'Clothing is a Window to the Soul': The Social Control of Women in a Holdeman Mennonite Community

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The use of symbolic boundary markers has long been a cultural practice of conservative Mennonite groups. Visual symbols, such as "plain dress" provide a window through which one can examine issues of social control. This paper examines how the metaphor of women's appearance is used by a Holdeman Mennonite community in California to evaluate conformity to socio-religious norms. Clothing provides a frame of reference for interpreting the abstract process of social control.[1] This follows Mary Douglas' argument that in social groups characterized by strong internal allegiance, the most fundamental assumptions about the cosmos and people's place in it are colored by the socially appropriate image of the human body. Douglas postulates that the human body is a "natural symbol" for the social body and expresses both ideology and social control.[2] Conversely, Marcel Mauss argues that through symbolic systems, the social body constrains the physical body.[3] The "collective conscience" is visible in the member's appearance because the use of symbols is more than a manifestation of reality; symbols actively structure experience.[4]

The Holdeman Mennonite community under examination exerts control over women's physical bodies through conformity to a strict religious value

system. Since strict conformity is equated by the Holdemans with religiousness, compliance with strict codes of behavior, specifically dress codes, is considered symbolic of religious commitment. One minister I interviewed referred to this metaphorically, stating that "clothing is a mirror to the soul." Like a mirror, clothing can reflect appearances of religiousness. At the same time, however, the symbol of clothing can be used as a window through which the ethnographer might examine the operant social control system.

While a woman's level of religious devotion can not be objectively perceived, symbols such as clothing are used by Holdeman Mennonites as evidence that a woman is on the "right and true path." Consequently, appearance is constantly scrutinized and interpreted as a measure of a woman's relative level of religiousness. If the symbol of clothing is interpreted negatively, in that she deviates from established dress and grooming codes, the woman in question is defined as deviant and subjected to both formal and informal constraints. Holdeman Mennonite women and their clothing practices are controlled by other women, by their husbands, and by their ministers. Becky, a 23 year old Mennonite woman, stated it succinctly: "When I put on Mennonite clothing, I put on all of the Church's rules."[5]

Research Setting and Methods

Bend is a town and rural district of 250 people on the Sacramento River in Northern California. It is a small community of white middle-class farm families, the vast majority (65 families) of which are Holdeman Mennonites. The Holdemans drive ten miles to the county seat of Mayfield (pop. 4000) to shop for grocery staples. Most of their food, however, is home-grown and preserved. They drive farther to nearby cities to shop for men's and boy's clothing and for fabric for women's and girl's home-sewn dresses. While most of the men are farmers, all of the married women are housewives. Families with five children are the norm and raising children as good Christians is the central focus for all Holdemans. It is common for several generations of a family to live on farms near each other because land is inherited patrilineally. Most of the area between Mayfield and the Sacremento River is inhabited by Holdemans.

Beyond Bend, the community has extensive interaction with the other West Coast Holdeman Mennonite congregations; relations are maintained formally through a national church conference and international missionary work. The communities are linked through marriage as well, since the Holdemans are religiously endogamous. Approximately half of the young women leave Bend to marry men from other congregations. The combination of endogamy, patrilocal residence and a rarity of converts creates a community in which most people are related (at least distantly) to each other. In Bend, a community of 250 Holdeman individuals (95 percent of the population), there are only seven surnames.

I gathered the data for this study through participant observation, casual interviews and focused group interviews of women.[6] In addition, I collected data from academic libraries and Mennonite archives, though, since they avoid publicity, there is little published information about the Holdeman Mennonites. Their rules are passed down orally so codes of behavior have to be investigated through qualitative techniques. In my field work, I participated in and observed church services, Sunday school meetings, school classrooms, weddings, pot-luck dinners, youth group activities, quilting bees and numerous informal gatherings in women's homes. I interviewed 88 percent of the adult women who were under the age of 50, as well as seventy-five percent of the older women. I spoke with all of the young women who were over 16 but unmarried. Additionally, I also interviewed most of the local former Holdemans who had been expelled within the last two decades, as well as members who had been expelled but had returned to the congregation.[7] This included 95 percent of the expelled women (and several of their husbands) who lived within a hundred mile radius. These interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. They were a rich source of information because their expulsion process made these people acutely aware of the power of social control in Mennonite society. Expulsion, a practice based in Mennonite history, was the most severe form of social control used by the Holdemans to insure conformity to their social norms.

A Brief History of the Holdeman Mennonites

The Holdeman Mennonites have their genesis in the nineteenth century migration of Mennonites westward into the American frontier. Ohio, the new home of many Mennonites, became the site of the Holdeman Schism of 1859. At that time, John Holdeman, a lay Mennonite farmer, became concerned about the increasing assimilation of the "Old" Mennonite church into the larger society. He insisted on greater exclusion of believers from outsiders, increased discipline, religious endogamy, and the shunning of the expelled. The Holdeman Church became known for teaching that it alone was the "true church of Christ" and for strict maintenance of religious social boundaries. While the sect originated with eleven members, through natural increase as well as the conversion of other Mennonite and Amish people, the Holdemans came to number over 10,000 people. The majority of the present Holdeman followers stem from two groups, the Ostronger Mennonites and the Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites.[8]

The Holdemans maintained these social boundaries and separation from the world by continuing to speak German, dressing plainly, and living in isolated communities. They were also especially insistent on maintaining the practice of shunning, and the use of conservative religious symbols. Due to population pressures that began in the nineteenth century, however, physical isolation was less possible for many of the Mennonite groups, and acculturation ensued and threatened cultural cohesiveness. The perception of cultural

drift led to increased conservatism in some segments of the Old Mennonite Church at the end of the nineteenth century. When geographic isolation was lost and the language barrier surrendered, a final effort was made to reinforce the third device of separation, plain dress. It was noted that when other formerly plain churches gave up plain dress, they also surrendered two of the major Mennonite values, church discipline and pacifism. The issue of plain dress was seen as a final citadel that was to be conserved at all cost. Numerous conferences were convened and regulations were issued concerning plain dress.[9]

Conservative movements arose again in the 1920s and the 1950s. A major feature was the concern with remaining separate from the world and avoiding theological drift.[10] By 1923, the Holdeman Church made clothing symbols a crucial part of its "non-conformity to the world."[11] As a result, remaining separate from the world has become increasingly important to the Holdemans and now includes the symbolic realm.

