

**OLD ORDER AMISH IN OKLAHOMA & KANSAS: RURAL TRADITION IN URBAN SOCIETY****William E Thompson, Emporia State University, Kansas****INTRODUCTION**

In the past 190 years, U.S. census data demonstrate a major shift from a predominantly rural society to a predominantly urban society. The 1790 Census indicated that 95 percent of the nation's workers were engaged in agriculture, while the 1970 census indicated that only 5 percent were engaged in agriculture. This shift represents much more than a change in residential and occupational patterns in the United States. It represents a dramatic change in the attitudes, values, norms, beliefs, lifestyles, and overall culture of the people.

A theoretical framework often used to analyze the impact on a society which undergoes such a change is provided by Toennies' (1887) *gemeinschaft-gesellschaft* continuum. Toennies' conceptual scheme suggests that the structural changes experienced by a society in the urbanization and industrialization process helps to bring about an accompanying change in the nature of social relations and interaction. Contemporary social science literature is replete with examples of how the shift from a rural and agrarian society to an urban and industrial society has brought about emphasis on social roles, secondary relations, bureaucratic institutions, depersonalization and dehumanization.

However, not all Americans have surrendered to the urban-industrial conversion. *Gemeinschaft* type communities characterized by primary relations, fact-to-face interaction, and informal social control mechanisms still exist to some extent in rural and small-town America. Perhaps the perpetuation of traditional rural culture and lifestyle characteristic of the *gemeinschaft* community is nowhere better preserved than in the Old Order Amish communities of Kansas and Oklahoma.

**FOCUS OF THIS STUDY**

These Old Order Amish communities have battled the national trend toward urbanization and industrialization in an attempt to preserve a rural agrarian culture compatible with their religious beliefs.

I will apply the symbolic interactionist perspective to demonstrate how the Old Order Amish of Kansas and Oklahoma create their own sense of social reality. Rather than conclude that external forces such as industrialization and urbanization define social structure, as suggested by Toennies, I contend that through day-to-day interaction among themselves, the Old Order Amish create their own sense of social structure. The members of these communities phenomenologically create their own social construction of reality. By creating, defining, manipulating, and redefining a multitude of social and cultural symbols, the Old Order Amish perpetuate a social world that is meaningful to them. They use the nature of their day-to-day interaction to insure that they are not overcome by urbanization, industrialization, and technology.

**THE COMMUNITIES**

The two Old Order Amish communities in this study have very similar histories. Both were established at the turn of the century during the "fourth wave" of Old Order Amish diffusion and growth patterns (Crowley 1978). Young families from the Old Order Amish settlements in the Pennsylvania area moved westward to alleviate some of the problems of overcrowding and lack of available farm lands in the east, in order to establish new communities west of the Mississippi River in Kansas and Oklahoma. Both communities grew slowly through subsequent migration and natural increase. The Kansas community is divided into two church districts consisting of about 20 families each, with a total population of just over 300 people. The Oklahoma community is slightly smaller, and is also divided into two church districts with about 35 families, totaling just over 250 people.

Members of the Kansas and Oklahoma communities maintain ties with the Old Order Amish communities back east, both literally and symbolically. Virtually all of the families in these two western communities have relatives and close friends in the Amish communities of Ohio and Pennsylvania. Written correspondence is continuous, and occasionally,

the Kansas and Oklahoma Amish take trips back east to help maintain these ties. The Amish of the Kansas and Oklahoma communities also subscribe to traditional Amish publications, most of which come from Ohio and Pennsylvania. Since both Kansas and Oklahoma have other Anabaptist communities, such as Hutterites, Menonites, and Beachy Amish, members of these Old Order Amish communities feel that maintaining close ties with the traditional Old Order Amish communities of the east, especially those of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, helps to maintain their identity as Old Order Amish and distinguishes them from more modernized and more liberal Anabaptist groups. There are also meaningful links between the Old Order Amish communities of Kansas and Oklahoma which have close family relations, and maintain contact through correspondence and periodic visits.

