Ethnography of Mennonite Women in Higher Education
Lisa Stratton

Lisa Stratton wrote “Ethnography of Mennonite Women in Higher Education” for Professor Harkness’s ANTH 18210 Introduction to Cultural Anthropology class, using an interview process with two anonymous women. This essay explores generations of Mennonite women in higher education.

As part of the course “Introduction to Anthropology,” one of my assignments was to write an ethnography. As this is my first foray into this aspect of anthropology, I chose a topic that allowed me to interact with an individual with whom I have a fairly warm friendship. This permitted me to interact with someone that I am comfortable enough with to ask any questions, without concern that they may be invasive or inappropriate. The focus of this study was Mennonite women in higher education. I drafted a twenty-point questionnaire that I submitted to my friend, in addition to asking her to have one other woman from her church congregation fill out the same questionnaire, so that I could make a comparison between the two. The questionnaire asked about the educational history of the female family members of both subjects, while also requesting information about the women’s perceptions about the views of their immediate families, extended families, church members and secular community members regarding Mennonite women in higher education. Both completed questionnaires are attached as Appendix A at the end of this report.

In order to protect the privacy of both women that participated in this study, from this point on they will be considered the subjects. Subject one, hereafter referred to as Mary, is a 24 year old, single, white, Mennonite woman with no children. She currently lives at home with her parents and her 23-year-old sister. Subject two, hereafter referred to as Ruth, is a 26 year old, single, white, Mennonite woman with no children. She currently lives at home with her parents and her two brothers, 30 and 33.

I first attempted to determine what the term “Mennonite” meant. According to Dictionary.com, the term Mennonite stems from the German “Mennonit,” after Menno Simons (1492-1559), who was a Frisian religious leader. The word “Frisian” is a Latin term meaning “of Germanic origin.” The definition of “Mennonite” is as follows:

Mennonite (məˈnənˌtī) n. A member of an Anabaptist church characterized particularly by simplicity of life, pacifism, and nonresistance.

I was unfamiliar with the term “Anabaptist,” which, according to Dictionary.com, stems from the Late Greek “anabaptizein”, which means to baptize again. The official definition is as follows:

An·a·bap·tist (əˈnəbəpˌtəst) n. A member of a radical movement of the 16th-century Reformation that viewed baptism solely as an external witness to a believer's conscious profession of faith, rejected infant baptism, and believed in the separation of church from state, in the shunning of nonbelievers, and in simplicity of life.

According to Ruth, Anabaptist was originally meant as a derogatory term, but was eventually accepted by Mennonites as a description of honor and strong faith.

This led me to question how both of my subjects would define being Mennonite. Mary believes that the most important part of being Mennonite is loving and serving Christ, and living one’s life in honor of Him. She also believes this means one should dress modestly, respect authority and live this lifestyle, not just speak about it. Ruth believes being Mennonite means being a small part of a larger whole in an “ethnic-Anabaptist” community associated with the Protestant Reformation. There is a focus on literal interpretation of the Bible, in addition to adhering to those interpretations in every day life, not just on a day of worship. She also believes that being Mennon-
ite involves being non-conformist with the rest of society, and being non-resistant, such as in confrontational situations.

Mary perceives her family's definition of being Mennonite as the same as her personal definition, with the most important aspect as loving and serving Christ. Ruth's perception of how her family would define being Mennonite is also similar to her personal definition, with slightly more emphasis placed on the belief in adult-choice baptism, as opposed to infant baptism.

Mary believes that her church's definition of being Mennonite also reinforces serving Christ completely instead of part-time, in addition to "winning souls for Christ," and being active in church events. Ruth's response to my question regarding how she believes her church would define being Mennonite was to speak of the seven ordinances they adhere to, besides non-conformity and non-resistance: headship veiling for women, baptism, sanctity of marriage, observance of communion, feet-washing (as a part of communion), "holy kiss" and anointing with oil. She also states that her church believes that the Bible is literally the inspired word of God, with a strong focus on baptism as a choice an adult makes, instead of being thrust upon a non-consenting infant.

Mary's perception of how the secular community would define being Mennonite involves a respect for close family bonds, being hard working and faithful in their religion. Ruth believes the secular community often mistakes a Mennonite with an Amish person, associating their hard work ethic and "plain" lifestyle as the same. She also thinks that most in the community would view them as ignorant and uneducated, as opposed to intelligent people making a conscious choice to live as a Mennonite.