As the identity of the various Mennonite sects was threatened, religious leaders argued for an enforced standard of dress as well as religious endogamy, reduced interaction with the outside world and prohibitions against lending for profit. The use of plain dress had merely been custom but, with the conservative movement, became formalized in both proscribed and prescribed dress codes. While formerly Holdeman Mennonites remained physically separated from the world, the doctrine of separation from the world is now accomplished on a primarily symbolic level. Members of the Holdeman Church were required to follow the historical practice of Mennonite separation from the world, and were instructed to "live and dress simply in avoidance of the world." This continues to be a pivotal belief.

Separation From the World

Social control and clothing norms among Holdemans are linked by the historical pattern of Mennonite separation from the world. The Holdemans believe that there are two kingdoms, the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the world. Although they are here in the physical world, Holdeman Mennonites believe that they belong to the Kingdom of God. They repeatedly state that they are in this world, but not **of** it. Historically, the integrity of their separation from the world was easier to maintain while they were physically isolated in remote communities. Their separation and cultural cohesiveness, however, ended because of the population pressures of an expanding nation, and the impact of interacting with outsiders.

As outsiders encroached on their communities, the Holdemans reinforced their cultural boundary markers such as plain dress, religious endogamy, refusal of oaths and lending for profit, and the use of the German language. The use of plain dress which had merely been custom now became formalized in both proscribed and prescribed dress codes. For the Holdemans, separation became symbolic as the social order was manifested on the bodies of Holdeman's followers.

Throughout Mennonite history, the clothing styles adopted by various Mennonite sects were similar to those of other plain people, simple, but resembling contemporary styles. Citing a philosophy that was reiterated by the Holdemans, the nineteenth-century Mennonite minister Jacob Krehbiel stated that "excessive display in clothing manifests on the outside what is hidden in the heart."[12] To justify their distinctive dress, Holdemans cited the Apostle Paul's instructions:

> Women should adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array. But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works.[13]

Like other "plain people," the Holdemans believe that a lack of emphasis on external beauty leads to the expression of spirituality.[14]

One of the specific concerns of John Holdeman's reform movement of the 1850s was that the Old Mennonites had begun to dress more like the external society. This was interpreted by Holdeman as symbolic of the loss of Mennonite distinctiveness. Following his break from the larger body of Old Mennonites, Holdeman insisted that his followers wear clothing that indicated their conservatism and separation from the world at large. While there was no prescribed dress code for the Holdeman Mennonites in the late nineteenth century, the Holdemans developed a uniform clothing style by simply prohibiting adoption of new clothing styles. The standard dress for women was characterized by a cape dress with a high neck, loose bodice and fitted waist.[15] In addition, expensive fabrics, jewelry, cosmetics and the cutting and styling of hair were prohibited.

Holdeman women's appearance standards have remained relatively faithful to John Holdeman's 1859 prohibitions. The cape over the shoulders and bust has disappeared, and the fiber content of fabrics has changed, but by and large, the overall dress and adornment practices of the Holdeman Mennonite women have stayed consistent with Holdeman's edict. Today, women and girls wear shirtwaist dresses, characterized by a wide, long skirt and a fitted bodice with buttons down the center to the waist. Dresses generally have a small collar and belt. According to the Holdeman Mennonites, clothing, as all of life, has to be brought under the scrutiny of New Testament standards. The most specific item that illustrates this is the black head covering worn over uncut hair pinned into a bun. This is worn all day to symbolize the woman's submission to God, to men in general, and to her husband in particular. The dress code is a visible symbol of gender performance in that women who accept the dress code signify acceptance of female submission which is considered by the group to be appropriate female behavior.

According to the Holdeman Mennonites, male power is divinely ordered. Mennonite patriarchy has its roots in the Bible, the authoritative word of God. The acceptance of the divinely ordered hierarchy includes acceptance of male authority. Ministers, deacons and school board members (all men) are in formal positions of power. Known informally as "the staff," this group usually

numbers between ten and twelve men. In addition, the perception of natural difference between the sexes results in gender-based segregation within the sect.[16] The private sphere is the province of women, while the public sphere is the domain of men, many of whom become ministers charged with the task of defining and eliminating deviance. Thus, the uniform attire of Holdeman women attests not only to separation from the external society, but separation of the sexes. This important distinction is rooted in the perception of natural gender differences that underly their patriarchal social system.

For the Holdemans, dress also serves to mark the distinction between insiders and outsiders. Howard Becker emphasized this process by noting that "[s]ocial groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitute[s] deviance and by applying these rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders."[17] For Holdeman Mennonites, insiders are church members, while outsiders include everyone else, including expelled Mennonites. The ingroup/outgroup distinction is measured against their ideal social order that centers on the traditional Christian farm family and values such as modesty, humility, male authority and spiritual devotion. The outsider world is viewed with pity, suspicion and moral disgust; it provides a common enemy against which the Holdeman Mennonites can unite, and reaffirm moral superiority.

