Amish Perpetuation: Trapped Youth

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What would convince one to choose a life with strict rules, inconvenient transportation, no electricity or any other modern luxury over a world of endless technological advantages? With a retention rate of 80-90%, the Amish continue to amaze the Non-Amish with their ability to retain generation after generation. In the classroom, the community, and through religious training the Amish education system is immersed in using literacy for the continuity of the Amish culture. This massive focus on maintaining the customs without questioning individualistic thinking is greatly limiting the Amish youth’s options in life. Andrea Fishman, educator, discusses in her writings “Becoming Literate: A Lesson from the Amish” the focuses on schools and the Amish community as a whole, in hopes of illustrating the significance of literacy and absence of originality and creativity. Fishman conducts her study while staying with the Fishers, an Amish family from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. She also illustrates specifically the types of literatures that are viewed as acceptable, the curriculum taught in the school system, and the general philosophies regarding learning, reading and writing in the Amish community. Tom Shachtman, documentarian researcher, writes in his book Rumspringa: To Be or Not to Be Amish the research he discovered about the “running around” period the Amish youth experience. He digs into the secrets of how the Amish maintain their youth and perpetuate. He specifically expresses the stress and fears that are being faced at such critical times. As well as elaborates on how rumspringa and the education system are specific tools used for retaining the youth. While the Amish education system promises success in the Amish community, it lacks mainstream valued skills because of the threat it poses them. Leaving the Amish youth trapped, without support or opportunity to excel beyond the Amish
Community. As a result, they are choosing to revert back and continue their life in the Amish community for the wrong reason. In future years to come this is leaving the adult population with, what may seem to be preference, imprisonment due to a lack of choice and knowledge.

The Amish are threatened by the temptations of the mainstream world and the English influences. Social environment often makes a substantial impact upon an individual and will result in a choice to conform or rebel. Shachtman discusses the most crucial decisions pertaining to the continuity of the Amish community “To be, or not to be Amish” and the factors that play into this. (31) The ordung, a set of boundaries and rules, is used in attempt to faithfully follow Jesus. He emphasizes one of its large focuses, to avoid “whatever might unduly yoke believers together with unbelievers” and “activities [that] would link them too closely with the outside world.” (Shachtman 31) Since the Amish see the outside world as a threat to their survival, the ordung is used as a tool to shield their youth from being swayed by the Non-Amish. In fact, the Amish parents feared that exposure to modern education and secular values in the public school would entice their youth to leave. Fisherman describes the private, one-room, Old Order school house the Fisher family children will attend up until eighth grade. Not only are the Amish youth being shielded from the Non-Amish influences, but they are also reinforcing Amish values. She observed how “Critical reading […] considered particularly important by most people who are mainstream-educated or mainstream educators is not valued by the Amish because it’s potentially divine, counterproductive power.” (Fisherman 245) In fact, creativity and critical thinking present a large threat to the plain Amish way of life. Literacy cannot be an emancipatory process, it can only provide one more avenue to conform to a system designed to insure the continued existence of Amish culture, so they do not support individualistic thinking.

In the Non-Amish society, the competition for individual worldly
success is firmly focused around individualistic thinking. To accomplish what is perceived as a successful life in the eyes of mainstream society, relies greatly on intellectual achievement and technological abilities. Unlike the Amish society, that only relies on the basic fundamentals. Fishman confirms this by stating how “grammar, spelling and punctuation do count for the Old Order, they do so only to the extent that word order, words and punctuation must allow readers to read.” (Fisherman 246) Simply knowing how to communicate may be enough to provide success within the Amish community, but is not enough to be successful in the eyes of the mainstream society. By receiving such minimal education, the youth have a dramatically reduced chance when competing against the Non-Amish for jobs. Bonnie Barber, Dartmouth Now Author, confirms this idea in her article “Professor William A. Fischel Discusses the Amish Educational System in Modern Society.” She breaks down the history of the Amish education system and the negative effects it comes barring. She reinforces Professor William A. Fischel’s argument that the Amish education system is hindering the youth. She states that it “threatens the younger generation’s ability to earn a living in an increasingly complex society.” (Barber) It is greatly limiting their “younger generation’s” opportunities to compete with the Non-Amish. While the Amish education system is ideal in the eyes of those already baptized in the church, it does not provide the youth with the adequate knowledge and skills to be successful and compete in mainstream society.

Since the Amish youth are ill-equipped to enter and thrive in the modern world, it makes reverting back to the simple Amish lifestyle a much easier decision. Shachtman describes the simplicity of the Amish lifestyle and the stress and ambiguity that conforming eliminates. By choosing to be baptized, Shachtman states that “they acquire and affirm an already existing set of values—a hierarchy of values, set by the church but with which they agree.” (Shachtman 268). This allows them to avoid uncertainties and worries they have about their future. In the Amish community they are likely to get married in their early twenties; have
many children; the men will work on a farm, in construction, or in small business and the women will stay at home and take care of home chores and children. By the Amish choosing to be baptized they are making one big decision for the rest of their life. They have no idea, however, what awaits them if they do not return to their Amish community, other than the fact that it will involve family and community rejection.

