 4.
Negotiating Sexual and Spiritual Safety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Flaccid Safety (Fear)</th>
<th>Dynamic Safety (Grace)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Disembodied</td>
<td>Embodied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>Relational Complementarity</td>
<td>Whole-Hearted Relating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God</td>
<td>Hiding</td>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Flaccid Safety: Fear and Sexuality

The findings revealed a systemic culture in which fear served as the force from which sexuality was narrated and engaged. Scriptural texts were used as the tool for regulating sexuality through shame, interpreted through a neo-platonic lens in which body was lower than spirit and women were lower than men. Based in fear, engaging sexuality with self, others, and God was taught through suppression, projection, and avoidance. This became internalized by women and men and developed in them as their own form of coping (securing safety).

Self: Disembodiment. Based in gnostic interpretations of a few scriptural passages, suppression was taught as the primary manner of handling one’s sexuality. The suppression of sexuality began with the body. The sins of the body (e.g., sexual development and sexual desire) served as threats to spiritual development, leading to self-contempt of the body and a need to disengage. Typical sexual development such as menstrual cycles and arousal development were experienced with fear and threat. To
engage in sexual behaviors was taught as beyond the realm of sin, becoming not only loss of community but loss of self for women – rendering one damaged in body and spirit.

Emotions were partnered together with the body when it came to threats of the spirit. Emotions were not to be trusted, systematically taught as an antagonist to spirit and faith. The suppression of body and emotion led to a systemic fear of and disdain for one’s own being. Spiritually trained to believe their internal compass was faulty, the women were required to dissociate, unable to trust her very own self. That which was internal was kept in the dark, even from her own knowledge and awareness, bound in fear and shame, manifesting in numerous outcomes including shame, self-blame, affect dysregulation, sexual dysfunction, sexual acting out or suppression, and somatic concerns such as stress related illnesses and eating/weight issues.

Men were similarly trained in suppression and disengagement. The women (and the men in their lives) heard a clear, consistent message that men uniquely had no control over their bodies, emotions, or will. Instead of engaging the complexities of sexual conflicts within, control and disengagement were taught to men, leading to self-contempt for desire and ambivalent contempt or fear of women, the object of desire.

In relation to one’s own sexuality, suppression and detachment served as an avenue of securing safety. However, bound in fear, the flaccid safety of suppression actually resulted in dysregulated emotions and sexual behaviors, as well as contempt for one’s own body. Ironically, this left them feeling out of control, resulting in exaggerated attempts at control and suppression, or rebellious and secretive sexual acting out, but most often, a mix of both.
Others: Relational complementarity. The concept of danger played an interesting role in the women’s experience of her sexuality within her religious community. Fear of the body and therefore fear of women led to a highly systematized rhetoric around the dangerousness of women. Most intriguing was when the women felt unsafe or in danger sexually in their religious communities (through discrimination or abusive interactions), they attributed it to they themselves as being unsafe or dangerous. What appeared to occur was a transfer, or projection, of danger that became localized in women. Projection is considered a common form of coping in which one attributes their disavowed negative qualities into another, accusing someone else for having qualities that you in fact disdain in yourself or fear you have yourself. In other words, the women were accused of that (sexual danger) which the other was incurring upon them. For example, if boys’ sexuality is deemed out of control, too much for them to handle, the fear of their own danger then becomes projected into that which is the temptation, women.

Upon further exploration, this projective transaction was found to frequently occur between women and men around a variety of personal qualities (in addition to sexual dangerousness), leaving women in a lower position with less positive attributes than men and feeling to blame for that which was occurring to them. The women, in turn, attributed general negative qualities more to women than to men. Most of the women in the study were somewhat embarrassed by their gender and had greater admiration for the male gender, identifying and favoring “masculine” constructs of intelligence and moral superiority over “feminine” weak-mindedness and moral inferiority.

This projective transaction similarly fueled the rhetoric and biblical interpretation of how men and women should relate. Based on elaborations of a few scriptural passages,
rigid gendered distinctions served as narration and direction for women and men’s sexual scripts. Rhetoric such as “A man’s glory is in his strength; a woman’s is in her vulnerability,” or “Man’s greatest need is respect; a woman’s is love,” was commonplace regarding identity, creating a foundation for a relational “complementarity” view of male/female relationship. From this perspective, a systemic sexual script was formed and touted as biblical structure, in which women and men were locked in a culturally-created gender ideal and considered far more different than alike, establishing an opposite but complementary framework of relating.

At the core of relational complementarity is the biblical interpretation and female mandate of unilateral female submission to men. Enacted, men not women can hold positions of authority and teaching, and men not women make final marital and family decisions. Included in the rhetoric of relational complementarity is that of a woman possessing such great value that she is deserving of male guardianship and strong protection. While a woman’s value is indisputable and deserving of protection, the unilateral and rigid nature of these role distinctions created an experience of subjugation for the women. Additionally, this structure was actually shown to leave women unprotected, not the other way around. Simultaneously, this teaching became interestingly paired with the humoring concession that it is, in fact, the submissive woman who is directing her captain. As one participant stated, “It’s really strange, like some kind of S&M motif that’s going on where the submissive apparently has the power.”

Eight of the 11 participants experienced this as harmful to them sexually and spiritually. All of the women either believed or demonstrated that this teaching and its
enactment led them to feel less capable than men. Of significance, the three who did not find this to be harmful were the women who also exhibited the greatest amount of self-blame and self-deprecation regarding their strengths and abilities. They expressed ambivalence, as that which provided comfort also created problems for them in which they felt bound. Similarly, the ambivalence they experienced seemed itself to be a comfort; safer to struggle with something as compared to challenging it. As one woman stated, for fear of stigma, to actively challenge something with strength would essentially “put a target on your back.”

Understanding the motivations of the women from a lens of negotiating safety brings clarity to an experience of felt danger and need for safety. When fear is instilled within a system, those within the system create their own manner of resolving the fear. For some in the study, traditional gendered roles of complementarity, as interpreted and taught in their culture, served as a form of safety in which needed protection and a sense of stability was secured.

**God: Hiding.** Fear of a punitive (but loving) God and faith community led the women to want to hide their sexuality from that community and from God in order to secure safety. The sexual and spiritual harm of a conditional God ruptured their sense of secure attachment with God, leading to a type of people-pleasing identity where favor was continually sought and sin controlled. In coping with a view of God as excessively disdaining of sexual sin and desire, facing threat of expulsion from God, sexuality remained in secret, while it’s underlying structures were suppressed through behavior management.
As young women, God was taught as only accessible if you were doing what was right sexually, thus leading to what the women described as a “yo-yo’ing” relationship with God completely based on sex, or as some referred to as “God or the guy.” Similarly, the shunning nature of social inclusion based on sexual purity informed the belief that, as one woman stated, “church was for those who were doing what was right,” which essentially kept young women from engagement in their faith and faith community, compelling them to those outside their faith community for acceptance and freedom from cut-off for sexual missteps. For those who chose to remain in community, hiding (from self, others, and God) was the main avenue for securing belonging and avoiding cut-off from God and community. Righteousness and right behavior served as the primary path for security, and all else deemed unacceptable was suppressed or only handled behaviorally through accountability, thus keeping hidden a deeper understanding of self and God.

