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## Content Overview for This Special Issue

Katherine Jellison

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# Content Overview for This Special Issue

**KATHERINE JELLISON**

*Professor*

*History Department*

*Ohio University*

*Athens, OH*

With this gender-focused issue of the *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies*, we bring attention to an approach to Amish and Anabaptist studies too often neglected. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines gender as

the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviors and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.<sup>1</sup>

In their combined contributions, authors of articles included in this special issue investigate all aspects of gender as the WHO defines it, with particular attention to what might be termed external and internal comparisons. Externally, how do Amish/plain Anabaptist understandings of gender differ from those of mainstream “English” society? Internally, how have concepts and practices of gender changed over time within the Anabaptist community?

Guest co-editor Natalie Jolly launches this special issue with an examination of where scholarship on Amish and plain Anabaptist women has been and where it is going. With a specific focus on research about Amish women, Jolly examines scholarly trends of the past four and a half decades and suggests promising new paths of inquiry going

forward. As she notes, the articles in this special issue of *JAPAS* make important contributions to emerging developments in Anabaptist gender studies.

In their article, “Working Together: Women and Men on the Amish Family Farm in 1930s Lancaster County, Pennsylvania,” Katherine Jellison and Steven D. Reschly examine the importance of Old Order Amish women’s labor to their community’s economic survival during the Great Depression. In a time of economic crisis, Amish women and men effectively employed—with some modifications—the gendered work roles and system of mutuality that their ancestors had transplanted from Europe to Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century. Utilizing quantitative and qualitative data from New Deal government studies as well as oral history and newspaper evidence, Jellison and Reschly explore how women’s labor—both alongside men and on their own—enabled Amish farm families to weather the depression more successfully than the nation’s other agricultural households.

Rebecca Janzen likewise focuses on the twentieth century’s interwar period in “Old Colony Mennonite Women’s Lives in Mexico from the 1920s to the 1940s.” Using multilingual sources, Janzen examines the lives of Mennonite women whose families relocated from the Canadian prairies to Mexico in the 1920s. Centering her attention on two women in particular, Janzen demonstrates how unique but often neglected sources—in this case, passenger lists and foreign resident cards—

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<sup>1</sup> Definition retrieved 5 November 2020 ([https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1)).

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**Address correspondence to:** Katherine Jellison; 429 Bentley Annex, Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701; [jellison@ohio.edu](mailto:jellison@ohio.edu)

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can yield information about ordinary women in extraordinary circumstances.

In “Claiming a Piece of Tradition: Community Discourse in Russian Mennonite Community Cookbooks,” Amy Harris-Aber explores issues of cultural identity among the descendants of Russian Mennonite immigrants in south-central Kansas. Russian Mennonites settled this region of the state in the 1870s and 1880s, and the cookbooks that their female descendants produced between 1960 and 2010 reflect changes in an ethno-religious community moving away from its agrarian roots. Through the uniquely female medium of the community cookbook, Harris-Aber finds the voices of those simultaneously honoring their immigrant past while embracing greater engagement with the outside world of the present.

Natalie Jolly assesses the existing literature on Amish women in “Hemmed In? Considering the Complexities of Amish Womanhood.” Jolly notes that while scholarship once characterized women as mere supporting players in Amish culture, more recent work demonstrates the centrality and complexity of women’s experience in Amish life. Jolly also highlights the significance of excommunicated Amish women’s memoirs in elucidating the intricacies of Amish womanhood.

As Jolly notes, “Amish masculinity is as fascinating as its counterpart,” and Robert Strikwerda proves the accuracy of that statement in “Masculinity among the Amish: Characteristics, Hegemony, and Soft Patriarchy.” Combing through literature on Amish manhood, Strikwerda observes key juxtapositions between Amish masculinity and notions of manliness in mainstream society. His analysis considers the implications of these comparisons and interrogates the concept of soft patriarchy to suggest new ways of thinking about how the Amish perform masculinity.

Finally, this special *JAPAS* issue closes with consideration of a recent and significant contribution to Anabaptist gender studies, anthropologist Karen Johnson-Weiner’s *The Lives of Amish Women* (2020). In this book symposium, Amish author Gracia Miller, conservative Mennonite writer Sheila Petre, and cultural anthropologist Vlatka Škender provide an intriguing, multifaceted analysis of Johnson-Weiner’s new publication.

Taken as a whole, this special issue demonstrates the importance of bringing considerations of gender to the study of Amish and Plain life. As

the scholarship represented here illustrates, doing so can provide a deeper level of complexity and nuance to the field of Amish and plain Anabaptist studies.