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CONTEMPORARY AMISH YOUTH AND THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

by

MAEGHAN DESSECKER

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelors of Arts in Anthropology

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

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2012

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by

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The Honors College
Georgia State University
April 2012

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my work to my director and mentor, Dr. Cassandra White, my grandfather K. Melvin Dessecker, my great-uncle Kenny Walter, and, of course, the Beachy family. This paper would not be possible if it were not for the help of all of the above. Thank you all so much.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge David L. McConnell and Charles Hurst of Wooster College from whose readings I pulled most of my information.

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Introduction

Preface: Dan Everett, a well-known linguist, commonly gives this piece of advice: "Everyone should live a week with strangers,"(Everett 2009). I agree with Dr. Everett's recommendation as something that I often try to emulate (especially in my career as a budding anthropologist). I find that a worldly perspective is a notion of which everyone should have a small taste. This can easily be achieved by simply living one week with a stranger who is significantly unlike the conventional cultural lifestyle with which one feels most at home. I speak from experience: Dr. Everett's advice is life changing.

I daresay I detest this truth, but admittedly, I am somewhat of a high-maintenance, metropolitan, material girl. I have recently come to terms with this identity; however my wanderlust often gives the impression that I am comfortable acclimating to any culture. Rest assured that I compromise my city girl mentality for the sake of anthropology, but it is much more difficult for me than I may let on. I bring forth this unfortunate trait to emphasize the confusion of my family when I first announced that I wanted to go live a week with an Amish family to conduct anthropological research. Given some time, my father (who grew up near Holmes County, Ohio) encouraged me to contact his uncle, my great-uncle Kenny.

Uncle Kenny (as I call him) has worked with Amish families in conjunction with Ohio's Farm Bureau for some time. Today, he substitutes as an Amish school bus driver for parochial Amish schools. He and my grandfather, Melvin Dessecker, spent weeks networking through Amish families and consulting Amish directories to find me a host family. After conferring with three or four families, my grandfather and great-uncle

found the most wonderful host family possible. After Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board approved my research proposal, I contacted my future host family in Ohio, and planned for a two-week stay in Holmes County, one of the largest Amish settlements in the country.

WHO ARE THE AMISH?

To give a brief background to those who are unfamiliar with Amish culture, I will start with the commonality of all Amish orders: Christianity. One cannot be Amish without recognizing the son of the Lord, Jesus Christ. The entirety of Amish culture revolves around its church. The root to Amish doctrine is that of the Anabaptists, who believe that one must be of consenting age and of a willing state of mind to be baptized into the Church of Christ. To better maintain their Christian integrity, the Amish cut themselves off from the mainstream American culture by renouncing such niceties as electricity, cars, music, television, and conventional American dress. The Amish find that excluding many modern luxuries in their daily lives rids them of extraneous distractions that may get in the way of each person's relationship with God and the church.

Electricity is seen as something that can be lived without (especially in Mid-West Ohio). Instead of electrical lights, most family homes are equipped with gas lamps. Most appliances are run by gas, but by necessity (perhaps on a farm where some technological equipment is needed) a generator is usually located nearby. When confronted with questions on the Amish mode of transportation and the exclusion of automobiles (which Americans find a necessity), many Amish families conclude that cars and other means of modern transportation slowly separate the close ties of which friends and families have made. For these reasons, Amish families travel by the use of horse and buggy.

Telephones are occasionally used (depending on the wishes of the local church bishop's ordinances /laws). If an indoor telephone is available, it is located in the center of the house where there is little room for private conversations.

An equally unique feature of Amish lifestyle is the dress and the renouncing of an individual identity. Amish women wear long plain dresses without buttons or zippers. Their uncut hair, parted down the middle, is pulled back into a tightly pinned bun and capped by the signature Amish head covering. When I first arrived at my host family's house, the girls asked me right away if I wanted to wear a traditional Amish dress for the night's church activity. I was excited that they suggested this because I was too nervous to ask for myself. After a once over glance at my size and stature, the girls came back with a dress that fit me perfectly. One of the girls even adjusted the sleeves so that they fit my arms properly. She stitched up the elastic bands on the edge of each sleeve as we were walking out the door. The girls made sure that I was dressed in a garment that fit just right. One night I tried on three or four dresses because they wanted to make sure that the dresses they lent me fit as they pleased. I assured them that the fit did not matter as much to me, seeing as I was none the wiser, but they each insisted that I look just like an Amish girl. The mother (I will call her Lila) later mentioned that she wished she could have done my hair; I admit that I wish I would have let her, then I might have been more unquestionably Amish.

Amish men wear plain black or navy pants that are held up by suspenders, and plain colored, button down shirts. Amish men do not don wedding rings. A sign of marriage in the Amish church is a fully-grown beard on a man. I asked the youngest girl (I will call her Heather) if women wear engagement rings. After I showed her my good

friend's engagement diamond she replied "Oh, no. We don't have anything like that!" My recently engaged friend would have been flattered to know that Heather thought her ring was enormous.

Shoes are often dark and modest. There are no heels nor are any toes uncovered. I noticed a sequence of dark colored crocks lining the covered porch on the way out to the barn. The girls all wore them while gardening and tending to the chores. In a church setting, Amish typically wear black, ankle length shoes, but more than often-regular tennis shoes are worn. On one occasion, my younger brother expressed great amusement when noticing an Amish family friend walking around in 'Air Jordan's.'

The idea behind Amish dress and presentation revolves around the virtue of humility. Amish do not condone individuality as they find it to be prideful. Instead, members are encouraged to look similar to one another in order to reinforce the notion of a community. The Amish culture wholly centers itself around the concept of community. No one possesses insurance, as it is one's Christian duty to provide for the rest of the coterie. Although it is not necessarily an egalitarian society, Amish families are expected to allot funds for the church and for communal families in need.

In an egalitarian society, there are no considerable differences in wealth and power; however, there are differences in income within the Amish community (although the wealth distribution gap is much smaller in comparison to most U.S. communities and cities). Most money gained in an Amish family is donated to the church but there are some net gains in families as well as individuals. On a similar note, power is evenly distributed throughout churchgoers (perhaps men have a little more power than women) but the elders and bishops have more authority in the community.