For many, these experiences continued into adulthood, varying according to decisions of relationship or church. Sincere longing for a secure connection with God and a safe, Godly family fueled the handling of their sexuality, faith, and life through the script they were taught – to be pleasing, supportive caretakers, keeping displeasing feelings or beliefs buried. The sexual and spiritual shame, if left untreated, led to a continued hiding from addressing their true insecure feelings with God, true sexual feelings, or other desires in general. Perfectionism and relational complementarity served as a form of righteousness, while sexuality (theirs and their children’s) was handled through suppression, avoidance, or behavior-based spiritual practices without pursuing deeper understanding of self and God. What seemed to incur greatest long-term
psychological and spiritual impact was that the handling of sexuality (and all things human) through avoidance and behavior control kept the depth of one’s self and the depth of relationship and communion with God suppressed and out of awareness. In this state, opportunities for personal and spiritual growth and maturity were stunted by people-pleasing.

**Dynamic Safety: Grace and Sexuality**

When asked what they most longed for regarding their sexuality, how they wished their sexuality would be handled, each of the 11 women mentioned “*grace.*” Grace was what they were most after when it came to sex and spirit. Grace, a well-known construct in Christian scripture, dates back to the Hebrew Scriptures and is further elaborated in the New Testament. Strong’s Concordance defined grace (Greek: charis) as, “*favor,*” “*that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, sweetness, charm, loveliness,*” and “*the merciful kindness by which God, exerting his holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ, keeps, strengthens, increases them in Christian faith, knowledge, affection, and kindles them to the exercise of the Christian virtues*” (bibletools.org).

For the women, grace indicated freedom: to develop sexually, to experience God’s delight in their sexuality, and to not be cast out for missteps in their sexuality. Those who chose to step out of flaccid safety and take the risk into dynamic safety remained true to their scriptural understanding of grace. These women did not experience grace as a freedom without sexual boundaries or a freedom outside of their faith but instead as a secure attachment to their faith, a safe connection in which sexual missteps or conflicts were not too threatening as to terminate its bond. *In other words, it was grace that created the dynamic safety they experienced within themselves, with their intimate*
partners, and with God – a sacred, spacious holding place in which the goodness of attachment was not violated but was honored, allowing for the cycles of rupture and repair to occur, without fear of abandonment. This space was most abundantly given them by partners, counselors, and for one woman, church. And through these healing connections, they were led to experience it from God. From the findings, sexual and spiritual harm came through fear, teaching them to experience their sexuality in the face of God through a lens of threat and danger. Healing came through grace when their sexuality and gender was handled with respect and their sexual and spiritual harm was validated. Here they were encouraged to grieve the harm, feel their outrage, and see God’s favor on them as women.

This dynamic safety required risk; a sacred “truth-telling” the women described in their journey out of fear-based flaccid safety and into the freedom and peace that comes through dynamic safety. This shift was often triggered by crises of body and relationship. Whether it was a stress-related illness, depression and anxiety, fear of relationship with men, or a marriage on the edge of divorce, suffering a type of rock-bottom crisis of faith and self catapulted them into the pursuit of healing sex and spirit. In relationship with self, others, and God, healing occurred through and resulted in embodiment, whole-hearted relating, and trust.

Self: Embodiment. Embodiment was demonstrated as an active experience of presence or trust in oneself, listening to one’s felt responses in the body in the discernment of truth. Nelson (1978) referred to embodiment as a “body-self,” a unity within a person, manifested through feeling, desire, communion, and incarnation:
It is the refusal to be split into mind over body or heart over head. It is the refusal to locate true selfhood in only part of the self. The notion of feeling, then, is one way of pointing to the unified response of the body-self. And unified response means listening to the messages from all dimensions of the self – the mind, heart, the spiritual senses, the genitals, the viscera (p. 32).

Embodiment entails congruence of body, mind, and spirit, an internal harmony stemming from an open and honest position in which one’s disparate feelings, desires, and inclinations are brought into awareness and owned, as opposed to disowned.

Similar to our handling of gender, a few scriptural verses on the body have often been interpreted in Christendom through a gnostic lens, rendering the body a vessel of deception and debauchery (to include within it all emotion and desire) and contrary to the desires of the Spirit. Within this framework, embodiment (placing trust in that which is deceptive) will appear threatening to that which is true (God’s will); however, the findings revealed the opposite to be true. The more the women listened to their felt experiences in a given situation, the more discerning of truth they became, a truth that led to healing and communion. In reverse, the more detached they were from body and emotion, the more lacking they were in spiritual discernment, bound in fear and shame, hiding from healing and communion. Based on the results in this study the embodied experience was found to encompass a) listening, b) grieving, and c) dismantling shame, culminating in safety and a freedom from fear, an openness leading into a generous, whole-hearted (holy) communion with self, others, and God. In other words, embodiment became the physiology of grace.
The embodied process begins with listening to one’s own reactions and responses in the discernment of truth, often encouraged by another’s listening and validating presence. Listening to one’s self was found to begin in a dynamically safe relationship in which the other models deep listening, an attuned presence in which one is seen and accepted. This did not always occur with words, as body practices such as guided yoga or healing from body injury were shown to initiate attuned listening. Listening can often trigger anxiety, as that which has been buried can create an emotional flood of fear. However, if this can become gradually tolerated without extreme efforts to control or manipulate it, honest and valuable emotions can surface. Essentially, embodiment for the women in the study allowed them to surface true feelings and emotions with an openness that led to honesty with self, another, and God.

The gradual toleration of authentic emotion through embodiment initially leads to grief. For the participants, grieving occurred for their losses, the harm done to their sexual and spiritual selves, and the brokenness of their own sexuality. When their grief was encouraged and validated, they were able to make repairs by facing the truth of their experiences, its impact, and their own efforts to control and cope. Grace given by another, the spacious gift of tolerating and encouraging another’s darkness to come forth without fear of cutoff, offered them the freedom to grieve. Grieving, as opposed to shame, became the life-giving well that opened up the humility and vulnerability needed to listen to the Spirit.

Shame, an antagonist of embodiment, was instilled within them as a valuable spiritual tool in regulating body and spirit through fear-based suppression and control. They came to believe through strict control and fear of abandonment they could contain
sin, but in effect, the resulting fear and self-contempt led them to act out in sin, giving such power and allure to that which was forbidden. According to Timmerman (1992) shame plays a significant role in the sex-spirit split as it “keeps the emphasis on externals and actively prevents the transition to internal self-discipline. Thus sexuality is excluded from Christian sacramental experience of newness and freedom, ignored as a paradigm of life in the Spirit” (p. 15). Shame was not what freed them from sexual sin, but what aided them in keeping secrets and hiding, preventing both communion with God and sexuality from interacting with faith.

It was the dismantling of shame that resulted in the ability to regulate body and spirit. Grace given them, becoming internalized through embodiment, provided the life-giving freedom that allowed them the safety to take sexual responsibility (without fear of cutoff), and the openness (through listening and grieving) to experience the presence of God. Grace positioned them to humility (not arrogance) and vulnerability (not hiding), thus opening the door to spiritual growth. According to McMahon and Campbell (1991), it is through the body that grace is most realized, “We barely even know the meaning of grace with our rational intelligence. It must be felt in our bodies to be recognized as the power, which carries us through death into new life. This allowing for grace to happen in an embodied way, and not be forced, is critical for spiritual development” (p. 7). From these findings, it is suggested here that embodiment (as inhabited grace) leads one to healing of body and spirit and holy relating to others and God.

**Others: Whole-Hearted Relating.** In their bio-spiritual approach to sexuality, McMahon and Campbell (1991) proffered:
Sexuality is about growing into communion and wholeness in and through relationship. Both our clinical as well as personal experience lead us to conclude that the key integrating factor in sexuality is not genital expression. Rather, it is the quality of presence to oneself and others (p. 2).

