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Researching the “Un-Digital” Amish Community: Methodological and Ethical Reconsiderations for Human Subjects Research

Tabetha Adkins

This article argues that methodologies for studying community literacy must be reexamined in light of advancements in technology and the research community’s relationship to those technologies. Based on her ethnographic study of an Amish community in southeast Ohio, the author offers a counterpoint to discussions of literacy and digital tools by showing how differing perspectives on technology led to complications during the data collection process. Furthermore, Adkins argues that methodologies cannot always be dictated by a template or by “best practice” and that researchers and IRBs should be more flexible in their thinking about how to treat research communities ethically.

I think of myself as a technophile. I own every “iDevice” invented, am married to a software engineer, am hopelessly dependent upon the GPS in my car, and recently taught my seventy-seven-year-old Granny to use a Kindle. My life is thoroughly digitized—except when I collect data for my community literacy research on an Amish community in southeast Ohio. Since the Amish do not make use of most modern technologies, my digital identity has no currency in the Amish world. Shedding this identity may sound easier than it actually is. In fact, despite my best efforts to conduct ethical, thoughtful, ethnographic research with a community to which entrance is so difficult, I found that the methodological mistakes I made while collecting data can be attributed to one simple idea: technological values. In my world, the ability to produce and consume digital texts is at least normative if not expected. For the Amish, though, digital texts and the technology that creates and displays those texts are foreign, odd, and perhaps even dangerous.

The editors of this special issue of *Community Literacy Journal* ask us to consider ideas such as “servicing and collaborating with populations including recent immigrants, senior citizens, and at risk teens with an emphasis on technology of literacy” and how digital technology might

help scholars with the important act of “sustaining partnerships”—an especially important topic when discussing methodology—since research, and especially community literacy research, is always facilitated by new or existing partnerships. Charlotte Davies describes this relationship thusly: interviewing is “better understood as a process in which interviewer and interviewee are both involved in developing understanding, that is in constructing their knowledge of the social world” (98). The purpose of this article is to illustrate not how digital technology can better facilitate research but how a research population’s relationship with digital technology must be considered when designing a community literacy research protocol. Drawing on my own methodological mistakes and successes, I argue that our theories of ethical ethnography—theories to which I am very committed—must be reconsidered in light of digital technologies and potential research subjects’ relationships to those technologies.

The Amish are a religious group whose ancestors immigrated to the United States in the early eighteenth century to seek religious freedom. As John A. Hostetler explains in *Amish Society*,

The Amish are direct descendants of the Anabaptists of sixteenth-century Europe and were among the early Germanic settlers in Pennsylvania. As part of a widespread counterculture movement of religious reform, the Anabaptist movement produced three groups that survive to this day: the Mennonites of Dutch and Prussian origin, the Hutterian Brethren of Austria and the Swiss Brethren. Named after their leader, Jacob Ammann, the Amish are a branch of the Swiss Brethren (25).

In a 2008 study, I spoke to both Mennonite and Amish members of a community in southeast Ohio, though this article focuses specifically on my Amish research participants. The Amish are known for “living simply”—that is, they do not use modern conveniences like electricity, cars, or computers, as they explained to me, as a sacrifice to God. While there are many different congregations or, in the native Pennsylvania Dutch word *Ordnung*, who hold different beliefs about how to best “be Amish,” the basic tenet of Amish belief comes from the Bible, 1 Peter 2:11, which tells Christians to live “in the world but not of it.” In other words, the Amish should avoid, as many research participants put it to me, the “ways of the world” and live as the Bible tells them to live. As a result, the Amish are typically characterized as a private and exclusive group of people. I was able to interact with a group of Amish individuals living in Hanley, Ohio,¹ because many of the members of this community are friends and neighbors of my husband’s family.² It is important to note that my husband’s family is not Amish; they are simply farmers who spend a good deal of time with their Amish neighbors and

friends. I also want to note how I use the term “technology” in this article. For my purposes here, technology is defined as anything that requires an electric outlet or battery to operate. Gas stoves were the most advanced technology I observed in Amish homes.

