Chapter Three: Symbols of Integration and Separation

Overview

Chapter Three focuses on four key symbols in Amish society: Dialect, Dress, Horse, and Carriage. The text argues that these symbols:

- Are foundational to Amish identity;
- Reflect fundamental Amish values;
- Help to integrate various components of Amish culture;
- Serve as external markers that separate the Amish from the larger American culture; and
- Have been “negotiated” over the years as the Amish interacted with the larger society.

Key Points

- The central argument of Chapter Three is that the four symbols have both symbolic and substantive roles that are central to the identity of Amish society, both internally and externally.
- Emphasize that symbols represent basic Amish values and mark off boundaries with the outside world.
- Show how a symbolic artifact such as a car, signifies cultural meanings and also makes a practical difference in social behavior and interaction.
- Explore the importance of language for shaping reality in every society. Why is language so important in shaping world views and perceptions of reality.
- Demonstrate how language is one of the most powerful forms of social control in shaping the world view and values of children.
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• Explore how use of Pennsylvania German dialect in retarded Amish assimilation into the larger society. How might the Amish be different today if they did not speak a dialect?

• Show how contemporary dress styles, uniforms, and clothing in American culture symbolize connections and ties to social groups. Illustrate the connections between clothing and certain groups (sports, music, social class) in the larger culture.

• Emphasize how dress in Amish culture reflects conformity to their community and how, in contrast, dress in American culture is a tool of individual expression.

• Explore gender differences related to dress in both Amish culture and mainstream culture.

• Note how horse-and-buggy transportation is a powerful symbol of Amish separation from modern culture and technology.

• Consider how all four of the defining symbols of Amish society have changed — have been negotiated — over time as the Amish have adapted to the larger culture.

Questions

1. What feelings and ideas do Americans associate with the American Flag? How do non-Amish children learn the feelings associated with the flag? Why does flag burning trigger strong reactions?

2. Why might changes related to the symbols of Amish life — dialect, dress, horse, and carriage — stir strong feelings among the Amish?

3. How do the symbols of “horse-and-buggy” unite the Amish as a community?

4. Explain how the use of horse-and-buggy transportation is a prime symbol of Amish nonconformity to American society.
5. Identify and discuss how the buggy symbolizes key Amish values?

6. Discuss how the Pennsylvania German dialect unites the Amish community and forms a border with the larger culture?

7. What practical difference do dress standards make in the daily life of Amish people?

8. Compare and contrast the role of dress in Amish and American society. Which group conforms the most to dress styles?

9. In what ways does the buggy — as a “negotiated” symbol, serve as a general metaphor of social change in Amish society?

Statements

1. Support or Refute this statement: “The Pennsylvania German dialect is critical to the survival of Amish society and should be maintained at any cost.”

2. Support or Refute this statement: “The government should require Amish children to learn English from non-Amish teachers so the children learn to speak without an accent in case they ever want to leave the Amish.”

3. Support or Refute this statement: “The Amish spend less time than other Americans worrying about dress and clothing.”

4. Support or Refute this statement: “Americans are free from social constraints related to dress.”

5. Support or Reject this statement: “Amish identity is dependent on the horse-and-buggy and without them Amish society would die.”
Activities

1. Assume that you are an Amish Bishop. Some members come to you because they are worried about the erosion of the Pennsylvania German dialect and the fact that some children are using English while playing together. The members want you to reprimand parents who let their children speak English among themselves. How would you respond? Is the loss of the dialect a trivial matter? Or is this an urgent issue that church leaders should address immediately and search for ways to preserve the dialect? Make a list of five problems that could develop if the dialect gives way to English. In contrast, list five reasons why the loss of the dialect would not hurt the future of Amish society. What do you conclude and why?

2. Most Amish communities do not permit members to hire a taxi on Sundays unless they have an emergency or need to visit a family member in a far away hospital. Again, assume that you are an Amish Bishop. Several members approach you and ask permission to hire a taxi to bring some disabled members to church because it is difficult for them to ride in a carriage. How would you respond to this request? List the reasons for and against granting the request.

3. Make a detailed list of the clothing in your wardrobe. Estimate how much money you have spent on clothing for yourself in the past 12 months. Estimate how often you typically go shopping for clothing each month. Compare your clothing practices with an Amish person of similar gender and age. Who do you think spent more time and money on clothing over the past year? What does this say about the role of clothing in the two societies?
4. Identity the brand names of ten clothing products and show how they signal group identity or affiliation for the people that wear them. Why do brand names matter? How is clothing in American culture used to signify group affiliation? How does that compare to the social role of clothing in Amish society?