

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: "To Remind Us of Who We Are":
An Ethnographic Exploration
of Women's Dress and Gender
Roles in a Conservative
Mennonite Community

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Combining ethnographic methodology and feminist theory, this interdisciplinary study explores women's dress and gender roles in the religious culture of Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites, a conservative Mennonite group concentrated in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, that has never been researched before. My study is based on participant observation and qualitative analysis of interviews with 11 women and two men in three church districts.

I argue that conservative women's domestic roles in the private sphere and their adherence to strict dress codes create the denomination's primary cultural boundary marker. Although Eastern Pa. Mennonites accept modern technology and most no longer farm, members adhere to a church-wide discipline that forbids "immodest" and "fashionable" clothing, jewelry, and cut hair for women, while prescribing a particular style of women's dress and head covering. (Men's clothing is less regulated.)

Religious understandings around women's dress reinforce a gender ideology that is firmly rooted in women's subordination to men.

My study explores the multiple meanings that conservative women attach to their clothing. Much like a uniform, women's dress expresses group affiliation, suppresses individual expression, and mutes economic and social distinctions. Moreover, their dress affords them a feeling of protection from harm, offers them an opportunity to witness, and serves as an internal motivation toward religiosity. In sum, their dress both produces and reflects particular gender roles.

Finally, I discuss the interpretative challenges of my partial membership status and my use of feminist analysis to frame a discussion about women who would not describe themselves as feminists.

**"To Remind Us of Who We Are": An Ethnographic Exploration
of Women's Dress and Gender Roles in a
Conservative Mennonite Community**

by

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Mennonite women are discovering another, more private inner voice. It is more profoundly communal. It emerged from shared silence. For the spirit so long denied expression in the church did not die. It lived on in quilt designs, flower gardens, and creative relationships. It nurtured the practical arts of nursing, teaching, and hospitality. In a sense, each . . . Mennonite woman . . . is indebted to that abiding silent spirit given flesh by mothers, aunts, grandmothers. In another sense, our voices . . . are redemptive voices: redeeming the silence, giving birth from that silence and witnessing to the spirit that did not die.

Mary H. Schertz and Phyllis Martens
Born Giving Birth: Creative Expressions of Mennonite Women
(Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1991)

DEDICATION

To my parents, Lester and Eileen, with appreciation for
roots and wings

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I would like to express my gratitude to the following:

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Introduction

This thesis will explore women's dress and gender roles in the conservative religious culture of Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites.

Dress is a particularly rich area for study because of the variety of cultural meanings it yields. For all of us, our identity is to some degree linked to our clothing. What we wear may express our individuality and sense of ourselves but may also reflect, shape, and define group affiliation and gender identity. Moreover, dress reveals conscious and unconscious priorities. Grant McCracken has written that clothing is a means by which cultural categories such as gender, class, and status are encoded and made manifest. According to McCracken, clothing communicates the properties that inhere in such socially constructed categories as male and female. As such, clothing provides a "productive 'way in' to the study of a meaningful universe."¹

Specifically, examining women's dress offers revealing insights into the qualities that the wearer and her culture associate with being female. Claudia Brush Kidwell and Jo B. Paoletti suggest that dress "reflects social differences between the sexes, such as women's more restricted public

¹Grant McCracken, Culture and Consumption (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 76-77, 60.

lives, [and] the need for men to project authority. . . ."2

Moreover, Joanne Eicher and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins have written that, "dress is both a repository of meanings regarding gender roles and a vehicle for perpetuating or rendering changes in gender roles."<3 That is, dress may produce as well as reflect particular gender roles:

"gendered dress encourages each individual to internalize as gendered roles a complex set of social expectations for behavior."<4 My goal here is to explore the intersection of dress and gender roles in a particular Mennonite community from an insider perspective.

Despite widespread interest in Mennonite and Amish culture, little scholarly literature exists on Mennonite and Amish dress, particularly women's dress. What is available raises some interesting issues but lacks depth about the experience of insiders themselves. Melvin Gingrich's 1970 book, Mennonite Attire Through Four Centuries, an early treatment of the topic, offered historical background. Don Kraybill's 1987 article on the

²Jo B. Paoletti and Claudia Brush Kidwell, "Conclusion," in Men and Women: Dressing the Part, ed. Claudia Brush Kidwell and Valerie Steele (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 158.

³ Joanne B. Eicher and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, "Definition and Classification of Dress," in Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts, ed. Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 12.

⁴Ibid., 19.

women's head covering, based on quantitative analysis and observation, included virtually no qualitative information on the meaning of the symbol to the women themselves. Historian Marlene Epp, writing from the Canadian setting, argued in a provocative article that Mennonite women carried the burden of cultural separation through dress for the entire denomination during the first half of the twentieth century, however her article but did not address the contemporary situation. Only Linda Boynton Arthur and Pamela Klassen have attempted to work ethnographically on contemporary Mennonite women's dress. Klassen briefly explored the power of two symbols, the Swiss Mennonite devotional covering and Russian Mennonite wedding attire, in an unpublished paper based on limited interviews. The work of Linda Boynton Arthur on the Holdeman Mennonites (a related group in California), discusses clothing specifically as an element of social control, but does not examine other meanings conveyed by members through their dress.

My study is unique in that it relies on extensive interviews to examine the multiple meaning of women's dress and gender roles from an insider's point of view: how do women themselves think about dress? What does it mean for them? How does dress both extend and confirm existing gender roles? As we shall see, in the culture of Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites -- a group that has never been

researched before -- women's dress serves as the primary cultural boundary marker. For these conservative women, dress and gender roles reinforce each another. Standards of dress figure so prominently in the religious underpinnings of this community that the old saying, "you are what you wear" is especially applicable.

Before examining in detail the meanings associated with women's dress and gender roles in the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church, I begin by with an opening scene followed by a discussion of my membership role in the community, the methodology I used, and some background information on this community in comparison to Old Order groups.

Thinking About Conservative Mennonite Women

I am traveling with a celebrity. As we enter the Texter Mountain Mennonite Church, in Robesonia, Pennsylvania, several women recognize my friend Louise, recently pictured in the local newspaper for co-authoring a cookbook of Mennonite foods. We are greeted with smiles and warm handshakes. They seem honored that she, and I by extension, have joined them for church this evening.

Here on the female side of the vestibule, women in modest, pastel print dresses, black stockings and large

white prayer coverings greet each with a kiss on the lips.⁵ Across the way on the men's side, men and boys dressed in identical black suits greet each other with the same kiss.

As Louise and I file up front with her married cousin, Mary Ann, and into a third row pew, I have never been so conscious of my short hair. Later when we kneel and face the rear to pray, I notice 45 identical white net coverings hiding long hair primly nestled in buns.

"These women's lives," I find myself thinking, "are as straightforward as their unadorned dress and unaccompanied singing." A woman gardens, cooks, sews, and raises her children. "None of the stresses of my two-career marriage."

During the service my mind wanders. Men, it seems, get all the public parts: male song leader, bishop, prayer leader, preacher. "No conflict over roles here," I mused.

Perhaps one develops stamina for 40-minute sermons. Even young children are amazingly quiet and well-behaved. I glance over at my friend Louise, who is passing the time by smiling at a chubby-cheeked boy peering over his mother's shoulder in the pew in front of us. He is her ninth child, we later learn from the boy's mother, whose hair is turning grey.

⁵Members take seriously the biblical commandment in Romans 16:16, RSV (Revised Standard Version), which reads: "Greet one another [in the church] with a holy kiss."

Sitting next to me is Mary Ann. In her late-thirties, she is my age but worlds apart. Sliding her Bible my way she points to the passage in the King James translation. Her bible is worn and underlined. Later we share a Mennonite hymnal to sing, copyright 1907, three versions older than the one my own Mennonite congregation sings from.

As I glance around at the women's identically-styled cape dresses and their quiet demeanor I find myself wondering, "What do these women get out of this? Do any of them ever secretly aspire to preach or lead singing or pursue vocations outside the home? How does their clothing prescribe and preserve their assigned gender roles? Are these conservative Mennonite women as satisfied in their roles as mothers and homemakers as they tell me?"

Reflections on Membership Status

During the past year and a half I have wrestled with these questions through interviews and participant observation with Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite women in and around Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. I have conducted open-ended, ethnographic interviews with nine conservative and two formerly conservative Mennonite women, aged 24 to 79.⁶ (Two husbands, both bishops in the church,

⁶Of this group, four informants were single, five were married, and two were formerly married (one widowed and one abandoned). Interviews ranged from two to three hours;

were also interviewed.) I have eaten in their homes and gone to church with them. Although I am not a member of their particular Mennonite subgroup, we share a common Swiss/German Mennonite heritage and ethnicity. Moreover, the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church was a conservative split from the church conference to which my Mennonite home congregation belongs. In ethnographic terms this makes me a partial or "peripheral" member.⁷

In addition, through the course of this research I was reminded of my kinship connections to this particular Mennonite denomination, since some of my distant relatives are now members of the Eastern Pa. Mennonite Church.⁸ As John Caughey has argued, fieldwork involves important reflexive dimensions related to the ethnographer's personal history and experiences.⁹ At the annual Graybill family reunion and potluck in a neighboring county, my Mennonite relatives in various degrees of conservative to modern dress mixed with apparent ease and friendliness, even in

one-third of the informants were interviewed twice.

⁷Patricia and Peter Adler, Membership Roles in Field Research, (Newbury Park, Ca.: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1987), 36-49.

⁸I ultimately chose not to formally interview relatives because of distance -- they live over an hour and a half away -- and apprehension about how they would react to a more formal interview process.

⁹John Caughey, "The Ethnography of Everyday Life: Theories and Methods for American Culture Studies," American Quarterly 34 (Sept, 1982): 222-243.

cases where church splits have divided families. (As my grandmother told me, "I just suppose they don't discuss church too much.") Although we share a common ancestry -- all would trace our roots to seventeenth century Anabaptists who died for their faith -- and share similar religious beliefs about the importance of peacemaking, service, and "nonconformity" (not conforming to the ways of "the world"), I am separated from second cousins my age most visibly by my dress and appearance, as well as by my higher education and lack of children.

Moreover, I cannot pretend to share the strict religiosity that shapes their lives. My Mennonite grandparents were the only branch of the extended Graybill family to leave central Pennsylvania for the closest college town that would provide my father the higher education that my grandparents themselves had desired but which the church had discouraged them from pursuing. Unlike my father's primarily conservative cousins, he and my mother¹⁰ raised their children in the broader Mennonite Church during the time period of loosening dress restrictions. So while my family comes out of conservative Mennonite roots, I have experienced only in a limited way the outward dress and lifestyle restrictions that so distinctly shape my informants lives.

¹⁰My mother, the daughter of missionary parents, was raised abroad until college age, and so was less influenced by Mennonite Church dress restrictions.

Methodology

I deliberately chose to interview women in the Eastern Pa. Mennonite church because their particular emphasis on women's dress and their clear beliefs about appropriate women's roles fit the purposes of my study. I followed James Spradley's ethnographic model, deriving information from interviews and participant observation with specific attention to clothing as an artifact of material culture.¹¹

Members of this group were receptive to my requests for interviews, in part, because they place a high value on witnessing to their faith. They freely shared positive aspects of their life experience; negative or dissatisfying aspects were referred to obliquely or by omission. Most informants seemed pleased that I wanted to interview them and flattered that I was genuinely interested in their viewpoints. They often told me, "No one's ever asked me that before!"

In this research my partial membership status provided me with both particular assets and liabilities. First, being Mennonite afforded me a beginning level of trust with conservative women that would have been difficult to achieve otherwise. I was able to introduce myself as a friend of one of their relatives, some of whom either accompanied me on visits or phoned ahead on my behalf.

¹¹James P. Spradley, The Ethnographic Interview, (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1979).

(Since this particular denomination formed less than 30 years ago, many of my Mennonite friends had conservative extended-family members that they recommended I interview.) Moreover, interviews often began with informants asking me questions about my father's (and sometimes my husband's) relatives, designed to place me patrilineally in their Mennonite world. (On more than one occasion we discovered we were distantly related!) I came to view these opening genealogical questions as fulfilling a "gate-keeping" function which allowed conversation to flow thereafter. Since every ethnography is based on the quality of relationship between interviewer and informant, my research is certainly stronger for my partial membership.

Conversely, while a Mennonite, I was also usefully an outsider to their particular Mennonite denomination. This meant that I was forgiven for not wearing the "plain dress"¹² that these women adhere to. Because the fault was with my parents for not having trained me in the virtues of strict dress codes, I was not considered back-slidden or apostate. Moreover, my positionality gave them the opportunity to explain to me the full meaning of conservative dress, since I did not, in fact, understand

¹²In the vocabulary of my informants, "plain dress" is the generic term used to refer to the distinctive style of women's and men's dress worn by Amish and conservative Mennonites (sometimes called "plain people"). Plain dress lack ornamentation and is designed to reflect values of simplicity and nonconformity to the world.

the rationale for this particular outward expression of our common Mennonite beliefs.

During the course of my research I saw my role as bridging the gap between my informants and the academic community. I often asked myself how I would explain (or justify) a peculiar Mennonite belief to colleagues in the academy. Jim Thomas calls this a "dual translation" role, requiring the ethnographer to be fluent in three "languages": that of the informant, one's self, and the audience.¹³

Certain potential liabilities, however, may have been associated with my membership status. Caughey has written of the problems inherent in the study of American groups: that the ethnographer may overlook cultural beliefs that she shares with the group under study or believes she already understands. My challenge in this regard was to work at what Thomas calls "defamiliarization", that is, thinking critically about previously taken-for-granted concepts.¹⁴ However, as Caughey also argues, the advantage of studying groups "at home" is that we are less likely to make gross misinterpretations.¹⁵ I was living in the field

¹³Jim Thomas, Doing Critical Ethnography, (Newbury Park, Ca.: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1993), 66.

¹⁴Ibid., 43.

¹⁵John Caughey, "Epilogue: On the Anthropology of America," in Symbolizing America, ed. Herve Varenne (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska, 1986), 239.

already, so to speak, by virtue of my current geographical residence in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, the location of my informants. Although our perceptions differed -- for example, I live and shop in Lancaster City, they consider the city dangerous and visit it only to pass out religious tracts -- my familiarity with their cultural landscape nevertheless lessened the distance between us.

