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# EXPLORATIONS IN ETHNIC STUDIES

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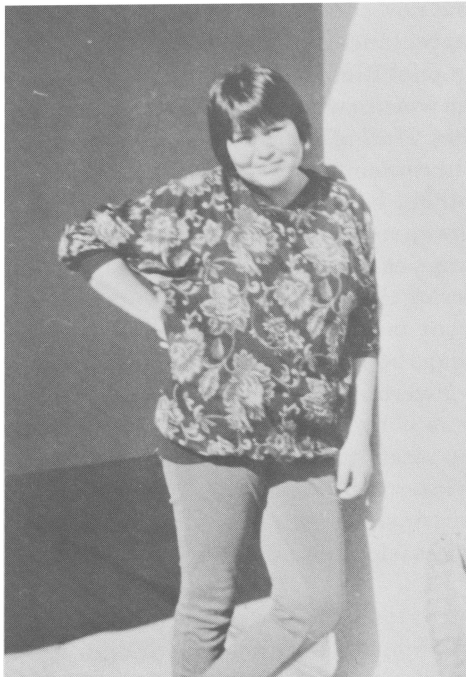


## **An Interview with Geraldine Keams**

**Gretchen M. Bataille**

**April 9, 1983**

**(November 16, 1986)**



When Geraldine Keams visited Iowa State University for the annual Symposium on the American Indian in 1983, I had the opportunity to interview her. The tape remained untranscribed until we met again in California during the fall of 1986, more than three years later. Geri and I discussed the directions her life had taken since our initial meeting, and we both agreed that her comments made in 1983 were still relevant. The interview is printed below in full, and some contemporary comments about her life bring the interview up to date.

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In 1983 Keams was best known for her role as the Indian woman in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. Today her roles are far more varied. Although she is still acting, and lives in Hollywood, she is telling traditional Navajo stories at museums throughout the southwest and California, she is a political activist, she is writing poetry and giving readings, and she is an aspiring screen writer.

Keams was born on the Navajo reservation in Castle Butte, Arizona, and was influenced by her grandmother, a well-known weaver. She heard and learned the traditional stories and later learned to weave. After college, she studied acting and performed with the Lee Strasberg School and Cafe LaMama in New York, but today she is spending more time behind the camera than in front of it. She was a consultant on *Broken Rainbow*, the documentary film which analyzes the Hopi-Navajo land dispute, but now she is anxious to get back to her dream to produce her own film. Acceptance into the Writers Guild of America West and the production of a pilot film have moved her closer to her full-length film about an Indian woman who comes to Los Angeles from the reservation. Keams describes *Trail of Pollen* as a comedy adventure story. Rather than viewing the contemporary urban situation for American Indians as dismal and without hope, Keams can laugh at the incongruities. The ability of the protagonist to cope with the “characters” found in Los Angeles provides the humor of her film.

As co-founder of the Big Mountain Support Group of Los Angeles, Keams has spent much of her time speaking to church groups and educational groups about the conflicts among the Hopi, Navajo, and the United States government over the parcel of reservation land at Big Mountain. She is political, and her politics are broadly based. She is concerned about reservation issues, but she is also “tired of eighty years of Hollywood’s interpretation of what Indians are.” In this attitude, her views today are consistent with those expressed three years ago about the lack of success for minorities and women in the entertainment industry.

She is consistent too in her reverence for the beliefs she learned from her grandmother about her role as an Indian woman. In one of her poems, Keams writes about the peace that she has gained from tradition:

Weaving my thoughts  
Listening to time as it passes slowly in front of me  
Softly so I can see the me I have learned to be  
I sat weaving, ever so carefully  
Weaving my life back into order.

GB: Tell me something about your background, how you grew up and where you went to school.

GK: I grew up both on and off the Navajo Reservation in Arizona, and I had a traditional upbringing from going home on weekends to my grandmother. I also went to boarding schools and public schools. I went to about twelve different schools before I graduated from high school, so I had a lot of different kinds of experiences as far as going



into non-Indian situations and going back to being with the Navajos and going back and forth. I would always go back to my grandmother's and that is how I picked up the language and the Navajo ways, going back out there and herding sheep, doing chores, and taking care of the land. My grandmother lives on quite a bit of land and they are sheep herders. Navajos are sheep herders, and they plant corn, so there was always a lot of responsibility when I went home on weekends. I virtually had no social life unless I was into sports and that only happened at school. Being the oldest of nine kids, I was pushed into situations where I had to always be the responsible one, the one held accountable, and the one put in charge whenever the family had to go away. At a very early age of eight years old I was cooking for my other brothers and sisters and taking care of them and changing diapers and washing diapers, so I guess that is why I am thirty-one and I haven't had any kids. I haven't gotten married and I have already done all of it. Being the oldest of nine brothers and sisters, I did have a lot of responsibility and my family was always saying, "well, you aren't a kid." I never played with dolls, never got the chance to do what all other little girls did and when I went to school and read about Dick and Jane and Spot and Puff, it was a totally different world. I had no conception of the kind of world that a little white girl would have, and it just seemed so unreal to me and almost surreal. I didn't pay too much attention. I learned to read; I loved to read, but I had no idea about how Jane or Dick or some of these characters actually lived. I had no idea what it was. My favorite thing was reading. That is how I escaped from all the day-to-day life on a reservation and going to school out there and everything. It was my way of going off to another world of David Copperfield or Moby Dick and a lot of other adventure stories. I was about twelve years old, and I read everything I could lay my hands on and I did really well in school. I never had any trouble. As a matter of fact, I had teachers who saw me as being an exceptionally well-versed Navajo child. They constantly were putting challenges before me and they would even set aside special projects just for me after school to keep me going. Finally it was strongly suggested to my mother that I go off the reservation and go to public school, so she put me into public school when I was in about 7th or 8th grade and from there on through high school I was in public school. When I look back on my background or my life, it always seems like I was educating myself, always trying to learn how to read better, write better, or that kind of thing. What remained essentially just as important was what my grandmother would teach me. I had this desire to combine the written word with listening to what my elders had to say.

GB: How do you define your role now as a Navajo woman?

GK: In the Navajo way, women are the care takers. They are the care

takers of the tribe, they keep the bloodline moving. If something is going on with the people or the family, it is the woman who has to do something about it. They are the ones who are the lifeline of the tribe and women have a lot more to say and they have a lot more power and control over what actually happens because more women these days are actually supporting their families alone, single women, who have children. There are more and more Navajo women in leadership positions and all of a sudden after all these years of living in this world where we think the men knew what they were doing, now we are finding out that they don't and that they are ruining a lot of things in the world and our safety is being threatened in the world. Women bear children, and just in that experience alone they have an alliance with the earth and the earth being our mother, we being a mother. Just the whole idea of being a woman in terms of my Navajo background gives me a real feeling of independence. I was very independent as a child growing up and now being a woman I consider myself as thinking for myself, making decisions for a better life, always for a better life. My role as a Navajo woman is to try to make things better for my people in some ways and when I say "my people," it is not only for the Navajo but it is for human beings as well because we are all part of the same family which is on this earth. This earth is our mother, and we are responsible for her. That is really philosophical and it gets very metaphysical, but it is the lifeline of the way I live. It is like getting up every day and washing my face and brushing my teeth, it is just sort of that kind of knowledge. It is always a part of me. When you are growing up, you watch the women around you and they talk to you and they discipline you and they give you words of wisdom on these things and you integrate these things into your life and you are always conscious of it no matter what you do. Because of that and the accumulation of experiences over the years I am put into a situation as a woman to maintain that strength that our women have had over the years, the clanmothers, the medicine people. We are the new medicine people of tomorrow. People are preserving the old philosophy, and we are trying through films or through theatre, or through poetry or writing a novel to preserve that way of life which is being threatened now. We are trying to save that, and we feel the urgency.

GB: Given what is a very traditional philosophy of life combined with your choices to go into film, film making, and acting, have you found yourself psychologically compromised?

GK: Filmmaking and acting and that whole area of the arts is so new it hasn't really been touched upon or explored and so being Indian, being a woman, being involved in the filmmaking industry, there is a certain amount of difficulty in that. There is a certain amount of always feeling alone, always feeling this agony of bringing it all

together. I feel very good about women getting involved in filmmaking just in the last ten years, how women have permeated the filmmaking industry and video arts, both in the political structure and in the business management and marketing end of film making and video distribution. I derive power and energy from that knowledge. It gives me a chance, a chance to go on, to keep going on and I just hang in there and I hope that I will not give up and that soon other Indian people will join me, but as I say it is very difficult. For so long, Indians have given up their stories, they have given up their ceremonies, and they see it published in books and they see it in records and movies and they say, "I am not going to sacrifice my stories any more" and "I have been used and abused" and that kind of thing and they are very leery of the film world and they are very leery of anything that will record or duplicate or take their image away, like a camera or a picture. A lot of these technical products have been stigmatized, and Indian people don't feel like they want to be a part of it. People like myself go in there and we are trying to change this and go at it from the other angle, from the other side, saying if we don't document, if we don't preserve, then it is really going to be lost. From the other side, I am a product of that culture and that tradition and old way and I understand why a lot of people are the way they are and that they don't want to share real sensitive details about their culture and religion and the spiritual aspects, but yet they are more apt to listen to me now because they feel there is an urgency and that the only way to do it is through video or documenting on film or tape. There are people who are willing to listen a lot more these days.

GB: You have talked about how Clint Eastwood did listen and did allow you to help shape your own role in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. What are some of the compromises that you had to make, roles you had to play or things you had to do that were not so successful?

GK: *Josey Wales* was probably the most ideal situation I have ever been in. The other films, *Born to the Wind* and *The Legend of Walks-far-woman*, were very cliché-ridden, very typical Hollywood Indian scripts. They really simplified the life of the Indian family. There was really no story at all, no conflict, no reality; it was sort of like the Disneyland image of what an Indian family would live like in the 1800s and it is unrealistic in many ways. I have had to make compromises in my own mind, always just trying to think of ways that this could possibly change. With that hope I have played those roles where the women are shown as one dimensional, and the man's character is always a little more developed than the Indian woman's. The Indian woman is totally a cardboard figure, a shadow of the man. In reality the women are the lifeline of their people. They don't show that, so you do tend to have to compromise because you are faced with the fact that your agent calls you in and

you have to audition and if you get the job you make the money. Many different things are based on a system that has taken a hundred years to develop. It has taken all this time to say that this is an Indian woman, this is the way Indian people live. It has taken a hundred years of a certain kind of attitude that the public or Hollywood thinks the public would have about Indians. It is totally superficial, fabricated and without truth, but it doesn't change overnight. Raquel Welch played "wonderwoman" of the Indian nation, running through the village barefoot, racing against a man, running out in the forest, coming home with the deer. You know she is playing the man's role and in Indian society this doesn't happen. There was a very fine line, a fine bond between a man and a woman and their responsibility as members of a tribe. In those days people did have a very democratic way of running a tribe. Every tribe is considered a nation and every nation had its own cultural traits, the way they looked at the different sexes and responsibilities of the male and the female, but every single tribe believed that both sides had to equally join together in balance or there would be no life. You have to have a man and the woman and with that there is unity and balance and harmony in the world. In every single nation in this country that was the philosophy. There is distortion of that cultural reality by the Hollywood film industry.

