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Ethnography and Plain Anabaptist Women: Some Considerations on Positionality, Power, and Pandemic

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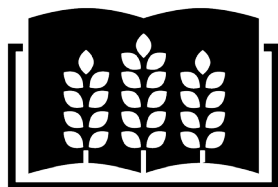
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Abstract: This article discusses ethnography as a discipline and the role of my qualitative fieldwork with Conservative and Old Order Mennonite and Amish women in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania over the past 20 years. It includes extended quotes with interview subjects based on my fieldwork with Plain Women in the ethnographic, female-centered tradition. In it, I discuss the importance of feedback and reflexivity with my interview subjects, and strategies for overcoming their natural humility. More importantly, this article discusses underpinnings related to gender and patriarchy as I examine power dynamics at home and in broader Amish society related to abuse and violence, and a critique of “soft patriarchy.” Moreover, I discuss gender-based considerations for Amish women during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of positionality regarding my identity, in regard to my interview subjects. This work contributes intellectually to the growing field of Amish gender studies. [Abstract by author.]

Keywords: Amish women; Old Order; Plain women; Patriarchy; COVID-19; Gender; Positionality; Entrepreneurship; Ethnography



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INTRODUCTION

This article shares vignettes and lessons from my qualitative research in Lancaster County, PA, with Conservative and Old Order Mennonite and Amish women, collectively known as Plain Anabaptist women, or simply Plain women, among whom I have lived, worked, and researched for the past 20+ years. I use the umbrella term “Plain women” to cover the various groups of Anabaptist women here in Lancaster County, PA, among whom I have done fieldwork, including Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church, Groffdale and Weaverland Old Order Mennonites, and the Old Order Amish, all of whom adhere to distinctive, modest, unornamented styles of dress and head coverings for women, often known as Plain dress, although their acceptance of technology differs.

In the ethnographic tradition in which I was trained, for me, this has included long interviews with extended quotes, preferably recorded and transcribed, as well as participant observation at benefit auctions, church services, dairy barns, and dozens of visits to homes and shops, as I sought to understand deeper cultural meanings through ethnography. This is what anthropologist Clifford Geertz has described as “thick description,” research that yields the benefits of in-depth analysis, though with a smaller dataset than quantitative methodologies, enabling the researcher to understand “webs of significance” illuminating cultural patterns of meaning (Geertz 1973 and 2017, 5-36). Extending this analysis, anthropologist Ruth Behar notes that ethnography is not only a methodology but a form of writing across the social sciences and humanities in a variety of literary and artistic forms. She describes this as “storytelling about real people in real places” that uses “a poetic sense of reflexive methodology to explore the embedded nature of personal experience” (Behar 2003, 16). For her as for me, this is female-centered practice and writing. Behar argues for ethnography as accessible storytelling, which I have taken as my model.

I begin with examples from my fieldwork that illustrate this methodology. In most cases, I have used pseudonyms to protect the privacy of my informants. I will also show how using gender as a lens brings women’s concerns into sharper focus.

VIGNETTES OF PLAIN WOMEN’S PAID WORK

When I push open the screen door, the aroma of fresh-baked bread makes my mouth water. It is Wednesday, bread-baking day at this small, Amish-run bakeshop in eastern Lancaster County. Beautifully crimped pies in six or more flavors adorn the counter, alongside still-warm loaves of bread, cookies, and cake-like whoopie pies. “We each have our own specialty,” Anna, one of the Amish sisters, tells me.

For 35 years, their bakeshop has been the livelihood for these three unmarried Amish women in their sixties. They live behind the shop in rooms at the back. When I entered, a buzzer sounded in the kitchen to let them know a customer had entered the bakeshop. They sell to tourists staying at a nearby campground, to passersby and locals, and at a farmers’ market in Wilmington, Delaware, where a neighbor takes some of their baked goods to sell. While the bakeshop is open year-round, the bulk of their business is seasonal: summers, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

Barbara, a maiden woman, or “leftover blessing,” as her community refers to older single women, tells me, “It’s not the Lord’s will to stay single if you can get married,” even though her sister has recently rebuffed a suitor, a middle-aged Amish widower, because she preferred life with her sisters. These Amish women have been good company for each other, and the business has supplied their economic needs.

Next, I visit Sadie’s quilt shop, whose business cards necessitate a map on the back side in order to locate the shop amid the hilly Lancaster countryside. Though her husband’s name is on the business card along with her own, she tells me he has nothing to do with the shop, but “it looks better that way.” The scenic setting is surely some of the attraction for customers to Sadie’s quilt shop. She has been in this basement addition to her home for most of her 30 years in business, space which includes the quilt shop, sewing room, office, storage, and public restrooms.