Similarly, addressing the integration of sex and spirit, Timmerman (1992) proposed the capacity for intimacy as that, “Which I will define as the experience of being wholly and deeply touched by others” (p. 36). Brown (2012) determined vulnerability as the key to whole-hearted relating, a concept of intimacy and connection, and concluded, “Vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experience . . . the ability to face uncertainty, exposure, and emotional risk” (p. 29). Contrary to a shame that conceals, vulnerability risks exposure in order to find connection.

Ironically, for the women in this study, the dynamic safety they longed for required the risk of vulnerability in relationship, the risk to be authentic and accessible, forgoing perfectionism, hiddenness, and the relational complementarity that served as a pseudo vulnerability. As the sexual harm that occurred to them originated in relationship, so too did the healing. In the context of a safe and encouraging relationship they learned to make themselves known, to enact their own sense of agency and relate wholeheartedly. The type of relationship in which they were able to dismantle the shackles of passivity, express themselves authentically, and learn to grow in love and vulnerability was one of intersubjectivity.

Originating in attachment theory, Benjamin (1988) proposed two types of relating: complementary and intersubjective. She described the machinations of complementary relating as based in objectification and the splitting of gender, in which
the person’s role supersedes the person. This occurs as “difference is defensively incorporated into rigid representations rather than recognized in tension with commonality” (p. 17). Benjamin purported complementary relating between men and women as born in a patriarchal system in which men are discouraged from identifying with that which is feminine and discouraged from recognizing the subjectivity (agency) of women. This type of relating leads to a give-and-take, doer-done to rigidity of relating in which power is traded back and forth, or held by one, as opposed to mutually shared and held in tension. Within this structure a woman’s power is not in her own desire but in her desirability, a structure in which Benjamin claimed that men become idealized for their agency and women for their lack of agency, and its reverse – men are denigrated if they lack agency and women, if they demonstrate agency. And so, the dominant man and objectified woman become eroticized and idealized.

Within intersubjective relating, on the other hand, Benjamin postulated recognition as an essential component of love, the key to a mutually vulnerable and healthy relationship. Benjamin offered a list of synonyms capturing the term:

to affirm, validate, acknowledge, know, accept, understand, empathize,
take in, tolerate, appreciate, see, identify with, find familiar, love . . . What I call mutual recognition includes a number of experiences commonly described in the research on mother-infant interaction: emotional attunement, mutual influence, affective mutuality, sharing states of mind (Benjamin, 1988, p. 15-16).

Not a one-time encounter, recognition becomes an ongoing conversation within a relationship in which each person is moved to a mutual liberation from the tendency to
seek power and control through negation or objectification of the other, out of fear of otherness. Recognition validates that each person has his or her own self-determined need to be seen and known for who they are as opposed to that which has been determined or desired for them (objectification). It is through mutual recognition that one is able to love whole-heartedly, in which both parties are able to respect the subjectivity of the other, holding in tension the needs of self with the other’s needs, engaging, not dismissing the ruptures and failures to love.

For the women in the study, recognition was key to their healing of sex and spirit. Free from the oppression of objectification that suppressed their ability to develop as women, respected for their own sense of agency and responsibility, they experienced an ownership of their capacity to love and their failures to love. Here they were encouraged to listen to their bodies, dismantle shame and its defensiveness and grow in vulnerability, leading to a greater capacity to trust in themselves, in those who were able to recognize them, and in God.

**God: Trust.** For those women on the path of healing sex and spirit, reclaiming safety through embodiment and whole-hearted relating led to an openness with God, a sort of truth-telling of the exhaustion involved in earning love and favor in an insecure attachment, often not realizing the deeper level of insecurity that is truly there. In her memoir of reclaiming a new adult relationship with the God she loved but was exhausted from trying to please, Hybels (2005) wrote of her journey of grace:

The first thing my counselor told me – quite emphatically, I might add – was to get off the treadmill and rest. This should have been welcome news, but it wasn’t. The God of my childhood would not let me rest. This
God demanded action, service, work, striving. Rest was simply out of the question. Yet I knew I needed to rest, and I knew I needed to radically change my life. I could not face the future if it was just going to be a repeat of the past. When I considered embracing the rest I so desperately needed, I knew it would require a momentous and scary decision: I could only rest if I got rid of my childhood God . . . I could no longer carry the burden of such a harsh and demanding deity (p. 15).

She later added:

In retrospect, I see it more like this: the true God, in grace, set me free. Even in my desperation, I don’t believe I would have had the courage to walk away from my childhood God unless I could hear the Spirit of a different God (p. 16).

A similar experience was found for many of the women in this study. They reflected an ability to intellectually trust God, yet not emotionally. The spiritual fear instilled in them left them feeling unsafe, unable to be fully at rest with God. Growing to trust God more meant learning to differentiate the fearful and shaming messages they were taught from the true God of their faith. When grace and respect was given them in their intimate relationships, where they could trust and feel safe, they were able to grow in a more secure attachment with God, leading to congruence of sex and spirit.

**Concluding Remarks**

Research has shown the difficulty women have in putting words to their sexual self-views, including feelings about what they’ve experienced and naming the complexity of their own identity. There is a sense that over time each of us unearthed ourselves
through thoughts and words. Naming becomes a powerful part of this process – I like this, I don’t like that, I’m drawn to this, or that turns me off. We learn of ourselves by seeing what we do, how we feel. We identify ourselves to others according to our passions, our faith, our job titles, or our families.

I entered into this project as a researcher, and therefore an outsider, which actually wasn’t too difficult. Having been a therapist for so many years, I’ve enjoyed entering in to another person’s story. The process began through sending out an announcement for the study on a Christian counseling list-serve, and within a week, there were almost 100 responses. So many women were willing to share their stories, and I knew from the first interviews that something profound was occurring. These open-hearted, willing, courageous women invited me in to their stories leaving me in awe of their strength and vulnerability. I was also disheartened in hearing of the sexual and spiritual wounds they received as children through pornography, sexual abuse, abandonment, and neglect. I was equally saddened and outraged by the corroborating levels of harm they experienced from their faith communities in attempts to preserve purity, while actively putting blinders on to the wounds that were being done to them, or often blaming them for being wounded. It became evident that shame and fear are not, as we’ve been taught, spiritual tools for righteousness.

I also entered this project as an insider, fully. They say children work out their issues through play, and graduate students through writing a dissertation. Throughout this process, my little story was tucked in a shirt pocket, written in scrambled letters that very slowly untangled, word by word. Memories returned - sometimes in hearing of identical experiences to my own, and often through hearing identical language. What struck me
was how powerful a community can be in shaping narrative and shaping belief through rhetoric. In faith-based communities, despite cultural differences and miles of distance, Scripture becomes a common language, having the power to save, to connect, and to heal. In this study, similar to others (Gardner, 2011; Regnerus, 2007), when it regards sexuality and gender, another layer of rhetoric appears with its associated beliefs and actions that has very little to do with Christian Scripture or even Christian belief. It is as if another “rule-book” is pulled out in play. And in this rule-book, women are not favored well.

I was taught that women’s stories didn’t matter, or even more, that they couldn’t be trusted. Of course, this was never directly told to me. It has taken me years to realize that my experience of fear, shame, and self-objectification as a woman is not confirmation of my inherent defectiveness as compared to men; I was taught this. It’s an insidious infection. In the midst of learning about the profoundly unconditional love of Christ and the love we can share with each other, that has rescued me, healed me, saved me, and made me wonderfully who I am, I too, like the women in this study, picked up this infection. Healing is a long road, and stories have power. My hope is that a redeemed story will be told, that the Good News of my faith will overcome the fear of powerlessness, bringing reconciliation between men and women, the spirit and the body, the believer and the Creator. My hope here is that these women’s stories are believed, that their telling can bring further healing for themselves and for their Christian communities.

