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Chapter 13

Total institutions

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[Erving] Goffman introduced the term ‘total institution’ and defined it more carefully than many of his imitators have done. A ‘total institution’ is ‘a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life’ (Goffman, 1961: xiii).

Not all institutions are total institutions, though ‘every institution has encompassing tendencies’; but some institutions, such as homes for the blind or the aged, mental hospitals, prisons, concentration camps, army barracks, boarding schools and monasteries or convents, are ‘encompassing to a degree discontinuously greater than the ones next in line’.

Goffman’s concept of the ‘total institution’ can be represented as follows: there is a continuum from open to closed institutions, but there is a break towards the closed end, separating off a group of closed, or nearly closed, institutions which can be described as ‘total’.

In fact, both the completely open institution and the completely closed institution are abstractions. No institution is ever completely open: if it were, it would have no distinguishing characteristics at all. No institution is ever completely closed. If it were, it would die off. Open systems theory has taught us that all human systems are dependent to some extent on their immediate environment, and that they cannot survive without it. A mental hospital or prison imports staff, inmates, policy, material supplies and public reactions from the outside world; it exports staff on completion of contract, inmates on completion of stay or sentence, empirical material which may affect policy, the product of work programmes (mailbags, assembled electric switches, carpentry, scrubbing brushes, fancy paper hats, those curious toys which are made in occupational therapy, and so on), garbage, and stories of strike, threat and crisis which form the basis of public reactions. All sorts of people cross the boundary: inspectors, professional superiors, inmates’ visitors, research workers, workmen, students, policemen, magistrates and others. But these considerations do not invalidate Goffman’s argument about the relatively closed or ‘total’ institution. His contention is that this group of institutions has features in common: he qualifies it by

adding that none of these features is specific to them, and that not all of the features may be found in any one of them. What he proposes is not a list of features to be identified in all cases, but a constellation of features which tend to occur in most cases, and which have some relation to each other. He is embarking on a sort of verbal cluster analysis. What he describes as a 'total institution' will probably not fit any real-life institution exactly. It is a Weberian ideal type against which the practices of real-life institutions may be measured.

It is important to clarify this definition, because the term 'total institution' has become something of a catch-phrase, and is often applied unthinkingly to particular prisons or mental hospitals. Goffman is much more scholarly than some of his imitators, and his frame of reference is precisely defined.

'Total institutions' have four main characteristics: batch living, binary management, the inmate role, and the institutional perspective.

'Batch living' describes a situation where 'each phase of the member's daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike, and required to do the same thing together'. It is the antithesis of individual living, where there are large areas of life which may be pursued on a basis of personal choice. It is characterized by a bureaucratic form of management, a system of formal rules and regulations, and a tight schedule which allows little or no free time. It allows the inmate no freedom of movement between different social groups, and no choice of companions: he lives with the same group of people, elected and defined by outside authority, 24 hours a day, without variety or respite. This is contrasted with 'a basic arrangement in modern society. ... the individual tends to sleep, play and work in different places, with different co-participants, under different authorities, and without an overall rational plan' (Goffman, 1961: 5–6). In the institutional situation, individuals are not merely constrained by, but are violently attacked by, the system. They live under surveillance, and any infraction of the rules 'is likely to stand out in relief against the visible, constantly examined compliance of the others'.

Goffman is not clear which came first, the 'large blocks of managed people' or the staff who manage them; but 'each is made for the other'. 'Total institutions' typically consist of these two groups of people, the managers and the managed – staff and patients, prison officers and prisoners, teachers and pupils.

This is 'binary management': 'Two different social and cultural worlds develop, jogging alongside each other with points of official contact, but little mutual penetration' (ibid.: 9). The managers have power, and social distance is their weapon. They exercise this most tellingly in withholding information, so that the managed exist in 'blind dependency', unable to control their own destinies. The very fact of being an inmate is degrading: 'Staff tend to feel superior, and righteous. Inmates tend ... to feel inferior, weak, unworthy and guilty' (ibid.: 7). Because the two groups do not and cannot know each other as individuals, they set up antagonistic stereotypes. Staff tend to see all patients or prisoners or pupils as being alike – 'bitter, secretive and untrustworthy'. The managed draw similar hostile pictures of the managers. The two groups may use a special tone of voice in talking to each other, and informal conversation and social mixing may be frowned upon by both sides.

