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Introduction

Purity culture is an evangelical Christian way of teaching about sexuality and gender. Purity culture has influenced the sexuality, relationships, and identity development of millions of adults, many of whom now seek understanding therapists.

Purity Culture Includes:



education based on **gender assigned** at birth.



Strict binary gender role performance expected.

Heterosexual marriage moralized as good.

Sexual exploration framed as dangerous and sinful.



Participants

16 Gender-diverse adults between the ages of 19-45

Sex and Gender:

Assigned female at birth (12), Assigned male at birth (4) Transgender (8), Genderqueer (7), Nonbinary (7), Genderfluid (1), Reidentified (1), Detransition (1)

Sexual Orientation/Identity: Lesbian (3), Bisexual (6), Homosexual (2), Pansexual (4), Demisexual (3), Heterosexual (2), Panromantic (1), No response (3)

Race: European American/White (12), American Indian and White (1), No response (3)

Participants selected multiple gender and orientation identities, so totals do not equal the number of participants.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were performed fall and winter 2020-2021 Interviews were transcribed, deidentified and checked for accuracy.

Identified smaller thematic categories (e.g., words, quotes,

phrases)

Data was coded phenomenological thematic analysis.

Meaningfully collapsed smaller themes into larger thematic categories to create preliminary thematic structure

Pure and Trans: Experiences of Gender-Diverse Persons Raised in Purity Culture

Preliminary Themes and Sub-Themes

Coming out s gender diverse produced an immediate backlash from amily and church members.

Church

Purity culture makes no space for trans bodies." -P30

Participants lost relationships due to their gender and sexual identity.

spaces were dangerous for LGBTQ+

> Repression of sexual orientation and gender identity produced intolerable levels of

"It was like almost like this anxious conversation, I just shoved to the back of my brain." P53

Inability to

conform to

idealized gender

performance

caused significant

distress.

One's body itself is not to be trusted.

Sexual desire is

dangerous and

disconnecting

from one's body

is safer.

Masturbation is shameful; intentional work to develop comfort with self-pleasure.

"The more I ignored being transgender, the worse my depression got, the worse my anxiety got." P36 distress.

Teachings placed men above women in authority and value.

"I had to take these messages about what a person with my body was supposed to be and build a fictional person out of them." P31

> Gender binary was emphasized and compliance to one or the other was required.

Lack of sexual education deprived participants of language to understand their orientation and gender.

Gender and sexual orientation were conflated in purity culture teachings.

then explore gender. "It wasn't until I

Exploring sexual

orientation

allowed

participants to

was like, oh I'm BI that my brain was like, now you can question other things. Congratulations."

This Study Asks



"How did gender diverse persons who grew up in purity culture experience the gender essentialist messaging of purity culture, and how were they impacted by it into adulthood?"

Discussion

Clinical Implications

- More than half of our participants reported experiencing sexual abuse in childhood. Healing included deconstructing sexist purity culture messages that created self-blame for abuse.
- Steps toward gender affirmation were often met with total rejection from family & church community. This loss produces complex, disenfranchised grief.
- Limited sexual education, grounded in shame, resulted in internalized fear of-and disconnection from-the body, reducing clarity about gender.
- Clinicians may help clients unlearn & deconstruct purity culture's oppressive gender-based systems.
- Deconstructing one piece of purity culture often produces a domino effect of examining, deconstructing, and un-learning narratives around sexuality, gender, and relationship structures. The careful support of a therapist familiar with the nuances of purity culture can be invaluable.

"Only men and women exist as you know, what they were assigned. Um, according to what their genitalia looked like. And they said, 'it's a girl' when I was born. And so I was a girl and I was never given the opportunity to be anything different or to even know there was an option to be anything different." -Participant 30

Social Justice Implications

- Creating educational resources, whether online or community-based, may help gender diverse people in purity culture feel less isolated and unlearn oppressive messages.
- Supporting shame-free basic sex education for adults who were deprived of thorough, queerfriendly and gender-inclusive sex education can help facilitate safe exploration of sexuality and gender.
- The queer community has provided many participants with a safe and caring place for identity exploration.

References

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