When I began this research for my 2009 dissertation, I wanted to understand what counted as important, meaningful, and worthwhile literacy in the Amish community and to what end this community values literacy. I also sought to understand how Amish literacy helps to define a sense of Amish “self” or how Amish literacy helps define Amish communities. Closely related to this question was the issue of the Amish community’s trilingual nature in which, as I explain in “‘The English Effect’ on Amish Language and Literacy Practices,” languages serve specific purposes for designated spheres of life. As one participant explained it to me: “We use English to communicate with English neighbors and for business transactions; the Pennsylvania Dutch is for home and connects us to our forefathers; and we use Old German for our religion.” Finally, in this study I aimed to understand the cultural roles of literacy artifacts like *The Budget*, the international Amish newspaper composed of letters written by community-appointed “scribes” who report on the news and happenings of their community, which I discuss at length in my 2010 article “‘To Everyone Out there in *Budget* Land’: The Narrative of Community in the International Amish Newspaper, *The Budget*.”

My primary concern in designing this project was to engage the community in a way that is responsible, ethical, and what Davies calls *reflexive*. I knew that Amish participants could potentially and understandably resist my attempts to learn about their reading and writing practices, especially since I, as a graduate student and later a faculty member at a public university, represent state-sanctioned education and institutions. Historically, the Amish have fought for the right to educate their children in the manner dictated by their traditions and faith, and this fight was especially brutal in Ohio where, as John A. Hostetler and Gertrude Enders Huntington show in *Amish Children: Education in the Family, School, and Community*, Amish fathers were imprisoned for refusing to send their children to state-supported schools (39). The 1972 Supreme Court decision *Wisconsin v. Yoder* gave Amish families the legal right to educate their children as determined by their faith and traditions, but many of the participants in this study attended school before *Wisconsin v. Yoder* and knew of the struggles their fellow Amish suffered at the hands of local governments and school boards. I was mindful of these events while designing my protocol, and I carefully followed the advice of methodology scholars like Gesa Kirsch, Charlotte Davies, Beverly Moss, Pamela Takayoshi and Katrina Powell, Patricia Sullivan, Mary Louise Pratt, Thomas Newkirk, and others. It was important to me for participants to understand that my

goal was not to make a value judgment on their education model, literacy practices, or lifestyles but to learn about their literacy practices. With these goals in mind, I tried to create a research design that was as transparent and reflexive as possible.

I obtained approval from my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before beginning my fieldwork. Upon gaining this approval, I first approached Matthew, a community bishop, and asked for permission to interview him. I wanted Matthew to understand the nature of my presence in the community so that as a leader of the community he could give guidance to others who had questions about my intentions. Among ethnographers, there is a precedent for interviewing community leaders before engaging with the community as a whole. Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole state that in their study, "in each town we began our interviewing with the chief and the elder statesmen, as a courtesy and because they usually requested that we begin in this way" (45). My experience now leads me to believe that starting with Matthew was the right decision, because if Matthew had heard secondhand that an outsider was asking questions about the community's reading and writing, his reaction could have had a negative effect not only on my study but also on my husband's family's relationships with Amish community members.

While an informed consent form certainly does not guarantee ethical research practice, it is a staple of what most scholars consider ethnical methodology and is discussed at length in most texts about human subjects protection. With the importance of the informed consent in mind, I spent hours writing and revising this form. During this first interview with Matthew, though, I could see almost immediately that there were problems with my IRB-approved informed consent form, which I include in the appendix of this article. Matthew had many questions about the form, and I soon recognized that I considered the wrong audience when composing it using the IRB's template; Matthew made me realize that I was writing for the IRB, not for the Amish. I could see almost immediately that my methodology would have benefited from Gesa Kirsch's advice to involve participants in research design. Matthew could not understand why categories like "Privacy," "Risk," and "Compensation" were present if all I wanted to do was talk about reading and writing. As I explained that the consent form uses academic conventions that are required by the university, I came to understand the language typically used in informed consent as a kind of, to borrow from J. Elspeth Stuckey's term, literacy violence, especially in communities where access to literacy has been compromised or, as is the case of the Amish, where institutions can be suspicious. In fact, I argue that the so-called protections practiced by IRBs and scholars of ethical research practice could actually put some research participants at greater risk. Although the form was relatively free from "academic jargon" as the