The virtue of humility also applies to pictures. The Amish find self-portraits or photographs to be self-worshiping and egotistical. Although the Amish are heavily family-oriented, there are rarely any family photographs in the home. Despite the lack of personal pictures, Amish homes are typically cozy and are not unlike the mainstream English (or non-Amish) country houses. While with my host family, the eldest daughter graciously gave up her room for me. I took a picture of her room before the day that I left to use as an example of familiarity. Amish housing designs are not unlike the commonplace English homes surrounding them. The girl's bedroom was open with a mirrored dresser and a full bed attached to a shelved headboard. Its walls were decorated with decaled quotes and some pictures of peaceful landscapes. Above her bed, black block letters were hung that spelled out, 'dream.' Not only was her room light and beautiful, but it also made me feel at home.

DIVERSITY IN THE AMISH CULTURE

Despite popular belief, the Amish community is incredibly diverse. David McConnell and Charles E. Hurst note in their paper on Amish education, "No Rip Van Winkles Here,"(2006), "Though the differences between these affiliations may not be apparent to outsiders, each maintains practices (often involving adoption of or rejection of technology) or beliefs (about how to control the youth or whether to support mission work, for example) that allow for claims of distinctiveness" (McConnell & Hurst 2006:240). Some families are allowed the use of tractors, generators, telephones, cellular phones (with limited use), cars, and travel by airplane. Some families allow their teens to partake in a highly sensationalized rite of passage known as *rumspringa* (literally meaning 'running around'). Depending on the sect of the Amish church, a teen may be

allowed to experience *rumspringa* when he/she turns 16. During this time teens are allowed to experience a modern world of cars, music, electricity, jeans, television, competitive sports, and may sometimes participate in parties. Because the Amish faith requires one to willingly submit one's life to God and the Amish way of life, some young adults wish to experience the alternative before deciding whether or not to be Amish. Other families abstain from partaking in *rumspringa* as they find it unnecessary.

The latter are all the things that are heavily debated within the Amish culture. In the Amish church there are separate sects who follow different conducts as well as different interpretations of the Amish doctrine. The pendulum varies from the use of dark colored cars in the Beachy Amish Order to the absence of indoor plumbing in the Schwartzentruber Amish (Hurst & McConnell 2010). The reasons for these differences vary but all result over fractions in interpretation of convenience and Amish doctrine. There are about 8 known Amish orders today (Hurst & McConnell 2010) but many distinctions lie within the individual Amish family or the specific church they attend. My research took place between the larger two orders in the Amish culture: the New Order and the Old Order.

From my observations, I have found that the Old Order Amish tend to be more stringent in the use of technology but allow their youths to participate in *rumspringa*. Because the Amish believe that one must choose to be Amish, the Old Order find it best to let their youth get a taste of the outside world before ultimately making the choice to be baptized in the Amish church or to become part of the 'English' mainstream. Youths tend to engage in dating activities during their *rumspringa* years. Generally, Amish teens make the decision to settle down once they have found someone they wish to marry. This

can be at any time after the age of 16 but usually baptism occurs during an individuals late teens or early twenties. The act of *rumspringa*, although commonplace in an Amish setting, is somewhat of a phenomenon to the non-Amish community.

Regardless of the attention *rumspringa* seems to generate among the greater American public, Amish families tend to insert a discrete eye-roll when asked about this concept by outsiders. This 'sewing of wild oats,' albeit a rite of passage for some, is heavily sensationalized outside of Amish neighborhoods. I can attest to being on the receiving end of a heavy sigh a few times after mentioning my research intentions. Although I tried to explain that my purpose was to paint a better picture of Amish society, I understand where the skepticism comes from. Popular books and television series, like the documentary *The Devil's Playground* (2002), exaggerate the lives of the partygoers participating in *rumspringa* by suggesting that heavy drugs and the act of shunning are typically in the equation.

In contrast, the New Order Amish do not condone the act of *rumspringa* because they believe it compromises one's relationship with God. Comparable to the Old Order, the New Order teens join youth groups upon turning 16; however, the act of partying or turning a blind eye to traditional Amish rules is discouraged. Youth groups establish a strong camaraderie between members and entails volleyball games, Sunday night singings, Bible devotionals, and socializing over cups of coffee. Dating also occurs during a teen's youth group years, although it is strictly hands off, unlike dating in *rumspringa.* The church sets somewhat of an age restriction on dating as well. It encourages one to be at least 18 to date or to have been baptized in the Amish church. One bishop I spoke with during my stay noted, "The Bible says: *Seek ye first the kingdom*

of God. We think they [should] take care of their personal connection with God, you know, we like them to make a commitment to God, to live for Christ and become a member of the church, and *then,* [dating can happen] you know."

One New Order tradition that I learned of during my stay with my host family is when a dating girl's parents buy her a new couch so that she and the boy that is courting her can spend some private time studying devotions. In contrast with the Old Order, the New Order allow the use of some modern technology. My host family owned a used tractor, a skid loader, a telephone, and a generator. Typically minor compromises are made in the use of technology as long as the local church's bishop approves these utilities.

RETENTION RATES WITHIN THE AMISH CHURCH

I had some previous knowledge to the statistical retention rate within the Amish church was relatively high. However, I have to admit that I was shocked to learn that 80-90% of Amish teens end up becoming baptized within the Amish faith (Mazie 2005). I was curious; I assumed that given the choice, most would lean towards a life of modern technology and other luxuries but the statistics show that most Amish prefer a life of simplicity. Thus the question I wished to answer was: What would make one choose a life with no electricity or any other modern luxury over a 21st century world of seemingly endless technological advantages? Before visiting Holmes County, I found these numbers to be unbelievable but after interviewing youth and their families of both Old and New Order Amish these statistics no longer seem surprising.

Methodology and Methods of Assessment

To preface this section, I would like to add that I owe so much to my family for putting forth the effort to helping me find Amish families and individuals to interview. My family in Ohio has built friendships with Amish families for over a decade and I am grateful that they allowed me to reap the benefits of their connections. If it were not for my familial connection into the Amish community I doubt that I would have gotten past the cultural barrier to perform successful fieldwork.