The relationships between the family and within the community play a major factor in the decision to return to the Amish community. The Amish survival and beliefs revolve significantly around the family and community. In general, their lifestyle is extremely family orientated. Each person has an importance and a role within the success of the household and community. Their bonds and collaboration can be seen as honorable to many outside the Amish community. Fishman discusses an evening spent with the Fisher family and her experiences observing their family traditions and relationships. She observes how even through literacy, they demonstrate their family values. She states “When all the Fishers took turns reading the Bible aloud, for example, someone would read Eli’s verse aloud slowly, pausing every few words, so that he could repeat what was said and thereby take his turn in the rotation.” (Fisherman 241) This assistance and support Eli, Jr., the youngest member of the fisher family receives displays an example of the support and encouragement provided within the Amish family and community. The youth have grown custom to this way of life and know that if baptism is not chosen, then they will no longer seek this aid because they will be ostracized by the Amish family and community. This creates another challenge in their journey to success in mainstream society. Robert Bellah discusses how “private life”, friends and family, play a large role in becoming successful. He states this by saying “Perhaps [private and public life] are so deeply involved with each other that the impoverishment of one entails the impoverishment of the other.” (Bellah 73) If they lack the support from private life, then they will most likely see a consequence of that in their ability to be successful. Reaching success can be very hard and challenging at times. In order
to be successful, one needs support of family and friends. The Amish don’t get this when they are ostracized causing them face another barrier, holding them back. They need encouragement. The Amish are aware of the pains and hardships neglecting causes and that is why they choose to shun people who do not follow ordung. The youth are also aware of this and are scared to go out into modern society knowing relationships and encouragement will be lost. The strong support that is provided by their current peers is an attractive quality that pulls them back into the Amish community.

Rumspringa also causes fear and makes it hard for the youth to get an adequate experience of what modern life is really like. Shachtman goes into discussion about the way that the family views rumspringa and persuades others that it is a fair chance for their youth to test out the mainstream world. She states how “The Amish count on the rumspringa process to inoculate youth against the strong pull of the forbidden by dosing them with the vaccine of a little worldly experience.” (Shachtman 14) Though, they claim to provide them with a “little worldly experience,” after being sheltered and so tightly restricted their entire lives, the youth are eager to take advantage of their freedom and over vaccinate themselves with irresponsible things. In order for the Amish to really gain an understanding of the outside world they must be given more opportunities throughout their entire life to interact with others and learn through literacies and education what mainstream society entails. The youth are overdosing on the rumspringa “vaccine” and this is sending them back to the Amish lifestyle. There is much more to modern life than can be experienced during a period of time. Especially such a crucial time as adolescence. Psychiatrist George H. Orvin in Understanding the Adolescent, writes about the time of adolescence and how it is hard to make a life time decision when one is not entirely sure of themselves first. He writes “What other period of life is more frightening and anxiety-ridden?” (Orvin 4) The Amish are sending their youth to make a life time decision, knowing that they are not prepared for the stresses and adult
responsibilities that come with choosing to enter mainstream society and earn a living. In all reality Rumspringa is not providing the youth with “opportunity” and “choice” to choose a life in the modern world.

This doesn’t seem like the correct way to retain their youth. Everything in the Amish community is used to revert their kids and ratify the Amish lifestyle. In the Fisher home the Mother specifically chooses books that confirm the Amish way of life. Terence Brunk, editor of Literacies, expresses in the introduction article “Reading, Ratification, and Risk” the ideas of reading for “ratification” versus “risk”, and the benefits of reading with an open mind. He identifies ratification as reading distinctively for reassurance, then elaborates to say that this tactic does not develop growth. He expresses that “After having temporarily ‘surrendered,’ good readers use their critical skills to ‘recover’ their own integrity and shape their own means, Scholes says, which may now be broader and more powerful.” (Brunk xix) By educating their youth to mainstream standards and providing them with a fair opportunity to experience the English lifestyle, they can revert back to the Amish religion with integrity and a more powerful dedication. Rather than reverting back because of fear and lack of opportunity to be successful beyond the Amish community. To be baptized into the Amish church should be based strictly on religious beliefs. Shachtman discusses how the Amish believe “There is no firmer adhesive bond to a faith and way of life than a bond freely chosen.” (Shachtman 14). If they want their youth to have an “adhesive bond” then they must properly prepare them for the mainstream world so that it can be a choice rather than reverting back for simplicity, fear and lack of knowledge. Knowing they can be successful, but choosing to be Amish is considerably more meaningful. The Amish make the choice to not be Amish very difficult, resulting in a community of trapped individuals, convinced they were provided choice.

By not providing education, individualistic thinking, community or family support, and a true understanding of mainstream society, the
Amish youth are being trapped through ratification. These are all aspects very important to the existence of the Amish community, but is creating a future of imprisoned adults who will continue this cycle generation after generation. In order to provide the youth with a chance to reject mainstream society voluntarily they should begin with literacies. It is a minor transformation that will open up many opportunities for the youth and help them become more powerful in their own Amish faith. Reducing the restrictions on readings will provide the youth with the opportunity to learn about the mainstream world without having to participate in anything that goes against their ordung and beliefs. Also, by altering the learning and writing styles to focus more on critical thinking and creativity. If the youth are provided a chance through literacies to gain a better understanding and become well equip through writing and thinking styles they can make their decision based on religion and beliefs, rather than fear and simplicity. This is a simple way to make a huge impact on the Amish youth without making a dramatic change within the Amish lifestyle.
Bibliography


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