

The Amish Gossip, Too

Societal Norms and Values in Ethridge, TN

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This research examined the norms, identity, and values of the Amish community in Ethridge, TN. Observational and interview exploration into this particular sect in Ethridge revealed a high context and highly collectivistic culture, emphasizing family rituals and societal patterns. The evident, nonverbal signs in physicality, dress, and religious customs yielded understanding in more latent, formal hierarchy and social cohesion.

The accommodating natures in which the Amish interacted intertwined well with familial values and reverent gatherings as well as their growth in gender identity. Communication of self to the outside world embodied their tolerance and willingness in teaching others and reaching out to various communities, never compromising their own integrity and poise.

Before the Encounter

The Amish culture stumps the outside world with their ability to ignore and disengage with worldly technologies that conflict with their religious values and beliefs. They seem to live in a small collectivistic culture surrounded by an individualistic country. Throughout this encounter, I hope to learn more about their experience of simple living by looking at their depth of values, their concept of identity throughout history, and their communication patterns.

I. History

The old order Amish arrive in America during colonial times, and they are direct descendants of the Anabaptists of 16th century Europe; they are among the Germanic settlers in Pennsylvania (Hostetler, 25). They are named after their leader Jacob Amann. The Amish people branch out from the Swiss Brethren, one of the three groups to survive the Anabaptist movement (Hostetler, 29). In 1527, a secret conference for Anabaptist leaders issues a “Brotherly Union,” which lays out rules/articles that the Amish use as guidelines today. There is also a Mission Movement that comes about and helps change the Amish Identity, almost making it more sectarian.

Brotherly Union:

1. Adult Baptism – one must choose to be baptized so as to know the promises being made to the Lord
2. The ban – when one sins, you are warned twice privately and then the third is public

3. Breaking of the bread – one must be baptized before taking communion, drink in remembrance of Christ
4. Separation – separation from the evil in the world
5. Shepherds – “a shepherd should read, exhort, teach, warn, admonish, and preside in prayer” and the breaking of the bread
6. The sword – “the rule of government is according to the flesh; that of Christians, according to the spirit.” They believe that physical violence solves nothing and does not have a place in their community
7. Rejection of Oaths – quarreling is not acceptable and conflict is not pursued, simply discussed in simple and calm terms

In particular, there are twenty Indiana Amish settlements with 37,000 Amish folk spread across 267 church districts. Their goal is to show diversity throughout the Amish culture while continuing to live our what might “constitute an Amish ‘core’” (Brenneman, 2009). Brenneman states that the combination of migration histories, ethnicity, rules for church discipline, and local contextual factors contribute to the identity formation of certain Amish orders throughout the US. These incongruities do not always make sense to non-Amish because of certain stereotypes we assign and attribute to all Amish folk; however, despite “English” belief that all Amish are sworn off American commodities and conveniences, some Amish are involved in “mainstream consumer culture” (Tharp, 2007, p.38).

II. Outside Stereotypes & Media Perceptions

Sociologists have classified the Amish as sectarians, meaning they act as a group or a body whose faith comes first and foremost, and they incorporate it into everyday life; however, they differ from true sectarians because they do not ask that others conform to their practices. From my research, my developed stereotype, and a common stereotype, of the Amish living became one of an “ignorance is bliss” state-of-mind; after encountering their belief to be that pride leads to knowledge, it does not seem that they learn to their full potential because they do not find it necessary to live abstinent of worldly evils. Fifty years ago, the Amish are an obscure, stubborn people “who resist education and exploit the labor of their children” (Hostetler, 1980, p.4). Outsiders also view the Amish as old-fashioned because all branches do not take advantage of the technological advances, and most non-Amish find this strange. Also, the Amish stay out of media, so there are not many public displays of their culture simply because they do not involve themselves in areas that carry much media news. However, one that is very prevalent is the TV series on TLC, “Breaking Amish,” where cameramen follow Amish and Mennonite young adults as they encounter the English way of life.

