Sexual assault and secondary trauma experiences within the Evangelical church: A qualitative study

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Abstract

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The beliefs and actions of the Evangelical church are particularly relevant in the midst of our current social and political landscape. This is especially true regarding beliefs around sexuality, gender, and teachings or beliefs around bodily autonomy. Little research explores the experiences of women who grew up within this particular social context, or the impact it may have had on them. This qualitative study explores through in-depth interviews the perceived effects of the social beliefs and expectations of the Evangelical church on women, and how those beliefs may have supported or contributed to abuse they experienced. Interviews with 5 women revealed six themes: (1) Fear and Love (2) Guarding Purity (3) Navigating Roles (4) Seeking (5) Point of No Return and (6) Reframing Experiences. The implications for social work practice and research include a need to: explore the impact of childhood Evangelical beliefs on adult relationships and experiences, enhance individual provider awareness of the potential impact of repressive faith communities, and to explore differences of experience for those who have moved away from Evangelicalism in response to trauma as opposed to those who have restructured their beliefs while maintaining their connection to the church.

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Introduction

The United States is still very much a "Christian nation." In 2015 the majority of the population (75%) identified with a Christian religion according to a Gallup poll (Newport, 2015). In practice, like most faiths, Christianity includes a variety of subsets. One of those significant subsets is Evangelicalism. About 25% of the country identifies with the term "Evangelical" and, notably, they are overwhelmingly white (Pew Research Center, 2014a). Evangelicalism is not a denomination in and of itself, as there is no central form of church governance (though individual denominations may have their own administrative leadership structure). In 1989, Bebbington created a definition for Evangelicalism that has become known as the Bebbington Quadrilateral (Bebbington, 1989). According to this definition, there are four particular specific qualities or priorities that create the basis of the faith: "conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross (Bebbington, 1989)."

Abuse in the Church

Over the past decades, allegations of rampant, systemic sexual abuse within the Catholic Church has been extensively reported not only in mainstream media, but also by the church itself (Breeden, 2020; Carroll et al., 2002; Dwyer, 2019; Horowitz, 2019; Knaus, 2020; Shanahan, 2019; Sherwood, 2020). This revelation soon became more widespread in exposing sexual abuse particularly of children in other religious denominations besides Catholicism (Dias, 2019b; Moyer, 2019; Pease, 2018). More troubling, these cases revealed not only a significant and ongoing pattern of abuse within the organized religious institutions, but also an extensive,

intentional, and covert pattern of covering up allegations when they were formally or informally presented to church officials. The goal of these cover-ups was largely to protect local religious leaders, administrators, and the overall structure of churches over the lives of parishioners, victims, and their families. Even to date, there has been very little accountability for these abuses, which for many victims extended over decades, and management of reparations and healing continues to be an ongoing source of tension between church officials and their congregants, with victims continuing to demand justice (Otterman, 2019a, 2019b; Shanahan, 2019).

In the era of the #metoo movement there has been a stronger push for those responsible for abuses of power in many different fields to be held accountable. In November 2017, two young queer activists started a hashtag #churchtoo, inspired by the #metoo movement (Kasana, 2017). This new hashtag gained traction quickly, with thousands of Tweets in a matter of days of people telling their stories of abuse within the walls of their churches, frequently perpetrated by the people who were supposed to protect them. Since then, accusations have begun to pile up with more high-profile cases hitting the news every day (Dias, 2019a; Goodstein, 2018; Haag, 2018). These stories have consistent and recognizable patterns, not only of abuse from those in positions of religious power who were trusted, but of communities who actively sided with or protected abusers, of authoritarian teachings that demanded trust and obedience above all other virtues, and of a loss of support when individuals or families came forward to report and share their experiences of sexual abuse, manipulation, and coercion from within their churches. However, only a few formal reports of church-based sexual abuse have touched on other potentially damaging and toxic teachings that have emerged repeatedly in survivor stories shared online: teachings about sexual ethics and authority that many survivors assert are coded into

much of Evangelicalism's DNA. These teachings include a strong emphasis on gender roles, particularly a focus on women honoring and submitting to God through submitting to the men in their lives. "Purity culture" is often frequently cited, an umbrella phrase used to encompass a variety of teachings about sex that honors God, including sexual purity or chastity until marriage, sexual sins being perceived as particularly "dirty" and damaging to the soul, and the responsibility of women to protect men from the base sexual impulses viewed as a part of being a man (French, 2019; Ingersoll, 2019b; Pikel, 2018) While some of the longer exposes, such as the excellent Houston Chronicle's multi-part story on the Southern Baptist church scandal (Downen et al., 2019) do begin to delve into these issues, for most of the pieces these unique parts of church abuse are left untouched. This study intends to add to the literature on sexual abuse in the Evangelical church through the stories of survivors.

In this study five women share their stories and experiences of not only the sexual violence they experienced while members of the Evangelical church, but the additional and unique factors co-related with living through that trauma in their faith communities. A process model comprised of six themes uncovered in the respondent stories will be offered. The themes showed a similar journey for participants, as they moved from the earnest faith of childhood to the trauma of abuse and loss of community to redefining their lives outside of the church experience. The points on this path are: 1) Fear and Love; 2) Guarding Purity; 3) Navigating Roles; 4) Seeking; 5) Point of No Return; and 6) Reframing Experiences.

Literature Review

Within the literature there are two broad bodies of work relevant to this research project. The first is focused on a macro view of the Evangelical church system, which provides a more

structured background for the culture in which sexual abuse occurs, and explanations for why and how the Evangelical culture may protect sexual perpetrators and the institution above the individual survivors. The second body of literature is focused on the impact of sexual abuse by members of/within the Evangelical church on survivors of sexual assault who are also church members. , and what shapes this impact, as well as what perspectives it is being written from. These categories will give a broader picture of some of the underlying factors contributing to abuse in the church, as well as some of the reasons why this particular community and those in it may struggle to report the abuse, or find support to heal from it within the church.

The Evangelical Church

The American Evangelical Church, as it is currently known, emerged out of controversy between "modernists" and "fundamentalists" in the mid-20th century (Melton, 2016). This theological controversy was primarily centered in disagreements about how, or if, the Christian church should respond to the rapidly changing social landscape. The modernists believed that the church needed to adapt, opening itself to new ideas and interpretations of scripture and the place it might hold in the modern world. This included social, theological, and scientific views of scripture, with biology and specifically the theory of evolution as prominent concerns to be addressed and reconciled. The fundamentalist movement arose as an opposing force to these ideas, perceiving them as both a dilution of their beliefs and a dangerous concession to the secular world. While both fundamentalists and modernists viewed the church as a chosen vessel of God in the world, fundamentalists pursued remaining distinct and apart from the rest of the culture, while modernists felt the survival of the faith relied on adaptation to new ideas (Melton & Sandeen, 2016). This helps place the inception of this movement as stemming from a belief in moral superiority and absolutes. Like many ideological groups, Evangelicalism is often defined

as much, if not more, by what they oppose as by what they support. Examples of this include views on evolution, sex before marriage, abortion, a woman's role in leadership both in the home and in the church, the death penalty, and climate change (Bishop, 2019; Lipka, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2009, 2014b, 2014c). Those who don't support the expected values, or who do support values that do not align with the church become the "other" to be wary of. This creation of a "moral other" assists in creating moral guidelines to enhance a sense of community. In Williams' work on the construction of the moral other, he discusses the importance of creating a movement frame using social movement rhetoric to call a group to action. A frame, Williams explains, must do four things – create a persuasive diagnosis a social problem (including who is to blame for it), provide a prescription for solving the problem, make it clear that a solution is possible, and motivate people to take action (Williams, 2009). This maps almost directly onto the points of the Bebbington Quadrilateral – conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism. For the Evangelical the social problem is perceived to be that people inherently need to change and move towards God away from their "nature," leading to the need for conversion. The prescription for solving that problem is the activism, as it is commanded to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19, NIV). In response to this command, Evangelicals see themselves as called to go bring the solution to the world, a solution which is available to all exclusively in the Bible (biblicism). Finally, the motivation is contained in the crucicentrist belief that the violent sacrifice of Christ places a debt onto both the church and the individuals in it that cannot be repaid but must compel action as a sign of both obedience and gratitude for the unearned salvation from eternal damnation. While moral frames by nature are designed to appeal to the values and ethics of those who embrace them as a way to motivate social action, by creating a

frame directly connected to the will of an all-powerful and at times vengeful God, Evangelicals not only create moral lines in the sand, but they ensure that these lines are considered sacred and dangerous to cross.

While there are many examples in different realms of what those sacred lines are, the most relevant to this study is in the realm of sexual purity. Particularly centered around dating and intimate relationships, for Evangelical woman an emphasis on the role of submission, a belief that sex devalues women, and that sex is primarily (if not exclusively) intended for procreation create rigid, paternalistic expectations on young women raised in church culture (Klement & Sagarin, 2017; Moon & Reger, 2014). The expectation of female sexual submission, as well as the supposed immutable differences between males and females, not just in biology but in expected behaviors and God-assigned roles, is a frequent finding when exploring purity culture. The experiences of Evangelicals being raised in "purity culture" as it has come to be known have become more widely discussed in recent years (Dubick, 2018; Filipovic, 2013; Ingersoll, 2019a; Shunnarah, 2020), often highlighting dramatic visuals seen in youth group such as comparing those who have premarital sex to chewed gum or used tape but these dramatic visual examples are merely one part of a larger culture of dangerous messages that disempower young women with potentially long term consequences. This sacred moral frame assures women that their role is to serve and submit to all men, and specifically men in the church, who are divinely granted more power and authority, "encouraging women to adopt the worldview that women are distinctly and essentially different from men and that sexuality is itself dangerous, resulting in, for example, the construction of sexual violence as 'giving in' to temptation" (Fahs, 2010).