Her business is on the 38-acre-farm where her family raises sweet corn and cultivates chicken eggs. While Sadie and I are talking, favorite customers of hers, a retired couple from Staten Island, stop in to visit, bringing six dozen empty egg cartons. Sadie steps out to refill their egg supply. The

woman tells me that they travel down to Lancaster every few months to patronize Sadie's quilt shop, almost like a pilgrimage. Later, they leave having placed a custom order for an Amish quilt (which takes about four to six months); Sadie tells me that they "musta bought a dozen quilts from me over the years. . . . She has brought a carload of her friends down to buy quilts, and now a baby quilt for her new granddaughter" (Graybill 2009, 126). Sadie's income (up to half of the family budget) and her friendships with tourist-customers – which have led to travel and vacation opportunities in the West – gives her status and affluence in her Amish neighborhood and extended family.

The preceding vignettes illustrate economic benefits of Plain women's paid work, a theme to which I return later in this article. I next discuss positionality and reflexivity for myself as a researcher, both of which are key considerations in female-centered ethnography.

POSITIONALITY

"Graybill. Isn't that a Mennonite name?"

—Informant in my study, on first meeting.

In relating to Plain Mennonite and Amish women, I had both a foot in and out of their world by virtue of my position of partial membership status. I do not wear Plain dress, nor do I speak Pennsylvania "Dutch" (a Palatine German dialect). This allowed them to explain to me the meanings of their chosen dress and business choices and to do so in English, without assuming that I would know the Pennsylvania Dutch shorthand for these choices. But living in Lancaster County enabled frequent opportunities for participation observation and data collection, both formally and informally. I could share common concerns about the weather and gardens and local events taking place in Lancaster County with the women in my study.

Likewise, being Mennonite gave me a beginning level of entry that may have been harder to achieve otherwise. Mennonites and Amish in Lancaster County share similar Swiss-German roots growing out 16th century Europe, and have been common neighbors for nearly 300 years. In addition, my last name is recognizably Mennonite. Interviews often began with informants asking me questions about my father's relatives (though mar-

ried, I go by my maiden name), designed to place me patrilineally. I came to view these opening genealogical questions as fulfilling a gate-keeping function that allowed conversation to flow more easily thereafter.

Moreover, I was able to initially introduce myself as an employee of and show business cards from known and respected Mennonite organizations in the county, both of which were reputable and known to Plain women in Lancaster, PA.¹ Thus, in these ways, my informants saw me as a credible researcher rooted in the local community.

This is somewhat akin to the notion of being "a halfie" in relation to one's informants, which was introduced by the Egyptian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1991 and 2008). Closer to home are Barbara Myerhoff (1980), an American-Jewish anthropologist who worked in a U.S. Jewish senior center, and Ruth Behar (1993), who returned to her Latin American roots through her Spanish-speaking fieldwork in Mexico.

However, my Mennonite identity alone did not allay the fears of all the Old Order participants in my study. Perhaps it was my need to record interviews, and their mistrust based on fear of words being misquoted or ending up attributed to them in the newspaper, which has happened. Despite my promises of anonymity, it seemed to me that with each research participant there was a period of proving which necessitated several visits before a time could be arranged to record an interview. And some would never agree to be recorded. However, in my case, recording was indispensable. Research took place over several years given other demands on my time, so having the oral record was crucial in keeping the material fresh.

In particular, with Amish women, I gradually noticed in conversations that they referred to Amish as "our people" (as in referring to store clerks, "I like to hire our people, when possible,"

¹ When I began my research, I worked for the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), an international development agency with local headquarters in Lancaster County where Amish and Mennonites volunteer with quilting, meat canning, and sorting health kits for relief. Later I directed the Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society (now Mennonite Life), known among the Old Orders for our quarterly consignment book auctions and our annual summer used book sale, which attract Plain buyers. Both organizations are long-standing, reputable organizations known to Amish and Mennonites in Lancaster County.

and in relation to the Amish address directory, “it’s just our people”). They referred to the “English” (their term for non-Amish). And they spoke of “you people” when referring to Mennonites. For example, one businesswoman talked about hiring “Some Amish, some Mennonite. Not too much English.” That is, to them, Lancaster County Mennonites are clearly not insiders among the Amish, yet we are seen in a different category than non-Amish outsiders. This acknowledged some shared culture and history between us, even though, as in my case, we differed in our acceptance of technology and dress.

