

*Interdisciplinary Journal of
Research on Religion*

Volume 15

2019

Article 2

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A Case Study of Amish Visiting Practices

Rachel E. Stein^{*}

West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia

Katie E. Corcoran[†]

West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia

Corey J. Colyer[‡]

West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia

^{*} rachel.stein@mail.wvu.edu

[†] kecorcoran@mail.wvu.edu

[‡] corey.colyer@mail.wvu.edu

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Rachel E. Stein

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Katie E. Corcoran

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Corey J. Colyer

West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia

Abstract

Frequent interaction among group members fosters affective commitment. Establishing a strong bond to the group is especially important for strict, high cost groups, and yet some such groups have beliefs that make frequent interaction difficult. We use the Old Order Amish as a case study to examine the use of visiting groups to foster interaction among the members of a non-communal, strict religious group for which regular interaction among all members is difficult. Our results indicate that the visiting group provides interaction and positive emotional experiences for the core group, the guests of the core group, and those who are visited. In addition to providing face-to-face interaction with members who are otherwise isolated from the community, the activities of the visiting group are published via a scribe report in an Amish newspaper. As such, the entire community receives information on community members and benefits from the interactions of the visiting group.

Religious groups depend on their members' commitment to survive and be successful. In particular, affective commitment—strong emotional bonds to the group—facilitates group cohesiveness, that is, members sticking together even in the face of external threats (Kanter 1972). There has been a considerable amount of research done to investigate mechanisms that generate commitment to a group (see for example Collins 2004; Corcoran 2015; Hall 1988; Hechter 1987; Lawler and Yoon 1996; Sosis 2000; Sosis and Bressler 2003; Wollschleger 2012). A core finding across studies is that frequent interaction among group members increases affective commitment through positive emotional experiences and information sharing (Collins 2004; Kanter 1972; Lawler and Yoon 1996; Markovsky and Lawler 1994).

Frequent interaction is especially vital for strict or high costs groups whose beliefs restrict the degree to which their members can participate in secular society (Iannaccone 1994; Kanter 1972). These groups must provide alternative activities for their members to substitute for missed secular opportunities (Iannaccone 1994). This is relatively easy for communal groups, since members live together, and for non-communal groups in which members can efficiently travel to activities at a central meeting place, such as a congregation. And yet, not all strict religious groups meet these conditions. Some religious groups do not have central meeting places for interaction and have strict beliefs that make travel costly, both of which factors make participation in group activities difficult. Prior research on commitment has not examined how these types of religious groups enable frequent interaction among their group members.

We investigate this using the Amish as a case study. The Amish are a part of the Anabaptist movement which began in Switzerland in 1525. The Anabaptists' disagreements with the Catholic Church, which included belief in the practice of adult baptism and keeping separation between church and state, led to the persecution of Anabaptists in Europe (Friedrich 2001; Nolt 2016). The Anabaptists left Europe and immigrated to North America in the early to mid-1700s in pursuit of religious freedom. The Amish are a strict non-communal church (Iannaccone 1994) without a central meeting place and with beliefs prohibiting certain modes of transportation. The visiting practices of the Amish represent a type of ritual that effectively facilitates interaction and information sharing under these conditions.

Like the broader literature, research on the Amish has also highlighted the importance of ritual and interaction for commitment. The regular interaction among people in the community builds informal ties of trust and respect among community members (Carey 2012; Huntington 1956). Rituals represent purposeful gatherings of people in the community and help tie families and church districts together in a common sense of destiny (Hostetler 1993). Ceremonial rituals include events such as weddings, funerals, bi-weekly worship

services, and baptism. Amish people who attend these events often take the time after each gathering to visit with friends and family. Visiting practices are a social ritual that emphasize connections and strengthen the bonds of obligation across community members (Hostetler 1993; Kraybill et al. 2013).

And yet, no one has empirically examined the visiting practices of the Amish. *The Budget*—an Amish newspaper published weekly—provides an excellent source that allows us to document the visiting practices of the Amish and will serve as our primary source of data in this study. In this paper, we focus on a specific type of visiting that has been previously unexplored, the visiting group. We show how the visiting group facilitates interaction among the Amish, overcoming the barriers of transportation, lack of a central meeting location, and non-communal rural living. We also discuss how the Amish visiting practices compare to those of other religious groups. For example, while Christian and Jewish religious leaders typically visit the sick and elderly, this differs from the Amish visiting group, which is comprised of lay members and reports its activities in a widely distributed community newspaper. We conclude by discussing how the findings have important implications for other strict, non-communal groups facing similar barriers to interaction.

