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Hemmed In? Considering the Complexities of Amish Womanhood

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Abstract: How have conceptions of Amish womanhood changed over time? In this article, I show that while early scholars offered only a rudimentary look at Amish women's lives, current research is expanding and expounding upon this question. To begin, I survey early Amish studies literature, demonstrating that women's lives rarely featured in these analyses. More recent scholarship demonstrates that when women's lives take center stage, a fuller appreciation of the shape of women's lives emerges. Specifically, I demonstrate that a simplified rendering not only masks the role women play but also obfuscates important aspects of Amish gender norms. I then turn to the voices of excommunicated Amish women and, through analysis of their recently published memoirs, explore how the norms of Amish womanhood both allow for and foreclose upon certain aspects of their lives. These memoirs offer an in-depth analysis of the experiences of domesticity and motherhood. I conclude that, in these voices, we can identify social features and gender norms—including resilience and stoicism—that both allow for a woman's deep investment in reproduction, childbirth, and motherhood and, at the same time, put a woman at risk for domestic violence and sexual abuse. Recognizing that these are not mutually exclusive features of Amish life but are in fact part and parcel of the same set of gender norms suggests that we are merely at the starting point. I conclude with a call for plain Anabaptist research to continue to draw upon the innovative work happening in feminist theory and the social sciences to further inform how women shape—and are shaped by—gender norms. [Abstract by author.]

Keywords: memoir; motherhood; reproduction; feminist theory; gender; sexual abuse; domestic violence

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INTRODUCTION

“Where have you been,” says my old friend the poet, “and what have you been doing?” The question weights and measures me like an unpaid bill, hangs in the air, waiting for some remittance.

Well I’ve been coring apples, layering them in raisins and brown sugar; I’ve been finding what’s always lost, mending, and brushing, pruning houseplants, remembering birthdays.

The wisdom of others thunders past me like sonic booming; what I know of the world fits easily in the palm of one hand and lies quietly there, like a child’s cheek.

Spoon fed to me each evening, history puts on my children’s faces, because they are the one alphabet all of me reads. I’ve been setting the table for the dead, rehearsing the absence of the living, seasoning age with names for the unborn. I’ve been putting a life together, like supper, like a poem, with what I have.

“Workshop” (Espaillat 2009)

As interest in Amish life grows, our knowledge of Amish society continues to expand. Amish women have increasingly become a focus, and new works by scholars, journalists, and even former Amish women themselves offer a more richly textured portrait of Amish womanhood than has previously been presented by conventional Anabaptist research. So while early work on Amish women offered a simplistic rendering, characterizing women as docile “helpmeets” to their husbands, as loving mothers, or as hard-working housekeepers, new work offers a deeper look into both Amish women’s lives, and the gender norms that structure their Anabaptist world.

I begin by briefly reviewing some of the foundational work that has served as the cornerstone for Amish scholarship. I argue that Amish women were often seen in these writings as playing a supporting role to the larger story of Amish men’s work, faith, and lives. I then consider more recent scholarship on the Amish to demonstrate that when women’s lives take center stage, a fuller appreciation of the shape of Amish women’s lives emerges. I focus here on the tensions that these researchers surface, and suggest that such research can help to illuminate interesting features of the

Amish landscape. Specifically, I demonstrate that the simplified rendering not only masks the role Amish women play but also obfuscates important aspects of Amish gender norms. I then turn to the voices of excommunicated Amish women, and through analysis of their recently published memoirs, I explore how the norms of Amish womanhood both allow for and foreclose upon certain aspects of their lives. I conclude that in these voices we can identify features of Amish society that allow for a woman’s deep investment in childbirth and motherhood, which are the same as those putting her at risk for violence and abuse. As a result, we are left with a more nuanced understanding of the gender roles that Amish women occupy, and an appreciation that *women do* and *women should* is often tangled at the root.