GB: Tell me some things about the employment situation for American Indians in the film business. How many Indian people are really involved and how many should be?

GK: By any kind of percentage basis as far as the population of American Indians in this country is concerned, the number of individuals who have decided to become producers or directors or actors is very small. Because there has always been little hope, there has always been doubt that anything was ever possible. Who would ever dream of an Indian funding a big Hollywood production or who would ever dream of an Indian directing an Oscar-winning film? There are more Indian actors and actresses now, but directors are even fewer, producers even fewer, and writers, almost next to nothing. I think we need more writers. That is where I think the whole thing lies.

GB: One of the problems has been in casting of Indian parts in films. What are some examples?

GK: *Mystic Warrior* is the ultimate example. *Mystic Warrior* had a cast of 80 to 100 Indians, or maybe even more, a whole village. There are all Mexican people playing the parts. I know that *Mystic Warrior* did go through a lot of political problems because of the *Hanto Yo* issue. As a result of that, I think the producers were afraid of being threatened again and having to spend even more money, so they played it safe and they hired all Mexicans. What does that do for Indian people? Absolutely nothing. It sets us even farther back. It

makes some Indian people even more insecure.

GB: What is your fantasy film? If you could choose a film to either direct or write or act in, what would the subject or theme be?

GK: I would like to direct and I would like to help develop a couple of projects. My fantasy film, and I have always wanted to do it, would be to do the classic cowboy and Indian movie in reverse and do it all from the Indians' side. Have all the classic components of a western cowboy and Indian movie, but tell it from the Indian's point of view. The other one is to try to capture the essence of what Indian people were before the Europeans came. I know a lot of people have attempted to do the Indian movie of the century, to make the movie that will capture the spirituality of what the Indians feel about the land and the world and the universe and they want to be the one to capture the spirit of Crazy Horse or the essence of Sitting Bull. I think that would be a fantasy of mine, to do the Indian movie about some figure like Geronimo who everyone thinks was the most brutal savage or war-like man of all times and to actually see this man being a simple medicine man.

GB: What do you see for the future?

GK: As time goes on I really feel that we are the ones who have to change. We are the ones who have to be motivated to change things, otherwise they are never going to be done. When my grandmother said nobody else is going to do it for me except myself, I never realized that some day I would actually think of having to produce my own film out of a desperate cry to express some kind of truth. I realized that to complain and demonstrate, to tear down the system was not going to help, that that was only going to agitate and would not create solutions. It would only stir up the dust, and the dust will settle down almost in the same place. And then I heard about becoming a technical militant, and I wanted to find out more of what that meant. I finally realized that being a technical militant only meant getting off my behind to quit complaining and to do something about whatever it was that I was complaining about—to move my people ahead, to move myself ahead toward my vision of the future.



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## Implications for Survival: Coping Strategies of the Women in Alice Walker's Novels

Robbie Jean Walker

Various strategies for coping have surfaced in the uncertain, arduous, and frequently faltering struggle by black Americans for equality of opportunity, coping strategies characterized variously as carefully considered judgments or mere reactions devoid of ideological commitment. These efforts have engaged the attention of historians, sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, and other scholars motivated by a perceived obligation to explicate the nature of the struggle and articulate viable modes for ameliorating the effects of discrimination. Literary artists have also manifested a similar interest by using the medium of imaginative literature to illuminate and dramatize the realities of the historical situation.

Alice Walker—poet, storyteller, essayist, novelist, and winner of the 1982 Pulitzer Prize for fiction (*The Color Purple*) has been heralded for her ability to dramatize the realities of the black condition, specifically, and the human condition in general. The inter-generational effects of poverty and discrimination, the operative distinctions between resistance and revolution, and the plight of desperate men and women are among the numerous and varied considerations that fall within the purview of her fictional creations. Of the numerous themes evident in Walker's fiction, the traumatic plight of black women is her proclaimed forte. In an interview with John O'Brien, Walker admitted this emphasis: "I am preoccupied with spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women."<sup>1</sup> Her portrayals of the coping strategies of the women, bound by the common denominators of pain and suffering, indeed, possess a generalizability that is characteristic of literature of enduring value.

One would not expect to find in fiction a comprehensive, explicit set of instructions for coping with any situation, and certainly not a set of instructions comprehensive enough to address the multifaceted problems of race survival and progress. The very nature of fictional literature, however, permits the reader to observe circumstances and evaluate characters as they respond to a given milieu. From these observations,

plausible inferences may be drawn that shed light on past events and future possibilities. Inferences deriving from such observations are instructive in that the imaginative component of literature, requiring as it does the willing suspension of disbelief, permits considerable latitude in problem construction and resolution.

*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Alice Walker's first novel, covers the time period from 1920 through the civil rights movement of the 1960s and depicts the cumulative effects of poverty and the disillusionment spawned by that poverty on three generations of a family of Georgia sharecroppers. *Life* in the title of the novel is a synecdochial figure representing a period of time in Grange Copeland's life during which his world view and value system undergo a demonstrable transformation that manifests itself in an increased acceptance of personal responsibility and a greater concern for the welfare of others. Despite the prevailing pessimistic tone, the novel does introduce a note of optimism as the protagonist—Grange Copeland—in his third life, the period during which he sought to make amends for his mistakes and to affect, in a positive way, the lives of those he loves—develops a close relationship with his granddaughter, Ruth, and establishes her survival as the controlling motivation of his life. One of the most poignant moments of reflection in the novel occurred after Grange had suffered numerous reversals in his efforts to ensure Ruth's survival, reversals resulting primarily from his own vacillating perception of the meaning of survival, and concluded: "Survival was not everything. *He* had survived. But to survive *whole* was what he wanted for Ruth."<sup>2</sup>

To survive *whole*. Grange Copeland's differentiation between merely surviving and surviving whole is often overlooked by critics analyzing the female characters in Alice Walker's novels, the analyses all too often obfuscated by too great an emphasis on the commonality of the women's plights: their humble beginnings, the brutality of their male partners, and the milieu of hopelessness (with the possible exception of *Meridian*) in which they operated. In actuality, though, Walker's female characters are more like the "pied" world described by Gerard Manley Hopkins in his sonnet "Pied Beauty," in which he intimated that the beauty of the universe, though often described as if it were one unbroken totality, is a much more "dappled" phenomenon, with folds, spots, patches, and pieces.<sup>3</sup> These pieces, he conceded, ultimately blend into a unified manifestation of beauty, but to overlook the diversity of the pieces would result in a gross oversimplification in assessing the total effect. Although most of the women in Walker's novels are victims of unfortunate circumstances who fail more often than they succeed, the common circumstances do not obviate the fact that the women do indeed differ in the manner in which they appraise and exercise their options. Some of them, like Grange Copeland himself, attempt only to survive; others of them, as Grange hopes for his granddaughter, attempt to survive whole.

The operative terms from psychological and sociological research and



theory that inform the analytical model for this discussion are appraisal and locus of control. The appraisal component of coping strategy refers to those distinctions that individuals make when categorizing a given set of circumstances as potentially harmful, beneficial, or relevant, and includes “a perception of the range of coping alternatives . . .”<sup>4</sup> Appraisal requires, as well, a calculation of the risks involved in the coping alternative selected. Locus of control, the second component of the analytical model, represents the extent to which individuals perceive mastery or resolution to reside within their own power.<sup>5</sup> An idealized continuum of coping strategy, then, would include an evaluation of existing circumstances, a consideration of available options, and a perception of self-determination.

These components of coping strategy—appraisal and locus of control—cannot be applied in a linear analysis, but do provide the framework for a discussion of the women’s perception of their situations, their appraisal of the options available to them, as well as the extent to which they view the possibility of ultimate success and assume personal responsibility for that success. Thus, this study concerns itself not so much with the common environments of the characters selected, not so much with their distressingly similar reversals and failures. Rather, the objective is to examine the extent to which each woman recognized her possibilities as well as her limitations and attempted to alter, in a systematic way, restrictive environmental influences.

The three characters selected for this analysis are Margaret and Mem from *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and Celie from *The Color Purple* (1982). The emphasis on commonality decried earlier is invoked here briefly, but necessarily, for it is that commonality that illuminates differences in the coping strategies employed by the women. To compare the coping strategies of Meridian with those of Margaret or Mem or Celie, for example, would result in distortion because of vastly different historical circumstances. Similar distortion would inhere in comparing the three selected characters with the high spirited, indomitable Shug (*The Color Purple*, 1982), who consistently demonstrates confidence in her ability to ensure her own well being. But in Margaret, Mem, and Celie, the vulnerable ones, victims of environmental deprivations and extreme insensitivity—even brutality—on the part of their husbands, is found the parity necessary for an analytical comparison of varied strategies of coping with similar circumstances. These three women exemplify the type of women described by Alice Walker in an interview with Mary Helen Washington: “women who are cruelly exploited, spirits and bodies mutilated, relegated to the most narrow and confining lives, sometimes driven to madness.”<sup>6</sup>

The two characters selected for this analysis from *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* are, in relationship to Grange, his wife Margaret and his daughter-in-law Mem. Grange Copeland, a black tenant farmer in Georgia, passes on to his son Brownfield a legacy of defeat. Both men are

disillusioned by the sharecropping system, cognizant of and resigned to their inability to escape from it. The hopelessness that accrues in response to their economic imprisonment erupts constantly, venting itself on the only people who will tolerate their rage: their wives and children. The rage that characterizes Grange is transmitted to his son and manifests itself in the men's insensitivity to the needs of their wives, mental cruelty, physical brutality, and infidelity, infidelity that is unique in that both men ultimately become lovers of the same woman. Thus Margaret and Mem inherit the same set of circumstances, but variations in the way they appraise their available options are evident. The fate of Margaret is only sad, pitiful—not tragic—while Mem's ultimate failure is at least dignified by a series of courageous attempts to rise above the set of circumstances she inherited.