It is clear that the Evangelical community is concerned about the problem of abuse, even if they rarely attempt to grapple with it as a problem within their own community. Research focuses on the role of the church in healing for survivors, with little mention made of the possibility that the predators may be a part of the church (Schmutzer, 2008; Smith, 2004; Zust et al., 2017). An overwhelming majority of perpetrators of sexual violence within the church are found to be men in positions of authority. Pastors or youth pastors are by far the most common perpetrators, with a notable number also being volunteers within youth groups (Francis & Turner, 1995). There is also a significantly higher percentage of minor victims, leading to concerns about a lack of effective precautions being taken within church communities (Planty et al., 2013).

Impact of the Evangelical Church System Upon Survivors' Experiences

Sexual abuse has been repeatedly shown to be rooted in power, rather than sexual desire (Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, 2017; Jewkes & Dartnall, 2017; Rossetti, 1995). As a result, most instances of sexual abuse occurs in sites where power differentials are built into the system, including the military, Congress, colleges, and White male assaults against native women on tribal lands (Dolce, 2019; Lee, Serfaty, & Summers, 2017; Machles, Cochran, Hill, & Brewer, 2019; Philipps, 2019). Though the Catholic Church is most often implicated as a religious institution of sexual predation and assault, particularly of child and youth parishioners (Alexander & Birzer, 2016; Breeden, 2020; Sullivan, 2020; Vela-McConnell, 2017), revelations about abuse in Protestant churches have also come to public attention (Dias, 2019; Downen, Olsen, & Tedesco, 2019; Haag, 2018). In this section I examine the existing literature on the experience of survivors of abuse within the church, both individually and communally, and the structural and institutional systems, beliefs, and role expectations that may add to the

vulnerability of victimization, as well as compound survivors' trauma after sexual assaults have occurred.

The experience of attempting to re-examine spiritual beliefs and practices, frequently ones that have been taught as sacred and critical for a person's entire life, is a significant process that can result in personal upheaval for many persons. Much of the literature on sexual abuse and the church is focused on this struggle to find or create meaning in the midst of traumatic circumstances. In one example of this Abbot (2012) explores the complexities of what he sees as the church's work in helping people process trauma. He attempts to wrestle with how to apply the communal compassion of the church to trauma as a unique and individualized experience, and argues that this may be a critical role that the church can play in the post-traumatic growth of the individual. He determines that there are practices that are a critical part of the church, such as worship, hospitality, and lament can help a survivor of trauma reintegrate into a healthy and loving community. This presents ways that the church may fit into healing, as well as articulating some of the more positive ways that members of the community may find meaning in this communal setting after trauma.

In a more targeted approach, Zust et al's (2017) qualitative study on the experiences of Evangelical pastors counseling domestic violence victims finds several common themes. The study was done through open-ended interviews with seven Evangelical pastors from the midwest, who were asked four questions around methods of counseling, challenges, and possible solutions. The study found that the pastors often felt unprepared for these conversations, as they had had no specific training around abuse or responding to abusive situations. They reported that they felt particularly ill-equipped when women chose to stay with their abusive partners, and expressed a great deal of concern for the children involved. The role of pastors in abusive

situations came up multiple times in this study, with an emphasis on how little they seemed to do in response (in best case scenarios). Zust et. al helps create context for the experiences of many survivors, particularly in calling attention to the lack of training provided for pastors who are often expected to provide counseling without the credentials to do so.

Crisp (2007) examines how sexual abuse impacts spirituality. She points out spiritual practices and traditions, both communal and individual, that may be triggering or difficult for survivors of assault, including traditions of silence, responses to anger, and pressure on the victim for forgiveness. She articulates a belief that the church struggles to understand the additional complications that a survivor may experience around many commonly accepted spiritual practices, while also maintaining that the church remains an opportunity for survivors to make meaning of their lives if these problems are taken seriously by the church community. In this same vein, Rose (2002) explores some of the positive impacts that Evangelical communal expectations can provide by examining the parallels between Evangelical conversion narratives (commonly known within the church as "testimonies") and trauma narratives. Rose finds that elements of these understandings of community expectations and practices can be a source of both comfort and power and that, while the two types of narratives she examined are distinct, they overlap in a number of ways, as some participants were both Evangelicals and survivors of abuse. She also discusses the ways in which these narratives can become centers of healing, giving women a voice to speak their own experiences, expressing the power in naming and identifying their pain. In this study did find women having found power and identity in being able to speak their own stories out loud, but also found that the expectations from the community on particularly the conversion narrative could serve as a silencing mechanism.

Smith's (2004) examination of the interactions between trauma and spirituality continue to explore nuances in the relationship between the individual and communal experience. Her explanation of trauma as an event that damages a person's trust in themselves and in the fairness and rightness of the world helps explain the relationship of trauma to people's spiritual journeys, as an understanding of oneself and the world is much of what people gain from spirituality. Smith looks at both the potential long term positives or negatives of navigating trauma within a faith community, discussing ways in which a foundation of faith and involvement in a faith community may provide a person a safe place to build their new worldview, or may add to the trauma by setting unrealistic expectations, or blaming the victim. Her specific point that trauma frequently leads people into a new journey of spirituality and finding themselves is reflected in this study as participants often found themselves seeking new ways to frame and shape their life within Christianity before most of them determined that Christianity was no longer sufficient to contain their new understanding of the world.

The ability to make meaning from the experiences of trauma is an important part of a journey towards healing. Giesbrecht & Sevcik's (2000) grounded theory study of five Evangelical women recovering from sexual assault found that, for all participants, their faith served as a way of making meaning, however they also found that it was a complex process which could either engender hope and empowerment, or shame and guilt around their experiences. The relationships participants had with their churches were similarly crucial as a critical part of their lives and understanding of their experience, while also able to function either as a supportive community or a continuation of the abuse that they endured. This emphasizes the complexity of the relationship between trauma and spirituality/engagement with spiritual communities.

A crucial part of not only individual and communal experience, but the experience within the larger Evangelical subculture is the importance of hierarchy and roles (Nichols, 1995). This included career roles like pastors, while also including understandings of gender and sexuality that had a significant impact on study participant's sense of self within their family, their church, or their larger communities. This implicit and explicit set of expectations shaped communication and expectations for the future.

In one example of the impact of roles on family interaction, Colaner (2009) looks at the differences in communication styles in Evangelical families and how that connected to their beliefs on gender roles. From a non-random sample of 144 Evangelicals, Colaner collected data using the Revised Family Communication Patterns Instrument, the Egalitarian/Complementarian Scale, and the Religious Orientation Scale. As hypothesized, Colaner found that family communication patterns were significantly impacted by their gender role ideology, with more complementarian families being more prone to emphasize conformity rather than openly sharing ideals. This fits with commonly accepted parenting advice in Evangelical communities, where authoritarian parenting has long been taught to be a sign of obedience to God (Dobson, 1978; Stephens, 2013). Research has indicated that the communication style of a family can have an extensive impact on whether a child feels able to disclose their abuse, making this potentially another vulnerability for many Evangelical families (Alaggia & Kirshenbaum, 2005).

This emphasis on appropriate roles is also shown to have an impact on what women can do professionally, both inside and outside the church. Within the church Perry (2013) studies the impact that complementarian ideology has on women's roles in fundraising. Collecting qualitative data from over 3000 women, Perry found that these beliefs placed unique burdens on women, including suspicion towards single women regarding their motives for involvement,

Evangelical men expressing an earnest desire to support single women only up until they are married, and internal struggles over their roles and the expectations they were navigating. In a larger view of future expectations outside the church Colaner & Giles (2008) used data collected from 134 church-going women from two colleges, one in the Midwest and one in the Southeast. They examined the correlation between gender role ideologies, and career aspirations and mothering aspirations. As hypothesized, mothering aspirations were significantly impacted by more conservative gender ideologies, limiting the possible future aspirations of women growing up within Evangelicalism.

The focus on roles and expectations have also been shown to significantly impact what men and women were taught about what to expect in relationships and how to navigate sexuality. Fahs (2010) argues that the construction of sexuality particularly found in spaces focused tightly on "purity," such as churches, further gender segregates society and reinforces women's views of themselves as property of men, as well as enforcing the construction of an identity that centers around repressed sexuality. She also shows some of the dangers associated with these viewpoints, including studies that show heightened risk taking for women involved. Her look at the pressure on gender roles in sexuality also highlights the impact this has on sexual assault. She observes the use of language around "sexual sin" and how it differs for men, who are often referred to as having "given in" to the temptation that is presumed to be biological for them in ways that it is not for women. Focusing in more tightly on this topic, Klement & Sagarin (2017) hypothesized that a critical analysis of Christian dating books would find themes of dehumanization and objectification, expected roles based on both sex and gender, and potential consequences for women who stepped outside of these expectations. Their findings confirmed themes of women losing value based on sexual experience, accepted roles for sex in life (i.e.

intended for procreation), and an expectation of sexual violence as a part of day to day life for women.

Expanding on that and looking more deeply at the role of Christian theology in abuse within the church Scarsella & Krehbiel (2019) specifically examine the roles that certain Christian theologies have played in both minimizing the existence of sexual abuse, and creating a culture that protects abusers. They specifically examine doctrines such as the doctrine of atonement - the belief that Jesus perfectly exhibited holiness in his obedience and submission to torture and death to save the world - and their role in creating a culture unsafe for survivors –

> *"When willing, violent, abusive self-sacrifice is held to be the source of salvation and, therefore, the quintessential expression of Christian piety, the self-preserving steps necessary for resisting sexual violence become heretical by relation."*

They also observe that cover ups of offenders, while it may look similar to comparable situations in secular settings, can easily be justified as protecting the Church, and therefor protecting God. Exploring this concept of the impact of gender role beliefs on potential real violence Jankowski et al (2018) studied Christian beliefs specifically around hierarchy in both the human relationship to the divine and humans relationships to each other and beliefs about gender roles to see if it impacted their agreement with Interpersonal Violence Myths (IVPM). They also explored why this association might exist. As hypothesized, it was found that beliefs in more conservative gender roles and hierarchy expectations made both men and women more likely to agree with IVPMs. Connections were found to hierarchal relationship expectations, gender inequality, and a lack of acceptance towards those seen as outside the group.

