



# Purity Culture, Sexual Shame, and Sexual Desire Discrepancy

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# Purity Culture Defined

## Belief System

- Sexual behavior is reserved for heterosexual, monogamous marriage.
- It is the greater responsibility of women and includes strict gender norms.
- Adherence to purity culture (PC) is required for happiness and salvation (House & Moslener, 2023).

# Introduction

## Purpose

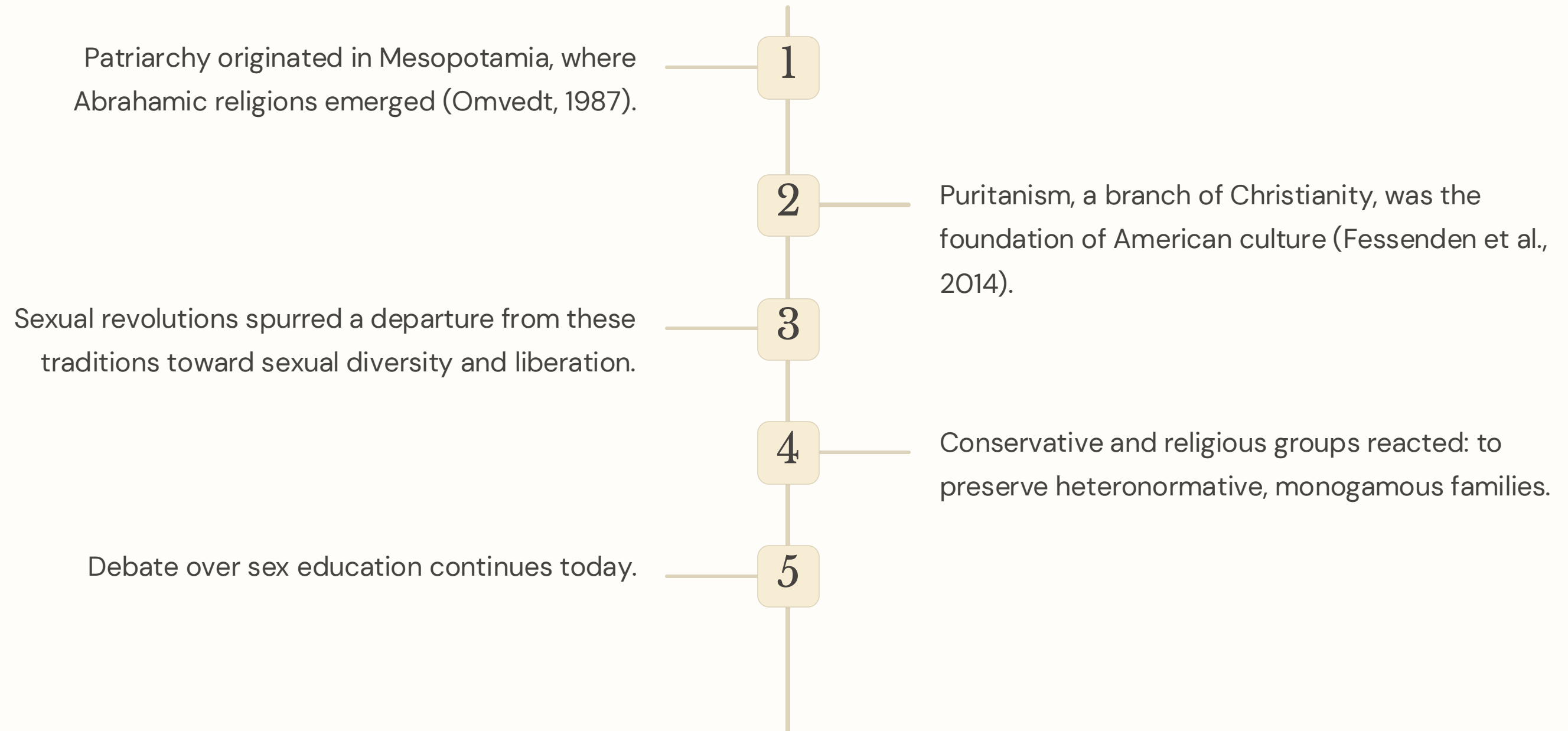
- Understand the relationship between American sexuality teachings, sexual shame and sexual desire discrepancy (SDD) among heterosexual couples

## Relevance

- Young people in the U.S.
- Americans who were raised Christian, especially Mormons and Evangelicals.