Dramatized in the opening chapter of the novel is Margaret's failure to capitalize on an opportunity that represents, possibly, her only avenue of escape from a miserable existence. She is shown with her husband and her ten year old son, Brownfield, watching her sister and family depart for Philadelphia after a visit with the Copelands in Georgia. Margaret's opportunity to leave with them and make an attempt to establish for herself and her young son a more meaningful existence in the North is even approved by Grange who says, in uncharacteristic softness, "You could've gone."<sup>7</sup> Her dismissal of Grange's encouragement and his confidence that she could learn the ways of the "norse" (Margaret's own pronunciation of the word "North") is indicative of her resignation to her current situation. Although the informed reader understands that Margaret's sister and family are guilty of perpetuating the rather widespread exaggerations of the blissful life in the North, there can be no doubt that Margaret's current quality of life is less satisfying than that of her sister's.

Margaret's myopic appraisal of her own situation and her hasty dismissal of this opportunity to escape her life with Grange—a life marked by his violent rages, his excessive drinking, and his flagrant infidelity—suggest her unquestioning adherence to a value system that dictates and perpetuates her own subservience. She is, in actuality, the embodiment of the psychological orientation to which Walker often alludes when she invokes Zora Neale Hurston's "mule" concept. The essence of that concept is that black women have been socialized to believe that it is their duty to bear, stoically, the burdens of the world. Margaret fails to explore the available possibilities and, thereby, becomes inevitably entrapped, considering it her "lot in life" to accept the prevailing circumstances, no matter how demeaning.

Eventually, however, Margaret does react to her situation, and therein lies the disappointing flaw in her character; she *reacts* but does not take control of her life. Walker describes Brownfield's impressions of his mother's transition:

Somewhere along the line she had changed. Slowly, imperceptibly. Until it was too late for Brownfield to recall exactly how she had been when he had loved her. It seemed to Brownfield that one day she was as he had always known her, kind, submissive, smelling faintly of milk; and the next day she was a wild woman looking for frivolous things, her heart's good times, in the transient embraces of strangers.<sup>8</sup>

Two key words in Brownfield's description of his mother's transformation should be noted: *frivolous* and *transient*. These words accurately depict the mindlessness and the futility of Margaret's escapism. Failing to appraise, in an intelligent manner, the potential harm of her actions, Margaret turns to other men as an antidote to the general hopelessness of her situation and Grange's flagrant affair with Josie, a prostitute. The "way out" chosen by Margaret could claim no potential for success and evinced no conscious effort to deal, in a rational way, with the realities of life.

Brownfield's recollection of Margaret's submissiveness is not nostalgic inasmuch as he did not view that trait favorably. His perception of this trait is noted in the following passage:

His mother agreed with his father whenever possible. And though he was only ten Brownfield wondered about this. He thought his mother was like their dog in some ways. She didn't have a thing to say that did not in some way show her submission to his father.<sup>9</sup>

The submissiveness would return during the weekdays as she shrank from Grange's angry moods and sought to be "sober and wifely, but . . . on weekends . . . she became a huntress of soft touches, gentle voices and sex without the arguments over the constant and compelling pressure of everyday life."<sup>10</sup> Thus, the shifts between submissiveness and wantonness, neither trait bearing significant potential for enhancing the quality of her life, form the pattern of her coping strategy and represent the extent of her efforts to alter the quality of her existence.

Though some could view the wantonness as an effort to alter the quality of her life in that such a course of action could possibly bring some degree of happiness, the reality is that nothing in her experience justifies a belief, on her part, that her irresponsible behavior would yield beneficial results. The son recalls his father's jealousy even "if she spoke, just to say 'how're you?' to other men."<sup>11</sup> And Josie, Grange's lover, later spoke of Margaret with contempt, commenting on the folly of [Margaret's] thinking that she could keep Grange by making him jealous of other men. The relevant consideration here is that whatever Margaret's motivation for her indiscretion may be, her actions evince too little forethought and analysis to qualify as considered judgments, that must necessarily take into account the potential for success that inheres in the course of action pursued. When Grange finds himself unable to tolerate her behavior, and his minimal concern for her disappears completely, he leaves her. And with characteristic shortsightedness, Margaret, who has never had the courage or sufficient insight to evaluate the options available to her, sees no way out and takes her own life as well as the life of her infant son.

Grange Copeland, in his third life, cannot find the correct words to tell

Ruth, his granddaughter, about his life with Margaret. He doubts Ruth's ability to understand and forgive his own degradation, his lack of truth and honor, and his affair with Josie that contributed to Margaret's bewilderment. He doubts, as well, that Ruth can understand her grandmother's revenge and ultimate efforts "to play her husband's game." He recalls that Margaret "threw away on other men what she felt her husband did not want."<sup>12</sup> He cannot find the words to tell Ruth that "the sweaty, unkind years plastered themselves across [Margaret's] lovely facelike layers of dull paint put on every year."<sup>13</sup> These words also accurately describe the deterioration in the marriage of Brownfield and Mem Copeland, Ruth's parents. Brownfield, in young adulthood leaves Green County for Baker County, Georgia, and meets Josie, the woman with whom Grange had maintained a long-term love affair.

Although Brownfield, like his father, becomes one of Josie's many lovers, it is Mem who reminds him of the ultimate in fine womanhood. Mem is Josie's niece—bright, articulate, and beautiful. Brownfield describes her as "someone to be loved and spoken to softly, someone never to frighten with his rough, coarse ways."<sup>14</sup> He ultimately succeeds in winning Mem's love, and their marriage is, initially, a happy one. But approximately five years later, they are overcome by the stress involved in simple survival.

Over the years they reached, what they would have called when they were [newly] married, an impossible, and *unbelievable* [italics in original] decline. Brownfield beat his once lovely wife now, regularly, because it made him feel, briefly, good. Every Saturday night he beat her, trying to pin the blame on her by imprinting it on her face; and she inevitably, repaid him by becoming a haggard, automatus witch...<sup>15</sup>

The contentment and joy of the early married years are replaced by misery, scorn, and contempt.

Initially, Brownfield idolizes Mem. Her education and beauty are, to him, desirable attributes. But these become the selfsame attributes that he seeks to destroy by inflicting upon her a desolation that matches his own. So, after several years, their marriage assumes the same predictable pattern of Grange and Margaret's marriage: Saturday night beatings, recovery from hangovers, suspense and tension, followed by another week bearing the characteristics of the preceding one. Temperamentally, Mem, like Margaret, is essentially docile, doing whatever she needs to do to promote Brownfield's sense of manhood. But Mem's character is more complex. Mem is capable of experiencing genuine anger, as opposed to mere despair, and is also ambitious enough to hope for better things. "There was a time when she saved every cent she was allowed to keep from her wages as a domestic because she wanted, someday, to buy a house. That was her dream."<sup>16</sup> Mem's ambition derives, in part at least, from her ability to differentiate between the potentially harmful and the potentially beneficial. She analyzes the flaws and deficiencies in her current standard of living and detests the deficiencies so vehemently that she feels compelled to effectuate change. Mem's dissatisfaction with the quality of her life inspires her to buy a home.

Being forced to move from one sharecropper's cabin to another was something she hated. She hated the arrogance of the white men who put them out, for one reason or another, without warning or explanation. She hated leaving a home she'd already made and fixed up with her own hands. She hated leaving her flowers, which she always planted whenever she got her hands on flower seeds. Each time she stepped into a new place, with its new, and usually bigger rat holes, she wept.<sup>17</sup>

Mem's anger derives from the discrepancy between her current status and a desired status, and her response to this discrepancy suggests the possibility of ultimate success. This success will not soon become a reality, however, because of Brownfield's extravagance and unwise investments each time Mem saves money to buy a home.

After two unsuccessful attempts to buy a home, Mem ultimately has her hour of glory. She stands up to Brownfield and, in one triumphant moment, informs him that she and her children will live in the house for which she has secured a lease and that if he chooses to live with them, he will treat her with respect and abide by the rules she has established. They move, for the first time, into a decent house with indoor plumbing, a refrigerator, and other conveniences they have not known before. While Brownfield grudgingly enjoys the unaccustomed comfort of the new home and finds his new job in the frozen pie factory much more dignified than dirty farm work, he cannot forget that it was Mem who searched for a decent home and signed the lease without his consent or knowledge. He vows to bring her down, and he succeeds when she—swollen with pregnancy and weakened—can no longer work. They are forced again to the shacks on the plantation.

Mem's most tragic moment does not occur when, returning home with gifts for her children on Christmas Eve, she walks into the sight of Brownfield's gun and is killed. Her most tragic moment comes on the day that she is made aware of Brownfield's devious scheme to remove the family, himself included, from the most comfortable living conditions they had ever known. He has systematically plotted her downfall.

As it was, he could not seem to give up his bitterness against his wife, who had proved herself smarter, more resourceful than he, and he had complained about everything often and loudly, secretly savoring thoughts of how his wife would "come down" when he placed her once more in a shack.<sup>18</sup>

The intention here is not to berate Brownfield for secretly planning Mem's downfall. Mem's lack of circumspection, her failure to calculate her risks as well as her opportunities, was her fatal flaw.

The fact that Mem's efforts are not ultimately successful could lead the casual observer to categorize her with Margaret and claim that both were equal losers. Mem, however, brought to her experiences two dimensions of coping that distinguish her from Margaret: a dissatisfaction, sufficiently potent to inspire meaningful efforts directed toward improving her lot in life and a sense of her own responsibility for that improvement. But Mem lacks an important attribute necessary for effective coping. Her appraisal of the possibilities for success fail to take into account the evil of which Brownfield is capable. Walker refers to Mem as a "nonfighter," a reference that should not be interpreted literally but in the context of

Walker's own definition of the word: Mem was not evil and [Brownfield] would profit from it."<sup>19</sup> Because Mem is not evil, she does not attribute this trait to others, a naivete that clinches her failure. Thus, despite the admirable quality of her perception, she does not succeed because of her failure to anticipate appropriately the risks involved in her chosen course of action.