Another potential liability relates to the subject of objectivity. Given my Mennonite connection I certainly did not approach the data as a detached observer, although neither did I have an ax to grind. However, I question whether total objectivity is ever attainable, or even desirable. Ethnographer Ann Oakley, among others, rejects the falsely "objective" stance of the neutral interviewer as impossible and undesirable, since meaningful research depends on empathy.¹⁶

Moreover, I approached the data as a feminist. This meant that I wrestled with what ethnographer Pamela Cotterill describes as the dilemma of:

how a feminist researcher deals with data generated from interviews with women who are not feminists. They may not agree with the researchers' interpretation of their lives if

¹⁶Ann Oakley, "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms," in Doing Feminist Research, ed. Helen Roberts (New York: Routledge, 1981), 30-61.

they do not share the political view which shapes those interpretations.¹⁷

I often asked myself what was at stake for me in viewing these women as more contented or constrained than myself. Whose frame of reference should I use to describe their gender roles and clothing choices -- theirs or my own? I took some solace from sociologist Laurel Richardson who writes of the impossibility of "getting it right" about who others are, since "there is no essence defining what 'right' is."¹⁸ In perhaps the most eloquent treatment of this dilemma, scientist and feminist theorist Donna Haraway argues that we are always viewing things from some embodied position; our knowledge is always situated, our perspective always partial. Paradoxically, according to Haraway, "The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular . . . only partial perspective promises objective vision".¹⁹ Haraway argues that we move toward objectivity when we acknowledge our particular starting place and move out from there, a perspective I have tried

¹⁷Pamela Cotterill, "Interviewing Women: Issues of Friendship, Vulnerability, and Power," Women's Studies International Forum 15, No. 5/6 (1992), 201.

¹⁸Laurel Richardson, "Speakers Whose Voices Matter," Studies in Symbolic Interaction 12 (1991), 36.

¹⁹Donna J. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," in Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (New York: Routledge, 1991), 188-190.

to emulate in explicitly identifying my positionality in relation to my research.

Comparison with Old Order Groups

The Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church, according to their 1995 directory, numbers 3,434 adult members in 58 congregations. (Most members join the church at age 16 or older, so the actual size of the community including children is closer to 10,000.) They are concentrated in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, with smaller numbers in neighboring counties. Congregations also exist in eight other states, one Canadian province (British Columbia), and three foreign countries: the Bahamas, Guatemala and Paraguay²⁰.

In Lancaster County, Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites rub shoulders with both more and less conservative neighbors in their family of faith. Lancaster County is a rapidly developing rural and suburban area; distinctively dressed Amish and conservative Mennonites, often referred as the "plain people," comprise roughly 10 percent of the county's population of 422,822²¹. All the plain people

²⁰1995 Directory of the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church and Related Areas, Publication Board of the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church, Eastern Mennonite Publications, 1684 W. Main St., Ephrata, Pa., 17522.

²¹Stephen Scott, Old Order historian employed at The People's Place, Intercourse, Pa., 17534; telephone interview with author, 23 June 1995; based on 1995 data compilation. Also, 1990 U.S. Bureau of the Census data for

share a related religious ethnicity that has been marketed as a valuable tourist commodity.²² Similar to what Michaela di Leonardo described in her study of northern California Italian-American families, "ethnicity is a commodity, a kind of local color or atmosphere, like cable cars or fog, to be consumed by tourists."²³ The commercialization of ethnicity in Lancaster County, of which quilts and shoofly pie are obvious examples (both of them women's crafts, interestingly enough), tends to obscure distinct divisions in religious dress and practice. Overlooked by tourists, these distinctions matter quite a bit to insiders. As a woman in the plain community,

Lancster County, Pa.

²²While Lancaster County's plain groups share similar German roots, their sense of ethnic identity has been constructed, in large part, from outside the community. Michaela di Leonardo defines ethnicity as "the labeling from within or without of particular populations as somehow different from the majority . . . it is the labeling itself, the cultural process, that is crucial to the construction of ethnicity." See Michaela di Leonardo, The Varieties of Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class, and Gender among California Italian-Americans, (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1984), 22-25 and 18. My thinking in this regard owes much to the work of Evelyn Torton Beck, who has written extensively about the construction of Jewish ethnicity. As Beck has demonstrated in her investigation of the phenomenon of the Jewish American Princess, outside labeling has a damaging influence on ethnic identity. See Beck's "From 'Kike' to 'JAP': How Misogyny, Anti-Semitism, and Racism Construct the 'Jewish American Princess,'" in Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology, ed. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth publishing Company, 1995), 87-94.

²³di Leonardo, 22-25 and 18.

whether you adopt black stockings or not, or wear a head covering with strings or without, demonstrates important group distinctions related to personal piety and religious boundaries.

Individuals occasionally move from one plain group to another along what Leo Driedger has described as the Anabaptist (that is, Amish-Mennonite) identification ladder²⁴. However, most of that movement is towards less conservatism. Traditionally, those groups that accept fewer modern conveniences and are more separated from the world, for example, by virtue of occupations such as self-sufficient farming, are referred to as conservative or Old Order. About half (six of 11) of my informants left more traditional or conservative groups such as the Old Order Amish, Weaverland Conference or Horning Mennonite Church (also known as "black-bumper" Mennonites), Beachey Amish, or the Hutterites, to join the Eastern Pa. Mennonite Church. One of my informants, a former Catholic from Germany, converted with her family as an adult. The remaining informants joined the church when it formed in 1967 as the conservative split from a mainstream Mennonite conference. The Eastern Church has had a reputation among other conservative groups for being more strict with its youth and having an "evangelistic point of view" that one

²⁴Leo Driedger, "The Anabaptist Identification Ladder: Plain-Urbane Continuity in Diversity," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 51 (October 1977): 278-91.

ex-member described as "a feeling of holier than thou."²⁵ Almost uniformly, my informants were attracted to the "discipline" and adherence to biblical principles they saw represented in the Eastern Pa. Mennonite Church. In addition, some former Amish and Horning Church members were drawn to the Eastern Church because of its Sunday School, which their own denominations lacked.

Unlike many other Old Order groups, the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church accepts electricity, cars, and telephones. Moreover, Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites are more involved in the world through their occupations than most of their more conservative counterparts. The percentage of farming families in the four congregations represented by my informants was 10 to 30 percent; most men are employed in blue-collar trades such as mechanics, plumbers, masons, printers, and carpenters; a few work as accountants or public school teachers. Most women, single and married, work at home. Some "single sisters" (unmarried women and widows) teach in church schools while those I encountered who work as a midwife or in a shoe factory are clearly the exceptions. More frequently a single woman might live-in as a mother's helper, assisting a young family in the congregation.

²⁵Louise, interview with author, 17 Oct 93 and Florence, interview with author, 8 Nov 93. Here, as elsewhere, I have generally used pseudonyms to ensure the privacy of my informants.

Background on Eastern Pa. Mennonites

The Eastern Pa. Mennonite Church is governed by a church-wide *Statement of Rules and Discipline*, updated every two years. It expressly forbids (among other things) radio, television, divorce, mixed seating in church, jewelry including wedding bands, immodest apparel, and cut hair for women. Since the Eastern Church accepts modern technology (eschewing the cultural separation that lack of electricity and automobiles demonstrates), dress and appearance, and primarily women's dress and appearance, is the central cultural boundary marker for members of this church. To put it succinctly, women's dress (and women's related subordinate gender roles) carry the full weight of cultural separation from the world, a doctrine known to Mennonites as nonconformity²⁶.

Another way to characterize my informants is that they adhere to a prescriptive religion and also hold themselves to a high degree of personal religiosity. Here I find Gavin Langmuir's thinking helpful. Langmuir defines religion as the belief and practices "explicitly prescribed

²⁶Mennonites base their belief in nonconformity on the Scripture verse from Rom. 12:2 RSV, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." While traditional or conservative Mennonites express nonconformity through outward visible markers such as dress and rejection of modern technology, progressive Mennonites have tended to emphasize inward beliefs and more subtle lifestyle differences such as cultivating a simpler standard of living.

by people exercising authority over other people" and religiosity as the conduct associated with non-rational (i.e. symbolic, subjective) thinking.²⁷ Just as Langmuir defines Catholics as those individuals who accept the authority of the Pope, likewise, and to an even greater degree, an Eastern Pa. Mennonite woman is defined by her acceptance of the authority of the Bishop's Council, evidenced through her personal piety and adherence to the church's dress codes.

Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites, like the Old Order Mennonites and Amish, but unlike their more liberal mainstream Mennonite counterparts, have grown rapidly since 1967, when the group formed. At that time, nine conservative congregations withdrew from the Lancaster Conference of the mainstream Mennonite Church because of "a desire to maintain a more strict interpretation of church discipline ... [placing] more emphasis on attire and less emphasis on higher education," according to one researcher.²⁸ The Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church

²⁷Gavin Langmuir, History, Religion, and Antisemitism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 158-162.

²⁸A. Martha Denlinger, Real People: Amish and Mennonites in Lancaster County, Pa. (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 1985), 73. In addition, one of my informants cited opposition to women in leadership as another crucial factor in the denomination's founding.

has grown rapidly since 1967, averaging a growth rate of 42 percent, according to historian Steve Nolt²⁹.

Large family size is certainly one reason for this church growth. Mary Ann, one of my informants, described her family of six children as "small, but that's because we married late." The fact remains, however, that the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church is keeping the great majority of its youth. One bishop whom I interviewed estimated that, similar to Old Order Amish, roughly 80 percent of their young people join the Eastern Church. The church runs its own parochial schools, certainly a factor in children remaining in the denomination. Children attend church schools through grade ten; some study independently or by correspondence to receive their G.E.D. Single women serve as teachers in all but the upper grades which are taught by men. Since women are the primary caregivers at home and the main teachers at school, certainly much of the credit for children remaining in the denomination belongs to women.

Women's Gender Roles

Before looking specifically at the implications of conservative dress and the meanings assigned to it by insiders, I turn to a discussion of women's gender roles in

²⁹Steven Nolt, "The Mennonite Eclipse," Festival Quarterly (Summer 1992), 10.

this community. Later we shall examine the connections between women's roles and clothing.

Overall Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites are guided by a strong belief in the essential differences between men and women. Rhoda described their philosophy in this way: "God has an order set up, it's God, man, woman. That's God's chain of command." These religious understandings about women's subordination to men, which they support through specific scriptural references³⁰, are embodied through adherence to traditional, gender distinct roles for men and women, sometimes known as separate spheres ideology. While most men work away from home in public sphere occupations (non-farming, often blue-collar trades), women's work takes place primarily in the private or domestic sphere. As Rebecca put it, "Women are supposed to be homemakers. I mean, they would--, our church would frown on women developing any kind of career. Definitely not if they're married."

Most women do marry and become full-time homemakers where they shoulder at-home, unpaid but valuable tasks which feminist researchers such as Evelyn Nakano Glenn have referred to as the work of "social reproduction." This includes the care and nurture of children, food production

³⁰One key passage often referred to is from I Corinthians 11: 1-16 RSV: "But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of the woman, and God is the head of Christ."

involving large gardens and home canning, household cleaning and upkeep (most of my informants live in older farmhouses), purchasing household goods, and sewing, laundering and mending clothes.³¹ Some families also take in foster children, and in many cases, women are primary caregivers for aging parents who often live with them.

In addition, the women I interviewed also took major responsibility for what Michaela di Leonardo has called the "work of kinship,"³² that is, maintaining kinship ties through such activities as planning family reunions and organizing visits to family members in other locations, corresponding with children in mission locations, and organizing "Sisters Days", i.e. extended family work parties at the family homestead.

In cases where a second source of income is needed, a woman will usually take on additional work for pay in the home. Women with older children might occasionally work part-time away from home. I was told of women who contributed to their families' income at home through binding quilts or quilting, babysitting or sewing clothes (usually for other church members), selling baked goods at roadside stands, sewing women's prayer coverings, or growing an extra family plot of strawberries or asparagus

³¹Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor," Signs 18, no. 11 (1992): 1-43.

³²di Leonardo, 194.

to sell. However, at least one of my informants believed that a woman's income should not be necessary. As Ellen assured me,

Financial needs are met through our husbands working. Our lifestyles are not geared so that we need a second income. . . I think as a whole you'll find that people who live by the Bible standards will, will have their financial needs met.

At least in the mind of this informant (and presumably her view is representative of at least some in the denomination, since her husband is a pastor) religious piety ensures financial prosperity.

Single women in the denomination, equally pious but less prosperous, usually are employed away from home. Young, unmarried girls work in nursing homes or as secretaries or cashiers at grocery stores or at small businesses run by church members, such as a dry goods store and automobile repair shop. One informant supported herself through drawing illustrations for church periodicals and textbooks. Single women of all ages serve on short (one-year) or longer-term (five to ten year) service assignments at the denomination's mission stations in Guatemala, the Bahamas, or Paraguay. Older never-married women usually work in some aspect of health care or teach in church schools, with teaching, (and to a lesser degree, nursing,) being the profession most likely to be thought of as a career, rather than simply a job.

The work history of one of my informants illustrates the expectation that she be financially self-sufficient either through marriage or her own employment. Ruth lived at home with her parents doing odd jobs until age 27, then moved in to live with a church family as a mother's helper, doing housework and farm chores for 13 years until marrying a widower. After his death she worked four days a week clerking at a stand in the city farmer's market for 25 years before marrying another widower at age 75.

