Overview

Chapter Four focuses on the patterns of social organization and social structure in Amish society by accenting:

- How the social architecture (social structure) of Amish society contrasts with the social organization of contemporary society;
- The impact of age and gender roles in Amish society;
- The changing role of women;
- The influence of the extended family;
- The centrality of the local church district (congregation) in the life of the community;
- The relatively flat and informal organizational structure of the settlement;
- The networks of social capital that provide resources for the community; and
- The distinctive features of Amish social organization and structure.

Key Points

- This chapter provides an opportunity to demonstrate how social structures reflect cultural values and, in turn, how social structures shape personal behaviors.
- How does the extended Amish family structure impact the personal behavior of individuals related to: child-rearing, sibling influence, and number of grandchildren and first cousins etc?
• Explore the role of women in Amish society. How does it differ from the role of women in contemporary society? In many ways traditional farm families have pre-industrial gender roles. Explore with students the difference between pre-industrial, industrial, and post-industrial gender roles.

• What are the sources of happiness and satisfaction for Amish women? How do their sources of satisfaction differ and coincide with those of contemporary women?

• Children are an important source of labor and economic production in Amish society. How does the labor of children in Amish society differ from the labor of children in mainstream society?

• Consider how the role of the contemporary American family has changed over the past 50 years? How does day-to-day Amish family life compare and contrast with suburban family life in North America today? Do other ethnic-minority groups in American society have similar family structures to the Amish?

• Invite students to explore how involvement in the local Amish church district compares with the involvement of members in the typical congregation, parish or synagogue in American religious life.

• A remarkable feature of Amish society is their relative lack of bureaucratic structures. Identify how informal social bonds integrate Amish society instead of formal bureaucratic structures and policies.
• Sociologists often distinguish between *gemeinshaft* (local, informally organized) and *gezellschaft* (large, highly specialized, and bureaucratized) societies. Identify the ways in which Amish society reflects the features of a *gemeinshaft* society.

• On pages 101-105 the text identifies various committees and informal organizations that have emerged to address special needs in Amish society. How do these function as reservoirs of social capital? Why are they important to the vitality of Amish society?

• The text on pages 106-110 summarizes the distinctive features of Amish social structure and social organization. Identify some distinctive features of American social structure. How does the social structure of the two societies differ?

**Questions**

1. In a book called *McDonaldization*, George Ritzer argues that many aspects of contemporary society have been “McDonaldized” — by an emphasis on rationality, specialization, and predictability. To what extent is Amish society McDonaldized? In what ways?

2. How do small families in American society support the values of individualism in American culture?

3. Select an adult woman in your extended family. How do the expectations and obligations for her role differ from the role expectations of a typical Amish woman?

4. The text argues that power accumulates with age in Amish society and that men have more power than women. How does this pattern compare to the power structure of contemporary society? Who has the most power and why in the larger society?
5. If you are a member of a religious community, use your own experiences, if not, consider the experience of a friend. Describe how the expectations for the involvement of members in a local parish, congregation, or synagogue might differ from expectations for Amish members to participate in their local congregation? What differences do these expectations make?

6. What are the positive and negative implications for friendship and emotional support of being a member of an Amish church district with 25 to 30 families?

7. Some religious groups develop their own organizations for education, insurance, and retirement, as well as other needs. Consult the list of informal Amish organizations in Table 4.3 on page 103. Why are these organizations important to the vitality of Amish society? What might Amish life look like if these services were obtained from the general public?

8. The text of *Riddle*, pages 106-110, lists five characteristics of the social architecture of Amish society. Take each characteristic and compare it to the structure of American society. What difference does each of the five characteristics make in the lives of individuals in both societies?

**Statements**

1. Support or Refute this statement: “All things considered, the average Amish woman is happier than the typical woman in American society.”

2. Support or Refute this statement: “The growth and vitality of Amish society rests largely on the important role of the local church district.”
Support or Refute this statement: “Unless the Amish develop stronger formal organizations they will not survive in our large bureaucratic modern society.”

Support or Refute this statement: “Bishops have too much power in Amish society.”

Activities

1. Develop a profile of your family. List the number of siblings, first cousins, aunts and uncles on both the maternal and paternal side of your family. Also list the number of grandchildren your maternal and paternal grandparents have. How many divorces have occurred among your aunts and uncles? Compare the profile of your family with a hypothetical Amish family of eight children. Compare each generation. List the number of cousins, aunts, grandchildren, etc. Compare the differences in the two family structures. Discuss the impact that different family structures have on child-rearing, socialization, personal identity, and values.

2. The text of Riddle argues that Amish society revolves around the home and that there is relatively little geographical mobility in Amish life. Identify the number of times that your family has moved since you were born. Ask two or three of your friends how often their families have moved since they were born. Compare the number of moves with a typical Amish family which, at most, may be once. Why do Americans move so much. How does the high mobility impact family and community life? How does the immobility of Amish life contribute to its stability and continuity? Is mobility a positive or negative factor in the formation of personality and family life? If your family had never moved since you were born, how would your family and social connections be different today?
3. Make a list (one for the groom and one for the bride) of the assumptions and expectations for marriage of a newly married couple among your friends. Make a similar list of understandings about marriage for an Amish couple. How do the two understandings of marriage differ? Why do they differ? What difference do these different understandings make?