Defying Insider-Outsider Categorization: One Researcher's Fluid and Complicated Positioning on the Insider-Outsider Continuum

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Review Essay:

David Weaver-Zercher (Ed.) (2005). Writing the Amish: The Worlds of John A. Hostetler. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 351 pages, ISBN 0-271-02686-3 (hardcover) $34.95

Abstract: In *Writing the Amish: The Worlds of John A. Hostetler,* WEAVER-ZERCHER compiles key ethnographic works which reflect HOSTETLER's role as a Pennsylvania Old Order Amish and a scholar-mediator of Amish culture. This project originated from the late HOSTETLER's unfinished book, part auto-biography, part scholarly review. Essays and commentaries contextualize and expand HOSTETLER's original discussions of Amish culture and social science, showing HOSTETLER's development from advocate to anthropologist across decades of publications. HOSTETLER describes the origins of this journey as he describes his family's shunning from the Peachy Amish church and his own calling, not to join the Amish church as a young adult, but to pursue academic learning instead. Using WEAVER-ZERCHER's text as an example, I offer a re-conceptualization of insider/outsider positioning, not as a fixed and binary positioning, but an unsettled, tenuous positionality situated within a continuum. The book offers a unique example of the problematic conceptualization of researcher positioning as either insider or outsider.

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1. Essay Roadmap

In this review essay, I offer *Writing the Amish: the worlds of John A. Hostetler* by David WEAVER-ZERCHER as a text that implores ethnographers to re-conceptualize the seemingly stable binary positioning of the researcher as insider/outsider. The story of John A. HOSTETLER's ethnographic research with the Old Order Amish of Pennsylvania illustrates the nature of his researcher positionality as dynamic and tentative, falling within an insider/outsider continuum. This project originated from the late HOSTETLER's unfinished book, part auto-biography, part scholarly review. WEAVER-ZERCHER compiles HOSTETLER's

key ethnographic works which reflect his role as a former Pennsylvania Old Order Amish and his eventual role as a scholar-mediator of Amish culture. Through the author's choice of key HOSTETLER pieces, WEAVER-ZERCHER provides ethnographers with not only a primer on HOSTETLER's work, but also an illustration of how HOSTETLER negotiated his insider/outsider positions over the course of his work with his Amish participants. WEAVER-ZERHCER states three goals for his text: to provide access to HOSTETLER's work, to contextualize HOSTETLER's work and to advance discussion of ethnographic representation (WEAVER-ZERCHER, 2005, p.XV). While I provide a general sense of the text as a whole, the pertinence of this review revolves around goal three—the complexities of ethnographic research. [1]

Throughout the text via commentary and text selections, WEAVER-ZERCHER effectively illustrates HOSTETLER's scholarly development into his eventual role of cultural-mediator between the Amish and English[1] worlds. While doing so, he simultaneously offers a useful example of the complexities of insider/outsider positioning in ethnographic research. The book offers lessons about the interplay between self, audience and participants. HOSTETLER's shifting position within the insider/outsider continuum over the course of three decades of ethnographic work with the Amish has evolved simultaneously with the very notion of what it means to do ethnographic work from an insider's orientation. [2]

Part one of the text is comprised of four essays: by John HOSTETLER himself, Donald KRAYBILL, Simon BRONNER and David WEAVER-ZERCHER. The essays work together to provide personal and professional background on John HOSTETLER and contextualize his work in terms of the trends and theories that he applied (or rejected) in his work. *An Amish Beginning* (originally published in 1922, then revised by HOSTETLER in 1992), reprinted in WEAVER-ZERCHER, 2005, Chapter 1) and *An Uneasy Calling: John A. Hostetler and the Work of Cultural Mediation* (Chapter 4 in the reviewed book) work together to give the reader a good sense of John HOSTETLER's early years and how they both aided and troubled his scholarship. Donald KRAYBILL and Simon BRONNER in chapters two and three speak to the academic significance of HOSTETLER's work in rural sociology, folklife studies and anthropology and contextualize his work in regards to American and Amish society at the time. WEAVER-ZERCHER'S essay *An Uneasy Calling: John A. Hostetler and the Work of Cultural Mediation* concludes part one of the text by specifically taking up HOSTETLER's complex situatedness and the ethical questions surrounding his work. Part two is a collection of fourteen previously published pieces by John HOSTETLER that illustrate concepts discussed in part one. Headnotes and footnotes by WEAVER-ZERCHER contextualize the selections, providing background on the piece and important commentary about HOSTETLER's ever-changing positioning in relation to his subjects and audience. [3]