A Mirror to the Soul: Clothing and Religiousness

Holdeman Mennonites say their primary task is to live life as devoted Christians. Since nearly all members attend every church activity, however, objective evaluation of a person's commitment to the faith is impossible and symbolic measures are substituted. Holdeman Mennonites who stray from the social norms are considered deviant and are therefore castigated. While behavior in general is scrutinized, external forms of self-expression, thus, are most closely monitored. As Foucault noted, the soul is more than an ideological construct; it exists and has a reality in that it is produced within, around and on the body.[18]

The Holdeman Mennonites refer to appearance metaphorically as "a mirror to the soul," because they perceive appearance as the external manifestation of inner attitudes. Consequently, the Holdemans look for signs and symbols of a church member's spirituality. Visual cues, particularly related to appearance and consumer goods, are analyzed for signs of non-conformity. The appearance of a home, including its design, landscaping and interior decoration, is evaluated. Paint on cars and designs on trucks are checked, but more than anything else, women's clothing is scrutinized.

At issue is conformity to social norms that are rationalized by religious dogma. Holdeman signs of religiousness, from the perspective of this work, are signs of socio-religious conformity and gender performance. Intra-group relations involve an invisible hierarchy that evaluates conformity, religiousness, social embeddedness (involvement) and ultimately, the assignment of status. At the top of this stratified system are orthodox members who conform

to the norms, are thoroughly embedded and considered highly religious; these people have high status and prestige within the Holdeman community. Lower status is accorded to marginal members who deviate from many of the norms and are considered less religious. Since marginal members are seen as less religious and are only minimally embedded in this ethno-religious culture, they are generally perceived within the community as having low status.

The Embeddedness of Mennonite Women

For Mennonite women, levels of embeddedness include age, marital status, level of religiousness and status of the family within the community. Age is significant in that people are seen to pass through a number of critical periods during which their spirituality is tested. If they pass through these life crises without being expelled, they typically become more conservative. Additionally, marriage and parenthood lead to increased conservatism, as do high levels of religiousness and family status (determined by lineage and material wealth). Embeddedness leads to orthodoxy. As a woman's level of cultural embeddedness increases, so does the perception of her religiousness and her enculturation of accepted social norms; this is followed by a significant decrease in the need for formal social control.

Orthodox members wear the most distinctively plain clothing (see Figure 1). The Holdemans evaluate each other's appearance to estimate religiousness. During this process, they analyze minute details of dress and measure them against the orthodox costume. They evaluate the gender performance of the woman in question to see how closely her appearance approaches the ideal. If she has adopted the idealized image, her gender performance is considered acceptable and is then validated and reinforced.

The minute details of a woman's appearance include a hierarchy of symbols. Certain symbols are not to be altered by any female church member; these include the black head covering, belts, a button-up bodice, long skirts and high necklines. Other details (darts, tucks, types of sleeves and fabrics) are more negotiable. While some deviation is allowed, a woman can not push the limits in too many areas. For example, Sarah has an extensively decorated house, and her sister has an elaborate garden, but both are careful to dress in the orthodox manner. Women are aware that all avenues of self-expression are monitored. The flexibility inherent in this process provides for a small measure of self-expression within group norms, and gives evidence that compromise and negotiation are possible. That the rules are not absolute gives hope to marginal members who can emulate orthodox women and consequently aspire to higher status.

Through personal control, both informal and formal, women are constrained by each other, by men in general and by ministers in particular. As the level of religiousness increases there is a corresponding increase in personal control, and a decrease in external constraints imposed by the group. Women who were interviewed about control issues parimarily spoke about clothing;

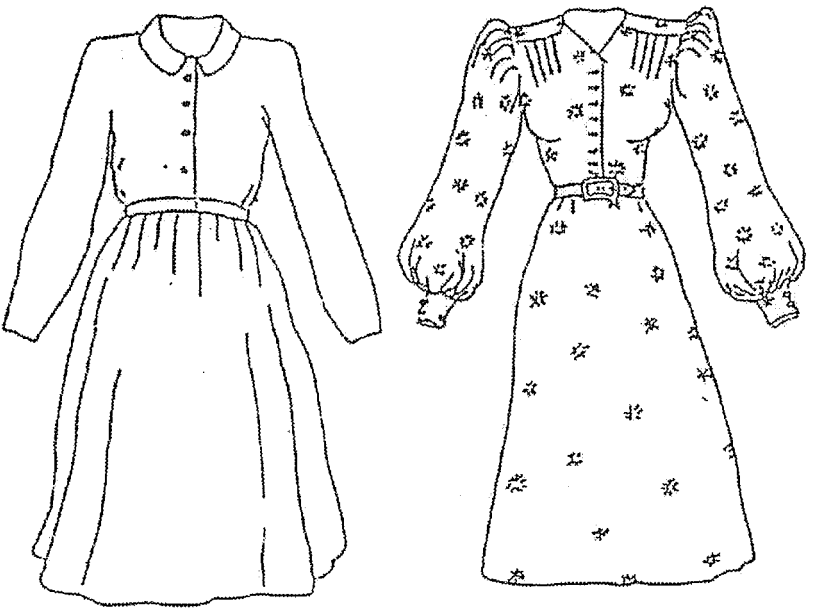

Figure 1: Orthodox women (left) dress according to a strict dress code based on Holdeman ideals. Marginal women (right) alter the normative pattern in numerous ways, resulting in dresses that are acceptable, but deviate from the ideal.

these examples are used to illustrate personal, informal and formal social control in the Holdeman Mennonite community.

Social Control, Deviance and Dress

The enculturation of children into the values and norms of Holdeman society is the primary responsibility of women. Through enculturation, personal controls are instilled to ensure voluntary compliance to norms. Enculturation then leads to social solidarity. Within the Mennonite community, the ideal member is well enculturated and needs little external social control in order to remain within societal norms. This behavior pattern is evidenced by orthodox women, who are sober in demeanor and appearance as they enact the ideal gender performance. On the surface, it appears that clothing is rigidly controlled in this sub-culture. However, what is controlled is the body itself, from its physical appearance to its emotional and sexual expression. Holdemans have a special reverence for the early Christians' celebration of purity of the spirit and their abhorance of the dangers of fleshly corruption. Their attitude is symbolized in the concept of a cherished, but vulnerable, bodily form that is austere and concerned about purity, a bodily form that treats sex with the utmost caution.