### RESEARCH METHOD

The field methods for this study include limited participant observation, with full disclosure of the sociological research intention (Schatzman, Strauss 1973 61; Spradley 1979, 1980), and the use of selected knowledgeable informants who were members of each of the communities (Back 1960). A primary relation developed with one of the Oklahoma Amish families which proved to be an extremely valuable source of information about the community and its members.

Approximately three years of periodic visits to the Oklahoma community preceded any contact with the Kansas community. A general description of the Old Order Amish community of Oklahoma can be found in an earlier work (Thompson 1981). The primary informant in the Oklahoma community introduced me to his parents and family in the Kansas community, greatly facilitating entrance and acceptance in that community for observation and research. I made periodic visits to the Kansas community over the next two years to observe and gather data for this descriptive analysis.

### RURAL TRADITION AND OLD ORDER AMISH CULTURE

Rural tradition and Old Order Amish culture seem almost synonymous in many ways.

"If you live in any one of America's farm belt states, you are not more than a few hours from Amish farming country. Here, you can stand in the doorway to the past and witness horse-drawn plows turning up rich farm land, barn-raising, and quilting bees." (Sielinski 1981 102)

Living much like their ancestors of 200 years ago, the Old Order Amish strive to maintain and perpetuate a plain, simple agrarian lifestyle consistent with their fundamental religious beliefs (Hostetler 1980).

My analysis will concentrate on how the Old Order Amish of Kansas and Oklahoma have managed to adapt to the very different environment than that of their eastern counterparts. Yet despite these adaptations, which actually make the lifestyle of Kansas and Oklahoma Amish people vastly different from that of the eastern Amish, they symbolically redefine the meaning of this lifestyle so as to minimize and in a sense, negate those differences.

On the other hand, while it has been pointed out that the Old Order Amish attempt to maintain and perpetuate a rural lifestyle similar to the Amish of centuries past, this does not mean that they are preserving a lifestyle similar to that of non-Amish farmers of earlier centuries. A study of another Amish community in Kansas notes that the Old Order Amish are not merely living a nostalgic life as the United States was before the industrial revolution. Rather, they are living much as *their* ancestors lived then (Knight 1977). The Old Order Amish have *always* been different from their non-Amish counterparts.

Finding themselves in a pluralist society, the Old Order Amish have always tried to maintain a clearly defined sense of boundary maintenance (Knight 1977; Buck 1978). The success of this maintenance of a cultural boundary, especially among the Old Order Amish of Kansas and Oklahoma has depended largely on their ability to differentiate themselves symbolically from non-Amish rural society, and to link symbolically with the traditional Old Order Amish culture of Pennsylvania. At the same time, to survive as farmers in Kansas and Oklahoma, these people have had to alter their lifestyle, and especially their farming techniques, in order to adapt to a different environment.

### ADAPTATION & PRAGMATISM

To the sociologist, cultural adaptation usually refers to "... those aspects of culture ... that represent a society's adjustment to its physical environment and enable it to survive." (Theodorson, Theodorson 1969 96) The Old Order Amish in Kansas and Oklahoma have shown an uncanny ability to adapt to the physical environment in which they live, while they preserve the desired social and cultural environment. Old Order Amish have always viewed their ties to the land as a moral imperative to maintain and perpetuate their religious beliefs and desired lifestyle (Ericksen et al 1980). A major part of that moral imperative, and a critical aspect of maintaining their traditional culture has focused on their reluctance to incorporate modern agricultural technology into their farming techniques. In the eastern part of the United States, the Old Order Amish still rely on horse-drawn farm implements, and only the more rudimentary farm machinery (Hostetler 1980). The creeping inroads of modernity into the Amish culture has often been cited as a major problem with which the old order must cope if they are to maintain their identity and preserve their culture (Kephart 1976).