# Historical Origins



# Sexual Desire and Shame

## Sexual Desire

- Foundation of sexual functioning (Kaplan, 1979)
- Reciprocal relationship with psychological factors and sexual satisfaction (del Mar Sánchez-Fuentes et al., 2014)
- It is affected by cultural norms (Ronghe et al., 2023).
- Freedom and a sense of deserving pleasure are among the keys to sexual desire (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2020).

## Sexual Shame

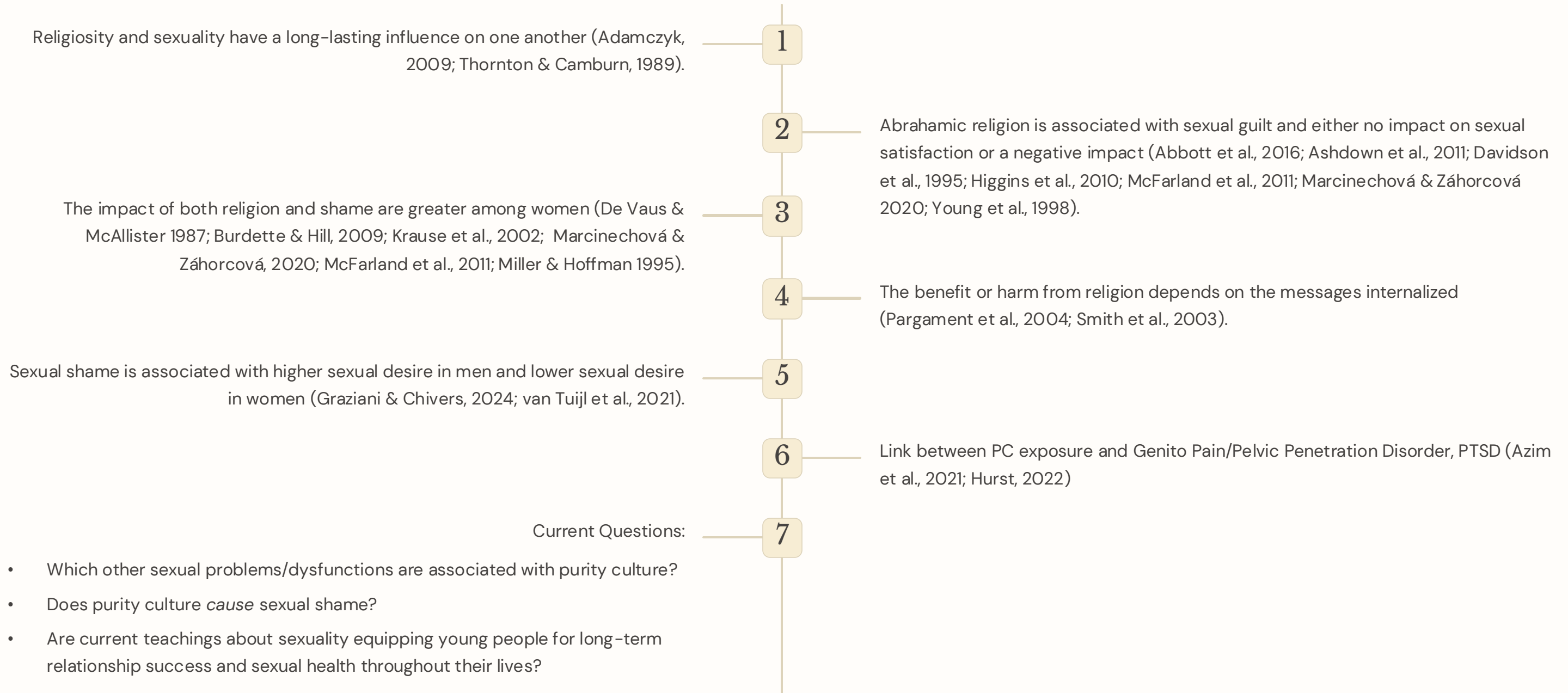
- Unresolved shame can build up, live in our bodies, and affect our sexual health (Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2024).
- Associated with lower desire in women and higher desire in men (Graziani & Chivers, 2024; van Tuijl, Verboon & van Lankveld, 2021)
- Associated with sexual dysfunctions (Pulverman & Meston, 2020)

## Sexual Desire Discrepancy

- Associated with relational conflict and dissatisfaction (Willoughby et al., 2014)
- Number one reason couples seek out sex therapy (McCarthy & Oppliger, 2019).
- Left unaddressed, the negative impact of SDD is compounded over time (Jodouin, 2021; Willoughby, 2014).