It follows that gluttony, too, is despised. Over time the Holdeman Mennonite community has seen obesity as a sign of gluttony and generally indicative of a lack of control. "Lust of the flesh" is a term used by the Holdemans to indicate sensory enjoyment of anything from eating to sexual pleasure. Although their major social activity is eating, ideally it is a functional, rather than pleasurable activity. According to the Holdemans' physician, the obesity rate of women in the surrounding community is forty percent, while only ten percent of the Mennonite women are considered obese; these rates have stayed consistent in the past decade.[19] Dieting is a constant topic among women, and many attend "Weight Watchers" meetings and diet clinics. While attendance at such a meeting with outsiders might be considered worldly, membership in Weight Watchers is allowed since the larger issue, control of the body, is a major goal for Holdemans. An expelled woman discusses the Holdeman's need to control their bodies as follows:

> Obesity is gluttony, but you won't get into as much trouble being fat as you would with worldly clothing. It's because Mennonite women are obsessed with their bodies—they want to be slim, sexy and modest all at the same time.

Similarly, sexual expression is kept under tight rein, and is only allowed within the confines of marriage. During my years with the Holdemans, there were no cases of premarital pregnancy, due in large part to the constant separation of the sexes from adolescence until marriage. Motherhood and adulthood are synonymous; married women unable to conceive (a very rare occurrence) will adopt children. The occasional spinster generally marries a widower later in life, and then has step-children. Birth control, sexual behavior and the physical expression of love between man and wife are regulated by the church.

Personal control is clearly manifest in the appearance of orthodox women. For example, Sarah is a minister's daughter, married to a minister, and has ten children. As a role model, she diets and dresses plainly. Sarah wears dark, solid colored dresses with no detail other than the required belts, collars and buttons. Interestingly, she makes hand-worked buttonholes for the buttons (as many as twelve per dress) that require weeks to complete. Although few women do this, she states that it protects her from accusations of "dressing fancy." Making hand-worked buttonholes is her commitment to conservative dress and to Christian living: this is a recurrent theme in the interviews. Mary, a church member who came from a long line of ministers, was an articulate informant who stated:

> There is a value in plain dress. When I was fifteen, I saw a woman with blue hair and hose in a shopping mall in Phoenix. She looked silly. Is that how God wants us to look? This gives no evidence of her spirituality. It's OK to be different if that difference expresses the word of God.

Mary's example illustrates Foucault's assertion that the soul can be literally signified *on* the body.[20]

Although the Holdemans state that their culture eliminates status hierarchies, there are clear status differences evident in this community, with orthodox members at the top of the social hierarchy. Status is determined by religious orthodoxy, lineage and material wealth. Like the Hasidic Jews, status in the Holdeman Mennonite community is reflected in ethno-religious clothing. Charity is a minister's daughter whose mother is known for her highly orthodox dress. When asked about her mother's conservative clothing, Charity stated that "minister's families have to set examples. In her heart, Mother despises arguments and confrontations. The plain clothing is her way of avoiding confrontations." Interestingly, there can be pride in humility, as expressed in clothing. Following a church service a man said to his wife, "Mother, I believe we were the plainest ones there!"

Informal Social Control

Women function as agents of informal control in the private sphere, while men administer the system of formal control in the public sphere. This follows the historical progress of domesticity in which responsibility for the informal control of others through the imposition of standards has been assigned to women.[21] Holdeman women are subjected to informal methods of social control ranging from gossip to reproval.

Gossip is the most frequent form of informal social control used. Women spend a great deal of time in the company of their friends; the other members of the community are the main topic of conversation. When a woman breaks a norm, she knows that the transgression will be noticed and become a current topic of conversation. If that is ineffective in redirecting her behavior, a woman's best friends will talk to her directly and express their concern regarding her spirituality as an expression of Christian love. Members are continually aware of clothing and use it as a gauge of a person's submission to the will of the church. Anna stated that:

> When Leah was expelled, it was so sudden. There were no signs that she was in trouble—no changes in her behavior. Even her clothing was the same —I'd have expected to see some changes, like her dresses getting fancy or something, 'cause clothing was so important to her.

The intent of these measures is to suppress non-conformity, and any needs for self-expression and individuality. One of the primary differences between Holdeman Mennonites and members of mainstream society concerns their repression of individuality. The Holdemans derive satisfaction from social ties, and to retain this characteristic, the self is always subjugated to the will of the group. When asked "what if, on a Wednesday night, you did not want to go to the youth group singing?" the answer invariably was "you wouldn't want to *not* go." Individual needs are equated with community needs. Self is equated with pride, a cardinal sin. As a consequence, any signs of individuality are seen as signs of rejection of group norms and values. Naturally, the expression of

individuality in clothing cannot be ignored. A minister's daughter who left the church at nineteen but still lives in Bend, concluded:

> If your clothes are straight down the lines as to the rules of the group, then everyone can see that you are submitting your will to the Church. The Mennonite dress is like a uniform—it indicates that you're keeping everything under control. When you're having trouble with the [church's] rules, your clothing can show it. This is why everyone watches what everyone else is wearing and how they are wearing it, because clothing shows acceptance of all the rules of the church.

This example shows how gender performance occurs; by adopting the rigid dress code, a woman symbolically adopts the group's gender ideals and presents the ideal gender image.

The control of women by each other most frequently occurs in an indirect manner, or is done in a collegial manner. Control of women by men generally occurs face-to-face, and in an authoritarian manner. Some women resent the amount of control men exert over women. Leah stated:

> We have to conform to whatever the men want, whether it's the way we dress or our behavior... They think it's scriptural. I think it's just another way to **tame women down** [her emphasis]. The men say "Women, submit yourselves to your husbands."