Perceiving the "locus of control" over the outcome of events to reside within oneself is one dimension of the analytical model applied in this study. This trait is consistently elusive in the coping strategies employed by Celie in *The Color Purple*, the last character included in this analysis. She is, nonetheless, more complex than her limited vocabulary and broken language suggest, and she demonstrates—at intervals—the capacity to separate the potentially harmful from the potentially beneficial and to appraise the probable outcomes of the options available to her. Although her occasional triumphs are largely attributable to the assistance and intervention of others, she comes closer to utilizing the full range of coping strategies presented in the model than do the other characters analyzed.

*The Color Purple* is a moving narrative depicting the devotion of two sisters, Celie and Nettie, separated by continents for approximately thirty years. Celie remains in the rural South, but Nettie travels to Africa as a missionary. The novel is epistolary, the reader's sole source of information for a significant portion of the work being Celie's letters—addressed to God because she has no other confidant. She begins writing to God after being sexually abused by the man whom she thinks, at the time, is her real father. Only fourteen years of age at the time, Celie is warned by him, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy."<sup>20</sup> For years thereafter, Celie pours out to God her thoughts, her fears, her impressions of others, and her aspirations—as modest as they are.

Celie's repertoire of coping strategies early in the novel is marked by a dependence on the intervention of others, a seeming inability to envision ultimate success as a phenomenon of her own making. The trait of dependency is established early in the work as Walker depicts Celie's reaction to conversations between her father and Albert, the man she later marries. She hears Albert ask her father for permission to marry Nettie, her younger, more attractive sister, and listens as her father refuses permission. She also hears her father telling Albert, "But I can let you have Celie . . . She'd come with her own linen. She can take that cow she raise down there back of the crib . . . She ugly . . . But she'll make the better wife."<sup>21</sup> From March to June she listens to these negotiations between Albert and her father and, on one occasion, she is even called into the room with them so that Albert can take one more look at her.

Although Celie realizes that her marriage to Albert will be one devoid of love and mutual respect, a marriage motivated only by the desperation of a widower seeking a mother for his children left motherless when his

wife was killed by her lover, her plans are not to avoid the marriage altogether, but to escape from the marriage later—with Nettie's assistance. She writes to God:

It took him the whole spring, from March to June, to make up his mind to take me. All I thought about was Nettie. How she could come to me if I marry him and he be so love struck with her I could figure out a way for us to run away. Us both be hitting Nettie's schoolbooks pretty hard, cause we know we got to be smart to get away.<sup>22</sup>

Her ability to envision success is evident, but her plan of escape is linked to Nettie.

The plan is thwarted. Nettie does live with Celie and Albert for a time, but finds living with them for an extended period intolerable because Albert is unable to conceal his desire for her. Even after Nettie travels to Africa as a missionary and the sisters are separated for many years, Celie continues to dream of Nettie's return, again making her escape contingent upon Nettie's cooperation. Celie's hopes to escape her miserable marriage lie dormant while she mistakenly believes that Nettie is dead. She does not hear from Nettie for many years. But her hopes are reactivated when she learns that Nettie is alive. In a letter to God, she reveals the renewal of her hope to escape: "Now I know Nettie alive, I begin to strut a little bit. Think, when she come home, us leave here."<sup>23</sup>

The dissatisfaction exhibited by Mem in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* that enables her to visualize a more satisfying quality of life is also seen in Celie. She aspires, but the dependence on others prevails. Her ambition to lead a life of greater dignity and fulfillment becomes linked to yet another person, Shug Avery, her husband's lover. Shug and Albert were lovers in their youth, but his family opposed their relationship and arranged his marriage to a more "respectable woman," ironically later killed by her lover. Shug's return to town after many years' absence poses several problems for Celie. Albert begins to stay away from home for days at a time and when Shug becomes ill, he brings her home so that Celie can help nurse her back to health. After Shug's health and energy return, Celie tolerates Shug and Albert's renewed love affair, aware that they are sleeping together almost every night in the next room. Yet when Shug announces her plans to move on to another town, Celie begs her to stay, explaining to Shug, "He beat me when you not here."<sup>24</sup>

Celie's perceived need of the intervention of someone else to protect her own physical well being in this instance is reflective of her general attitude or coping style. The sense of dependence evident in her behavior is not problem-specific; that is, her inclination toward dependence does not vary from one problem to another. Whether confronting day-to-day issues or making decisions at pivotal points in her life, the same attitude is evident. Her occasional triumphs, as noted earlier, can be attributed to the intervention of others. She seems to possess no self-sustaining motivation that enables her to approach her problems with the expectation of success, independently achieved.

Shug Avery channels Celie's anger into purposeful activity when Celie

learns that Nettie is not dead after all. Celie discovers that Nettie has written to her regularly for many years, but Albert has hidden the letters in a large trunk in their home. This is a punitive action on Albert's part, directed toward Nettie for refusing his sexual advances. Celie becomes so enraged that she vows to kill Albert for this monstrous deed, which she perceives to be the most despicable thing he has ever done. At Shug's insistence, however, Celie begins sewing, an activity that Shug believes will absorb some of Celie's anger. Initially, she makes pants for herself and Shug only, but later makes them for others or merely for the sake of making them. Despite her obvious talents in her new hobby, Celie's characteristic lack of confidence leads her to believe that she is wasting time until Shug encourages her to convert the dining room into a sewing factory and assists her in the organization of what proves to be a profitable business venture. Shug then blesses the effort by declaring, "You making your living, Celie. . . Girl, you on your way."<sup>25</sup> Only then is Celie satisfied; she still requires Shug's approval and validation of worth to appreciate fully the importance and potential success of her own work.

Shug intervenes in yet another instance, urging Celie to take advantage of an inheritance. When Celie's stepfather (Alphonso) dies, she learns that the house in which he lived belongs, legally, to her and Nettie. She now knows that he is not her real father. Alphonso's current wife explains to Celie, "Your real daddy owned the land and the house and store. He left it to your mama. When your mama died, it passed on to you and your sister Nettie. I don't know why Alphonso never told you that."<sup>26</sup>

Celie recalls her stepfather's abuse and decides that she wants nothing that comes from him. Shug places the situation in perspective by assuring Celie that the property was willed to her and she has every right to assume the ownership. This event represents a pivotal point in Celie's life wherein she comes close to sacrificing a deserved inheritance because of her inability to recognize fully the possibilities within the range of her own influence.

Support groups and network systems are recognized concomitants of survival, but their inefficacy as substitutes for self-determination is dramatized forcefully in Walker's depiction of Celie's faltering efforts to survive. Nettie, upon whose assistance Celie depends, travels to Africa. Her return is uncertain. Shug, with whom Celie eventually develops an intimate relationship, temporarily replaces Nettie as Celie's source of support. But Shug leaves to pursue her singing career and later marries. After a protracted period of adjustment, Celie's perception of locus of control begins to shift from others to herself. In a letter to Nettie, she writes of Shug's promise to come home, concluding the letter with her first affirmation of self-determination: "I be so calm. If she come, I be happy. If she don't, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn."<sup>27</sup> The text does not provide an enumeration of Celie's goals or evaluate the level of her aspirations, but at last she envisions contentment without assigning responsibility for that content-



ment to anyone other than herself.

Alice Walker's portrayal of these women presents a range of coping strategies that can be tested for their generalizability to real life situations. Although the regressions and failures accompanying the efforts of these women are frequently disappointing and occasionally alarming, a catalogue of the coping strategies employed by these women is revelatory of the problems and possibilities involved in recognizing and assessing options, calculating risks, and activating self-determination. The characters in this analysis cannot be neatly categorized as three unfortunate women who suffer deprivation and brutality. Their responses to a common plight are indeed "dappled," as each woman brings to her experiences a unique temperament and repertoire of coping strategies.

Generalizing beyond the fictional context and attaching universal significance to the specific must, necessarily, be approached with caution, fictional literature having no inherent obligation to reflect reality. Enduring literature, however, has traditionally attained that status largely as a result of its timelessness and universality, its relevance beyond the immediate context. Although the dynamics of group interaction may preclude a perfect analogy between individual and group survival, the coping strategies employed by the characters in this analysis may be evaluated for their potential effectiveness when applied to real-life situations. The strategies in the analytical model begin with appraisal, a vital component of coping strategy. This strategy involves appraising circumstances and anticipating potential outcomes, undeniably valuable dimensions of coping because they increase the possibility of ultimate success. They serve to underscore the contrast between an existing status and a preferred status. But this appraisal is not, in itself, determinative of success. Self-determination, the belief that the locus of control over the outcome of events resides within oneself, emerges as the *coup de maitre* that concretizes Grange Copeland's differentiation between merely surviving and surviving whole.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>John O'Brien. *Interviews With Black Writers*. (New York: Liveright, 1973) 192.

<sup>2</sup>Alice Walker. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970) 214.

<sup>3</sup>Gerard Manley Hopkins. "Pied Beauty." *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. W. H. Gardner and H. H. MacKenzie, ed. 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) 69.

<sup>4</sup>Robert E. Lazarus, et al. "The Psychology of Coping." *Coping and Adaptation*. George V. Coelho and David A. Hamburg, ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1974) 260.

<sup>5</sup>Katherine R. Parkes. "Locus of Control, Cognitive Appraisal, and Coping In Stressful Episodes." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Vol. 46, (March 1984).

<sup>6</sup>Mary Helen Washington. "An Essay on Alice Walker." *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*. Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1979) 139.

<sup>7</sup>Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, 14.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 177.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 57.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 58-59

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 103.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Walker, *The Color Purple*, 11.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 17, 18.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 139.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 76.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 192.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 215.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 247-48.

## Critique

Overall, the author presents an interesting, readable concept. Considering the popularity of Alice Walker's prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*, and its acclaim since being made into a movie, a wider audience and interest in black Americans will pique prospective reader interest in the article.

"Coping Strategies . . ." serves to compare and contrast the lives of Margaret and Mem from *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and Celie from *The Color Purple*. Unfortunately, the article states and restates the purpose of the paper is to focus on the women, yet considerably weakens its position by being too heavily laden with Grange Copeland as the lead-in and concluding character. He becomes the "bookend" person who detracts and is almost permitted to overshadow the females within the text and footnote citations. With a little recasting of emphasis, readers should be able to place their attention upon the three women as the thesis statements intended.

The implications of economic impoverishment and entrapment as a reality for numerous black Americans historically and currently should not be overlooked nor downplayed as "Coping Strategies . . ." seems to do. Readers could be quietly misled and overlook these aspects which are an essential foundation to understand Alice Walker's characters; unfortunately such concepts are seemingly relegated to the backstage.