COMMITMENT AND INTERACTION

Religious groups, being collectives, require their members' commitment for their long-term survival. An individual "is committed to a group or a relationship when he himself is fully invested in it, so that the maintenance of his own internal being requires behavior that supports the social order" (Kanter 1972: 66). Thus, commitment attaches an individual's self-interests to their group's interests, so that when they behave based on their own desires, they are simultaneously behaving in ways that benefit the group. Commitment thus makes the individual and their group "inextricably linked" (Kanter 1972: 66). The problem of commitment is how to transition members into such a condition, where they are fully connected to the values and goals of the group and are willing to sacrifice some of their own independence for its benefit. A key element of commitment is group cohesiveness, or "the ability of people to 'stick together,' to develop the mutual attraction and collective strength to withstand threats to the group's existence" (Kanter 1972: 67). Kanter (1972) argues that group cohesiveness is achieved through mechanisms that generate affective commitment, or strong emotional attachments to the group. Affective commitment has been found to be an important predictor of one's likelihood of behaving on behalf of a group (Ellemers et al. 1999; Ouwerkerk et al. 1999; Mael and Tetrick 1992).

Numerous studies have investigated predictors of affective commitment. Across different subfields and theoretical frameworks, studies have found that

interaction among members is vital for generating and sustaining affective commitment. Emotional attachment stems, at least in part, from participating in group activities that cause one to feel emotionally connected to the group (Kanter 1972). Regularized group interaction brings “members into meaningful contact with the collective whole, so that they experience the fact of oneness with the group and develop a ‘we-feeling’” (Kanter 1972: 73). This interaction allows group members to share information and contribute to “routine decisions”, which makes them feel all the more connected to the group (Kanter 1972: 98).

Durkheim ([1912] 1965) theorized a particular type of group interaction—collective rituals—that facilitates commitment to religious groups. He argued that when individuals participate in rituals they generate collective effervescence, an intensive, shared emotional experience that attaches participants to the group. Collins (2004) extended Durkheim’s argument and proposed that all interactions between two or more people are rituals that have the potential to produce emotional energy (i.e., the emotional by-product of experiencing collective effervescence). Because this emotional energy can only be obtained through interaction with others, it is attributed to the group in which it is experienced by the participants and serves to connect the participant to the collective. Consistent with Collins’s (2004) Interaction Ritual Theory, social psychological research has also found that the more frequent and intense the interactions are between group members, the stronger their affective attachment to the group (Markovsky and Lawler 1994). That is, “the emotions experienced individually are interpreted by actors as coming from something they share” (Lawler and Yoon 1996: 95) and are thus attributed to the group. In essence, commitment is a by-product of interaction between group members (Lawler and Yoon 1996).

Empirical studies of religious groups have further supported the connection between interaction and commitment. Intensive interaction is one of the most important factors facilitating an individual’s commitment to a religious group (Lofland and Stark 1965; Stark and Bainbridge 1980; Snow and Phillips 1980; Lofland 1997; Stark and Finke 2000). There has also been research applying and supporting Collins’s (2004) theory in the context of religious groups (Baker 2010; Corcoran 2015; Draper 2014; Heider and Warner 2010; Inbody 2015; Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly-Meyerdirk 2014; Wollschleger 2012, 2017). Taken together, the relationship between interaction and affective commitment has become axiomatic.

INTERACTION IN STRICT GROUPS

Interaction is particularly important for commitment in strict or higher cost groups. Higher cost or strict groups, such as those who intentionally separate from society to varying degrees, need to establish commitment more than groups that

remain connected to society and are thereby supported by it (Kanter 1972). When the beliefs and/or practices of a group restrict members' interactions with outsiders or increase the costs of such interaction (Abel 2005), the group must compensate for this by providing alternative activities (Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Finke 2000). As Iannaccone (1994) identifies, higher cost groups "that isolate their members socially must provide alternative social networks with ample opportunities for interaction, friendship, and status" (1204). These interactions keep members bound to the group even in the face of high costs.

Social practices and ways of organizing that affect interaction will thus ultimately affect commitment (Kanter 1972). In the case of communes, Kanter (1972) identified communal dwellings, communal dining halls, few private spaces, regular or daily group meetings, and rituals as contributing to frequent interaction among group members. Following Kanter (1972), there has been extensive research on commitment and cooperation in the context of communes (e.g., Brumann 2001; Hall 1988; Hechter 1987; Sosis 2000; Sosis and Bressler 2003; Thies 2000). However, frequent interaction with group members is easier and more cost effective when group members live together.