Leah was an unusual church member. From the time she reached adolescence through her early married years, Leah was not submissive to efforts made toward controlling her forthrightness. Leah is a very pretty woman, with a voluptuous figure. She became a target for the ministers who were simultaneously attracted to, and fearful of her beauty and sexuality. Although some of the women were her friends, as many others resented Leah's beauty or were afraid to associate with her for fear that they too would become a target. As long as she conformed to the orthodox dress standards, Leah avoided the envy of the women and the ire of the ministers. However, Leah disliked dressing in drab, shapeless dresses. "They want me to look like an old woman," she said, "but that's not me." Leah chose to dress like her peers, but doing so attracted the attention of the Holdeman men.

Men and women have different standards as to what is considered proper dress. While the women dress in a uniquely plain style, the men dress in Levis and plaid shirts, much like outsiders. John, an expelled man, said:

> It's always been that way. Women have always had to dress more carefully. It's a way of the men controlling the women. Holdeman men *need* to control women, and the Bible has nothing to do with it. They feel so controlled themselves, so that is *one* expression that they can be in control of someone else. They are controlled by the ministers, and by the religion.

John's wife explained, "the men feel like they're accomplishing something if they can get someone to do whatever they want of them. That is control... Women's clothing shows they are being controlled—they have to dress plainer than the men." Clearly, ex-members have a different frame of reference than

do the Holdeman Church members. While the members generally perceive the positive aspects of social control, in that it brings order to the community, expelled people understand the hegemonic base of the social control system. They generally see and intimately feel the coercive side of control because they live with shunning on a daily basis. Most of the expelled people stated they would have preferred to move to another community, to avoid daily Holdeman shunning. The decade during which I conducted this study was one of constant economic hardship for family farmers. Most of the expelled people were confined to this particular community because they could not afford to sell their farms at a huge loss.

Another aspect of informal social control, intended to insure compliance to group norms, is reproval. While it does that, the process also provides some small measure of agency for women because, as they control each other, they protect other women from control by men. Though reprovals usually occur between two people in private, they can occur formally and in public. Most people are formally reproved at least once, and informal reprovals are common for marginal women. In theory, every Christian has the right to monitor another's behavior, but in practice, high status (religiously orthodox) individuals reprove marginal and low status individuals. John noted:

> Just the more religious ones reprove—the self-righteous... those who do reprove others are of a high status. Status is determined by how much you believe in what the church is teaching, and how verbal you are in expressing that belief.

If the member believes in the Church's teachings, and then provides evidence of that belief through "witnessing," then the assumption is that faith equals religiousness, which then leads to the ascription of high social status. The member who is religious, acts and looks religious, is on the moral high ground. Leah explained:

> The church members are always reproving you for this, that, and the next thing, and the fact is that you'll rise a little if you can reprove someone else. It's a status thing if you can criticize someone else's dress for being too loud, or worldly, or fancy, so if you can reprove someone, you have power... but no one will listen to anyone who hasn't established that power. I'd buckle under to the minister's wives. On the first Sunday that my daughter wore lacy little anklets, Rebecca reproved me. She was really on her toes to catch that the first time they were worn!

Women are reproved much more often than men, and are generally reproved by other women. It is in the best interest of all of the women to keep each other committed to the social norms, in order to insulate themselves from formal control by the ministers. An expelled woman described the process:

> I was reproved for wearing a low-neck dress—it was a dress which was unbuttoned to just below the collarbone. Her neckline was *lower* than mine—but she reproved me anyway... I was occasionally reproved for my daughter's dresses—I made her beautiful dresses which were a little bit on the fancy side. She loved them! Now that I've been expelled, the [Holdeman] Mennonite women

> make ugly, plain dresses for her that she prefers to wear. She won't wear anything that I made anymore.[22]

Women are reproved by men for any number of infractions, but clothing is one frequently used because it provides visible evidence of ambivalence regarding the idealized gender norms. "Men do not get reproved very often: women are reproved by men in order to control them... but certain women do not get reproved," said one member in a group interview. Her friends concurred. Women prone to reproval are assertive, or from low-status families, and have not totally internalized the social norms. Because they are not suitably controlled on a personal level, they are considered to be deviant and subjected to constant scrutiny and informal reprovals. However, if these are ineffective, formal measures of control are used to encourage compliance. At this point, the marginal member generally gets into what is called "church trouble." This term is used by the Holdemans to describe formal social control.

Formal Social Control

Marginal members are subjected to formal social control measures when personal control is weak, and when leaders perceive that the marginal members have lost their connection with God. Formal measures of social control are meted out by ministers and deacons (all men) in public. These measures include general displays of control, formal reprovals, denial of communion, church repentance and expulsion.

Among the general displays of formal control was an incident in which a minister exerted power concerning the head covering. A widow (a church member in good standing) remembered the following incident of conflict between women and ministers:

> We went through a period of time where we were having some trouble about the head covering. It is a three cornered black flat scarf, which only becomes round when you shape and fold it around the bun. If you have a lot of hair, this is hard to do. What is paid attention to is the way it looks when finished. You pin it on at the top, bring it down, fold in each side, tie it under, tuck the bottom tail around, and then it looks like a cap. We began to sew caps we could just slap on and pin down. That wasn't allowed because the ministers said that it wasn't traditional—but they only pay attention to history if they can use it to their advantage.

The head covering is a salient symbol of the Holdeman perception of a divinely-ordered patriarchal social order. Holdeman women stated that the head covering symbolizes their submission to God, to ministers, and to men in general. Therefore, alteration of the symbol might be perceived as an attempt to alter the gendered power relationship between Holdeman men and women.