Early in conversation, Plain Mennonite and Amish women usually inquired about my husband and son. I was often asked matter-of-factly who was looking after my child. This is not a question that male researchers face; I believe that it speaks both to Plain women’s desire to connect around family concerns and the recognition that for them, as for many women, childcare is still primarily women’s work, not to be neglected. Usually, my son was at school or with his father or his grandparents, which seemed to be an acceptable answer. And in these interviews, women were unfailingly kind. After Mary, an Amish businesswoman, asked about my son’s personality and I mentioned his strong will, she said sympathetically, “Well your son is an only child; he’s probably a little more used to having his own way,” acknowledging our differing lifestyles, yet a characteristic that would be much less acceptable for an Old Order child.

In ethnography, the researcher herself is the primary instrument of research. Positionality, that is, who the ethnographer is, matters. It draws on resources of empathy and connection that I benefited from in my woman-to-woman interviews with Plain informants.

REFLEXIVITY AND FEEDBACK

In my work with Plain Mennonite and Amish women, I took to heart a number of hallmarks, the first being the importance of feedback. I remember the gentle corrective of a Plain woman at one of my first academic talks, in which I was discussing the “burden of nonconformity,” that is, what I had correctly identified as the unequal wearing of visually marked clothing between men and women in the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church tradition. I had noted that women repre-

sent cultural separation visually, via their clothing, to a much greater extent than do men. As one of my interviewees had told me,

The men are to be the leaders, but in plain dress, too often they aren’t. In the workaday world, in the wintertime, you can’t tell. My son goes off to work, he’s a carpenter, he’s out in the cold, so he has an insulated coverall suit, and, you know, an insulated pullover-hood jacket. When you get to know one of our men, who are consistent, you do know that they are separate, but the line is not as distinct as for women. (Graybill 2002, 63)

The Plain woman in my audience that day noted that while the distinction is accurate, she sees it not as a burden but as an opportunity. This importantly nuanced the way I evaluated Plain dress, as freely embraced rather than onerously imposed. However, it should be noted, that in Faulkner’s (2018) research with ex-Amish, arcane rules about dress restrictions, and the greater scrutiny on women’s as compared to men’s clothing, was a significant factor in the departure of some women. My error was in assuming this was true for Plain women who remained *within* the church.

I have tried to practice reflexivity, thinking carefully about myself as researcher, my potential biases, and what impact these might have on the value of the ethnography I produced. I often asked myself what was at stake for me in viewing these women as more contented or constrained than myself. I was aware of areas where I and my interviewees differed, and I strove to evenhandedly represent their points of view. Cory Anderson (2020), among others, has noted the indispensability of reflexivity for ethnographic researchers, “especially when researcher-subject ideological differences are sharp,” as well as “the complicated interaction of scholarly interpretive authority and the voices of the people written about” (p. 186). One can err on the side of valorizing everything Amish and highlighting Amish exceptionalism, as many celebrated authors do, or err on the side of being highly critical of the culture, as in the writings by most ex-Amish, thus alienating emic members. I strove to find a middle ground that allowed critique as well as empathy, as in the section that follows.

UNDERPINNINGS: THOUGHTS ON GENDER, POWER, AND PATRIARCHY

I turn now to a discussion of gender and patriarchy, using primarily Amish sources. One of the insights that undergirds much of my research comes from Louise Stoltzfus, herself raised Amish and author of the book, *Amish Women: Lives and Stories* (Stoltzfus 1994).

In an interview with me, Louise noted that in her experience, the quality of an Amish woman's relationship with her husband (or father, if unmarried) is the single most important factor influencing her life and happiness. As she told me:

Men in these groups — well, I guess they're the same as men everywhere, but some of them use the church's interpretation as a license to express power. And for some women that's everything from completely terrible, to just sort of a pain that's kind of constantly there. (Graybill 1995, 35)

This follows a quote from an Old Order Amish woman in Hurst and McConnell's (2010) study that some Amish men "interpret the Bible wrong. ... It says the husband should be the head of the household, and they think he should be the lord of the household." These particular Amish men, she concluded, "have no respect for their women" (p. 125). These authors noted that the Amish women they interviewed spoke of their own personal freedoms but cited *other* Amish women who were controlled by their husbands.² While the latter Amish women, under their husbands' control, are not those to whom researchers typically have access, we do well to remember the spectrum of experiences for Amish women regarding gender and power.