Collins (2004) describes how planned interaction rituals (IRs) require resources and effort for their production: "Group members have to put effort into assembling. Homes, church buildings or convention halls are important for staging an IR [...] There are costs of transportation, real property, and other material means for the production of rituals" (160). Studies of non-communal strict churches have identified weekend worship services and a variety of activities throughout the week as the primary means by which they foster frequent interaction. For example, in addition to Sunday services, Mormon congregations offer numerous activities throughout the week for group interaction including youth, women's, and men's groups, Bible studies, education classes, and volunteer opportunities (Grzymala-Busse 2012; see also Stark and Bainbridge 1980). As Stark (2001) notes, "the ward hall is not simply a church. It is a community and social center providing scouting, sports teams, teen social activities including dances, activities for singles, for young marrieds, for widows, and so on. An array of volunteer social services are also organized through the ward, such as hospital and nursing home visitation, taking meals to the ill and elderly, baby-sitting cooperatives, daycare, and more" (236). Evangelical churches offer similar activities, along with a variety of small groups that may be centered on religious matters or secular hobbies (Wellman 2008). Of course, religious groups like these have a permanent central building structure where interaction can take place (e.g., the ward hall for Mormons), and their strict beliefs do not affect their travel options.

But what about non-communal religious groups whose beliefs make travel costlier and do not support the creation of a permanent building structure for

interaction? Assembling under these conditions requires more effort and incurs higher costs than in the Mormon and Evangelical communities described above. Given this, how do these religious groups facilitate frequent interaction among group members? The Old Order Amish are an excellent case to address this question. They are a non-communal strict church (Iannaccone 1994; Grzymala-Busse 2012) without a centralized building for interaction whose strict beliefs do not allow them to drive cars. We examine the visiting practices of the Amish as an example of a social practice that institutionalizes regular interactions in an efficient manner under such constraints.

THE AMISH

The Amish live in rural areas and their homes are interspersed among those of rural residents of other faiths and traditions. Amish communities are organized by settlements and church districts. The three largest settlements¹ in the U.S. are comprised of several hundred church districts; however, the smallest settlements contain only one church district. Settlements vary in size, while church districts are intentionally kept small. Kraybill (1989) notes that the intentional pursuit of small-scale organization of communities among the Amish is unique. The church district serves as the primary functioning unit of the Amish community. Church districts are generally comprised of 20 to 40 families who live in close geographical proximity to one another (Donnermeyer 2015).

Church districts are often defined by roads, railroad tracks, creeks, mountain ranges, or other physical landmarks (Hostetler 1993; Nolt 2016). Amish families participate in the church district in which they live. Church districts hold worship services every other Sunday and rotate the location from one household to another. The size of the church district is restricted by the number of people who can be accommodated in a home. When the number of members is too large to be accommodated within a home, the church district splits (Hostetler 1993; Nolt 2016).

The geographic size of church districts varies. Districts in the Lancaster settlement encompass an area of about four square miles, while the districts in Indiana average about six square miles because the farms are larger (Hostetler 1993). The size of church districts is important, as the Amish use horse and buggy as their primary means of transportation. When a member on one side of the district travels to a home on the opposite side of the district, it can take between one and two hours to make the trip.

¹ Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Holmes County, Ohio, and Elkhart and LaGrange Counties, Indiana (Young Center 2017)

Rules about transportation are based on church doctrine. Specifically, the use of horses and buggies instead of cars slows down the pace of life and discourages individual autonomy. The ownership of cars would allow individuals the freedom to travel, which would also allow them to prioritize their own desires (Hostetler 1993; Nolt 2016). Young Amish men often obtain a driver's license and a car before joining the church; however, churches maintain strict rules about when and how cars can be used. Many churches do not allow members of the church to ride in cars with relatives when traveling to and from church. This ensures that members of the church use horses and buggies to attend church services (Hostetler 1993). While car ownership is restricted, most Amish are not prohibited from hiring a driver. Hiring a driver fits into Amish values, as this practice promotes cooperation and limits frivolous trips due to the cost incurred (Nolt 2016).

VISITING PRACTICES

The structure of Amish communities facilitates visiting practices that provide order and structure to everyday life among the Amish (Hostetler 1993). Church services are held every other week and are a full day event. The religious service lasts approximately three hours and is followed by a noon meal. Church members spend the remainder of the afternoon visiting with one another (Hostetler 1993; Nolt 2016). This visiting practice provides an opportunity for friends and families to sit together and talk with one another (Huntington 1956). Informal visiting often takes place on the "off" Sundays, those Sundays in which no church service is held (Hostetler 1993). These visits are generally unannounced, but the culture within Amish society ensures that Amish families are always prepared for visitors (Byler 2010; Hostetler 1993; Kraybill et al. 2013; Stevick 2014).