In similar fashion, the ministers exerted power in another incident, by refusing to allow women to adopt new technologies with regard to home sewing. The case of zippers is such a point. The bodice of a Mennonite dress opens down the front and has several buttons. A great deal of time is

involved in making the opening of a dress in this manner. According to my sources, sometime in the 1960s Holdeman women at Bend tried to replace buttons with zippers which are quick to install. Considering that women generally sewed for themselves and several daughters, this time saving was significant. However, the ministers sensed that the women's intent might have been to redesign the costume and could not be persuaded to accept the changes, so the women agreed to keep the buttons and buttonholes down the front of the dresses and included zippers in the side seam to make getting dressed easier.

In addition to controlling women, the ministers put a great deal of effort into trying to control the behavior of people considered to be on the fringes of the group. For marginal members, "church trouble" often starts with public reprovals. These typically begin with the meeting of several ministers or deacons to define and label a person as deviant.

Because rigid conformity is the norm for this sect, it does not take much to be labeled deviant. Marginal members are continually watched by ministers in order to detect behaviors that vary from established norms. An individual's behavior is interpreted in light of the deviance label applied by the ministers. This results in an unequal enforcement of the rules. Jane was orthodox, but her sister Leah who was marginal, recalled:

> I was 8-1/2 months pregnant and overweight, and I had borrowed a maternity dress from my older sister Jane and I was sitting there and they were giving me the third degree—asking why I do this, or that, and I was crying and they asked why couldn't I please my husband. And one of the ministers said, "Just take for instance that dress you're wearing." It was a decent [typically Holdeman] dress, but he said, "That dress is loud—a woman like you wearing such a dress is offensive." Jane wore it many times after I did, and never was reproved for it. I was the only one who was. And it was because they saw me as a threat... The ministers always kept their eyes on me.

Leah felt that the ministers watched her constantly. They seemed fascinated by her strength, attracted to her sensuality, and simultaneously frightened by both. To the ministers, Leah represented a real threat to both the patriarchy and order within the Church. While this incident occurred at the church, it involved only the ministers, Leah and her husband. Formal reproval most often occurs in this manner, but it is not uncommon for the errant member to be brought before the entire congregation for a public reproval. As a member becomes more recalcitrant, the increasingly public and formal nature of the social control becomes evident.

As part of their gender performance, Holdeman women are required to be submissive to men in general, and ministers in particular in order to acknowledge the power God has invested in their men. In this case, female submission exemplifies hegemony, in that the Holdeman women often unquestioningly accept the power that men, in the dominant power position, exert over the subordinate women.

Another mechanism of formal social control is to deny members communion. The ministers focus on marginal members who are used as examples to the other church members. If the marginal person became defiant, formal control measures become increasingly overt and it is at this juncture that the member may be denied the right to partake in communion. At the annual communion service, the minister states the general doctrines of the church, and asks the congregation if they support the doctrines of faith. The members reply in unison. However, marginal members are occasionally singled out:

> They would call me out and say, "Did you forget something, Leah?" and I would mutter it. The last few years they weren't allowing me to go to communion. They didn't really have anything on me except for clothes, which was what they harped on. And my clothes were pretty much like everyone else's.

Mary and her husband, Will, were considered marginal; they were denied communion for two years. While no specific charges were leveled against them, they were aware that their liberal attitudes and frequent interaction with outsiders were the cause of the minister's concern. Mary made sure her clothing was orthodox in order to compensate for her and Will's marginalized status. This couple was watched closely because their parents and most of their siblings had been expelled. Will and Mary owned the only rice huller in the area, so the community needed them to remain in good standing in the church; if they were expelled, none of the church members could use the rice huller and would have to truck their rice a great distance to have the rice processed. Consequently, the community needed Will and Mary to stay in the church, and had to put pressure on them to prevent them from becoming more liberal and drifting. When Will and Mary did not change perceptibly, the ministers announced at a church meeting that the couple was put on "church repentance."

A formal declaration of deviancy, church repentance is a period of formal censure that follows being in church trouble. According to an expelled woman, "being on repentance is like purgatory, like hell, like being shunned, but not quite. You're untouchable. People look at you and weep, because they know you're going to hell." Mary's brother explained the ministers' motives:

> For a couple of years they put Mary and Will through the wringer. Now they've decided to leave them alone. Maybe it was to see them jump through the hoops... If everything is peaceful, they decide that there needs to be some action... they feel like they're doing God's work if they are tearing somebody up—they really do. They will find someone to work on, just like now; there's a couple of guys they're after... They need to feel like they're making waves.

The ministers however defended their role as providing guidance and a firm hand as they carried out a literal interpretation of the church rules.

After a person is put on church repentance, a vote pertaining to expulsion is taken at a members' meeting, usually at the annual communion service. In general, the time period in between is sufficient for repentance. If the member is unwilling to conform, however, expulsion follows.

The most drastic form of formal social control is expulsion, followed by shunning, social ostracism. Following deliberations, ministers expel people with or without their presence at a meeting of the members. In this community, twenty-two percent of the members were expelled for specific acts of nonconformity during the 1970s and 1980s; this seemed to support the national figure of twenty percent cited by Hiebert.[23] When expelled, a person is not allowed to have religious, economic or social interactions with church members. They may not eat at the same table with their family members who are in good standing with the church. The intense pressure used to result in the expelled person begging for forgiveness and being readmitted to fellowship. However, informants state that the return rate has dropped significantly in recent years. This may have occurred because expulsions commonly result from conflicting attitudes and perceptions rather than specific acts; for instance, an unwillingness to conform to the dress code may be interpreted by ministers as defiance of authority. None of my expelled informants had returned to the church by 1993.

