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Book Reviews

Review of **Stevick, Richard. 2014[2007]. *Growing Up Amish: The Rumspringa Years* [2nd edition]. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.**

By Denise Reiling, *Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminology, Eastern Michigan University*

The first thing that should have caught my attention when I received my copy of Richard Stevick's second edition of *Growing Up Amish* was that he had changed the cover image from one of a male and female adolescent riding in an open-top buggy—the picture of traditional conformity—to an image of a single male, walking down the road in a blatantly cocky fashion, under his own power rather than being conveyed, staring unabashed, straight into the camera. His black vest is flapping open, and his white shirt is partially untucked, loose, and gaping around the collar, so big as to be ill-fitting. He is taking a long, cool drag on a cigarette. A decade ago, I would have honed-in right off on this image as rather inappropriate for a jacket cover of a book about the generalities of Amish youth culture. Apparently it has become far too commonplace to see images of Amish deviance for me to have noticed. This is what Stevick brings new to his second edition: what has changed seemingly so quickly.

What did catch my attention first was that Stevick had changed the subtitle, which struck me as not a common thing to do. *The Teenage Years* had become *The Rumspringa Years*. Perhaps it seems a small thing to notice, but as a sociologist from the symbolic-interactionist perspective, I noticed. Language is culture's primary conveyor of meaning, so I entered the text searching for the bigger changes that I assumed would support this seemingly small one. Was Stevick attempting to communicate that the teenage years are now dominated more so by the deviance that can occur during Rumspringa (for hasn't Rumspringa come to be synonymous with deviance?) than by other aspects of this coming-of-age period?

Stevick allows Mose Gingerich, one of the first reality TV stars (*Amish in the City*), to have the opening words in the book, which cleverly reflect the question that lingers at the end of the book about the future of Amish culture, although Gingerich speaks it as a statement: "If they

still take us back after being on television, they'll take us back no matter what we do" (ix). The placement of this quote is brilliant of Stevick because it summarizes what I drew out as his major thesis point and reason for writing a second edition only seven years after the first: Amish families, communities, and Amish culture, writ large, are facing challenges brought about by the internet and social media that are qualitatively different from those of any other time, with normative boundaries being pushed by youth further to the edge than previously thought possible without the bough breaking.

Stevick writes that when he began work on the second edition in 2012, he noted in amazement that in the 2007 edition, he made no mention of *MySpace* or *Facebook* and used only eight words—eight—to comment on cell phone usage (x). This seems unimaginable to anyone who has spent any time within the three largest Amish communities of late. (Note that I restrict my comment to include only the “big three,” a point I will return to later in this review). In fact, Stevick's attention to technology-based changes is such that he dedicates the entire preface of this edition to what he refers to as the “e-savvy” “electronic generation” of Amish youth (x-xi).

The reader also learns in the preface that the felt need to publish an update began to coalesce in mid-2011 when Stevick was contacted by his publisher at Johns Hopkins University Press regarding a news story printed in the *Lancaster Sunday News* reporting use of the internet and *Facebook* by Amish youth (x). The remainder of the preface leads the reader through the adventure Stevick embarked upon to gain entrée into the Facebook lives of Amish youth. His goal was to understand the manner in which the use of social media by individuals who have not yet taken baptism, who are not yet “officially” Amish, could potentially impact not just the individual but the future direction of Amish culture.

Stevick makes a distinction in his analysis of this issue between “faster” groups that are more likely to emerge from within larger “urban Amish” rather than smaller groups (with his acknowledgement that little is known of smaller groups). Chapter one contains a very good discussion of the impact of these faster, urban groups on the type and level of deviance committed by youth during the Rumspringa period, the conditions under which a more peer-centered rather than adult-centered environment for youth during the Rumspringa period will emerge, and the consequences of that environment on youth behavior.

The preface and first chapter, with their emphases on social media and the notion of “fastness” set the stage for what will emerge as the primary difference between Stevick's first and second edition, which is the exploration of the use of social media and the internet. The book otherwise covers the same topics as the first edition, describing the lifespan from childhood to adulthood. It is interesting that Stevick changed eight of the eleven chapter titles in a way that appears to reflect subtle changes within Amish youth culture, whether or not intentional on his part. This is not to say that the other chapters do not contain new information, indeed not. I felt that there was something new and fresh in every chapter, which is not always the case with subsequent editions.

Chapter eight, “Rumspringa: Stepping Out and Running About,” and chapter three, “Adolescence: Building an Amish Identity,” are worthy to be singled out for mention because they convey the greatest amount of information on the two biggest changes. Chapter eight brings to light the depth and magnitude of change that has occurred in acceptance of the internet, smart phones (which are qualitatively different from standard cell phones), and social media. Readers unfamiliar with the current circumstances will likely be surprised to learn that the Amish are concerned over matters such as males’ involvement in online pornography, for example.