Limitations

There are several limitations in this study. Participants were solely from a clinical population. There were potential limitations that participants might either represent as
psychologically healthier or more challenged than the general population of women. In order to offset the limitation, some participants chosen had just begun counseling. This limitation was weighted against the benefit that participants who had been in counseling would be more experienced at identifying and articulating with another person the highly personal nature of their sexuality. It order to enhance generalizability, it would be beneficial to compare the findings of this study with future research in which participants had not received counseling.

Another limitation of the study was lack of racial diversity. Within a Western Christian tradition, there are multiple cultures with varying socialization. For the phenomenological purpose of this study, it was decided that the study of women from a variety of Western Christian cultures (i.e., African American Christian tradition, Hispanic Christian tradition) could thwart the purpose of studying one particular culture.

Within a qualitative design, a small sample size permits in-depth understanding, yet creates a limitation of generalizability. Of the 11 women, all were Caucasian, and all but one identified as heterosexual (save one who identified as a bisexual orientation in a heterosexual relationship). All of the women had attended college, and six held graduate degrees, and all were in a lower income to middle income socioeconomic class. Race, class, and privilege must all be taken into consideration when evaluating the findings of this study.

Recommendations

Research Recommendations

Known to date, this current study is the first to explore a broader understanding of self-objectification outside the identified research realm of body image. The findings here
introduce an expanded understanding of self-objectification from solely the objectification of a woman’s body to include the objectification of a woman’s function. This indicates that within a culture there exists gender objectification according to culturally created idealized standards of how one should relate and behave as a member of that gender, for the benefit of others outside that gender. Further research is needed in order to examine this process, with the recommendation that self-objectification theory be broadened to include additional aspects of the self in relation to culture.

This current study focused on the sexuality of women; however, the men in their lives became de facto participants, indicating need for additional research into the effects of religious socialization on male sexuality and identity. It appeared men’s spiritual and emotional growth was likewise stymied and distorted through rigid gendered representations, based more in cultural fabrication than biblical texts. Of particular interest is the cultural effect on men’s opportunities for spiritual and emotional growth. In the purity rhetoric, men are seen as both out of control sexually and yet expected to be in total control of everything. Within this rigid structure there is speculation they carry their own unidentified sexual or emotional harm, kept hidden by the cultural suppression of their vulnerability, coupled with vague (but prolific) mandates to be the protector. It is suspected they are caught in this double bind and become stuck, unable (and unsupported) to access what they need to grow and develop spiritually and sexually.

Due to the small sample of participants, diversity was limited in this study. Further research is indicated for an in-depth understanding of those raised in a Western Christian tradition who identify as LGBT, seeking to understand their experiences and needs. All of the women attended higher education and were raised in a lower-middle to
middle-class family. Research on religious socialization amongst varying socioeconomic classes is recommended. Often, religious communities are segregated racially. It was believed that Hispanic American or African American religious socialization could be significantly different, indicating a need to study them phenomenologically on their own. Research on women raised within these traditions would be highly beneficial, given lack of existing literature. Similarly, further research is suggested that includes the experiences of racial minorities raised in a predominantly White religious culture.

The study of sexuality and religious socialization has predominantly focused on adolescent and young adult socialization. There has been some research examining purity culture for teens, yet none prior to this current study has examined this across the lifespan, focusing specifically on how these messages morph once one is established in adulthood. The findings here revealed a theology of purity that continues into adulthood, showing great impact on women’s overall wellbeing, their marriages, and opportunities in society and ministry, in need of further exploration. Similarly, women’s psychological, sexual, and spiritual recovery and healing was shown to take a developmental path, of which further exploration would be highly beneficial.

Clinical Recommendations

As of 2014, 71% of US citizens identified as Christian, and 1 in 5 identified as Evangelical Christian (pewforum.org). These figures represent the vast number of Christian Americans as well as the level of influence theirs is in shaping general beliefs and practices in the US. For the clinician in a counseling practice, chances are a number of clients were raised in or influenced by a Western Christian tradition, even if they no longer identify as religious or Christian. As noted in the literature, other major Western
religions of Judaism and Islam are shown to espouse similar beliefs and practices around women’s sexuality, indicating a potentially shared influence.

A number of studies have identified the influence of religion on shaping women’s sexual feelings and practices, including sexual shame and sexual dysfunction, and recommended further exploration of the needs, presentation, and cultural history of women coming to counseling with depression, anxiety, and relationship/sexual problems. This study supports previous recommendations on the value of ongoing clinical assessment and engagement of a client’s potentially unknown religious sexual script, as it pertains to presentations of shame, self-blame, self-objectification or sexual, relationship, or spiritual difficulties.

The findings here lead to several clinical suggestions. First, most of the women sought counseling not for sexual or spiritual issues but for general depression, anxiety, and somatic complaints. Many women reflected spending some time in counseling before arriving at underlying and unhelpful religious scripts which, when known, was critical to their healing. The severity of religious shame, self-blame, and self-objectification served to initially hide a cause-and-effect awareness of harm and impact. An astute and sensitive counselor needs to balance guiding a client into this awareness while allowing the time needed to dismantle shame and self-blame without forcing his or her own religious/sexual/spiritual values upon the client. This includes moral beliefs about sexuality, gender roles, and spirituality. Equally important is the ability to keep an open mind of the benefits of their religious values and their potential desire to remain in their religious community.
Second, many stories of sexual discrimination and harm were shared, incurred by religious family members, partners, and leaders. Incidents were often disclosed in a dismissive manner, only to find upon further exploration that they were actually quite significant in harm. With this understanding, clinicians might need to seek further information when such experiences are shared. It would be important as a clinician to understand the role of self-blame and self-objectification in religious purity culture, particularly with regards to sexual harm and discrimination. Most effective is when a counselor is able to share genuine emotion in response to a given experience (that will both comfort and challenge) noting elements of shame and self-blame in their story, while holding in tension the client’s need for safety, which for a time, might be to hold on to her long-held views.

Third, understanding the need for safety is vital for a therapist working with women. Safety is at the heart of gradual processing of trauma. As mentioned, when one’s own sexuality, gender, and emotions are experienced as dangerous, respect and care is essential in response. Modeling of genuine emotion to their story (concern, joy, sadness, anger), offering a perspective of truth, while making room for one to secure their own safety and maintain their coping, is the dance of trauma processing. Once stronger and more secure, the necessity for unhelpful coping will often diminish.

Finally, grace is what the women most needed in response to their sexual stories. In a clinical setting, grace includes the previously mentioned recommendations as well as the ability to work within a client’s value-system and community, not assuming to know all the choices that are in the client’s best interest. This will require cultural competency and sensitivity on the part of the therapist, respecting and seeking to value and understand
the benefits and the choices one makes within her religious values. The culturally competent therapist would be able to offer suggestions of choices for growth and healing within that client’s religious framework. This could include encouraging relationships, couples’ counselors, ministries or churches that are egalitarian.

**For Faith Practitioners**

For the women in this study, both harm and healing occurred in a religious context. Yet, for most, healing of sex and spirit occurred not in church but in the bedroom and therapist’s office. It is recommended that faith practitioners, such as pastors, counselors, and ministry leaders consider the findings from this study (and others) indicating the need for religious leaders to examine long-held beliefs on gender and sexuality and move to make churches safer places of healing. Grace was proposed as the alternative to fear, but what does this practically look like, and how can this be implemented systemically? Following are some suggestions to begin addressing sexuality with a grace that leads to spiritual and emotional growth.

