3.4: Resocialization and Total Institutions

Learning Objectives

- Discuss what is meant by resocialization.
- List any two characteristics of a total institution.

Some people live in settings where their lives are so controlled that their values and beliefs change drastically. This change is so drastic, in fact, that these people are in effect resocialized. Such resocialization occurs in what Erving Goffman (1961) called *total institutions*. As their name implies, these institutions have total control over the lives of the people who live in them.

*Figure 1*: A boot camp is an example of a total institution. Source: Photo courtesy of U.S. Navy, [http://www.navy.mil/view_single.asp?id=47674](http://www.navy.mil/view_single.asp?id=47674).
Several types of total institutions exist: mental asylums, Nazi concentration camps, military boot camps, convents, and monasteries. Some scholars would also say that criminal prisons are total institutions, as they exhibit some of the same processes found in the other types. As this list implies, total institutions can be used for good or bad purposes. Resocialization is not necessarily good or bad in and of itself; what is more important is the ends to which it is put.

Whether we are talking about total institutions that are good or bad, they all share certain processes and procedures that make them total institutions. The most important characteristic is that they have total control over the lives of their inmates, patients, or whatever name is given to the people who live in them. These residents, to use a generic term, have no freedom or autonomy. They are told what to do and when to do it, and punishment for rule infraction can be quite severe. In Nazi concentration camps, punishment was torture or death; in religious cloisters, it may be banishment; in boot camp, it may be a court-martial; in mental asylums, it may be solitary confinement in a straitjacket.

Second, total institutions take away the identity of their residents in an effort to weaken their self-identity and ensure conformity to the institutions’ rules. Their residents typically wear uniforms and often have their heads shaved and, depending on the institution, may be known by a number or a new name. These procedures make everyone look more similar to each other than they otherwise would and help to weaken the residents’ self-identity. Whether these outcomes are good or bad depends again on which total institution we have in mind.

Third, total institutions subject their residents to harsh treatment and, quite often, abuse, although the nature of this abuse, and whether it occurs at all, obviously depends on which total institution we have in mind. Nazis starved concentration camp inmates, tortured them, striped them naked, conducted hideous experiments on them, and, of course, exterminated millions (Gigliotti & Lang, 2005). Literature on mental asylums is filled with examples of abuses of the patients living there (Goffman, 1961). Drill sergeants have also been known for harshly treating new recruits: some observers defend this practice as necessary for military discipline and readiness, while others consider it to be unjustified abuse.

Resocialization is often accompanied via a degradation ceremony, an encounter in which a total institution’s resident is humiliated, often in front of the institution’s other residents or officials (Goffman, 1961). A drill sergeant may call a physically unconditioned male recruit a “girl” or “lady” and question his manhood in front of other recruits. In a mental asylum or prison, an inmate may be stripped naked and checked in their private areas for lice and other vermin. Shaving the heads of new military recruits or prison inmates is another example of a degradation ceremony.

Resocialization also occurs in groups that are not institutional settings. Alcoholics Anonymous is one such group, as it tries to change the alcoholics’ value system by having them internalize several principles about how to live one’s life. The goal here, of course, is to have the alcoholic stop drinking and to continue to refrain from drinking (Davis & Jansen, 1998). Some religious cults also resocialize their members and continue to spark much controversy in today’s society (Cowan & Bromley, 2008).

**Conclusion**

- Resocialization involves far-reaching changes in an individual’s values, beliefs, and behavior.
- Total institutions exert total control over the lives of their residents. They typically try to eliminate the individual identity of their residents and often subject them to harsh treatment.
For Your Review

1. Do you know anyone who has spent time in a total institution of any kind? If so, describe how this person's experience there changed the person to the best of your knowledge.

References