Although the clear impression I took from my interviews is that a woman's place is at home, some Eastern Pa. Mennonite women nevertheless manage to carve out space for themselves and their vocational interests. One informant who knows that the church "frowns on college educations, or, you know, developing a career" is also aware that they "don't totally outrule it," and so is making plans to go to nursing school. Another woman told me in an interview that "nothing would be said against it" if a childless, married woman wanted to "help out" by having a job. However, this phrasing implies that, regardless of the amount of income the woman might be bringing in, her paid labor would still be viewed as supplemental to her husband's income, and permitted but not endorsed by the larger Mennonite community. As a church manual entitled, "Building Christian Homes," puts it,

"Under normal circumstances, the wife and mother should not enter the job market."³³

A number of church activities fill the lives of my informants, both single and married. Some women teach children's Sunday School classes. Others write for "Wee Lambs," the church's publication for children. Some of the women I interviewed mentioned accompanying their husbands on outreach assignments: singing hymns and handing out tracts in cities like Boston and New York or, closer to home, at retirement communities and rest homes in Lancaster County. In addition, many Eastern Pa. Mennonite women gather monthly to participate in sewing circle, making quilts or sewing clothing for overseas missions.³⁴ These women's gatherings, active in many but not all congregations, are important for most of my married informants but not for the single sisters. Although every woman is welcome to attend sewing circle, in reality, few single sisters can attend because most are away at work during the day when meetings are held. (Sewing circles

³³Publication Board of the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church and Related Areas, Building Christian Homes: A Manual of Bible Principles and Practical Instructions, (Eastern Mennonite Publications, 431 Royer Road, Lititz, Pa. 17543, 1991), 23.

³⁴Local sewing circles make important contributions of labor. The sewing circle of one informant supplied 1,400 garments over the course of a year for church missions in Guatemala, the Bahamas, and Paraguay.

usually do not meet in the summer, when single women teachers in the Eastern schools would be able to attend.)

Women's church involvements are important to study because historically in US society religion has functioned outside of separate spheres ideology. Neither public nor private sphere, the church is instead better described as the social sphere, according to researcher Theresa Murphy.³⁵ At different points in history, women have used religion as a way to extend their activities into the wider, public sphere. But for Eastern Pa. Mennonite women the opposite is true: rather than functioning as a broadening wedge for involvements in the public sphere, their roles are contracted in the realm of the church as well. For an Eastern Pa. Mennonite woman, the social sphere of religion is more important than either the public or private sphere, and here men dominate, as we shall see below.

Marriage

Most Eastern Pa. Mennonite women eventually marry. Many begin dating around age 18 and marry around age 21; others may marry a widower later in life. Younger women often meet their spouses at the denomination's Mennonite

³⁵Theresa Murphy, "What is Women's History?" presentation at The Quiet in the Land? Women of Anabaptist Traditions in Historical Perspective conference, Millersville University, 6-8-95.

Bible School, held each winter in central Pennsylvania, attended by young people from congregations all over the U.S. and Canada.³⁶

However, despite the visible presence of single women in the denomination -- about half of the congregations represented by my informants include never-married women, although virtually no unmarried men³⁷ -- few women would apparently choose singleness. The following interview with two single sisters in their fifties illustrates this point:

Question: Do you think there might actually be some single women who would actually choose singleness over marriage, for whatever reason?

Evelyn: I doubt that. Maybe she would eventually feel that she made a good choice by not getting married and, and be very, you know, comfortable in her, in her, whatever, but I don't think she

³⁶The yearly handbook for Numidia Mennonite Bible School encourages its reputation as a source of marriage partners, as in the following: "Many a lifelong friendship has begun within its doors. . . . Can Numidia Bible School be that for you? Come and see!" The handbook emphasizes that dating is permitted weekly "by permission of the Principal" and with chaperonage. Numidia Mennonite Bible School: Spiritual Growth, Fellowship, Service: Dec. 6, 1993-Mar. 18, 1994 (Box 26, Numidia, Pa. 17858), 1, 11.

³⁷Congregations represented by my informants included several never-married women of various ages; only one congregation included an unmarried man over age 30 who I was told had not yet married because he was shy. Moreover, my informants made a distinction between the following terms: unmarried women (usually younger women still of marriageable age), never-married women (usually older) and "single sisters," the generic term which included unmarried, never-married, abandoned, separated, and widowed women. Another term used for never-married women but disliked was "leftover blessing." (Because the church believes that divorce and remarriage is a sin, a woman whose husband leaves or divorces them must remain celibate until their first husband dies.)

would just decide that she's not going to get married.

Janet: Because they do hold the, the marriage as a, a high thing to accomplish.

Evelyn: I mean it's not that they try to promote a, a single life although there's--, they have no problem with a person that remains single. And they do make the statement that it's not for everybody to be married.

While marriage may not be for every Eastern woman, it is for most. Sermons encourage this; pastors preach frequently on marriage, the family, and the Christian home: a district-wide sermon series over Memorial Day was entitled, "The Christian Home: Source of Sacred Social Security." As Rebecca, age 24, put it:

I think most girls grow up with the idea that marriage is the ultimate and something's wrong with you if you don't get married. And a lot of girls my age who are unmarried really struggle with the fact that something must be wrong with them because they haven't gotten married. And it's not like they have dreams for anything that would be higher or better for them than that. So I can't really say they, they give anything up [when they marry] because that's what they want.

For most young women in the denomination, according to this informant, marriage is a highly esteemed goal, and with it the desire for children. Married but childless women are the exception, as illustrated by my informants' reactions to me. When they learned that I had been married ten years and was still childless, none assumed it may have been by choice; most told me stories of friends of theirs who had adopted children or had unexpectedly become pregnant ten or 15 years into their marriage. Childless

couples in this denomination usually adopt and many adopt either Central American children or biracial children from the U.S. One of the most interesting dynamics in this denomination will be watching the church incorporate these children as they grow into adulthood, since many church members are troubled by inter-racial marriage -- as one woman told me, "I just don't think it's natural, do you?" -- though no one I spoke with had biblical justifications against it.

The Importance of Motherhood

Clearly most of my informants derived their primary identity from motherhood. With large families -- my married informants averaged six children apiece -- motherhood and later, grandmotherhood, consume a large portion of their lives. Mary Ann reflected on her childbearing years, "That was my life, having children. I just loved it, you know. Looked forward to having babies." Mary Ann's favorite activity was making "mother's scrapbooks," in which she saved memorabilia from her children's growing-up years. She also participated in "mother's circle letters," passed among a group of 12 young mothers who lived at a distance, sharing ideas about mothering, including information on breast-feeding from the La Leche league. Even for unmarried women the idea of mothering was important. As one woman who never bore children of her own but was influential in the lives of her

(now adult) nieces told me, "Sometimes you can mother children without being a birth mother."

In general my informants believe that a woman's primary responsibility is to be home with her children. In at least one instance, the local congregation is helping to financially support a young widow with five young children so she can remain at home with them full time. When they reach school age, the congregation expects she will take a job to support herself. Rhoda, a mother of adult children, spoke about wanting to be available for her children when they get home from their jobs at the end of the day.

I have never, with all my other responsibilities, never want to be away when my children get home. And even with sewing circle, sometimes, I see that my first responsibility is to them. . . . I have my degree in teaching, and that's my--, that's a joy. I would love to do that if circumstances changed drastically. . . . But with them all out of school, I'm not ready to be a teacher. There's just too much--, you know, to be on a regular basis away from home, it's just-- that's not right. . . . I would lose control, or, not control but contact . . . with what's happening in everybody's life.

The way many of my informants spoke about being connected to their children suggested to me that they view motherhood as a mission or special calling. Linda Boynton Arthur, writing about the Holdeman Mennonites, a related conservative group in rural California, states that, "No vocation in this society is considered to be higher than that of the mother, because she . . . is responsible to God

for the care and training of her children."³⁸ The sense of mission and identity that many Eastern Pa. women invest in their roles as mothers (and grandmothers) adds value to what at times is demanding and tedious work. Single women also have opportunities to nurture children through babysitting or teaching children's Sunday School. Older women occasionally mentor younger women through shared tasks such as sewing or canning or simply getting together to talk. As Rhoda described it,

I've had a number of young girls come to sit and talk. And I'm not the only one who does that. . . . I mean, we wouldn't call it counseling exactly, but that's what it is. . . . As much as possible we try to meet each other's needs.

In these ways mothering is a highly esteemed role for Eastern Pa. Mennonite women.

Perhaps partly in recognition of this fact the Eastern Church recently added a section on "The Christian Home" to its church-wide *Statement of Rules and Discipline*. The section encourages members to "make their homes models in simplicity and cleanliness, . . . headquarters for godly influences, training schools for God." While the section does not explicitly recognize women's contributions in the home -- the statement is directed to "brethren and sisters upon whom rests the responsibility of making the Christian home what it ought to be" -- I think it would be understood

³⁸ Linda Louise Boynton, The Plain People: An Ethnography of the Holdeman Mennonites (Salem Wisconsin: Sheffield Publishing Company, 1986), 107.

as an exhortation directed primarily to women, and implicitly as a validation of women's caregiving work, given the community's understanding of separate spheres.³⁹

In many ways, this church community reflects the kind of strong women's culture described by historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in her article about the nineteenth-century "female world of love and ritual."⁴⁰ She describes a female-centered world bounded by home, church, and the institution of visiting. Similar to the emotionally intimate, supportive, same-sex social networks Smith-Rosenberg describes, virtually all of an Eastern Pa. Mennonite woman's socializing takes place among females.⁴¹ Women greet and visit with other women at church functions. When families pay Sunday afternoon visits, the conversation quickly breaks down into same sex groupings. At times of major transition (births and deaths), Mennonite women

³⁹Another interpretation of this statement is that its inclusion might also be used to blame women for problems in the home as, for example, if children do not remain in the faith.

⁴⁰Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America" in Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York: Oxford, 1985).

⁴¹I found no evidence of the homo-eroticism described by Smith-Rosenberg in her study, although that is not to say that such "special friendships" do not exist. For example, one occasionally hears of unmarried women, often sisters, living together. But given the church's position against homosexuality, described to me as an "aberration," I doubt a woman could consciously acknowledge such feelings within herself and remain part of the denomination.

provide instrumental and emotional support to each other. At funerals, Mennonite women prepare and serve a meal after the burial. Frequent visiting is common to welcome the birth of a new baby. One formerly conservative informant expressed surprise that mutual friends who live in the city were not deluged with visitors upon the birth of their new baby, which would have been common in the conservative community she left.

Moreover, in the nineteenth-century world described by Smith-Rosenberg, the mother-daughter bond is generally strong. This also holds true for Eastern Pa. Mennonite women. My informants with teenage daughters spoke of advising them on boyfriends. Another told me with pride, "My girls talk things over with me. If they have a problem they come to me." In this community, daughters become homemakers and usually mothers in a mutually reinforcing tradition. Mennonite daughters rely on mothers for training in tasks of traditional domesticity. Likewise, mothers of large families rely on older daughters for instrumental help in household tasks. Smith-Rosenberg's study reminds us of the "absence of that mother-daughter hostility today considered almost inevitable."⁴² The concept of separation from one's parents, a common theme in psychoanalytic literature, is foreign to them. In fact, what I find surprising about conservative Mennonite mothers

⁴²Ibid., 21.

and daughters is their lack of separation. While a daughter may occasionally spend several years away from her home community teaching or in church mission work before she marries, these absences are characterized by frequent visits, letters, and phone calls to her mother. Women live at home until they marry and mothers are very involved in their daughter's lives.

Arguably, conservative Mennonite daughters are drawn closer to their mothers in reaction to the perceived threat posed by the wider culture. Edith Neisser has hypothesized that hardship and harassment from the outside may intensify the mother-daughter bond. For Eastern Pa. Mennonites, the *Statement of Rules and Discipline* mentions the need to "safeguard against . . . worldly accommodations,"⁴³ and one mother spoke of zealously "guarding our children's influences," to the extent of excising offensive sections from the family's World Book Encyclopedia. The dangers that conservative Mennonites perceive from the outside culture may lead to a strengthened bond between a daughter and her mother, who is a woman's primary role model.

Decision-making at Home and in Church

⁴³*Statement of Christian Doctrine and Rules and Discipline of the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church and Related Areas*, (sixth statement, published privately, 1993), 1.

Eastern Pa. Mennonites accept that men are to be the leaders at home and in church, a situation in which women claim to be quite content. Ellen describes the home situation as follows:

We feel very strongly that the father is the head of the home. He has the final word. Um, we see the women's movement, liberation movement, as being completely contrary to God's plan for the family, where the father is the head of the home, even though he's not there all the time or maybe not as much as the mother. We've heard, just [sermons] all the time encouraging the fathers to take their proper responsibility, don't push it off on your wife, you know, it's actually your job. I think in the Bible almost all the commandments are to fathers. It hardly ever says, "Mother, do this." But it says, "Father," you know, "train up your children in the way they're to go," and, and ah, giving them advice. So I think it's actually [fathers'] responsibility to see that it's going to go right. Be the spiritual head of the home. And, and actually the discipline, disciplinary head, too. . . . It's finally their responsibility.

In fact, women's actual reality may be less patriarchal than the above rhetoric implies. In her description of the Holdeman Mennonites, Linda Boynton Arthur argues that although Holdeman marriages are traditional in nature, "these domestic-oriented women wield a considerable amount of informal power."⁴⁴ In Eastern Pa. Mennonite families where the fathers work away from home (which is the majority of the cases), women exercise day-to-day control over children and household matters. One informant described mothers as "leaders in their homes."

⁴⁴Boynton Arthur, "Holdeman Ethnography," 213.

Mothers seldom wait to discipline children until fathers come home but administer punishment themselves. In general, my informants have control over the household budget. Some take on extra work at home and in at least one case that income became the woman's discretionary fund: Rhoda plants and tends a garden plot of lilies which she sells to a local greenhouse, using the money for trips to visit family.

However there were other indications that conservative women in this tradition sincerely believe that men are more able leaders and better thinkers, a belief which I found troubling. One of my informants, a single mother who was abandoned by her husband and has since single-handedly raised and economically supported her three children into adulthood, suggested solicitously that I have my husband help me transcribe our interview and write up the results, "so then you'll be sure to get an A." Hers was a sincere effort to be helpful and an ironic reflection, given her own independent history, of her belief that a woman's work would obviously benefit from a man's input.

Patriarchal attitudes such as this carry over into the marriage relationship, as well. Louise, an informant who is no longer conservative, believes that the quality of a woman's relationship with her husband is the single most important factor influencing conservative Amish or Mennonite women's lives for good or ill. She says,

Men in, in those groups-- well, I guess they're just the same as men everywhere, but some of them use the church's, um, interpretation as, as a license to express power and, ah, for some women that's everything from completely terrible to, you know, just sort of a pain that's kind of constantly there.⁴⁵

Women's subordination to their husbands in marriage carries over into the church setting as well, where women are subject to the authority of men. As Ruth summarized for me, "It's mostly the men's business to make the decisions at church."