EARLY RESEARCH ABOUT AMISH WOMEN

Earlier, highly cited academic work on the Amish from the 1990s and 2000s focused little attention on Amish women. Instead it favored the more public aspects of Amish life and society, with women remaining in the shadows. Many early prominent texts (Hostetler 1993; Kraybill 2001; Kraybill and Bowman 2001) on Amish society did not feature material focused on Amish women but instead were peppered with quips about Amish women’s work ethic and commitment to their family and community. Paradigmatic pillars such as Donald Kraybill have anchored traditional Anabaptist scholarship, but have largely resorted to generalizations when discussing Amish women:

The work is hard and the hours long, but there is quiet satisfaction in nourishing thriving families, tending productive gardens, baking pies, sewing colorful quilts, and watching dozens of grandchildren find their place in the Amish world. (Kraybill 2001)

In much of this early work, the lives of Amish women warranted only cursory mention, and scholarship offered little in the way of analysis. Instead, topics such as work, community structure, and faith feature prominently. While the dynamics of Amish men’s lives are showcased, Amish women make only cameo appearances.

When authors did engage the question of Amish women, their work was often brief. In ‘The

Amish Struggle with Modernity’ (Kraybill and Olshan 1994), Olshan and Schmidt (1994) provide the sole chapter focused on Amish women. Primarily intent upon dispelling the myth that Amish women were victims of their patriarchal culture, they are able to answer their primary research question, “Do Amish women constitute an exploited resource or are they empowered by their work?” (Olshan and Schmidt 1994) without referencing the voices or experiences of Amish women themselves. Instead, it is the words of Amish men that provide commentary on everything from their views of feminism to violence within the Amish household. This tendency to rely on the voices, experiences, and lives of men to better understand all of Amish society has been found wanting (Jolly 2014b) and more recent scholarship has attempted to remedy this oversight, to broaden what we know about the work of Amish women and the world they live in, and to explore how gender operates within Amish culture. Norms about femininity, masculinity, decision-making, and the distribution of power are increasingly taking center stage in current Amish scholarship.

CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP ABOUT AMISH WOMEN

Amish women’s experiences have become a focal point in the last decade of research. As Amish women have increasingly moved from conventional work within the home to paid work outside of it, there has been increased interest in their workforce roles (Graybill 2009). Work that extends women’s domestic duties appears to be preferred (quilting, baking, and cleaning jobs common) (Handrick 2019), and Amish women still strongly identify with the domestic sphere (Tharp 2007). Moreover, work that keeps women close to home (i.e. home-based or home-adjacent businesses) allows Amish women to maintain their role as mother and husband’s “helpmeet” in life (Johnson-Weiner 2001). Community involvement in Amish women’s businesses has been seen as not just an economic boon for Amish families but also provides a socializing opportunity for Amish youth. These new employment options help to instill core Amish values such as hard work and community-mindedness when decreasing numbers of Amish children grow up on farms (Johnson-Weiner 2001).

As women-driven businesses continue to thrive, new tensions around technology adoption, rejection, and adaptation present novel complexities for women and their Amish communities to consider. These pressures have similarly plagued Amish men as they continue to choose non-farming employment to maintain economic viability (Handrick 2019). Amish society now has to increasingly reckon with the question, *What does it mean to be Amish?*, as technology paves the way for everything from credit card machines to online marketing to use of the internet. For Amish women, *not using* the internet can be a strong signifier of Amish identity and carries a currency not afforded to those who do go online. “If the coins of modern societies are what we have and use, their coins are what they do not have and do not use. Nonuse constitutes an important part of one of the most valorized aspects in those [Amish] communities’ value systems: isolation from mainstream society” (Neriya-Ben Shahar 2017) The internet offers one example of how Amish women, in rejecting the use of online technologies in their homes and in their businesses, actively shore up their Amish identity. As such, Amish women are now seen to occupy both the role of gate-keeper (in ideologically opposing new technologies) and that of an agent-of-change (in creating new businesses that bring these questions to the fore) (Neriya-Ben Shahar 2017). Work that acknowledges Amish women’s burgeoning role as economic contributors, coupled with their ongoing mothering and child-rearing, makes for an interesting point of analysis for understanding how Amish women actively negotiate the allowances and restrictions of Amish society with agency rather than with passivity.