All the emphasis on preservation of culture, identity, boundaries, and simple agrarian lifestyle consistent with their religious beliefs, as a central theme in most of the literature about the Old Order Amish, tends to shift attention away from the fact that the Old Order Amish farmers are innovative, willing to try something new, and extremely pragmatic when it comes to making a living on their land. The 18th and 19th century Amish in the United States were noted for their agricultural innovations, and were among the first to practice: "stall feeding of cattle, crop rotation, meadow irrigation, and to use natural fertilizers and clover and alfalfa pastures as a means of restoring fertility to the soil!" (Kollmorgen in Nagata, 1968, cited: Stoltzfus 1973 197) Of course, in recent years with the advent of large scale capital intensive farming operations common to rural America, the Old Order Amish seem set in their ways, and unwilling to try innovative farming techniques. This is not entirely true.

The Old Order Amish farmers in the two communities in Kansas and Oklahoma understand

that the land on which they must make a living is not identical to the lush soil of the Ohio valley where many of the eastern Amish communities are located. Consequently, these western Amish farmers have developed some very pragmatic adaptive strategies to retain as much traditional Amish agrarian culture as possible, and yet make their farms reasonably productive. Horse-drawn farm implements are not feasible to till land of east central Kansas and northeastern Oklahoma. Consequently, tractors and harvest combines are used in both communities. The Amish farmers make every effort to buy older used tractors without most of the luxury options, but some find that in order to buy a tractor large enough to do the job, they must buy one which is equipped at least with power steering and hydraulic lifts for implements. While the introduction of the tractor alters traditional Amish farming practices, it is rationalized as a necessary compromise if Amish farming is to survive at all in Kansas and Oklahoma. Thus, the Amish farmers take what is generally considered a modern technological device and simply redefine it as being a necessary implement in preserving their most basic traditional value — living off the land. Consequently, what could be interpreted as an element of *major change* in Amish culture becomes redefined as being a major element of *preservation* of that culture. Likewise the use of commercial fertilizers, hybrid seeds, modern plows, combines, and a multitude of other modern farm implements are all pragmatically defined as being absolutely necessary if the Old Order Amish are to survive on their farms and maintain their "non-modern" simple agrarian lifestyle.

Perhaps electricity is one of the best examples of how the Old Order Amish in these two communities have effectively introduced modern technology for pragmatic reasons, and yet, effectively limit its use so that it can be rationalized as important to maintaining their culture. Most of the farmers in both communities own herds of dairy cows, and sell the milk. Their dairy operations are small by today's standards, and most farmers milk 30-60 cows. The Amish farmers do not have all the necessary equipment to meet the minimum standards to have their milk sell as "Grade A." Their milk is usually graded lower, and is used

in other dairy products such as cheese and butter. Even to meet the lower grade standards, the milk must be obtained under sanitary conditions and refrigerated until it can be collected by the milk trucks. This requires electric milkers and electric refrigeration tanks. The Old Order Amish have always rejected electricity and all the gadgets dependent on it for their use.

As a pragmatic compromise, the Amish farmers in these two communities use simple generators, usually homemade from spare tractor parts, to generate electricity needed for milking machines and refrigeration equipment. This is defined as being a pragmatic necessity if they are to retain their milking operations. But these same farmers steadfastly refuse to use electricity in their homes. Homes are typically lighted with kerosene oil lamps, and are heated with wood-burning stoves. Refrigerators and cookstoves in the farm home are typically operated on propane gas, and some of the homes in Oklahoma use natural gas.