Rudy (1997) helps illuminate why the church places such importance on roles specifically around gender and sexuality by tracing the path of the Religious Right's use of sex, particularly sex outside of marriage, as a tool both of social control for men and women (but particularly women), and proof of the threatening reality of the changing times. The focus on the "traditional family" then becomes focused on sex, who does it, how, and when. Rudy notes that homophobia present within Christians and Christian churches is directly connected to a conservative belief that it is a threat not just to their way of life, but to their spiritual connection to God.

> *Conservative Christian men and women feel that their access to God is dependent on their gender and their sexual orientation; if the distinction between men and women or gay and straight is challenged or deteriorates, how will they know how they relate to God?* (Rudy, 1997, p. 65)

By placing so much emphasis on the roles of men and women, and the importance of nuclear family, as God-ordained, merely the existence of homosexuals, or others who deviate from this mandate becomes a threat to their way of life. This again ties to the importance of roles but it also illuminates a deeper and more fundamental spiritual dread tied to the fear. The additional weight of tying an individual's relationship with God (itself often connected to additional fear of hell and suffering) to beliefs about sex, gender, and an approved role within church hierarchy is deeply complex and may lead to deep internal struggle.

While research on the topic of abuse within the church is relatively sparse in general, perhaps the most noticeable gap in it is the stories of those whose abuse may have ultimately led them to leave the church entirely, or at least move to a far different version of it than what they

had known. While there are certainly survivors who will choose to stay within faith communities and restructure their world around the event(s) that have happened to them, there are also those who choose to find new communities, and who may see the faith community as a whole as too toxic to return to. These people who leave are occasionally alluded to but almost never talked to directly. There is certainly evidence that many young people are leaving faith in general (Cooper et al., 2016; Kramer & Fahmy, 2018), however even when this is discussed it is often focused on a generation's distaste for the political direction conservative faiths have embraced (Cooper et al., 2016; Renaud, 2019). In my study I have the opportunity to explore some of these stories of women's experience of sexual violence, as well as their experience of leaving their faith community behind.

Methods

This study was conducted using intensive, semi-structured interviews. The primary goal of the interviews was to elicit the participant's own experience and understanding of their experience, and intensive interviews are designed to meet this goal (Charmaz, 2014a, p. 58). The data were analyzed using grounded theory. The use of grounded theory was particularly important in this study as a way to both deeply examine the stories and experiences that were being shared and also to maintain an awareness of the researcher's own deep connection to the subject material, recognizing the impact that this connection had both on the collection of data and the analyzing of it (Olesen, 2007).

Recruitment Procedure

Participants were recruited through a non-probability convenience sample, using snowball sampling. This method was chosen because the researcher had been a member of these

communities for over a year, was aware of people who both wanted to share their stories, and who would either know the researcher directly as a trusted person to share them with, or who could be referred by others in the community. Recruiting through social media has both been shown to shorten the time frame of the initial collecting of participants more than many other approaches and to potentially have a better success rate at targeting specific populations (Arigo et al., 2018; Gelinas et al., 2017). Due to the specific nature of experience being sought for this study, as well as the time constraints of a thesis, social media recruiting was selected as the method of recruitment.

Participants were identified through both Facebook and Twitter, using the same hashtag or identifier of "Exvangelical" and snowball sampling was employed with this method. Interested parties who contacted me via Facebook or Twitter were asked to fill out a screening questionnaire (see Appendix A) to assure that they met the following study inclusion criteria: cisgendered women between the ages of 21 and 35, from the US, who had attended an Evangelical church from the ages of 6 to 16 years and who experienced sexual violence during the time they were a part of that community. The hope was to identify participants who had been taught Evangelical principles over their childhood to young adult developmental stages, and who experienced sexual trauma while they were still within their church community. The recruitment post was up for approximately 72 hours total. The criteria was limited to cisgender women to mitigate additional factors, such as the experiences of trans women and nonbinary individuals as distinct identities. Male participants were also excluded from this study due to the potentially unique additional factors faced by male survivors of sexual assault, particularly related to stigma and support when abuse is disclosed (Easton, 2013; Kia-Keating et al., 2010).

The screening questionnaire included basic demographic information, including name, age, gender, where they grew up, how long were they a member of the Evangelical church, and experience of sexual trauma during the period they were in or identified with the church community. It also included questions regarding beliefs within the church, including views on marriage and divorce, gender roles, and the specific role of women.

Study Sample

After excluding subjects who did not meet the study criteria, 38 potential participants remained. From those 38 persons, I attempted to choose a sample that varied in age, location they grew up in, and type of church experience. The latter was determined primarily by the factors of what denomination their church identified as and how big the church community they grew up in was. Given my time and resource constraints, and expecting attrition among those who were selected, I decided on a study sample of n=10. An email was sent to the selected individuals, with further information about the study, giving each an opportunity to ask questions. A final sample of five persons were interviewed for the study. Pseudonyms were used for all participants.

As shown in the below table, the five participants were adults who self-identified by gender and expression as female, between the ages of 22 – 35 years old, and in their childhood had attended several different types of churches that were all self-identified as Evangelical. Two had grown up and attended church in California, one in North Carolina, one in Pennsylvania, and one in Wisconsin (most were living elsewhere at the time of this study). Four out of five were white.

Pseudonym	Age at Time of Study	Age in Church	Church Size/Type	Location	Method of Interview
Rebecca	24	0-20	100-500, Nondenominational	California	Google Hangouts
Mary	22	0-21	100-500, Evangelical Free Church & Plymouth Brethren	Wisconsin	Skype
Kim	33	0-20	1000+, Reformed Baptist	California	Google Phone Call
Bella	26	0-25	100-500, Baptist	Pennsylvania	Skype
Naomi	35	3-30	50-100, Assembly of God	North Carolina	Google Chat

Table of Participants, Table 1

Their experiences of sexual assault varied. Naomi was in a long-term abusive marriage starting at 18, Bella and Mary had experienced intimate partner assault during adolescence, Rebecca was assaulted by an older child when she was under age 10, and Kim had been groomed and assaulted by one of her pastors from age 12 into her early years of college.

Data Collection Methods

This study used semi-structured interviews as the data collection method. One initial interview was conducted with each participant, after which a select group of participants were contacted for follow-up interviews, to be described further below (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Three interviews were done over video chat (either Skype or Google Chat), one was done audio only over Google, and one was unable to make time for a phone call and did her interview over Google Hangouts chat, based on my approved IRB protocol (1/24/2019). The participants were made aware that the interviews were recorded (they could request that the recordings be stopped or ended at any time), that the recordings (or transcripts in case of the instant messenger)

would be transcribed and stored securely, that their personal and identifying information would be kept confidential, and that the research might be used in future studies on the topic. They were also made aware that the researcher was a mandated reporter, and what that entailed about any disclosures to hurt themselves or others who are in vulnerable classes. Based on my approved IRB protocol, they were not required to sign a consent form, but instead asked to verbally consent. All participants agreed.

Interview Procedure

Each interview followed the general protocol below:

1. The interviewer reviewed the process, as well as a brief background about the researcher, and the purposes and goals of the study.
2. Participants shared their responses to questions on the interview guide (See Appendix B), as well as additional questions that came up during the interviews.
3. The interviews were recorded via a handheld recorder, and then transcribed by the interviewer.
4. Once the initial interviews had been coded, a decision was made to conduct follow up interviews to explore themes that had been identified during coding (See Data Analysis below). Three of the five initial participants were contacted for follow-up interviews. The two participants who were not interviewed a second time stated in their first interviews that they were busy or had other demands. For the follow-up interviews, participants were reminded of the conditions in the study's informed consent
5. Participants were told they were simply going to be given words or concepts, one at a time, that had come up in the first interviews (possibly their own or others') and to

respond with whatever came to mind with those ideas. They were reassured that there was no wrong answer, and if nothing came to mind they could feel free to move to the next question. They were then walked through the list of words (See Appendix C). These follow up interviews were decided on after the first round, after consultation with my advisers, in the hopes of further clarifying what appeared to be unifying themes. Because of my own lived experience with the material and the language used by participants, I wanted to be particularly cautious to ensure that my interpretations reflected their experiences.

Data Analysis

I chose to use grounded theory for my study. Out of the several iterations of grounded theory, I adopted the constructivist version for this study (Charmaz, 2014b). This method allowed helped to foster my own reflexivity within the research process, something that was critically important given how close I was to the material (Hall & Callery, 2001). I was particularly impacted by Mills, Bonner, & Francis (Mills et al., 2006) in their discussions of constructivist grounded theory and their focus on researchers being explicit about power imbalances and attempts to mitigate them. I am a member of the community about which I chose to do my research, and it was important to me to ensure this was not merely a gift that I was receiving from participants, but an exchange of information and processing these stories together. In a similar vein of exploring power, I attempted to explore my topic from the perspective of symbolic interactionism – understanding that the meaning of experiences is negotiated and understood through social interaction (Charmaz, 2014b, p. 262). This seemed critically important when viewing interpersonal sexual abuse through the lens of a social organization like the Evangelical church. Approaching my study in this way allowed me to

explore power as it was used against the participants in my study or navigated by them, and as it was present within the study itself (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007).

The data analysis began with line by line coding, with consistent and ongoing comparison to other parts of the data in an attempt to see parallels and give accurate names to observed phenomena(Bryant & Charmaz, 2011). During this process I endeavored to remain open to any findings that may come up within the data, consistently checking my own notes, as well as the perspectives of others less familiar with the material. Through the process of coding and comparison, themes began to emerge. The most frequent codes were grouped into more focused codes as potential categories. The focused codes and theories were then examined and those that were the most significant were moved into categories (see Table 2). During this time extensive notes were kept, as well as ongoing discussion with my chair to be aware of and examine my own biases and assumptions (Lempert, 2007). All categories and concepts were generated from the data, and were consistently checked against each other. Examples are provided below in Table 2.