Writing the Amish takes it rightful place among other seminal works on the Old Order Amish, such as *Amish Society* (4th edition in 1993) and *Amish Life* (2nd

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1   The Amish refer to those who are not Amish as "English."

edition, 1983) both by John HOSTETLER. Donald KRAYBILL, a contributor to this text, authored *The Riddle of Amish Culture* (1989), one of his many scholarly works on the Amish. Considerations of HOSTETLER's researcher locations and the contextualization of his work, posed beside his key writings, makes for a book that will appeal to ethnographers, sociologists and those interested in work under the umbrella of religious sociology. [4]

2. The Old Order Amish

The Old Order Amish are one of three Anabaptists groups in the United States: the Mennonites, the Hutterian Brethern and the Swiss Brethren/Amish (HOSTETLER, 1993, p.25). The Amish are direct descendents of sixteenth century European Anabaptists who fled religious persecution and immigrated to America, starting in the eighteenth century (HOSTETLER, 1993). Successfully positioning themselves as outsiders, the Old Order Amish have captured the American imagination largely through their use of symbols (ibid., Chapter 11) that mark their separation from the larger rural communities in which they live. While there are distinct differences between Old Order Amish churches scattered across the U.S, the Old Order Amish can generally be identified by their distinctive dress, use of horse and buggies and rejection of electricity. They are commanded biblically to be "in the world but not of it" (John 17:14-15, King James Version of the Bible). Thus, they affirm their separation and protect members from outsider influence. These forces of separation in symbol and action have hampered the access of social science researchers, making ethnography a virtual impossibility with this group that defines itself by its separation from the world. [5]

3. Problematizing the Insider/Outsider Binary

> "Location and positionality should not be conceived as one-dimensional or static but as multiple and with varying degrees of mobility"
> (ALCOFF, 1995, p.106)

Judith BUTLER (2004, p.108) identifies the inner/outer binary as a stabilizing and consolidating distinction and insider/outsider researcher positioning may be read similarly. When we, as researchers, position ourselves as "insider" or "outsider," we attempt to stabilize and make coherent that which is tenuous and discursively constituted. We attempt to say, "I am *not* one of them" or "I *am* one of them." What does this construction of coherence conceal? If the binary positioning is suspect, aren't our ethnographic "findings" equally troubled? [6]

As WEAVER-ZERCHER illustrates, researchers cannot declare themselves consummate insider/outsider in relation to another individual. While John HOSTETLER, a former-Amish male, shared specific and important subject positions with his participants, he could not share the important subject position of *current* Amish and thus could not declare himself Insider. As a former Amish

church member, he shared very specific and important subject positions with his participants and thus was as close to being an insider as any ethnographer studying the Old Order Amish will ever be, but even he could never reach complete insider status. Conversely, it seems that a researcher could nearly always find some shared subject position (or at least shared experience) that precludes deeming oneself absolute outsider. Pollyannaish, perhaps, but are we not compelled to believe that we can connect in some small way with any other human on the planet? What is the consequence if we cannot? Objectification? Violence? Conversations with research participants in ethnography have the potential to create development of alternative discourses with which to understand the participants' subjectivity, not completely, but differently. These conversations, enabled and fettered by shared and conflicting discourses, allow the researcher to imagine an understanding of that positioning at times, but they *do not* allow a complete and untroubled understanding of participants' social locations. BUTLER (1990, pp.105) quotes FOUCAULT: "Nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men." Ethnographers can only imagine the other—and that has to be enough. [7]