Amish children who are grown and have established their own homes often live close to their parents. The geographic proximity allows for regular visiting (Ericksen et al. 1980). Visiting practices are often instilled in young couples immediately after marriage. In some affiliations, young married couples are expected to visit with each of the families who attended their wedding. These formal visiting practices can be rather intense, with young couples visiting up to nine or 10 households in one weekend (Stevick 2014). Young couples often rely on the support of the community for resources such as food and emotional support; support from older families solidifies the bonds across people in the community (Ericksen and Klein 1981).

Visiting is an important practice amongst the Amish, but is limited in practice by the challenges of traditional modes of transportation. As such, visiting is often organized around ceremonial rituals, including weddings and funerals. In addition, many social events are routinely arranged in the community to facilitate

visiting. These events include quiltings, church picnics, and school picnics (Kraybill et al. 2013). The most common form of visiting in Amish society is visiting that takes place among families, friends, and neighbors. Visiting practices also include in-home visits to the sick, elderly, and widowed members of the community (Kraybill et al. 2013). This form of visiting is akin to what occurs in Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish congregations, where religious leaders often visit the elderly and the sick who are unable to attend religious services (Moran et al. 2005). A key difference is that religious leaders and lay members alike engage in such visiting in the Amish and it is an institutionalized and routinely expected practice. While lay members within other Christian denominations and Judaism also engage in visiting the sick and elderly, the practice is not consistently institutionalized within these religions; thus, its practice varies across congregations within the same religion where some will have visiting ministries and others will not.

CURRENT RESEARCH

The location of Amish settlements in rural areas, and the use of horse and buggy as the primary source of transportation, present unique challenges to group cohesiveness. Despite these barriers, strong Amish communities are built and maintained through regular interaction among members (Carey 2012; Hostetler 1993; Hurst and McConnell 2010; Kraybill et al. 2013; Nolt and Meyers 2007; Stevick 2014). Visiting practices—and more formally, visiting groups—provide a structure within the Amish community to maintain regular interaction. We focus on one church district in the Holmes County, Ohio settlement with a regular visiting group as a case study to map out the characteristics of the visiting group. An analysis of the visiting group allows us to explore how a formalized social practice is used to foster interaction within a non-communal strict religious group.

DATA

We use *The Budget*, a weekly Amish newspaper, as the primary source of data in our study. The founding editor of *The Budget* was an Amish Mennonite man. He first published the newspaper in May 1890 as a weekly local newspaper for all residents of Sugarcreek, OH. The editor later sent copies of the newspaper to his Amish friends who moved out west. As a result, those people wrote back with news of the happenings in their new community. The editor published the letters in the newspaper. Three months into the publication of *The Budget*, the newspaper was established as a correspondence newspaper that served primarily as a communicating link among the Amish people (Yoder 1966). *The Budget*

continues to be a well-read publication among the Amish and Mennonite, with the circulation up to 18,000 in recent years (Carey 2012).

The Budget includes letters from scribes in Amish and Mennonite church districts across the United States and abroad. Many *Budget* scribes contribute to the newspaper every other week or once a month; however, some scribes contribute on a weekly basis. The scribe letters are used by the Amish to communicate the daily routines and happenings in their communities, and focus on face-to-face interactions between people in the community (Nolt 2016). Scribe letters follow a general pattern, which includes a report on the weather, church news, community news items, and a narrative section that includes other items of interest (Adkins 2009; Carey 2012; Galindo 1994; Nolt 2008). The majority of the letters published each week also note which families hosted church services (Nolt 2016). The news item topics are likely to include births, deaths, health updates, and visiting (Adkins 2009; Galindo 1994).

In an analysis of scribe letters from the *Budget*, Huntington (1956) notes that scribes write about visiting with greater frequency than any other type of event (see also Hostetler 1963). Visiting practices in scribe letters cover a range of activities, from bishops and ministers visiting church districts, to informal Sunday visiting practices within the community, to the activities of visiting groups. We use scribe information from *The Budget* to identify common characteristics among a visiting group in one church district, Sugarcreek South, located in the Holmes County, Ohio settlement.

We supplement *The Budget* scribe information with data from the Ohio Amish Directory, Holmes County and Vicinity. We use directory data to build a demographic profile of the people in the visiting group and those being visited. The Ohio Amish Directory includes demographic information for all Amish families located in 263 church districts in Ohio (in 2015). The directory for Holmes County was first published in 1955, and the most recent directory was published in 2015. Directories are published approximately every five years. The directories provide information for the male head of household and his spouse, including birth date, marriage date, parent's names, and the names and birthdates of children.