Interview Data	Initial Coding	Focused Coding	Theoretical Coding
So I wasn't told anything about menstruation, I wasn't told anything about sex except you're not supposed to have it. I wasn't told really anything about… friendship dynamics, with the same gender or with opposite genders… And it was so unfortunate because it's really stunted my relationships with anybody but especially with men	Ties lack of social education to lack of sex ed, feeling left stunted, opposite sex relationships tinged with fear, feeling responsible for behavior, importance of appearances	Protecting and being protected; Fear in intimate relationships	Guarding self from men; reframing experiences
if I didn't sing a certain song for my mom's friends, or be able to quote a certain scripture, I'd get a spanking and earn my mom's disapproval. I always had to like the minister. Not going to church was not an option. As	Connecting faith to parents; performing; checking checkboxes; using scare tactics;	Fear in intimate relationships; meeting complex expectations	Interactions of fear and love; navigating assigned roles

I got older, it was a constant demonization of anything that inspired critical thinking.	increasingly complex rules		
my whole life revolved around this church, nothing outside it, which was pretty much their goal. Um, it always was told, you know, there's no way you can have meaningful friendships outside of, you know, this church, or even people who go to other churches, they believe slightly different things, you won't have as fulfilling relationships with them… they went so far as to say that no one else understands true love and friendship like we do.	Isolation from outside sources; scare tactics; using relationships as a threat; church as only source of good; distrust of outsiders/others	Isolation as protection; emphasizing danger	Loving relationships as fear-based; guarding from the "world"
when I was in high school I had a long distance boyfriend and I had to tell my parents anytime I was texting that boy. Um, never allowed to be alone even in public kind of thing. There was always this assumption that I was just gonna have sex or something and that was gonna ruin me forever	Overwhelming; smothering; protecting; value connected to purity; fear of losing value; danger from men; danger from the outside	Guarding from men; feeling smothered, not protected	Prioritizing value or worth over comfort
I can't read the Bible anymore myself, I've tried. Um, all I think about is what I was taught growing up? And it's very um judgmental and condemning and uh… it's just not, I just don't because it's not healthy for me to read anymore	Feeling judged; unable to return to what she spent so much time on; setting healthy boundaries for self	Stronger understanding of self and needs	Reframing experiences; setting healthy boundaries

Table 2

Examples of initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding

Six categories emerged from the data, and with further exploration, these six categories followed a recognizable order of experience that was repeated in different but comparable ways through all 5 participants.

Findings

Fear and Love

Fear is defined by Oxford as "an unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a threat" ("Fear," 2020). For the purposes of this paper, the definition of love encompasses both feelings of love, and feelings of safety. Brene Brown says that "Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, accountability, and authenticity" (Brown, 2012). If vulnerability is the birthplace of love, then love must include a feeling of or belief in safety in the moment allowing a person to open up and be willingly vulnerable. One of the core concepts in the Evangelical faith is the interactions between fear and love. The theme of fear and love is defined through early and consistent teachings that ongoing threat of fear and love is intimately connected with loving and supportive relationships. These relationships are both with God and with others who are attempting to emulate God. This is also seen in more subtle community understandings which are supported by families, churches, and also Evangelical entertainment. Evangelical entertainment covers a wide scope of materials, from cartoons and radio programs for children, myriad books that are both Christian and aimed specifically at children or teenagers, board games and video games, and an entire genre of music that has come to be known as Contemporary Christian Music or CCM.

Many research participants recounted these concepts as foundational starting from a very young age. God was not only seen as loving, but as the actual definition of Love. Caregivers were presumed to love you as their foundational role in your life. And yet God was also frightening, as a consistent reminder of the threat of Hell. When bad things happen in your life or to those you love, they were likely to be portrayed as either God protecting you from something

worse, or possibly even punishing you for known or unknown sins. This was dramatically demonstrated by Mary, when describing her struggles with debilitating endometriosis in high school –

> *"(I felt like) it's my fault. I have to either pray better or I'm not believing the right thing, or I haven't made it yet; I haven't suffered long enough yet, cause you know they used that thing of God uses suffering to bring glory to himself and then you'll be fine and I was like… well, it's been 10 years [since her health problems began]?"*

Bella described her thoughts after her father and brother were killed in a car crash, and how she thought their deaths might have fit into God's plan;

> "*…for a really long time I was like, well, who knows what would have happened if my dad and brother were here, like my brother could have went into drugs or my dad could have been abusive, or… like I went there. Because this happened for a reason. If God made this horrible thing happen, it was to avoid something more horrible happening later on. It was either that or God let this happen to you so that you could relate to people [relating to the suffering in other people's lives as a part of your witness]"*

This assertion that negative experiences not only come from God, but are also a part of His love and care for you may be hard to process, especially when you are a child. This fear of God and His potential unpredictability was well exemplified by Naomi describing her childhood nightmares –

> *I would have nightmares about the Rapture happening and I would start to float up, but would get stuck and I would cry and cry...I would wake up and start just reciting all my "sins" in the dark, hoping that if I died or the rapture happened, I had begged forgiveness for anything that could possibly have been considered sinful enough to keep me out of heaven.*

The concept of discipline is seen as a consequence or series of consequences given out of love, and is specifically tied to being children of God. A verse that exemplifies this concept and practice is Hebrews 12:7-11 *"Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."* This perspective may well provide a framework for processing traumatic events in the moment, as Bella mentioned with the death of her father and brother, however, it also lacks the flexibility to continue the growing process from traumatic events. The rigidity of the Evangelical worldview comes with the expectation that all negative experiences that individuals may experience glorify God in the end. This creates an expectation of tragedy being ultimately focused on God and not the individual, as well as a single acceptable endpoint of the healing journey. If the only acceptable conclusion to tragedy is determined from the beginning, the journey to that conclusion may be both less

personalized and less fulfilling or helpful in the long term. More about these journeys in the lives of the participants will be examined in a later finding.

As is clear from the above referenced verse in Hebrews, the larger community is expected to support the discipline of both God and caregivers, viewing it as protection from both consequences in this life and in eternity. This can lead to the most loving relationships and experiences in a child's life being characterized by fear of emotional or physical consequences for mistakes due to both the community and family attempting to protect them through discipline. Fear and love are taught as inextricably entwined concepts, with fear being portrayed as a defining factor of a loving relationship, perhaps most importantly of *the* most loving relationship they are expected to have – the relationship between themselves and God.

Guarding Purity

A significant focus of Evangelicalism is the guarding of purity. Purity is understood to a consistent goal, if unattainable due to humankind's sinful nature, to keep oneself completely focused on God, and to keep both intention and action uncontaminated by sin or the outside world. True purity of intent and action are understood to be exclusive to God, which is expressed imperfectly both communally and individually through His people. As a result, Evangelicals commonly express a desire to be continually on guard so their purity is not infected by ideas or actions from the outside world, from others, or even from within themselves. This is frequently known in Evangelical communities as "guarding your heart," a phrase that stems from Proverbs 4:23, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. (NIV)" While the idea of "guarding purity" is often used in reference to sexuality, the idea of guarding or

maintaining purity to glorify God extends to many areas of life. In this study, guarding purity was discussed in three broad sub-themes by participants in my study.

1. Guarding against 'the world'
2. Guarding (from) men
3. Guarding from self

Guarding Against "The World"

While there are several verses that 'The World' may refer to, the relevant understanding of this term is best exemplified in verses such as Romans 12:2 "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Or James 4:4 "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." This understanding of the world as a corrupt source of sin and cruelty, as the antithesis of God, with the only purity to be found in God and his people leads many Christian parents and communities to guard their children from the impure influence of outside influences; "outside" referring to the world external the internal and formal organization, structure, and teachings of Evangelicalism. Also, the subsequent failure to seek this refuge is met with the punishment of hell. For participants in my study, one of the consequences of this belief was restricting the media to which they were allowed to watch, read, or listen. Mary summed up her experience succinctly – "*(no) Harry Potter, no magic, no boobs, no butts, no swearing, unless it's in a violent movie. I read a LOT but my mom would proofread."* When talking about the fear of the outside world, Naomi also mentioned that *"Science was of the devil, Christian rap music was a gateway."*

However, controlling access to entertainment or other cultural touchstones extends beyond just guarding from the dangerous external world. For participants in my study it also meant they were educated in Christian schools or homeschooled, and even the types of churches or theology they were allowed to engage in were very limited. Kim felt this particularly deeply in her formative experiences in church:

> *…my whole life revolved around this church, nothing outside it, which was pretty much their goal. They always said there's no way you can have meaningful friendships outside of this church, or even people who go to other churches, they believe slightly different things, you won't have as fulfilling relationships with them, they don't understand. They went so far as to say that no one else understands true love and friendship like we do. Because we're part of this club. So it was very much pushing the world out, even other Christians out.*

The specifics varied individually, but the overall message seemed the same – the world is a dangerous place and parents must do what they can to keep their children from being infected. However for participants in my study, who saw themselves as being those vulnerable children, they experienced this claim as a false promise. Rebecca reflected on the idea of safety in our second interview:

> *"Even when I believed the church was safe and that was a place where I told my body, 'No, we're safe here, stop feeling nervous, we're okay,' when I was molested in a church. I was stalked in a church… my whole life I was told church is a place of safety and that never actually came through even when I believed that it was a safe space."*

Guarding (from) Men

Men/boys are viewed as a specific danger to female-identified people because of the importance of maintaining female purity. This belief was combined with the assumption that males had an allegedly higher sex drive. Young Christian women are encouraged not only to ensure that they are never alone with men who are not related to them, but also to make themselves as unappealing as possible, while still being "feminine." Almost all participants discussed being required to wear uncomfortable or restricting clothing to keep their modesty intact, including wearing long skirts and multiple layers of clothing, no matter the temperature. This belief that men lack the ability or will to control themselves if a woman wears the wrong clothing, or is alone in a room with them connects both to the sinful nature that Evangelicals believe is inherent in the human condition, as well as a belief that sin is not only our actions, but our desires. In Matthew 5:28, Jesus says "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." This verse coupled with Romans 14:14 which entreats the faithful to "not do anything to cause your brother to stumble (in the faith)" are often used together to shame women into dressing "modestly" and ensuring they are aware that it is their responsibility to keep men from sinning. In this way they are told that their purity is being guarded from men and also that their bodies and their sexuality are ever-present dangers from which they must protect men. This assures that women and girls understand they are both in danger and a source of danger. Rebecca experienced this intensely when she made a choice to go to a secular college. She describes her first experience meeting with her male adviser –

> *...he asked me to close the door and I almost had a panic attack because I was in a room alone with a man and I thought that was a sin. But like I hadn't been*

taught that that was a sin, but I'd been taught that that wasn't safe; that wasn't good.