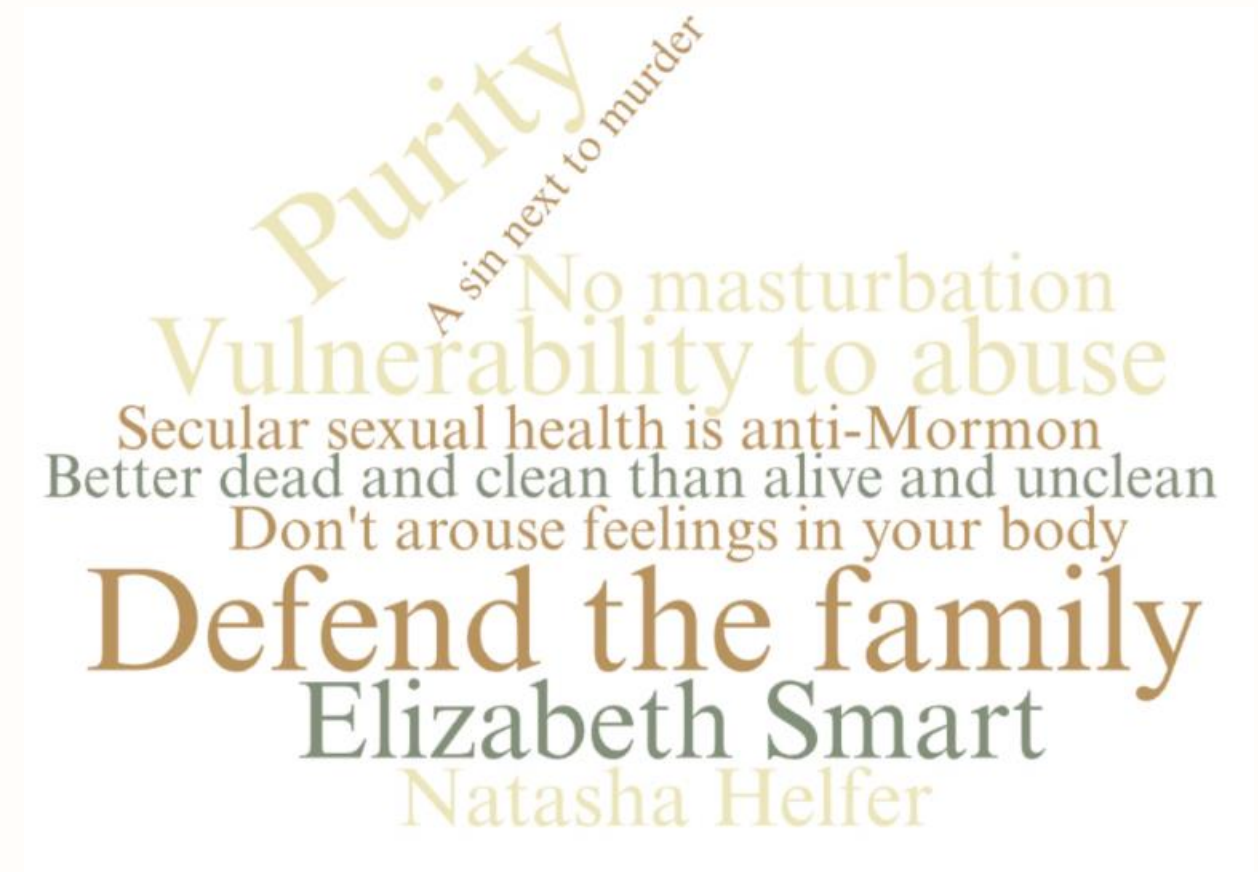
# Religiosity and Sexuality Related Literature



# Most affected populations



Christian Evangelicism



The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

# Purity Culture Messages

(Ortiz, 2019)



## Double Standard

Women as sexual gatekeepers, men unable to control desires.