Prior to my visits to the Amish community, I researched several books and academic papers written about the Amish and their practices. I had taken a particular interest in youth practices within the Amish culture, but I also considered topics such as gender equalities and inequalities within the Amish culture and abuse support within the Amish community. I decided to research the rite of passage, commonly known as *rumspringa,* within the Amish youth without knowing details of the distinctions between factions of the Amish church.

After a few hours spent with my host family, I realized that *Ordnungs* (or doctrines of different orders) varied greatly within the Amish culture and not every affiliation practiced the conventional perception of *rumspringa.* After making myself comfortable getting to know the a few of the girls from my host family, I asked them if they were still in their *rumspringa* years and when they thought they might 'join church.' One replied with a laugh and shook her head "No, we don't do that here."

My primary location of study, Ohio's Holmes County, is one of the largest Amish populations in the country. The greater Holmes area includes popular tourist stops such as Berlin and Walnut Creek, though I spend the majority of my time with a family on the

outskirts of Millersburg, Ohio. I had an incredibly unique opportunity to live with an Amish family for five days. The rest of my two-week stay was spent traveling to different families in the area with my grandfather. During my time in Ohio, I conducted both formal and informal interviews with approximately 25 Amish men and women that were both recorded and written. The majority of my research was completed through participant observations. I made every effort to follow my host family's schedule and enrich myself in the Amish culture.

I would like to introduce my host family as the Yoders. Although the identity of my host family is kept confidential (as are all of my informants' identities), Yoder is the most common surname in Amish communities, much like 'Smith' in the non-Amish mainstream society. There is a running joke with 'English' (or non-Amish) people that work closely with the Amish; it involves this surname with a particularly lucrative side job for many non-Amish residents in Holmes County. Often co-workers will drive their fellow Amish employees to and from work as a favor, but most charge for gas money, and more claim to be somewhat of an Amish cab driver as a secondary job. This occupation is cleverly coined as a "Yoder Toter," toting the Yoders. I like this joke; therefore my host family will be known as the Yoders.

The Yoders' day starts at 4:30 a.m. to milk the cows (as they were too polite to wake me up that early, I did not participate in the morning milking). After morning chores are completed, Daniel (the father), Lila (the mother), Leia (who is seventeen), and Heather (the youngest at fourteen) take a two to three hour nap on the many couches downstairs. The family eats breakfast and then starts the day. Kaleb (the eldest boy at twenty-five), Nicholas (the second oldest at twenty-two) and Kellie (the oldest girl at

twenty) leave for their outside jobs. The rest of the family goes about completing any farm work that is required for the day.

During my stay, I ate breakfast (admittedly a little later than the rest of the family) and then proceeded to help with any house hold chores like washing the dishes left over from breakfast, sweeping the floors, and folding laundry. Heather, Kitty (who is eighteen), Leia, and I helped to prepare lunch around 11:00 a.m. After lunch at noon, we either read or took a quick nap before returning to farm work. At 4:30 p.m. we returned to the barn to milk the cows and "chore" (an Amish verb that means 'to do chores'). The many horses and cows had to be fed; cow dung had to removed from the barn; and the broiler chicken house had to be walked through. After dinner the older kids and I participated in church youth group activities. The first night of my stay, I rode with Kellie and Leia to the youth Bible studies. It was also the first night I donned an Amish outfit and the first time I tripped over the hems of my long dress.

Through my observations and participation in the Amish culture, I worked on recognizing the distinctions in the Amish community. Although it may be difficult for an English person that is unfamiliar with the Amish lifestyle to perceive, these differences are seen to be conspicuous in the Amish community. One Amish youth I spoke with told me that he thought there were *huge* differences between the Old Order (his affiliation) and the New Order. From an etic perspective, the Amish appear to be extremely homogenous. Although the culture as a whole attempts to be homogenous for the sake of a dependence on community and faith, individual families as well as individual orders make variations in their lifestyles to follow the path that they perceive to be the most compatible with God, their family, and their community.

During my stay with the Yoders, I not only participated in their day-to-day life on the farm but also attempted to gain an emic perspective of life in the New Order Amish community. I attended church singings, Bible devotions, youth gatherings, church services, and even a wedding in order to immerse myself into the Amish culture. Although I had less time to participate in the same kinds of activities with the families of the Old Order, I had many conversations with Old Order youths and their parents. My grandfather and I attended a bonfire thrown by an Old Order family and I sat in on an Amish schoolhouse class taught by an Old Order teacher.

ON DRESSES AND MANNERS

My greatest fear on interacting with an Amish community was that I would be judged for my English ways. At first, I tried really hard not to make a really strong "English" presence, but at the same time, I found it difficult to blend in. After a day or so, I realized how prevalent the English world is in an Amish person's life, which made it a little easier for me to be myself. I remember feeling really awful about my initial fears because I was not judged at all, in fact, the Yoders were just as curious about me as I was about them. That is not to say that our relationship was merely mutualistic- I would say that we, at the very least, were all good friends by the end of my stay! That is why, when I tell this story, I do so with a note of humor.

The girls seemed excited to dress me in Amish clothing on the evening that I arrived; so I absolutely took up their offer to make me look Amish. I dressed in Amish garb 3 times within the 5 days that I stayed with the Yoders. I remember the first night that I arrived, the girls immediately went to work on finding me a suitable option for a dress. I admit that I was quite ambivalent on finding the perfect fit (after all, I was not too

sure of what a good fit was at this point in my stay). Of all the four girls in the house, I ended up adorning complements of each in my Amish dress. I remember a former dress of Leia's that fit me the best. I wore Kellie's covering, Kitty's socks, and Heather's shoes. The girls took great care into making sure everything fit me properly; Kellie even went so far as to tighten the elastic band around my arms so that it fit snugly as a three-quarter-length sleeve.

As a jean wearer, I found the Amish dress to be really breezy (in a good way). During the hottest summer months, I was more comfortable in the long Amish dress than I was in my tee-shirt and jeans. I did, however, find it extremely difficult to be productive in a long dress; I helped out on the farm and around the house in my own English clothing.