Early in the scholarship on Amish women, Olshan and Schmidt (1994) argued that religion legitimized patriarchal authority as it also mitigated it, due to the emphasis on *Gelassenheit* (yieldedness) and humility. This is a truism that has followed through the writings of Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt (2013) and Johnson-Weiner (2020), who describe the Amish in terms

of a "soft patriarchy." As evidence to support this viewpoint, Olshan and Schmidt noted the lack of instances of family abandonment, domestic violence, and child abuse among the Amish. By contrast, in my own research, I found examples of all of these (Graybill 1995, 37). While the secrecy of family violence impedes gathering information about it, my study illustrates that Plain groups are not immune to these problems.³ Given this fact, the designation of "soft patriarchy" seems ill-suited.

Here again, a word from an Old Order woman is instructive: speaking for herself and many other Amish women, Amy Schlabach has written, "I do not feel oppressed by our patriarchal society; instead, I feel it is a blessing" (Schlabach 2021, 232).⁴ Likewise, the 30 Amish women interviewed by Hurst and McConnell in their study were very comfortable with the idea that the "man is the head of the household" (Hurst and McConnell 2010, 121). Evidence supporting this viewpoint is that despite patriarchal leadership at home, it would be atypical, though not unprecedented, for an Amish husband to make family decisions without his wife's input and assent. In many families, Amish women exercise considerable influence in the domestic sphere, and informally, also in community matters. As Louise Stoltzfus once told me, "A lot of things get decided around the quilting frame," when Amish women gather and discuss community matters (Graybill 1995, 41).

However, these data notwithstanding, I share Robert Strikwerda's thoughtful *critique* of Amish "soft patriarchy." As he writes, "It is men who largely determine the shape of these domains [of

²This is similar to Neriya-Ben Shaha's study of Amish and Orthodox Jewish women (2021) in which she noted "third-person perception," that is, believing that the effect of something is greater on other women than on themselves.

³In my initial fieldwork, one of my informants had been abandoned by her husband, another had suffered childhood sexual abuse by a relative, and a third informant alluded to a situation in her congregation in which the husband's abuse of his wife was "*mostly* limited to verbal abuse" (emphasis mine). In another interview, two mothers acknowledged that outsiders might consider as child abuse their strict discipline of children" [i.e., corporal punishment] (Graybill 1995, 37).

⁴In Faulkner's (2018) study of ex-Amish, she notes: "Many respondents, including women, did not report that they left the Amish because of gender inequities, even as the gender regime shaped their motivations for exit in other ways. In other words, even among those motivated to leave due to some form of dissatisfaction or incompatibility with their Amish lives, many did not assert a belief that the Amish gender regime's inequalities were problematic to them ..." (23-24).

social interaction] while women operate within them. Given the lack of women in positions of some power, even in the ones outside of the ministerial ... by my reading, Amish women are indeed second-class citizens” (Strikwerda 2020, 179). While Amish women may decide things around the quilting frame, their effect on community matters is typically mediated through their husbands or fathers. Moreover, author James Cates describes a darker side of patriarchy in a recent book on Amish sexuality. Cates notes in his chapter on gender roles that Amish women can find themselves facing “subjection as well as submission. An abusive or neglectful husband can be supported by the loyalty of a hierarchical system,” and “mistreatment may go unpunished” if it threatens “the ideal of paternal leadership” (Cates 2020, 104). Thus, Amish patriarchy, in practice, allows for gendered abuses of power.⁵

While recognizing the wide diversity within Amish women’s lived experiences, the following examples of violence and abuse among the Amish would seem to refute the idea of patriarchy as benign: a variety of writings by abused, ex-Amish (see for example Furlong 2011 and 2014); a magazine article detailing 52 official cases of Amish girls and boys being sexually assaulted in seven states over the past two decades (McClure 2020 and Zweig 2020); Lancaster County Judge Reinaker who has presided over some 30 cases of sexual abuse within the Amish Community in his nearly 20 years on the bench (Meko 2020); and a recent new story of a Lancaster Amish bishop being criminally charged with failing to report child abuse (Nepkin, 2022).⁶ The recent book by

Allen Hoover and Jeanette Harder, *For the Sake of a Child: Love, Safety, and Abuse in Our Plain Communities* (2020), is a heartening step in the right direction.

Amish society, in which abuse of women and children exists in practice and can find justification in patriarchal beliefs, is more rightly described, in Strikwerda’s words, as “strong patriarchy” (Strikwerda 2020, 181). Every community has such problems, and more targeted research would be needed to see if it occurs at any higher rate among the Amish than the general public. To be clear, the Amish do not condone sexual abuse or violence. However, while abuse occurs among most every people, my point is that Amish practice and theology do not *prohibit* it; power dynamics are at play in “strong patriarchy,” which researchers do well to remember, whether or not we encounter such evidence firsthand.