## Virginity as a gift

Virgins are worth more, if not, you are "damaged goods"



## Heterosexual, monogamous, procreative

The only sex condoned by God



## Extreme Modesty

Bodies are inherently bad and should be covered up to avoid temptation



## All-or-Nothing

Inconsistent messages, either a virgin or a whore



## High Stakes

Salvation, acceptance from community





# Methods and General Outcome



# Purity Culture Beliefs

(Sample items, PCBS, Ortiz, 2019)

Women should dress modestly to avoid sexually tempting men.	Virginity is a gift to give your spouse on your wedding night.
God’s will is for sex to happen within a marriage relationship.	It is more acceptable for a man to not be a virgin on his wedding night than a woman.
Waiting to have sex until marriage will make the wedding night and future sex life that much better.	Sexual thoughts and feelings outside of marriage should cause guilt.
You lose a piece of yourself every time you have sex with someone new.	A woman who dresses immodestly causes her brothers to stumble.
Women should not have sexual desire.	Having premarital sex will make you unattractive to your future spouse.
If you remain a virgin until marriage, God will bless you and your spouse with a great sex life.	Sex outside of marriage will make you damaged goods.
It will be difficult for your future spouse to forgive you if you have sex with someone else before marriage.	If you are patient and sexually pure, God will bring you the perfect spouse.
Women are, by nature, more sexually pure than men.	You should feel ashamed if you have sex outside of marriage.
Women should be cherished as pure creatures.	It is the woman’s fault if sexual boundaries are crossed in a dating relationship.

# Hypothesis I - False

Participants exposed to video clips demonstrating purity culture beliefs will report increased sexual shame on a post-test measure.

Measured via PANAS Ashamed and PCBS-GS. Both decreased in every condition.

Repeated measures ANOVA

<i>Means and Standard Deviations for Dependent Variables by Experimental Condition</i>						
	Purity Culture Condition		Sex-Positive Condition		Control Condition (Finance)	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
PCBS-GS	2.01 (1.08)	1.86** (1.06)	2.10 (1.88)	1.88** (0.96)	2.09 (1.84)	1.84** (0.93)
Ashamed	1.61 (0.96)	1.51* (0.98)	1.81 (1.09)	1.51** (0.90)	1.65 (0.96)	1.51** (0.87)
Distressed	1.87 (1.07)	1.94 (1.18)	2.01 (1.16)	1.73** (1.03)	1.92 (1.07)	1.79** (0.98)
Inspired	2.39 (1.15)	2.23** (1.29)	2.55 (1.19)	2.83** (1.19)	2.51 (1.29)	2.57 (1.25)
Proud	2.57 (1.27)	2.52 (1.36)	2.72 (1.21)	2.77 (1.24)	2.66 (1.30)	2.63 (1.29)

Notes. P values for pre-post only. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .001$ .

# Hypothesis II

## Partially Confirmed

The greater the exposure to purity culture beliefs, the greater the sexual desire discrepancy between heterosexual partners. – **Confirmed**

