

**Consumption in Practice: Gift-giving as Mutual Aid in Amish Direct
Homes Sales**

by Nao Nomura

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Abstract:

The seemingly pastoral way of Amish living, manifested in their denial of modern technology, use of the horse-and-buggy, and community-sanctioned use of solid-color dress codes, does not invoke an image of the Amish as active consumers. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, this paper examines Amish participation in direct home sales parties, exploring how consumer culture reflects the Amish emphasis on mutual aid, a nuanced form of gift giving with its own complex, idiosyncratic set of rites and gestures. By exploring the practices of direct home sales in Amish homes, I argue that consumption-based social events such as direct home sales parties reinforce the close-knit relationship of the Amish by providing participants with opportunities to practice mutual aid in intimate social settings. Additionally, the personal nature of these parties also provides Amish women with an opportunity to socially interact with their coreligionists. In turn, this social aspect legitimizes their enthusiastic consumption activities, ultimately constituting an integral part of their religious identity.

Keywords: Amish, Direct Homes Sales, Ethnography, Material Culture, Mutual Aid, gifts

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The Old Order Amish, a North American conservative Anabaptist Christian group, are often portrayed as an anachronism in modern society. Their seemingly pastoral way of living—manifested in their denial of modern technology, use of the horse-and-buggy, and community-sanctioned solid-color dress code—does not evoke an image of the Amish as active consumers. Similarly, while many scholars have recognized that some Amish people favor mainstream consumer products, little attention has been paid to the cultural significance of domestic consumption practices in Amish communities. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted while living with Amish families in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, one of the largest and oldest Amish settlements, this paper examines Amish participation in direct home sales parties in order to explore how consumer culture reflects the Amish emphasis on mutual aid, which is a nuanced form of gift giving with its own complex, idiosyncratic set of rites and gestures.

By exploring the practices of direct home sales in Amish homes, this paper argues that consumption-based events such as direct home sales parties reinforce the close-knit relationship of the Amish by providing participants with opportunities to practice mutual aid in intimate social settings. In addition, the personal nature of these parties also provides Amish women with social interaction. In turn, this social aspect legitimizes their enthusiastic consumption activities, which ultimately constitute an integral part of their religious identity.

Reciprocal Consumption: Amish Princess House Home Party

In their research on the direct selling business, sociologists Jamie L. Mullaney and Janet Hinson Shope argue that direct home sales are equivalent to the anthropological concept of gift exchange practices such as the *kula* of the Trobriand Islanders and the *potlatch* of Pacific Northwest indigenous peoples. In direct home sales, selling and gifting are intertwined with “the underlying principles of gratitude and obligation” that constitute the gift cycle between the consultant, the hostess, and party guests (101). In Amish communities, the gift cycle of direct home sales also serves as a form of mutual aid, an important cultural tenet in Amish society, because the party guests, with a complete awareness of this business structure, bring about material and financial benefits to both the consultant and the hostess. Ultimately, their purchases result in the practice of their responsibility of mutual aid by helping their fellow coreligionists. Using the direct-home sales party known as “Princess House parties” as a case study, this paper delineates the function of the direct homes sales as something more significant than a shopping spree, something that actually embodies the Amish value of mutual aid.

Princess House is a direct sales company known for its quality cookware and tableware. The company was founded in 1964 and now distributes its products throughout the United States as well as in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Guam. It is one of the most successful businesses in the direct selling industry, ranking 74th, with a revenue of \$170 million, as of 2016 (“2016 DSN Global 100 List”). This nationwide direct sales company is surprisingly one of the favored kitchenware brands in the Lancaster Amish community, and according to Bruce M.

Tharp, also popular in other Amish settlements (195). The following ethnographic accounts are constructed from field notes documenting my firsthand experience of attending a Princess House party with Old Order Amish women. Other direct quotes in this paper are also drawn from field notes taken during my ethnographic fieldwork in the Lancaster Amish settlement.

My mother is going to have a Princess House party. My cousin is a Princess House consultant, you know? Would you be interested in going?