New work expands discussions of Amish women to now consider gender in Amish society more generally. Concepts such as the “Amish gender regime” and the “Amish gender system” (Faulkner 2018) allow researchers to investigate the uneven impact of Amish gender norms. By introducing how gender functions in Amish society, these studies are able to “emphasize gender’s social features, such as its legitimating ideologies, organizational structure, cyclical practices, and connection to human agency and power, which make “gender’s invisible dynamics...more apparent” (Martin 2004, cited in Faulkner 2018). Understanding Amish gender norms that valorize

women's docility and meekness must be understood within the physical reality of being poked for making a mistake. And while adult Amish women will largely report that they now know how to navigate life without getting poked, a straight-pin is nonetheless a very effective sanction. With men in loose trousers and buttoned shirts, it is easy to see gender norms impact Amish women and men differently.

Aspects of Amish womanhood that prioritize submission, child-rearing, and domestic work can be felt as restrictive, unfair, or even traumatizing by Amish women (Faulkner 2018), and are sometimes cited in their decision to leave their Amish world. And yet these same norms can, for others, create an environment that many Amish women point to as fulfilling, buoying, and positive (Hurst and McConnell 2010; Jellison 2001). Amish women's self-denial and submission to others (especially to her broader community) may in fact create an environment that elevates her mothering and her other work that sustains Amish society. Anderson finds that as women move to a more autonomous, individualized society (such as the more liberal Beachy Amish-Mennonites), their connections with the communal are loosened (Anderson 2013). For mothers this can be especially difficult, as they navigate the tension between encouraging a personal religiosity and yet instilling a communal ethic. "The strong focus on the individual—personal devotions, personal commitment to God, etc.—conflicts with emphases of Amish such as self-denial and submission to others" (Anderson 2013). Those in mainstream society have long considered the patriarchy of the "divine hierarchy" that positions God above man and man above woman, and the selflessness required by the *Ordnung* to be a source of Amish women's oppression. More recent scholarship on Amish women and their relationship to religion and to wider Amish society suggests that such a broad brush may not adequately capture the complexity of their experiences.

In some regards, Amish women seem quite well-served by gender norms that privilege women's bodily strength and fortitude. Certainly the Amish tendency to value women's perseverance, stoicism, and bodily strength over their physical appearance stands in stark opposition to non-Amish notions of gender that do just the opposite.

[A]reas of Amish culture may protect Amish women from fully internalizing the thin-ideal body type and the schemas and coping strategies associated with it (Hargreaves and Tiggemann 2003). Additionally, our results suggest that Amish women may be more inclined to use religious coping strategies to combat body image concerns, which may be not as readily accessible for Catholic and non-religious women (Davidson et al. 2018).

Because Amish femininity is built on a narrative of competency, hard work, and resilience, Amish women "do gender" (West 1991) in a way that allows for a high degree of body confidence. Jolly's work on childbirth within the Amish further substantiates this, and she argues that,

In conceiving of womanhood through a lens of competency, Amish femininity provided Amish women the opportunity to be physically dexterous and intrepid. The result was a strikingly different experience of birth, one where a woman could revel in the strength of her body and in her ability to labour as a seamless part of her femininity. Amish society casts women's bodies as capable, and as a result, the strength and the pain tolerance that unmedicated birth necessitated did not exist in opposition to femininity but instead became emblematic of it (Jolly 2014a).

For Amish women, then, the strict gender norms allowed for an understanding of selfhood that "was undergirded by an ethic of work" (Jolly 2015). Such a conception challenges the weakness and passivity implied by Amish women's position as mere helpmates and may even offer new ways to think about what it means to live as an Amish woman.