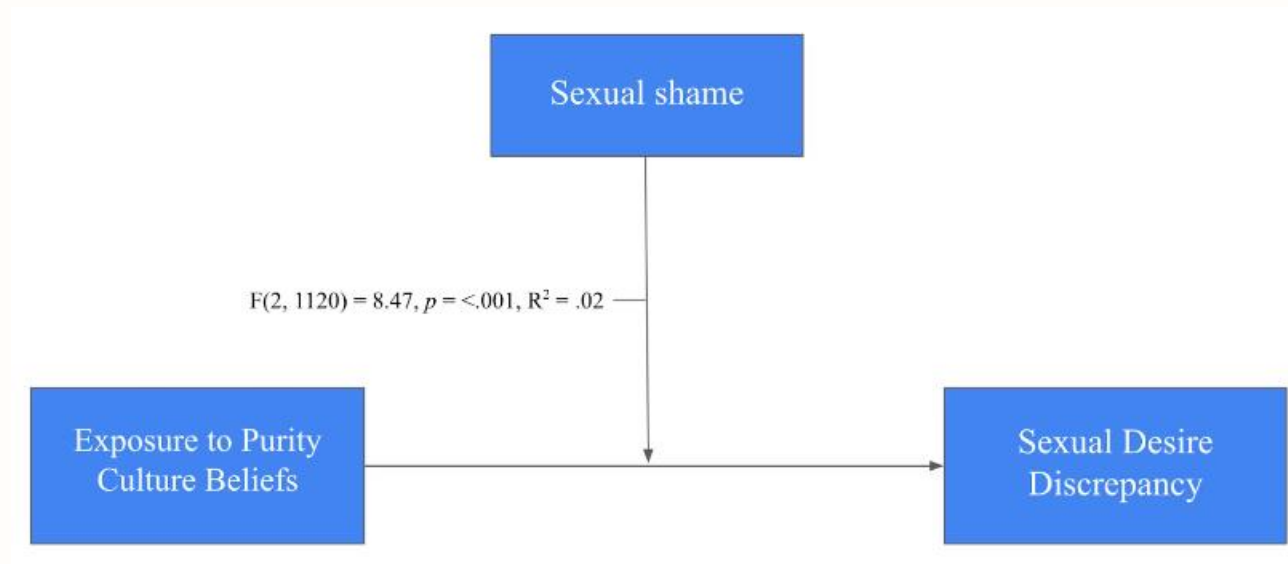
Spearman correlation: ( $\rho = .14$ ,  $p = <.001$ ,  $R^2 = .02$ ).

This relationship will be stronger the more sexual shame participants have and when they endorse PC beliefs such that exposure to PC beliefs is associated with greater desire discrepancy.

Moderation analyses:

