

The Amish Veil: Symbol of Separation and Community

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In June of 1991, I packed the U-Haul truck with my personal belongings and my 10 and 11 year old boys and moved to Jamesport, Missouri where I was going to do a year of participant observation research living among the Old Order Amish. It was perhaps the most peaceful, reflective, and revealing year of our lives. That year resulted in lifelong friendships with several Amish friends that I remain in contact with to this day. As time has passed, some changes in dress have occurred, but very few.

When one lives with a group of people outside of one's own culture for an extended period of time, we learn about all kinds of things about that group. Although my research question had to do with business practices, I learned and have written about many other aspects of Amish life.

In order to facilitate acceptance with the Amish, I adjusted my normal appearance, foregoing makeup and jeans and adopting plain skirts and blouses. Because I had grown up on a Kansas farm I was given a measure of legitimacy that gained me quicker access. It was only a short time after I had arrived that I found myself helping my new Amish friends make bread on a wood-burning oven, wash clothes in a diesel-powered washing machine, make

candy on a kerosene stove, drive thousands of miles (55,000 in one year!) as a "taxi" driver for the Amish who would hire me to take them places, make cider on an oak hand press, feed horses, take the Amish women Christmas shopping in Kansas City, work in an Amish-owned store, and quilt with women on several quilting projects.

By the end of the year I had attended Amish birthday parties, church services, auctions, weddings, "singings", volleyball games, work bees, quilt frolics, hospital visits, barn raisings, and a multitude of more routine daily chores. Over the year I gained a mutual respect of the Amish, a remarkable degree of acceptance, and a profound understanding of their world view, social structure, and level of technology.

Amish History and Culture

The Amish are a large Christian-based group whose core values focus on separateness from the world, commitment to tradition, family, and community. These values have set them apart from the rest of the world, making them a curiosity for many Americans and this curiosity has caused the media to make them the subject of movies, news stories, and even reality TV.

The Amish are a permutation of the 16th century Swiss Anabaptist movement that was part of the Protestant Reformation in Switzerland, Germany, and France. They believed that church and state should be separate and that the final authority for Christianity was the Scripture. For these beliefs, they were often violently persecuted in Europe so they escaped to the United States in the late 1600s and settled in William Penn's religious freedom area near Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Since then, they have migrated to other rural areas throughout the continent, primarily Ohio, Indiana, Missouri, and Iowa. The Amish migrate for two primary reasons: (1) schisms among the members regarding orthodoxy/progressiveness, and (2) the search for viable farmland away from congested urban encroachment so that the agrarian integrity can be maintained. Today many of the Midwest Amish have little social or ideological connection with the Pennsylvania Amish and, as a result distinct differences have evolved.

Despite predictions, the Amish have not assimilated into the dominant American culture, nor has their population become smaller over the years. Instead, their large family sizes and relative small attrition has resulted in a population growth that has gone from more or less 6,000 in 1900 to approximately 200,000 today.

Amish often refer to themselves as *plain*. Their primary tenets of faith include rejection of violence, submission of the individual members to the authority of the Amish community, the development of self-sustaining agricultural lifestyle in a commitment of stewardship of the land, refusal of infant baptism, and independence of the Amish church from

the authority of the state (Hostetler, 1993).

The Old Order Amish are located in rural communities throughout North and Central America. Each Amish community is unique with its own set of rules called the *Ordnung* (pronounced ott-ning). Outsiders have difficulty understanding why Amish from some communities might use tractor engines mounted on a flat-bed wagon to power the farm equipment and facilitate the work load while another Amish community strictly enforces the use of only horse-drawn power. Another Amish community might allow a transistor radio in the barn while other communities strictly forbid any radios. These variances are due to community-specific rules of the *Ordnung* resulting in a continuum of orthodox Amish (Old Order) on one end and progressive Amish (Beechy Amish) on the other end. The Amish often compare their own Amish district to other districts as "higher" or "lower." It is these varying rules that also explain the variations in Amish dress that I will discuss below.

Regardless of community-specific details of the *Ordnung*, the values that rule daily life of the Amish include (a) modesty and stewardship toward personal property, and self, (b) sharing of wealth through an intricate system of mutual aid, (c) a dedicated work ethic that focuses on farm life, and (d) a commitment to thrift (Hawley, 2005). Through dress, lifestyle, horse and buggy culture, language, appearance, and technological simplicity the Amish have established a determined boundary maintenance that keeps them separate from the world so that they can more

carefully manage their social control and therefore their existence.