IRB requires, I should have revised phrases like “the data will be stored on a password-protected computer” with my audience in mind. I learned quickly that in a community where computers are absent, there is no perceived difference between a computer and the Internet, so some community members thought I was placing their personal data on the Internet. To mainstream Americans, “password” and “protected” are words that promote a sense of safety, security, and privacy. But the Amish community members with whom I conduct my research do not hear these phrases the way mainstream Americans do. Their frame of reference does not often extend beyond the word “computer,” so it is certainly understandable why this phrasing was confusing to my research participants. The consent form may as well have been written in French or another language they do not speak; after all, digital technology comes with its own lexicon, and the Amish choose not to be users of this language. And of course, this community is right to show concern. Technological safety and especially Internet safety are of great concern to many people right now. In fact, the community’s concern for online privacy as early as 2008 suggests a kind of technological savvy one might not expect from a community unconcerned with, for example, whether or not Google saves searches or what Facebook does with personal data.

Methodologies like mine for research studying Amish community literacy would benefit from the work Jeffrey T. Grabill reports on in his book *Writing Community Change: Designing Technologies for Citizen Action*. In this book, Grabill describes the community literacy project he conducted with a risk communications project group working with the Michigan State University Technical Outreach Services to Communities program. Borrowing on the work of James Scott, Grabill uses two terms that are relevant to the argument I make here: the first is *metis*, which he explains as “a form of local knowledge that Scott equates with know-how, experience, or knack—knowledge embedded in local experience” (82). Quoting Scott, he explains further that “*metis* ‘represents a wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment’” (82–3). Most importantly, “*metis* is local, a function of practice, and in some of Scott’s characterizations, almost innate” (83). Closely related to *metis* is the second of Grabill’s germane terms, *infrastructure*, which he says “forces us to understand the technological, cultural, social, and rhetorical as inseparable” (91). I certainly learned that the technological was inseparable from the cultural, social, and rhetorical in my own research experiences. Grabill and Scott make use of the terms *metis* and *infrastructure* to make recommendations to inform design decisions, including to “accommodate the unforeseen and the unexpected; that is, create plans that allow this” (93) and “create *metis*-friendly institutions” as the “quality of the institution and its product depend on engaging the

enthusiastic participation of its people” (93). Scholars should be encouraged to utilize Grabill’s concept to create what he calls a “*metis-capable*” infrastructure that gives careful considerations to what Grabill calls the “knowledge work” of the Amish community.

Another technology-related mistake I made in the consent process was to include telephone numbers on the informed consent form. While Amish people are known to visit their neighbors’ homes to use the phone on occasion—this occurrence is typical at my in-laws’ house—including a form of communication that is not easily accessible to the research community felt, in hindsight, like a kind of literacy violence. Similarly, Denny Taylor writes that “if you have power and privilege in society, literacy can be used to maintain your social status. You can use print to your advantage and to the disadvantage of others,” and she refers to abuse of these powers as toxic literacy (10). The technological elements of the informed consent were not the only toxic or violent terms; terms like “OHRP,” “IRB,” “HSPPO,” “Legal Representative,” and the inclusion of the name of my dissertation director—a woman none of my subjects knew—as the primary investigator all led to confusion among the research participants. Reflecting on the consent form and how I presented myself to the Amish made me realize the extent of privilege and power I gain from digital technology and from being a part of an institution like a university, which administers technology. It is crucial that scholars strive not only to be aware of the privilege and power obtained from digital technology but also to be sure that they do not abuse this privilege and power. On the other hand, researchers must realize that in some communities, access to digital technology creates skepticism and distrust. More and more, these technologies and the values surrounding them must inform methodological approaches.