These responses prompted me to ask my subjects about their perceptions of Mennonite women in higher education. Mary's personal opinion was that she was not particularly interested in higher education for herself, but admires those women that do pursue it. Ruth thinks that being Mennonite, as well as female, presents a unique challenge to pursuing higher education, as it does with any minority, as it is a breaking out of expected roles. This is especially difficult for women, as their appearance is more obviously "different" from the norm, as opposed to men, whose attire allows them to blend in more. She also believes that Mennonite women tend to pursue what she calls "predictable roles" in higher education, such as education or nursing. She later verbalized that these specific choices were those most likely to be used within her community, such as education being used to home-school one's own children.

Mary states that her immediate family would not be opposed to Mennonite women in higher education, but would not necessarily recommend it, while her extended family would not have a problem with it and has multiple members currently pursuing degrees in higher education at the time of this writing. Ruth considers her immediate family to be substantially atypical in their views about higher education, with a note that their views extend to either males or females. They are very supportive of her in her choice to pursue a college degree, and extend that same support to the rest of her siblings, while her siblings are slightly skeptical about the parental support she receives. She believes the skepticism comes from her being "outside the norm" even within her own family. She stresses that the fact that she is female is not an issue for her or her immediate family. Her perception of her extended family's views on Mennonite women pursuing higher education is split between her father's side of the family and her mother's side of the family. Her father's family is more conservative, and while they are not opposed to education, she feels they may view her as too prideful for pursuing her degree, even though her aunts were rather derogatory to her in her childhood, demeaning the fact that she was home schooled early on. Her mother's family is seen as more liberal and supportive of higher education, again with emphasis placed on being male or female being irrelevant.

Mary believes that her church, in the past, has generally looked down upon women in higher education, because of the emphasis on women taking care of responsibilities at home, but that in recent years, acceptance of women attending college has increased. She believes that members of her secular community would admire Mennonite women in higher education. While Ruth also believes that members of the community would encourage Mennonite women to pursue higher education, she believes that members of her church have been more supportive in the past, and are less supportive now. She feels that there is sometimes the idea that she thinks she is better than others, and wonders if perhaps that is just the view of her as an individual (as someone that lives outside of the "norms") as opposed to all Mennonite women in higher education. In spite of this, she says she still receives support and encouragement from some members of her congregation.

This brings me to a rough outline of the education levels in immediate and extended family members of the
subjects, primarily women, along with their chosen professions. Mary’s parents are both in their early sixties. Her mother completed ninth grade and is a homemaker, while her father completed tenth grade and works as both a pastor and a self-employed painter. She has one sister, age 23, that was home-schooled through grade seven or eight, and works as a self-employed house cleaner. She also has one brother, age 30, that completed tenth grade and works as a self-employed painter, and part time at a retail store. In her extended female family (grandmothers, aunts, cousins, nieces), both on her father’s side and her mother’s, there are twenty-three women total. Six are over the age of fifty-five and seventeen are between the ages of twenty and forty. Of the six women over fifty-five, five completed ninth grade and one completed tenth. Four of these women are homemakers, one is a caregiver and one cleans condominiums. Of the seventeen women between twenty and forty, eleven completed twelfth grade and six completed twelfth grade and some college (various amounts). Nine of these women are homemakers, one is a caregiver, one holds an unknown occupation, one is a restaurant worker, one is a veterinarian’s assistant, one is a licensed practical nurse, one is a registered nurse and one is a certified public accountant.