Amish Dress

For most Amish, their clothing represents several dimensions of their cultural values including nonconformity to the broader culture, humility, modesty, function, and group conformity. Although the relative orthodoxy of Amish dress varies from one community to another and results in what outsiders see as a confusing breadth of acceptance for Amish dress, Amish clothing has remained relatively unchanged for nearly a century. For men in the Old Order Amish, clothing consists of broadfall pants, suspenders, high shoes and no zippers. Vests and Sunday frocks use hooks and eyes and no buttons because buttons are seen as prideful. The male hat is a shallow-crowned straw for the summer and for work and felt for the winter and for Sundays. Dress for Old Order women consists of a white prayer cap made of organza, the black bonnet, a shawl, cape, apron, black stockings, and a dress. The long dress, apron, and shawl are intended to conceal the body, and the bonnet to follow the Biblical notion of “shame-facedness.”

Even though Amish dress has remained relatively unchanged for the past century, some new introductions have been made, namely shoes, eyeglasses, and headscarves for workdays. In addition, Amish clothing has evolved over time as outsiders interact with the Amish and as members of other Amish communities visit from other states. Just as in mainstream America, change usually occurs from those who are “leaders” or in the case of the Amish,

“on the edge.” For the Amish, change often occurs from either the young people who experiment during *rumspringa*, an institutionalized period of experimentation during adolescence for Amish youth, or by marginalized Amish who are often found breaking the Amish rules.

Similar to technological differences by community, Amish dress also varies by community and is based on the *Ordnung* rules. For example, some Amish communities require that Amish women use straight pins to close their dresses while other Amish communities use snaps for dress closures. When I lived in Jamesport, a young girl was visiting from an Amish community in Indiana where snaps were used to close the dresses. In Jamesport, straight pins were used. Concern from the elders immediately was raised because young Jamesport girls were seen trying to “get by” sewing snaps onto their dresses. A special meeting was held and the girl from Indiana was told that if she did not remove all the snaps from her dresses and start using straight pins like the other girls in Jamesport, she would have to go back to Indiana. This illustrates one example of how social control is exerted.

In some Amish communities, women are required to wear black shoes while in other communities sneakers are allowed except on Sundays. And in some Amish communities, Amish men have a 3 ½ inch brim on their hats while in other communities the hat brims are only 2 ¾ inches wide. These subtle, but community-specific rules, are controlled by the *Ordnung* and are parallel to the rest of the community’s relative level of progressiveness.

Amish dress serves as both a separator and identifier. As a primary tenet, the Amish strive to be separate from the world and believe that appearance serves as a constant reminder of their beliefs. They also believe that the church, rather than the fashion designers and business owners, should control identity. Furthermore, the fashion system's notion of planned obsolescence contributes to waste rather than thrift, another tenet of the Amish belief system.

Amish dress also serves as an identifier, which serves as a form of boundary maintenance and contributes to the notion of community and belonging. Members of the same community are easily recognizable from within the group, even though outsiders may not notice the subtle differences of one Amish group from another. Let me explain. During my research year, I attended a horse auction with some of my Amish friends. In the center of the arena was a young Amish boy and I asked my friend whether he was from Jamesport. My friend said, "No, can't you tell by his hat? The brim is much smaller!" To me, the hat looked the same, but to my Amish friend who was an "insider" there was an obvious difference.

Another example that I found amazing was when I took some Amish friends to an Amish wedding in Iowa. When everyone went indoors for dinner, all the men took off their straw hats and threw them under the same tree. There must have been at least 100 straw hats under that tree. I thought to myself, "How will they ever know which hat belongs to whom when they come out?" because to me, they all looked alike. As I watched

them gather their hats after their dinner, each man easily found his own hat from under the tree as if each were a different color!

These stories illustrate how outsiders lack the understanding of the subtle differences in community identifiers; while insiders fully comprehend who belongs to which community by simply *reading* the dress cues.

Head Coverings

Amish, both men and women, cling to the belief of head coverings as part of their convictions to being Amish. And while it is true that Amish clothing customs are steeped in religious leanings and traditions from the Bible, after a year of living among the Amish I am convinced that for many Amish, several of their customs are more a deep-seeded conviction of what it means to be culturally Amish than convictions to their religion.

That being said, I would like to spend a brief moment on the religious origins of the Amish head coverings. The Amish belief system is Christian based and, as such, their head coverings stem from I Corinthians 11, which dictates that men should have their heads uncovered for prayer, but women should cover their heads at all times even when she is not praying. There are primarily two reasons they believe this: (1) submission to God and to man, and (2) because the Bible says women are to "pray without ceasing." Hair is also discussed in this passage, and it is clear men's hair should be short and women's should be long.