WEAVER-ZERCHERS' commentaries and organizational scheme of this text illustrate John HOSTETLER's complex, fluid researcher positioning as he both positioned himself and was positioned by his audience within an insider/outsider continuum. [8]

4. Development of the Insider/Outsider in Ethnography

Insider and outsider research orientations are social, historical constructions whose meanings are in flux. Emic and etic, terms coined in 1967, correspond, but are not identical to contemporary understanding of the terms insider and outsider (YOUNG, 2005, p. 152). Emic and etic refer to narrower notions of insider/outsider; they do not consider the social contexts acting on a research situation nor the consequences of researcher/participant positioning, which are now increasingly understood to be central to ethnographic interpretation. Young defines emic as having, "personal experience of a culture/society," while etic is described as, "the perspective of a person who has not had a personal or 'lived' experience of a particular culture/society" (YOUNG, 2005, p.152). Conversations among social science researchers examining the researcher-participant dyad first emerged in the 1970's (DE ANDRADE, 2000, p.269). The debate acknowledged the qualitative difference between work done from insider versus outsider position, but lacked critical analysis of how the researcher shapes the research (ibid., p.270). Feminist researcher Linda ALCOFF (1995) interrogates how researcher-participant social orientation writes the representation of subjects and controls the totality of the ethnographic research situation. Two ethnographies by DEL CASINO (2001) and DE ANDRADE (2000) illustrate this development in the field of ethnography. DE ANDRADE analyzes not only how her orientation as insider studying racial and ethnic identity in the Cape Verdean American community of southeastern New England shaped the research process, but also how her participants affected the process. DEL CASINO (2001, p.456), an

"outsider" studying outreach programs for HIV and AIDS in Thailand, discusses how his decision-making in the field affected the nature of his participant observation and how the participants themselves swayed both the direction and content of his research. [9]

Like many contemporary ethnographers, both DE ANDRADE and DEL CASINO, who self-identify as insider and outsider, place their research meta-analysis appropriately at the center of their interpretative work. Their respective insider and outsider identities are changeable and constructed simultaneously via their own notions of self and their participants' view of them as researcher, friend, student, co-worker or group member. Neither insider nor outsider orientation is a taken-for-granted, fixed identity. DE ANDRADE explains the interdependent, constructivist nature of what she conceptualizes as insider status: "Through them, I understood that insider status is not simply granted or achieved. It is created through an ongoing process of evaluation that is dependent on the performance of group membership by researchers and participants at multiple levels" (DE ANDRADE, 2000, p.283). Clearly, for DE ANDRADE (and for HOSTETLER as explained below), birth right is not assurance of insider status. [10]

Insider/outsider positions are socially constructed and entail a high level of fluidity that further impacts a research situation. A researcher, by nature, has to have some level of "outside-ness" in order to conduct research. This does not mean that the inside perspective is surrendered; both exist simultaneously. There is othering in the very act of studying, a necessary stepping back or distancing in varying degrees. There can be no interpreting without some degree of othering. Researchers, then, can be neither Insider nor Outsider; they are instead temporarily and precariously positioned within a continuum. [11]