I am not arguing that the use of consent forms is a kind of literacy violence in itself or that, given my preference, I would not obtain informed consent. In fact, I sit on the IRB at my university and I share the core values of human subjects protection first articulated in the 1978 Belmont report. Briefly, an IRB is typically concerned with ensuring that each and every study completed by someone affiliated with its institution is ethical and does not harm the human subjects involved in that study. IRBs ensure the protection of human subjects by ensuring that the subjects are not vulnerable (i.e., children, pregnant women, or prisoners), that they will not be physically or emotionally harmed by the research, and that they enter into the study with full knowledge of (1) the fact that participation in the study is voluntary; (2) the fact that they may leave the study if they chose to; (3) what is required of them to participate in the study; (4) why they’ve been selected to participate in the study; and (5) as much as is possible, the purpose of the study.³ In my view, the ethics of ethnography are the most important elements to consider when designing a research protocol. I share the respect

for the review process detailed by Paul V. Anderson in “Ethics, Institutional Review Boards, and the Involvement of Human Participants in Composition Research.” I argue that just as ethnographers must be reflexive in their interpretation of the data, they must also be reflexive about the very basic details of a research project, including the language used to obtain informed consent. This reflexivity goes beyond the typical advice to avoid academic jargon; the values of the research participants must also be considered. To return to Grabill, this reflexivity requires close analysis of community *metis* and infrastructure. If I had the study to do over again, I would have asked Matthew, the bishop, to help me create the Informed Consent form and other elements of the study. Of course, not every participant would want to be involved in this process, but for a participant like Matthew who, as a church official, has an interest and obligation to protect his community from outsiders to a certain degree, I believe this would have been a worthwhile venture. He would have benefited from better understanding my intentions, and I certainly would have benefited from his cultural expertise and experience.

A second technological complication of the data-gathering process was one I anticipated and for which I was prepared. Ethnographers generally agree that a tape recorder is an essential tool of good ethnography because audio recorders capture, as Michael Quinn Patton puts it, “the raw data”—“the actual quotations spoken by interviewers. Nothing can substitute for these data: the actual things said by real people. That’s the prize sought by the qualitative inquirer” (380). The problem this method created for my research is that the Amish, who believe they are made in God’s image and, in accordance with Exodus 20:4, which warns Christians against “mak[ing] for [themselves] a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above,” do not allow themselves to be photographed. When considering whether or not to use an audio recorder, I came to think of an audio recording as a kind of “photograph” of the subject’s voice and words, so I decided against recording the interviews for fear the technology would do more harm than good. Andrea Fishman addresses this conundrum in her own study of the Amish, stating that she was given permission to use a tape recorder but found that “the big black box” (tape recorder) was too much of a distraction to her participants who were not used to having such technology present (11–12). I therefore prepared to record participants’ responses to my questions with pen and paper. I developed an elaborate note-taking code that allowed me to use symbols and abbreviations for commonly used terms like Amish, English, church, school, family, etcetera. At the end of every interview, I read my notes back to the participant to ensure I had not misunderstood any of their responses. After leaving an interview, I sat down immediately to write “reflective remarks” and to interpret my symbols and abbreviated notes into a longer narrative as is

suggested by research scholars Matthew Miles and A. Michael Huberman (66). Having completed ethnographic research projects prior to this study for which I was equipped with a tape recorder, I did miss having the luxury of being able to hear my research participants' words again during data analysis. Like Fishman, I expect that my Amish research participants, if asked, would have granted me permission to record our interviews; after all, they were not offended, for example, that I drove to these interviews in a car. Members of this community certainly did not expect me to behave like the Amish behave for this study. I felt, however, that asking for permission to record the interviews would have been disrespectful to my participants' beliefs and values.

Another way in which technology affects a community's values became clear to me in a very unexpected manner. Since the Amish aim to live outside "the world," communities and families are often very close. When a stranger like me enters the community, naturally there is a period of uncertainty. "Knowing" a person and where they come from is very important in this community. One incident that illustrates this point occurred at my husband's grandmother's funeral before I formally began my research and before we were married. Many Amish families attended the wake, which I attended with my parents. When the Amish families came into the funeral home, I watched as they scanned the room to see who was in attendance. A man I later came to know as the bishop Matthew approached my parents and me and asked who we were and how we knew the deceased. I explained that I was her grandson's girlfriend and these were my parents. I watched as his face relaxed, and then we shared a quick and friendly conversation. Following the conversation, he went back to his family and told them who I was. In addition, my mother-in-law took me to many of the interviews I conducted and events I observed, and she always introduced me as her future daughter-in-law. This introduction often led to discussion about which of my mother-in-law's sons I was marrying, if we were looking forward to having a family, and where "my people" (family) live and what they do for work. Even though I understand that, as Shirley Brice Heath and Brian V. Street say, "the ethnographer is the ultimate instrument of fieldwork," my training in ethical research made me initially uncomfortable with all this attention on me and my life (57). But Fishman argues that familiarity creates a sense of authority and trustworthiness in the Amish community, and familiarity is an especially important source of credibility, second only to the Bible (45).