While not expressly forbidden in church literature, women in leadership is understood to be unbiblical. This is a mandate apparently so well understood that it is nowhere expressly stated in the Rules and Discipline.

⁴⁵Marc A. Olshan and Kimberly D. Schmidt have written of the Amish that while religion legitimizes patriarchal authority in conservative communities, it also mitigates it. As evidence of this viewpoint they suggest that such issues as family abandonment and domestic violence are not major problems for the vast majority of Amish women. My research disputes this. One of my informants had been abandoned by her husband, another had suffered childhood sexual abuse by a relative, and a third informant alluded to a situation in her congregation in which the husband's abuse of his wife was "mostly limited to verbal abuse" (emphasis mine). In another interview, two mothers acknowledged that outsiders might consider as child abuse their strict discipline of children. While the secrecy of family violence impedes gathering information about it, my study demonstrates that conservative groups like Eastern Pa. Mennonites are not immune to the problems that Schmidt and Olshan describe. See Schmidt and Olshan, "Amish Women and the Feminist Conundrum," in The Amish Struggle with Modernity, ed. Donald B. Kraybill and Marc A. Olshan (Hanover, N.J.: University Press of New England, 1994), 215-229.

Rhoda described their philosophy on men's and women's roles in the church as follows:

In Corinthians it talks about a woman keeping silence in the churches. Uh, there's different ways to interpret that, . . . we believe it is [that] we don't usurp authority over a man. We don't lead the discussion where there's men [present], that type of thing . . . A woman would never stand up and teach a men's Sunday School class . . . And if the boys and girls are together than there's a man teacher. So I feel that we do have--, we can share our feelings and our opinions but the men, the woman basically does not take authority over men.

Although women are subject to men's authority, in certain areas of church life a woman can still exercise leadership. Referring approvingly to a woman she sees as a leader in her congregation, Rebecca told me, "Well, she just gets ideas, takes them in hand and does them," citing examples of the woman's reorganization of the school library and establishment of a sewing committee to make clothing for Guatemalan relief. In some congregations the bishops' wives, who accompany their husbands on pastoral visits, are also seen as leaders. In these ways women can exercise some leadership in church while not challenging male authority.

In church, formal decision-making power rests with men. While every member is permitted by church rules to vote on congregational decisions, in practice women almost always abstain. Rhoda described what takes place at church business meetings:

And the sisters come, now, not all of them, some of them choose to stay home . . . with their children because it can get late, but that's not because they aren't welcome. And we are allowed to vote, ah, we're even allowed to voice our opinions, but basically, the, the men have--, do most of the talking.

The same sentiment is also echoed by unmarried women. Local congregations schedule periodic "heads of home" meetings that single women who live independently would ostensibly be eligible to attend, although they never go. The following interaction between two older single sisters demonstrates this dynamic:

Evelyn: We may vote, women may but I usually don't. I just feel that it's--, personally, I'd rather have the men make the decision than I do.

Janet: Same here. I don't want to make the wrong decision. (laughs)

Evelyn: I'm not, ah, good at that, making decisions. I'm more indecisive. (laughs)

Janet: I've had to make a lot of decisions. But ah, I just feel for in church life that's, that's the men's role more than mine.

Evelyn: That's the way I feel. I'm comfortable with what they--, I'm sure they, they have more insight than I do on the issue. . . . Not that I don't care. No, it's because I have confidence that, that they can do their job. I have enough of other things to think about.

Note the difference in perspectives: Evelyn feels herself to be indecisive and has other concerns to bother with while Janet is comfortable making decisions but draws a distinction in church life, where she prefers men to take the lead.

Women, as in the example above, prefer to abdicate decision-making out of a strong belief in men's superiority, which they believe to be biblically ordained. I had to wonder if this self-deprecation takes an emotional toll, a question to which I will return later. But women may also be constrained by implicit understandings about proper and improper actions for women. Rebecca and I discussed the indefinable "unwritten rules and assumptions" about how much initiative a woman can take before she is dismissed as "uppity" or "lacking in modesty or in [womanly] graces." It seems that what the *Rules and Discipline* "allow" women to do and what, in fact, is considered acceptable behavior, differ.

While women lack formal decision-making power, married women, at least, participate in informal church decision-making processes through their spouses. According to Rebecca, "The married [women] generally let their husbands speak for them, I mean, they would discuss issues together at home." After agreeing on issues at home beforehand, married couples also usually vote alike on church decisions. As Rhoda said, "If I'm not sure how Harry would vote on this issue, I don't vote. Because if I vote different than him (laughs) than I, than I'd cancel out his vote." These descriptions suggest that married women exercise indirect influence in church decision-making

through coming to agreement beforehand with their husbands.

As Louise put it,

You get to say what you want to say because you can sort of say it through this man. (laughs) Which in a way is terrible. In another way it really works for people.

While married women can influence church decisions informally through their husbands, single women are at a significant disadvantage. Lacking a male spokesperson they are denied influence in church decisions and information afterward about why particular decisions were made. As one single sister described it,

And sometimes there are just, um, brothers' meetings . . . where married men would go and discuss some issues and then, of course, if you happen not to be married, you know, usually, there's someone you could talk to afterward about what took place, or, you know, to give your input. But, I can tend to feel a little cut off from some of the major issues. . . . [It's harder to] know what's really going on. There are a number of people that are especially considerate about letting single women know what's going on, you know, without us constantly pestering to find out, . . . women who've been single for a while themselves and recently have gotten married and remember what it was like.

In this way single women are denied access to both formal and informal channels of influence in the church.

As we have seen, then, conservative women's gender roles are centered in marriage, motherhood and homemaking, with little access to formal power.⁴⁶ I turn now to a

⁴⁶ As one church publication puts it, "Even though the husband is the head of the wife and home, the wife should take her place in managing the domestic affairs of the home." Building Christian Homes: A Manual of Bible

discussion of the relationship between these gender roles and women's clothing, looking for those sartorial meanings identified by conservative women themselves.

Reflections on Conservative Dress

I have never been out so far in this direction from the city, almost at the river where farmland rolls in verdant hills of cultivated corn and tobacco. Just as Rebecca told me over the phone, the gospel sign at the end of her lane marks the first farm on the right, where I am to turn in. "Fear God and Repent From Sin" the sign proclaims in hand lettering. As instructed, I continue back the half-mile, dusty lane toward the second farmhouse facing the barn.

At the first farmhouse I pass smiling toddlers and their mother shelling peas on the porch, surrounded by cats and a dog. Seeing them solves a question I had been meaning to ask about what clothing adaptations conservative Mennonites make to accommodate active children on hot summer days. The girls, in simple dresses, are bare-legged to the knees, the boys wear shirt sleeves rolled back and pant legs rolled up, and both are barefoot. I drive by slowly and smile, glad that my car, while not their regulation black, is at least a sedate grey color, and

Principles and Practical Instructions (Lititz, Pa.: Eastern Mennonite Publications, 1991), 22.

wondering what explanation my informant will give these neighbors for my strange appearance on her doorstep. Evangelism, probably.

As I park by the barn, three boys and their father are heading out in a hay wagon. I approach a neat farmhouse surrounded by a tidy arrangement of flowers and herbs. Rebecca answers my knock, a young, light-brown-skinned woman dressed in conservative dress, her kinky black hair pulled back under a white prayer covering. Yesterday's informant has described her to me as, "a black girl, but dear as can be."

Before we can sit down she asks if I will accompany her to leave her car at the garage for repair. It's the least I can do, though not the ethnographer's reciprocal "pay-back" I would have thought of first. Soon I am trying to keep up with Rebecca as she zips her car down hills and around sharp turns. I am hoping not to lose her (thereby becoming hopelessly lost myself) en route to the mechanic. Eventually she slows for me to catch up and I follow her to the garage.

Once there, Rebecca parks and unselfconsciously nods to the mechanics. While every woman in plain dress attracts attention, surely Rebecca especially stands out because of her race. As she hops into my car I am dying to ask her how she came to join this small band of homogenous ethnic-Swiss/German Mennonites. The closest I can come is

to ask how long she has been in Lancaster County. Fourteen years, she tells me, making me feel like the newcomer as a seven-year resident.

Later we talk at her kitchen table, with the sounds of a tractor droning outside and an old-fashioned clock chiming inside. Rebecca tells me how, as a former foster child, the church has given her a sense of rootedness, family, and a place to belong. These compensate, she believes, for the fact that she doubts she will ever marry because, "even though church people say they believe in inter-racial marriages, very few of them actually would permit it for their own families." Rebecca smiles wryly about the fact that she is more comfortable here than in any black church she has ever visited, summarizing, "I guess [belonging] has more to do with the things you're used to in your culture rather than the color of your skin."

Like my other informants, Rebecca's sense of belonging as a conservative Mennonite woman is distinctively marked by the clothing she wears. Among other things her dress visibly identifies her as a woman in subordination to men. Moreover it protects, motivates, and separates her, as I will examine in the following sections.

Conservative Dress and its Meanings

The dress of conservative Mennonites is considered by them, as for Hasidic Jews,⁴⁷ to be apparel once worn by all members of the group during an earlier time period.⁴⁸ As prescribed by the church, the dress of Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite women is a requirement of membership. As Rhoda told me, "We promise to dress this way. And if we don't then we forfeit membership."

Women in the community are mandated to wear a particular style of dress called a "cape dress" that includes an extra layer of fabric -- a cape -- over the bust, attached at the shoulders and waist but open at the sides, designed to mask a woman's figure (see figure 1.) The *Statement of Rules and Discipline* requires that cape dresses be "modest" and "without trimming," as well as have "at least a mid-calf length skirt and three-quarter length or longer sleeves."⁴⁹ Dresses are sewn at home out of serviceable cotton-polyester fabrics (a knit material called "softique" is especially popular), usually with tiny print patterns in either pastel colors or sober, dark colors; prohibitions include "no sparkly colors or flimsy

⁴⁷Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz, ed. Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment (New York: Mouton Publishers, 1979), 17.

⁴⁸For a full historical treatment see Melvin Gingerich, Mennonite Attire through Four Centuries (Breinigsville, Pa.: The Pennsylvania German Society, 1970).

⁴⁹*Discipline*, 17-18.

fabrics," as one informant summarized it. Church rules specify that "materials shall not be transparent and shall be of subdued modest colors." Cape dresses are worn with white mesh head coverings and black shoes and stockings. Jewelry (including wedding rings) may not be worn; pins and "bracelet-style watch bands" are proscribed, although watches with simple bands are allowed.⁵⁰ Winter coats and woven head scarfs are black and serviceable.

For men's apparel, the church recommends "the regulation coat, plain hat and black footwear."⁵¹ The regulation suit coat, often referred to as the plain suit, is a jacket without lapels that buttons up to the neck, a historic carry-over from the mid-nineteenth century that has become standardized.⁵² Neckties are deemed "unnecessary" and not to be worn. Men are expected to wear solid color, long-sleeved shirts under their suits (see figure 1.) The church, however, specifies no restrictions on men's work clothes.

Children dress in simplified versions of adult clothing: girls in simple pastel print dresses (without a cape) and knee socks, and boys in dark trousers and long-sleeved shirts buttoned to the top button (see figure 2.)

⁵⁰*Discipline*, 16.

⁵¹*Discipline*, p. 17.

⁵²Melvin Gingerich, Mennonite Attire through Four Centuries, 51.

Often boys beginning at age ten or 12 will wear plain suits to church. Since they are not yet church members subject to church rules, children have more latitude in choice of clothing. In at least one congregation, young children are allowed to come to church barefoot in summer. Boys wear short-sleeve shirts at home. Except for church, youth often wear running shoes.

Infant clothing is gendered at a very young age. While a child might occasionally wear sleepers for the first six weeks or so, soon thereafter baby boys are dressed in trousers and baby girls in dresses.

Eastern Pa. Mennonite women intend certain meanings through their apparel: primarily, subjection to God and submission to male authority. This is explicit in sermons and statements of church discipline and my informants also consistently voiced it. Beyond these intended meanings, however, my analysis of all the conversations with informants revealed additional patterns of meaning implicit in the apparel of Eastern Pa. Mennonite women to which I will return after discussing the expression of subordination in women's dress.

Head covering: expression of submission

By far the part of women's dress most imbued with meaning is the head covering, sometimes called a veiling, which carries clearly connotes submission for my

informants.⁵³ The covering is made up of two pieces of white net fabric, sewn together and pinned to the hair with straight pins; covering strings, left untied behind the ears, are optional and may be white or black (see figure 3.) The church's *Statement of Rules and Discipline* states that, "Every sister shall wear an appropriate veiling at all times for a constant testimony that she accepts her position as a Christian woman." A woman's position is very much related to male headship, as written in the discipline: "We believe that it is the properly veiled head which is the sign of the Christian woman in God's divine order."⁵⁴ In this, Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites refer back to the biblical injunctions in I Corinthians 11:1-16 RSV, in which the Apostle Paul states that "any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head," and "the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God."

⁵³I had indications that women's subordination extended not only to dress but to discussions of dress as well. On at least two occasions I scheduled interviews with women to talk about clothing and women's roles. Upon arriving I unexpectedly found that their husbands had arranged to be present during our interview. While I addressed my questions to the woman, her husband sometimes offered responses on his wife's behalf or the wife occasionally deferred to him. Husbands most often answered questions related to congregational or biblical reasons for certain practices such as dress. In time, to avoid this problem I learned to deliberately schedule interviews when I knew that husbands would be away at work.

⁵⁴*Discipline*, 25.

Just as for Muslim women the veiling communicates deference to men,⁵⁵ so, too, the "Christian Woman's Veiling" -- as church publications refer to the head covering -- visibly expresses a Mennonite woman's submission to male authority, both at home and in church.