When the wife of my Old Order Amish host family, Miriam Stoltzfus, extended this invitation to me, I was thrilled to have my first opportunity to attend a direct home sales party with Amish women. The invitation to an Amish Princess House party probably included the unstated expectation of a free ride to the venue, which was located about eight miles away from her house. Miriam's mother, Ruth Yoder, was the wife of a respected minister and was thus expected to conduct herself in such a manner as to serve as a role model for other Amish women in her community. If she was hosting a Princess House party at her austere farmhouse, this consumption-based gathering was evidently an approved form of social activity.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, when I was still discovering the unknowns of Amish material culture, the frequent appearance of delicately etched glassware in Amish homes contradicted my preconception of the austere Amish lifestyle. Many scholars of Amish Studies, such as Donald B. Kraybill, Karen M. Johnson-Weiner, and Steven M. Nolt, have emphasized that the Old Order Amish are devout Christians who value a frugal and austere lifestyle and who are concerned more about "usefulness than show, practicality than display, saving than spending" (106). However, many Amish homes that I visited for church services and other social occasions displayed a modest collection of what later turned out to be Princess House goods in their kitchen or dining room. These practical items such as mugs, sugar bowls and creamers, bowls, or casserole dishes added a subtle decorative accent to their otherwise plain interiors while also serving as practical household products.



[Fig. 1: Image of Princess House mugs, author's photo]

Princess House was certainly Miriam's favorite brand of kitchenware. She owned a set of stylish stainless steel cookware as well as glassware that neatly occupied a very prominent spot in the cupboard in her home. In contrast, a set of traditional hand-painted glass dinnerware that was given to her as a wedding gift in 1992 was hidden away in a box because she considered it too "old-fashioned" (Nomura). She did not, however, overtly praise the aesthetic values of Princess House products. Rather, she often emphasized their practical qualities: "I really like cooking my veggies in this [Princess House stainless] pan...I would add just a little bit of water and it cooks beautifully without using a lot of oil. Their nonstick pots and pans also work great...and they come with lifetime warrantee, meaning you can exchange them at any time if they have problems. It's expensive, but it's worth it." Miriam, thus, quietly justified her preference for these products over other widely distributed kitchen brands while she sautéed beets that were freshly picked from her garden (Nomura). As she admitted, the Princess House products were not cheap, but were worth the money for a health-conscious housewife.

A few weeks before the Princess House party, Miriam and I sat down at the kitchen table and browsed through the catalog together. Miriam already had some items in mind to order at the upcoming party. "I have an eye on this griddle on special ... I heard it really works great," she said as she scrutinized the "customers special" section of the leaflet. Many of the Princess House products might have been well beyond Miriam's means because her home-based quilt business was struggling that summer. At the same time, new cooking utensils seemed like an appropriate purchase for a "good housewife" who was responsible for feeding her family. Indeed, Miriam was a good cook who enjoyed preparing healthy meals.

On the day of the home party, Miriam, her church friend Anna, and I arrived at the house of Ruth Yoder, Miriam's mother, a couple of hours before the party, because Miriam wanted to help her mother get everything ready before the guests arrived. A picturesque scene of a small vegetable patch and open grassy pasture stretched beyond the glass windows. The bucolic setting—Amish farmhouse and tranquil landscape on a quiet late summer morning—made a stark contrast with the consumption-based social activity that was about to happen. I shook hands with Ruth, a customary greeting gesture among the Old Order Amish, as I went inside her house through the kitchen door. Ruth lived in a “dotty house,” a small residence built adjacent to the farmhouse where her eldest son and his family lived. The close proximity enabled Ruth's son to take care of his elderly parents.

Miriam, Anna, and Ruth caught up with each other as they straightened up the house and prepared the refreshments for the guests. After a short while, many familiar faces from church—mostly middle-aged, married women—started to trickle into Ruth's house. They shook hands with each other as they found a place to sit. Even the young farm wife whom some of my Amish informants would call “the plain person in our church” came with one of her daughters. It was quite surprising that the Princess House party attracted this very conservative woman who did not appear to be either an avid Princess House user or an active consumer. A dozen or so Amish women sat around the couch and conversed while they waited for the Princess House consultant to arrive, enjoying the homemade dessert that Miriam had baked and the refreshing fruit punch that Ruth had prepared using a store-bought drink mix.