III. Values

The “law of love and redemption” rules the Amish culture (Hostetler, 1980, p.5). They hold familial relations very dear, and no matter what one does during rumspringa, the family accepts them with open arms and non-judgmental hearts (Walker, 2003). Their

faith and customs blend in a way that make them inseparable; their Amish core is religious, and their conceptions of self, the universe, and their place in it reflect their beliefs and how those derive from scripture and biblical teaching. In American schools, their families and the community around them prepare children for adult life, and school plays a relatively small role in their lives. In the Amish culture, they incorporate teaching and learning into everyday life and tasks around the house and the farm, and there is an emphasis on “social cohesion, practical skills, and social responsibility” (Hostetler, 1980, p.20). This differs from American culture because our free time outside of school usually reflects relaxing or playing, leisure time. In the Amish culture, they always work and they always place an emphasis on humility in work and a feeling of being blessed through the opportunity to work.

IV. Rites and Rituals

Work and recreation are combined—it is made up of work such as woodcuttings, quiltings, preparations for church services, weddings, funerals, and more. Social life centers on Sunday night worship (Hostetler, 1980). Rituals and everyday life can really be split into two categories: *social*, including work, dress, family, relationships, kinship, and visiting, and *ceremonial*, including worship, baptism, marriage, communion, and funerals (S.F.). A special thing about baptism is that they do not baptize the children as infants. They want the child to choose for him or herself because it “signifies repentance, total commitment to believing church-community, and admissions to adulthood,” which the family wishes the child to choose consciously because it requires a change of life and heart (S.F.).

Rumspringa, the most noticeable ritual to the outside world, gives Amish young-adults, ages 16-21, the opportunity to become “English” (what the Amish call Americans) in order to discover if they want to commit their lives to the Amish church or to leave and be shunned by their family in exchange for an American life (Walker, 2003). Throughout this time of Rumspringa, the child usually lives with their parents, although not always, and they are experiencing all of this under the protection of their parents’ wings; but the parents are hands off during this period in their lives. They allow their children to experience fully the “English” lifestyle; then they let the child decide which culture to live in, the English culture or the Amish church.

V. Communication Patterns (verbal, nonverbal) & Language

The overarching description of Amish communication is that they are a high-context culture. Nonverbal communication speaks volumes for those in the Amish church because they are extremely non-confrontational, and their humility does not allow them to be too outspoken (Pennsylvania Amish); “simple messages with deep meaning flow freely” (Hostetler, 1980, p.18). In the Amish culture, the expectation to respect elders resides deep in their norms, and they communicate with outside cultures, but only when necessary. Despite this expectation to respect elders’ wisdom, because of their humility, their vision of equality shows by communicating on a first name basis (Pennsylvania Amish). Because of the worldly temptations from the “English” culture, they do not

pursue relationships with other Americans, but they do maintain relationships with them when they have them. In my research, I found some dos and do nots when interacting with Amish people:

Do – burp at meals, it means you enjoyed the food; use slower body language, so as not to appear too confident

Do not – use pet names-they seem superficial, do not say pardon me or excuse me, do not interrupt, do not say thank you (just reciprocate the favor), do not be too enthusiastic or forceful when laughing and shaking hands (Pennsylvania Amish)

VI. Dealing with Conflict

The Amish handle conflict by remaining calm in discussions, not arguments, when things go wrong or when handling something that has not gone their way. Also they internalize a lot of their pain and struggle. Americans are much quicker to discuss suffering, whereas the Amish are more selective; they soak it in and internalize it, rather than lashing out or discussing it at length (Hostetler, 1980). This is especially true with mothers; because they are at home taking care of the kids, when they have trouble with them or are frustrated, they internalize their struggle and release it to God with open hands to avoid complaining about it, and they accept that this is their role in life.