5. *Writing the Amish* and the Insider/Outsider Continuum

WEAVER-ZERCHER illustrates how HOSTETLER, in his role as scholar-mediator between his subjects and audience, was influenced both by his Amish discourse and its accompanying degrees of insider identity and his academic discourse and its disaccord with his Amish participants. Though he positioned himself at differing ends of the continuum, his membership in both discourse groups persists in his work. WEAVER-ZERCHER'S text is rife with examples of the complexity of HOSTETLER's positioning. For example, Simon BRONNER discusses in his piece, *Plain Folk and Folk Society: John A. Hostetler's Legacy of the Little Community* (Chapter 3 in WEAVER-ZERCHER, 2005, pp.56-97), how HOSTETLER actively worked to censor popular works on the Amish practice of bundling. Bundling is described by WEAVER ZERCHER as a courtship custom, "in which courting men and women lay in bed fully clothed—or, depending on the story at hand, not so fully clothed" (WEAVER-ZERCHER, 2005, p.114). In his own writings on bundling, HOSTETLER wrote squarely from the middle of the insider/outsider continuum as he assumed the authority of both a former Amish man and current academic in order to influence how the general public read the practice of bundling. [12]

In the key essay of the book, *An Uneasy Calling: John A. Hostetler and the Work of Cultural Mediation*, WEAVER-ZERCHER (pp.98-149) describes how decades after HOSTETLER's cultural mediation surrounding bundling, he again attempted to use his positioning to influence public perception of the Amish and temper their exploitation. He worked actively, but unsuccessfully, to block the production of the 1984 Hollywood film, *Witness*. This example is particularly useful for illustrating HOSTETLER's fluid positioning, as ethics surrounding HOSTETLER's own work and the Amish subjects he sought to protect were both called into question (WEAVER-ZERCHER, p.136). His criticism of the film's intent to profit off the Amish was deemed hypocritical by his adversaries when it was pointed out that HOSTETLER himself has made his living (as an outsider) "off the Amish" (WEAVER-ZERCHER, pp.136). English neighbors offered conflicting, sordid, stories about their Amish neighbors in response to HOSTETLER's discussion of Amish "integrity" (WEAVER- ZERCHER, pp.136). [13]

HOSTETLER, like many ethnographers, engaged his outsider positioning in his efforts to defend and protect his subjects from what he viewed as exploitation. He describes Amish people as "vulnerable," "easily exploited" and "harmless" in his 1984 piece, "Marketing the Amish Soul" (reprinted as Chapter 16 in WEAVER-ZERCHER, 2005). HOSTETLER uses his insider-authority in his language intended to manipulate his English audience into accepting this characterization of the Amish as weak and naïve in his efforts to stop production of the film, *Witness*, yet in his writings describing the Amish's struggle to gain the rights to have their own schools, "The Amish and the Law" (reprinted as Chapter 15 in WEAVER-ZERCHER'S 2005/1984) he characterizes the Amish as able and effective organizers who tap outsider expertise and negotiate the judicial system effectively. HOSTETLER'S contradictory and purposeful use of language is not taken up by WEAVER-ZERCHER, but offers another example of the inadequacy of conceptualizing insider/outsider as a binary. [14]

HOSTETLER not only worked to change his audience's perception of the Amish, but also worked to influence Amish society itself. In HOSTETLER's 1944, "Letter to Amish Bishops Concerning Shunning" (reprinted as Chapter 5 in WEAVER-ZERCHER's text) He assumes an insider status in writing a letter to Amish bishops condemning the practice of strict shunning based on theological and psychological objections (WEAVER-ZERCHER, p.154). Writing from the insider end of the continuum on a matter that would only have relevance to Amish people themselves, the authority he evokes is not academic-outsider, but religious-insider; he signs his letter, "an unworthy servant," and he explains his motivation as, "a sense of duty to warn all who are ignorantly or willfully sinning" (HOSTETLER, 1944/2005, p.159). As WEAVER-ZERCHER illustrates with this piece, HOSTETLER's early, theological writings posit him close to his Amish origins, squarely within the insider end of the continuum. [15]

WEAVER-ZERCHER demonstrates over the course of the text that HOSTETLER's writing would become increasingly anthropological over the course of his career, indicating a distancing from his Amish roots and his insider identity: "Hostetler was himself experiencing a growing distance from Old Order

