4.5L: Resocialization and Total Institutions

A total institution is a place where a group of people is cut off from the wider community and their needs are under bureaucratic control.

Learning Objectives

- Review Goffman’s five types of social institutions and their functions, including their processes of resocialization

Key Points

- The term total institution was coined by the American sociologist Erving Goffman.
- Resocialization is defined as radically changing an inmate’s personality by carefully controlling his or her environment.
- Resocialization is a two-part process. First, the staff of the institution tries to erode the residents’ identities and independence. Second, the resocialization process involves the systematic attempt to build a different personality or self.

Key Terms

- **Resocialization**: Resocialization is defined as radically changing an inmate’s personality by carefully controlling the environment.
- **Erving Goffman**: Erving Goffman (June 11, 1922 – November 19, 1982) was a Canadian-born sociologist and writer. The 73rd president of American Sociological Association, Goffman’s greatest contribution to social theory was his study of symbolic interaction in the form of dramaturgical analysis. This began with his 1959 book, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.
• **total institution**: It is an institution that controls almost all aspects of its members’ lives. Boarding schools, orphanages, military branches, juvenile detention, and prisons are examples of total institutions.

A total institution is a place of work and residence where a great number of similarly situated people, cut off from the wider community for a considerable time, lead an enclosed, formally administered life together. The term was coined by the American sociologist Erving Goffman. Within a total institution, the basic needs of a entire bloc of people are under bureaucratic control. These needs are handled in an impersonal and bureaucratic manner.

Goffman divided total institutions into five different types:

1. Institutions established to care for harmless or incapable people, including orphanages, poor houses and nursing homes
2. Institutions established to care for people that are incapable of looking after themselves and are also a threat to the community, including leprosarium, mental hospitals, and tuberculosis sanitariums
3. Institutions organized to protect the community against perceived intentional dangers, with the welfare of the sequestered people not the immediate issue, including concentration camps, prisoner of war camps, penitentiaries and jails
4. Institutions purportedly established to pursue some task, including colonial compounds, work camps, boarding schools, and ships
5. Institutions designed as retreats from the world while also often serving as training stations for the religious, including convents, abbeys, and monasteries

The goal of total institutions is resocialization, the radical alteration of residents’ personalities by deliberately manipulating their environment. Key examples include the process of resocializing new recruits into the military so that they can operate as soldiers. Resocialization is a two-part process. First, the staff of the institution tries to erode the residents’ identities and independence. Second, resocialization involves the systematic attempt to build a different personality or self. This is generally done through a system of reward and punishment. The privilege of reading a book, watching television, or making a phone call can be a powerful motivator to conform. Conformity occurs when individuals change their behavior to fit in with the expectations of an authority figure or the expectations of a larger group.
Total Institutions: Prisons are examples of total institutions.

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