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Making Hay: Gendered Inquiry in Anabaptist Studies as Communal Endeavor

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INTRODUCTION

Within plain Anabaptist scholarship, questions of gender have largely been in this world, but not of it. Both accidentally overlooked and deliberately sidelined, details about women’s lives have rarely been harvested. Bit-by-bit, scholars strove to remedy this, so that today, we can review a body of work and better understand where we are now. Several themes have arisen as researchers attempted to understand the work and life experiences of plain Anabaptist women. In what follows, I offer a brief review of this research to help situate and contextualize current work emerging in the field and the exciting research featured in this special issue.

EARLY WORK (1977 – 2000)

Several themes emerged from early research on Anabaptist women, the most significant being an increased attention to women’s daily lives. Early scholarship offered insight into Amish women’s work, both within and outside the home. This research considered the experiences of individual women, their involvement in and relationship to Anabaptist faith, broader patterns of women’s work such as entrepreneurial endeavors, and women’s wider role in producing and reproducing Amish society.

Especially in its focus on women’s involvement in work on and off the farm, this research expanded what we know about one of the central tensions facing Amish women—how they balanced the economic need to seek outside employment with the cultural pressure to maintain separation from mainstream society (Huntington 1994; Wright 1977). Similarly, research tracking single women (Cong 1998) and Amish marriage patterns (Hurd 1985) offered insight into the relationships between individuals and communities, and the broader structure of Amish society. Women (Shoenberg Rozen 1977), their clothing (Graybill 1998), and their roles (Ericksen and Klein 1981) have been of interest, leading researchers to argue that women be factored into our knowledge of the plain Anabaptist world (Olshan and Schmidt 1994). Their claim that a robust understanding of the plain Anabaptists—and the Amish in particular—was not possible without including the life experiences of women became the framework upon which contemporary scholarship about women has been built.

CURRENT WORK (2000 – PRESENT)

Recent research on Conservative Mennonite and Amish women has offered more nuance to our understanding of Anabaptist societies. Central to this insight has been a sustained focus on the tension surrounding the work/home balance that Amish and Mennonite women hope to achieve (Lehman 2005; Schmidt 2001). This expanded focus is due to a more explicit investigation into the daily life experiences of plain Anabaptist women, using women’s voices through interviews and participant observation (Graybill 2009; Handrick 2019; Johnson-Weiner 2017; Jolly 2014b; Neriya-
Ben Shahar 2017), as well as using historical data (Jellison 2001; Jellison 2002; Jellison 2014) to further illuminate the work women have done in the home and on the farm.

A focus on health has similarly shed light on plain women’s lives. Research has considered women’s experience of health and wellness (Dabrowska and Wismer 2010; Miller et al. 2007; Reed et al. 2017) and connected those experiences to particular features of Anabaptist societies. Amish women’s sanguine approach to childbirth (Jolly 2015; Kulig et al. 2008) and body image (Davidson et al. 2018) suggests that aspects of Amish society bolster women’s identity in positive ways. Likewise, a focus on Mennonite women’s (Naka 2013) and Beachy Amish-Mennonite women’s (Anderson 2013) affirming experiences of mothering and other domestic work (Cheek and Piercy 2008) has brought a degree of nuance to understanding Anabaptist women’s daily life.

Additional work has focused on broader concepts of gender socialization within the Amish world. Indeed everything from romance novels (Cordell 2013) and other fiction (Brown 2016) to the quintessentially Amish ‘circle letter’ (Dutcher 2009) has been analyzed to better understand how Amish girls and women are socialized into Amish gender norms. And such work is not limited to Amish adherents, as researchers have learned much from women who have left plain communities, as migrants (Good Gingrich and Preibisch 2010), Mennonite missionaries (Janzen 2018; Hiebert 2013; Klassen 2008), and excommunicates (Pederson 2002; Voelz 2016). This line of inquiry has shed new light on how Anabaptist women construct their identity and how gender intertwines with economics, religion, and the social.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

As Anabaptist scholars draw more explicitly on feminist theories of gender (e.g. Jolly 2014a; Faulkner 2018), they will expand the conversation beyond plain women as a category of analysis to consider gender as a socially constructed, theoretically dynamic, multifaceted concept. Conceiving of gender as identity, as interaction, and as institution (Risman 2004) will help Anabaptist researchers think about how gender becomes embodied and enacted at levels from the individual to the social, how it spans both public and private spheres, and how we might reach into the past to comment on the present and gesture towards the future.

As such, concepts such as patriarchy might be explored with greater specificity and theoretical muscle. Patriarchy is not only a fixed socio-religious structure of Amish life (Reschly 2002) but is also a set of practices that individual women embody, contest, negotiate, produce, and reproduce through their personal identities, individual choices, social norms, and domestic roles – all of which come to constitute women’s lives. The infusion of feminist social theories into plain Anabaptist research will afford Anabaptist scholars the opportunity to return to central questions that have motivated research on women, the heart of which Olshan and Schmidt (1994) termed “the feminist conundrum” over 25 years ago. Namely, what are the fundamental tensions of Amish womanhood? How do Amish women find feminist agency, autonomy, and domestic satisfaction within their starkly patriarchal and hierarchical social structure? How do they enter the mainstream workforce while preserving their distinct Amish identity? How do Amish women maintain separation in an increasingly connected society? Why do Amish women continue to be both insiders and outsiders? These conundrums are ripe with possibilities; returning to foundational feminist theories of agency (Smith 1990), embodiment (Bordo 1993), performativity (Butler 2004), domination (Collins 2000), and hegemony (Connell 1987) will be useful as new scholars offer innovative and interdisciplinary answers.

Poised at the intersection of the humanities and social sciences, gendered inquiry within the Amish and plain Anabaptist studies is well positioned to extend scholarship boundaries. Future research taking women’s lived experience as case study will offer a novel test site to apply both emerging and established theories of gender. And Anabaptist scholars wading into those deep theoretical waters have the potential to bring back analytic tools to unlock questions currently unasked within plain Anabaptist studies. These cross-fertilizations suggest a ripe field ahead; let’s make hay of it.

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