VII. The Encounter to Come

I plan to go to Ethridge, Tennessee and go on a tour of the Amish country to get a feel for what their life is like before I try to interview Danny Gingeridge. Diane at the Welcome Center confirmed that they do not make appointments, but hopefully, he will be at his house the day I go into town, so I can interview him. If he is not at his house, I will interview the Diane at the Welcome Center because she works there every day and understands the culture around her.

VIII. Proposed Interview Questions:

- 1) Tell me about your beliefs – more specifically, your religions, family values, why you choose to live in the Amish church...what does it mean to be Amish?
- 2) What is your favorite aspect of the way you live? I assume you experienced Rumspringa...what was the hardest thing to give up, but what did it make you appreciate after the fact?
- 3) Have you known any families who had a child who decided to leave the Amish church? What does that ceremony look like? Do families struggle with wanting to contact that child?
- 4) What does marriage/a wedding look like in the Amish culture?
- 5) What rituals/traditions are important to the Amish?
- 6) What/How do you teach your children about polite and impolite behavior? What does the family like look like in your culture?
- 7) Are there differences between different Amish communities in the US?

After the Encounter

On April 6, 2014, I venture to Ethridge, TN to encounter the Amish culture. My findings confirm previous research and intrigue me as I found surprising discoveries about this Swartzentruber Order 70 miles southwest of Nashville. Unfortunately, a death in the community the previous Wednesday prevents me from sitting down and visiting with Mr. Danny Gingeridge; however, I do get the chance to speak with Diane, whose family lives in Ethridge and has since the 1800s. [Her family actually sold land to this old order Amish community in the 1940s, and Diane grew up surrounded by Amish folk.] I find her sense of Amish culture and tradition genuine and true. Through my conversation with her, I gather amazing insight into Amish communication patterns, norms, identity, values, traditions, and rituals, and I learn a bit about myself in the process as well.

Before I dive into those, I want to mention some things Diane shared with me that I found surprising and unexpected. In congruence with something I read in my research, she tells me how Walmart is a large part of their lives. This particular order does not use electronics or modern conveniences; however, they do go to Walmart to buy basics like black shoes at the beginning of the year and 25-50 pound bags of rice for cooking and canning. I wonder if it hinders their own business, but she says since they make furniture and are tradesmen in other things, Walmart helps more than it hurts.

Diane also informs me that the women love to gossip and love yard sales and shopping, just like us.

“There was an Amish lady who had a coffee table in her buggy and I said, ‘Mary what are you going to do with a coffee table?’ And she said ‘I do not know what that is.’ I said, ‘That table!’ She said ‘Your people call that a coffee table? Why do they call it a coffee table?’ I said, ‘I do not know! I guess used to people sat around that a drank coffee, I do not know.’ She said, ‘I do not know,’ she said, ‘I bought it because I’m gonna let my little ones sit around it!’”

The way Diane tells the story is endearing and definitely draws a few laughs from me. These differences just show me that even something as simple as a coffee table might seem unnecessary...why would we need a table specifically for coffee? It makes me think about how many little things we “English” have that are unnecessary and just seem to be fillers in our homes and also draws the curiosity in me to wonder what it is we are actually trying to fill.

Some communication patterns and norms I gather from our conversation are that the Amish are high context and are relatively accommodating and assertive. In church, the men and the women do not sit together. This does not necessarily reflect their high-context culture; however, they do not necessarily have any particular reason as to why this is the way things are...they just know it is the way it has always been done. They have the same viewpoint on many community rules and norms for living; they do not necessarily have a reason for the way they do things, but they do it because they understand that it is how it is been in the past, so they wish to continue with that tradition.