Women begin wearing the head covering when they make a public conversion and join the church, usually at about 13 years of age, though sometimes as late as age 16. As Rhoda told me, "They all put capes on and the covering when they accept the Lord and become church members." There is no corresponding male headwear; men are encouraged to wear a particular style of black polyester hat, machine-washable, with a medium-sized brim, but from my observation, few do. Head coverings are worn at all times, except when sleeping. Laura Weaver has described how old, slightly soiled head coverings are worn at home for cleaning or gardening; new ones are worn when a woman goes out.⁵⁶

Conservative women in my study have clear ideas about how the covering ought to look; as Ruth pointed out, it should be "becoming, not look like it's falling off." Moreover, as Marie described it,

⁵⁵Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986.)

⁵⁶Laura Weaver, "Writing about the Covering and Plain Clothes as a Mennonite 'Family' Possession," Mennonite Life (December 1994), 5.

Our church recommends that we have a covering that pretty well covers our hair. . . . We like when it comes close to the ears, . . . so that it pretty well--, there's not a lot of hair out in the back here.

My informants also draw clear distinctions between their style of covering and that worn by other Amish and Mennonite women in Lancaster County. A recent issue of the church's monthly publication states that, "The veiling should be worn in such a way that it can be seen from any direction. It should be the prominent feature on the sister's head." Marie pointed out that their style of covering is "less round than some." They do not wear headscarves or kerchief-type head coverings to avoid being confused with nuns. Moreover, Ellen expressed disdain for

these women that wear just a real tiny little thing, you know, on top of their head. It might be like, ah, "I'm trying to obey the letter of the law by wearing something," but it's really not veiling your head. It's not consistent, it's more of a mockery, . . . or maybe a shame to what the Bible commands, what we feel the Bible commands Christian women to wear.

Like most elements of women's dress in this denomination, the head covering has changed little over the years, with only a slight variation in fabric, "toward heavier material that you can actually tell somebody's wearing something rather than a real thin material that you can barely see," according one informant.

What comes through in the above quotes is women's desire that their coverings be very visible, neither too transparent nor too small to be noticed. Pamela Klassen

has speculated that the woman's head covering "interiorizes female subordination," an assessment that seems to apply here.⁵⁷ Coverings both reflect and further a woman's sense of submission. Conservative women fully accept their identity as subordinate and are proud to make that visible.

On the other hand, because it is such a potent, visible symbol of women's submission, changing her covering may be the first indication that a woman plans to leave. For example, when Florence decided to leave her community she adopted a slightly smaller version of the covering without strings, a change that was immediately noticed by her friends and family. Later, she was told by an Eastern bishop, "Once you start making changes there's no convenient stopping place." This seemingly minute conveyed important meanings to insiders.

The only optional element in covering style has to do with covering ties or strings. The presence of strings in this denomination seems to indicate somewhat greater conservatism and conscientiousness or religiosity, since in several congregations only minister's wives and older women wear them.⁵⁸

⁵⁷Pamela Klassen, "The Power of Symbols: Dress and Gender among Mennonites," presentation at Mennonites and Power conference, Elizabethtown College, June 1993, 4.

⁵⁸Historically in Lancaster Conference, the Mennonite conference from which Eastern Pa. Mennonites formed, covering strings were an important part of the head covering's effectiveness. As Laura Weaver has written, "We were taught, 'When the strings go, everything does.' .

In addition to covering ties, another indication of conservatism may be larger-than-specified covering size. I found one indication in the monthly church publication that some in the denomination are requesting "guidelines for those who wish to increase covering size beyond that which is normally practiced."⁵⁹ Since smaller size veilings are linked to apostasy,⁶⁰ by implication larger size veilings may indicate the presence of what Nathan Joseph refers to as "overconformity." As Joseph defines it, overconformity is behavior that "rises above the norm," as in "the overly conscientious penitent who requires an even higher standard of himself than the church exacts."⁶¹ Three of my informants wore covering strings, though they attached little importance to that fact when I asked about it except

. . . If the tie-strings were omitted, the cap could be made smaller, the hair could show at the neck, and the hairstyle could be more versatile. Then the woman could take off the cap more easily and go to places she wouldn't go and do things she wouldn't do while wearing it. Thus, the disappearance of the strings would ultimately mean the loss of important Mennonite values." In Weaver, "Writing about Plain Clothes," 5.

⁵⁹*The Eastern Mennonite Testimony* XXV, no. 11 (November, 1993), 6.

⁶⁰As in the following notes from a sermon on The Christian Woman's Veiling: "There is a tendency for veilings to become smaller; this is often the last mark of separation to be discarded as groups go into apostasy." Ibid., 5.

⁶¹Nathan Joseph, *Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication Through Clothing* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986), 94.

that ties made coverings harder to keep unsoiled, requiring more frequent washing. In my assessment, however, their decision to wear covering ties -- and presumably also the presence of larger-than-normal coverings -- indicates stronger conservatism and conscientiousness among women in the community.

Dress as visible expression of submission

While the head covering is a conservative woman's main indicator of subordination, to a lesser extent her dress also expresses the same message. In part this is due to the sharp distinctions evidenced between men's and women's clothing. As Barnes and Eicher have written, different forms of dress for males and females "define, support, and reinforce the relative power and influence of the sexes."⁶² For Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites, gender differences are highlighted by the sharp delineation of appropriate men's and women's apparel, thereby reinforcing and extending the existing power differentials between the sexes. Mennonite women's dress heightens femininity by its contrast with masculine clothing. In this the church has taken existing societal standards and consolidated them into prescriptive dress codes.

Grant McCracken argues that clothing gives a symbolic rendering of gendered cultural categories. He offers a

⁶²Dress and Gender, 20.

comparison of symbolic clothing characteristics by gender that holds true for my group as well. According to McCracken, women in general wear clothing that is nontailored, of soft and light fabrics, in lighter and varied colors with curved and flowing lines. By contrast, men generally wear tailored clothing that is coarse and stiff, monochromatic and darker in color, with square and angular lines.⁶³ Similarly, in the conservative Mennonite community, women's and men's clothing fits McCracken's categorizations. Men's only clothing requirement is the plain suit worn with solid color shirts and black shoes. Men are restricted to black or navy plain suits, usually made of a stiff, machine-washable fabric called Swedish Knit. Unlike women's clothing which is sewn at home, men's suits are predominantly ready-made (in China, according to the tags on the suits⁶⁴) and sold at a few select local stores selling plain clothing. Optionally, conservative men buy regular suit coats at the local shopping mall which women alter into plain suits. Only a few women (and men) sew plain suits from scratch.

⁶³Grant McCracken, Culture and Consumption (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 99.

⁶⁴Good's Store in Blue Ball, Pa., sells the largest selection of plain clothing in central Pennsylvania, including plain suits made in China. Interestingly, plain suits bear some resemblance to Mao-style jackets, so their production in China is perhaps not surprising.

That the plain suit is standard wear for conservative Mennonite men is not surprising, given the group's gender role ideology. In a new book entitled, Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress, Anne Hollander describes how suits came to convey power and authority, and for this reason have historically (at least until recently) been limited to men. Even today for men, she writes, "The suit remains the uniform of official power, . . . it suggests diplomacy, compromise, civility, and physical self-control," characteristics that also apply to conservative Mennonite men. In this way the plain suit reinforces men's power over women in the denomination.

The irony about Eastern Pa. Mennonite men's apparel, of course, is that work clothes, in which most men dress most of the time, are not regulated by the church, except under the general guidelines of modesty and proscription against fashionable clothing. While some men wear the plain suit to their jobs as accountants or teachers, most work in laboring trades where a suit would be inappropriate. This makes Mennonite men more easily able to pass in the wider world, leading to a double standard in dress that at least some of my informants are also aware of. Rhoda described it this way:

The men are to be the leaders but in plain dress, too often they aren't. In the work-a-day world, in the wintertime, you can't tell -- my son goes off to work, he's a carpenter, he's out in the cold, so he has an insulated coverall suit, and, you know, an insulated pullover-hood jacket.

Now, when my husband goes to work you can tell, he wears his plain suit in the classroom. . . . When you get to know one of our men, who is consistent, you do know that they are separate, because they don't wear some things that other people wear, but it's not-- the line is not as distinct [as for women].

Overall in this church group, women bear the burden of cultural separation on their very bodies to a much greater extent than do men, another indication of women's subordinate status in the denomination.

Constrictive clothing: symbol of subordination

Clothing can reflect women's subordination in yet a third way. Just as comfort and freedom of movement in dress symbolizes autonomy, so, too, can constrictive clothing symbolize subordination. To the outsider, Mennonite women's attire is not "wearer-friendly." To insiders, modesty is more important than comfort. Women wearing long-sleeved cape dresses and thick black stockings lack the mobility and coolness of slacks. While conservative women can and do perform everything from gardening to playing softball in dresses, their body movements are more constrained in comparison to men's and male clothing. Symbolically, this supports Susan Kaiser's analysis of men's clothing as that which emphasizes doing,

or physical effectiveness, while women's clothing emphasizes being, or physical attractiveness.⁶⁵

However this concern between male freedom of movement and female constriction in clothing is not one that most of my informants had considered. Most had been raised in the tradition and always dressed similarly. As Rebecca said,

I can't say I thought about [dress] a whole lot at that point [as a child]. I was young enough that, you know, that was what everybody did that was in my social group. And so really it would have been more difficult not to follow these dress codes than to follow them. So I guess when you grow up with something you're used to it.

By contrast, Nathan Joseph has written that uncomfortable clothing which constrains body movements is a "constant reminder to the wearers of their lack of power."⁶⁶ The corollary for Mennonite women, I believe, is that uncomfortable dress both symbolically and in reality emphasizes a woman's sense of powerlessness, reinforcing the church's teachings around women's subordination.

Dress as Sacred Symbol

A Mennonite woman's head covering is the one article of plain dress that cannot be bought by outsiders; neither the net fabric nor pattern for sewing it are available in stores. Ready-made plain suits, hats, sweaters, coats,

⁶⁵Susan B. Kaiser, The Social Psychology of Clothing: Symbolic Appearances in Context, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), 89.

⁶⁶Joseph, 40.

shoes, stockings, and undergarments, as well as acceptable cape dress fabrics are sold at select stores specializing in plain clothing.⁶⁷ But coverings must be custom-made by group members. I believe the reason for this is that the covering is imbued with sacred meaning. At Shady Maple Restaurant and Good's Store in eastern Lancaster County, tourists come for the smorgasbord and may stay to shop for Amish suspenders or a Mennonite-style hat without profaning the symbolism of the clothing article they buy as a souvenir. To sell a covering to a tourist, by contrast, would be sacrilege.

Evidence from my interviews suggests that women come to view the head covering as a sacred symbol and that this extends to from whom they buy it. While some women sew their own coverings (a time-consuming and detailed art), others prefer to buy them from mothers, grandmothers or friends, when possible. Often a few women in a church district (composed of several congregations) will run a small covering business. A skilled seamstress, like Marie, an informant, can make five dozen a week if she works hard,

⁶⁷These stores comprise a "Mennonite marketplace" for plain clothing which is easily overlooked by outsiders. I have visited small shops, for example, that sell over 25 styles of black women's lace-up shoes. This marketplace also includes outlets for secondhand plain clothing. One informant buys plain suits for her growing sons at a secondhand shop to keep costs down since they outgrow them so quickly.

though most prefer to make a few coverings for close friends and family.

Moreover, because the covering has special meaning for women who have once worn one, it cannot be trivialized. Laura Weaver, a formerly conservative Mennonite, intended once again to put on her covering for a Halloween party during graduate school, but discovered, "I could not wear the cap for other than its intended use; it was not just a piece of net to be treated as part of a costume." For her, even though she no longer dressed plain, the covering still held sacred symbolism.⁶⁸

The sacredness of the covering extends not only to its purchase but its disposal, as well. Nathan Joseph has written,

Since an item of clothing is not only a physical vehicle but also carries a freight of signs ranging from the profound to the trivial, it cannot be disposed of without reference to its meaning. Where the symbolism is sacred, the garment may not be disposed of at all, or else only with special consideration.⁶⁹

In perhaps the most striking example of this symbolism, one informant told me how she cuts up coverings when they become worn so outsiders cannot retrieve them and put them to any irreverent use.

Finally, because women's dress is so imbued with special meaning it is not easily discarded. Laura Weaver

⁶⁸Weaver, 6.

⁶⁹Joseph, 60.

has written that "not just artifacts, the cap and plain clothes are potent symbols whose power lingers even after the specific practices disappear." Florence, who left the Eastern church ten years ago, still chooses to wear a covering when she goes out to work. As she says, "It's just been so much a part of my life that I can't throw it off abruptly." Another woman in her fifties who no longer attends a Mennonite church still wears a head covering and cape dresses because she finds they express her cultural identity. As the preceding demonstrates, women's coverings are sacred symbols for many conservative Mennonite women.

Dress as mark of inclusion and exclusion

The particular style of dress worn by Eastern Pa. Mennonite women -- which falls in the same category as what one writer has described as "super-visible" clothing⁷⁰ -- serves to highlight who is included and excluded from the group. As Barnes and Eicher have written, "Dress serves as a sign that the individual belongs to a certain group, but simultaneously differentiates the same individual from all others: it includes and excludes."⁷¹ Likewise in his discussion of early American dress and religious culture, Leigh Eric Schmidt saw plain dress as a cultural boundary

⁷⁰Joseph, 42.

⁷¹Dress and Gender, 1.

marker through which inclusion and exclusion were reified.⁷² For Eastern Pa. Mennonite women, such distinctive dress not only clearly delineates insiders from outsiders, but it also serves to emphasize a member's sense of belonging to the group. Conservative Mennonites can easily locate members of their group at a glance, as, for example, when on trips. More than one informant mentioned striking up conversations with other plain people when traveling whom they identified by their clothing. Likewise, Melvin Gingerich described the symbolic value dress has had in bounding the Mennonite community, giving a sense of secure cultural belonging to those who adhere to the community's tenets.⁷³ In this way, as one author has written, "Agreement on bodily adornment [and in this case, lack of adornment] reinforces common consciousness and a common course of action that holds people together in a closely knit group."⁷⁴ The dress of conservative Mennonite women reinforces their shared religious values.

But just as dress can reinforce belonging and common values, so, too, it can communicate exclusion. Ruth Rubinstein, in a recent book entitled Dress Codes, describes groups such as the Amish, Hare Krishnas and Rastafarians who develop "clothing ensembles [that] are

⁷²Schmidt, 40.

