

Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies

Volume 9
Issue 1 *The Voices of Plain Anabaptist People*

Article 2

2021

What's in JAPAS 9(1) and Who Should Read It? Reconceptualizing Amish and Plain Anabaptist Culture through the Voices of Its People

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Recommended Citation

Anderson, Cory. 2021. "What's in JAPAS 9(1) and Who Should Read It? Reconceptualizing Amish and Plain Anabaptist Culture through the Voices of Its People." *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 9(1):v-viii.

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Editor's Introduction—What's in *JAPAS* 9(1) and Who Should Read It? Reconceptualizing Amish and Plain Anabaptist Culture through the Voices of Its People

CORY ANDERSON, EDITOR

WHAT'S IN *JAPAS* 9(1)?

This issue offers research that highlights the words and voices of plain Anabaptist people. Roslyn Burns seeks evidence among the Low German/Russian Mennonites for how historical, spatial, and religious contexts influence speech patterns, finding strong evidence especially for religious influence. Thalheimer seeks answers to why Amish parents send their children to a local public school in Northern Indiana when parochial options abound. Mong and Clifton use the narrative history method as a vehicle to allow Conservative Mennonite women to express themselves about their dress practices. Finally, Neriya Ben-Sharar compares Amish and Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women's sense of the third person perspective when discussing dangers of audiovisual media and the internet, finding that—unlike many other populations which view the risks as higher for others than self—these women seem quite aware of technology's danger for self.

WHO SHOULD READ *JAPAS* 9(1)?

First, those who want their work informed by what plain Anabaptist individuals are actually thinking; this is so rare to find even in the qualitative and humanities literature; more in a moment.

Second, those interested in women's voices should pay attention; two of our articles focus on plain Anabaptist women and the others include a mix of women and men.

Third, information communications technology features not only in Neriya Ben-Shahar's article but also Thalheimer's.

Fourth, professionals and service providers should especially pay attention to Thalheimer's article about Amish students in public school. Although his focus is on an educational institu-

tion, applications for *any* public institution are numerous. For example, he addresses how links between institutions and Amish people form, persist, and dissolve, not just as a matter of interaction between these two parties but also—if not primarily—as a consequence of Amish people's internal interactions. This study reminds me of the rather complex network research findings of Loomis and Janzen (1962), who over half a century ago found some evidence that Amish/non-Amish school integration does not necessarily activate assimilatory doomsday for the Amish; instead, some rather counterintuitive convergence-oriented processes were identified.

Fifth, if you are looking for models of qualitative interview methodology disclosures in plain Anabaptist studies, this issue has it, and we certainly need more of it. Authors provide reflections on opportunities and limits in their role as an insider/outsider, e.g., Thalheimer as a school superintendent of an Amish-majority school, Mong as a former Mennonite adherent interviewing Conservative Mennonite women, and Neriya Ben-Sharar and Clifton as—respectively—current and former members of strict religious groups. Authors also provide relevant details about their analyses, including transcript coding, respondent selection, and listings of participants. If such disclosure is not enough to provide readers with confidence in author's arguments, then the extensive quotations will: enough nuance exists in quotes for readers to make personally informed interpretations.

Finally, legal experts interested in the 1972 *Wisconsin v. Yoder* decision—the Supreme Court ruling that, in effect, granted Amish the right to their own schools—should read Thalheimer's article. The Amish interviewees inadvertently bring our attention to how some Amish are reconceptualizing their views on the very socio-economic dynamics that undergirded the *Yoder* decision.

Recommended citation: Anderson, Cory. 2021. "What's in *JAPAS* 9(1) and Who Should Read It? Reconceptualizing Amish and Plain Anabaptist Culture through the Voices of Its People." *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 9(1):v-viii.

Publication type: Editor's comments (may be freely distributed). *JAPAS* is published by the Amish & Plain Anabaptist Studies Association (<http://amishstudies.org>) and the University of Akron.

RESITUATING RESEARCH WITH THE VOICES OF PLAIN ANABAPTIST PEOPLE

Now to return to our first audience: those valuing the voices of plain Anabaptist people in informing research priorities. As an ethnic/religious “studies” area, Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies parallels a range of other peoplehood preoccupations, such as African Studies, Jewish Studies, Gender Studies, and Mormon Studies. Yet, Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies stands out with a jarring peculiarity: several exceptions notwithstanding, the people *studied* are not the people *doing the studies*.