Sexual shame – **Confirmed**

Purity culture endorsement – **False**





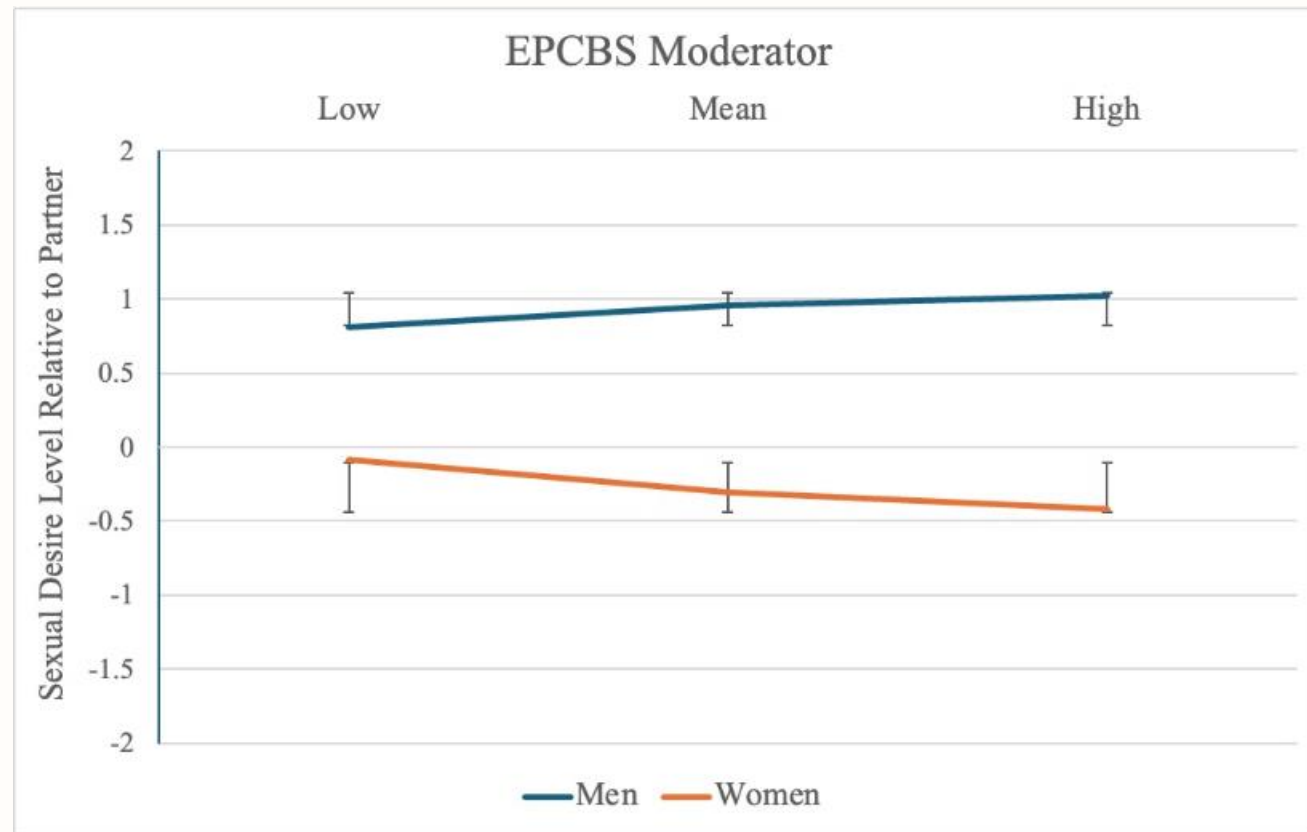
# Hypothesis III

## Confirmed

In heterosexual relationships, women's sexual desire will be lower than men's sexual desire and this will be moderated such that women exposed to purity culture will report even lower sexual desire compared to their partners.

T-test: women were much more likely than men to be the lower desire partners in their relationships ( $t(1092) = 17.0, p = <.001, d = 1.03$ )

Moderation analysis: With greater PC exposure, women were even more likely to be the lower desire partners, and men were even more likely to be the higher desire partners.



Note. This figure demonstrates gender (binary) as the independent variable, sexual desire level relative to partner, where 0 = my sexual desire is about the same as my partner, 1 = slightly higher or lower, and 2 = much higher or lower, with their exposure to PC (mean EPCBS score, one standard deviation higher and lower) as a moderator.

# Hypothesis IV - Confirmed

Participants will report lifetime experiences of distress associated with exposure to purity culture beliefs.

Predominant themes identified using the Braun and Clark (2006) Thematic Analysis method:



## Shame

- "I logically disagree with everything on this list... and feel anxious about sex and sex outside of marriage in general (I am a virgin)... I still feel shameful for things that I don't want to feel shameful for."
- "These beliefs were very harmful. I believe they caused me to explore my sexuality with a lot of shame and secrecy. I felt like I was sinning for having sexual desires before marriage."
- Others reported being exposed to these teachings but not feeling very impacted due to either:
  - Recognizing the beliefs as harmful or incorrect early on
  - The messages not being emphasized in their home



## Emotional Impact

- 70 participants reported negative emotional impact including guilt, regret, fear, anxiety, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or feeling that PC had "ruined" part of their life or "messed them up."
- "...it was understood that becoming a wife and a mother was the whole purpose of women. Not to mention that my virginity was the most important thing about me. The only thing of value. Losing that meant I was no longer of value..."



## Sexual and Relational Impact

- Hurt or prevented important relationships and experiences.
- Feeling their sexual development was stunted or delayed.
- "Purity culture sets men and women up for disappointment and resentment in marriage."
- "I am middle aged, 50s, single female and have never had sexual intimacy... [I have] deep feelings of what is wrong with me, also perhaps if I had violated these 'laws' earlier, I could possibly have had a child."
- "...purity culture... caused me to believe I was "damaged goods" and it destroyed any kind of normal sexuality I could have had. Sex was trauma."

# Hypothesis IV continued

Predominant themes identified using the Braun and Clark (2006) Thematic Analysis method:



## Hope

- Participants noted finding healing and growth as they moved on from PC.
- Accessing sex-positive, secular education, learning about consent and communication, coming to embrace themselves as a sexual being, accepting their sexual identity, exploring erotic literature, non-monogamy and naturism were all named by participants as things that have helped them recover.
- “Leaving these beliefs behind allowed me to feel more empowered and in control of my own body.”



## Religious engagement

- 46 participants reported their experience with PC influenced their religious participation, either:
  - Deconstructed PC beliefs and no longer endorse them
  - Left religion in part, due to these teachings
  - Committed to teach their children differently than they were taught regarding PC



## Endorsement of purity culture beliefs

Differing from most participants, those who endorsed PC beliefs did not share their personal experience with it, but rather additional beliefs and values:

- Modesty, privacy, respect in matters of sex
- Sexual desires should be controlled
- Purity is sacred and important
- Promiscuity is wrong.
- “We don't need to get away from feeling shame for committing sin, although with Christ's help and atonement, we can be forgiven.”