Although the issue of social media forms the core of the most critical new material, Chapter three deserves recognition for Stevick’s more fully developed discussion of a sense of self than in his first edition, including a discussion subtitled, “A Healthy Sense of Self.” Here, Stevick brings forward new information about reports of disordered eating among Amish girls. I applaud this inclusion, but I do not believe as strongly as Stevick that this issue is recent to emerge due only to the tendency of Amish people to “...keep this information away from outsiders, whether they be neighbors, physicians, or academics” (56). I question whether it is more the case that we do not want to see because we want to believe his concluding statement on the matter: “Whenever children are wanted, loved, and nurtured by a caring mother, father, extended family, and the community, they are likely to develop both a confidence in their self-worth and a positive sense of themselves as Amish” (57).

In a similar vein, a reviewer of Stevick’s first edition criticized Stevick for what in his read was an over-emphasis on the positive influences on youths’ decision as to remain or defect from the Amish, failing to acknowledge the threats. In his second edition, Stevick redeems himself by including a brave discussion of these matters under the subtitle, “*Dynamics of Amish Retention*.” Stevick brings forward evidence of what some readers would view as rather harsh treatment at the hands of Amish culture, such as reports that those who defect from the Amish are told they are doomed to Hell. These are hard stories to hear because they conflict with what we want to be true.

Stevick is forthright again in his epilogue, wherein he openly confronts the potentially explosive tension between adults who advocate for greater parental surveillance and guidance of youth away from destructive forces and those who advocate for non-involvement, as per past practice, believing that youth should find their own way. The role of parents during the Rumspringa period has sparked debate within the literature as well, which Stevick covers in chapter three.

Most of what the reader will learn from this book concerns youth living in the three largest communities, which is a limitation of Amish studies in general. Stevick is to be commended, however, for the number of times that he cautions the reader to not inappropriately generalize his findings to all or even most communities. He also provides a better-than-expected sampling of what is known about the smaller communities. Anyone’s ability to write more broadly than Stevick is seriously hampered by the fact that there simply is not much research on

the lived experience within smaller communities available.

The final point I have to make is that I would like to have seen Dr. Stevick work more with the sociological concept of cultural lag, a problem that emerges when the technological imperative (if technology is available, it must be used) drives us into usage before contemplation of the consequences of our actions. I would have liked a solid acknowledgement of cultural lag as a cultural universal, not a condition experienced by only Amish people. I have no doubt that he knows this, but when the hallmark of Amish culture is its much touted uniqueness, it can slip from one's consciousness. I bring this voice to the table because a consistent plea of Amish people has been for the world to understand that they "are no different." It is a matter of form versus substance: they share culturally-universal forms of social arrangements, even though the substance of those forms may vary.

None of the criticism I make of this work should take away from the strength of the work and the contribution it makes to the literature. Richard Stevick's second edition of *Growing Up Amish* should be required reading for anyone within Amish studies, whether to inform their research or teaching. His book would serve as a highly valuable textbook in university and college courses in the area of Amish, cultural, ethnic, or ethno-religious studies. Other professionals would be well-served by this book as well, particularly those providing medical and mental health services to Amish people and those within public-school education and law enforcement in that it could improve cultural competence among providers.

I enjoyed reading Stevick's second edition even more than I enjoyed reading his first. To summarize, I would say that it was an easy read, accessible to a diverse audience, but that language seems to be used increasingly as a proxy for "unscholarly," and that is indeed not true in Stevick's case. I enjoyed reading the book because it informed my research, teaching, and my thinking about fellow human beings as they traverse a dynamic, ever-changing world that at times outpaces their cultural response, just as it does in mine. It was engaging, forthright in a fashion that rings authentic, a truth-telling, and yet written with sufficient contextual grounding so as to not make Amish youth and cultures appear bizarre. Stevick writes about Amish youth and the cultures they create with great respect, cultural competence, and sensitivity.

I look forward to a third edition and anticipate that one will be forthcoming because Stevick's academic interest in the research questions he poses and the concern he holds for the future of Amish culture suggests that a third edition may be at least in the back of his mind. Even though Dr. Stevick is now emeritus professor of psychology from Messiah College, Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, he at least relocated to a geographic region rich with data collection opportunities: Holmes County, Ohio. By the way, I learned all of this biographical information from Stevick's Facebook page. I believe an Amish kid might say "touché" in response to this turn-about-is-fair-play tactic, or more likely: "WD. TFFW." (Translation for those not as e-savvy as Amish kids: "Well done; Too funny for words.").