They are accommodating in that they allow outsiders to come in and observe their culture, like what I did for my encounter. However, the Amish do not let their children play with English children, and they have some separation qualities from outsiders and the outside world. Because English children usually have an outside influence of social media and technology and most likely a more diluted sense of religion and purpose, they do not allow their children to fraternize with English kids. This particular order accommodates also by allowing English families to act as liaisons for doctor or veterinary appointments and making a phone call in case of emergencies. The Amish understand that technology can be useful, but this particular order does not participate fully by refusing to integrate it directly into their lives; they use no electricity. They are assertive by educating outsiders about their culture while communicating self and continuing to live up to their own expectations of their own purpose in their religion and culture.

Another aspect I glean from my conversation with Diane, rather than her blatantly telling me, is the definition of the Amish identity. Through examples and stories, I gather that the Amish are a collectivistic society with particular gender roles that stem from their religious core. When Diane tells me that I probably will not find Mr. Gingeridge at home, she says there has been a death in the *community*...not in his family, but in the community. This means that he may or may not have been very close to this man; however, he still attends the funeral because of the support they have for each other. Also, gender roles are very well defined in the Amish culture. Girls and boys attend school until they are 14. After this from ages 14-21, the boys learn a trade, like woodworking, furniture making, saw milling, and the like, and they farm during the summers. On the other hand, during this time, girls are learning how to cook, clean, take care of the home, and most of all, can. Diane said that one mother of ten canned between 3,000 and 5,000 cans each summer!

Religion is not only a tenet of the Amish culture; it is foundational to their being and purpose. The way they live their lives centers around being who God has made them to be which involves simple living and appreciating the things in life that are given to them in humility. Their Sundays look a little different from the English culture; they hold church in someone's home and a set of benches provides seating each week; the benches are passed around each Sunday to the family who hosts church that week. There are usually about 200 people at church, and they serve everyone soup after the morning service where three to four preachers speak. The men eat first, followed by the women, and then the children. This is opposite from the English culture because we would most

likely want to get the children out of the way before the adults eat, but out of respect and hierarchical order, the elders and men eat first. Also, the Amish do not necessarily meet in their own community for church every Sunday of the year. Some Sundays, they visit other communities where friends or family live. If a family does not attend church that Sunday, Diane says they visit the elderly or the sick.

I learn a lot about Amish values, traditions, and norms through speaking with Diane. This Swartzentruber order does not participate in Rumspringa; Diane said a friend of hers said they had never done it, so they never thought to do it. Diana also mentioned that her friend thought it would be confusing to the children. I personally thought it was interesting that they did not practice Rumspringa at all, but their reasoning for not doing it coincided with my questions about its usefulness.

In the Amish culture, their nonverbal speaks volumes. They dress very plainly in dark, plain colors, and everyone wears the same thing to some extent. Boys and girls both, until they're potty trained, wear gowns, and one deciphers if it is a boy or a girl based on the bonnet the little girl wears. The hair is a female's "crown and glory" said Diane, and it is saved for the eyes of the husband. The Amish do not make much eye contact, I think because of humility and not wanting to appear over confident. They are also very soft-spoken, but do not lack a sense of humor.

One of Diane's favorite things (which quickly became my own as well) was that they have what they call "dotty houses." These are additions to the family home later in life when the last child has gotten married and the parents give the house to one of their children. On the side of the house, they build a little house, so they parents may live there with their family and watch their grandchildren grow up. "They take care of their own."

Another ritual I loved hearing about was their "frolicks." When they built a house or a barn, 50-100 men would come ready to work and build and women would come to feed the men and have a social gathering. It is basically one big picnic for the women while the men build and work, and it becomes a large social event for the community. This communal aspect of building and working to expand the community also exemplifies their collectivistic nature.

My personal identity and communication tendencies impacted me when I spoke with a man of the wrong house I drove up to initially. My instinct was to smile and act very friendly and outgoing as I would when meeting someone for the first time, but I had to remember to be more reserved and be cognizant of their humble and quiet-natured tendencies. I also wanted to stay and chat with Danny Gingeridge's granddaughter (the girl I bought the bread and jam from) and ask her more about her life growing up in the Amish culture, but I wasn't sure it was appropriate seeing as she was working, and I do not want to seem pushy or overbearing when asking a younger girl questions about her culture without an adult present or without receiving someone's permission first.