A related reflection on gender and sexuality can be taken from the tragic case of missing Amish woman, Linda Stoltzfoos. She disappeared in June 2020, and for months, Amish teams with dogs combed the farmland area near where she was last seen, hunting for additional clothing (her undergarments had been found) or remains. These were uncovered ten months later when the suspect led investigators to her grave (Nepkin 2021). Before her fate was known, local papers speculated that, if alive, she may have been a victim of human trafficking. After her body was found, what initially startled me were comments about the case from Lancaster Amish women to the effect that it was better for Linda and her family that she died, rather than be prostituted in human trafficking and survive with such a past.

Setting aside the issue of valorizing martyrdom in gendered violence, of Linda Stoltzfoos as for the girls of the Nickel Mines school shooting, these comments may reflect insights from Cates. He argues that Amish have a view of sex and sexuality that is largely unspoken, in which irregular sexual activity is a source of great embarrassment (or defilement, in this case), and aside from procreation in marriage, “sexual behavior itself remains deviant, sinful, and subject to condemna-

⁵ In a critique of *The Lives of Amish Women*, Marlene Epp noted that neither corporal punishment of children nor violence against women was adequately addressed. Epp notes that the author “has a short section on abuse, acknowledging the existence of violence in Amish households, yet says little about what the church’s response to such situations is. Numerous scholars have made linkages between domestic violence and patriarchal societies in which female submission is a key religious mandate. If such a cause and effect does *not* exist among the Amish, then we need a deeper analysis of how ‘mutual submission’ functions in practice” (Epp 2021, 115).

⁶ In an interview with Chanel 3000, ex-Amish author and abuse survivor, Torah Bontrager, said she knows hundreds of Amish women who have experienced sexual abuse. She claims that the Amish church’s response doesn’t encourage survivors to come forward. “Both parties have to go before

the church, and confess about what happened, and the victim has to ask the male perpetrator for forgiveness for having tempted him,” she said. “It’s the woman’s fault” (Perez 2020, 3).

tion” (Cates 2020, 61). These insights helped me make sense of Amish reactions to this tragedy that seemed to me uncaring or perhaps simply practical, overlooking as it did the many survivors of sexual violence who go on to rebuild successful lives.

Sexual assault notwithstanding, I think we can rightly characterize Amish women’s lived experiences along a patriarchal spectrum that the “Amish Studies” web site, maintained by the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, correctly describes as “shades of dominance from husband to wife across a wide spectrum, with many variations,” some more severe than others. As I have been in contact with Amish women entrepreneurs in Lancaster County who, by virtue of the fact they are running successful businesses, are situated at one end of the spectrum, I have tried to bear in mind the darker end of the spectrum that exists and to which I have less access.

HUMILITY AND ECONOMIC SUCCESS

One interesting avenue for evaluating gender and power dynamics is my research documenting Old Order women’s livelihoods and business success, as in the opening vignettes of this article. While my research focused primarily on Amish women’s tourist businesses, I also documented Old Order Mennonite women’s greenhouses and produce stands, a significant source of entrepreneurship and income for these Old Order women, who are less likely to engage with tourists. Women’s business is particularly important to research, as economic contributions to the family affect status and power dynamics within the family and community. In this, a challenge for me was in going beyond my informants’ natural humility, an established virtue among the Amish, to assess their business success.

In particular, asking directly about their influence as businesswomen got me nowhere. One woman told me, “I’m glad to be able to brag about her store, but not my own.” Another woman joked that if I wanted to know how she and her business were thought of by Amish in the community, I could knock on doors, take a survey and let her know. Or a quote from another, “Go ask my neighbors. I could tell you anything. ... Humble yourself.” Amish women in my experience were reluctant to speak well of their businesses to me, so I devel-

oped the technique of asking them indirectly or inviting them to talk about other women’s businesses success.

The following exchange with Linda, the most successful entrepreneur in my study, known for her business acumen and her generosity, including business loans to Amish members, illustrates some of the ways in which Amish women framed their accomplishments in term of caution and humility:

I can’t say [the business] was all right. You know, I had a family. I mean, I took care of my family. But was it right that I did so well? To me, I can’t advise anybody to act like I did.

Interviewer: Well, you did it because you needed the money, right?

Yeah, that was the start of it. But it just grew out of proportion, I think. I mean, you know, I knew how to make money. There again, I’m bragging.

Interviewer: You were good at making money.