Because I am a clumsy person, I found that I am not as mobile as every other Amish girl in a long dress. On one instance, after Sunday church, I offered to pull out the buggy parked in a grassy embankment when Kitty announced that she was going to saddle up the horse. As I tried to pull the buggy from where it was parked, (buggies are deceivingly heavy, by the way), I tripped on the hem of my dress and fell flat on my derrière. Because this almost happens daily for me, I expected there to be some giggling as I dusted myself off. However, there was only silence. Nicholas immediately hurried over to help me take the buggy out, but there was no suppressed laughter in his face-or in anyone else's. That is, until Heather came around Kitty and the horse giggling, "I saw that!"

When we arrived home, I admitted how embarrassed I was that I tripped on my dress and fell right on my butt. Kitty, Leia, and Heather looked at me with concern and

assured me not to think anything of it, “Everyone wanted to be polite; that’s why they didn’t laugh.” Upon having this information I could not help but laugh out loud. I explained that in my own, English setting, silence might be taken negatively-perhaps as judgment-and that openly laughing when a person falls (and does not hurt themself) is almost welcomed. I explained that when people laugh when I make a mistake, it is almost like they are laughing with me; it makes it easier for me to laugh at myself and dismiss my embarrassment. I am sure they thought this was strange, but at least they laughed when I mimicked myself falling and then Nicholas rushing over-in all seriousness- to help me out.

ON DINING

I was particularly worried about dining with my host family because I am an incredibly picky-eater. It seems like an irrational anxiety to have but many forget that there are a lot of possible missteps that one can make when sharing a meal, especially in a foreign environment. For me, this fear is applicable; I typically have to worry about offending another party when I choose not to eat what is prepared (unfortunately, I am also terrible at hiding facial expressions). I went in with the mind set that I must *not* offend my host family and show my gratitude by eating everything on my plate. The phrase: When in Rome, do as the Romans, seemed befitting for this situation.

I watched everyone else load his/her plates before I took any food for myself. Another oddity that I can admit to is that I am very adamant on keeping my foods from touching one another. I mention this because, as I was watching everyone else, I noticed that no one seemed to mind the overlapping of foodstuffs. In fact, a few members of the Yoder family mixed their food together. I had absolutely no issues with eating the food

that was on my plate (it was delicious to say the least) but I could not overcome barricading each separate serving of food. I was embarrassed at my meticulous eating methods but I made up for it by taking second helpings and finishing what was on my plate. I will not, however, state that I 'cleaned' my plate as I did not clean my plate at all. I mention this because everyone at the table (excluding me) literally cleaned their plates. All remnant food scraps were scraped from plates so that absolutely nothing went to waste. I initially attributed this act to living on a farm (my mother occasionally catches my father, who also grew up near farm country, licking his plate clean) because my grandparents used to encourage my brother and I to clean our plates so that no hard work that was put into making a dish was wasted. A few days later, I was lucky to attend an Amish wedding. At the reception dinner I noticed plate scraping throughout the large dining facility. As not all Amish are farmers, I now understand the importance of not being wasteful.

On the other end of the spectrum, I cooked my host family dinner one night during my stay. I remember someone joking to me that the Amish do not care for extra salt on meals. I dismissed this initially, but I do not remember there being any salt and peppershakers on the kitchen table. Whether that is here or there, I am not sure; howbeit, I made a college savvy recipe that is a favorite to my boyfriend and me. We call it 'ranch chicken,' and it is *salty.* I am not sure if anyone really liked what I made (if they did not, they were good at hiding it). I asked one of the boys, Kaleb, what he thought of my cooking and he said something along the lines of, "I like it. Either way it doesn't matter. It's just food and it's all going to the same place." I guess one could say that I was dealt the same hand of cards.

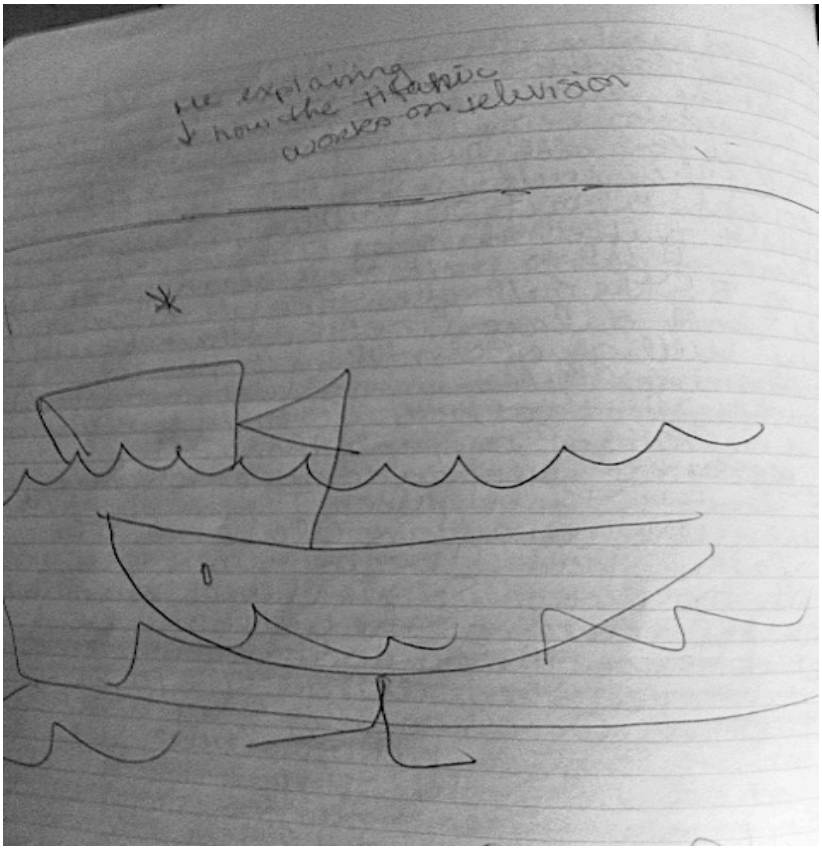
ON CELINE DION AND GREEN SCREENS

The Yoders have a magnificent clock in their dining room that, upon the hour, splits and spins while it plays various tunes. Heather called it a rhythm clock. When I first arrived at the Yoder farm, Heather took me to the *dawdy* house across the driveway to meet her grandparents. While I became acquainted with Ethel and the bishop, Heather brought a small version of a rhythm clock to show me. She was excited to show me how it worked and what music it played. I was at first confused at her excitement before remembering that the Amish have no radios, CD players, or iPods. The rhythm clock is a pleasant device that plays soft music every hour. I see it as a radio alarm clock.