Others described complex interactions and processes, involving both protecting themselves from the nature of men, as well as protecting men from themselves.

Mary: *I was not allowed to talk about it around my dad or my brothers because heaven forbid they feel uncomfortable by a normal bodily reaction.*

Bella: *I think I said my bra itched one day in class? And some of my classmates turned around and said, "We don't talk about that stuff when guys are around!"*

This set of messages about relationships with the opposite sex often had very damaging impacts on these women, not only in terms of their view of their own bodies, which will be examined more in the next section, but in terms of how to create and sustain healthy relationships with the opposite sex. The belief that women functioned as gatekeepers of both their own sexuality and the sexuality of the men around them, made it difficult to understand appropriate boundaries, or how to recognize healthy relationships. Rebecca sums this up poignantly when reflecting on the impact of her upbringing –

…it was so unfortunate because it's really stunted my ability in any of my relationships with anybody but especially with men because I was always so concerned that I could do something that could make them stumble, I could do something that could make them uncomfortable, I could do something that could look like a sin… I just had no idea that you could just hang out with someone and have fun and then develop into that intimacy. It was just all or nothing.

Guarding from Self

Finally there is a pressure to guard one's purity and heart from our own "sinful nature." Like many things in Evangelicalism, this plays out in deeply gendered ways. Men may be told that their nature of depravity is manifested visually, e.g. they are warned not to look at women with lust and they are warned about pornography and masturbation. Because women are presumed to have less to no sex drive, they are counseled about emotional sin. When women are told to "guard their heart" one of the verses often quoted to them is Song of Songs 2:7 "Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the does of the field: do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires." This focuses on the girl's emotional purity, suggesting that if she becomes too emotionally entangled with someone other than her betrothed or marital partner, she will have "given away" parts of herself that belong to her husband. This was discussed in terms of sexual activities, such as a first kiss or the first time having sex as important markers of purity, whether or not the participant had followed that rule themselves.

> Rebecca: *I personally thought you know maybe I shouldn't kiss anybody unless I thought I was gonna marry them and I shouldn't date anybody unless I thought I was gonna marry them and so then I was entering these relationships with people that were high intensity because I thought they were going to be my spouse and I thought that I needed to practice being a good submissive wife*
>
> Naomi: *I kissed a boy at 17 (my first kiss) and after I walked in the door, my mom called me a whore and whipped me with a leather belt.*
>
> Bella: *I did NOT save my first kiss… sex was still like my line, like we're not having sex. I'll do lots of other things, but no sex.*

> Mary: *I remember thinking I'm supposed to feel guilt after this, or I'm supposed to feel different, like they said you're supposed to, after you have sex you feel different and I didn't.*

While this understanding that initial sexual acts were connected to purity and goodness was clearly and widely disseminated, the concept of "guarding yourself" encompassed a more complete idea of a woman belonging to the men in her life. Because a female's worth is seen as so deeply connected to her purity (both body and soul), women and girls are commanded to submit to male authority figures in their lives (fathers, pastors, brothers) in the hopes that eventually this will lead to attaining the husband as authority figure. Females learn early and consistently throughout their lives that they belong to men.

> Naomi: *I was told over and over and over that if I "messed up" I was giving up God's plan for my life and my future husband. Just throwing it all away. Again, fear, fear, fear. I was taught that once I was married, it was my responsibility to ensure the marital bed stayed active, that if he wanted it I had to give it to him, or he would have a biblical right to seek it elsewhere. This led to me submitting to countless abuses in my first marriage to keep him happy, since it was my "duty."*

> Mary: *There was an implication that once I got married that a man, that you know the headship of the father passes over to the husband and then, you know, I'm under my husband's authority.*

> Rebecca: *Everyone told me that I was super mature, and I was super bossy, and I was super opinionated and super hard to deal with so I would need to find a really mature, headstrong guy to put me in line.*

> Kim: *I can't remember if it was in 3rd grade or the 4th - 6th grade Sunday School class but we were at the age where girls and boys just naturally gravitated towards other sides of the rooms? So huge girls section and huge boys section. And they had the boys look over to the girls section, "God created them to be your helpmeet." So even at the youngest age, girls are meant to serve the boys.*

This is perhaps where there is the most complex overlap between guarding men, being guarded from men, and guarding against oneself. Knowing that the physical body and internal female or feminized self was created to serve men and that it was the job of girls and women to protect the self, not for themselves but for someone else, leads to a longstanding, internal struggle with the female self-concept. While defining ourselves by those around us is not an uncommon experience for most people, the idea that one's entire existence is intended for other people may make it hard to build an understanding of the Self on your own terms. This often leaves people open to abuse by those they believe are specifically created by God's laws or will to be in power. Like other findings in this study, this expression of patriarchal values is certainly not uncommon outside religious circles, but the added pressure of believing that an omniscient higher being has ordained this way of life may make it a more challenging paradigm from which to break out.

The assumption is that women are driven by emotional desires and men are driven by physical desires (including the sexual). While all strong desires, emotional or physical, are viewed as potentially dangerous, sexual sin is often perceived as particularly damaging to both the body and the soul. Many study participants reported feelings of ambivalence when they began to engage in sexual activity, not only because they believed it was wrong, but because their own sex drive was not something they were taught to manage. Instead they were taught that

men were the aggressors and it fell to females to protect males from their own uncontrollable desires. This led to feelings of guilt and shame when women's desires were a driving force in sexual relationships. Also, with such feelings it indicated that females lacked the tools to understand or manage their own sexual desires.

> Rebecca: *my boyfriend and I, we had a list? And these were our rules, and these were our physical boundaries? And if one of them were broken, and it would always be me, like I was a little horndog. When one of those rules would be broken, I would then feel so crushed with the self-loathing? So that became another trigger for me, any sort of natural self-expression of my sexuality and like feeling good, and like actually feeling good in my own body, right? It would lead to that exact same shame spiral, just with a different subject.*

Another way of protecting from yourself and your desires seemed more connected to the physical existence of women connected to their reproductive role and function. Several participants experienced reproductive health complications and in their interviews showed a mixture of discomfort and shaming around the body. There appeared to be a damaging connection to sex and impurity in explaining these struggles, as well as (at the time) an ignorance of what was "normal:"

> Kim: *I actually had massive problems with my reproductive system and never even knew it. Yeah, let's go five months without a period and then die for about two weeks, or maybe five months period in a row! I had no clue. Nobody told me anything. I tried to talk to my mom about it, and she's automatically thinking, oh my god sex! The doctor said 'She's of the age she should probably be taking more*

folic acid and a multi vitamin.' My mother took one look at the folic acid label and it said on it 'for women of childbearing years' so she wouldn't let me take it.

Mary: *I was chronically ill from the age of 9 onwards. I hit puberty and I started getting my period and it was terrible. Horrible… (The endometriosis) was bad, but you know, no one wanted to talk about that part of it. But I would have… so many times people would just like all of a sudden put their hands on me and pray over me. That God would heal me. And I remember a couple times after I had kind of spoken up about the fact that I had been assaulted, it was well, you're sick with this, because of that. Or you're sick with this because you made these sexual choices and that's why this is happening to you.*

Navigating Roles

As with any hierarchical community, a great deal of importance in Evangelicalism is placed on the role that each member is expected to have within the community. For participants in my study, they described the confusion and frustration of navigating their assigned community and familial roles about sexuality, gender, their relationship with God, and their relationships with others, particularly romantic partners, but this also included roles as daughter, sister, and friend. Ostensibly there was a great deal of turmoil when the roles did not bring satisfaction, or when they simply found themselves unable to meet the expectations associated with each role.

Gender roles were most frequently discussed in the context of this study. Virtually all participants remembered clearly being taught what their role as a woman would entail, particularly in relation to men. Much of this has already been covered in the Guarding Purity section, as so much of their relationships with men was expected to be defined by sex; however

there were also expectations that applied to other parts of their lives. Mary shared these struggles:

> *Gender roles were VERY important. I have only recently started to deconstruct this idea that I thought my biggest desire in life was to become a wife and a mother. I'm starting to realize that I only wanted that so bad because I was, you know, suppressing all of the other things I wanted to do. Because I was like you know, what's the fucking point if that's not gonna matter and my only purpose in life is to have children.*

In another facet of role expectations was in coping with set expectations versus the reality of one's life and experiences. Rebecca reported struggles in her expectations from her father:

> *[my father] was the head of household, he was the protector? Yet he did so little to actually protect me when I felt unsafe, when I was not safe… he never prioritized me.*

A less gendered role that was a common thread was the role of being a Christian. The expectations for this role were particularly focused on external markers that connected to how people perceived each other on both a personal level and as representatives of the larger community:

> Naomi: *One thing that really sticks out is how much church was a performance. Even very young, I remember having to be a certain way just to be there, and I had to do things and say things that I didn't necessarily understand just so my mom would be happy.*

> Kim: *[the way the church responded to my abuse] showed me that they circled the wagons. All the stuff about friendship, all the stuff about helping people only applied if you're in that circle. And there's apparently a whole long rule book of things that get you out of that circle, such as listening to rock music or wearing black all the time.*
>
> Rebecca: *I didn't speak in tongues. Our church did not speak in tongues, and you could do that in a private space, the couple of times that the pastor talked about it from stage he's like speaking in tongues is okay but in a public space it could scare people away from Christianity and that's not what we want. Because you never know if a person who could be saved was there so you couldn't do it during service or anything like that.*