Other “studies” areas tend to be supersaturated with navel gazers, academic departments that must struggle to diversify and attract the complementary insights of non-members. The near-absence of plain Anabaptist people in academic institutions is one of the most remarkable challenges our “studies” area faces. Because nearly all plain Anabaptists shy away from higher education, let alone graduate work and the professorship as a career, plain Anabaptist people are basically absent from the role of researcher. As an adherent myself, I am keenly acquainted with this gap.

Why are non-adherents interested in the plain Anabaptists anyways? And more so the Amish than any other group? What explains the almost absolute dearth of, say, research about another Anabaptist group, the Apostolic Christians, or any number of Conservative Mennonite denominations? For one, the sheer number of Amish adherents accounts for disproportionate attention, as our journal title acknowledges. However, the public popularity of the Amish has also attracted researchers, perhaps due to sheer curiosity, perhaps due to perceived relevance to broader research, perhaps because Amish are large and are more likely to be noticed, or perhaps because the curious public confers prestige and money on interpreters—“Amish” has currency and public recognition in ways that Apostolic Christian, German Baptist, and Conservative Mennonite do not.

Yet, without the involvement—let alone directly quoted voice—of plain Anabaptist people, we lack accountability and risk appropriation, exploitation, stereotyping, and othering-oriented reification of the very people we research, as I and other scholars have stated in one form or another (Anderson et al. 2019; Billig and Zook

2017; Enninger 1987; Garneau et al. 2018; Good Gingrich 2016; Loudon 1991; Olshan 1981; Petrovich 2017). An indirect statement of these concerns is represented in an earlier co-authored publication by our *JAPAS* copy editor, Rosanna Hess. Hers is the only Amish-focused publication I know of where first authorship is conferred on a group of Amish participants! See Amish Burn Study Group, et al. (2014).

So how do we study people who are unrepresented, whose voices are absent in our study area? This issue of *JAPAS* responds with four articles that privilege the words and voices of plain Anabaptists in research—Burns in actual pronunciation, the others in words—thickly icing their final product with rich, extensive quotes that allow the ethnic-religious population under study to speak their mind and readers to freely interpret meanings. I can think only of Luann Good Gingrich’s *Out of Place: Social Exclusion and Mennonite Migrants in Canada* (2016) —much admired by many of our *JAPAS* staff—as a precedent for this depth of voice-probing.

Far too much writing—whether scholarship or popular—approaches the Amish or Mennonites at the group level, offering some sort of seemingly obligatory statement about their history, religious beliefs, demographic dynamics, church structure, and peculiarity: “the Amish believe,” “the Amish frowned upon,” “Compared to the outside world, the Amish” and so forth. More recently, it has become fashionable to qualify such overarching statements by noting the existence of “diversity,” but this only excuses, rather than reforms, poor *initial* conceptualizations. The consequence of this other-oriented approach is an overly structured view of Amish individuals’ lives and a neglect of the multiple structures within which individuals develop identity, identify others, and perform social action.

In contrast, research in this issue of *JAPAS* makes only minimal assumptions about what defines “Amish” or “Mennonite”—for the sake of a sampling frame—working instead from the bottom up, from individual agents to the tenuous social structures and ideologies they create. In prior research, we have been told repeatedly that church leaders and authorities, *Ordnung*, and subcultural group consciousness are noteworthy characteristics of the Amish and Mennonites. In these studies, however, a surprising lack of explicit references to these structures’ deterministic influence exists.

Instead, we see vignettes of individuals creating and recreating values and social realities in ways and places we have been ill-prepared to encounter, and it shapes particular social actions: speech, dress, internet (non)access, and school selection.