SUGARCREEK SOUTH CHURCH DISTRICT

The Sugarcreek South church district is an Old Order Amish community located on the eastern edge of the Holmes County settlement. The Sugarcreek South district was part of the original Sugarcreek church district, founded by Jacob Miller in the early 1800s—one of the first pioneers in the Sugarcreek area. As a result of Amish population growth, the original Sugarcreek church district has undergone several divisions—the Sugarcreek South(east) district is a result of

these divisions. The demographic composition of the district is similar to other Old Order Amish districts in the Holmes County settlement.

The scribe for the Sugarcreek South district has been a *Budget* scribe for over five decades. She consistently contributes to *The Budget* every week. After the most recent church district division in 2012, the scribe contributes to *The Budget* every other week, taking turns with the new scribe from the Southwest district. The Sugarcreek scribe writes about various forms of visiting in her column every week. Her columns follow a specific pattern: each letter begins with a list of visiting ministers and other visitors in church. She includes a report of the people she visited, those who visited her, and a list of visitors to the elderly, widowed, and ill members in the church district. The scribe also reports on ceremonial rituals—primarily weddings and funerals—and notes out of town visitors for these occasions. The scribe is a member of a local visiting group. This particular visiting group is unique, as it is comprised of people who meet specifically for the purpose of visiting folks across the Holmes County settlement who are home bound. It is comprised of elderly members of the Sugarcreek and surrounding districts who have the time and resources to commit to a formalized visiting practice. We focus our analysis on this formalized type of visiting.

We examine the Sugarcreek scribe's *Budget* entries from December 2006 through January 2015 to explore the components of the visiting group as it exists in the Sugarcreek South(east) district. There are 369 entries of the Sugarcreek scribe within this nine-year time period. The span covers a total of 98 months, and the scribe mentions the visiting group in 75 of her entries. We analyzed these entries using coding conventions from the Grounded Theory tradition of qualitative analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987). First, we examined and coded each of the 369 entries for concepts, without concern for any overall organizing principle. Several core categories emerged from this preliminary "open coding" stage. Then we reexamined the entries based on the most common concepts coded in the data seeking to clarify their dimensions. This constant comparative method led us to discover visiting as an axis of community activity. We present the results of this analysis below. Pseudonyms are used in place of names to protect the identities of those described in the entries.

ANALYSIS: THE VISITING GROUP

The visiting group is comprised of eight females who represent the core group. The core group includes the scribe, her sister, two of her sisters-in-law and four women not related to the scribe. The average age of the core members of the visiting group was 73 in 2005, with an age range from 66 to 80. In 2005, five of the women were married, two widowed. By 2015, five of the women were widowed—including the Sugarcreek scribe—and two remained married. One of

the core members was never married. The core members reside in seven different church districts, all within geographic proximity to the Sugarcreek district.

We identified core members by noting the names of women who planned visiting days and those who the scribe specifically wrote about as a member of the visiting group. We also identified core group members by visitation days they were not able to attend. For example, in a 2010 letter, the scribe notes, “Tuesday we ladies, all but M. Stoltzfus were on visitation day...” [08-03-10]. The scribe also notes when new people join the group. “We had two new ladies going along, Mrs. M. Stoltzfus and Mrs. S. King” [10-09-07]. These two women were recorded as an addition to the core visiting group, as the scribe noted in later letters when they were not able to attend visitation. Both women also served as planners to the visitation day on later dates.

The visitation day is a planned, day-long event. One member of the core group serves as the organizer for the day. An organized visiting group in the community ensures the ritual of visiting is firmly in place. While it is clear that each visitation day has a planner, the scribe does not consistently provide information about who plans each visitation day. The scribe includes the planner’s name in 26 of the 75 columns that include visiting group activities. We were unable to distinguish patterns in who plans the visitation day from the scribe’s letters. In addition, the planners do not have a regular list of people they wish to visit.

The planner has complete control over the day; the other women in the visiting group do not necessarily know who they will be visiting. For example, the scribe writes, “Sister A. did a good job planning all this without the rest of us knowing where we are going” [01-16-07]. The element of surprise makes the activity a fun event, an adventure of sorts. The excitement surrounding the visiting day keeps the core members interested and invested. The planner also has the benefit of bringing a guest along on the day she plans the visiting schedule.

Was M. Fisher’s turn to plan the visitation day May 2. Her daughter S. Beiler went along too. [06-04-13]

Was B. Stoltzfus’s turn to plan the day for visitation last Tues. Mrs. E. Lapp was the invited guest by B. Stoltzfus to join us for the day. [08-27-13]

Our group were on visitation day Tues., May 20 planned by E. Fisher and the writer. Took my friend Mrs. L. King along as my guest. [06-03-14]

The benefit of including a friend or family member as part of the visiting day encourages the women to remain engaged. The inclusion of additional members in the group strengthens attachment across community members beyond the core visiting group.