For persons who read the article but have not read the Alice Walker books, or have seen the movie version of *The Color Purple*, an unsettling dissonant feeling could be engendered toward black males. Black males are portrayed in the article (and apparently gleaned from the larger works of Walker) as being resentful, mean-spirited, and jealous of female intervention of efforts to improve the quality of life. Perhaps then, the criticisms leveled at Walker's writings being anti-black males do have a ring of truth to them inasmuch as black females appear to be constantly victimized by their male counterparts. "Coping Strategies . . ." does not appear to dispell the notion and thereby misses an opportunity to address a troublesome intertwined issue.

The idea of examining and discussing coping strategies of the three women is good. The attempts to discuss the appraisal and locus of control while lauding the reflection of realities is strongly stated in the beginning of the paper. As the author winds down the discussion, there is something of a retreat from the blow-by-blow reflection of reality notion. The author has pointed out some very important concepts which speak to others across the lines of color, social status, and gender.

—Janice W. Clemmer

## Critique

Intersecting the tools of psychological and sociological research which attempt to explain real human behavior with the tools of the novelist which attempt to portray a fictional accounting of human behavior, Walker presents an analytical model for examining the coping behaviors of three women in two novels of Alice Walker: *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple*.

The three women, Margaret and Mem in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and Celie in *The Color Purple* are examined in terms of their ability to confront, manage and otherwise cope with the drabness of their marital experiences. The ability of these three women to meet their challenges is analyzed within a psychological-sociological-literary model having two major components: "locus of control" and "appraisal."

The author defines locus of control as meaning the problem-solving ability of the three black women. Appraisal is represented as the ability of each woman to discern from a range of alternatives, choices which will result in some personal gain, or an otherwise benefit to her.

The author presents this framework presumably to assist readers of Alice Walker's novels in better understanding, if not appreciating, the myriad of challenges besetting the three women in the two novels. Moreover, it is the apparent intent of this model to assist readers in seeing these three women as proactive beings: women attempting to assert some influence, if not control, over their lives.

The author asserts that each of the women develops coping strategies which enable them to make decisions, albeit in many instances the wrong decisions, about how their lives will be led. Translated, decision making for these women invariably involves trying to improve their marital relationships. The focus of the paper is on the ability of each of these women to carefully evaluate their respective situations, their plights, and to make decisions that will improve on their life circumstances. The ability of each woman to appraise, that is, evaluate her situation and to come up with the right decision is a critical and reoccurring element of both the analytical model and the paper. The author of the paper spends much time presenting Mem, Margaret, and Celie within the context of appraisal.

Overall, the paper provides an interesting analytical framework for examining the literary contributions the black novelist can make towards explaining the black predicament, and especially the predicament black women find themselves in in this society. The framework is helpful if we are interested in better understanding and assessing the complex, subtle, and occasionally very confusing ways black women confront—and at times conquer—the many challenges presented to their womanhood and personhood.

A less appealing feature of the model is its inability to assist in assessing the ability of Margaret, Mem, and Celie in surviving as

independent, self assured individuals. Perhaps this is not so much a failing of the model as it is due to the powerfully dependent personas of the women. Each is portrayed essentially as victim. Although the particular life circumstances of each differs—in common—Margaret, Mem, and Celie live basically loveless lives; they're brutalized and neglected by their husbands, they are exploited by their environments, and they are long sufferers.

The analytical model presented in the paper, while holding out promise as an additional eclectic tool for better understanding the coping strategies of the three women in the subject works, it does not inform us much about the extent to which Margaret, Mem, and Celie seek independence, the essence of surviving whole, in their employment of coping strategies. This point notwithstanding, the paper makes an important contribution in the first instance to understanding the multifarious coping dimensions of the black women in Alice Walker's two novels. In the second instance, the paper brings us closer to the world of black women.

—Otis L. Scott

## Critique

An examination of the coping strategies of vulnerable and victimized women characters in Alice Walker's fiction does suggest possibilities for coping with racial oppression. The most oppressed woman in Walker's fiction, however, is not Mem, Margaret, or Celie, but Sofia, the wife of Harpo, Celie's stepson in *The Color Purple*. Certainly Sofia is one of those "women who are cruelly exploited, spirits and bodies mutilated, relegated to the most narrow and confining lives, sometimes driven to madness." But she is not brutalized by her husband. Her tormentors are much more powerful and, therefore, much more frightening.

When Sofia is first introduced, she is nobody's victim. Big, pregnant, and sassy, she seems not to have a care in the world. "I ain't in no trouble. Big though."<sup>1</sup> Once she and Harpo are married—after the baby is born—Sofia refuses to let him beat her. She tells Celie:

All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me. (46)

In fact, it is Sofia, not Shug Avery, who first encourages Celie to fight Albert. "You ought to bash Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ head open, she [Sofia] say. Think bout heaven later" (47). When she tires of fighting Harpo, the independent Sofia simply leaves.

But later she encounters a force much more brutal and powerful than Harpo or her male relatives. She comes face to face with white justice in the form of the mayor and his wife. When the mayor's wife asks the very clean Sofia if she would like to be her maid, Sofia's response is a

matter-of-fact “hell no” (86). And when the mayor slaps her, Sofia, of course, slaps him back, just as she would Harpo. But, unlike Harpo, the mayor has the law on his side—“The polices come, start slinging the children off the mayor, bang they heads together. Sofia really start to fight. They drag her to the ground” (86).

Sofia is taken to the jail, more dead than alive, and there the brutality intensifies.

They put Sofia to work in the prison laundry. All day long from five to eight she washing clothes. Dirty convict uniforms, nasty sheets and blankets piled way over her head. Us see her twice a month for half a hour. Her face yellow and sickly, her fingers look like fatty sausage.

Everything nasty here, she say, even the air. Food bad enough to kill you with it. Roaches here, mice, flies, lice and even a snake or two. If you say anything they strip you, make you sleep on a cement floor without a light. (88)

It is at this point in her life that Sofia, who achieved self-determination and independence at an early age, needs coping strategies. And, ironically, she chooses to mimic Celie.

How you manage? us ast. Every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say. (88)

Sofia has evaluated the situation, which is oppressive and even life-threatening, considered the available options—none—and recognized that she has *no* control over her life. She has taken the only action possible under the circumstances; she has transformed herself into a passive victim.

As Sofia's relatives recognize, however, she can not survive indefinitely using this desperate coping strategy. She is already going insane and will soon die. Her circumstances require a communal effort and some devious tactics. Because Squeak, Harpo's new woman, is the niece of the warden, she becomes the emissary. But she is not to beg for mercy; instead she is told to pretend that Sofia is enjoying her confinement.

Tell him you just think justice ought to be done, yourself. But make sure he know you living with Sofia husband, say Shug. Make sure you git in the part bout being happy where she at, worse thing could happen to her is to be some white lady maid. (93)

The tactics work. Sofia is released into the custody of the mayor's wife. Although she is not really free, Sofia is no longer brutalized, and she survives.

With the portrayal of Sofia, Alice Walker seems to be demonstrating that racist institutions are much more brutal and overpowering than are individual black men. Sofia is able to assume responsibility for success in her fight against the black men in her family. But it takes the combined efforts of friends, relatives, and even natural enemies (Harpo and Squeak) to rescue her from white justice.

—Mary F. Sisney

## Note

<sup>1</sup>Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), p. 38. Subsequent passages cited parenthetically in the text.

# The Challenges and Limitations of Conducting Research Among the Old Order Amish<sup>1</sup>

Jerry Savells and Thomas Foster

## Introduction:

The Old Order or “horse and buggy” Amish have been a part of American society for more than two centuries. Today, some 95,000 Amish persons reside in over twenty states, a Canadian province, and two countries in Latin America. Although variations exist in the social values and behavioral practices within different Amish communities (or church districts), they have basically resisted the acculturation process that would reinforce and promote a standard of living and lifestyle embraced by most of the non-Amish in the U.S.

Contrary to popular belief and some of the ideas presented in the movie *Witness* (1985), the pacifistic Old Order Amish are not being overwhelmed by creeping urbanization and the pressures of co-existing in an industrial society. Despite certain accommodations, the Amish have been largely successful in practicing voluntary separatism and sustaining religious beliefs and social customs which can be traced to their origins in 17th century Europe.

According to Thomas Foster, the Amish typically emphasize the importance of humility, modesty, strong obedience to God, and social conformity—and abhor pride, social snobbery, individualism, and winning through competition.<sup>2</sup> They also employ small-scale (“appropriate”) rather than large-scale technologies, and there are no social classes, no bureaucracies, and no institutions of higher learning within Amish society. *Family* and *faith* are the cornerstone of an Amish lifestyle.

According to the writings of W. I. Thomas, “every individual has a vast variety of wishes which can only be satisfied by his incorporation into society.”<sup>3</sup> Hence, Thomas maintained that people had essentially “Four Wishes”: the desire for new experience, for security, for recognition, and for mastery. Yet for the Amish population, it survives *without* an abundance of new experiences and perhaps with a minimum of social recognition as well.

The Old Order Amish have thus sought to avoid the pitfalls of modern materialism, self-serving lifestyles, hedonistic behavior, extreme compe-

tion, the quest for wealth and status, and careerism as a means of determining one's self-worth. Instead, the Amish have placed a strong emphasis upon serving God, maintaining a simplistic lifestyle, voluntarily separating from the "ways of the world," providing respect for the integrity of the family as a sacred institution, and promoting the merits of both hard work and frugality—preferably, in close cooperation with the forces of nature.

The present study examines the challenges and limitations of conducting field research within Old Order Amish communities from the perspectives of two researchers who independently conducted ethnographic investigations of the sect, involving a combined total of seven different Amish settlements in five states.

### **Background and Research Design: Savells' Study**

This research project began in the winter and spring of 1982. At that time an extensive review was made of the available—and meager—published ethnographic research on the Old Order Amish. After a careful analysis of this literature, the researcher began to identify major issues and challenges confronting the Amish as they attempt to co-exist with high-tech society.

Numerous schools of thought exist about the Amish, some reflecting their religious conservatism and others focusing upon their simplistic lifestyle. The schools of thought have reinforced two common myths which pertain to them: (1) that the Amish never yield to the forces of social change for any reason—essentially suggesting that to become "modern" is the equivalent of practicing "evil"; and, (2) the antithesis of the first myth, that the Amish will soon fade from the American scene as a distinct culture, because they cannot possibly resist the temptation which comes vis-a-vis their increasing number of contacts (and commercial encounters) with outsiders.