Across the range of Anabaptist groups (e.g. Amish, Baptists, Brethren, Hutterites, Mennonites, Bruderhof Communities and Quakers) the head covering is usually worn. For Amish women, the prayer cap is the white Swiss organza head covering that must always be worn in public. Depending on the orthodoxy of the Amish community, the style of the prayer cap and how it is worn changes. In low churches, the prayer cap strings are tied tighter under the chin and has less starch and therefore form. In progressive or high communities, the cap strings are not tied at all (or non-existent), and the cap is highly formed with heavy starch. In Jamesport, where I lived for a year, the level of orthodoxy fell around the middle but slightly towards the higher end of the continuum. The women's prayer caps had a medium starch and the strings for the married women were joined in a bow but low on the strings away from the chin. For the teenage girls, the strings were not tied at all and they often used the strings as a tool to toss when flirting with the young teenage boys. The amount of starch used to keep the shape in Jamesport was *medium* as illustrated in this story:

I took a family to a wedding in Iowa. On the way home, the teenage daughter pouted to her mother in the car because she wanted to have a cap shaped like her cousin's cap that lived in Iowa. Her mother argued back that, "a cap like that with all that starch shows way too much pride and that the church elders would have a fit." But the daughter rebutted that the Iowa caps were so much more modern and

stylish and that it wasn't fair that she couldn't have one too! 'I think I'll just move to Iowa.'

Amish women are not supposed to cut their hair, but during *rumspringa* the young girls will often cut bangs so that when they are wearing their non-Amish clothes they appear more "stylish". Then when they are wearing their Amish clothes they pull their bangs back with bobby pins hidden under their prayer cap and hope that the church elders don't see them. One group of girls were admonished by their mothers to tuck their bobby pins in better because the pins were showing and surely the bishop would see them at the gathering that was about to take place! This illustrates constant checks and balances to control appearances. Even though young Amish girls were not supposed to cut their hair, but because they did mothers stepped in to help control the situation as well as possible given the situation.

In the Jamesport dry-goods stores, stacks of bandana squares in a plethora of colors are merchandised with the intent to match the fabrics used in women's dresses. Amish women, particularly the unmarried girls and younger women, use the bandanas as head coverings when they are working. Usually they match or color-coordinate with their dresses, which explains the wide range of colors that are available in the stores. I overheard one group of young Amish girls talking about the need to shop in order to buy headscarves to match their new work dresses that they had made.

In years past, most Amish women made their own prayer coverings and bonnets but today each community has a seamstress that makes a living sewing

prayer caps and bonnets for the community. In addition, there are several websites that feature a wide variety of religious head coverings for all Anabaptist groups. Even though this might seem an odd way to market to a culture that does not use electricity, this is not necessarily the case. For example, in Jamesport, the Amish have access to computers with their non-Amish business friends in the downtown Jamesport business community or at the local library. Although they do not often use the computer, they are aware of sites such as the one that sells prayer caps online and it would not be uncommon for them to order through their local library. The Amish learn of these websites through word of mouth and through the two nationally distributed Amish newspapers, the *Die Botschaft* and *The Budget*.

Children are acculturated to the wearing of the veil from a very young age. At about age four, children begin dressing just like their adult counterparts, including the head covering. From age 14 until married, however, girls will wear a black prayer cap during Sunday service. This indicates that the teenagers are in their cohort *rumspringa* years and also indicate availability for courtship.

A time and a place

Amish tenets expect Amish women to have their heads covered in public at all times. But there exists a public/private notion of place when it comes to covering the head. Once a very close level of friendship is established, an Amish woman may allow herself to be seen by a non-Amish female friend without her head covering when in a private place. This happened on several

occasions between me and a couple of my very close friends that I made while living in Jamesport that year. But this is rare and occurred only after a certain degree of trust and friendship had been established.

Married Amish women are supposed to wear the black bonnet over the prayer cap when in public, but often do not. They are hot and cumbersome. Occasionally church hierarchy puts their foot down and tells church membership that rules need to be enforced better. During this social enforcement time, the women will be seen wearing their bonnets more often—or at least carrying them in such case when they see a church elder they will have it with them and can put it on quickly.

Both regional differences and levels of orthodoxy occur in both the prayer cap and the bonnet. So not only does it depend on how high or low the community is, but also on whether the community is Midwest Amish or Pennsylvania or Ohio Amish. Unique differences abound for each region.

Conclusion

The history of Amish clothing is hard to establish. Some of it goes back to European peasantry, some to early American colonial times, some of it can be traced to rural America, and some of it embraces cultural tenets of separatism, humility, and avoidance of fashion. Over the years only minor changes have evolved, but change undoubtedly *does* occur.

Amish continue to draw appeal from outsiders in part because of their amazing resistance to modernization as they maintain their cultural traditions.

For those of us who belong to a lifestyle that seems too busy, too laden with emails and annoying cell phone tones, their nostalgic lifestyle has appeal. For me, it was one of the most peaceful and enjoyable years of my life. I teach fashion merchandising at a major university and to know me, you would not think that I could escape to a year of plain living because I live an otherwise “fashionable” lifestyle. But after a year with my Amish friends, I now understand the importance of dress to Amish. It serves as an index of their commitment to Amish-ness. To them, they succeed when their dress communicates that they are loyal,

humble, conforming, thrifty, and faithful. Ironically, both the Amish and I, use dress as a way to separate and integrate ourselves to and from our environment.

Works Cited

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