Getting to "know" people was the greatest surprise of the study, and I am certain that had I not developed relationships with members of this community, this research would not have been possible. While some scholars warn ethnographers of growing too close to participants for fear of "going native" (Patton 568), I would argue that in this case, my bond with

the community only led to better results since familiarity and friendship, not college degrees and institutional support, are what create credibility and trust in the Amish community. Using Bruce Horner's ideas in "Critical Ethnography, Ethics, and Work," I came to see that these relationships were critical to the *demands*, not the dilemmas of the study (14). On an even more fundamental level, it was relationships and "knowing" people that gave me access to the community in the first place; had my in-laws not been members of this community with friendly relationships with the Amish residents in the community, I would never have gained access to these research participants. And again, this value for "knowing" a researcher translates into all kinds of communities studied by literacy scholars, especially when those communities are suspicious of literacy for bureaucratic purposes, as Taylor illustrates, or for violence, as explored by Stuckey. Taylor's study of the oppressive forces of literacy is an especially good example of how enriched a study can be whenever a researcher earns the trust of her subjects.

This value for "knowing" people reminds me of how digital technology has changed how we feel we "know" people in our lives, and I had to adjust to Amish ways of "knowing." In this community, there is no calling or texting ahead to ensure you are welcome at someone's home; instead, you just assume you are welcome. I will not be receiving Facebook friend requests from my Amish friends, and we cannot stay in touch over e-mail. I now live a thousand miles away from Hanley, but I still feel connected to many members of the community despite the lack of technology I use to stay in touch with other friends throughout the world. Several participants have stayed in touch by sending messages through my in-laws or sending me gifts: Ezekiel sent me a mug with the name of his business printed on it; Caleb sent me an article from a newspaper about a business pretending to use Amish artists to craft "Amish stoves"; Jacob sent me an Amish man's Sunday hat which I display in my office with an Amish-made quilt. I bought this quilt at the annual auction that raises money for local Amish schools and often show the quilt to students as a model of reciprocity; the Amish community I studied gave me their time, experience, and knowledge, and in return, I helped support their schools that year. Experiences like these—connecting with people, developing relationships—are what drew me to ethnography as a research method in the first place. The absence of the electronic conveniences somehow makes these connections feel more real—to stay connected to someone without texting, calling, or e-mailing requires more effort.

While I believe that ethics, informed consent, and ethnographic "distance" are essential for creating sound research and for protecting subjects, my experience has prompted me to rethink some of these conventions. Certainly, researchers concede that every research situation is

different, but it is unethical to suggest that the approach for every context should be the same. These methodologies, while good guides toward ethical practices, do not always work when we leave the confines of the academy to conduct literacy research. The values of a community, and specifically their views on technology and other elements that may only be hinted at in the informed consent, must also be considered to avoid the kinds of challenges I encountered.

What I learned about Amish research subjects and how to research this community ethically can be applied to many communities other than the Amish. For example, scholars and researchers should reconsider the traditions of informed consent—not only the forms themselves, but also the conventions of how consent is achieved. Literacy has often been at the center of informed consent—forms must be read and signed—but how might we rely on other forms of consent? This question seems especially important given that the subjects we study are often victims of compromised access and that a suspicion of texts and literacy exists among many communities, the Amish included. Further, I echo Kirsch's assertions that researchers must consider the potential of participant input on research design. Contributions from the emic or insider perspective or, put another way, from those who better understand the community's *metis* and infrastructure, can lead to richer data collection, more trust between the researcher and her subjects, and less opportunity for the clashes in understanding I experienced. Finally, given that digital technology has had such an effect on how scholars conduct both qualitative and quantitative research, researchers must begin to consider how a community's position on technology should affect methodology. This consideration has great potential for rich, fresh elements of ethics and analysis.