THE VISITING GROUP: WHEN THEY VISIT

The visiting group is active once a month. The visiting group hires a driver and a van to travel together to six to eight households in a day. In 2006, the visiting group consistently gathered on Wednesdays. The Sugarcreek scribe notes in her column the day the visitation takes place: “First stop on Wed. morning for our visitation group...” [1-16-07] and “Wednesday we went visiting....” [10-07-08]. In 2008, the regular visitation day changed to Tuesdays, and in 2011, the scribe offers evidence that the day for visitation is a scheduled event: “Our visitation group changed our week going to visit. Now will be the 3rd Tues. of the month” [10-04-11].

The regularly scheduled event provides structure for the visitation day. Visits by the visiting groups are unannounced, but most visitation days were successful—the visiting group found the intended folks at home. The unexpected nature of the visits is evident in the activities that are interrupted by the visiting group:

Some of these were shorter stays as one was cleaning house and one canning peaches. [08-28-12]

Our group was on visitation the past Wed. to Mrs. M. Masts’, which she got to take a break as was house cleaning in her basement. [03-18-08]

...to J. Miller’s, even J. got to quit his job of trimming weeds and his wife A. was on her way to check for new potatoes. [08-11-09]

...then to Mrs. J. King’s (had hernia surgery, doing okay). She was just done baking cookies, so we got to sample them. [12-08-09]

The importance of visiting in the community is evident, as the scribe notes that people stop their tasks to talk with the visiting group. Because visits are unannounced, the visiting group is not always successful in finding people at home. The scribe mentions these instances in her report of the visiting day: “J. Millers were not home...” [09-23-14]; “Stopped at the A. Yoder home, finding no one at home...” [05-03-11].

Even though the visits are unannounced, the visiting group holds certain expectations that people will be at home when they visit. The scheduled nature of the event—the third Tuesday of each month—might lead to these expectations. One day, the visiting group tried to visit four people who were not at home: “...tried 3 widows who were not at home...tried Mrs. E. Stoltzfus, but not at home... It was still an enjoyable day” [11-13-07]. The next month, the visiting

group attempted a return visit, “Afternoon tried Mrs. E. Stoltzfus, again not home...” [12-18-07]. The attempt was not repeated the following month. While most missed visits are noted as factual events, the scribe registers disappointment in one such event: “...then D. Kings’ who were not home (sure spited us)...” [10-09-07].

THE VISITING GROUP: WHO THEY VISIT

The visiting group targets people who live in the Sugarcreek district and those who reside in towns up to 25 miles away. The majority of the people on the visiting list include those who are home bound—recovering from surgery (knee, back, broken bones, hernia, heart, colon, gallbladder), people injured in accidents, and those who are ill (pneumonia, stroke, diabetes, wheelchair bound, Parkinson’s, vision problems, cancer). The local nursing home is also a regular stop on visitation days. A focus on visiting those who are home or hospital bound is consistent with the visiting practices of Christian and Jewish religious leaders (Moran et al. 2005). The Sugarcreek scribe not only reports on who the group visited, but offers a report on the health of those they visit. The report effectively shares health information and updates with the broader community.

The scribe’s reports on health allow members of the broader community to feel connected to those who are home bound, especially when geographical distance makes regular visits difficult. The scribe includes positive and negative health reports in her column. The positive health reports often note the patient is in good spirits: “To L. Mast, her jolly self as usual. Glad she is better again from her pneumonia...” [03-31-09]. The specific mention of activities the patient is involved in gives the community a more tangible report of health:

First stop by J. King who had colon and gallbladder surgery. She is improving well. ... Next to C. Stoltzfus’s. She can still crochet rugs even if her eyesight is not so good. [01-29-13]

To J. Mast’s. He has Parkinson’s. Can still go in church. Is well cared for by his wife and family. [08-31-10]

The reports on ill health provide notice to the broader community of who needs care and visits from community members. Some of the scribe’s reports let folks know when time may be short for visiting the ill: “Last stop with E. and V. Mast. V. is on oxygen and uncomfortable. Not able to be in bed for some time already. Is on a recliner, can’t eat much.” [01-24-12].