The consultant finally arrived in a hired car with a heavy suitcase full of Princess House merchandise. In contrast to my expectation, the consultant, Emma Stoltzfus—Miriam's cousin and Ruth's niece—was an Old Order Amish woman. I had naively assumed that the consultant would be a non-Amish woman since she was involved in such a worldly consumer business. She hurried to display a tempting assortment of products on the dining table for demonstration while we waited for another few minutes while browsing through the catalogs. I wondered what Miriam thought of the expensive household goods when she seemed to already have a sufficient set of cooking utensils for herself and her husband.

“Hello, everyone!” The consultant welcomed the guests with a theatrical smile, wearing a Princess House green apron over her subdued lavender-color Amish dress. Her garb—a combination of the capitalistic costume (the Princess House apron) and the austere, religious uniform (the Amish dress)—suggested that she reconciled two different worlds as an energetic sales consultant who was also a hardworking Amish woman. There were about a dozen Amish women seated in a circle in the living room area.

Nicole Woolsey Biggart shows that the party ritual followed the conventional direct home sales party plan sequence of self-introduction, parlor games, and product promotion (42-44). Emma used the standard techniques to warm up the audience and asked everyone to introduce herself and her favorite Princess House items in turns. Everyone, including the “plain” farm wife, seemed to know Princess House well enough to make some remark about its products. Emma and her party attendants would nod and relate to others by saying “Yes, that is a great item!” or

"I use it almost every day at home, too!" After the self-introduction, a sense of togetherness abounded in the room from our having shared something in common, though I was aware that what we had shared was a commercially-oriented subject.

Emma moved on to another parlor game to further create a relaxed atmosphere. "Now, let's play a little game...I will ask you to find some Princess House items in your catalog. If you get the correct answer, you will get a little prize! Now, where is the butter knife?" Showing just how obedient the Amish can be, they earnestly flipped through the 60-page catalog. "Page 9!" shouted someone excitedly. "Awesome!" Emma said and drew a piece of paper from a small cardboard box. "Wow! You get 20% off on any cleaning items," she said as she handed the handmade coupon to the winner and explained how wonderful a particular product in that category was. "Next, let's find..." We continued to play the game a few more times. Everyone seemed eager to give a correct answer. I tried, but could not get the answer as fast as the well-versed Amish women in the room. By the end of the game, the party participants had studied the catalog diligently and had become familiar with many of the Princess House products that might have been new to them.

Once the game was over, Emma segued to the sales pitch. She demonstrated some of the signature products as well as special offers that could be purchased with a qualifying amount of regular priced items. Ruth, the hostess, who would receive the "Hostess Free Credits" that can be used for her own purchase based on the total sales at the party, occasionally jumped in to recommend some products that she already owned. The hostess is entitled to the incentive of buying certain products at lower prices. "This griddle is on sale...People use it a lot," Ruth backed Emma as she presented one of the sale items to the audience. Others would also endorse Princess House products, making comments such as "It makes good brownies!" or "It cooks vegetables perfectly!" when familiar items were introduced. In addition to learning about new products from the professional consultant, women also enjoyed sharing their favorite items and recipes that they believed tasted better when cooked using Princess House products.

After the demonstration was over, everyone lingered either to place orders or just to visit with others. As Emma assisted the customers, she jokingly told a story shared by many Princess House patrons that husbands often complained Princess House products were too expensive and that they were made in China. Everyone laughed and agreed, confirming that indeed their husbands were less than fond of Princess House products. She was quick to assure the potential customers that the quality of Princess House products was guaranteed with a lifetime warranty. While the women were still hanging around the kitchen table, Emma carefully tapped out the total sales for that day with a calculator that turned out to exceed \$1300, resulting in at least \$350 worth of hostess credits for Ruth. In addition to the hostess credits, she was qualified to get certain items at a reduced price as the party hostess and so ordered nine identical stainless steel nonstick pans for \$24.95 a piece as Christmas gifts for her daughters and daughters-in-law. The suggested retail value for the pan was \$149.95; thus she was able to perform the role of frugal housewife by saving \$1,125 on her Christmas gift purchase.

By the time everyone was getting ready to go home, the unstable late summer weather had brought in a heavy rainstorm. I offered rides to women, including the most conservative woman at the party who had come with her young daughter. As we were driving the back road to her house in the pouring rain, I asked her if she bought anything at the party. “No, I did not,” she replied quietly. Her answer was not unexpected. I remembered from visiting her house for a church service that they lived in an old and simple, but clean, farmhouse with very few decorative items—the kind that would fulfill the stereotypical image of an “authentic” Amish home. It was difficult to imagine this particularly frugal housewife squandering money on fancy household goods such as Princess House.