Why these seeming irrational inconsistencies in allowing electricity in the Amish dairy barns, but not in the farmhouse? When asked these questions, the Amish farmers will look quite confused that the inquirer does not see the obvious logic in these actions. In the barn, the Amish farmer uses electricity only to carry out a basic function of the farming operation. Its use is temporary, sporadic, and absolutely unrelated to convenience, comfort, or avoidance of labor. Amish farmers will say that they prefer to milk all of their cows by hand, but simply cannot do it. Virtually all handmilk one or two cows for their family's supply of milk, cheese, and butter. The Amish farmers argue that when a house is wired for electricity, its use is usually constant, and the family typically becomes dependent on its use. Eventually, a lot of unnecessary and merely convenient electrical items are used. In the barn, the Amish farmer uses and *controls* the electricity; in the house, the Amish family runs the risk of becoming dependent on electricity, and hence, being *controlled* by it.

The inconsistencies in the logic of this argument may seem readily apparent to anyone who chooses to look for them. The key is that the Amish people do not choose to look for them. Rather, they look to what they see as

consistencies which apply to the introduction and use of any modern technology in the Amish community. If possible, they try to avoid the introduction and use of any technology if at all possible. If deemed impossible to reject the new technology, before any technology is allowed into the community, the implications and effects of its use are discussed by the community members. Usually, the church elders take a vote on the more controversial items.

If the introduction and use of new technology is defined as being absolutely necessary for the community, they will also make a conscientious effort to use the technology in a unique way so as to enhance and perpetuate the conventions of the Amish lifestyle. There can be no mistake in the minds of community members. They are not becoming more modern, but are using a modern technology in order to avoid becoming more modern. In this way, the members of these two Old Order Amish communities simply define the situation in such a way that the *new* becomes a means of preserving the *old* (Thomas 1931). This redefinition becomes a necessary element in the process of their construction of social reality (Berger, Luckmann 1967). While using modern farming equipment, the members of these Amish communities retain virtually all of the other significant symbols of the Old Order Amish. They drive horse-drawn buggies, dress in the traditional Amish attire, and speak German as their first language.

## CONCLUSIONS

The main thesis here is that the Old Order Amish in Kansas and Oklahoma have successfully managed to retain and perpetuate their traditional agrarian culture in an increasingly more modern, industrial, urban United States. The explanation for this success is offered in part, as being the pragmatism of the Amish farmers in their willingness to introduce change into their culture, coupled with their tremendous ability to redefine the meaning of these changes in such a way as to minimize their potentially harmful effects. Thus, what might threaten severely to weaken traditional Amish culture and lifestyle, instead serves to reinforce it. They refuse to get caught up in an urbanizing, technologizing world which would drastically alter or destroy their culture

and lifestyle, as would be inferred from the more functionalist approach suggested by Toennies. Instead, as suggested by the symbolic interactionist approach, the Old Order Amish define their social world on a day-to-day interactionist basis, both symbolically and literally, constructing a society that is meaningful to them. Not merely a static society caught up in the nostalgia of trying to live in the past, the Old Order Amish of Kansas and Oklahoma have used pragmatic adaptive strategies to survive in the present and in the future. They have managed to do this in such a way as to allow them to preserve their basic philosophy and keep their traditional culture largely intact.

Can the Old Order Amish of Kansas and Oklahoma continue to retain their identity, culture and lifestyle in the urban society which surrounds and threatens to consume them? There is a multitude of problems the members of these Old Order Amish communities must address and overcome if they are to continue to survive. However, anyone familiar with the history of the movement knows that ever since their European beginnings in the 1660's, they have continually faced, met, and overcome serious threats to their existence. With the potential threats of nuclear holocaust, large scale economic upheaval, and a variety of other possible conditions, many suggest that the entire world community is in a critical struggle for survival. Gerald Wilkinson, Director of the National Indian Youth Council put it this way:

"Now, when you talk about the destruction of the earth, you are talking about political states and social systems and psychological attitudes. You are not talking about the end of life. There will be some people left, who will learn to live again. Who will survive? People who are close to the earth, who are the custodians of the soil, who have learned from the earth's wisdom, who have learned how to survive. They will survive." (Cited, Sterner 1976 296)

Who will survive? The Old Order Amish will survive.

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