Ruth’s parents are also both in their early sixties. Her father has a BA in Education and is retired, while her mother is a licensed practical nurse that gained a collegiate degree. She currently is a homemaker. Her sister is thirty-seven, attained a BS degree and is a registered nurse. One brother is thirty-three, attended public school through seventh grade, then was home-schooled for an indeterminate time. He currently works in a hardware store, and has occasionally worked as a mason and in the floor/tile industry. Her other brother is thirty years old, was home-schooled and works as a mason. Neither brother attained GED’s but both began working at a young age (not specified). Ruth included her male relatives in her extended family list, without specifying which relative completed specific levels of education, or hold specific jobs or careers. Of those she listed, fifteen are aged fifty-eight to deceased (in the case of some grandparents). One completed fourth grade, two completed eighth grade and one completed ninth grade. Seven completed high school without attending college, two attended college but did not receive degrees, one received a BA in Education and one attended medical school before changing careers and becoming a millionaire. The only occupations listed are for the first four (fourth, eighth and ninth grade completions), which are farmer, factory supervisor, carpenter, and homemakers. Of those under the age of fifty-five, thirteen are listed, eleven of which completed high school without attending college, one is currently in college pursuing a degree in music education and one attended college for approximately one year. Note that no occupations were given, and that reference was made to there being many other cousins not mentioned or listed. Also note, there was no differentiation between male and female in almost all of the extended family outline.

The next step in my questioning came with the subject’s perceptions regarding the expected use of a higher education degree, if pursued and received. Mary believes both her immediate and extended family would be very supportive and proud, and not give up if it became difficult. Ruth’s feels that her immediate family does not limit what they expect or hope she can achieve, but she also feels that they want her to keep God firmly in her life. She thinks that her extended family will expect her to stop college after attaining her BA in English, then pursue either teaching English, teaching German, teaching English as a second language as a missionary, or to settle down, marry and teach her children from home.

Mary’s beliefs regarding her church’s expectation of the use of a higher education degree is that would hope that she keeps a firm grip on what is most important, which (to them) is to love God with all her heart, soul and mind, and to not get caught up in the world’s thinking. She believes they would also wish her to not be ashamed of dressing modestly or wearing a headship veil, to be a light and a witness for her coworkers, and that they would love and support her choice. Ruth believes that her church would react much the same as her extended family, expecting her to teach, be a missionary or become a wife and mother and then home-school her children. She also thinks that they would expect her to give back to her community, perhaps by teaching in a Mennonite or Christian school, and to give up her career and stay at home once she had children.

Mary thinks that the secular community would respect her choice to pursue and achieve a higher education degree, and would encourage her to not give up if things became difficult, while Ruth believes that the secular community would have a higher expectation of her going to graduate school or pursuing a doctorate as opposed to stopping once she received her BA.

My last two questions for the subjects were: what would be your ideally desired use of a higher education degree (if pursued and received) in the short term and the long term, and what would be your practically intended use of a higher education degree (if pursued and received) in the short term and long term? Mary feels that attain-
ing employment quickly, with good pay and benefits, would be ideally desired. She also would like to stay at a company long term, so that she may retire with a good record of her accomplishments. As for a practical use of her degree, she thinks that helping people, such as being a nurse, and earning the respect of her coworkers is important. Most important to her, however, is bringing honor and glory to Jesus Christ. Note that at this time, Mary has no intention of pursuing a degree in higher education. Ruth’s ideal and practical uses are the same. She wishes to attend graduate school and possibly continue on to receive her doctorate. She would like to teach at the collegiate level and strongly desires to encourage other Mennonite men and women to pursue higher education and make a difference in society.

In comparing the results of both subjects’ responses to my questionnaire, I noticed some interesting differences. In Mary’s family, the majority of people over the age of fifty did not go on to pursue higher education, while in Ruth’s family it is quite the opposite. Another difference was in the desires of the two subjects regarding pursuit of a higher education degree. Mary has very little interest in doing so, while Ruth wishes not only to go on to graduate school but also to attain her doctorate. Yet another noticeable difference was in their perceptions of how their church views Mennonite women in higher education. Mary believes that the church has become more tolerant and supportive in recent years, while Ruth thinks that they have become more conservative and restrictive.

Some of the similarities in their answers were also fairly interesting. For instance, they are both in their mid twenties and single, and live at home, as opposed to living separate from their families. They both also feel that the secular community would be very supportive of Mennonite women in higher education, along with their immediate families. Another similarity would be their strong assertions that no matter if they choose to attend an institution of higher learning or not, God plays the most prominent role in their lives.

One thing I’ve discovered in this process is that the scope of what doing a proper ethnography entails is immense. Each answer led to more questions, which in turn led to a desire to broaden my research. I would like the opportunity to interview more Mennonite women, and also women outside of the Mennonite tradition, to compare the differences. I now have a firmer understanding of how one anthropologist can spend ten years studying various aspects of one culture and still feel as if they have much more to learn.