Several people receive recurring visits by the visiting group. The majority of these people are elderly. Some have lost a spouse, a few have never been married, and others suffer from recurring illness. The A. Yoder family provides an

example of an elderly couple the visiting group has visited repeatedly. The visiting group visited the Yoders five times within a five-year time span. One of the visits was to celebrate A.'s 94th birthday in 2010. The group visited again in May 2011 when A.'s health was declining. A. died in September of 2011, and the visiting group followed up with a visit to A.'s wife in November 2011. These continued efforts to visit the Yoder family highlight the importance of interaction among community members who are ill or who have suffered loss to help them remain engaged in the community.

While many of the visits focus on the elderly who are home bound, the visiting group also visits families who care for children with special needs.

...to J. Lapps' who have a son P. who can't walk nor talk, turned 30 last Sun. Mrs. Lapp said he weighs 60 lbs. He goes to the Training Center, having spring break last week. [04-05-11]

First stop was at J. Kings'. They care for Mrs. Kings's sister E., 60-year old and has a water head. [08-07-07]

These families are often more isolated as their ability to travel and attend community events is limited by the care for their children. Visitors are therefore an important part of maintaining their connection to the larger community. The support shown by the visiting group fosters strong emotional attachment across community members.

DISCUSSION

Prior research has found that regular interaction among group members increases affective commitment to the group through information sharing and positive emotional experiences (Collins 2004; Kanter 1972; Lawler and Yoon 1996; Markovsky and Lawler 1994). The structure of the Amish community presents challenges to frequent interaction, including living in rural areas, lack of a centralized meeting building, and using horse and buggy as the primary form of transportation. Visiting groups within the Amish community provide a structured pattern of visiting that serves to overcome some of these barriers to face-to-face interaction. Visiting establishes connections across people in the church districts, settlements, and across settlements. The impact of people talking to one another face-to-face on a regular basis contributes to positive emotional interactions and information sharing in the broader community in several ways.

First, the members of the core group benefit from frequent positive interactions with each other, thereby forming close relationships with people of similar age and standing in the community. The core group includes family relationships, emphasizing the importance of kin, but also includes other elderly

ladies in nearby church districts. Because the entire visitation day is planned out by one of the core members without the knowledge of the other members, there is an element of surprise and excitement experienced by the core group members. This provides evidence of the positive interactions they have with each other.

Second, the planner also has the privilege of bringing a guest on the day she organizes the visitation. The guest benefits from interacting with the women in the core visiting group. She also has the opportunity to build and strengthen emotional bonds with others across the community during visitation.

Third, visitation facilitates interaction and positive emotional experiences with those visited. The fact that daily tasks are put aside to make time for the interaction indicates that the opportunity for face-to-face interaction is prioritized and considered valuable by community members. Because the Amish are a high cost religious group, face-to-face interaction amongst the Amish is particularly important. This is especially the case for members of the community who are homebound and cannot engage in group activities such as church services, weddings, funerals, and social gatherings. The visiting group provides interaction opportunities for them, so that they do not remain isolated.

Fourth, in addition to the face-to-face interactions provided by the visiting group, the entire community is able to receive information regarding community members and positive interactions through the visitation reports in *The Budget*. The Sugarcreek *Budget* scribe, a member of the core visiting group, reports on the visiting practices, highlighting successful and unsuccessful visiting days. The reports also serve as an update to the larger community on the health and well-being of the home bound. The scribe's report allows members of the community who are unable to participate in visiting to feel connected to others in the community. This is likely especially important for facilitating a sense of connection with the home bound who are unable to attend group activities and thus for whom there are fewer opportunities for interaction. The large circulation of *The Budget* indicates that its information, including that related to visiting, is considered valuable by the community. *The Budget* is an important institutionalized product in the Amish community because it allows for information sharing—a key mechanism by which interaction leads to affective commitment (Kanter 1972; Collins 2004)—to occur with those who do not participate in the interaction. In essence, *The Budget* makes them a part of these interactions when physical presence is inaccessible.

Collins (2004: 87) notes the importance of communication about “third persons”, those who are not directly involved in the interaction, for the “prolongation of group membership.” These “third-person narrations [...] circulate the identities of individuals within the network of those who talk to each other (Fuchs 1995). Both individual names and narratives about them are symbols, which get charged up with significance through the amount of

momentary effervescence of the conversations in which they play a part” (Collins 2004: 87). Collins (2004: 87) identifies that group members can become symbols for the group, not only through direct observation but also through “indirect observation, by having stories and qualities attached to the person’s name insofar as they are subjects for lively conversations.” Thus, as stories circulate, group symbols “built up out of personal identities and narratives” do as well, and they connect those directly engaged in the interaction with “the symbolic objects they are talking about,” thereby generating feelings of group membership. In the Amish, the visiting group scribe’s reports, published in *The Budget*, serve this purpose. As members of the community read these reports, they are engaged in an interaction ritual in which they learn about “third-persons”, individuals they are not directly interacting with, but in which they are reading narrations regarding. Through *The Budget*, these narrations/stories circulate through the group as group symbols, connecting members to each other through information sharing without direct interaction. As Collins (2004: 87) argues, this circulation of symbols prolongs “group membership beyond ephemeral situations of emotional intensity” such as church services. It connects members to each other without the need for direct interaction.