I was. I don’t wanna brag, I don’t wanna brag, but it was good. ... I think the whole business thing is good if you keep it in perspective. But maybe I didn’t? I thought, you know, I am giving enough to the poor, but I now see what I *could* have given to the poor. So God blessed me, and richly. ... Abraham was rich. It don’t say that you can’t be rich [sic], but keep it balanced. I feel now that maybe I kept too much for myself. (Graybill 2009, 225)

This selection illustrates Linda’s reluctance to name her business success (she knew how to make money, the business was good) and her need to downplay that success by doubting her own generosity (maybe she didn’t give enough), when, in fact, she made many sizeable loans to Amish men, (for example, to build a dairy barn, and to start a pig operation). As the oldest woman in my study, Linda also faced a good deal of criticism early in her business (for example, not taking the whole day off to go to Amish weddings, having a business deemed too big, or at least, too big for an Amish woman), at a time when few other Amish women were entrepreneurs. This may also influence her reflections.

I learned during this project to weigh both what was said in interviews and gained through participant observation, and to be alert to the contradictions. This was most obvious in my discussion about Amish mothers and work for pay. My informants were at pains to tell me that business should always take a back seat to mothering, yet many of their own work histories and interactions belied this. They had various strategies for constructing their personal situations: financial need necessitated putting work first, the shop was at home so they could prioritize mothering (though customers usually took priority), it was something to do in their spare time, daughters functioned as “surrogate mothers” while they were in the shop, not wanting other Amish women to experience their regrets, etc. However, it seemed to be a case of, “Do what I say, not what I did.”

Using Karen Johnson-Weiner’s (2020) construction of “Three Paths” in her recent book on Amish women, the Lancaster Amish women entrepreneurs in my study constitute the second path: that is, Amish groups that have innovated technologically, allowing the establishment of larger and smaller businesses. Johnson-Weiner notes that in this framework, “Amish women generally start, own, and operate businesses that are extensions of their traditional roles as homemakers” (p. 26). In my research, this includes grocery and bulk food stores, quilt shops, stores selling housewares, greenhouses, produce stands, fabric stores, bakeries, flower shops, craft stores, scrapbooking shops, owning and running a bed & breakfast, and cooking meals for groups at home.

Importantly, I found that many of these are not sidelines but full-time businesses, often constituting a significant part of a family’s income. In some cases, a husband has quit his employment to join his wife in business. Erik Wesner (2010) has written that Amish recognize and respect business success; this is also true for Amish women in business. Thus, it is not the nature of Amish women’s businesses but the fact of their existence and financial success that is modifying gender status and perceptions. As Mary told me, “Nowadays nobody expects a business woman to give up a whole day” to close for an Amish wedding or funeral (Graybill, 2009, 232). Or another, “When my children needed spending money growing up, they came to me [not my husband]” (Graybill, 2009, 218). Other women entrepreneurs gained oppor-

tunities for business travel. Their income funded family vacations to Pinecraft, Florida. They were treated with deference and respect. In short, some opinions matter more than others around the quilting frame, and beyond.

Initially, I was concerned that my work with Amish women business owners would not portray mainstream Amish women, because successful entrepreneurship seems to require attributes that not all Amish women possess, such as salesmanship and an outgoing personality. Yet, Amish women entrepreneurs operate within the same milieu as do other Amish women and thus are subject to similar social pressures. In many ways, this distinctive group of informants is representative of the Amish, with its wide range of variation. As P. Stevick (2007) wrote,

Not only do Amish communities differ [in different states and geographic areas], but so also do Amish persons within each settlement. ... Outsiders are tempted to consider them as a monolithic entity rather than as a configuration of human beings with different ways of reacting to and living out the values of their culture. (p. 9)

As in all research about the Amish, diversity abounds. Nevertheless, the economic success of Amish businesswomen can bring significant cash income leading to elevated status, which can subtly shift power dynamics within Amish patriarchy.

COVID-19 AND ITS EFFECT ON PLAIN WOMEN

I turn now to a discussion of the coronavirus pandemic, as an example of how using gender as a lens can bring women’s concerns into focus. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were particular implications for Old Order Mennonite and Amish women.

Beginning in March 2020, the plain people in Lancaster County largely halted school and church services. The impact for women was that when schools dismissed, mothers were home-schooling their children for the remainder of that school year, on top of their domestic and other duties. Old Order teachers, nearly all of whom are women, made house calls to drop off and review lessons, requiring greater work and travel for them, in what was already a low paid and undervalued occupation. Children did not return to school until

the following August when schools reopened as normal. One Amish mother told me, “Well, I sure was glad when school opened up again in the fall! I’m too old to be a teacher for my children.”