At the party, there were women who simply enjoyed the company without indulging in consumption activity while others were coaxed into shopping. Miriam, a faithful Princess House client, added a few more pieces to her collection despite her austere financial situation. Her mother Ruth did not even hesitate to make an instant few hundred-dollars worth of purchases. Others also justified their expenditure as early Christmas shopping, obviously one of the most important religious holidays observed in the Amish community. In contrast to these active consumers, some women were not carried away into a mood for shopping, but rather used the opportunity to cultivate friendships.

Direct Home Sales Parties as a Form of Mutual Aid

What accounts for the popularity of direct home sale parties in the Amish community? Why do supposedly frugal Amish women willingly participate in such a consumption-based activity? Before discussing direct home sales in today’s Amish society, it is important to situate the direct selling industry within the historical context of Amish culture. In current Amish society, an increasing number of the Old Order Amish engage in shopping at national and global mega-chain stores such as Costco, Target, and Walmart, largely from economic motives and also possibly due to curiosity about mainstream culture. However, Amish participation in mainstream consumer culture is not actually a modern phenomenon. In addition to supporting local Amish-owned businesses, the Old Order Amish have historically embraced mainstream retail services, including the mail-order system and door-to-door peddlers who catered to a wide variety of consumers, particularly in rural areas as early as the late nineteenth century. Therefore, shopping through direct home sales can be considered not so much as evidence of the encroaching influence of mainstream consumer culture in Amish society but rather as a continuation of the traditional Amish consumption practices that enabled them to purchase household necessities without having to use a horse-and-buggy to travel to stores.

Biggart argues that the direct sales industry in the United States is strongly rooted in the colonial period when peddlers sold “tools, tea, and liniment from door to door,” a practice that continued to thrive by distributing “goods, services, information, and social contact to a rural population with limited access to the small retail shops” until the 1840s (20-21). Although the need for direct selling declined in urban areas, due to the emergence of new retail outlets such as department stores and mail order companies, direct selling survived as a form of business bolstered by traveling salesmen who directly and personally promoted commercial products to

consumers living in more rural areas. According to Eve Wheatcroft Granick, by the 1920s, the direct sales industry had developed to include at least 200,000 salesmen traveling door to door. The Old Order Amish often purchased household goods from traveling salesmen as well as through mail order services from the late nineteenth century onward. Some Amish families even formed a strong personal relationship with sellers and are known to have given them dress fabric as wedding gifts (58-60).

Direct home sales parties enable middle-class, suburban women, who struggle to balance their time between work and family, to enjoy social interaction even when there are few opportunities for them to nurture friendships in their everyday lives. According to a survey conducted by Mullaney and Shope, 59 percent of women in general ranked “getting together with friends” as the most significant reason for attending direct home sales parties, and 72 percent indicated that these parties provided an opportunity to “catch up with friends” (92). These women enjoyed participating in the “interaction rituals” of the party in part due to the decline of social time in post-industrial American society (88). According to political scientist Robert Putnam, only 39 percent of Americans engaged in informal socialization in 1995 compared to 65 percent in 1965 (107). Direct home sales have capitalized on these women’s emotional desire for spending time with friends and on their social networks by obscuring the consumption activity and emphasizing the social aspect of the party.

Although the lack of social time is not necessarily a problem in the close-knit Amish community, where people congregate at biweekly three-hour church services, Amish women’s response to direct home sales resonates with mainstream American women’s motivations as demonstrated in a candid comment by an Amish teenager. “I’m going to a ‘Close to My Heart’ party at Nancy’s next week...Close to My Heart is very expensive, but I get to meet my friends. That’s the only reason I go,” Mary Sue said as she was cleaning up her scrapbooking tools in the sewing room. Her best friend Miriam was hosting a party with Close to My Heart, a direct selling scrapbooking and stamping company well known in the Amish community.