I thoroughly enjoy the opportunity to immerse myself in a culture foreign to my own in order to better understand the norms of that culture and to evaluate my own actions when encountering a new place outside my comfort zone.

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Amish Gossip book. Read 4 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Massive changes are shaking the foundations of Hannah and Jakob's quiet... He and his wife had just arrived from Ohio and were out to change things that they deemed too worldly. The two young couples were brave enough to take a stand before the new preacher destroyed the community and their livelihoods. I enjoyed learning more about the Amish and their customs. It was interesting to read about the way they choose their religious leaders. I especially like the way the author switches back and forth from chapter to chapter with different characters telling the story from their perspective. It is interesting to read and compare the two points of view. The Amish people and their lifestyle and culture in Lancaster County, PA - still thriving and holding to their traditions in the face of modern society. The Amish feel these distinctive clothes encourage humility and separation from the world. Their clothing is not a costume; it is an expression of their faith. The following answers to questions we received as part of our "Ask the Amish" feature were given by the resident experts at the Mennonite Information Center in Lancaster County: Why don't the Amish use electricity? "Amish people interpret linking with electrical wires as a connection with the world" and the Bible tells them they are not to be "conformed to the world." The Amish life is steeped in tradition and an adherence to the teachings of the bible. With a culture that goes back 400 years, there are many surprising traditions and beliefs that exist in stark contrast to modern day life. The men have zippers and hook and eye closers. I have gotten in trouble with the elders for sharing too much with the women, or giving them conveniences they are not allowed to have. I invited the mothers and children to a birthday party in town once. We lived in the country but had an Herb shop in town.

The Amish people and their lifestyle and culture in Lancaster County, PA - still thriving and holding to their traditions in the face of modern society. The Amish feel these distinctive clothes encourage humility and separation from the world. Their clothing is not a costume; it is an expression of their faith. The following answers to questions we received as part of our "Ask the Amish" feature were given by the resident experts at the Mennonite Information Center in Lancaster County: Why don't the Amish use electricity? Amish people interpret linking with electrical wires as a connection with the world and the Bible tells them they are not to be conformed to the world. Amish Gossip book. Read 4 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Massive changes are shaking the foundations of Hannah and Jakob's quiet... He and his wife had just arrived from Ohio and were out to change things that they deemed too worldly. The two young couples were brave enough to take a stand before the new preacher destroyed the community and their livelihoods. I enjoyed learning more about the Amish and their customs. It was interesting to read about the way they choose their religious leaders. I especially like the way the author switches back and forth from chapter to chapter with different characters telling the story from their perspective. It is interesting to read and compare the two points of view. The Amish are more than bonnets and buggies. Look at their culture and see how strict rules and separation can breed abuse. Let's stop romanticizing them! Amish life seems so idyllic! And so we Christians gobble up millions of romance novels about the Amish. We travel to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to see them up close. We hold them up as proof that even in this busy world you can still live a simple life. I think the American church certainly has and the Canadian one, too. And the Royal Commission in Australia was very thorough, and I'm sure the church has really cleaned things up there. I'm just not sure the Vatican itself has, simply because Cardinal Law is still there. Start studying Amish. Learn vocabulary, terms and more with flashcards, games and other study tools. Who are the Amish? descendants of a Swiss group church community that practices conservative living in a family-oriented, labor intensive environment. Who was Elder Jacob Ammann? "Amish" comes from his name believed in conservative traditions and separating oneself from the rest of the world. Before the group was the Amish, what were they in the 16th century? called "Anabaptists" believed in adult baptism because adults are able to make more mature decisions about their faith. what led to the division between the Anabaptists and the rest of society? Catholic and Protestant countries punished them by death due to their beliefs on baptism.