Participants reported many adaptations to the roles they were assigned. This often connected closely with guarding their purity, as they attempted to navigate roles that were often poorly defined. While most, if not all, Evangelicals agree that sex should be saved for marriage, exactly what sex should be saved for varies across churches and even families within those churches. For some, any dating is "practice for divorce" (Harris, 1997) and should be discouraged or forbidden. Instead, courtship is allowed – usually defined as not beginning until both parties are seen as ready for marriage, and conducted with heavy involvement and oversight from the parents. But even in families or communities where dating is allowed, what is acceptable in that frame varies. A central understanding was that a woman's purity was an inseparable part of what made her valuable, both to God and to her future husband. Some participants mentioned that any kissing before an engagement was seen as giving up part of your value, while for others it was any intimate or sexual activity beyond kissing:

> Mary: *Yeah, I remember the visual picture that a camp counselor gave me and our whole dorm, that every time you kiss a man, she said imagine you're at your wedding and your husband sees behind you all of the guys you ever kissed and then he's gonna be like, I don't wanna marry her. And he's gonna leave you.*

This muddiness around what protects your value made it hard for participants to know whether or how their behaviors or actions were beyond the conventions of Evangelical religious values and conduct. More importantly, these role expectations and behaviors often varied specifically by gender:

> Mary: *I remember for example, my brother said he had kissed his girlfriend and my dad was like awesome, great. But when it came to me, I had to get permission to see anyone, I had to tell them if I held hands? When I was in high school I had a long distance boyfriend and I had to tell my parents anytime I was texting that boy. Never allowed to be alone even in public kind of thing, there was always this assumption that I was just gonna have sex or something and that was gonna ruin me forever.*

> Bella: *You don't date unless you're planning on getting married. And you never get divorced because God does not agree with divorce, unless your partner cheats on you. Or MAYBE they would allow for a divorce if there was physical abuse? But there would have to… like you would probably have to be hospitalized before they would ever say that's not okay and so we were never taught about emotional abuse or you know, don't get into relationship with someone who's super manipulative.*

Kim: *Somebody made a big deal to the RD that I was again studying with boys, and you know I'm studying with them in the only place that's open 24/7 that's co-ed which is the laundry room… It was SO bad. And then she's telling me that I need to change my major. Because it's putting me in situations that have the 'appearance of evil.'*

Rebecca: *We didn't have sex or anything, but we would do weird, almost kinky, everything but kissing? And then we'd feel bad because I felt like we'd broken a boundary but boundaries were so vague? Like they would talk in youth group about how you've gotta have boundaries with your boyfriend, and you don't wanna have premarital sex, it's bad, but they wouldn't like go into specifics? So what I was taught about boundaries in like a romantic or sexual relationship made no sense, was not helpful.*

The lack of clarity put forward by authority figures often created a confusing situation for study participants I interviewed. Their adaptations often involved trying to become more faithful, hoping to meet and possibly even surpass the expectations of the church or family. Rebecca reported keeping extensive journals of her prayers and sermon notes, trying to make sure she understood what was expected of her. Naomi reported trying her hardest to please her abusive husband, feeling it was her responsibility to keep him happy no matter what:

"I did my wifely duty. I let him do things to my body that would make me cry in the bathroom afterward from pain and shame. And he still cheated on me. And came home and demanded I have sex with him or he would leave me and take the kids and I'd never see them again. Because as a woman, he owned me."

Kim understood that she processed things differently from a young age, and argued with the adults around her when she felt they were wrong. She described acting out gendered roles that did not feel natural to her as a part of the social group that she belonged to in high school:

> *"The homeschool co-op I was a part of, it was so… you know. We'd sit around having tea all the time wearing outlandish floral dresses, huge hats, talking about Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, those types of books, knitting, crocheting, quilting, all that SHIT that I wasn't interested in! No, that is not me. I can appreciate British literature and all that, tea is shit, I like coffee, and I really don't like wearing colors."*

These attempts to navigate roles in their lives that often seemed both unsatisfying and unattainable often led participants into the next theme we will be exploring – seeking.

Seeking

When navigation within accepted and established community boundaries failed to meet the needs for acceptance, intimacy, and community study participants were experiencing, they began to seek fulfillment outside those established boundaries. This could include seeking out new theology that may have been deemed heretical when they were growing up or wearing clothing that had been deemed off limits.

> Rebecca: *I realized oh, my feminist ideals doesn't mean I can't be a Christian. I can be an egalitarian Christian. So that was kind of my attempt at staying religious but not compromising my personal ethic as a woman and as a person who doesn't hate gay people and all of this. It started there though, it started as I think women matter, I think women are smart enough to be able to make decisions*

and that limiting God based on gender doesn't make any sense, if God is super omnipowerful, it doesn't make sense.

For most of the participants it happened as they were entering college, most likely as part of their natural human development. However when such exploration was demonized by their families and/or faith communities, they sought fulfillment of their need for relationships and connection in new people or communities, usually while trying to maintain a connection with the faith and community in which they grew up. Kim talked about seeking out new community in her undergraduate experience, seeking both belonging and protection:

"I have problems with social interactions, with social cues I just was not picking up on. I was just weird, but at that point I was okay being the weird one. One of my majors was computer science so I found a lot of weird people that I fit in with. We were so weird that people were afraid to sit at our table like, if I wanted to avoid being confronted about something, I would just sit with that group at lunch and nobody would come near me. It was like drawing a chalk circle around us. You know, it was, it was amazing, just we were so weird. That every normal person was afraid to come near us. It was quite nice actually, it was a nice little shield."

While seeking out and experiencing new community and identity was exhilarating, it also led to ongoing tension as respondents tried to both hold on to the people and the community that they had grown up in and loved, while seeking sustainable support from those in the outside world. While this tension is in some ways typical of the young adult developmental stage, where separating from parents and cementing your own role in life are critical tasks, it is given extra

weight and conflict in Evangelical families because of the stakes that are presented – for the youth who choose to leave their families behind, Hell is a possible consequence, which therefore often left a seemingly unbreachable rift in parent-child communication. For study participants who were still in communication with their families or friends from the community, there were often many aspects of their personal lives they couldn't share, including sexuality or gender identity, their romantic relationships, or their true feelings about religion.

> Mary: *Some of my brothers are… they're in it, they're very in it, and it's a lot of homophobia. It's hard to deal with. I have since realized my gender identity and sexual identity is more fluid than I maybe thought it was and that's not something that I can share with them safely.*

> Bella: *Now some of my friends now know that I'm not… I haven't come up with a word to describe what I am religiously? But definitely not Evangelical? When one of my friends found that out she said she would pray for me? Which was [not] super great but you know. And some of my other friends have been more supportive, as much as they can be. I know they don't really get it.*

> Rebecca: *it sucks because I would like to have… I don't know if I could say healthy but I would like to have A relationship with my parents and instead, like with Evangelicals in general, I really can't be friends with them because they cannot honor me, they cannot respect the decisions that I'm making, they cannot see that I have never been healthier, I have never been happier because that would break their cognitive dissonance.*

This ongoing dissonance and struggle in their relationships with the people closest to them and the new identities they were creating may have distanced study participants from the Evangelical community, helping pave the way for their point of no return.

Point of No Return

Each of the participants in my study had a moment or series of moments that shifted them firmly outside of the community in which they had grown up. It is worth noting that this was not the experience of sexual assault(s) for any of them; instead it was the response of their community when they reached out for help – often for services such as fertility advice or protection from their abusers. When the community and their family responded in hurtful ways, study participants all reached points where they realized they could not return to the faith they grew up with, whether that meant leaving Christianity altogether, or moving into a different form of religious connection that had been viewed as heretical in their younger years. For some this involved a total disconnection from their families, and for others it was marked by a significant change in their familial relationships. This "point of no return" was both painful and exciting, often opening up new opportunities to thrive, while also damaging or destroying relationships that had previously sustained them throughout their lives.

For Rebecca, her moment of realization came while she was in college. In high school a boy she had known slightly through their homeschool co-op but hadn't seen in years had begun sending her inappropriate letters. The letters expressed a desire to marry her, saying he was in love, etc. They made her feel very unsafe, but then she left for college and felt that the distance helped (though he sent her several letters to her parents' house during that time). On a visit home, she visited the church she had grown up in and volunteered at all her life to see friends.

This young man was there, and clearly interested in talking to her. When she expressed a desire to leave or for him to, she was shamed by male leaders in her church:

> *"The deacon and the youth pastor came over to me – I was hiding outside – the youth pastor came over to me and he's like 'it wouldn't look good to ask somebody to leave when youth Sunday's all about redemption and my daughter got letters, she's not uncomfortable by his presence.' He just made it very clear that if I required him to ask this man to leave that I would be being dramatic, I would be being difficult, and I would be going against God's will."*

Not wanting to make a scene, Rebecca agreed, but stipulated that she didn't want him to be able to speak to her or come near her. She was surrounded by the women in her church, other mothers she had grown up with, in what she described as them "forming a wall around me with their bodies." Though the young man tried to approach several times, he was kept back. However, eventually the crowds dispersed, the men of the church were outside eating food, and she was talking to a friend who saw him running up behind her. The two of them ran, and made it into the ladies room, where Rebecca texted a friend to come distract him so she could get out to her car. When meeting her family at the restaurant and telling them what happened, "one of the first things that somebody said was thank god the bathrooms are still gendered." This experience had a profound impact on Rebecca, as she eloquently described:

> *Family values are more important [to them] than me literally being stalked in a church. And that just really sealed the deal, that was my ticket out, for sure. Because these men, who I explicitly told I needed to be protected by this one person, didn't actually care about me, did nothing to protect me, I didn't actually*

matter. [It was framed as] it's the one sheep returning to the fold and that's who God would care about, but the fold also matters and also deserves to be safe.