1. Examine long-held views and practices when engaging issues of sexuality and gender. Are they structured along rigid gender lines that aren’t actually biblical? Are they based in fear? If so, what is the fear? Evaluate and consider theological egalitarian perspectives.

2. Seek to hear from women their experiences in your ministry/church around issues of sexuality and gender. Consider their experiences when evaluating your theology of women.

3. Examine responses to sexual violations, understanding the cultural tendency toward under-responding and under-reporting. Become more equipped and educated on sexual offending and relationship violence. Examine fears that might keep you from responding adequately.

4. When someone brings sexual issues to your attention, seek to respond with curiosity and a desire to understand. Sexual issues are often reflective of one’s history and might be an opportunity to provide help and healing, not immediate evaluation.
5. When someone brings marital issues to your attention, be aware of the tendency to place greater responsibility on women and less on men. Consider unchallenged cultural gender views that minimize male responsibility and diminish men’s abilities to grow and heal.

6. Examine double standards regarding sexuality. Are men treated as more sexual than women? More incapable of being sexually responsible? Are women held to a higher standard?

7. Consider responses to sexual minority congregants with compassion and grace, not with immediate doubts as to one’s salvation. Examine theology of sexual orientation.

8. Examine the fairytale prosperity rhetoric behind purity messages. What promises or offers are being made that are unrealistic/unknowable/unbiblical? Examine legalistic theology behind such promises, considering the long-lasting harm that could be incurred. Consider the long-term impact of construing women as princesses and men as the knights who rescue them.

9. Listen and seek to hear women’s voices when they share something that was said, done, or taught that felt hurtful, shaming, or blaming. Assume that if they tell you how they feel, that it is actually so. Avoid responding in a parental manner. Consider your own gender biases in your responses.

10. Consider efforts to promote women in governing leadership roles. Examine unchallenged discriminating treatment of women professionally and in ministry.
References


Herman, J. (1997). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York: Basic Books.


Recruiting email to professional colleagues, searching for research participants:

SUBJECT: Referral Request for Research Participants

Dear Colleague,

I am writing to you as a Licensed Professional Counselor who is in private practice in St. Louis, MO, and as a doctoral student at the University of Missouri – St. Louis, in the Department of Counseling & Family Therapy. I am looking for female participants for my dissertation research and am asking for your help in recruiting participants. The purpose of this research is to examine Western Christian teachings on women’s sexuality, the sexual experiences of women socialized in this tradition, and how women make meaning of their sexuality given their religious socialization and experiences.

I have attached a flyer and am asking if you would distribute the flyer to your female clients and any other female prospective participants (including yourself) who might fit the below research participant criteria.

Requirements for participation in the study are women who are

1. Over the age of 30
2. Currently participating in outpatient counseling; and
3. Have been raised in a Christian home (Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox) in which they regularly heard religious teachings. Participants are not required to currently identify as Christian.

The amount of time involved in their participation will be approximately 6-8 hours, consisting of three interviews, which I will conduct and a self-reflective writing assignment, all of which will be completed within a consecutive 3-week period of time. Identity will be kept confidential, and participants will be free to withdraw from the study at any point in time. Participants who complete the protocol will be given a $25 gift certificate to a local major store.

Thank you again for your contribution to the study of women’s sexuality. Your assistance is appreciated and will contribute to the study of women’s sexuality, including clinical recommendations for best care of women. Please advise prospective participants to reach me at the number or email on the flyer to inquire further about the study. Lastly, feel free to contact me should you have any further questions.

Warmly,

Petra S. Blum, MA, LPC
Doctoral Student, University of Missouri – St. Louis
1715 Deer Tracks Trail, Ste. 260
St. Louis, MO 63131
314-503-3001
petrablumcounseling@gmail.com
Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

Participant_____________________________HSC Approval Number ____________________

Principal Investigator ____________________ PI’s Phone Number ____________________

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Petra Blum, M.A., LPC, under the supervision of Dr. Angela Coker, Ph.D, LPC, in the Department of Counseling and Family Therapy at the University of Missouri – St. Louis. The purpose of this research is to examine Western Christian teachings on women’s sexuality, the sexual experiences of women socialized in this tradition, and how women make meaning of their sexuality given their religious socialization and experiences.

2. a) Approximately 8-15 participants may be involved in this research.

b) If you are asked to participate in this study, our participation will involve:

1. Three 90-minute audio-recorded interviews with Petra Blum in which you will be asked to share in the first interview about the religious messages you received growing up about your sexuality, in the second interview about critical sexual experiences you have had, and in the third interview the meaning that you have made about your sexual self that includes your sexuality, psychological well-being and spirituality, given those messages and experiences.

2. The completion of a writing assignment about a critical sexual experience and how this experience has impacted you sexually, relationally, psychologically, and spiritually.

3. Participation in a follow-up phone call with Petra Blum in which research results will be shared with you for your clarification and feedback regarding accuracy.

The three interviews will occur over the course of 3 consecutive weeks. The writing assignment will be given to you after the first interview, and you will be required to complete and submit it before the second interview.
c) The total amount of time involved in your participation will be approximately 6-8 hours.

3. There are no known risks associated with this research; however, it is possible that reliving certain experiences could cause you to feel overwhelmed. If this happens, please let me know. You can discontinue your study participation at any time. The study researcher is an experienced licensed professional counselor and part of your participation in this study is the understanding that you are participating in outpatient counseling. It is recommended that for your benefit you speak with your counselor about any of the uncomfortable feelings or memories that might arise as a result of participation in this study.

4. Upon completion of your participation in the research study, you will receive a $25 gift card to a local major store. It is my hope that your participation in this study will contribute to the knowledge about women’s sexuality and may help society.

5. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

6. The researcher is a Licensed Professional Counselor and is mandated by law to report a) if you intend suicide, or if you intend to do serious harm to yourself, b) if you intend homicide, and c) if a child, elderly person, or disabled person is being abused or neglected.

7. By agreeing to participate, you understand and agree that your data may be shared with other researchers and educators in the form of presentations and/or publications. Your audio-recorded interviews will be transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Interview transcripts will be reviewed by a fellow doctoral researcher in order to verify accuracy of the analysis and results. In all cases, your identity will not be revealed. In rare instances, a researcher’s study must undergo an audit or program evaluation by an oversight agency (such as the Office for Human Research Protection). That agency would be required to maintain the confidentiality of your data. In addition, all data will be stored on a password-protected computer and/or in a locked office. Once the study is complete, all data will be destroyed.

8. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Petra Blum at 314-503-3001 or Angela Coker at 314-516-6088. You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your rights as a research participant to the Office of Research Administration, at 516-5897.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant's Signature</th>
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<th>Participant's Printed Name</th>
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<tr>
<th>Signature of Investigator or Designee</th>
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APPENDIX C

Demographic Questionnaire

This survey should take about 5 minutes to complete. If completing this form on the computer, please fill in the blank or put in bold your multiple-choice selection. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty and you also have the right not to answer any question. All information from this study will be kept confidential.