⁷³153.

⁷⁴Cordwell and Schwartz, Fabrics of Culture, 18.

carefully conceived to set their behaviors apart from others and to reflect the groups' distinct ideas, beliefs, and values."⁷⁵ According to Rubinstein, the specific attire adopted by members of these groups places them outside the established social order. Nonmembers are "thus alerted that the social game will be played under different rules. Members of the audience may associate or interact with group members, but only on their terms."⁷⁶ In many ways the preceding holds true for conservative Mennonite women in my study. Just as dress restrictions historically were an impediment to winning converts in the wider Mennonite church,⁷⁷ little of the growth in the Eastern Pa. Mennonite Church today comes through new converts, despite the church's emphasis on evangelism.⁷⁸ Dress visibly marks this separation from the unconverted. Because of its very uniformity, Mennonite plain dress emphasizes social distance. It serves as a visible reminder of separation from non-Mennonite neighbors and relatives. Conservative

⁷⁵Ruth Rubenstein, Dress Codes: Meanings and Messages in American Culture (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1994), 13.

⁷⁶Ibid., 191.

⁷⁷See Marlene Epp, "Carrying the Banner of Nonconformity: Ontario Mennonite Women and the Dress Question," *Conrad Grebel Review* (Fall 1990), 251-2.

⁷⁸In explaining why they hold to plain dress standards despite it's impediment to winning converts, one bishop told me, "What do we gain if we become just like the world to win people from the world?"

Mennonite women thus demarcate distinct lines between insiders and outsiders through their dress.

Dress promotes uniformity

Eastern Pa. Mennonite women strive for uniformity in their clothing. Their dress comprises a "symbolic shorthand,"⁷⁹ distinctive and easily recognizable. My informants believe that the church's uniform dress code promotes united thinking and a consistent witness. As Regina told me with satisfaction about their uniform dress, "It expresses that we are one body."

In fact, conservative women's dress functions very much like a uniform, marking them as visibly separate. Similar to uniforms worn by nurses, police, or prisoners, the Eastern Mennonite women's "uniform" identifies group members, helps externalize standards for group behavior, and enables the group to exert social control over its members, as I examine in the next section. Visually, dress as a uniform suppresses individual ideosyncrasies of behavior and appearance. Moreover, it serves as testimony to group solidarity, "a uniform witness," as one informant told me.

So central is uniform dress to a woman's self-concept that some of my informants seemed to equate clothing with identity, as in this quote from Rebecca: "if I wouldn't

⁷⁹ Joseph, 105.

dress this way I would still have to choose an identity of some sort." For Regina, who converted to the church, uniform dress confirmed her identity as a Christian woman:

I can say that in this kind of dressing, with the cape dress and . . . the covering, I, I found my role as a Christian woman. I can say that. Because I was, always, for years and years, I was looking for something to express that I was a Christian woman. And I just wasn't satisfied with the way I looked. . . . And once I came to this church and they gave me some [cape dresses], I felt some kind of-- what can I say, it gave me a kind of security in a position I wanted to be. I thought, ah, now I'm, I'm living how Christ wants me to, to live. That's what I found and I, I feel very good about it.

For my informants who grew up in the church, dressing plain was not a difficulty. As one said, "it wasn't a difficult thing for me because I've always dressed out of fashion."

Because conservative Mennonite women's clothing functions as a uniform, little deviation is possible except for one area. While the uniform suppresses individuality in almost every area, women's choice in dress fabric reveals personal preferences. As Regina told me, some women choose fabrics that

are very plain, they have almost no print at all, some have little prints -- that's one of my favorites. . . . And some prefer flowery prints, but those just don't fit me. . . . You have to look for what suits your personality.

Ironically, in this limited way, women have greater clothing choice than men, because they can express their

personality through the color and design of fabric they choose.

As demonstrated through their clothing, Eastern Pa. Mennonite women willingly sacrifice individual self-expression for the larger goal of supporting a uniform witness. They show their acceptance of the group's standards by dressing in a way that is understood to reflect those same ideals. Dress powerfully symbolizes the importance of holding together the community of faith.

Dress as Means of Social Control

Uniform dress serves to make authority visible. Linda Boynton Arthur has written extensively about the dress of Holdeman Mennonite women as a form of social control. Forms of control that she identified include personal control, or self-regulation, informal control, such as gossip, and formal control, such as public reproofs by ministers.

In the case of Eastern Pa. Mennonites, social control or authority is that of the male bishops in leadership who set dress standards and enforce women's dress codes in the denomination. Like members who fail to meet church standards in other areas, a girl will be "visited" (i.e. in order to reprimand) by the local ministry for failing to dress properly. The following violations were cited as examples to me: wearing loud colors or large print fabric

patterns, putting a too-large collar on a dress, hemming a dress too short, putting extra trim or a wide ruffle on the sleeves, or top stitching with contrasting thread. As

Ellen told me about the preceding examples,

You know, it seems like such a small thing. But it's finally an expression of pride, or rebellion, that's really what it is.. . . Anything that attracts attention we feel is not consistent with our meek and quiet spirit, like the bible says.. . . We feel, ah, the loud colors and the big prints would actually encourage attention to themselves.

Other parents often help enforce community dress codes. The church helps with discipline problems. For example, according to Ellen, one parent might say to another, "Do you realize that you're actually, you know, planting pride in this child's heart by, maybe, the way you're dressing them?"

The fact that some young conservative women push the limits of what their church defines as acceptable may be related to sexual desirability, the desire to be noticed by members of the opposite sex. As one mother told me, "I think that's in every girl -- the desire to be just a little prettier." Given the ultimate importance of marriage in this tradition, these impulses toward attracting a potential marriage partner are understandable.

Anti-Fashion among conservative Mennonites

The dress of conservative Mennonite women is designed to oppose many of the influences often revealed in clothing, such as fashion and individual style. In many ways, their views on dress fit what Fred Davis has described as, "anti-fashion." Unlike fashion indifference, sometimes called "nonfashion"⁸⁰, (which Davis defines as that in which one is oblivious to or unconcerned with fashion trends), anti-fashion is oppositional dress. According to Davis, anti-fashion is a form of deliberate disidentification with the cultural mainstream that castigates the wastefulness and vanity associated with fashion.⁸¹ A quote from the Eastern Pa. Mennonite *Statement of Rules and Discipline* reflects this attitude, reminding male and female members that black dress and casual shoes "shall not follow the unhealthful and sensual designs of the world."⁸² Writers Cunningham and Voso Lab have defined anti-fashion as:

clothing which goes against what is currently in fashion. It is viewed as a means of making a political statement, and is meant to communicate a message about the group that embraces it. It often reflects beliefs, attitudes, and ideas of subcultures of the larger culture. The dress functions as a sign of rejection of the norm and

⁸⁰See Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits* (New York: Knopf, 1994) 17-18, for a discussion of nonfashion. She equates nonfashion with traditional dress found in primitive societies.

⁸¹Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 180, 168.

⁸²*Discipline*, 18.

hence the status quo. . . . [Anti-fashion] make[s] a statement through its style that clearly says no to the hegemony of the prevailing style of fashion.⁸³

In likewise opposing fashion's hegemony, Thorstein Veblen, at the turn of the century, castigated modern society for "conspicuous consumption," of which anti-fashion as expressed by my Mennonite informants is the antithesis.

Interestingly, as Davis has noted, the fashion industry often attempts to co-opt and distort expressions of anti-fashion. In a pertinent, recent example, the August 1993 *Vogue* magazine fashion spread, which was photographed in Lancaster County, featured androgynous-looking models wearing Amish suits and straw hats. Interestingly, the fashion editors chose to feature men's clothing on female models, rather than women's clothing, perhaps because of the inescapable elements of unfashionability and subordination evident in Mennonite and Amish women's dress.

Anti-fashion, then, is a deliberate reaction against contemporary fashion trends which applies to Eastern Pa. Mennonites. In several places the *Statement of Rules and Discipline* specifically guards against fashionability: e.g. for men, "clothing or footwear shall not be of fashionable, sporty, or Western styles," and for women,

⁸³Patricia A. Cunningham and Susan Voso Lab, ed. Dress and Popular Culture (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press) 13-4.

"fashionable head dress shall not be worn."⁸⁴ Now obviously, a member must have some sense of what the prevailing fashion is in order to dress unfashionably, thus making anti-fashion a conscious, deliberate choice.⁸⁵

Anti-fashion, as expressed by Eastern Pa. Mennonite women, has much to recommend it. Rebecca illustrated the benefits of this attitude when she told me,

I don't have to worry about what's in style and what's not in style and I don't have to make sure I'm always all matching. And, I spend very little money on clothing, because, you know, I can wear the same dress for five years. I mean, to me it just cuts out a lot of the frivolous--frivolousness and the worry that I would have about dress otherwise. You know, I tend to be a practical person and from that standpoint its very convenient to dress this way.

Moreover, as Janet told me in an interview,

Well, I don't have to worry about . . . keeping up with the latest. What I wear is what I wear all the time. It's economical. I mean, styles change constantly and I don't have to worry about it.

Her attitude toward clothing, typical among women in the community, is one of practicality and economy. The same attitude extends to the size of a woman's wardrobe.

Teenage girls who are dating tend to own more dresses than

⁸⁴Eastern Mennonite *Discipline*, 17, 18.

⁸⁵In a similar way, John Caughey has discussed how the seemingly distinctive practices of Old Order Mennonites, whom he studied, are connected to mainstream cultural patterns through their opposition to them. John, Caughey, "Epilogue: On the Anthropology of America," in Symbolizing America, ed. Herve Varenne, (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska, 1986), 233.

their mothers but no one owns many. As one typical teenager told me, she owns "three Sunday dresses and a bunch of everyday ones" which turned out to be 12. Even wedding dresses (new, white cape dresses) continue to be worn regularly on anniversaries and special occasions. In death the same practicality applies. When a woman dies, she is buried in her covering and a Sunday dress -- sometimes in her wedding dress if the woman is younger, other times in a good dress of a darker color if the woman is older.⁸⁶ In these ways anti-fashion, because of its practicality and opposition to mainstream fashion trends for conservative Mennonite women, can be said to be the modern-day equivalent of nonconformity, a traditional Mennonite value.

Dress mutes status distinctions

Eastern Pa. Mennonite women's dress is deliberately designed to mask many of the marks of identification usually revealed in clothing. For most of us, what we wear expresses our status, economic class, and social standing. By contrast, conservative women's dress is designed to

⁸⁶This same practical attitude applies to women's undergarments, which are store-bought at local plain clothing outlets. These come in limited styles with little lace or other ornamentation and include, among other items, women's undershirts, panties with legs (for extra modesty), a variety of nursing bras, and garter belts (more practical for thick hosiery).

conceal these very distinctions.⁸⁷ When immersed in a sea of identically dressed individuals, uniform dress lends near-invisibility to the usual class and status distinctions.

In his examination of early American religious life, Leigh Eric Schmidt discusses plain dress as the concrete expression of an egalitarian, communal order which symbolized "an equalization of rank and property."⁸⁸ In a similar vein, Gingerich has written that, historically, one of the arguments in favor of Mennonite plain dress has been its tendency to erase social barriers between rich and poor within the group.

To be sure, some muted social and economic distinctions are apparent among Eastern Pa. Mennonite women. In one church district, for example, the wives of men in leadership (as bishops, pastors, or deacons) are asked to wear covering strings, which may indicate status. In another case, an informant who had been chronically ill and recently unable to sew for herself wore dresses showing slightly more wear until a daughter took it upon herself to sew for her. In general, however, newer dresses are saved for Sunday wear and those that have become slightly faded

⁸⁷This is in contrast to Thorstein Veblen's turn-of-the-century critique of dress as an indirect reflection of status, and the role of the middle-class wife to display the wealth of her husband through her clothing.

⁸⁸Schmidt, 40.

are worn at home, muting sartorial distinctions. But while style of clothing does not reveal economic distinctions, variety does, according to one informant. Women with more money get new dresses more often -- every fall and spring, for example.

However, I found few clothing distinctions regarding age. While young women wear dark colors (black or navy blue) only for funerals and church communions, some older women choose to wear darker colors more often. In one congregation, married women are not to wear collars on their dresses but young girls may. But by in large, women's attire is interchangeable though the generations. Ruth gave the example of one mother who sewed herself a dress that turned out to be too tight, so her 13-year-old daughter is now happily wearing it.

Dress offers a feeling of protection

Just as Muslim veils are seen as effective "anti-seduction devices,"⁸⁹ so, too, do conservative Mennonite women view their dress as a form of protection from society's dangers. Their dress makes women feel less susceptible to harm, as Rebecca indicates in the following:

I guess I thought of [my dress] more as a protection. . . . Protection from whether it be, um, violence or abuse or anything like that, that

⁸⁹Fatima Mernissi, Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society (New York: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1975), 101.

you could meet out in the streets. I think, I guess in first Corinthians 11 it does say that a woman with a veiled head has power on her head because of the angels and I always thought of that as being a certain protection from physical harm, that God gives.. . . it could be that even without my knowledge, you know, God has been protecting.

A woman's faith in her dress as protection is related to the community's desire to protect members from a variety of outside evil influences. Occupations are chosen based on finding a safe work environment, "without the influence of a lot of things that we wouldn't approve of," according to one woman I interviewed. The husband of another subscribes to the daily newspaper and weekly news magazines but censors them before his teenagers are permitted to read them. A pastor's wife used the analogy of "hothouse plants" to describe protecting her children from non-church neighbors and relatives. As she said,

What hothouse owner would put his little tomato plants out in the frost? You don't do it because you know it's not good for them. . . . We're actually deliberately protecting [our children] from those influences.

Likewise, the same desire for protection exists in clothing choices as well. Dress restrictions in the denomination are extremely prescriptive. For example, the rules for young adults at the church's Bible college in central Pennsylvania mandate that a head covering be worn at night. In addition, the *Statement of Rules and Discipline* specifies the prescribed thickness of stockings ("30 denier or its equivalent") and size of covering ("the front piece

being at least one and one-half inches wide"). Following rules like these seem to give women a feeling of added safety against harm. Rhoda related this story to me:

When I went to Millersville University, I remember coming out of the library one day -- did I tell you this story?-- and there were some fellows, I call them, looked like hoodlums, and so I just [went about] my own business. And after a bit they started laughing, "Ha, ha, can't touch her, she has the angels on her head."⁹⁰ I didn't think about that for a long time. But that has been a real source of security to me, to hear them say that.