For Kim it was a series of traumatic incidents that led her to understanding that the church she had grown up in would not protect her or keep her safe. Growing up in an abusive household, she also experienced sexual abuse for many years at the hands of one of the pastors of their church, starting when she was 12 years old. As a sophomore in a college connected to the same church she had grown up in, with the abuse still ongoing, she made a brave decision to approach the school and ask for help with housing. She was still living with her parents and realized that she needed a way out. After hiding her away for several weeks and insisting that she could talk to no one, including her boyfriend, they called her in for a meeting. She didn't know what it was about, but assumed they were finally going to figure out her housing. Instead, "I walk into a complete ambush. The elder's there, the dean of women is there, the VP of Student Life is there, my parents are there, and my rapist is there, and my boyfriend is there." They proceeded to conduct a "trial," accusing her of lying and making up her abuse allegations to cover the fact that she was sleeping with her boyfriend (which she wasn't). Her boyfriend was also taken aback by the meeting. Though she impressively argued her own case and the meeting ended in a stalemate, her life at the school got increasingly more difficult. She began to spiral into depression and to abuse substances. Meanwhile, her family had cut her off and when she went to apply for her next year of financial aid, she was told she needed their signature on the FAFSA forms. The harassment on campus from faculty and other students, combined with her attempts to cope with her past trauma largely on her own, caused so much stress for her that at one point she ruptured her eyeball. In spite of this, showing remarkable resourcefulness, she managed to continue in school for several months despite the continuous barriers placed in her

way by both other students and administration. However, when members of the faculty conspired to break up her and her boyfriend, this seems to have been a final straw for her. She left school and the church she had grown up in, and came away with a profound distrust of those connected with the larger church institution –

> *They went out of their way, and people I've found years later attest like yeah, the Dean of Women was always down at [name redacted] church and [name redacted] was the one mentoring my boyfriend at the time. So you went all the way out there, to another town, to go jack me over. You know how they like telling the story of the prodigal son? Where he's hit rock bottom, he's Jewish and he's eating the food meant for pigs and he's taking care of pigs, this is how far down he's gone before he ran back to Jesus – they orchestrate that. They don't just leave you in the gutter. They throw you in it.*

For Naomi, her experiences were more connected to her seeking help for the abuse she was undergoing. Fearing for the safety of herself and her children, she finally made the difficult and brave decision to leave her husband, who served as one of the pastors at the church during that time. Similar to Rebecca's experiences, Naomi came to understand who was truly being protected in this community she had considered her home. She went to the head pastor to ask for help:

> *"You wouldn't believe how I was treated when I finally got a restraining order against my first husband. I literally ended up having to leave the church because "it's not God's will to break up families." Forget that I feared for my life and the safety of my children. That was irrelevant… Even when he cheated on me, the*

> *pastor didn't take his minister credentials, didn't support me in trying to get him away from me, but rather said we needed counseling because children need to be raised in a home that's not broken. Everyone acted like he cheated because I wasn't enough for him, but that wasn't the case. I gave him everything he wanted sexually. Every time he asked."*

Bella also experienced the threat of people she trusted who withheld protection and safety when she shared her experience of sexual assault. After breaking up with the boyfriend who had sexually assaulted her, Bella joined a large Christian missions organization for several years. She was able to travel and learned more about her skills and passions. During the time she spent in Germany, she began to make friends with a group of Syrian Muslims. This had a profound impact on her understanding of her own faith, as she feels the reason that she was drawn to them was because she recognized so many of the values that they held as being similar to what she had been taught in her own conservative upbringing:

> *I more or less grew up Mennonite and there's a lot of strict rules that come along with that and the concept of women covering their hair is not weird for me. The whole concept behind hijab is not weird to me. Modesty was my entire life. And so I felt very comfortable being their friend.*

Despite her own comfort, she found that many of her family members and community did not understand these new friendships, and she began questioning what truly made the Muslim faith so different than what she had grown up with. For Bella the final straw was when the leaders of her group had a discussion with her, leaving her feel angry and betrayed:

> *"They told us that essentially they could not control our actions but they did not support this, and if anything happened to us, they would not be there to pick up the pieces. So, I did not deal with that well. I don't know, I would dare anyone to deal with that well though. When you've given your entire early 20's to this organization, like… I don't have a 401k? I haven't started saving for retirement- like all, all I want is a 401k! (laughs)"*

Finally Mary had been experiencing some doubts and uncertainties around her faith for some time, but found the community's lack of ability to support her and provide comfort during a traumatic time in her life to be a final straw. Mary struggles with endometriosis, and because of that and surgeries she had had related to that, she and her husband knew that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to have children. When they did conceive, they told both of their families on Mother's Day – only to miscarry the next day. As tragic and devastating as that experience was, for Mary it was the responses of people in her faith community that made it impossible for her to return. She reported being told things like that "God knew she wasn't ready to be a mother", or that "the baby would suffer less in heaven," or perhaps most frequently, that "it was God's will."

> *that was a real strong push cause of the… you know. What people tell you when you have a miscarriage when they believe in god is really fucked up. And that's when I really seriously started questioning everything cause I was like, what kind of fucked up person does this? What kind of fucked up God is like, you're gonna lose this baby, cause it's my will?*

For all five of these women there was a strong sense of betrayal and loss. At it's best, a faith community should offer comfort and support in the face of injustice and pain. For all of these women, they felt that these things had been promised to them as they had been growing up, that while God might not stop bad things from happening, your community was put around you to help you heal from them. They believed that their lives would be granted special meaning in fulfilling these expectations, meaning that they would be unable to find else. They believed that the roles they had accepted as daughter, future wife and mother, and child of God were in exchange for protection – fulfilling those roles would protect them from heartache that those outside the community might suffer, and the roles of the men in their life would help protect them from people who would hurt them. When these perceived promises were broken, staying within the community became no longer an option.

Reframing Experiences

Finally, for each of the participants, it was obvious how much self-reflection and thought they had put into understanding their experiences over their lives. Whether they were currently atheist, agnostic, or still believers in a different way, each of them looked at the experiences of their childhood and adolescence as profound and deeply influential. As such, they began to recontextualize those experiences. Many of them had done extensive reading about Evangelical ideas and history, seeking a larger view of the faith they had grown up in for a better understanding of how the communities that shaped them had been shaped themselves. Many of them had also sought new language for what they had experienced and the ideas they were taught. This new language seemed to help them gain more clarity on their experiences. There were also many examples of seeking to understand their younger selves and the ways they navigated those experiences, what needs they might have been meeting, if imperfectly.

For virtually all participants, they now looked back and saw their Evangelical upbringings as not only failing to protect them against their abuse but as grooming them for it. Several discussed how they were taught to ignore their own instincts and to not create boundaries:

> Mary: *…boundaries were kind of frowned upon cause you need to have your life totally open so you that you can grow in Christ and people can encourage you and boundaries are bad. Oh my god. Yeah. That was awful. There were no boundaries cause you had to have everything laid open to everyone so that 'as sword sharpens sword' or whatever that verse is and ugh. Yeah. It like went up to the director one time that I was not being vulnerable enough and like not sharing enough of myself. Because I needed to be more vulnerable to be broken by Christ.*
>
> Bella: *My entire life I was taught that your job as a woman is to make your man happy and submit to him and do whatever you need to do to keep the relationship good? They taught, in a relationship, you are supposed to lay down your own wants and needs for the other person… you as their significant other have to lay down your own needs to have an emotional relationship, or a healthy relationship for the good of this other person. Because everything that you do, you are supposed to be Jesus to this person and* ***Jesus is nice****.*
>
> Naomi: *The man is the head of the household. The woman's body is his. My mom always used the word "helpmeet" and I always understood it from her that I was never to overshadow my future husband. I was to be at his side, making him look*

good. I had a responsibility to keep my husband happy by keeping a clean house, cooking good food, and basically catering to his every whim.

When the people who love you taught you things that may have made you particularly vulnerable to predators, or at least failed to protect you from them, it can be a real struggle to sort through that love and trauma. For all of these women, they had begun to reckon with their own sense of self in powerful ways, finding new communities and partners to provide support, coming to a clearer understanding of themselves, and looking at their younger selves compassionately.

Rebecca: *I have 10 journals of all of the sermons that I took notes in, and the bad poetry that I wrote, and all of the prayers, I was really big into writing out prayers? Which are just heartbreaking to read now because I was so sad and broken and confused… oh! Poor little Rebecca, I just love her so much and I wish she had better things!*

Naomi: *I stayed single for a long, long time, because I didn't trust anyone to not be hiding those awful things beneath their niceness and Christianity. I started to deconstruct, started to realize the gaping holes in the logic and morality of Evangelical Christianity and, somewhere along the way, I met my current husband. We've been married almost 5 years, and it's SO different. I have scars that cause me to overreact sometimes, and he just accepts them and loves me through it. He knows everything.*

Kim: *There's certain people that I allowed to control, to have control over my actions? Or that inner voice in my head, like should I be doing this, or looking at*

> *myself a certain way? That sort of thing. That boundary is way up now, where pretty much the only voice in my head is my own.*
>
> Mary: *[my husband and I] deconstructed at the same time during this last year and it was just really a very beautiful thing. I think we had both been questioning for a while… somehow I found the Exvangelical hashtag on Twitter, and I just dove nose deep into that and researched everything for months, like that's all I did in my free time was theories and podcasts and this and that and learning from so many people and doing all the things they tell you not to do. (laughs) And that was my pathway in that.*

Bella summed up her experiences succinctly looking back:

> *At the time NOTHING was fine and therefor it made everything fine.*

This insight speaks compellingly to the stories of the participants, speaking to how difficult it can be to tease apart the nuances of what is healthy or positive in community and individual experiences when in the midst of trauma. It also speaks to the remarkable resilience, plasticity, and survival skill people can show as social beings, learning to navigate community and family norms openly and with determination in the short term, even if those norms may be causing damage in the long term.

This final theme is ongoing in ways that the others are not. While most of the themes explored by study participants served as signposts on their journeys, the process of reframing those experiences with their current understanding is likely to continue to evolve as their understanding and life experience extends. It is also the theme that contained the most hope in

these interviews, offering multiple insights of clarity, compassion, and healing around layers of trauma.

Study Limitations

Limitations in this study included my positionality as the researcher. As a queer, non-binary person who grew up in a family, educational, and church community background that was very similar to the participants, I was able to share an understanding of language and culture which may have helped put the participants at ease and feel open to sharing freely. However, it also may have created biases and limits in my analysis that I am not aware of. I see myself as an insider researcher, with both the privileges and challenges that affords (Kanuha, 2000). The experiences of the participants in many ways mirrored my own growing up within the same community. While this often gave us a shared vocabulary and understanding of the experience, looking back at the interviews, I recognize points where I assumed understanding of participant's meanings and did not ask for clarification. I know that a shared vocabulary does not automatically mean a shared understanding of concepts or shared experience. The follow up interviews that were conducted with several participants were conducted partly as an attempt to address this limitation, seeking to further clarify concepts and words and the study participant's understandings of them.