How do ordinary people, with their own way of life and personal networks and round of activities, become inmates? Goffman thinks that this is not a process of 'acculturation', which involves moving from one culture to another, but of 'disculturation' or 'role-stripping' so powerful that the individual who is subjected to it may be rendered incapable of normal living when he returns to the community. He has been reduced from a person with many roles to a cipher with one: the 'inmate role'.

Much of this process is achieved through admission procedures, which Goffman sees as ‘a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations and profanations of self’ – a mortification process. Institutions are ‘the forcing houses for changing persons’. To become an inmate involves a total break with the past, symbolized by the acquisition of a new name or number, uniform clothing, and the restriction or confiscation of personal possessions. All this may be done in a highly ritualised admission procedure in which the inmate may be forced to recite his life history, take a bath, possibly without privacy, and submit to weighing, fingerprinting, intrusive medical examination and head-shaving. The overt reason for these activities is administrative necessity: the real purpose is role dispossession. The bath, in particular, is a highly symbolic ritual, involving physical nakedness as the midpoint of a process of abandoning one life for another. ‘The new arrival allows himself to be shaped and coded into an object that can be fed into the administrative machinery of the establishment, to be worked on smoothly by routine operation’ (ibid.: 16). The new clothes are likely to be standard issue, the property of the establishment. Combined with a loss of ‘personal maintenance equipment’ such as combs, shaving sets or cosmetics, they create a new and humiliating appearance. The process is one of personal defacement.

As the stay is prolonged, so the loss of personal identity becomes more marked. There may be systematic violation of privacy through the practice of group or individual confession. The inmate’s defences may be repeatedly collapsed by a process called ‘looping’ where the mere fact of defence is taken as proof of guilt (ibid.: 35–37). There may be ‘indignities of speech or action’ – inmates are forced to beg humbly for a glass of water or a light for a cigarette, to move or speak in a markedly deferential way indicating their lowly status. They may be beaten, or subjected to electric shock treatment, or physically contaminated – there are some particularly nasty examples drawn from concentration camps and political prisons.

Control may be kept by means of a system of rewards and punishments, petty by outside standards, but assuming Pavlovian dimensions in a situation of deprivation. Rules may not be made fully explicit. The inmate cannot appeal to them for protection, and may break them unwittingly, and be punished for it. Like Kafka’s K., he exists in a half-world of guilt and apprehension. He has no privacy, no rights, and no dignity.

How does the inmate survive these attacks on his personality? Goffman suggests four types of ‘secondary adjustment’ (ibid.: 61–64):

- 1 The inmate may withdraw, cutting himself off from contact.
- 2 He may become intransigent, and fight the system.
- 3 He may, in a vivid phrase, become ‘colonised’, paying lip-service to the system like the inhabitant of some African or Asian country awaiting the day of independence.
- 4 He may become converted, genuinely accepting the institution’s view of himself, and what is acceptable behaviour.

The last of these is not really survival, but a kind of personal extinction. Curiously, and on the face of it illogically, it is the only adjustment acceptable to the authorities of the institution. Any attempt by the inmate to immunize himself against the destructive forces focused on him will be seen as non-co-operation, and may be used as an excuse to detain him longer.

He may develop a ‘line’, a sort of edited account of how he came to be an inmate, repeated to his fellows and to anyone else who will listen with increasing self-pity. He may have a sense of ‘dead and heavy-hanging time’ – of life wasted, and the months or years

ticking away without gain or satisfaction. Against these reactions, the authorities offer 'the institutional perspective': a view of life which denies his individual perspective and validates the institution's existence. It is promoted by such means as the house magazine, the annual party, the institutional theatrical, the open day and the sports day, which create an artificial sense of community. These formal events offer certain minor possibilities of role release for the inmate – recognized and routinized liberties, forbidden in normal circumstances, may be allowable; but the total effect is to reinforce the power of the institution, and the 'assault on the self': 'These ceremonial practices are well suited to a Durkheimian analysis: a society dangerously split into inmates and staff can through these ceremonies hold itself together' (ibid.: 109).

Reference

Goffman, E. (1961) *Asylums*. New York: Doubleday/Anchor.