In a similar vein, another informant told me about the security she derives from believing her 13-year old daughter's plain dress will keep boys from bothering her.

The church's restrictions on women's dress are related to its understanding of sexuality. Cape dresses are designed to hide a woman's figure, a process of de-emphasizing sex. Young girls begin wearing the cape dress, I was told, when they "begin filling out." Moreover, women are considered responsible through their dress for men's moral failings. Women who expose their body and are "improperly clothed," I was told, should not be surprised if they attract unwelcome male attention. As Ellen told me,

⁹⁰This is a reference to I Corinthians 11:10: "For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head because of the angels," a verse of confusing meaning. Eastern women take this verse as protection in exercising some authority (teaching children's Sunday School, for example) as long as their heads are veiled and they adhere to plain dress standards.

We definitely feel that a woman dressed as we are does not encourage a man's attention. . . . We try to do our part in not encouraging it.

The reason most often given for dress restrictions is modesty. As Rebecca said,

God expects women to be dressed modestly and, ah, our church simply likes to have a, a uniform standard. I can't really say that this is the pattern that God expects me to wear, you know. It's something our church has agreed on and it's considered modest and distinct from anything that's stylish.

In this way, women believe that their attire avoids male harassment, thereby offering them a feeling of protection from harm.

Dress as internal motivation for good behavior

Clothing, beliefs, and behavior interact in a dynamic relationship for Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite women. Religious beliefs inform choices about attire which in turn influence decisions about appropriate women's behavior. Rhoda described the intent of Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite women's dress as follows:

We want people to look at us and think of God. And the way you dress changes how you feel about yourself. . . . Because I dress plain, people expect something from me that they wouldn't expect if I didn't dress different from everybody else, which is a challenge. . . . We believe very strongly that just because you dress plain . . . isn't the answer. It's the life that must back it up. But the dress, the plain dress, is a help to remind us of who we are.

As Rhoda's quote implies, wearing the prescribed clothing influences a wearer's identity and self-concept.

Since it "reminds [them] of who [they] are," it calls forth certain behaviors. As Ruth told me, "Some people say there's no religion in clothes. But when I'm in them there is." Beliefs as expressed through clothing thus become internalized as normative behavior for conservative Mennonite women. This internalization of group norms may also explain why women like Florence, who left the conservative Mennonites, still wear the head covering. As Joseph stated, "The group witnesses not only for outsiders but also for itself."¹

Dress as visible witness to outsiders

While Mennonite dress is important for the women who wear it, their apparel is also intended to project a desired image of the group to outsiders. My informants view their dress as a form of witnessing. As Ruth said, "With your dress you can be a witness wherever you go. . . . Your clothes should help people to be God-conscious." Marie carries tracts with her when she travels to give out to people who ask about her dress. Rebecca has even been asked if she gives out dress patterns. Moreover, the attitude that Eileen expressed was typical: "When you walk down the street even in our local towns, do people know you're a Christian? You know, I think it's important that they do."

¹Joseph, 44.

According to my informants, most strangers seem to recognize the head covering as a religious symbol. They are occasionally asked in airports or by tourists in the local farmers' market what religion they are. As Rhoda said, "It's not a strange thing to be asked, 'Are you Amish, are you a nun?'" Along the same lines, one Old Order woman has written of her visits to New York City, "New Yorkers do seem to recognize us as representing a religion. Although I've been mistaken for a nun or a Quaker, at least they've got me in the right category."²²

In the church's dress codes, distinction is made between public and private sphere activity, which is related to public witness. One of my informants called my attention to the phrase in the church's discipline that refers to what is to be worn "in all areas of public life." According to my informants, many women and children leave off their shoes and socks and go barefoot at home. One woman puts on her stockings only to walk down her lane to get the mail, since she might run into neighbors. Other women occasionally leave their hair down (literally) when at home, thus relaxing the rules somewhat when in the private sphere.

This sense of being a visible witness because of one's dress seems to influence women's behavior. In an article

²²Bonnie Helling Brechbill, "My Turn: A Well-kept Secret: A visitor to the Big Apple gets to see the residents' core of kindness," *Newsweek*, 2-20-95, 21.

about the Mennonite prayer veiling, Don Kraybill has noted how wearing the veiling reinforces expectations for role performance. Kraybill argues that Mennonite women may feel pressured to behave according to how they think outside observers expect a Mennonite wearing a white cap to behave.⁹³ As Rhoda, one of my informants told me, "If I find myself going over the speed limit and oh! and I have a covering on, you know, (laughs) what, what are they going to think of Christ?" In this way, as Joseph has written, uniform clothing enlists all onlookers as "norm enforcers."⁹⁴ Rhoda's awareness of other people's expectations for her, given her dress, influence her behavior.

Clothing, Ethnography and Reflexivity

As the preceding analysis has shown, dress for Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite women carries many complex meanings. These conservative women understand their plain dress simultaneously to protect, separate, serve as a witness, and motivate them in the enactment of their religiously defined roles as women in the church. Moreover, as we have seen, dress reinforces gender roles which are rooted in women's subordination to men. Thus women's dress and gender roles are intimately intertwined. While this study

⁹³Don Kraybill, "Mennonite Woman's Veiling: The Rise and Fall of a Sacred Symbol," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 61, no. 3 (July 1987), 298-320.

⁹⁴Joseph, 50.



Figure 1

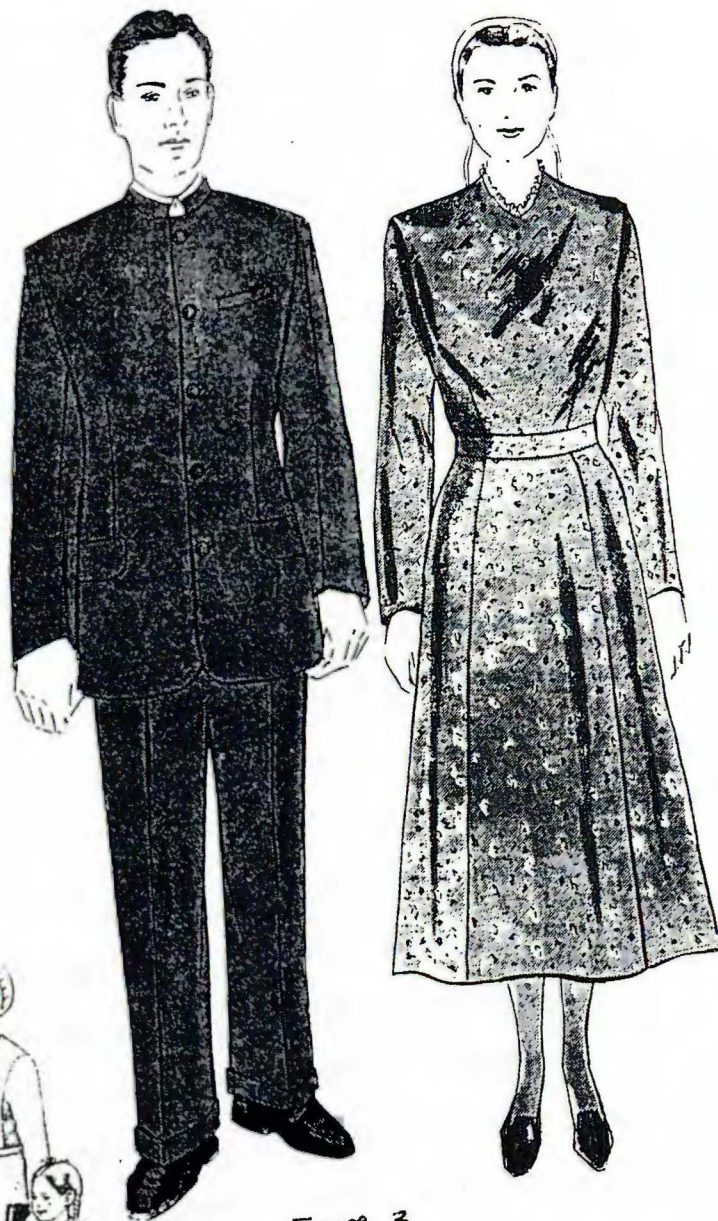


Figure 3

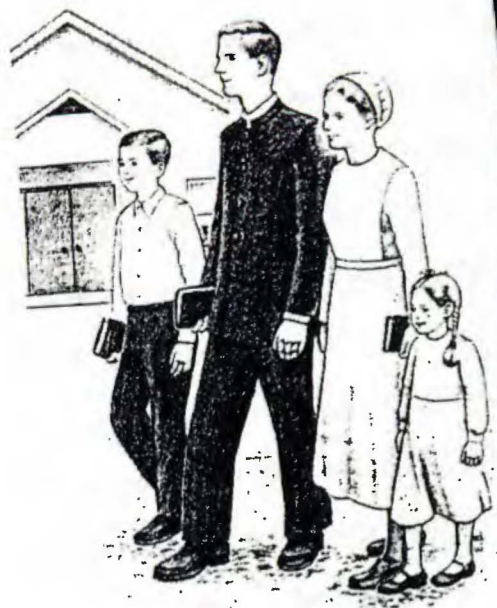


Figure 2

has demonstrated the values conservative women attach to their clothing, it has also brought into sharp relief my own positionality in relation to dress and its meanings.

Through the course of this research I have had to reflect on my own motives for choosing to focus my study on dress. Although I don't sew, I have always enjoyed clothing and fabrics. One of my earliest memories is visiting the ladies sewing circle at church and fingering the checkered quilts and comforters stretched on frames for quilting. I loved to play dress-up as I child; play-acting in costume was a favorite past-time. Moreover, there have been periods in my life when I have thought that the best part of being born a girl was the opportunity to wear a far greater variety in cut, color and fabric of clothing than could my brothers, (even though they were never prohibited from wearing shorts or slacks, as I was, for the sake of modesty). I soon learned that I could compensate for what my budget couldn't afford by thrift-store shopping. Finding unusual outfits at bargain prices became a form of recreation. In addition, though I lack the patience to sew for myself, I have nevertheless enjoyed picking fabrics and being fitted by seamstresses for dresses designed for special occasions like graduation, high school banquet (in lieu of prom), and my wedding.

Given this background, I have had to shake my head in disbelief at conservative women who seem content with a

limited wardrobe of ten or 12 dresses, worn interchangeably. While I admire the simplicity of such a lifestyle choice, I am not yet ready to give up my bulging closet of thrift-store shoes and funky hats, even if I rarely wear them. To me a life circumscribed to essentially one style of dress seems grimly restrictive; to them it is life-giving, one less distraction. Some pleasures we share: browsing through a fabric store and running our hands along the bolts of material. Certainly they associate certain passages in their life with particular dresses, hand-sewn with care, in much the same way that certain store-bought outfits have marked my memories.

But while I delight in dress as creative self-expression, the conservative women I interviewed view their clothing as an expression of their religiosity. While I convey different aspects of my personality through different attire on different days, their clothing, which varies only slightly from one day to the next, conveys a consistent witness. Because their identity and religion intertwine and are reinforced through their clothing, in many ways they are what they wear. For these women, dress is a way to externalize their commitments, a visible representation of religious beliefs. Clothing and gender identity mutually reinforce one another. While I would not

choose this approach for myself, I have come to respect it in them.

Clothing is only one aspect in which I have experienced mixed emotions through my interactions with Eastern Pa. Mennonite women. As a feminist ethnographer I continued to wrestle with how to interpret their lives with integrity, especially in those instances where our perceptions of their experience differed. I found no final answers to this quandary, though I have come to believe that while an ethnographer cannot expect to feel impartial about the data, she can remain open to multiple interpretations of it. Although my feminist perceptions have certainly influenced my analysis, I have labored to make respect and fairness the guiding principles in describing the lives of the women I interviewed. I have struggled to write it in such a way that, in the words of Laurel Richardson, "the people who teach me about their lives are honored and empowered, even if they and I see their worlds differently."⁹⁵

Women's Subordination, Power and Production

One of the ways in which I and my informants see the world differently has to do with women's status in relation to men. As we have seen, Eastern Pa. Mennonite women

⁹⁵Laurel Richardson, "Trash on the Corner," Journal of Contemporary Ethnography (April 1992), 108.

clearly and self-consciously accept a subordinate role. As Ellen told me,

I think by living in subjection to the Bible and under the subm--, and, ah, in submission to my husband my needs are met: emotional needs are met and social needs are met within our church setting, . . . and also spiritual needs.

While the preceding illustrates the existence of gender subordination among Eastern Pa. Mennonites, Susan Carol Rodgers has argued that subordination does not necessarily imply powerlessness. Rodgers contends that in certain societies, male dominance functions as a myth while in reality a balance is maintained between women's informal power and men's overt power.⁹⁶ To a certain extent, Rodgers theory holds true for the married women in my study. As we saw earlier in my discussion of women's gender roles, married women wield some informal power in the domestic sphere through independent decisions related to household budgeting and child discipline, as well as through discussion and influence of their husband's decisions in church.

However, in general, male dominance is more reality than myth for Eastern Pa. Mennonite women. Unlike Old Order groups, where women fill a valued role as household producers of goods and services essential to the successful

⁹⁶Susan Carol Rodgers, "Female forms of power and the myth of male dominance: model of female/male interaction in peasant society," *American Ethnologist*, 1975, 727-756.

functioning of the family farming enterprise, women in transitional groups like the Eastern Pa. Mennonites are less involved in production than they are in activities related to household consumption, purchasing rather than producing the necessary goods and services.