Early in the pandemic, Amish women sought information about the disease, according to community wellness educator and nurse, Rosemary Search, a health promotion specialist at Lancaster General Health (LGH), who had previously met with groups of Amish women in their homes on health topics such as heart disease, stroke, and menopause. “Many of our Amish contacts reached out directly to me with questions or seeking more information about COVID-19,” she said. LGH responded by putting fact sheets at Lancaster fundraising auctions and in *Busy Beaver*, a weekly print advertising publication that reaches thousands of Amish homes; this information covered handwashing, mask-wearing, and caring for someone with COVID-19 (Penn Medicine News Blog 2020). And at sewing parties held across Lancaster County, Old Order women made thousands of face masks for health-care providers, first responders and local charities.

Just how widely COVID-19 infections spread among Old Order Mennonites and Amish was difficult to ascertain. A year into the pandemic, Allen Hoover – who directs Parochial Health Center near New Holland, Pennsylvania, the largest provider treating Old Order Mennonites and Amish in Lancaster – was quoted in a news interview that fewer than 10 percent of sick persons among Lancaster’s Plain people had consented to be tested for the disease, despite exhibiting symptoms emblematic of COVID-19 (Brambila 2021). Moreover, there were concerns about under-reporting of coronavirus deaths among Old Order Mennonites and Amish. Pam Cooper, a physician’s assistant at the Parochial Medical Center, noted in news interviews that virus-related deaths at home were likely listed as pneumonia, a belief shared by Dr. Stephen Diamantoni, the Lancaster County Coroner (Stauffer 2020; Brambila 2021). One Amish daughter with whom I spoke told me that her elderly mother died when the mother’s “double pneumonia turned into triple pneumonia” (a misapplication of an actual medical term), and likely COVID-related.

When Old Order Mennonite and Amish became sick with COVID-19, caregiving and nursing the infirm put increased demands on women, since

such care primarily took place at home. Though some seriously ill Amish sought hospital treatment, most Amish I spoke with knew of people who refused hospital admission due to coronavirus restrictions on visiting, preferring to live or die at home under the care of female family members. In the summer of 2020, one Amish wife cared for her ailing husband as best she could at home until she felt she could do so no longer, as she was also sick; she agonized over the isolation of admitting him to the local hospital, where he fortunately recovered. Afterward, the family continued hosting tourists for visits in their home, trusting in God for protection against the virus. Spokesperson Allen Hoover estimated that during summer and fall of 2020, some 90 percent of the Lancaster Old Order Mennonites and Amish had a family member sick with COVID-19 (Brambila 2021). As one Amish shopkeeper told me, “I think all of us know someone who died, but they all had something else, too [a pre-disposing medical condition]. Most of them were older.” What she didn’t mention, until I asked directly, was that care of the sick and dying was women’s work.

The pandemic also affected Plain women’s livelihoods in Lancaster. Old Order Mennonite and Amish men at work in woodworking and construction trades, harness shops, and buggy manufacture were considered essential workers and their businesses thrived. Not so for Plain women running quilt and craft shops. Many lost considerable income due to lack of tourists. Said Anna, “My sales were less than half of a normal year.” Some Old Order women developed profitable, short-term, sideline enterprises sewing cloth masks for sale to locals and visitors alike (which they themselves did not wear); this compensated, in part, for the loss of tourist sales.

By contrast, Old Order women running greenhouses experienced unexpected growth in sales. Greenhouse businesses—gendered female, like gardening—have been a growing occupation for Old Order women. Said Amish greenhouse grower, Lavina, in spring 2021, “It seemed like all the English were planting their own gardens last spring. I had to re-order vegetable seedlings three times to keep up with the demand.” Turning to the group of tourists I was guiding, she asked, “Are you all planning to do as much gardening this summer?”

An area of conversation among Lancaster Old Orders was what to do with government stimulus checks. Many bishops, in consultation with local politicians, encouraged their members to write “Void” on the assistance check, and send them back. But as one Amishman, in business with his wife, told me: “We pay taxes, I figured we were as entitled to it as the next family. I put it in the bank for my daughters’ future,” while his wife nodded her assent.

Hostetler (1993, 18) framed the Amish as a face-to-face, high-context society. Accordingly, it is not surprising that neither social distancing nor masking found favor among the Amish. During the pandemic, before vaccines were available, I continued my part-time work guiding visitors to Amish homes, with most of us wearing masks. Our Amish hosts did not and routinely told us, “You don’t have to wear your masks on our account,” illustrating their belief that sickness would come to them, or not, if it was in God’s plan. Other Amish women simply found mask-wearing uncomfortable, so avoided stores like Walmart, which required masks. Said Susie, “I get everything I need from my garden and the Amish bulk food store, where I don’t need to wear a mask.”