One morning, while I was upstairs brushing my teeth, I heard the melody of Celine Dion's 'My Heart Will Go On.' I was confused because I did not remember seeing a piano so I went downstairs to look around for one. I laughed when I noticed the rhythm clock spinning to the tune. I asked Lila, Kitty, Leia, and Heather if they knew the song. They shook their heads while I chuckled and explained that 'My Heart Will Go On' was one of the most popular songs of my generation. I told them that I had brought my iPod with me and asked if they wanted to listen to it. We all sat down at the kitchen table while each of them listened to Celine Dion. Lila shrugged, "I can sort of hear it."

I told them that it was the theme song of one of the highest grossing films of all time, James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997). Lila said that she remembered seeing posters for the movie, but the historical sinking of the *RMS Titanic* is known in the Amish community. I told them about the movie and how the director modeled the ship after pictures of its sister *RMS Olympic* and the setting on the film was uncanny from the actual ship. Lila was curious about how the sinking of the *Titanic* was filmed. She

wondered how the actors played their parts to a violent end. I told her that a green screen probably made the scenery onset possible. I have in my field notes, where I tried to explain a green screen and how computer animation can make something look real without it actually happening. I did a poor job but I think I conveyed the idea successfully.



ON HAIR

Amish girls never cut their hair following rules set in the Bible. Although it is difficult to tell because Amish women always wear their long hair in a tight, covered bun, the length of an Amish girl's hair typically reaches her thighs. It never occurred to me that Lila, Heather, Leia, Kellie, and Kitty had long, flowing hair underneath their head coverings until Lila was brushing Heather's long blonde hair out after she had washed it (it only takes Heather 15 minutes to wash her-almost- knee length hair).

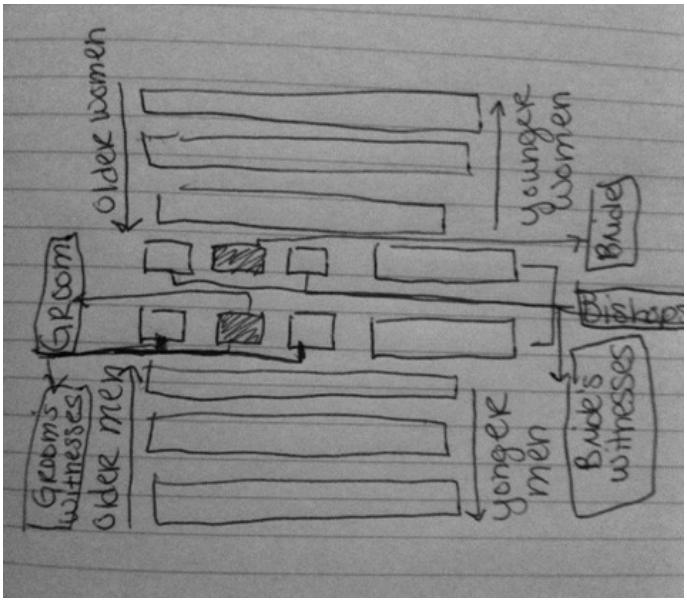
One afternoon, I had mentioned that I knew how to French braid hair. The girls got excited and gathered around the kitchen table to watch me braid Heather's hair. Lila brushes out the ends while I attempted to braid from the crown. After I finished, I ran up to the bedroom in which I was staying to grab my camera because one could have jumped rope with Heather's long braid. I tried to set it in a bun so that she might be able to fit her covering over it for church the next morning. Lila laughed, "Oh! What would the bishop think?"

Later that evening I asked Leia if I could also French braid her chestnut hair. I had an idea of what it would look like if I braided her hair into pigtails and then twisted them up into two buns. On a side note, Leia looks very much like a certain Star Wars character with braided hair donned like earmuffs (hence her alias). I was quite pleased with my self because I made a Princess Leia doppelganger. No one, except Daniel, had ever heard of *Star Wars* but we all had a great laugh anyway.

ON FORMAL OCCASIONS

On many Amish farms, the parents of either the father of the household or the mother of the household (usually it is the family that originally owned the farm) live in a small house (known as a 'dawdy' house- 'dawdy' being the term for 'Grandpa') adjacent to the main family home. The bishop and his wife Ethel (Daniel's parents) occupy the Yoder's *dawdy* house. One day, while I was assisting Lila in 'throwing hay,' Ethel approached Lila and they had a small conversation in *Deitsch* (or Pennsylvania Dutch) before Lila turned and asked me if I would like to go to an Amish wedding. I jumped at the chance to witness the unique marriage rites that take place between an Amish man and his bride.

I woke up around 6:00 a.m. to make myself ready for the wedding. I actually made it to breakfast (the Yoders were too kind and never wanted to wake me up because their day starts early). It was still dark outside when I met the bishop and Ethel by the buggy garage. It was a 50-minute ride to barn in which the wedding would be taking place. I had to ride on Ethel's lap for most of the ride because we rode in a two-seat buggy (there was no sense in taking a larger buggy as there were only three of us). Once we got to the barn, I followed Ethel to stand with all of the women lined up outside of the venue. I leaned up against a long wooden table lined with black bonnets while each woman shook hands and kissed one another on the cheek before filing into the barn. The set up inside is hard to describe, so I sketched it in my field notes:



Backless, wooden benches lined either side of the two rows of three chairs, which were centered in the middle. Men sat facing one direction while women faced the other. The bride and groom each have two witnesses (usually siblings but sometimes family friends) whom they sat in between. Older women sat in the front while younger women sat in the back. Older men also sat in the front while younger men sat in the back. The

bishop and elders sat alongside the witnesses of both parties. The bride and her two witnesses all wore the same color blue dress (blue is a popular color for brides), with white aprons and black head coverings. The groom in his two witnesses wore straight black, buttonless jackets with no collars, and no hats. Usually the bride and groom's sisters will all wear one color, and the mothers of the bride and groom and all of their sisters will wear another color. This was the case for the wedding I attended. The sisters all wore a maroon while the mothers and their sisters wore a light green.