As a point of comparison, women in Old Order societies are invaluable to the family economy. In his classic work on the Amish, John Hostetler argues that Amish women are productively engaged through subsistence agriculture and producing children needed for work on the family farm. In these ways an Amish woman's economic importance to the family accords her greater gender status.⁹⁷

Eastern Pa. Mennonites, by contrast have largely moved away from the family farm economy to male breadwinner, away-from-home employment, accompanied by acceptance of labor-saving household appliances at home. In this move, women's roles have shifted from being co-producers of family income and industry to unpaid household managers and thrifty spenders of that income. Historically in wider US society, this move toward industrialization -- which shifted the home from the center of production to the center of consumption -- was accompanied by the perception of domestic work as routine and repetitive with a subsequent drop in women's status as homemakers. While the devaluation of women's homemaking role is somewhat lessened

⁹⁷Amish Society, 4th ed., p. 150.

by religious underpinnings in the Eastern Pa. Mennonite tradition, its contrast with Old Order groups is clear, while its implications for the future of this group remains to be seen.

The daily work load of a conservative Mennonite woman includes some combination of production and consumer-related activities. More actual productive labor takes place in Eastern Pa. Mennonite homes than in homes of persons outside the denomination, due in part to responding to the needs of greater numbers of children than the average US norm. But for an Eastern Pa. Mennonite woman, necessary tasks such as driving children back and forth to school, running errands, and doing the household shopping are often undervalued and do not contribute to the productive family economy in the same way as do the sewing of a woman's own and her daughters' clothing, the working of big gardens, and the home canning of large quantities of food. In addition, while lacking in status, housework is still time-consuming; one source estimates that the average woman not employed outside the home spends five to 12 hours a day on household work.⁹⁸ In these ways Eastern Pa. Mennonite women function more as consumers than producers, and their perceived importance to the family economy is lessened.

⁹⁸Susan Estabrook Kennedy, If All We Did Was to Weep at Home: A History of White Working-Class Women in America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 231.

Karen Johnson-Weimer has done comparative research on women's roles in Old Order Amish and Fellowship churches, the latter being related to Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites." She concludes that women are much more oppressed in Fellowship churches because, although less tied to home than are their Old Order counterparts, women's labor is primarily directed to the support of their husbands. Johnson-Weimer argues that women are denied access to the public sphere, restricted to the less productive and less prestigious domestic sphere, and completely subservient to men in church, sometimes called the social sphere. Moreover, Fellowship churches blame the degeneracy of society on women leaving their biblically ordained roles. As Johnson-Weimer quotes from a tract published by Fellowship churches (the same tract that many Eastern churches also use), "A nation rises or falls with the virtue of its women. The degeneracy of women marks a nation's fall." This degeneracy, according to the tract,

"As one informant described it, Fellowship churches are "pretty similar" to Eastern churches. Both groups participate in "pulpit exchanges" (where ministers speak in each others' churches), indicating a level of trust regarding doctrinal matters. Intermarriage among members of both groups is accepted and not uncommon. Moreover, many Eastern churches display tracts published by Rod and Staff, the Fellowship publishing house. The husband of another Eastern Pa. informant was about to begin translation work with Rod and Staff Publishers.

is related to "short-haired, short-skirted women," another indication of the link between dress and subdination.¹⁰⁰

In Fellowship churches as in the Eastern Pa. Mennonite denomination, the subordination of women as expressed through their dress functions to maintain order within the group and draw boundaries around it. As I have studied Eastern Pa. Mennonites I have come to the conclusion that women's dress and gender roles are paramount to maintaining the denomination's identity. Women's dress and gender roles have come to be so important because they have been made to carry almost the entire burden of cultural separation. At least in theory, this burden would seem to expose women in the denomination to harsher forms of patriarchy than Old Order women. Anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo has written that "women's status will be lowest in those societies where there is a firm differentiation between domestic and public spheres of activity."¹⁰¹ As I have shown above, I believe this hypothesis holds true for women in the Eastern Pa. Mennonite denomination.

Depression and Leaving

¹⁰⁰Tract entitled, "Eve is Again Listening to the Voice of the Serpent," Rod and Staff Publishers, Inc., Crockett, KY 41413, p. 2.

¹⁰¹Michelle Rosaldo, Woman, Culture and Society (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1974), 12.

Through my interviews with women in this denomination, however, I have been forced to recognize that they do not perceive themselves to be oppressed or particularly low in status. Women claim to find real fulfillment in their roles as wives and homemakers, as the following quote by Ellen illustrates:

I think the greatest fulfillment that a woman can have is to be in subjection to her husband and to be raising her family. That's all I want to do. Incidentally, I am a nurse. (laughs) But I have no desire at this point to go out and work. I have a full-time job at home and I am finding fulfillment in that.

At the same time, the above quote shows that Ellen still identifies as a nurse -- and wants me to know this is her vocation -- despite not having practiced nursing for ten years. In another response to my question about fulfillment, Rhoda and I had the following interchange:

Rhoda: I'm very happy this way. I guess I feel I have enough responsibility in sewing circle and, . . . talking for other sisters, I think they're very happy. . . .

Questions: I guess if a woman wouldn't be happy, what would happen?

Rhoda: She'd find another congregation. Another church group.

Putting aside for a moment the question of leaving, through the course of this research I have had to wonder what might be the mental health strains for women of limited gender roles and enforced dress restrictions, especially in a setting where knowledge of other options is extensive. In fact, two of my informants suffered from

depression -- one in a cyclical, ongoing way; the other in a several-year episode after the birth of her fourth, and ultimately her last, child. A third described her mother as manic-depressive and remarked, "When my mom is most depressed she is most like women in my church are expected to be. . . . She's quiet, and submissive."

For Eastern Pa. Mennonite women, raised to view the larger culture as dangerous and immoral, any re-evaluation of self or community may appear extremely threatening. Feminist psychologist Dana Crowley Jack, who researches chronically depressed women, believes that depression for some women is a price they choose to pay in order to hang on to a particular view of self or valued relationships. Jack writes, "A woman may move into known depression rather than grapple with an unknown self that will, perhaps, destroy life as she understands it."¹⁰²

Writing out of a religious studies context, Gavin Langmuir also supports this viewpoint. Langmuir describes the painful struggle of those individuals who must "face the conflict between their faith in the authorities of their religion and their disbelief in some of its prescriptions." He suggests that what he calls "irrationality" comes about through the conscious

¹⁰²Dana Jack, Silencing the Self (New York: Routledge, 1992), 146.

repression of doubts by individuals who remain adherents of a religion.¹⁰³

Applying this framework to Eastern Pa. Mennonite women, then, one way to view women who leave the denomination is as resisters. Florence, who was a Eastern Pa. Mennonite Church member for ten years, remembers the rigidity that finally led to her leaving.

But after a while, I didn't fit in there. Simply because I was, I am my own person and I don't think I am my own person to the extent that it destroys my, ah, ability to serve God in a practical way but, ah, you couldn't-- I felt like I couldn't be my own person there. Because I was--I would challenge the status quo, and not necessarily because I wanted to see all the rules, but like, Why are we doing this? And how's come that? So finally there was no place for my voice.

In many ways this religious community, like most others, is self-selecting: dissenters usually leave and are not around for me to interview. With the exception of Florence, the women I spoke with had negotiated a satisfying relationship with the Eastern Mennonite church. If we accept Jack's argument that depressed women tend to censure themselves, than leaving, at least for some women, may be construed as a sign of health.

As a feminist researcher I couldn't help asking why women put up with patriarchal structures that limit their

¹⁰³According to Langmuir, this inner tension causes individuals to become antisemitic and religiously intolerant to the point of irrationality. Langmuir, 257-258.

voice and their options when, from my perspective, the obvious choice would be to leave. While no studies have been done on conservative Mennonite groups, a related study on the Amish suggests that more men than women leave, as do more singles than married persons¹⁰⁴ (both my informants who left were single.) The congregations represented by my informants include single women but no single men, which also supports this interpretation. Why, I wondered, don't more women leave?

One answer to this question is that leaving is difficult to do. As Rebecca described it, "Someone who left would be looked on as apostate, falling away. . . . Relationships would be strained." Rebecca reflected on a friend who left the church, "Most people feel she has almost lost her salvation." A woman may also be fearful about where she will go or what she will do next if she leaves, having fewer options than men because of less activity in the public sphere. As Florence described it, "The longer one is in a group such as that the more difficult it becomes to leave." Another informant, reflecting on to what extent she remains in the church out of conviction or out of habit, mused,

Rebecca: Really, it's almost more difficult to leave than to stay.

¹⁰⁴Thomas J. Meyers, "The Old Order Amish: To Remain in the Faith or to Leave," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 68:3 (July 1994), 378-395.

Beth: I guess you'd have to have a good reason for leaving.

Rebecca: Yes, you would. And have something else out there to connect yourself with. Otherwise you'd be totally alone.

What Women Gain from Conservative Religions

Through my research I have come to recognize that not only is leaving difficult, but a woman might have valid reasons for remaining part of a conservative religious group. Within their narrowly defined gender roles, Eastern Pa. Mennonite women experience comfort and security. In the current stress and discomfort of my commuting marriage and the multiple roles my husband and I both try to juggle -- as breadwinners, responsible homeowners and renovators, housekeepers and active church members -- the definitive lines drawn in these women's lives have sometimes looked attractive.

Janet Liebman Jacobs, in a book entitled, Divine Disenchantment: Deconverting from New Religions, has speculated that women are attracted to conservative religious movements out of a "desire for community and family in a technocratic culture where such affiliations are difficult to maintain."¹⁰⁵ According to Jacobs, such religions represent a particular form of family life based

¹⁰⁵Janet Liebman Jacobs, Divine Disenchantment: Deconverting from New Religions (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 2.

on the ideology that emerged out of the post-World War II period when the family was idealized as a private world of loving relationships that shielded children from the harsh realities of the outside world. An attractive element for women in these religions may be the protection and reassuring simplicity offered by patriarchal authority. Certainly we can see this dynamic at play in the lives of Eastern Pa. Mennonite women.

Moreover, in Lynn Davidman's study of contemporary Jewish women's attraction to Orthodox Judaism, she found that an important function of these groups and their attraction for women was in providing clear-cut norms for gender roles and in legitimizing the value of nuclear family life. Davidman writes that women who choose conservative religion,

are in fact being highly rational -- they have examined the various alternatives and decided that the religious groups either provide better explanations or offer opportunities that are unavailable elsewhere. Thus religious realities continue to appeal to individuals because they offer solutions to the dilemmas and ambiguities that pervade contemporary life. . . . Religion offers a valuable certainty concerning gender roles and family life that is unavailable elsewhere.¹⁰⁶

Women in my group have good reasons for choosing to stay. The warmth of the community is not easily found

¹⁰⁶"Women's Search for Family and Roots: A Jewish Religious Solution to a Modern Dilemma" by Lynn Davidman, p. 405; in In Gods We Trust: New Patterns of Religious Pluralism in America, ed. Thomas Robbins, and Dick Anthony, 2nd ed., New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1990.

elsewhere, nor is the sense of caring. Instrumental assistance, particularly in times of tragedy, can be especially meaningful, as Florence remembers:

For instance, like when my father died -- he died very suddenly of a heart attack -- and gee, you know, half an hour elapsed, and one neighbor was there with folding chairs, bringing chairs and setting 'em up because they knew that persons would be coming very shortly and we probably wouldn't have enough of chairs for everybody that would be showing up. And people were there with food, and persons came and cooked the, cooked a meal, prepared a meal for the day of the funeral, and ah, just, you know, that kind of thing. It was there automatically.

This depth of care and community are not readily found outside the Eastern Pa. Mennonite Church, and both are valid, rational reasons for remaining part of such a fellowship.

Through my explorations into the Eastern Pa. Mennonite community, I have found much to value. Because women's energies are concentrated in the domestic sphere and children and the family are highly valued by both parents, children grow up with the full-time attention and availability of at least one parent. For example, one mother who I interviewed described her support to a son with learning disabilities which enabled him to stay in school and gain his G.E.D. She believes, and I agree, that without her encouragement he would have dropped out of school.

However, other aspects of Eastern Pa. Mennonite

women's experience remain troubling: the lack of individual expression, patriarchal decision-making, and women's restricted choices. Often after meetings with conservative women I came away depressed over what seemed to me to be the narrow women's roles imposed on them and to which they assented. But by the same token, I usually left feeling respect and admiration for the obvious sincerity and assurance with which these women live their lives. The following exchange with Louise illustrates the dual dynamic of admirable and troubling aspects:

One of the things that's interesting about the [Eastern Pa. Mennonite] Church is I think they're very-- what's a good way to say this-- they hold each other to a very high standard of accountability. . . . So that you, you know, the good of the community is like the absolute central, ah, focus of the church and you choose to dress a certain way, to, to have certain beliefs, foundational beliefs, because that's what the community asks of you, the church asks of you. . . . Um, commitment and, ah, care, all of those are positives. The lack of individual expression, ah, openness to that is, then, the negative and a lot of people, ah, fit in really well, you know, and other people find it impossible to survive and either leave or, you know, have a great deal of pain and that happens. Ah, there are [women] within each of these groups who have an enormous amount of pain because they, they, they are not allowed to express their own gifts.

In a similar vein, Florence described the intertwining of positive and negative elements in her experience:

the same ties that are a blessing in the binding are also a, a burden. . . . Let me put it this way, the same factors that create the network for caring, that allow caring to flow through the channels, are also the same factors, in a sense, that can choke growth.

I have been struck again and again by the ways in which Eastern Pa. Mennonite women seem willing to sacrifice individual self-determination for the greater common good of the Mennonite community. In this I have come to realize that we operate from different frameworks; my concerns are not theirs. Where I value independence, they value obedience. Where I value self-expression, they value speaking with one voice. Where I value open-mindedness, they value single-mindedness. Where I value individuality, they value uniformity.

Don Kraybill and Marc Olshan end their recent collection of essays with a chapter intriguingly titled, "What Good are the Amish?" In it, Olshan argues that we moderns can learn from the Amish the value of establishing some kind of limits. Researcher Jean-Paul Benowitz has argued that liberal Mennonites can learn to resist assimilation of our beliefs through studying the resistance practices of conservative groups. He goes on to express admiration for the ways in which conservative groups have nurtured the ability to resist innovations which have the potential to erode their religious community.¹⁰⁷ In a similar way I have come to appreciate the integrity and resolve of my informants' convictions on dress and women's

¹⁰⁷Jean-Paul Benowitz, "The Old Order Mennonte Division of 1893: An Interpretation," Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage (October 1993), 17.

gender roles within the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite community.

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