1. Name: ________________________

2. Phone Number (best contact): ________________ Is it okay to leave a message at this number? ______ Yes ______ No

3. Name: ________________________

4. Phone Number (best contact): ________________ Is it okay to leave a message at this number? ______ Yes ______ No

5. Age: ______________

6. Race (please select all that apply):
   a. American Indian
   b. Asian American
   c. African American
   d. Caucasian/White
   e. Hispanic/ Latino
   f. Other: ____________

7. Relationship Status (please select all that apply):
   a. Single
   b. Married/Partnered
   c. In a relationship
   d. Divorced: Dates of each marriage: _________________________________
   e. Cohabiting (living together)
   f. Widowed

8. How many children do you have?: ____________; Ages?: ________________________

9. Occupation: _____________________________

10. Annual household income: ___ 0 – 20,000; ___ 21,000 – 40,000; ___ 41,000 – 60,000; ___ 61,000 – 80,000; ___ 81,000 – 100,000; ___ 101,000 – 125,000;
11. Education:
   a. Did not complete high school
   b. Completed high school/GED
   c. Some college
   d. Obtained undergraduate degree
   e. Some graduate school
   f. Obtained Master’s degree
   g. Obtained doctorate (Ph.D., M.D., etc.)

12. How do you identify your sexual orientation?:
   a. Heterosexual
   b. Lesbian
   c. Bisexual
   d. Other: ______________

13. Is your current primary sexual partner a man or a woman?:
   a. Woman
   b. Man
   c. Not in a sexual relationship

14. Are you currently:
   a. In an exclusive/monogamous sexual relationship (that is, we only have sex with each other)
   b. In a non-exclusive/non-monogamous sexual relationship (that is, one or both of us has sex with other partners)
   c. Not in a sexual relationship

15. Religious History – In which religion were you raised (please circle all that apply)?:

   Ages of Participation?:

   a. Catholic
   b. Christian Orthodox
   c. Protestant:
      Which denominations?:

      __________________________
      __________________________
      __________________________
      __________________________
      __________________________
      __________________________
16. Current Religious Identification:

   a. Catholic
   b. Christian Orthodox
   c. Protestant:
      Which denomination?:              
   d. Jewish
   e. Atheist/Agnostic
   f. Buddhist
   g. Hindu
   h. Muslim
   i. Pagan/Wiccan
   j. Other (specify): ______________
   k. None: ______________

How many years?:

17. Were you raised in a church/home in which purity and chastity messages were taught?: __________ Yes ______________ No

18. Were you ever asked to sign a purity pledge?: __________ Yes __________ No

19. How would you currently identify yourself?:
   a. Religious but not spiritual
   b. Spiritual but not religious
   c. Both religious and spiritual
   d. Neither religious nor spiritual

20. How important is religious faith in your life now?
   a. Very important
   b. Important
   c. Slightly important
   d. Somewhat unimportant
   e. Not important at all

21. Age: __________

22. Race (please select all that apply):
   a. American Indian
   b. Asian American
   c. African American
   d. Caucasian/White
23. Relationship Status (please select all that apply):
   b. Single
   b. Married/Partnered
   c. In a relationship
   d. Divorced: Dates of each marriage: _______________________________
   e. Cohabiting (living together)
   f. Widowed

24. How many children do you have?: __________; Ages?: ____________________________

25. Occupation: ________________________________

26. Annual household income: ___ 0 – 20,000; ___ 21,000 – 40,000; ___ 41,000 –
   60,000; ___ 61,000 – 80,000; ___ 81,000 – 100,000; ___ 101,000 – 125,000; 
   ____ + 125,000

27. Education:
   h. Did not complete high school
   i. Completed high school/GED
   j. Some college
   k. Obtained undergraduate degree
   l. Some graduate school
   m. Obtained Master’s degree
   n. Obtained doctorate (Ph.D., M.D., etc.)

28. How do you identify your sexual orientation?:
   e. Heterosexual
   f. Lesbian
   g. Bisexual
   h. Other: ____________

29. Is your current primary sexual partner a man or a woman?:
   d. Woman
   e. Man
   f. Not in a sexual relationship

30. Are you currently:
   d. In an exclusive/monogamous sexual relationship (that is, we only have sex
      with each other)
   e. In a non-exclusive/non-monogamous sexual relationship (that is, one or both
      of us has sex with other partners)
   f. Not in a sexual relationship
31. Religious History – In which religion were you raised (please circle all that apply)?:

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32. Current Religious Identification:

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<td>t. Other (specify):</td>
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<td>k. None:</td>
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33. Were you raised in a church/home in which purity and chastity messages were taught?: ____________ Yes ______________ No

34. Were you ever asked to sign a purity pledge?: ____________ Yes ____________ No

35. How would you currently identify yourself?:
e. Religious but not spiritual
f. Spiritual but not religious
g. Both religious and spiritual
h. Neither religious nor spiritual

36. How important is religious faith in your life now?
   f. Very important
g. Important
  h. Slightly important
  i. Somewhat unimportant
  j. Not important at all
APPENDIX D

Research Interview Protocol

Research Questions:
1. How are women’s sexual self-views informed by religious teachings?
2. How is the interplay of religious messages and sexual experiences lived out in women sexually, psychologically, and spiritually?

Interview Questions:

Interview #1 (questions pertaining to religious messages regarding sexuality):
1. What were the religious teachings you received growing up (from family, church, and other sources) regarding your body, gender, sexuality?
2. What were the messages you received from your non-religious culture regarding your body, gender, sexuality?
3. In adulthood, what have been the messages you have received from the religious community about your body, gender, sexuality?
4. In adulthood, what have been the messages you received from your non-religious culture regarding your body, gender, sexuality?

Interview #2 (questions pertaining to history of sexual experiences):
1. Given the sexual history questionnaire you completed, what would you like to share regarding your history of sexual experiences?
2. If not already mentioned in interview #1, what were the responses by your religious community (family, church, others) to those sexual experiences?

Interview #3 (questions pertaining to meaning made of sexual selves that include sexuality, psychological wellbeing, and spirituality, given the religious messages received. Overall theme - How do you believe the experiences that you have shared in interview #1 and #2 (the messages and the sexual experiences) affected you emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, sexually, and relationally?):

Some Questions to guide Interview #3:
1. Upon reflection, what would you say are some themes in your sexual story?
2. How would you describe yourself as a sexual person? What words would you use?
3. How has it felt or does it feel now to explore these issues of your religious upbringing and your sexuality?
   a. What reactions do you find yourself having?
   b. What feelings does it stir in you – anger, shame, resentment, relief, gladness, sorrow, etc?
   c. Do you find yourself thinking that it’s not that significant or there isn’t much of an impact? Explain.

4. What impact do you believe the church/religious community/moral teachings have had on how you view yourself?
   a. Your role as a woman in society/relationship?
   b. How you see yourself as a sexual person?
   c. What value you have to God/others?

5. What do you believe are the expectations that have been placed on you as a woman? Do you feel conflicted about these expectations that have been placed on you?

6. How have these messages that you have received affected how you view God? View of the church?

7. Do you believe God loves your sexual story? Why, why not?

8. Looking back, what do you wish had been different in how your sexuality was handled? By parents, church, men, others?

9. What has helped you to cope?

10. If you were to imagine wholeness or healing in your sexual story, what would that look like?

11. What does it mean to you to integrate your sexuality with your spirituality? If these two concepts feel incompatible or confusing, explain that experience.
Sexual History Questionnaire

In this survey you will be asked to provide personal and detailed information regarding your history of sexual experiences. This survey is intended to help you prepare for the second interview that addresses your history of sexual experiences. **This survey will not be collected by the researcher.** This survey is intended to be a personal aid for you in memory recall to help you prepare for your interview. It is not necessary that you fully complete the entire survey. Please select whichever questions to answer that you believe resonate with you and might help in memory recollection. The information asked is sensitive in nature, and if there are any concerns, please contact the researcher, Petra Blum, at 314-503-3001, and/or your Psychotherapist.