Because I had no idea what I was doing or with whom I should sit, I sat next to Ethel near the front. Once we were all seated, the congregation started signing; one person (usually a bishop or an elder) will start the chant and the rest of the men will join in. These hymns are sung for quite some time until the bishops walk into the building followed by the bridal party. Once the couple was seated men stood up to talk in Pennsylvania Dutch. I have to admit, I nodded off for a bit but when I jolted awake, everyone around me was in tears. Because I was eager to fit in, I tried to mimic the touched look on everyone else's face. Ethel whispered to me that the father of the bride had just told a touching story. The ceremony lasted for three hours.

After the ceremony was over, the guests walked over to a barn next door that was moderately decorated. Ethel and I waited outside for sometime socializing with others before going in. I was perplexed to find that everyone at the wedding approached me in English, and not in Pennsylvania Dutch. I was so frustrated that I had no idea why I looked 'English' and not Amish (I always ask the Yoders why everyone knows I am English and they always reply, "they just know"). Ethel and I went in to sit at one of the extra-long wooden tables. We first said grace (in English) and sung "Amazing Grace"

before large quantities of food were passed around. We had family styled garden salad, mashed potatoes and gravy, beef brisket, corn, bread, and ice cream.

I recognized a few of the Yoder girls' friends serving the meal. Ethel told me that the youth serve the meal to the guests and then when everyone is finished, younger married couples serve the meal to the youth. I read something in an article that talked about the youth mingling after wedding parties. Ethel said that typically they are allowed to chat with one another and meet new people during this time.

Literature Review: Other Studies of the Amish

Although my family has many Amish friends, prior to this study, I have never known much about Amish culture. Before my stay in Holmes County, Ohio- I read as much as I could on Amish societies. The most reliable sources of information that I have come across during my research are the works by sociologist Charles E. Hurst and anthropologist David L. McConnell of Ohio's College of Wooster, both of whom worked directly with Amish families in Holmes County, Ohio. In fact, the bishop and elder of the Yoders church (who also happens to be Daniel's father) was mentioned in the credits of Hurst and McConnell's 2010 *An Amish Paradox: Diversity and Change in the World's Largest Amish Community.*

Hurst and McConnell's 2010 book gave me most of the background information about the Holmes County settlement. The authors tackle one of the bigger issues in modern Amish communities: compromising and regulating restrictions on technology in order to survive the fast pace "English" surroundings. I finished reading the book after returning from Holmes County, but I found the information to match what I had learned during my stay. Hurst and McConnell (2010) provide an in-depth description as well as

the history of the many Orders of the Amish church completed with a linear chart. I found this incredibly helpful while gathering my thoughts as, prior to my trip to Ohio, I had no idea that there were different factions within the Amish church. The book also goes into detail of which Orders approve of the advancement of some technologies, which Orders agree with shunning, and who is allowed to participate in *rumspringa.*

On the cover of Hurst and McConnell's 2010 book is a photo of a young Amish girl standing by a fence, chatting on a cellular phone. When I showed my copy of the book to Heather (the youngest of the Yoder children) she exclaimed that she had heard that this girl on the cover found Hurst and McConnell's book in a local book store, saw that it was her face on the cover, and felt as though she was a star. When I told this story to my Uncle Kenny, he noted (a little darkly), "I'm sure her parents were thrilled to see her on the cover of a book."

Hurst and McConnell have written a number of other articles on the same population of Amish settlements. One, "No Rip Van-Winkles' Here: Amish Education since Wisconsin v Yoder," (McConnell & Hurst 2006) provided me with stories that share similar information on the differences in Amish Orders. Although the article was mainly focused on the changes in Amish primary education, it provided valuable information on the fine differences of opinions between the largest Old Order Amish compared with many other factions.

I also read a detailed blog (accessed 2012) by a former Old Order Amish woman and a popular author, Saloma Furlong. Her accounts of her Amish life growing up gave me the best emic perspective preceding my visit to Holmes County. Although Furlong had a negative experience in the Amish faith, she notes that she has recently come to

grips with her past Amish life. In her blog, there is section dedicated to frequently asked questions. I used this section to answer a few questions of my own and to gain a much-needed perspective on the pros and cons of being Amish.

The work that I am most eager to discuss is that of political scientist Steven V. Mazie. His article, "Consenting Adults? Amish *Rumspringa* and the Quandary of Exit in Liberalism" (2005) compares the Amish requirement that one must be willing to submit him/herself to God and the Amish way of life to that of free choice in the idea of liberalism. He essentially questions the freedom of consent to be baptized in the Amish faith.

Mazie (2005) takes a modern look at John Locke's written works on religion and political membership and compares this idea of liberalism to the Amish act of *rumspringa.* He references John Locke's famous 1689 thoughts in the very beginning of the paper, "*Nobody is born a member of any Church,"* and *"[A] child is born a subject of no country or government,"* (Mazie 2005:746). He notes that he believes Locke's accounts are false in today's setting. He then challenges Locke's thoughts by stating that people are automatically born into/associated with a nation as well as a religion depending on where and to whom they are born (Mazie 2005:746). His purpose for establishing this connection is to ask whether or not the Amish (and other illiberal groups) compare to Locke's idea of liberalism. The author touches on liberalism in illiberal societies (he uses the Amish and some Native American communities as examples). In his paper, Mazie (2005) asks whether or not the individuals that belong to illiberal groups, who have some liberal aspects, have a viable exit option in order for them to claim that they do have liberal traits.