Because of my own relationship with this specific community, the participants that I spoke to had all left Evangelicalism, most of them completely. There was one exception, in that one study participant had found new ways to conceptualize her faith and the idea of community within that faith, while still retaining many of her beliefs. This shift away from the Evangelical church meant that the pathway taken by the participants in this research all led them to similar

conclusions. This is not a uniform response to abuse or traumatic experiences within a faith community, and should not be treated as such. However, it provides key insights into the experiences of women within the Evangelical community, even though outcomes may vary on an individual level.

Another limitation was the form of interviews. Three participants video-chatted with me via Skype, one spoke voice only via Google Hangouts, and one chatted with me via text only, also in Hangouts. It would have been helpful to be able to interview participants face to face for added clarity. Both sample size and selection criteria also are limitations, and broad generalizations would be inappropriate with the specific size and scope of this study. Finally the sample was almost entirely white, which certainly does not speak to the broad experience of those growing up in the Evangelical church. While many Evangelical denominations do skew heavily white, particularly in their US locations, there are many people of color belonging to churches throughout the country who undoubtedly experience unique struggles due specifically to this intersection of identity.

Conclusion

In this study, I found the impact of growing up in the isolated subculture of Evangelicalism was profound for all interviewees. Although the abuse each participant suffered varied, the responses they reported both internally and from their communities have a number of commonalities, including feelings of guilt and shame which were externally reinforced by their families and communities. The timeline varied somewhat, but virtually all participants reached the stages of seeking and their point of no return in their young adulthood, often coinciding with their college experiences. The experience of expanding one’s sense of the world and coming

more fully into one's own identity is a common one, and in fact one of the key "jobs" of young adulthood (Arnett, 2006). This coming of age experience can often cause friction with family and community of origin, however the pressure of conforming into a single narrative that is a part of Evangelicalism made this developmental milestone particularly fraught. Participants often felt forced to make hard choices between their own health, wellbeing, and values, while balancing those with the care and support of those they loved. This may also explain why none of them pursued this shift in worldview and values until they were more able to take care of themselves and seek out alternate viewpoints as young adults, something that would have been much more challenging while they were still under their parents' authority.

All of the participants in retrospect viewed the teaching and beliefs that were passed onto them by their faith communities to be more damaging than the abuse itself, or at minimum a more critical focus for them in the present. The consensus appeared to be that they viewed the abuse they suffered as falling within the teachings they were raised with, perceiving these teachings as having groomed them for the abuse. As such, both their local church communities, and the larger subculture of American Evangelicalism as a whole – were viewed as complicit in their abuse, having created both a belief structure and a community structure that left them more vulnerable to abuse, which was ignored or facilitated when the abuse was disclosed. The faith community that was purported to be as a singular place of safety was in the end a structure that promised emotional, sexual, and physical trauma. This caused additional emotional damage with roots reaching farther than trauma from a single perpetrator, through the many elements of their lives.

At the core of this secondary trauma was a deep sense of betrayal that often damaged the ability of the participants to trust. This betrayal led to additional loss for participants when the

communities they received support from proved to be too rigid to hold the difficult questions and grief that arise in the wake of abuse and other trauma. As the participants boldly pursued healing and growth in their lives, they moved further away from their family and faith community, understanding that the people who loved them were incapable of seeing their healing as positive unless it adhered to the rigid structures that were expected for a "child of God." Sometimes this manifested as family or community simply refusing to ask questions that they were aware they would not like the answers to, sometimes it manifested as more direct confrontation. Again, the specifics of how each participant coped with this varied, but all reported having struggled with distance from family and loved ones, and feeling forced to seek out and build community in new ways. While the new community was often a source of great joy in their lives, they were also forced to cope with the loss of lifelong connections and beliefs and to "parent" themselves through these processes.

Future Research

This research only scratches the surface of deeply complex experiences and processes regarding sexual abuse and Evangelicalism. Future research could include more closely studying the beliefs young Evangelicals were raised with and the impact of those teachings on their adult relationships, the experience of rebuilding community when your first religious community has failed you, and exploring their understanding of faith now as adults. It might also be instructive to explore the experiences of former Evangelicals who have moved into other faith traditions, or different versions of their own, and how that compares to those who have moved away from faith altogether. The population of former Evangelicals and the impact of Evangelicalism are not well studied, and particularly in a time in society when faith and politics have such a significant overlap in public life, it seems a topic that is ripe for future exploration.

Implications/Application

Multiple participants mentioned the difficulty and also the importance of finding therapists and providers who understood the damage they had suffered in their church communities and the impact that it had had on them. Often when religious communities are mentioned in the training of social workers, faith communities are discussed as a strength to be leaned on and which clients are encouraged to connect with more deeply and frequently. While this may be beneficial for some clients, what this research most clearly illuminates is that faith communities are neither inherently positive or negative, but may have many different types of impacts on individuals and families. All of the participants in this study had made significant progress in unpacking and processing the trauma they had been through. However, they all discussed early points in their journeys when there was still a great deal that they did not understand, and how helpful it would have been to have a therapist or provider who could help walk them through those challenges. A few participants also mentioned having to educate their providers on these unique experiences. Continued education around this population, and the specific intersections of trauma they may face fits the NASW Code of Ethics, as we value the inherent dignity and worth of clients, and walk with them in their search for wholeness and justice, supporting their need to not only resolve their community and family relationships, but also their pursuit of understanding the larger community and societal injustices that contributed to their victimization (NASW, 2017). Social workers are in a unique position, with our centralized focus on justice and systems of oppression, to support clients in their journey towards wholeness and reframing of trauma that has extensive societal implications, particularly in this moment in American political and religious history.

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APPENDIX A

Screening Tool

1) Age?
2) Sex Assigned at Birth
3) Gender
    a. Male
    b. Female
    c. Nonbinary
    d. Transgender
    e. Other
4) Where did you grow up? (State is fine, give dropdown?)
5) Age span during time spent in the evangelical church (open answer)
6) Did you experience sexual assault of some kind during the time you were a part of the evangelical church community? (Clarifier – not necessarily from someone within the church, although it could, just DURING the time you were regularly involved) (Yes/No)
7) What denomination was your church growing up? (Please be as specific as possible)
8) How large was your primary church growing up? (multiple choice)
    a. **5-20**
    b. **20-50**
    c. **50-100**
    d. **100-500**
    e. **500-1000**
    f. **1000+**
9) What did your church community teach about the role of women? (check all that apply)
    a. **Women should not work outside the home**
    b. **Women should not lead men in any circumstances**
    c. **Women should stay in the home till they are married**
    d. **Women CAN be pastors**
    e. **Women are not permitted to refuse sex to their husbands**
    f. **Women are separate but equal in relation to men (different roles)**
    g. **Open box – please fill in anything additional you think is important**
10) What did your church community teach about the role of men?
    a. **Men are responsible for their household**
    b. **Men should be in charge of household finances**
    c. **Men should not be stay at home parents**
    d. **Men are to take the lead in all romantic relationships**
    e. **Men are visually triggered to lust, and cannot control this**
    f. **Without a male in the home, children will grow up "broken" in some way**
    g. **Open box – please fill in anything additional you think is important**
11) What did your church community teach about courtship/dating?

   a. **Courtship only, strictly enforced (no one dated)**
   b. **Some people courted and it was seen as preferable but some people dated**
   c. **Both options were seen as valid, more about what God wanted**
   d. **Dating was the more common option, but a few people used courtship**
   e. **Dating only, you didn't know anyone who used the courtship model**
   f. **What is courtship?**
   g. **Open box – fill in anything else you'd like to add**

12) What was the expected dress code for you? (multiple choice)

   a. **Strictly long skirts/dresses, head covering, loose-fitting shirts, etc.**
   b. **Long skirts/dresses, loose fitted clothing**
   c. **Skirts/dresses but no strict expectations around length except modest**
   d. **Pants were allowed, but they had to be 'appropriate'**
   e. **Jeans, shorts, tank tops, etc. As long as nothing was too revealing.**
   f. **No particular expectations**
   g. **Open box**

13) Was there a difference between clothing expectations in church vs. other places?

   a. **No, we were expected to look the same wherever we went**
   b. **There was some variation, we could be a little more casual outside of church**
   c. **Pants weren't allowed in church, but were outside**
   d. **Shorts weren't allowed in church but were outside**
   e. **No difference**
   f. **Open box**

14) How was education viewed in your church community? What were expectations around it?

15) How were other Christian denominations viewed or spoken of in your church community?

16) Was church discipline practiced in your church community?

17) What was your church community's policy/beliefs around divorce? (Check all that apply)

   a. **Divorce was not allowed for any reason**
   b. **Divorced people could not remarry**
   c. **Divorce was only allowed for reasons of infidelity or abandonment**
   d. **Divorce was allowed in a broader set of instances, the leadership had to decide**
   e. **Divorce was specifically encouraged in cases of Domestic Violence**
   f. **Divorce was frowned on but no one stopped it or stopped anyone from remarrying**
   g. **Divorced people could remarry without comment**

18) Any additional thoughts?

19) Contact information?

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your impressions of the church growing up.
2. How involved was your family in the church?
3. What were you taught about sex (explicitly and implicitly)?
4. What were you taught about gender (explicitly and implicitly)?
5. When did you first experience sexual abuse? Please tell me about it in however much detail you feel comfortable.
6. Did your family find out about it?
7. Did the church find out about it?
8. How did the church teachings impact/inform your response to your experience?
9. Did you receive counseling at the time?
10. Were you aware of anyone else going through similar experiences in your community?
11. Have you become aware of anyone else since then?
12. Is there anything else you want to add about your experience?

APPENDIX C

Follow-Up Interview Word List

1. Protection
2. Conservative
3. Safety
4. Testimony
5. Boundaries
6. Authority
7. Rebellious/Rebellion