You will not be required to specifically share any of the information you write in this survey during your interview; however, you will be asked to share your emotional experience of completing it. It is your decision if you would like to keep this survey after you complete it. You may bring this to your interview if you prefer; however, it is not necessary for you to bring it to the interview.

You will be asked in the survey to reflect on highly personal and potentially difficult sexual information. This survey has 3 sections of questions: partnered sexual experiences, non-partnered sexual experiences, and other sexual information.

**Partnered Sexual Experiences**

1. What was your age of first partnered sexual activity (does not have to include sexual intercourse)? ________; Was it a positive or negative experience? Please explain:
   
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____ I have not engaged in partnered sexual activity.

2. What was your age of first intercourse? ________; Was it a positive or negative experience? Please explain:
   
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____ I have not engaged in heterosexual intercourse.

3. How many sexual partners have you had? ________
4. Have you ever had sexual experiences that do not match your identified sexual orientation (e.g., you identify as heterosexual but have also had same-sex sexual experiences)? Y/N; Please explain:

________________________________________________________

5. When you were a child, did an adult or someone five years older than you attempt sexual contact with you? Y/N; Please explain:

________________________________________________________

6. As a teenager or adult, have you ever had a sexual experience in which you felt forced or coerced to participate? Y/N; Please explain:

________________________________________________________

7. Have you participated in sexual activity in which you experienced a heightened state of pleasure and connection that could be described as sacred or transcendent? Y/N; Please explain:

________________________________________________________

8. Are there any partnered sexual experiences you have had that have not been identified on this survey that you would like to describe? Please explain:

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________

Non-Partnered Sexual Experiences

1. Have you ever been exposed to pornography? Y/N;
   Have you ever sought out pornography? Y/N

2. At what age did you first masturbate? ______

3. At most frequent, how often did you masturbate? ______ per month;
   Currently? ______ per month
4. Age of first sexual fantasies? ________;  
Current sexual fantasies? Y/N ________ per month

5. Have you participated in any other non-partnered sexual activities that you have later regretted or have felt bad about? Y/N; Please explain:
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________

6. Have you participated in non-partnered sexual activity in which you experienced a heightened state of pleasure and connection that could be described as sacred or transcendent? Y/N; Please explain:
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________

7. Are there any non-partnered sexual experiences you have had that have not been identified on this survey that you would like to describe? Please explain:
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
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Other Sexual Information

1. Have you had a history of menstruation difficulties? Y/N; Please explain:
________________________________________________________________________________________

2. Have you experienced menopausal symptoms? Y/N; Please explain:
________________________________________________________________________________________

3. Have you ever experienced a miscarriage? Y/N; Please explain:
________________________________________________________________________________________

4. Have you ever experienced fertility problems? Y/N; Please explain:
________________________________________________________________________________________

5. Have you ever had an abortion? Y/N

6. Do you experience sexual difficulties such as lack of desire, arousal difficulties, or pain during intercourse? Y/N; Please explain:
________________________________________________________________________________________
7. Have you ever had an STD? Y/N; Please explain:
____________________________________________________________________

8. Are there any other sexual experiences you have had that have not been identified on this survey that you would like to describe? Please explain:
____________________________________________________________________
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APPENDIX F

Research Writing Assignment

Below are two writing assignments. Please take your time in completing them and email them to me prior to your next interview at petrablumcounseling@gmail.com. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty and you also have the right not to answer any question. All information from this study will be kept confidential.

Writing Assignment #1

In no more than 600 words, please write a narrative story of an actual sexual experience you have had that you believe to be a formative part of your sexual development and identity. Please note that this does not necessarily have to be of a specific sexual act but can be an experience related to your sexuality in general (e.g. issues related to sexual development, fertility issues, non-partnered sexuality).