A twelve-page structured questionnaire was developed for collecting interview data. This instrument was subsequently reviewed and approved by the Wright State "Human Subjects Committee." By the summer of 1982, the instrument was ready for pre-testing. The pre-test was conducted in the small community of Berne, Indiana, where there is a well-established Amish settlement.

After refining the questionnaire, co-author Savells proceeded to identify a stratified random sample of Old Order Amish families using the *1983 New American Almanac* and the *1981 Ohio Amish Directory*.<sup>4</sup> Communities were selected that would represent different regions (and church districts)—with the intent of investigating variations in Amish lifestyles and social values. In the intervening months (and years), visits were made to collect interview data from six Old Order Amish communities in five states.<sup>5</sup> The Amish communities selected for study were: Berne and Milroy, Indiana; Ethridge, Tennessee; Intercourse, Pennsylvania; Kalona, Iowa; and, Plain City, Ohio.

In addition to face-to-face interviews with the Amish, efforts were also



made to establish contact with outsiders who had frequent contact with them in each of the communities, with the intent of gaining insights into “how” and “why” they accept certain forms of social change. This latter category included farmers, mail carriers, drivers of local milk trucks, agricultural field agents, and fertilizer salesmen. One hundred and six Amish families participated in this study.

Although the sample is quite small, it is an encouraging beginning, since the Old Order Amish have basically spurned most efforts from the scientific community to investigate their lifestyle. This particular effort gave new meaning to the term “field research,” because it has represented approximately 6,500 miles of driving (spread over a thirty-month period.)

Although the Amish make up a specific culture, it is not discrete by geographical area. Amish are scattered in several states and their farms and residences are often interspersed among non-Amish folk. Some communities have a rather small population (such as Milroy, Indiana, where there are approximately sixty Amish families).

The Amish respondents who were interviewed were polite and cordial, but they typically do not welcome outsiders intruding into their lives. They are separatist, private, and pacifist in cultural orientation and are not socialized into wanting to interact with strangers. Their history, lifestyle, and religion promote voluntary isolation, and this is a major obstacle to anyone intent upon collecting research data via personal interviews.

The Amish are a “designed folk society,” bounded by their desire for separatism and daily usage of German or “Pennsylvania Dutch” as a language of choice. This designed folk society is semi-closed, i.e., in the sense that it is extremely difficult, but not impossible, for an outsider to become Amish as a convert. Devout Amish are expected to adhere to a most stringent code of behavior with severe sanctions imposed (including banishment) for those who are identified as disobedient.

To assume that one study of the Amish in six communities will suffice to offer an assessment of the Amish “condition” in America in the mid-1980s is both illogical and unwise. Such a suggestion would be an insult to the Amish people and the communities in which they live.

The researcher began with a question that has been asked by others: Have the Amish shown an increasing vulnerability to the forces of social change, and, if so, in what way(s)? The answer to this question is a qualified “yes”—but it is not simple nor easy to explain.

Using a social-historical perspective, structured observations, and interviews, the researcher began to make contact with select individuals in the Amish population of five states in 1982. Since the focus of these efforts was essentially “exploratory,” observations are sometimes more tentative than definitive.

The major limitations encountered in this study can be summarized as follows: (1) limitation of research funds for travel, (2) limitation of time

for commuting to interviews, (3) the challenge of finding a truly random sample in sparsely settled communities, (4) the extreme difficulty of locating certain Amish families in rural areas with poor roads and unmarked mailboxes, (5) the hesitation of the Amish to interact with outsiders, and (6) a considerable amount of everyday Amish conversation conducted in Pennsylvania Dutch (German), a language not easily understood by the researcher.

### **The Challenges Confronted in Collecting Data: Savells' Study**

The Old Order Amish are polite but somewhat aloof when approached by strangers. They tend to group all outsiders together unless they are non-Amish neighbors well-known to them. Consequently, they would not necessarily make a sharp distinction between interacting with a sociologist and a conventional tourist. They are sometimes amused that researchers would want to make considerable efforts to meet with them (almost always at the convenience of the Amish person—and frequently problematic when trying to arrange interviews around the daily demands of operating a farm).

Since the Old Order Amish typically do not encourage education beyond the eighth grade, they are often suspicious of the motives of those who represent a different lifestyle and value system. Even when the motives are fully explained and understood, they may have only a limited appreciation for the merit of social scientific research. For example, this researcher included questions on the questionnaire that addressed the issue of child abuse; and, although the Amish are strong believers in the “spare the rod, spoil the child” approach to parenting, they are also extremely loving and devoted to their children. They had difficulty comprehending why anyone would abuse a child.

The Amish practice voluntary social isolation from the “ways of the world,” and are defensive in shielding their children from any threat to their beliefs or lifestyle. Therefore, children in the Amish family tend to be passive and withdrawn in the presence of outsiders—often hesitant to even offer directions to the next house. The Amish family is also very patriarchal, with a “father knows best attitude.” Inquiries must be directed to the oldest male of the household, wherever possible, and this is no small feat during crop planting or harvesting season. Although an Amish wife may talk with an outsider, she is likely to refrain in the presence of her husband—and it would be most unusual for her to disagree with him in the presence of others (particularly outsiders). Within this closed social system, information can only be obtained from a single source—with limited opportunity to verify how other members of the family might react to the same question.

The Amish are not overly concerned with schedules and deadlines of outsiders, unless they are directly affected, and are often elusive in suggesting a convenient time for an appointment or an interview. Rather than volunteer to provide information, even when arranged by mutual

convenience, they often prefer that the researcher talk with someone else in the community who they believe is more knowledgeable on the subject, or simply refer the person to the bishop for answers. This can sometimes create a real dilemma, since the bishop may not be sympathetic, and he typically sets the tone (of either approval or disapproval) for others in subsequent interviews. Even though the Old Order Amish do not have electricity or telephones or automobiles, "word" travels quickly by the grapevine within the Amish community, and upsetting the local bishop would almost assuredly terminate the opportunity for additional interviews within that particular church district.

The Old Order Amish are extremely ethnocentric, and any researcher must be careful not to offend their sense of what is "right or wrong" behavior. Although the Amish do not promote advanced education, they are often intelligent and intuitive and are quick to pick up on "non-verbal cues" which suggest disapproval of their lifestyle or ideas. Common sense and caution must be exercised. Common sense, caution, and patience are qualities generally beyond the domain of a novice or inexperienced researcher, whose main concern may be "getting on with the job as quickly as possible." For this reason, data were collected by the author operating alone, since it would have been risky (and expensive) if one encountered early rejection in the community. In this regard, a serious researcher must have a good preparatory understanding of Amish traditions and folkways, since this may be the best guideline for avoiding error or insult and for exercising *Verstehen* in probing for additional information or deciphering what has been said.

Another obstacle that the researcher must contend with is the temptation of the Amish to want to compare answers with that of other respondents. For example, they may ask the interviewer, "What did so-and-so say in response to that question?" as they do not want to appear different or to offer an answer that someone else in their church district might consider controversial. The Amish are sometimes hesitant to answer questions they think are too provocative or probing. In these circumstances, it may be necessary to alter the wording of the question, or, if the person appears annoyed, recognize that success in completing the interview may depend upon accepting the idea that there will not always be a totally completed questionnaire. Both insight and patience are strong virtues in this situation.

The Amish, as with members of other cultures, do not necessarily expect the researcher to have a full understanding of why they live the way they do.<sup>6</sup> However, they do expect respect for their right to be different. The interviewers should avoid giving the impression that they regard the Amish as being "backward." Yet, beyond this, any in-depth familiarity with the literature on Amish culture should convince the researcher that the Amish are *not*, in fact, a primitive folk culture, but that they have consciously opted for simpler lifestyles, i.e., for lifestyles with fewer complex social and moral consequences.

The Amish frequently believe that outsiders (even those from the academic community) have a very limited understanding of their culture. Consequently, the Amish respondent may question the interviewer's ability to fully comprehend what he or she can visually observe. To establish "legitimation" as one who has a basic knowledge about Amish life and values is important.

From a purely practical point of view, there is little for the Amish to gain by talking to any interviewer—other than satisfying their curiosity about the beliefs and habits of various outsiders. They prefer to live a separatist existence, with carefully controlled contact with the non-Amish population. The Amish are not likely to volunteer information about their lifestyle, and even when approached politely, may offer a rather evasive answer (or question why you would want to know that). They are very sensitive to the stereotypes that have been sensationalized and trivialized by the media portraying their lives. In brief, they guard their privacy with considerable effort and diligence.

The researcher should be prepared for reciprocal questions from the respondent, particularly as to "how" the data collected will be used or reported. The Amish make a concerted effort to avoid attracting media attention and do not welcome publicity—even if it is favorable. They believe that showing pride is wrong (a major reason they think it is wrong to take pictures of one another), or to be self-serving in one's actions. As a consequence, they do not want to be exploited or manipulated by strangers for vanity reasons, i.e., either money or fame. They recognize that some members of the academic community may try to enhance their careers or salaries by writing books with information that may be distorted, inaccurate, inadequate, or demeaning.

As a people, the Amish place a major emphasis upon "trust" and "respect" for their neighbor and their "brothers and sisters in the faith." This kind of trust cannot be won overnight, nor can the researcher anticipate an easy rapport. The Amish *are* suspicious of outsiders and the outsider will be watched carefully for evidence of insincerity or hollowness. Genuine friendship is not easily won among the Amish, but if it is offered, it will be sincere, not superficial or transient.

### **Background and Research Design: Foster's Study**

Co-author Foster's research, conducted in the Geauga County, Ohio Old Order Amish settlement, was the byproduct of a mapping study that was commissioned by the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company and the Ohio Edison Company during the period May 1982 to February 1984. Four years earlier the same electric utilities had proposed to the Ohio Power Siting Board the construction of a line of 345,000 volt electrical transmission towers that would have extended from the Perry Nuclear Power Plant, on Lake Erie, to the Ravenna substation, located some fifty-two miles due south. The proposed line would have traversed the center of the Geauga Amish settlement on a vertical axis, passing through a heavily forested maple sugaring area, north of Middlefield,

Ohio, and continuing southward, through Amish and non-Amish farms, and then through the village of Middlefield itself, and, finally, across some additional farmland, terminating at the substation.