Becky was an unusual woman in that she had been expelled and readmitted five times prior to her mid-twenties before settling down and conforming to Church rules. Becky remembered that she could foretell impending church trouble by being aware of her increasingly negative attitude toward the Holdeman Mennonite dress code:

> It felt suffocating, as though when I put on the clothes, I put on the Church's rules. I was a different person in worldly [fashionable] clothing—I was uncontrolled. The Church's rules didn't apply to me. Gradually I got back into the frame of mind that was expected, and I grew to appreciate that God wanted me in the Church. Then I no longer wanted worldly clothes. Eventually, putting on the [Holdeman] Mennonite clothes and head covering felt right.

Becky described a crisis of identity that was visually apparent. This points to the ability of clothing to symbolize not just group affiliation, but the enculturation of group norms. As Mary Douglas has noted, cultures create order by exaggerating gender differences, and punishing transgressions. In doing so, the culture inscribes the social body on people's physical bodies. As Judith Butler has argued, however, the boundaries of the body provide evidence, not just of social order, but of social hegemony.[24] In Holdeman society, control of the body led to the investiture of great symbolic value in the head covering, which allows us to see hegemony at work. Attempts to change the head covering, as I have noted earlier, were met with great resistance by the ministers who seem to have seen in this change a threat to the patriarchy. The symbolic power of the head covering was especially apparent to expelled women who immediately removed it when they left the church. They reported an incredible sense of freedom with the removal of the covering and often immediately cut off their hair. The symbolic power of the head covering lasted for a long time in the minds of ex-Holdemans. Judith, a minister's daughter, left the church twenty

years earlier. She relayed an interesting example of the cap's longevity as a symbol of Holdeman hegemony:

> I have had dreams that I had to put the head covering back on—it's like a horror dream. And I have woken up in horror... it's when I have to go back and see my parents that the dreams come, and I just wake up with this horrible feeling. I feel such pressure to do as they want. Before I go back to that community, I have to be in that mold. I find myself making dresses to please them. I think it's from all of the years of living around them and knowing that is what they expect.

On the surface, it appears as though women and their clothing are rigidly controlled in this sub-culture. Fundamentally, however, what is being controlled is the body itself. Leah remarked:

> I can't figure out Mennonite preachers. One would say, "I can tell by the way you walk that your spirit isn't right. I can see by the way you walk into church that you aren't what you should be." I intentionally held my shoulders up and let them look at me. It bothered them that I wouldn't be humbled. They wanted me to be meek.

Clearly, Leah understood that her unwillingness to bend to the power of the ministers was a perceived threat. In Douglas' terms, Leah became a "polluting person" because she crossed over the neatly drawn lines provided by the patriarchal hegemony. A polluting person is always in the wrong because by crossing over the lines, she unleashes danger.[25]

Discussion and Implications

Clothing is a symbolic marker of social boundaries. When a social group is threatened, as the Holdeman community is by the larger American society, it will use the body in a symbolic manner to define and defend its social group and its boundaries. The case of the Holdeman Mennonites substantiates Douglas's and Butler's theses. Douglas has argued that the more value people give to social constraints, the more value they set on symbols of bodily control.[26] The social structure of this group requires a high degree of conscious control which is manifested by the social control of the body. Butler has argued that we must delve deeper to see that the social control of the gendered body is exhibited in gender performance, which shows evidence of hegemony.[27] Holdeman Mennonite culture is dominated by issues of control; deviation from socio-religious norms is considered threatening to the patriarchy and its hegemony. Religious dogma is used to rationalize a rigid dress code, since clothing is seen as evidence of either religious conformity or deviance. The greater the deviance from the dress code, the more likely it is that the woman will encounter formal and public treatment of her deviance. The body is controlled through conformity to socio-religious norms.

This research indicates an analytic need to go beyond narrowly drawn descriptions of deviance. In this case, the labeling process provided not only an avenue for the treatment of deviance, but also provided a measure of flexibility

that helped preserve the society. Holdeman women helped each other conform prior to the minister's awareness of problems. Additionally, some deviations from normative behavior were overlooked if the woman was conservative in other behaviors and exhibited a convincing gender performance.

Among the Holdeman Mennonites, the importance of informal deviance labeling is apparent in the treatment of marginal women as a stigmatized group. Stigmatization is an indication of imputed deviance, rather than an indication of the weakening of religiousness, as proposed by Mennonite ministers. Schur noted that the recent interest in interaction studies through qualitative fieldwork is consistent with a focus on informal deviance-defining, and suggested that the stigmatization of women be addressed in such research.[28] Analysis of social control at the microscopic level should provide an opportunity to understand deviance and control in routine interaction, while concurrently shedding light on gender and power relations.

Of significance in this research is the impact that men have in social definition of reality amongst selected conservative Mennonites. In this case, men defined the situations in which women were labeled as deviant and subjected them to greater control than were Mennonite men. Edwin Ardener's theory of muted groups can be used to analyze the relative lack of freedom for Holdeman Mennonite women. According to his theory, the dominant structures in a society define the situation and provide for little input from the muted group.[29] When the sexes are polarized, as with the Holdeman Mennonites, women are generally muted.

This case showed that muting of the weaker group can be understood through the analysis of symbols. Among the Holdeman Mennonites, the symbol (appearance) sheds light on the underlying social reality. At the same time, the dress code points to the efficacy of analyzing dress codes as a tool for the investigation of hegemony. Further, this case substantiates that the body is a highly restricted medium of expression, especially in social structures which require of their members a high degree of conscious control. Clearly, the case of the Holdeman Mennonites shows that social relations are never purely social in character; rather they are political, gendered and embodied. The implications of this research might be extended to other closed systems to the extent that they embody the patriarchal value system. Further ethnographic research should be conducted to analyze the symbolic use of appearance in other subcultures. Through an analysis of the human body, there is much to be learned concerning the social body.

Notes

[1] Clothing is used in the most holistic sense to mean both dress and adornment practices.