This does not imply, however, that there are not real and pressing concerns when women and children are positioned as secondary citizens. The ongoing news coverage of child sexual abuse in Amish communities suggests that researchers still have much to learn about the scope of the abuse and the mechanisms that allow for it. McClure (2020) writes,

There is no one reason for the sexual abuse crisis in Amish Country. Instead, there's a perfect storm of factors: a patriarchal and isolated lifestyle in which victims have little exposure to police, coaches, or anyone else who might help them; an education system that ends at eighth grade and

fails to teach children about sex or their bodies; a culture of victim shaming and blaming; little access to the technology that enables communication or broader social awareness; and a religion that prioritizes repentance and forgiveness over actual punishment or rehabilitation. (McClure 2020)

A culture of stoicism coupled with their secondary status leaves women and girls vulnerable to abuse at the hands of boys and men. I would add to McClure's list that Amish gender norms that valorize girls' and women's resilience and fortitude make them particularly vulnerable to abuse and violence. So while Amish gender norms can create an environment where women have a positive body image and a healthy approach to childbirth and mothering, they can simultaneously create a place where victims of abuse are not able to speak out and/or have little recourse for help. Context matters, and future work on the Amish needs to continue to consider not only the lives of women and girls, but how gender operates – often unevenly and with much tension – in Amish society.

Indeed, fruitful inquiry can result from seeking out these places of cultural inconsistency such as the tension inherent in a strong sense of Amish womanhood built upon a foundation of servitude, and feminist theorists have long pointed to these fissures as sources of potential insight. Anabaptist scholarship is only just beginning to import the innovative theorization being done by feminist scholars, and doing so has the potential to radically challenge how we think about Amish women's lives. By “understanding the *contradictions*” (Mohanty, Russo and Torres 1991, 66) that exist between social structures and women's experience of them, we can better understand how women both respond to and resist social norms in lived and embodied ways. As more Anabaptist scholars search for “gaps, contradictions, aporias” (Hennessy 1993, 92) in Amish women's experiences, a more nuanced understanding of Amish society will result.

MULTIPLICITY IN AMISH MEMOIR

In a new crop of memoirs, women who were previously members of the Amish have begun to offer new perspectives on how Amish gender norms shape women's identities and life trajec-

ries. Academic studies of Amish memoir are still relatively novel, but are useful because of the access to voices not previously heard in the more mainstream assessments of Amish society that they provide (Voelz 2016). In fact, Voelz argues that memoir as a genre offers access to those who may have “conflicting ideas about Amish life” (p. 203), making it an especially attractive form for those Amish women who may have a new Amish story to tell (Janzen 2018). I build on and extend Voelz's Amish memoir analysis to consider three recent memoirs: *My Amish Story: Breaking Generations of Silence* (Borntrager Graber 2017), *Leaving My Amish World: My True Story* (Eicher 2019), and *Born Amish: Life Before the Ex-communication* (Stoltzfus Taylor 2019). I explore how these memoirs can illuminate gender norms in Amish society, and how Amish gender norms impact Amish women in complex and multifaceted ways. These three memoirs represent the most recent works being published by former Amish women, and, when read together, offer an expansive perspective on Amish womanhood, the role that gender plays in Amish society, and the meaning of Amish women's experiences.

These memoirs all center on domesticity and the ongoing value these authors place on the domestic skills they learned during their Amish upbringing. Cooking, care-giving, and running a household provided these authors with skills that they drew upon throughout their lives, even after leaving the Amish. All report that their immediate Amish family was a central feature in their lives. They reflect on the role of their parents, especially in their early years, and repeatedly return to what they learned from their own mothers, writing “Today I greatly appreciate all my mother taught me” (Eicher 2019). They credit their mothers for passing on a strong work ethic and a sense of accomplishment associated with completing difficult tasks. “Labor on the farm was one of the hardest things I've ever done, but it taught me how to work. I learned to appreciate the ‘good feelings’ that come from getting things done” (Stoltzfus Taylor 2019). All seem to treasure the familial, writing, “I love my family. I love the Amish lifestyle. I love the German language. I love the community frolics and get-togethers.” (Borntrager Graber 2017) And yet despite the camaraderie and strong sense of kinship, these authors wrestle with

the strict dictates that sometimes harmed them, their families, and their communities.