This issue's authors permit interviewees to shift attention to agential emic considerations in a way often running against the familiar etic-oriented latent functionalist narratives in scholarship. For Burns, agency shows up in the way words are pronounced, as individuals orally differentiate themselves from other Low German speakers according to their particular socio-religious experiences and history. For Thalheimer, agency expresses itself in school selection and opinions about other *people*, be they Amish or non-Amish. For Mong, agency is expressed in dress decision-making and ambivalence; far from having overly structured lives, individuals express a desire for *more* structure and teaching from church leaders. For Neriya Ben-Shahar, individuals rationalize their reservations against internet excesses; they are concerned about self, alongside family, with moderate reference to church-community. Unlike the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish comparison, the Amish women rarely reference their leaders and church, instead personally owning their responses.

When in research, we allow plain people to define the cultural domains and structures of interest, when we give considerable room for the people under study to define what is of interest and what gets researched, we get a loosely collected picture that may even appear offensive and self-justifying. This is not a utopic Smurf Village, as Billig and Zook memorably stated in *JAPAS* 5(1). Far from a coherent, self-evident, functionally re-enforcing structure, plain Anabaptist people manage changing identities that are situationally invoked according to the logics of multiple, nested structures, which themselves are not necessarily "Amish" or "Mennonite." This insight follows Wimmer's (2013) convincing conceptualization of all ethnic groups.

Consequently, we see an Amish and Mennonite culture where meanings of actions and symbols are probed, unstable, and contested—be it in language (Burns), schooling (Thalheimer), or clothing (Mong and Clifton)—rather than fixed. We have here a cross-sectional snapshot of where *some* plain Anabaptists are today. These individuals' opinions are not mechanically referencing some collective

superscript; rather, individuals selectively tap into logic structures that can be incoherent and inconsistent in order to make sense of social action. This is the revolution in cultural research that both Swidler (1986) and Sewell (1999) have brought about and Amish and plain Anabaptist studies has been slow to engage. Our research area has not been through a theory revolution in rethinking agency, structure, and culture. Those who would understand the plain Anabaptist people must devote attention to the emic perspective. This issue's articles show individual's priorities: interpersonal disagreements; ambivalence about certain rules; attitudes that seem indiscriminate toward a reified "world" but are actually quite nuanced; dysfunctional neighborhoods and parochial schools; modesty in dress; socialization of children; not being like "those other" types of Anabaptist people; and many other matters.

Thankfully, broader social scientific research addressing culture, structure, and social action offer compelling new theories and frameworks which readily map on to the Amish and Mennonite experience, if we will take the time to understand and properly apply them, as well as invest in immersing ourselves in the nuanced world of plain Anabaptist people. For one, I am particularly drawn to Patterson's (2014) sprawling synthesis of cultural domains and processes, which suggests three categories of symbolic meaning-making are nested and are activated in the form of practical knowledge when engaging different types of contexts. As with Enninger's (e.g., 1979) nuanced and rich research on Amish macro-micro structures, values, symbols, and social change (synthesized in Anderson 2017), this model of culture is particularly challenging to engage because of its sheer magnitude; yet, we *need* theories of magnitude to advance our work.

At a more modest level of conceptual advance, Vaisey (2008; 2009) offers a compelling argument that cultural values operate at multiple levels; one level, captured in Swidler's concept of culture, is at the surface and can be articulated in interviews. A deeper level of culture is difficult to articulate but can be probed using well-constructed, closed-ended questionnaires, which suggest value systems rather than asking interviewees to identify them open-endedly. Certainly, Jolly's (2017) exploration of how deep culture becomes embodied in Amish birthing strength illustrates this deep

cultural process, even as it's not the first place I would personally ponder evidence of deep culture. My thoughts instead go to conversations with other plain Anabaptist people about hot-button issues during times of social change. I can just stew to no end over these barrages of culturally appealing rationales, whether for or against a given change or issue. Akin to these conversations, the quotes in this issue's articles also suggest some deep cultural processes, and they likewise leave me with this nagging sense that some amorphous, deeper values are never fully articulated. Perhaps we need more dual-process methodologies—combining both interviews and surveys, as Neriya Ben-Shahar starts to do in her brief survey instrument.

As we have come to expect with *JAPAS*, this issue continues our strides toward an understanding of the plain Anabaptists that is deep, fresh, and needed. It continues to offer research that brings together rigorous methods and conceptual frameworks, and draws attention to the intriguing work of several new and up-and-coming scholars.

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