Amish life, not the least because of scholarly pursuits that, as any Amish bishop could have told him, insisted that he view the world through very non-Amish eyes" (WEAVER-ZERCHER, p.111). HOSTETLER's own decision to move outside of his Amish identity did not ostracize him from his Amish relatives, but would forever compromise his Amish insider status. In fact, WEAVER-ZERCHER shares how in 1951 HOSTETLER evoked his outsider positioning to assert that he had gained, "sociological training (that) had given him adequate distance to be suitably objective" (ibid., p. 114). [16]

If HOSTETLER himself considered his positionality in relation to his audience and participants, he did not explicitly write this up in his work. With the exception of a few gems in *Writing the Amish*, most of John HOSTETLER's reflections on the insider/outsider dynamic are lost to ethnographers; nonetheless, WEAVER-ZERCHER's text allows us glimpses of HOSTETLER's struggle with this issue. Clearly HOSTETLER's insider/outsider conundrum both enabled and complicated his ethnographic work and the tension he describes is endemic to the field of ethnography. Like all ethnographers, he worked diligently to maintain cordial relations with his contacts in order to facilitate his work. When he was approached to write a critique of Amish life, he responded: "until I get my Ph.D. and the data I want from Amish homes, I must keep my mouth shut" (HOSTETLER quoted by WEAVER-ZERCHER, p.124). [17]

6. Pushing Boundaries, Seeing Differently

While WEAVER-ZERCHER effectively illustrates that HOSTETLER's journey toward his eventual role as cultural mediator was shifting, HOSTETLER's movement within the insider/outsider continuum was anything but linear. In WEAVER-ZERCHER'S collection of his work, readers see repeated demonstrations of his negotiation between researcher and researched, insider and outsider. His work pushes the boundaries of how the field of ethnography has classified insider and outsider. [18]

Current texts in the field such as *Ethnography Unbound: From theory shock to critical praxis* (BROWN & SYDNEY, 2004) illustrate a conceptualization of insider/outsider that HOSTETLER's work defies. This text instructs its readers: "Studying genres within the actual contexts of their use—within real human groups—requires 'insider' research, a type of research that can be accomplished through a particular genre, the genre of ethnography" (REIFF, 2004, p.40). HOSTETLER's work forces the field to take issue with this notion of "insider" (or outsider) as a research typology. Is an insider perspective transparent and untroubled, something that a researcher can "accomplish" definitively? If researchers such as DE ANDRADE (2000) and John HOSTETLER cannot reliably be labeled as insider, who can? WEAVER-ZERCHER offers a lesson for all ethnographers about the fluid nature of perspective and its implications, not only on data interpretation, but also on the research process itself and *Writing the Amish* re-opens the insider/outsider debate initiated nearly forty years ago. How might work approached from a conceptualization of insider/outsider positioning as existing within a continuum be different from that conceptualized as a binary?

Would researchers listen, speak and think about interpretations differently?
Elizabeth ST. PIERRE questions how the complexity of positioning might be
represented in the ethnographic narrative:

> "Abiding by that inside/outside binary is bound to produce failure. How do we, rather,
> escape that binary to negotiate in praxis and represent in text the never ending
> contradictions that stymie, the looping folds that shift us in some different pause from
> which we try to make a more tentative sense or the last interpretation that is always
> presumptuous and often violent?" (ST. PIERRE, 2000, p.262). [19]

Yet it is not that the categories lack utility, for they clearly need to be engaged at
every turn in quality ethnographic work. Positionality needs to be regarded as
fluid and wholly dependent on the context of the research situation and, as DE
ANDRADE (2000) and DEL CASINO (2001) have exemplified, central to the
research itself. Researchers must constantly consider their elusive and
unpredictable positioning and how it writes their work. *Writing the Amish* is unique
in its intent to fully merge the interplay between researcher and audience and its
commentary on the complexities of insider/outsider positioning. WEAVER-
ZERCHER offers ethnographers much to consider in this text. He positions the
notion of interplay between researcher (outsider) and subject (insider) at the
center of this work, reasserting this important issue in the field of ethnography. [20]

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Citation