Local opposition to the proposed line developed quickly. A citizen's coalition, led by a Middlefield businessman, held public meetings to voice objections to the project. The protest meetings attracted an unlikely alliance of opponents: Mormons, environmentalists, state and local politicians, and members of the Old Order Amish. The Mormon opposition was based upon a concern that the line would cross the John Johnson Farm in Hiram, a religious meeting place. Naturalists argued it would adversely affect the Manua Swamp and some rare forested areas. Politicians and businessmen expressed fears that the line would destroy the character of the area, since the locale is a tourist attraction for many Clevelanders, and that it might lead to the mass emigration of Amish residents. At the public meetings, several Amish residents and leaders took the uncharacteristic step (for the Amish) of speaking out publicly against the proposed location of the power line. The primary objection raised by the Amish was their concern that, if built, the proposed route would result in the destruction of a major portion of their "sugarbush." (The Geauga county maplesugaring area is widely regarded as being one of the most productive in Ohio. In addition, much of the labor-intensive sugaring there is performed by Amish farmers, who net about \$6,000-\$8,000 per farm per season from such operations.) A secondary objection raised by the Amish was their uncertainty over the possible health hazards that might be posed to persons, crops and livestock near the high voltage lines. Lastly, Amish residents of the areas do not normally use electricity, unless they are sharefarmers or are employed by the "English" or "Yankees," as they term the non-Amish. In certain rural parts of the settlement, where the concentration of Amish is highest, there are, in fact, no electrical lines whatever.

In January of 1982, an Administrative Law Judge of the Ohio Power Siting Board refused to certify the utilities application for the proposed line and ordered the companies to undertake additional studies and to present a new alternative route for the transmission towers. After hearing various legal arguments from (non-Amish) opponents and proponents of the line, the judge ruled that the utilities had failed to demonstrate that they had, in proposing the original route, also attempted to minimize the impact of the line upon the region's Old Order Amish community. Although not directly prohibiting the companies from crossing any Amish-owned or occupied properties in the future, the judge did direct the utilities to present evidence, in any subsequent proceedings, that they were attempting to minimize the impact of the line upon the Old Order Amish.

Following this legal ruling, the researcher was invited to meet with a delegation of representatives from the utility companies, and they explained that a sociologist with knowledge of the Ohio Amish was being

sought to develop a cultural and geographic map of the Geauga county Old Order Amish settlement area. (The settlement actually extends over three Ohio counties: Geauga, Trumbull and Ashtabula, and is located only about 35 miles due east of Cleveland.) The company representatives stated that once the Old Order Amish in the region were definitively located, it would become possible for the utilities to propose a new alternative route to the Ohio Power Siting Board in compliance with the aforementioned legal directive. The researcher agreed to serve as a consultant to a Cleveland law firm representing the utilities and to map the settlement area, provided that, in interviewing subjects, he would also be permitted to ask some detailed research questions of his own, questions pertaining to Old Order Amish lifestyles and occupations that were not of particular interest to the study's corporate sponsors.

During eleven trips to the settlement, the author interviewed twenty-one heads of Amish households (some interviewed three or four times) as well as numerous non-Amish informants within the community. Most of the household heads were community leaders, i.e., bishops, deacons or ministers. The leaders were included in the samples because their districts were believed to define the westernmost boundaries of the Geauga Amish community at or near the points where the alternative route would parallel the edge of the settlement area.

The original interview protocol called for asking subjects questions that would identify them as belonging to the Old Order Amish sect and that would identify their church district affiliation. It would also request subjects to locate themselves, and other members of their church districts, on county maps. Finally, subjects were to be asked if they could locate persons or groups within the settlement who regarded themselves as being Amish, but who were not thought of as being Amish by members of the Old Order community (the latter question being designed to locate several Beachy or automobile driving Amish families who reportedly lived in the settlement.) The researcher then added the following categories of questions of his own to the interview schedule: (1) the type, and location, of subject's employment, (2) the subject's attitudes toward Amish occupations (farming, factory work, home industry, and so forth, (3) existing differences between Old Order church districts in the settlement area (regarding beliefs or technologies) and, (4) how Old Order church district boundaries came to be established and were maintained.

The researcher visited the Amish households in the company of a representative of one of the electric utility companies. The Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company's Chief Surveyer was along to answer any technical questions that might arise regarding the proposed location or the probable effects of the alternate high voltage line.

The interviewer introduced himself as a private consultant, whose task was to locate the Old Order Amish community on a map, so that the utility companies could be sure that they were complying with the legal

order to minimize the “impact” of the alternate route upon the Amish. After being shown a map with the alternate route superimposed upon it, most of the subjects expressed relief that the route had been changed, and that it no longer transected any Amish-owned lands. They typically commented, “Now why didn’t they do it that way in the first place?” or “We don’t intend to fight it (the alternate route) but is it really needed?”

### **The Challenges Confronted in Collecting Data: Foster Study**

Perhaps the greatest challenge that confronts the researcher who would study the Amish is convincing people that one has a valid reason (from their separatist perspective) for being in their communities, i.e., observing behavior and asking questions, in the first place. The Amish have little appreciation for the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake and are apt to be much more cooperative if they can perceive some practical purpose for the researcher’s presence. Absent a practical rationale, the researcher must be trusted as a real friend, that is, as someone who understands and respects the norms and ways of the sacred community. Yet such *rapport* is not quickly nor easily established among the Amish, whose historical experiences have taught them that there is indeed much in the world to distrust.

In the present study there was clearly a practical rationale for the interviews and most subjects seemed to believe that cooperation with the researcher was in their own best interests. Accordingly, during interviews, subjects often “opened up” and expressed themselves on a wide variety of unrelated issues and topics. However, whenever the *interviewer* began to systematically inquire into certain unrelated areas, e.g., such as differences in religious beliefs or political opinions among the Amish, the subjects tended to become notably more defensive and more circumspect in their answers.

The Amish are extremely conscious of the need to avoid even the appearance of individualism or pridefulness. Therefore, no Amishman wishes to speak out on a topic who is not also reasonably sure that he is speaking with the voice of the entire community. A problem, in this regard, is that differences of opinion and practice do exist within Old Order communities, and particularly between church districts (which establish their own norms of behavior [*ordnung*] based upon their leaders’ understandings of scriptures and upon a vote of ratification by the members). Despite these normative differences between church districts, the Amish are fond of saying that “We are one people,” or that, “We speak with one voice,” that is, to outsiders. The Amish desire to present a united front and to create the impression of cohesion and unanimity. In fact, this impression is largely accurate, for the differences that divide church districts are apt to be relatively minor. At the same time, these seemingly minor differences, e.g., whether or not to use motorized but horse-drawn hay bailers sometimes escalate into rather sharp, or even divisive, social conflicts between districts, and the Amish

have no desire to expose these inner conflicts to the outside world. Hence, in the present study, for the researcher to get Amish subjects to discuss any differences in beliefs or practices that occurred between Geauga area church districts was nearly impossible. About as far as subjects would go in this respect was to admit that there were in fact districts in the settlement which were "not in full fellowship," that is, whose members could not attend each others' church services.

Another concern that several Amish subjects expressed was their desire to avoid all media publicity. Time and again, they inquired as to whether any of their statements would be reported to the newspapers. And once they were assured that their anonymity would be respected, the subjects became considerably more willing to express their opinions. In a like vein, some Amishmen even objected to being put "on the record." That is, they said that they preferred not to have their statements recorded on tape, or even written down, by the researcher. The interviewer therefore soon abandoned tape recording or note-taking during interviews in favor of writing down his observations immediately upon leaving an Amish household.

Finally, the most cooperative subjects encountered in the study seemed to fall into two general categories: (1) Amishmen who had lived and worked in "English" society for several years before deciding to return to their original faith and their ancestral communities and, (2) the aged, retired Amish, who seemed to greatly enjoy having someone with whom to talk. In the first instance, some of the subjects impressed this researcher as being culturally marginal individuals who were more relaxed in the interview situation than were others and who verbalized much more readily than their peers. (One man had been a truck driver for ten years before deciding to return home, join the church, and marry an Amish girl.) "Don't repeat this," confided one subject, "but I'm not going to tell my son whether or not to drive a car; that should be his decision alone." The second group of subjects—the aged—were most enjoyable to interview. This group seemed secure in its identity (the old being respected in Amish society) and seemed less worried about what others thought of them. Even the women actively participated in discussions in this age group and on occasion contradicted or poked fun at their husbands (something which never happened among younger couples where the wife rarely spoke). In fact, the older Amish people in the sample seemed to epitomize the essence of the Amish character: kindness, earthiness, joviality, intuitiveness, and a sincere commitment to family and faith.

## **Summary**

The challenges and limitations of conducting research among members of Old Order Amish communities in five states were discussed from the perspectives of two investigators who conducted independent ethnographic research among the Amish. There is a high degree of consensus between the investigators concerning the nature of the problems that can



be expected in conducting such research.

For outsiders to truly understand and appreciate Amish lifestyles and values is difficult, since most have been socialized into believing that the “modern ways” of industrialized societies represent progress and improvement of some kind. This idea is usually taken for granted in “the everyday construction of social reality” without entertaining alternative views of human existence. Although sociologists are intellectually aware that all of us view the world through “tinted glasses” with the tint being our own socialization experiences, even they are not immune to emotionally-based cultural biases and stereotypes. And the Amish are particularly perceptive of, and sensitive to, the cultural prejudices of outsiders. Perhaps it is well to reflect, in this connection, that the Amish have successfully avoided most of the negative effects of technological and social change within the last half century. This period of time has been marked by the appearance of the Nuclear Age, the Space-Age, the Cybernetic or Computer Age, and Post-Industrial Society. Yet each of these “advances” have brought with them new social and moral problems, seemingly ever-larger and more serious in their implications than those faced by human beings in the past. Understanding this may help us to view the Amish with a greater degree of appreciation and respect.

## Critique

The fact that the Old Order Amish have resisted acculturation processes in the United States is not startling news. The generally successful persistence of many aspects of traditional Amish culture as islands within the mainstream of American society has been well-articulated in general studies by John Hostetler and others. It is also documented in more specific community studies, for example the work of Elmer and Dorothy Schwieder at Kalona, Iowa, published in 1975—a source not cited in the above article, although that community was also among the individual Old Order Amish groups studied by Savells and Foster. Similarly, the need to understand the value system of a group one is studying is a long-standing ethnographic axiom. *Verstehen* is mandatory whether one is studying an ethnic or similarly-demarcated group within American society or whether one is going off to learn about the culture of people in the Trobriand Islands or some other area which is relatively isolated from western society.

