Chapter Six: Auctions, Frolics and Gangs

Overview

Chapter Six focuses on networks of social capital, patterns of social interaction, and leisure activities in Amish life by exploring:

• The inputs of cultural and social capital;
• How capital is threatened and mobilized;
• The consequence of social and cultural capital for individual and community well being;
• How cultural and social capital is generated from childhood through adolescence;
• The role of youth groups and gangs in Amish society;
• The importance of weddings as festive gatherings and ritual transitions;
• The alternative Amish holiday schedule;
• The role of work frolics and various informal circles of support;
• The practice of mutual aid as a means of assisting members with material need;
• How the Amish serve people outside their community; and
• Expressions of social support at the time of death and mourning.

Key Points

• Figure 6.1 (page 143) summarizes the argument about social and cultural capital that extends throughout the book. Social and cultural capital are potential resources that can be mobilized to address needs that arise. Numerous forces (shown in figure 6.1) threaten to deplete social capital in Amish society. Why are these a danger to the Amish?
• Consider how controlling the threats helps to preserve and protect Amish life and explains many Amish practices related to technology and government intrusion.
The period of adolescence in Amish society is very short. Many youth marry when they are 19 and 20 years of age. Show how the length of adolescence in a particular society is related to industrialization and the larger structures of the society. At what age does adulthood begin in contemporary society?

Compare Amish teenage activities and dating practices with teenage behavior in contemporary society. How do Amish teenage activities reflect the values of their society? How do Amish youth activities strengthen social capital networks across the settlement and build a foundation for the future?

Despite the cultural differences, in many ways Amish teens and their parents have struggles that parallel non-Amish families. Why might some Amish parents tolerate some of the rowdy behavior of Amish youth?

In Chapter Five (page 112) the text noted that Amish weddings do not have rehearsals. What does the lack of wedding rehearsals say about the ownership and control of ritual in Amish society? What does it say about individualism? There is also only one way to have a funeral in Amish society. Families do not meet with the mortician to plan Amish funerals. Everyone knows what will happen. What do these features about weddings and funerals say about the nature of ritual and its relationship to the individual in Amish society?

Demonstrate how weddings, holidays, frolics, and other social activities both preserve and operationalize social capital in ways that benefit the individual and the community.
The circles of emotional and material support in Amish society offer significant assistance to members under the cover of an Amish umbrella. How would it impact Amish society if these social services (various forms of insurance) were purchased on the outside public market?

Social theorists argue that the transaction costs, both in time and dollars, are much lower in societies with strong networks of social capital. Expenditures (time and dollars) for services such as medical aid (insurance) in Amish society are substantially lower because they are provided through informal Amish networks without paid officers or formal offices.

Amish social relationships are often multiplex — meaning that a person interacts with the same people in many different roles — family, religious, work, play, and education. Said another way, the social networks of Amish society are dense, overlapping concentric circles of religion, family, education, work, and play. These forms of social networks differ greatly from the patterns of social ties in contemporary society.

The willingness of the Amish to aid outsiders surprises those who think that separation from the world leads to exclusion and social isolation. Explore why the Amish are willing to assist those beyond their own cultural family.

Consider differences in death and dying in both Amish society and American society. Because of large extended families live close together and because grandparents typically live near their children, young children are more frequently exposed to death than they are in the larger society. Moreover the care of the corpse prior to burial by members of the family, keeps family members closely involved with the process. Death is a major moment when the community surrounds the bereaved with love and care.
Questions

1. What is the difference between cultural and social capital? Use a barn raising to explain how the resources of cultural and social capital are mobilized in Amish life.

2. Compare the process of childbirth in American society with an Amish delivery at home. How does this event illustrate different resources of social capital in the two societies?

3. Compare and contrast Amish youth activities with American teen culture. How are American and Amish teens similar and different?

4. Discuss possible reasons why some Amish parents tolerate the rowdy behavior of their youth. Why does the church tolerate the rebellious behavior of youth?

5. Explain how Amish holidays create identity and solidarity within Amish society and establish boundaries between the Amish and the larger society.

6. Many interpersonal ties in Amish society overlap. Compare the continuity of Amish life and its thick web of social relationships with the social fabric of contemporary society.

7. Mutual aid is a cardinal value of Amish life. Contrast Amish and American expectations of mutual aid.

8. Compare and contrast the American and Amish experience with death. Discuss the role of the family and community during the time of a death.

Statements

1. Support or Refute this statement: “Church leaders should crack down on rebellious teens and forbid them from engaging in rowdy behavior.”

2. Support or Refute this statement: “Amish society frowns on fun and humor.”
3. Support or refute this statement: "The Amish church should baptize youth at an earlier age (10-14 yrs.) to prevent rowdy teenage behavior."

Activities

1. List your five best friends. How many of them are related to you? Participate in the same religious group? Live in your neighborhood? Go to your school? Work at the same place that you do? How might the overlapping, multiplex relationships of an Amish teen compare with your social ties to your friends?

2. Compare the clean-up and rebuilding activities after a fire at an Amish home and a non-Amish home. How might the responses be different? Identify the cultural capital (values, beliefs) in each setting. Identify the social capital (networks, traditions, rituals) that are mobilized.

3. Contrast death and dying practices in Amish and non-Amish society in the following areas.
   a. The number of funerals a person might attend in the last five years.
   b. Family support during the process of grief.
   c. Family involvement in the preparation of the body.
   d. Variation in funeral practices. Who controls the type and style of funeral?
   e. Symbolic and ritual practices for mourning.