[2] Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

[3] Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body", *Economy and Society* 2 (1973), 70-88.

[4] For a broader discussion of the theoretical nature of this problem please see Linda Boynton Arthur, "An Ethnography of a Holdeman Mennonite Community," MA Thesis, California State U., Chico, 1980); *The Plain People: An Ethnography of the Holdeman Mennonites* (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing, 1986); "Idealized Images: Appearance and the Construction of Femininities in Two Exclusive Organizations, (PhD Diss.,, U. California at Davis, 1992). Then, too, see the following works: Mary Roach-Higgins and Joanne Eicher, "Dress and Identity," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal,* 10 (Summer, 1992), 1-8; Fred Davis, "Of Maids' Uniforms and Blue Jeans: The Drama of Status Ambivalences in Clothing and Fashion, *Qualitative Sociology* 12 (1989), 337-355; Jane Workman and Kim Johnson, "Effects of Conformity and Non-conformity to Gender Role Expectations for Dress: Teachers versus Students, *Adolescence* 29 (1994), 207-223; Michael Micklin, "Anticipated Reactions to Deviance In a South American City: A Study of Social Control," *Pacific Sociological Review* 20 (1977), 515-535; Michel Foucault, "Sexual Discourse and Power," *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*, eds., J.C. Alexander and S. Seidman (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 199-204; Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); Susan Kaiser, *The Social Psychology of Clothing: Symbolic Appearances in Context* (New York: Fairchild, 1997); Judith Butler, Gender as Performance, *Radical Philosophy* 67 (1994), 32-39; Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance and Event* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3-21; Randy Martin, *Performance as Political Act: The Embodied Self* (New York: Pratt Institute, 1990); Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, 1963); Nathan Joseph, *Uniforms and Non-Uniforms* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986); Arnold Birenbaum and Edward Sagarin, *Norms and Human Behavior* (New York: Praeger, 1976); Sally Engle Merry, Rethinking Gossip and Scandal, *Toward a General Theory of Social Control*, ed., David Black, (Orlando, FL: Academic Press, 1984), 271-302; William Thompson, "Deviant Ideology: The Case of the Old Order Amish,: *Quarterly Journal of Ideology* 10 (January, 1986), 29-33; Richard Bauman, *Let Your Words Be Few* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983); Soloman Poll, *The Hasidic Community in Williamsburg* (New York: Free Press, 1962).

[5] For the sake of anonymity, names of people and places have been changed.

[6] I lived in Mayfield, the town nearest Bend. My participation with this group began when I became friends with one Mennonite woman, followed by our involvement in a support group of nursing mothers. After being socially involved with these women for a year, I began the fieldwork. The Holdeman Mennonites were not easy to study, due to their suspicion of outsiders. To my knowledge only one other study had been done on a Holdeman Mennonite group prior to my ethnography. Because of their skepticism regarding things academic, progress was quite slow. Casual interviews, with discrete notetaking, or dictating into a tape recorder as I drove home, characterized the first two years of research. The phone proved to be essential; I was able to take thorough notes while conducting formal interviews over the phone. By the sixth year, the Mennonite women were comfortable with my notetaking, and the last two years of interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Since the Holdemans were unwilling to fill out surveys, I collected data by interviewing members concerning their families. Specific questions focused on when and where people were married, who was divorced, remarried, how many children had been born to what unions and who had been expelled. Genealogies were assembled with the data, and statistics concerning expulsion and marriage were computed.

[7] While members focused on the positive aspects of Holdeman Mennonite culture, as one would expect, the expelled people had a more negative focus. Due to the large economic loss they

would incur in selling a farm in a depressed economy, only a few moved away following their expulsions. Consequently, the expelled people were unable to avoid the shunning process and came to perceive the Holdeman Church as somewhat oppressive.

[8] Clarence Hiebert, *The Holdeman People* (Pasadena, CA: The William Carey Library, 1973); Robert Graber, "Sociocultural Differentiation of a Religious Sect: Schisms among the Pennsylvania German Mennonites" (Ph.D. Diss., U. of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1979); Stephen Scott, *Why Do They Dress That Way?* (Good Books: Intercourse, PA, 1986); Royden Loewen, *Family, Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Urbana and Chicago: U. of Illinois Press, 1993), 176-238.

[9] Graber, "Sociocultural Differentiation.

[10] Melvin Gingerich, *Mennonite Attire through Four Centuries* (Breinigsville, PA: Pennsylvania German Society, 1970).

[11] Hiebert, *Holdeman People*, 273.

[12] *Ibid.*, 257.

[13] 1 Timothy 2: 9 and 10.

[14] Scott, *Why Do They Dress That Way?*.

[15] Clarence Hiebert, Personal Communication, 1980.

[16] Sexual segregation was most obvious in public settings, and extended to this ethnographer as well. Because I am female and an outsider, I was generally not permitted to interview men who were church members.

[17] Howard Becker, *Outsiders* (New York: Free Press, 1963), 9.

[18] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans., Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), 29.

[19] John Bradshaw, Personal Communication, 1980, 1990.

[20] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 29.

[21] L. Miller, "Uneasy Alliance: Women as Agents of Social Control," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 12 (1987), 345-361.

[22] Leah had been accused by the ministers of flirting (she denied the allegation) and had been expelled 18 months prior to our first interview. She and her husband eventually divorced, and while she asked for joint custody, she was granted only visitation rights. Her relationship with her children remains strained to this day.

[23] Hiebert, *Holdeman People.*

[24] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 131.

[25] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routlege, 1969), 4.

[26] Douglas, *Natural Symbols.*

[27] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 131-3.

[28] Edwin Schur, *Labeling Women Deviant: Gender, Stigma and Social Control.* (New York: Random House, 1984).

[29] Edwin Ardener, *Perceiving Women* (London: Dent/Malaby/Harstead, 1975).