According to the author, the Amish believe that they are giving their youth 'free choice' by allowing them to explore the outside "English" world and by turning a blind eye to any debaucheries that may result in this experimentation (Mazie 2005). Mazie argues that Amish teens are (in reality) not given the 'free' choice to become Amish or to live a mainstream American life because they are too uneducated about the outside world to make an informed decision to choose a path. Pulling from books such as Tom Shachtman's 2005 *Rumspringa: to be or not to be Amish* and Lucy Walker's 2002 documentary *The Devil's Playground,* Mazie questions whether or not the majority of the Amish teens that become baptized are happy with living an Amish life (Mazie 2005:755). In his conclusion, he suggests that the Amish church make fundamental changes in education, such as having children stay in school past the age of 14, teaching gender equality, and encouraging critical thought in religious dogma (Mazie 2005:755). As I will discuss later in this paper, I disagree with Mazie's paper and his generalization of Amish *rumspringa.*

Findings and Discussion

I loaned my copy of Steven V. Mazie's "Consenting Adults? Amish *Rumspringa* and the Quandary of Exit Liberalism" (2005) to the Yoders. I had explained to them that I was initially confused when I first read this article because it did not depict the Amish world that I had encountered while staying with them. Daniel, who is an extremely well-read individual and a world traveler, in addition to being a savvy dairy farmer, does not fit the description of a yokel with pitchfork and a sub par education, which Mazie's article seems to imply. I imagine he would have been slightly offended by the picture Mazie paints in saying that the Amish "…lack adequate knowledge of the possibilities of

modern life available to them and therefore are ill equipped to distinguish the 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures of life outside the farm" (Mazie 2005:752).

JUMPING ON THE BANDWAGON AND SENSATIONALIZING THE AMISH

Although I am not sure whether or not Steven V. Mazie has had any interactions with the Amish community, his article insinuates that his research is heavily weighted on previous studies by other authors. I find it problematic that his descriptions of the Amish community suggest a society of ignorant, overzealous, religious fanatics when he pulls his evidence from exaggerated documentaries like *The Devil's Playground* (Walker 2002). Through my own research, I found my informants to be kind, caring, well-spoken, and intelligent.

As stated earlier in the paper, Mazie is a political scientist and his primary concern in "Consenting Adults: Amish *Rumspringa* and the Quandary of Exit in Liberalism" (2005) is to compare *rumspringa*, a liberal aspect of a supposedly conservative community, to John Locke's written works on liberalism. He concludes his paper by making note that Amish teens do not have *real* freedom of choice because of the lack of education they have on the outside world. He states, "[the] 'English' world to which the Amish kids are introduced is a sharply limited one…[They] become acquainted with non-Amish life in a very particular setting: the materialist, consumerist culture of middle America, spiced with alcohol, drugs, and sex" (Mazie 2005:752). To make a note, Mazie makes a good point when bringing up that many Amish teens only have a survey of the mainstream American lifestyle. He suggests teens are drawn to the allure of material goods and socializing in a way that they were never able to do before (Mazie

2005). He implies that although material goods are a large part of the American lifestyle, life outside the Amish community has much more to offer than just consumer materials and risky behavior. Although Mazie makes a good point, many Amish see enough of the outside world to know more than what is on the surface.

THE REALITY OF AMISH PARTIES

A few of the Old Order Amish teens who I spoke with said that they do enjoy a good party; however, it is usually unlike the drug fueled "mega-fetes in the cornfield drawing hundreds, even thousands of Amish teens from states near and far for drinking, dancing, loud music, and often drugs" (Mazie 2005:749). A young, Old Order Amish boy, still in his *rumspringa* years, noted that his favorite part of 'running around' is the music. He told me that he plays in a Christian rock band and often performs at parties. I spent some time with him and his family at a campfire on their farm. He played guitar alongside his Amish mother, who played the harmonica, while the rest of us ate s'mores around the fire. Although he talked about the partying with which he is involved, it did not seem out of the ordinary for a college-aged teen, from my perspective. He did note that if one wanted to find marijuana at a party, it could be found but teens are more likely to drink beer and dance than to smoke cannabis.

Another Old Order girl with whom I spoke also said she enjoys the music that she is allowed to listen to during her *rumspringa* time. She told me that she loves country music and that her favorite artist is Brad Paisley, who she actually got to meet. She exclaimed, "It was one of the highlights of my life!" She also plays in a country band with two of her guy friends and they sometimes perform at parties in the area. She told me that she used to go to parties, drink beer, dance, and listen to rap music but now that

she has a boyfriend she parties less frequently. She also said that hook-ups sometimes happen at parties but that sexual intercourse is typically out of the picture. If sex happens, condoms are used.

WHY MAZIE'S ARTICLE IS PROBLEMATIC

Mazie's mass generalizations, on a population that he may not fully understand, provide an inaccurate explanation to a question that requires a much deeper cultural analysis than the one that he has attempted. He assumes that Amish teens are inadequately equipped to lead a fulfilling life in the mainstream American world and that they must, as a result, return to their Amish roots. Mazie uses this explanation in order to account for the high retention rate within the Amish church.

The story of young man with whom I had the pleasure of talking makes Mazie's assumptions that Amish teens are ill-equipped to live a life outside of the Amish community null and void. Matthew Weaver finished his Amish schooling at the eighth grade level like all of his peers. After deciding to join a Mennonite (non-Amish but still Anabaptist) church when he was 20, he visited Costa Rica on a mission trip. He worked with some of the medical aid in the developing nation and was inspired to obtain a medical degree. It is not unheard of for an unbaptized Amish teen to be accepted into a college or a university but it is difficult to do well on the GED without a high school education. Not only did Matthew get into college, but he also passed the MCATs. He is currently a medical student at Ohio State University in Columbus working his way to be an oncologist.

If Matthew can prove without a doubt that he is eligible for a medical degree, then there are many unbaptized Amish teens who are capable of living a fulfilling life in a

world outside of their own. Being unfit for a non-Amish life style is not the reason for a high retention rate of teens within the Amish church. Mazie fails to delve deeper into the issue of a high baptismal rate among Amish teens and assumes that they are ill equipped and therefore incapable of living outside the Amish community. Perhaps this query can be answered from a different perspective.