As they aged, they often struggled with family relationships. “I went from being told what to do and living in obedience to my parents to living in obedience and submission to my husband.” (Eicher 2019) Feelings of guilt over disappointing their parents often colored these women’s lives, especially as tensions grew in other realms (Borntrager Graber 2017). While relishing the affordances that their Amish lives offered, they also struggled with constraints that left them wondering, “Why does life have to be so complicated?” (Borntrager Graber 2017) These pressures were sometimes insurmountable, causing “Such a hopeless, overwhelmingly helpless feeling. Many times I would sit and cry.” (Eicher 2019) While still reflecting fondly on the lessons of their Amish youth, collectively these women acknowledge that the structure of their Amish society did not always serve them or support them in crucial ways.

“Could something be both terrifying and beautiful?” (p. 169) Borntrager Graber’s daughter Dorcas asks at the close of her mother’s memoir, referring to her parents’ attempt to find their way through the turmoil of their excommunication, or, the *Bann*. All the women seem to identify this tension between the affordances and the injunctions associated with Amish womanhood. Eicher remembers feeling “so cheated” (p. 38) by what she perceived to be the life facing Amish women. “Had God really just put me here to cook, clean, do dishes and be pregnant, as most of us Amish women were led to believe? Some even called themselves ‘baby machines’” (p. 22). Yet Eicher also relishes her role as a mother, writing “With each pregnancy there was a sense of excitement and anticipation. I loved my babies. I loved having them, I loved raising them. I felt like I was in my element. It seemed like it was meant for me” (p. 30). She returns again and again to the joy she found in mothering, especially when her husband would leave for work. “He would get up early and go off to work, leaving me to my world of being mom to my boys, which was most enjoyable to me. When I was in my world, I could be myself, which was a relief” (p. 26). And yet, this is the same world that left her bereft, “I felt stuck, like I had no other option than to be who I was. An uneducated Amish woman with no transportation, no phone and no money. STUCK!” (p. 43) Although she finds that

her Amish culture left her well-situated to succeed at mothering, Eicher concludes that those same cultural norms (specifically those focused on child rearing and domestic duties) foreclosed her ability to build a personally successful life and hampered her chances of creating a stable life after she left the Amish.

Other authors report responding to a similar strain, finding both pleasures and forfeits in their gendered Amish upbringing. Borntrager Graber tells a story that illuminates why Amish women might have found the gendered norms of Amish culture stifling.

As Rebecca scanned the detailed rules written about the house, a line caught her attention. It said the windows of the house were not to be one big pane of glass but were to have a specified number of dividers in each window. The window didn’t actually have to be made up of smaller panes but had to look like it did. This was done by using false dividers.

Rebecca waited for a pause in the conversation. When the bishop looked at her, she asked, “Where in the Bible did you find Scripture to regulate the size of the window panes?”

The bishop chuckled and said, “Oh, that is to keep the women busy cleaning those extra corners in the smaller panes; it keeps them out of mischief, so they don’t have so much time to gossip and stir up strife.”

Rebecca thought of the endless tasks Amish women faced every day and every season. For this man to make light of it and say he would in fact make life a little harder for them by his man-made rules did not sound biblical at all. (Borntrager Graber 2017)

All the authors struggled with frustration over Church dictates that they deemed unnecessarily punitive and the gendered impact of the *Ordnung*, or Amish rules, which seemed to fall disproportionately on women. This was especially true when it came to issues of sex and relationships. In discussing her *rumspringa* days, Eicher writes,

Though it was a taboo subject, and there are many Amish communities where sex before marriage is strictly forbidden, it was not forbidden where I came from.

At the end of the evening, often the guys would ask a girl for a date which consisted of him taking her home in the horse and buggy and would

end with him taking her up to her room. No one ever talked to me about abstinence or even gave me the “birds and the bees” talk. The subject of sex was something “dirty” we were not allowed to discuss.

No wonder there were so many “shotgun” weddings, a term used when a girl became pregnant and was forced to marry the guy who impregnated her regardless of whether or not they were in love. (Eicher 2019)

Feeling unprepared, uninformed, and unable to use her voice characterized the experience of several new wives. Everywhere women seem to be reminded of the “divine structure” that served as a justification for their submission. For Eicher, the marriage advice even came from the men in her family, reminding her always of the importance of submitting to her husband.