They also shared ideas of how the teachings could be improved to reduce shame.

# Additional Exploratory Findings

- Positive correlation between PC exposure and sexual shame ( $\rho = .06, p = .04, R^2 = .003$ )
- Sexual shame was associated with higher sexual desire discrepancy (SDD) ( $\rho = .30, p = <.001, R^2 = .09$ )
- Endorsement of PC was positively associated with higher sexual shame ( $\rho = .24, p = <.001, R^2 = .06$ )
- Endorsement of PC was not associated with SDD.
- PC exposure was negatively associated with PC endorsement ( $\rho = -.45, p = <.001, R^2 = .20$ ).

Correlations of exposure to PC, endorsement of PC, sexual shame and SDD, split by level of endorsement of PC.

	Rejection of PCB <sup>A</sup>			No strong opinion of PC			Endorsement of PC		
	$\rho$	$R^2$	$p$	$\rho$	$R^2$	$p$	$\rho$	$R^2$	$p$
Exposure X SDD	.09	.01	.01*	.11	.01	.04*	-.02	-	.90
Exposure X Sexual shame	.21	.04	<.001*	.03	-	.59	-.13	-	.29
Endorsement X Sexual shame	.11	.01	.002*	.17	.03	.002*	.20	-	.11

Notes. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .001$ ; PC = purity culture, SDD = sexual desire discrepancy; <sup>A</sup>Purity culture endorsement: Low PCBS score suggesting rejection of PC = 24-59; moderate PCBS score suggesting no strong opinion of PC = 60 - 83, high PCBS score indicating endorsement of PC: 84-120.

- PC Endorsement
  - 826 (67.5%) rejected PC
  - 333 participants (27.2%) had no strong opinion of PC
  - 64 participants (5.2%) endorsed PC
- PC exposure was only associated with higher SDD when PC was not endorsed.

Correlations of purity culture exposure and endorsement, sexual desire discrepancy and sexual shame, split by Sexual Shame Inventory score.

	Low sexual shame <sup>A</sup>			Moderate sexual shame			High sexual shame		
	$\rho$	$R^2$	$p$	$\rho$	$R^2$	$p$	$\rho$	$R^2$	$p$
PC Exposure and SDD	.061	-	.130	.103	.011	.038*	.269	.072	.008**
PC Exposure and endorsement	-.410	.009	<.001**	-.553	.305	<.001**	-.538	.289	<.001**
PC endorsement and sexual shame	.124	.015	.002**	.145	.021	.002**	.144	-	$p = .128$

Notes. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . PC = purity culture, SDD = sexual desire discrepancy. <sup>A</sup>SSI score: low = 10-26, moderate = 27-43, high = 44-60.

PC endorsement was positively associated with sexual shame in the low and moderate sexual shame groups but not associated in the high sexual shame group. The high sexual shame group had the highest positive association of PC exposure with SDD.



Correlations of purity culture exposure, endorsement, sexual shame, sexual desire discrepancy and higher desire relative to partner for men and women

		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Exposure	Spearman's $\rho$	-	-.49	-.01	.14	.10
	Effect size $R^2$	-	.24	-	.02	.01
	$p$ -value	-	<.001**	.76	<.001**	.02*
2. Endorsement	Spearman's $\rho$	-.40	-	.24	-.04	-.14
	Effect size $R^2$	.20	-	.06	-	-
	$p$ -value	<.001**	-	<.001**	.37	-
3. Sexual shame	Spearman's $\rho$	.13	.24	-	.05	.048
	Effect size $R^2$	.02	.06	-	-	-
	$p$ -value	.002**	<.001**	-	.27	.266
4. SDD	Spearman's $\rho$	.12	.01	.36	-	.66
	Effect size $R^2$	.02	-	.13	-	.44
	$p$ -value	.004**	.81	<.001**	-	<.001**
5. Higher Desire Relative to Partner	Spearman's $\rho$	-.11	-	-.12	-.26	-
	Effect size $R^2$	.01	-	.01	.07	-
	$p$ -value	.02*	-	.006	<.001**	-

Notes. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .001$ . SDD = sexual desire discrepancy. Scores above the diagonal signify men; scores below the diagonal signify women.