BRINGING PIERRE BOURDIEU INTO THE EQUATION

When I gave the Yoders' a copy of Mazie's article, Daniel made a valid claim in saying that the author does not mention the heart of the Amish community: God. Mazie does not consider the most vital part of Amish life into the issue of high retention rates. To the Amish, God creates the warmth and love that binds families and friends together. At the very least, a strong relationship with God is the tie that brings Amish of every *Ordnung* together.

Christianity creates a solid ground for the Amish communities. It is something that is displayed in all aspects of their day-to-day lives and is something with which they are comfortable and confident. Amish teens may be eager to try something new and therefore enjoy some aspects of a lifestyle that they have never been able to live. However, when it comes down to the everyday life of an "English" person, one may start to feel uncomfortable. What is fulfilling to one is not necessarily something that would be fulfilling to another. For this reason, I argue that Pierre Bourdieu's idea of *habitus* (1994) is applicable to the lives of Amish youth and the important decision that they must make.

To define the idea of *habitus,* I must first explain the idea of *doxa* (Bourdieu 1994). The concept of *doxa,* as Bourdieu so heavily puts it, is that they are the "systems of classification which reproduce…the objective classes…[and] make their specific

contribution to the reproduction of the power relations of which they are the product..." (Bourdieu 1994:160). I understand *doxa* as a 'social bubble'- a culture within a social construct that the people do not recognize because it is something that is so ingrained in their culture. One could also call *doxa* a cultural norm (Bourdieu 1994). For example, I have a specific routine in the morning. I wake up, I eat, I play my music loudly while I sing in the shower, I blow dry my hair, and I pick out an outfit before I put on my make-up. This is something I do every morning. I do not necessarily think about what I am doing and for what reason I do it. It is just something I do every morning because it is something that I have always done every morning. *Doxa* is a life routine that is not realized because it is part of a cultural act that is done on a regular basis.

When one's *doxa* is something done within a population it can be called *habitus* (Bourdieu 1994). To quote Bourdieu, "Schemes of thought and perception can produce the objectivity that they do produce only by producing misrecognition of the limits of the cognition that they make possible, thereby founding immediate adherence, in the doxic mode, to the world of tradition experienced as a "natural world" and taken for granted" (Bourdieu 1994:160). I understand Bourdieu's explanation to mean that perception is something that is limited to the realm in which we live. People see this realm as 'natural' because it is something that is so embedded in their culture that they accept it as a daily part of life.

Everyone perceives his/her 'social bubble' as natural because it is what he/she knows. That is not to say that he/she knows nothing else, but rather it is something that feels comfortable. For example, American children in primary school usually "Pledge Allegiance." I never listened or understood the words of the "Pledge of Allegiance" until

I was in college because it was something I said every single morning for more than twelve years. In essence, *habitus* is a way of being, acting, and living in the body that is not consciously followed; it is absorbed by growing up and living in a particular culture (White 2012).

Bourdieu also postulates that people with a similar *habitus* are more comfortable within their surroundings: "In the determinate social formation, the stabler the objective structures and the more fully they reproduce themselves in the agents' dispositions, the greater the extent of the field of doxa of that which is taken for granted" (Bourdieu 1994:161). The social formation is a product of itself. The more stable the formation is- meaning the more people within the formation that have the same ideas, live a similar way, and agree with one another- the more likely it is going to stay in that state- or in that "*doxic* mode." The greater the "*doxic* mode" of the formation, the less people know about or are comfortable with other social formations and perspectives.

Such is the case for Amish youths. I argue that one might be curious to go outside a 'social bubble' but his/her own 'social bubble' is what is most comfortable. Amish teens who are comfortable and happy with their surroundings are more likely to continue to live in that surrounding. Although parts of "English" life may be enticing for some, few might find the *habitus* of a conventional "English" lifestyle to be more satisfying than their own. For this reason, I argue that the high retention rate of youths within the Amish church is not a cause of being inadequate for the mainstream American lifestyle, but rather a matter of comfort.

Conclusions

Although I was, at first, surprised to know that the Amish church maintains an 80-90% retention rate (Mazie 2005), I now see this statistic as less astounding. Old Order Amish believe that *rumspringa* is a good way to experience the alternative lifestyle. Through participating in 'English' dress and modern technology, youths believe they are able to better mingle with their peers and foster an identity outside of the Amish church in order to make a sound decision on whether or not to continue living life as a member of the Amish church and lifestyle. New Order Amish see *rumspringa* as something that compromises the integrity of the Bible and alienates oneself from God and the family. They advise that it is better to find an identity in God first by joining the church and then pursue a husband/wife.

Although the New Order Amish do not necessarily get the same taste of the outside world that the Old Order youths get, they still spend time socializing with friends and having a good time. Amish orders, though diverse, are built off of one common ground: Christianity. Whatever the mode of transition to adulthood, whether it is participating in *rumspringa* or obstaining, the Amish church as a whole seems to be a desired life for many Amish teens.

Despite the fact that Amish schooling ends at the eighth grade level and the community as a whole is sheltered, Amish youths are not rendered the capability of making an informed decision about their future. Some authors believe that the Amish are not really given the free choice to be baptized into the church due to the lack of education. Because of a sheltered life, it is believed that Amish youths only experience what is on the surface (parties, jeans, cars, technology) of an alternate culture and

therefore do not have the ability to freely consent to being baptized in the Amish church. It is postulated that the inability to lead a fulfilling life outside the Amish community due to a lack of education accounts for a high retention rate within the Amish church.

I argue that Pierre Bourdieu's idea of *habitus* (1994) has more to do with the 80-90% retention rate within the Amish church than a lack of education. One's *habitus* is defined as the unrealized social and cultural norm in which one lives a daily life. Amish youths have a very different *habitus* compared to that of people living outside the Amish community. Although an alternative lifestyle may seem more attractive on the surface, the every day sense of 'normalness' may be unsatisfactory. I fully believe Amish youths return to their Amish roots because they are *comfortable* within their community and not because they are ill-equipped to fend for themselves in the 'English' world.

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