Like my uncle once told me, “As long as he puts the bread and butter on the table, you need to keep your mouth shut.” Cruel words, but I did. (Eicher 2019)

Borntrager Graber also found this position troubling, especially within the context of a faith so strongly built on biblical teachings.

And you know what they tell a woman if she complains about her husband or even if she asks for help in an abusive situation? They tell the woman that if she was being submissive and godly as the Bible teaches, her husband would be good to her. It’s her place to be submissive and take what comes and not complain. They say she’s to be a helpmate for her husband (Borntrager Graber 2017).

This idea of being a powerless helpmate (or helpmeet) to one’s husband provoked anxiety, and all of these authors identified the vulnerable position into which this placed Amish women and girls. Eicher recounts the story of her family’s excommunication after her alcoholic husband was arrested for drunk driving. She writes,

I could take no more of the pain. I knew what their reason was for excommunication of Mark, but what was their reason for excommunicating me? He was the one that went to jail, not me. (p. 76-77)

Taylor recounts a similar story, where her family was excommunicated for a decision her

father made. These experiences lend legitimacy to the claim that Amish women are penalized by their helpmate status and are not seen as autonomous from their relationship to their fathers and husbands.

But these authors would be remiss if you closed their books with the parting thought that they were mere victims of their circumstances. Each share poignant moments that illustrate their agency and suggests that we not permanently fix them in the role of helpmate. Taylor offers a humorous instance of this, remembering the story of how her mother used a pinch of manure to finally convince her father to stop using chewing tobacco:

Mom hated that dirty habit and warned that she would put something nasty into his tobacco pouch if he didn’t quit. He was surprised when it actually happened, and as a germaphobe, it “groused [*sic.*] him out.”

“I warned you,” she said, with a silly smile on her face, “but you didn’t think I’d do it.” (p. 90)

Eicher remembers that when things were getting bad in her life, her neighbor convinced her to get her learner’s permit to begin the process of obtaining a driver’s license. She made the decision to do so for the good of herself and her children, and without her husband’s knowledge:

One day, my neighbor Judy offered to take me to get my driver’s permit. What a frightening thought! [...] So, hesitantly, I agreed to go get my permit. Judy took me to her car as her husband Ed watched my boys. [...] What a mix of emotions! I was excited, apprehensive, and frightened all at the same time, but also hopeful that maybe, just maybe, there’s a brighter future ahead. [...] It’s not like I had anything to worry about. What Mark and the church didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them or me. At least, not today. (p. 65)

All these authors returned to the role that mothering played in their lives. “Mothering my children was one thing I knew how to do, and I did it well” (Eicher 2019, 25). Certainly the support and encouragement that Amish women received for their work as mothers allowed them the opportunity to embrace their role as caregiver. After the birth of her third son, Eicher writes that her extended family worked to support her new family. “I loved that my mom sent over food that could

just be heated and served. I was so very thankful for the kindness, generosity, and graciousness my family bestowed upon me and [my – *sic.*] fast-growing family” (p. 37). Taylor both begins and ends her book meditating on “the family values of my upbringing and how they might have influenced me and the choices I’ve made in life” (p. 3) and notes that, even after leaving the Amish world, she “was surprised to see my buy-in at a high level” (p. 133). Eicher sums up the sentiment all of these authors expressed when she states, “It was a lot of work, but it always brought a sense of accomplishment” (p. 37). These authors would agree, “Laziness was not in our vocabulary. We worked hard and we loved it” (p. 26). The stories women share illuminate the pleasure they found in their mothering, their domesticity, and their daily lives without sentimentalizing or trivializing that work. They also provide a framework to understand the roles and structures that constrain Amish women, and offer a broader picture of how these pressures shaped their lives.