# Additional Exploratory Findings - Gender Differences

1. T-Test: women were more likely to report greater exposure to PC than men ( $t(1208) = 5.57, p = .04, d = .3$ ). Men were slightly more likely to endorse PC than women were ( $t(1177) = 2.34, p = .009, d = .14$ ).
2. Among women, PC exposure was positively associated with sexual shame and there was no association among men.

# Discussion of Results



## Shame

- PC causing sexual shame was not found, though it was correlated.
- Supports previous findings that women are more affected than men by both religion as well as shame (De Vaus & McAllister 1987; Burdette & Hill, 2009; Krause Ellison & Marcum, 2002; Marcinechová & Záhorecová, 2020; McFarland et al., 2011; Miller & Hoffman 1995)
- Results give voice to implicit experiences of shame.
- Higher sexual shame is part of the reason why PC exposure was associated with higher SDD.



## PC Endorsement

- PC exposure was negatively associated with PC endorsement.
- Different participant beliefs were associated with different outcomes
  - PC endorsement did not moderate the relationship between PC exposure and SDD.
  - PC exposure was associated with higher SDD when PC was not endorsed.
  - The association of PC exposure with sexual shame was only present when PC beliefs were overall rejected.
  - PC endorsement was associated with sexual shame only when PC was not endorsed.
- Why?
  - Cognitive dissonance?
  - Beliefs influence outcomes



## Gender Differences

- Nuanced findings regarding the relationship between traditional gender roles and sexual satisfaction; has changed over the last 20 years (Daniel & Bridges, 2013; Marieke et al., 2020; Pedersen & Blekesaune, 2003).
- Women were more likely to report higher exposure to PC, become even lower-desire partners when exposed, and were less likely to endorse PC, while men were more likely to report lower PC exposure, become even higher-desire partners when exposed, and were slightly more likely to endorse PC.
  - Most people did not endorse PC
  - Endorsing PC was equally associated with sexual shame for both men and women.

# Implications



## Sexology Research

Results add to previous evidence that PC exposure is a risk factor for sexual shame, chronic sexual dysfunction, relationship difficulties, traumatic sexual experiences, and negative self-image, all of which impact sexual desire (Azim et al., 2021; Hurst, 2022; McCarthy et al., 2006).

Suggested future research to explore PC and:

- Out of Control Sexual Behavior (OCSB)
- Infidelity
- Other sexual dysfunctions: erectile dysfunction, Female Orgasmic Disorder
- More on PTSD and sexual victimization
- Overall sexual development, including the development of low sexual desire and an asexual identity



## Therapy and Education

Encourage sexual health for youth throughout their lives, not just while they are minors, through comprehensive sex education highlighting the need to:

- Embrace sexual pleasure
- Accept one's sexual identity
- Express one's desired sexuality freely while aligned with personal values and Harvey's 6 principles (Harvey Institute, n.d.)
- Eliminate myths like "men are always ready for sex" and women are "pure creatures" who need to be "won over"
- Teach that sexual desire occurs on a spectrum and varies over time can better equip partners to navigate sexual desire discrepancies.



## Religious Communities

PC has the unintended consequences of being associated with higher sexual shame, members choosing to leave religion, and higher SDD among heterosexual couples, which harms marital satisfaction, the very thing PC aims to uphold.

- Consider clarifying the definition of abstinence to all for more flexibility and developmentally appropriate exploration
- If teaching abstinence, encourage young people to explore sexuality in a pressure-free way over time, once married.
- Provide positive messages about sex that are not shame and fear-based.
- Provide realistic expectations for sex after marriage.

# Limitations

- Few Evangelical participants
- Majority of key findings were correlational and qualitative. Causality was not established.
- Experiment: sexual shame decreased in every condition. May indicate a flaw in the experimental design or an unknown confounding variable.
- PCBS and EPCBS control items should have been eliminated or analyzed differently for this study.
- This study was cross-sectional, based on self-report, and did not follow participants over time.
- Being an emotionally activating topic for many, may have impacted results.
- Positionality of the researcher, both an asset and a limitation.



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# Questions and Answers