Interaction is particularly important for strict religious groups, as they must provide a sufficient substitute for the relationships and interactions that are restricted by the group (Kanter 1972; Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Finke 2000). In the case of the Amish, their strict beliefs make frequent interaction among group members difficult and costly. The visiting group, combined with reporting visitations in *The Budget*, is an efficient way for the group to facilitate interactions, positive emotional experiences, and information sharing. The visiting group hires a van for transportation and often incorporates meals and errands as part of the day, making the most of having automobile transportation. While it isn’t efficient for all members of the Amish community to do this, having a formal group that hires transportation and visits members once a month is a less costly way to promote interaction and positive experiences among group members. Moreover, having a scribe from the visiting group report its activities to *The Budget* facilitates group information sharing in an efficient manner.

CONCLUSION

Member commitment is important for the flourishing of religious groups. Frequent interaction is key for generating affective commitment, primarily through positive emotional experiences and information sharing among group members (Collins 2004; Kanter 1972; Lawler and Yoon 1996; Markovsky and Lawler 1994). This is especially vital for strict groups that constrain members’ interactions with outsiders and must consequently provide substitute relationships

and activities (Kanter 1972; Iannaccone 1994; Neuhauser 2017; Stark and Finke 2000). And yet, assembling as a group and producing rituals is not without costs (Collins 2004). Past research has focused on strict groups in which group assembly is less costly, such as communes where members live together (Brumann 2001; Hall 1988; Hechter 1987; Sosis 2000; Sosis and Bressler 2003; Thies 2000) or religious groups with centralized buildings for meetings and efficient transportation to take them there (e.g., Grzymala-Busse 2012; Stark and Bainbridge 1980; Wellman 2008). Prior research has failed to consider non-communal religious groups in which strict theology makes group interaction costly. The current study examined one such group—the Amish—who, due to their strict beliefs, live in rural areas, prohibit driving cars, and do not have a centralized meeting building, all of which increase the costs of group interaction. This study identified how one type of ritual—visiting—facilitates interaction, positive emotional experiences, and information sharing among group members under these conditions. Further research is needed on what additional types of institutionalized practices or structures encourage interaction under these constraints within other strict religious groups.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints also has a type of visiting practice in which the Mormon bishop visits members. However, according to Grzymala-Busse (2012) this is primarily for the purpose of monitoring and sanctioning members. He notes that Amish religious leaders (i.e., bishops, deacons, and ministers) engage in such visiting as well. Faulkner (2018) indicates religious leaders in the Amish church do indeed use visits for the purpose of reprimanding members; however, research does not indicate whether this is common practice. Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish religious leaders visit members, particularly the elderly and those who are sick (Moran et al. 2005). All of these visits are distinct from the Amish practice of the visiting group in two ways: (1) these visits are done by religious leaders rather than lay members or lay leaders and (2) they are not reported in a community circulated publication. Even when lay members/leaders do engage in visiting in Christianity and Judaism, it is not an institutionalized practice, like that of the Amish, but varies across congregations within these religions.

Trinitapoli's (2006) study of visiting practices in Christian and Muslim congregations in rural Malawi provides the most similar example to that of the Amish practice of visiting. When members who otherwise attend regularly fail to show up to religious services, the congregation organizes a visiting committee to visit them. The committee visits those who are sick and could not attend. Within Christian congregations, they also visit those considered "lazy" who chose not to attend. In Muslim congregations, religious leaders visit "lazy" congregants. Christian and Muslim leaders will also visit the homes of those suspected of infidelity or other violations of their religion. This is akin to the practice by

Mormon and Amish leaders of monitoring and sanctioning members. All these forms of visiting lead to increased accountability. Similar to the scribe reporting the activities of the Amish visiting group in the *Budget* newspaper, in these congregations “each week, the visiting committees report to their congregations on their weekly activities” (Trinitapoli 2006: 265). The ways in which visiting may have both manifest and latent functions in the Amish and other religious communities calls for more research on the topic. Future studies would benefit from exploring whether and how these visits contribute to information sharing, positive emotional experiences, and affective commitment. Additionally, comparing the effects of visits from leaders versus lay members on these outcomes is a fruitful avenue for future research.

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