News coverage reported that Amish vaccine hesitancy in Lancaster County mirrored that of many of their white, rural neighbors (Strong 2021). Vaccination is not tracked by religion, but health practitioners who planned special vaccine outreach in Amish areas were disappointed in the low turnout (Seewar 2021). Among the Lancaster Amish, there were diverse responses but no church policy *prohibiting* vaccination.⁷ Fannie, an Amish woman who cleans houses for a living for mostly older, non-Amish clients, quietly went and got vaccinated to keep her employment. But when I spoke with Marvin, an Amish bishop, whose wife

I was hoping to interview, he was convinced that the vaccine contained a microchip implant. Marvin said that he and his fellow bishops had discussed the dangers of the vaccine chip and wanted no part of it. Thus, they warned against it.

Perhaps for this reason, Amish women have been hesitant to accept COVID vaccines, this despite the fact, as noted in a 2017 survey, that a majority of Lancaster Amish supported childhood vaccinations (Miller, et al. 2017). However, COVID-19 vaccination is seen in a different light, in part because of its relative newness. When I asked Lancaster Amish women about the vaccine, their responses were, “I’m not sure we need it,” and “It’s just so new.”

Some vaccine hesitancy may have stemmed from the Old Order belief in “herd immunity,” or the idea that, having contracted coronavirus and recovered, they were immune (Seewar 2021). More recent COVID-19 statistics seem to dispute the notion of such immunity. Hospitalizations for COVID in Lancaster County reached their highest mark in January 2022, and that month was the third highest of the pandemic for COVID deaths, largely among the unvaccinated (Evans 2022 and “COVID-19 in Lancaster County, PA 2022”). While hospitals don’t track religion, a local medical doctor at Lancaster General Hospital estimated that 20 percent of their hospitalized coronavirus patients in late January 2022 were unvaccinated Amish (D’Amato 2022). WellSpan Ephrata Hospital, the hospital of choice for many Old Order patients, set record highs for COVID – both acute cases, as well confirmed cases – as recently as Jan. 12, 2022 (COVID-19 Data Dashboard). Were Old Order Mennonites and Amish, in fact, immune, their hospitalizations would not have been climbing. And since many Lancaster Amish view hospitals as a last resort for illness, this means that many Amish women were caring for very sick family members at home before hospital admission.

As Old Order Mennonite and Amish women are the primary caregivers of the sick at home, so, too, some Plain women, mostly the unmarried, have worked in local nursing homes as aides, cooks, or housekeepers. Most of these women quit in January 2022 when the vaccine mandate for workers in health care went into effect, the exception being Fairmount Homes, run by the Weaverland Old Order Mennonite Conference, which does not

⁷ Anderson and Potts (2020), citing pre-pandemic sources, have summarized research about Amish and vaccine use as follows: “Some Amish reject vaccinations, referring to trust God. This belief is personal, not church policy, and varies widely (Garrett-Wright et al., 2016). Those rejecting immunizations likely distrust the whole modern medical program (Kettunen et al., 2017; J. Yoder and Dworkin, 2006). Other Amish accept immunizations as a way to show care about others (Huntington, 1993 [2003]). Controversy may arise when an outbreak occurs, though many Amish are then willing to get immunized (Gastanaduy et al., 2016; Medina-Marino et al., 2013)” (p. 9). [Citations from this quote are found in Anderson and Potts’ bibliography.]

require its workers (nor residents) to be vaccinated, but instead, tested weekly. In these ways, the coronavirus pandemic has had particular effects on Plain women and their livelihoods.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to demonstrate how gender is a lens that can bring into focus salient issues for Plain Anabaptist women in Lancaster County. This article has suggested some insights from reflexive ethnography, what we can learn by foregrounding gender and the value of women-centered ethnography. Perhaps sociologist and author Brené Brown (2010) put it best when she said, “I’m a qualitative researcher. I collect stories; that’s what I do. Maybe stories are just data with a soul.” Accurate, data-based storytelling is at the heart of good social science research, which seems to hold particular promise for women. Feminist anthropologist Ruth Behar (2003) has noted that ethnography has “emancipatory promise,” in part, by exposing power dynamics; for it to achieve that purpose, we need “strong, personal, heartfelt voices” (p. 36), which this work (and others like it) has sought to provide in our exploration of gender, positionality, and power.

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