Appendix

INFORMED CONSENT FORM ⁴

Amish Literacy Practices in Southeast Ohio

Investigator(s) name & address: [dissertation director] (primary) and Tabetha Adkins

Site(s) where study is to be conducted: -----, Ohio

Phone number for subjects to call for questions: (XXX) XXX-XXXX

Introduction and Background Information

You are invited to participate in a research study. The study is being conducted by [dissertation director] and Tabetha Adkins. The study is sponsored by the University of Louisville, Department of English. The study

will take place in ----, Ohio. Approximately 15-50 subjects will be invited to participate.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to learn about the reading and writing of bilingual communities living in rural areas.

Procedures

In this study, you will be asked to answer questions asked by Tabettha Adkins. The questions asked by Tabettha Adkins will ask about language learning, reading and writing in the home, reading and writing at work, The Budget newspaper, and second language acquisition. Questions will not deviate from reading and writing. These questions would be asked and distributed during a five-week span of time during the spring of 2008 and would require approximately 30 minutes of time to complete. Anyone is welcome to decline to answer any question that may make them uncomfortable.

Potential Risks

There are no foreseeable risks other than possible discomfort in answering personal questions, but as with any research study, there may be unforeseeable risks.

Benefits

The possible benefits of this study include contributing to knowledge regarding language learning and the teaching of reading and writing. The information collected may not benefit you directly. The information learned in this study may be helpful to others.

Compensation

You will not be compensated for your time, inconvenience, or expenses for your participation in this study. There are no foreseeable expenses for your participation in this study.

Confidentiality

Total privacy cannot be guaranteed. Your privacy will be protected to the extent permitted by law. If the results from this study are published, your name will not be made public. While unlikely, the following may look at the study records:

Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP)

Your identity will be protected in the following ways:

Your name will be changed to protect your identity

The name of your community will be changed to protect your community's identity

The data will be stored on a password-protected computer

Voluntary Participation

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this study you may stop taking part at any time.

Research Subject's Rights, Questions, Concerns, and Complaints

If you have any concerns or complaints about the study or the study staff, you have three options.

You may contact the principal investigator, [dissertation director], at [phone number].

If you have any questions about your rights as a study subject, questions, concerns or complaints, you may call the Human Subjects Protection Program Office (HSPPO) [phone number]. You may discuss any questions about your rights as a subject, in secret, with a member of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) or the HSPPO staff. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, staff of the institutions, as well as lay members of the community not connected with these institutions. The IRB has reviewed this study.

If you want to speak to a person outside the University, you may call [phone number]. You will be given the chance to talk about any questions, concerns or complaints in secret. This is a 24-hour hot line answered by people who do not work at the University of Louisville.

This paper tells you what will happen during the study if you choose to take part. Your signature means that this study has been discussed with you, that your questions have been answered, and that you will take part in the study. This informed consent document is not a contract. You are not giving up any legal rights by signing this informed consent document. You will be given a signed copy of this paper to keep for your records.

 Printed Name of Subject/Legal Representative

 Signature of Subject/Legal Representative

Date Signed

 Signature of Person Explaining the Consent Form
 (if other than the Investigator)

Date Signed

 Signature of Investigator

Date Signed

LIST OF INVESTIGATORS

PHONE NUMBERS

Tabetha Adkins
 [dissertation director]
 Department of English
 [address]

[phone number]
 [phone number]

Endnotes

1. This is a pseudonym, as are the names I use to refer to specific research participants.

2. At the time of the study, my husband and I were engaged. I completed most fieldwork during the summer of 2008, and we were married in June 2009.

3. Sometimes, of course, researchers have good reasons for deciding to keep the purpose of their research private. In these cases, they must appeal to the IRB for special permission to conceal the purpose of their research to subjects.

4. Telephone numbers and identifying information about the location of my research site have been removed for privacy protection.

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