Beyond these matters, the article by Savells and Foster offers food for thought along several dimensions of interest regarding the subject of ethnicity: (1) the matter of *voluntary* separatism as opposed to forced

boundary maintaining mechanisms which are imposed by outside groups, (2) the mistaken impression that the Amish never react to events or influences in the dominant society, (3) a myth that the distinctive Amish culture will soon disappear, and (4) a common misconception that there are no intra-group differences of opinion within the Amish communities. The fact that the Amish consciously and continuously define their socio-cultural domain is significant when considering how ethnic groups originate and, more importantly, how they continue. There is action, reaction, and change within Amish society, although the rates of change differ from those in the society which surrounds them. Savells and Foster's brief discussion of the dynamics of the Amish response to the proposed location of the power line, for example, is suggestive in pointing to the interplay of modern economic and political elements as well as traditional religious values. Even more intriguing to the discussant is the matter of intra-group factions, subtle though they be, among the Amish. To more fully understand ethnicity, we must comprehend not only the factors upon which boundaries are drawn *between* groups but also the polarities *within* these groups. Of course, as Savells and Foster nicely point out, members of various groups usually attempt to provide a "united front" when dealing with outsiders. The data summarized here from the Amish are instructive when compared to studies which have been made, for example, among factions within American Indian communities or the differences between American Reform Jews most of whom originated from western Europe and American Orthodox Jews who immigrated primarily from eastern Europe. The resulting perspectives may be confusing at first, but they challenge us not to think in static terms when dealing with ethnicity. The dynamics of intra-group connections as well as the structure of inter-group relationships are important in understanding coping strategies in the twentieth century.

As demanded by the space limitations of a journal article, Savells and Foster appear to have only skimmed over the data in their two related studies. It is hoped that they will further expand on this study not only in terms of the Amish example *per se* but also in a comparative framework oriented toward the perspective of ethnicity. Such a work should include a copy of the structured questionnaires, the interview protocols, and the kinds of qualitative information obtained from open-ended interviews. These materials would allow the reader to better determine the nature of the data base and to explore the cross-group comparisons which would assuredly elucidate a number of dimensions of ethnicity.

—David M. Gradowhl

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## **“The Challenges and Limitations of Conducting Research Among the Old Order Amish”**

**Jerry Savells and Thomas Foster**

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>This research was supported by three College of Liberal Arts Research Grants (1982, 1984, & 1986) and a University Research Grant (1983) at Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. Additional research funding was provided by the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company and Ohio Edison.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas W. Foster. “Amish Society.” *The Futurist*. (December, 1981) 33-40.

<sup>3</sup>Nicholas S. Timasheff. *Sociological Theory: Its Nature and Growth*. Third Edition. (New York: Random House, 1967) 154.

<sup>4</sup>Ben Raber. *The New American Almanac*. (Baltic, OH: Gordonville Printshop, 1983); Ervin Gingerich. *Ohio Amish Directory*. 1981 Edition. (Sugarcreek, OH: Schlaback Publishers).

<sup>5</sup>Initially, some research data were collected via mailed questionnaires. However, since the return rate was only 14.5 percent, this researcher proceeded to use face-to-face interviews—and this practice has continued for more than two years.

<sup>6</sup>The following studies provide some focus:

John Hostetler, *Amish Society*. Third Edition. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

John Hostetler, and Gertrude Huntington. *Children in Amish Society: Socialization and Community Education*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971).

William M. Kephart. *Extraordinary Groups*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976).

Douglas Lee. “The Plain People of Pennsylvania.” *National Geographic*. Vol. 165 (April, 1984) 493-519.

Marc Olshan. “Modernity, the Folk Society, and the Old Order Amish: An Alternative Interpretation.” *Rural Sociology*. Vol. 46 (1981) 297-301.

Randy Pollack. “Controlled Acculturation in an Ohio Amish Community.” A paper presented at the American Anthropological Association Meetings, Cincinnati, Ohio, November 1979.

Randy Pollack. “Culture Change in an Amish Community.” *Central Issues in Anthropology*. Vol. 3 (May, 1981) 51-67.

## Critique

Savells and Foster in individual settings and circumstances have conducted research among members of the Old Order Amish using interviews and questionnaire surveys. While they report their efforts in one paper, this reviewer suspects each author had very different purposes in mind as he conducted his individual ethnographic research project. Savells's and Foster's research may have generated new information, but this information needs to be linked with earlier research findings which in turn can be used to create new knowledge. The theoretical framework from which each worked is not clear, although both authors do attempt to place their findings within the historical, social, and cultural framework of the Amish communities they studied.

Neither author provided examples of their questions. This information would have been useful in determining the nature and scope of questions and may have shed light on the nature and purpose of the research, especially that of Savells. In addition, examples of participant responses would have been helpful. These responses may enable readers to more fully grasp the difficulties surrounding this research methodology. It would be interesting to note how the data were analyzed and interpreted as these might provide clues as to the researchers' theoretical and value orientation. The authors do recognize many limitations of their data base. One wonders if the authors used a research diary not only to record data provided by the Amish, but also to record their own actions and activities. Because Savells's study extended over a period of several years and many miles, a diary might be useful as to the data recorded and provide evidence of possible changing attitudes and values of the researcher himself.

Foster's research findings which resulted from a mapping study needed by the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company and Ohio Edison Company may be somewhat questionable since the Amish were opposed to the construction of electrical transmission towers through their areas of settlement. Therefore, it is possible the responses the Amish provided Foster were based on their strong desire not to have their lands traversed by electric power lines which would disrupt their way of life.

The fact that Foster mixed questions regarding the location of power lines and his own detailed research questions may or may not have been wise. It is possible the Amish provided the expected answers in order to avoid controversy. It is difficult to know whether the Amish would respond the same way in a discussion among themselves as they did in responding to an outside researcher.

It is not clear whether the researchers provided any sort of feedback to those who participated in the study. Feedback to participants is an important aspect and responsibility of any research endeavor, especially for ethnographic research. Such research is important and presents a

challenge to researchers. That Savells and Foster accepted a challenge is commendable and most encouraging. These efforts can be useful as a component in the growing number of ethnographic research studies. As Savells, Foster, and others continue ethnographic research, they are encouraged to demand rigorous methodology and develop theoretical creativity.

—Margaret Laughlin

## Critique

This article, by Jerry Savells and Thomas Foster may well be useful for researchers attempting studies of groups living voluntarily outside of the “mainstream” of American society. To a non-specialist like this historian, however, the article is ultimately frustrating.

A more thorough historical and demographic background would have been helpful. Over the years, have the Old Order Amish grown, lost members or remained stable? Given their relatively small numbers (95,000), despite characteristically large families, is it possible that more have been lost to the dreaded “creeping urbanization and the pressures of . . . industrial society” than the authors and the Amish are willing to concede? The fear of outsiders may well be related to worries about the attractions of that outside world. At any rate, without supporting data, it is difficult to evaluate the assertion that “the Amish have been largely successful in practicing voluntary separatism.”

From a methodological point of view, it is not at all clear whether the group which was willing to cooperate was typical of the Old Order Amish. As co-author Savells correctly points out, the small numbers (106 families) participating in the study make it “illogical and unwise” to offer an assessment of the Amish condition in America based upon its findings.

Savells does suggest a qualified “yes” to the issue of whether the Amish have shown “an increasing vulnerability to the forces of social change.” However, he drops this provocative question with a weak “but it is not simple or easy to explain.” An attempt, at least, to do so would have been worthwhile.

This reviewer realizes that it is unfair to suggest to authors that they should alter the scope, purpose, or focus of their paper. Nevertheless, some anecdotal material would have added a great deal. Did the authors win any real friendship from any of their subjects? If so, how was this accomplished? One longs for some stories or comments from those kind, earthy, and jovial aged Amish. The authors are obviously saving all this “juicy” material for another paper, but the reader is certainly entitled to hope. As an historian, this reader longed for the kind of concrete material

that might have led to some tentative conclusions about the Amish experience.

The caveat that researchers must avoid ethnocentrism and not conclude that modern ways are best certainly should not be necessary for anthropologists and sociologists in 1987. Sadly, however, there must still be some who have not yet learned this lesson. On the other hand, the authors seem to fall prey to the opposite "noble savage" syndrome which accepts the superiority of a more "primitive" life style which is credited with having "successfully avoided most of the negative effects of technological and social change . . ." The authors fail to note that the concomitant consequence is an avoidance of the positive effects of change such as greater tolerance of human differences, at least on the intellectual, if not the emotional, level. Perhaps they believe that there are no positives to the Post-Industrial Society. This uncritical assumption of the superiority of the simpler life also leads to an uncritical acceptance of the obvious sexism inherent in the Amish world.

Despite all of these reservations by one churlish historian, one can readily concede that this paper might be very helpful to anyone planning to do research among separatist groups that are cut off from, and suspicious of, the outside world. Such a researcher might well find the experience of Savells and Foster to be a useful model. Certainly their stamina and persistence are grounds for admiration and envy. This reviewer can hardly wait for another paper which might present some further conclusions about the Amish experience in a changing American society.

—Louise Mayo

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## Contributors

GRETCHEN M. BATAILLE is on leave from her position as professor of English at Iowa State University and is teaching in the Department of English and Foreign Languages at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.

JANICE W. CLEMMER teaches in the Department of Secondary Education at Brigham Young University.

THOMAS FOSTER is an assistant professor of sociology at the Mansfield campus of Ohio State University.

DAVID M. GRADWOHL is a professor of anthropology at Iowa State University and has done historical and archaeological research in American Indian, black, and Jewish communities.

MARGARET LAUGHLIN teaches in the Program in Education at the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay.

LOUISE MAYO teaches history and political science at County College of Morris in Randolph, New Jersey.

JERRY SAVELLS is a professor of sociology at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio.

OTIS L. SCOTT is director of the Ethnic Studies Center at California State University, Sacramento.

MARY F. SISNEY teaches black literature and composition in the Department of English and Foreign Languages at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.

ROBBIE JEAN WALKER teaches in the Department of English at Auburn University at Montgomery, Alabama.

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| <b>Thesis/Dissertation</b>   | <sup>6</sup> Michael G. Karni. "Yhteishyra"—or <i>For the Common Good: Finnish Radicalism in the Western Great Lakes Region 1900-1940</i> . Ph.D. Dissertation. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1975) 115-195.  |
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