The authors of these memoirs argue that amongst the heartbreak and frustration of their Amish lives are stories of humor, joy, strength, and resiliency. Borntrager Graber recounts a memory of caregiving while her entire family suffered from a terrible illness. The water pump froze, the children would not eat, the firewood was empty, and she herself was on the verge of losing consciousness. Despite the plot, this is – like so many other stories these women tell – a story of redemption, one where she not only sets upright the upended bucket of phlegm but also sets upright her family when they are upended, keeping them afloat when no one else can. These are the badges of pride that each author wears and shares with the reader. Eicher writes of creating a life she is proud of, despite the alcoholism that plagued her early years of marriage. Borntrager Graber’s daughter Dorcas writes of her Amish heritage as being “Opposite sides of the same coin” (p. 169). All seem to be trying to use their stories to speak to the broader narrative of their Amish upbringing, to toggle between both the turmoil and the contentment, the satisfaction and the frustration. Using these and other stories can help us better understand the ways that gender played out in the lives of women who left the Amish, and, possibly, begin to shed light on the lives of those Amish women who have stayed.

As Anabaptist scholars continue to engage with innovative work happening in feminist theory and the social sciences, new insights into how gender shapes (and is shaped by) Amish women’s lives will be possible. Formative theories of gender performativity (Butler 1999), social relations (Smith 1987), and sexual politics (Connell 1987) make possible new developments within the field of Amish Studies. Conversely, greater access to Amish women’s lives has the potential to broaden what we know about how gender operates within society more generally, providing rich case studies and unique data points. Research into gender identity, gender socialization, and gendered power relations within an Amish context will further extend our understanding of gender within the lives of Amish women and men. The potential for cross-fertilization between Amish Studies’ work and other critical theory is immense (Jolly 2017) and underscores the potential to broaden the infrastructure of our ideas about gender and the daily lived experiences of women.

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

Our understanding of Amish women’s lives has grown remarkably in the last decade. Previous work has tried to understand Amish women without investigating their life stories, and this astigmatism has structured so much that it is hard to gauge the extent to which our vision of things is skewed. Like a vein, what we know about Amish women narrows the further we get from the heart of women’s life experiences. More recent work has attempted to remedy this, and has benefitted from a widening of disciplinary perspectives and from a more systematic reliance on the voices and experiences of Amish women themselves. As a result, we are better equipped to explore the uneven terrain that is the landscape of gender in Amish society. Specifically, we are beginning to uncover the corrugated nature of Amish gender norms, especially the places where those norms offer certain allowances while also enacting certain forfeitures. The affordances and consequences of Amish women entering the paid labor force is one such site of inquiry. Exploring those tensions promises to augment what we know about Amish women and Amish society.

Also of interest are the experiences of domesticity and motherhood in Amish society, as they

seem to provide the architecture that allows for the affirming experiences Amish women report having with regard to childbirth and mothering. Motherhood, despite being immensely common, largely remains an academic oversight, and as a result the saccharine language often used to describe it prevents it from becoming a serious aspect of theoretical inquiry. Amish women's experiences of childbirth, mothering, and domesticity offer a new perspective into women's reproductive and domestic experiences. Conversely, gender norms that foster a positive relationship to reproduction (such as resilience and stoicism) may also serve to hamper Amish women and children's safety from violence and sexual assault. Recognizing that these are not mutually exclusive features of Amish life but are in fact part and parcel of the same set of gender norms suggests that we are merely at the starting point, not the ending.

Amish ideas about gender require a great deal of infrastructure. They accrete slowly and are nearly invisible to those who grow up Amish. To bring that background to the foreground is important work, and it teaches us not just about gender but about the history, culture, and structure of Amish society. Future work on the Amish will no doubt consider the question of how Amish gender shapes the lives of both men and women, as Amish masculinity is as fascinating as its counterpart. It will certainly challenge the simplistic tradition of either casting Amish women as passive victims of patriarchy or as seeing them enacting complicated choreographies of empowerment. The warp and the weft of Amish society has always produced a rich tapestry, and though conventional research on Amish women often left us with baggy generalizations, future work promises interesting ways that those ideas might be hemmed in.

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