Writing Assignment #2

In no more than 600 words, please identify how this incident represents a foundational part of your sexual story. How have the people in your life responded to aspects of this experience? Please write about the sexual, relational, psychological, and spiritual impact that this incident has had on you.
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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Properties</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity Conflicts</td>
<td>Fragmented Experience of Self</td>
<td>Binary Identity</td>
<td>Present or not</td>
<td>“It’s again that splitting idea where you’re you know you can’t ever be in the gray. You’re either good or bad and that always kind of tormented me . . . that Madonna/Whore split . . . I felt guilty all the time. I really was so fragmented, just I never could figure out how to merge the two . . . It took years until I came to this church where I am now where I feel like I can be . . . Where I can be my whole self” (Kr,1,730).</td>
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<td>Undeveloped Woman – Identity as Destination</td>
<td>Present or not</td>
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<td>Purity and Submission as Identity</td>
<td>Present or not</td>
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<td>Authenticity as Rebelliousness</td>
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<td>Disconnected From Self</td>
<td>Self-Awareness and the Underdeveloped Self</td>
<td>Present or not</td>
<td>“When you asked to describe yourself as a sexual woman, the first thing I wrote was that I’m not a sexual person . . . I haven’t put much thought into preferences or what I like or don’t like . . . I read ‘50 Shades of Gray,’ and I loved it. I was fascinated, because I wanted to understand what goes on in a sexual woman’s mind . . . so I feel as a sexual person I’m completely undeveloped and confused and conflicted and just not really at all educated or aware, just a complete lack of awareness in terms of my sexual identity” (U).</td>
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<td>Sex as Separateness from Self</td>
<td>Present or not</td>
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<td>Coping through Suppression and Denial</td>
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<td>Hiding</td>
<td>Secrecy</td>
<td>Present or not</td>
<td>“I was two different people and that kind of ties in with that Madonna/whore – what if they knew what I was doing on Friday night? I kept secrets. I kept secrets” (Kr,2,308).</td>
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<td>Compartmentalization</td>
<td>Present or not</td>
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<td>Value and Self-Worth</td>
<td>Less Than</td>
<td>Present or not</td>
<td>“I thought, this is what will happen if you sleep around, and like maybe she was not as good as me because of that. And she didn’t have like the status in youth group. It sounds so terrible . . . I still have not had sex, and I think about if I actually did, I would be devastated of like ‘I am so unworthy and like I don’t think I would be loved. I almost feel that God would shun me, and I’m like, ‘Man, how do</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>Sexual Shame</td>
<td>Shame as Dirtiness</td>
<td>Low to High</td>
<td>“I mean, I wanted to eventually look like a woman, but anything related to sexual development was weird and scary, so I was delayed. You know, and there were a lot of messages from my parents and church that sex was something we were not supposed to be interested in . . . which doesn’t mean I wasn’t interested, it was just shrouded in a lot of confusion and embarrassment” (B,1,385).</td>
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<td>Shame for Masturbation</td>
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<td>Shame for Sex</td>
<td>Low to High</td>
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<td>Body Shame</td>
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<td>Low to High</td>
<td>“My body has been the hardest thing for me to love . . . I think part of the seeking sex as a young women is to seek that affirmation of your body as beautiful. I’ve never been okay with my body. Never” (Kr,2,639).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>Shame</td>
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<td>Low to High</td>
<td>“There’s just a shame tied in of just being a woman in general. You know, it’s women are viewed as weak . . . it’s very confusing, because women are viewed as weak, yet men long for them” (C,2,96).</td>
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<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Shame</td>
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<td>Low to High</td>
<td>“With God, he’s disappointed in me ‘cause I’m not good enough in this area. I feel a lot of shame, because I work really hard to not be wrong – this is the one area where I don’t feel good enough . . . I really do believe God is not always viewing me in a loving way depending on my sin, and I think it makes me hate myself more because I can’t get it together and God isn’t like helping me either, is kind of how I feel” (S,2,106).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Objectification</td>
<td>The Idealized Christian Woman</td>
<td>The Feminine Woman and Feminine Shame</td>
<td>Low to High</td>
<td>“I learned really well how to be Godly, but I never really knew God . . . I needed to do all these things, and I’m going to devote myself to doing them the best that I can. And I think that was really prized . . . There was a lot of scripture to back that up, becoming a woman of excellence. Sometimes these verses will still haunt me as I feel guilty . . . I now read these verses and I’m like, ‘what does that even mean? Like what is the context of that?’ I don’t know, but this is how we used it – do everything well. Then if you don’t there’s just a lot of guilt and shame associated with that” (S,1,30).</td>
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<td>Woman as Wife and Mother</td>
<td>Distress</td>
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<td>Perfectionism and Appearance Monitoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Power and the</td>
<td>Modesty and the Sexualized Body</td>
<td>Low to High</td>
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<td>“We were constantly told not to advertise our goods . . . It’s taken me years to work through my attractiveness not being dumb and slutty” (Be,2,138).</td>
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<td>Objectified Body</td>
<td>Woman as Object of Man’s desire</td>
<td>Body Objectification</td>
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<td>Power and the</td>
<td>Subversion of Strength</td>
<td>Low to High</td>
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<td>“I have found in church that if you don’t mind being dismissed you can get a lot done. So if you can accept the insult and keep going, don’t demand to be taken seriously, you can say whatever you want to and if, you know, cry your whole way through it, then you’re forgiven because you couldn’t hold it in. This is horrible! This has been my strategy! Tears come easily to me so it’s not fake . . . but a sincere desperation that in some ways you’re forgiven for even the most audacious things you say because you were desperate. But I have moved to a new place in my life where I’m saying that I don’t want to . . . I don’t wanna just be allowed when I’m desperate. I would like to be taken seriously as a human being” (L,1,633).</td>
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<td>Subversion of Self</td>
<td>Subversion of Gifts and Abilities</td>
<td>Low to High</td>
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<td>Submission as Unilateral and</td>
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<td>A Woman’s Need for Rescuing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Blame</td>
<td>Seduction</td>
<td>Low to High Distress</td>
<td>“If I’m wearing a scoop neck, I’m immediately aware of ‘Am I going to be flashing somebody at the reference desk’ or ‘If I’m teaching, am I going to be leaning over.’ It’s much more conscientious, whereas, most people would be like, ‘Oh yeah, that’s cute.’ So there is much more of a ‘ok, is this sexualized? Is this appropriate for the workplace?’” (Be,3,231)</td>
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<td>Responsibility</td>
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<td>Low to High Levels of Responsibility-taking</td>
<td>“My immediate connection is, ‘Well I shouldn’t be wearing this dress, or it’s too short, or you can see my chest too much’ . . . you know, and you feel guilty and you feel like a whore, because you didn’t cover yourself up and you were tempting these men and it’s your fault for not covering up your body more, for you know wanting to be comfortable or cute or whatever. Like just, everything fell on you for the responsibility in terms of keeping everybody pure” (Ka,1,60).</td>
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<td>Deficiency</td>
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<td>Self-views of Deficiency Present or not Present</td>
<td>“Something must be wrong with my brain for thinking that” (1,1,361).</td>
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<td>Sexual and Relationship Problems with Men</td>
<td>Arousal, Desire, and Sexual Dysfunction</td>
<td>Problems of Arousal and Desire</td>
<td>Low to High Levels of Arousal, Desire, and Sexual Dysfunction</td>
<td>Lack of desire grew even more and more, so the longer I abstained, I just lost all desire, which can be good and bad you know. It definitely helped me regain abstinence but also made me wonder if I was becoming asexual” (Ka,3,28).</td>
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<td>Dysregulated Sexual Relating with Men</td>
<td>Fathers, Lovers, and Attention Seeking with Men</td>
<td>Low to High Levels of Dysregulated Sexual Relating with Men</td>
<td>“I realized at a young age . . . I’m coming to this time of definite dawning that I am very low in the totem pole . . . but that my sexuality was a trump card. And so there was a great deal of power involved” (Be,2,325).</td>
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<td>Mistrust of Men</td>
<td>Low to High Levels of Mistrust of Men</td>
<td>“It freaked me out . . . and it made me kind of mistrust men in general to think that he had the perfect wife and five kids . . . for that to happen. It just kind of made me scared of the commitment of marriage” (Je,1,273).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lacking Sexual Knowledge and Awareness</td>
<td>Low to High Levels of Sexual Knowledge and Awareness</td>
<td>“I feel shame for having clearly had such a lack of knowledge in that area myself . . . I feel naïve and that makes me embarrassed and sad that that’s true” (U).</td>
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### Table of Category Properties and Dimensions

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<tr>
<td>Spiritual and Sexual Conflicts</td>
<td>Insecure Attachment With God</td>
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<td>Low to High Attachment</td>
<td>I had this horrible thing happen and those teachings messed up my understanding of God and my relationship with Him and even his existence . . . I grew apathetic . . . I was convinced God was punishing me for having sex. I thought my dad’s suicide was God was displeased with me . . . and I was done with him. I was angry and hurt . . . which is part of the reason I went to Mexico. It was just like, whatever, maybe if I do something good like dedicate my life to working with orphans, then God will come back to me” (Ka,1,112).</td>
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<td>Difficulty Integrating Sex and Spirit</td>
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<td>Low to High Integration of Sex and Spirit</td>
<td>“I would like to believe that He does. That’s a very raw question . . . I mean, what does it mean for God to love me while admitting that I masturbate or can God love me if I’m not completely heterosexual . . . I would like to have it all integrated in a way that I could answer that question affirmatively . . . I’m trying to reconcile God’s holiness with the most human parts of myself” (B,3,985).</td>
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<td>Problems with the Church</td>
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<td>Low to High Distress and Difficulties with the Church</td>
<td>“And the church part, my view of the church is that it totally failed me . . . That’s supposed to be a place where you learn grace and love and yes also law and the Bible and good things. But it should be a balance . . . they set me up in terms of creating messages that stuck with me and still do affect the way I think and feel” (Ka,3,146).</td>
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<td>Affect Dysregulation</td>
<td>Fear, Shame and Anxiety</td>
<td>Low to High Fear, Shame, and Anxiety</td>
<td>“I fall into fear because I don’t want to sin, and I know that the slippery slope is easy . . . so I get paralyzed . . . I become afraid to take any steps towards sexuality or about sexuality, because I don’t want to sin and displease God” (Ch,3,31).</td>
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<td>Depression and Confusion</td>
<td>Low to High Depression and Confusion</td>
<td>“It was very judgmental there . . . I got really depressed, and people didn’t know what to do with me . . . They would tell me, ‘You can’t trust your feelings. Most of the time we have to do what we don’t feel like doing when it comes to our relationship with the Lord’” (S,1,68).</td>
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<td>Anger</td>
<td>Low to High Anger</td>
<td>“The feeling is anger. There’s so much false and unfair indoctrination I’ve had, like all these things in me that aren’t true but emotionally they feel just as true as anything . . . I feel angry that I was not taught grace, to live all these years with guilt and shame . . . I also feel like I was set up for failure; I wasn’t equipped well to do what they wanted me to do, which was to be abstinent” (Ka,3,112).</td>
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