James J. Farrell argues that adults, parents in tandem with help from “shopping centers, advertisers, marketers, retailers, service suppliers, and media magnates,” teach consumption to children through activities including taking them to grocery shopping and simply filling the house with consumer products (77). For Amish girls who learned the art of consumerism by accompanying their mothers to social activities when they were growing up, it is natural, then, that direct home sales become one of the quotidian options for shopping and social interactions. Direct home sales parties are not only important for married women with fewer opportunities to leave home because of their domestic obligations. Young girls in their *Rumspringa* period, during which Amish youth have ample opportunities for peer interaction at the weekly Sunday singing services and other social occasions, also embrace the consumption-based party. The social aspect of the direct home sales party seems the ostensible attraction for many Amish women.

Furthermore, motivations for socialization and strong social relationships in the Amish community help the direct home sales party to serve as a form of a gift-giving economy that

involves the participation of the consultant, the hostess, and party guests. Mullaney and Shope demonstrate that a consultant is promoted according to the number of parties she can book; the hostess helps the consultant by hosting a party and receives free gifts and incentives based on party sales; and the guests thank the hostess for the refreshments served at the party by buying something, with a clear understanding of their responsibility in “the interaction ritual of the party” (102). Research conducted by Mullaney and Shope shows that 62 percent of direct home sales party attendants accepted the invitation to the party because of “a sense of obligation to the hostess,” and about 95 percent of them usually make a purchase (103).

Furthermore, the direct selling scheme not only reflects a gift exchange economy in the Amish community, but also extends the opportunity for mutual aid with an incentive to the hostess, who receives a free gift and special offers based on the total customer sales of the home party. The guests, who are fully aware of this business structure or the ritual of the direct home sales party, may consciously or unconsciously put mutual aid, one of the tenets of Amish belief, into practice by means of consumption. At the same time, the support of party hosts is also a gift in itself as they express a gesture of time commitment, community spirit, and fellowship, all of which are underpinned by Amish values. The subtle expression of reciprocity, which might be returned if one decides to host a party oneself, mitigates a sense of guilt and stress in extravagant shopping because of the benefit ensured for the hostess by their purchases. Shopping for seemingly nonessential household products ultimately brings about financial and material rewards for a fellow coreligionist. In this way, the direct home sales party can be understood as an important complement to the principles of mutual aid and economies of gift giving.

Conclusion: Consumption as a Manifestation of Mutual Aid

My ethnographic accounts suggest that consumption-based activities such as direct home sales parties play a vital role in maintaining a cohesive community in Amish society. To be sure, what lies beneath these activities are the shared Amish cultural values of community preservation, direct communication, mutual aid, and a strong work ethic. At direct home sales parties, Amish women reaffirm a strong sense of community by participating in the event with a subtle understanding of mutual aid, firmly grounded in their religious beliefs. At the same time, their financial contributions, present in the form of consumption, constitute an inevitable part of these social events, one that deserves more careful attention. Diverse motivations for attending the direct home sales party indicate that many aspects of Amish cultural values are intricately entailed in its operation. The structure of the direct home sale party demonstrates that the significance of direct communication is nurtured by providing an accessible venue for an interactive shopping experience. Conversations that revolve around commercial products during parlor games and product demonstrations themselves serve as empirical testimonies and validate the product’s consumption. The occasional direct home sale party instills the ethic of face-to-face interaction through an alternative form of consumption practice. It also embraces the emphasis on community by serving as a practice that helps to sustain and strengthen social networks of Amish women across the widespread settlements. Although the home party is obviously designed with the intention of promoting commercial products, the home-based, intimate setting disguises this consumerist aspect of the event, resulting in the contrasting

outcome of fellowship. The communal characteristic of the direct sale home party allows the hostess to invite fellow church members and their family members, relatives, and friends to an active consumption activity without hesitation.

As Mullaney and Shope suggest, direct home sales incorporate the cycle of gift-giving processes that enables Amish women to welcome consumption into their austere lifestyle. The gift-giving nature of the direct home sales party essentially serves as a form of the mutual aid that is deeply ingrained in the Amish faith. We should not, therefore, exclude consumer culture from the analysis of Amish culture or regard it as a modern threat in Amish society. While the notion of Amish consumer culture may seem different from that of mainstream consumer culture represented in the capitalistic mass-consumption that we are more familiar with, consumer culture certainly exists in Amish society. These Amish women's chosen mode of participation in direct home sales serve as a vital expression of their religious identity.

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