A total institution may be defined as 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. Prisons serve as a clear example, providing we appreciate that what is prison-like about prisons is found in institutions whose members have broken no laws. This volume deals with total institutions in general and one example, mental hospitals, in particular. The main focus is on the world of the inmate, not the world of the staff. A chief concern is to develop a sociological version of the structure of the self.

Each of the four essays in this book was written to stand by itself, the first two having been separately published. All were intended to focus on the same issue—the inmate's situation. Some repetition is therefore involved. On the other hand, each paper approaches the central issue from a different vantage point, each introduction drawing upon a different source in sociology and having little relation to the other papers.

This method of presenting material may be irksome to the reader, but it allows me to pursue the main theme of each paper analytically and comparatively past the point that would be allowable in chapters of an integrated book. I plead the state of our discipline. I think
that at present, if sociological concepts are to be treated with affection, each must be traced back to where it best applies, followed from there wherever it seems to lead, and pressed to disclose the rest of its family. Better, perhaps, different coats to clothe the children well than a single splendid tent in which they all shiver.

The first paper, "On the Characteristics of Total Institutions," is a general examination of social life in these establishments, drawing heavily on two examples that feature involuntary membership—mental hospitals and prisons. There the themes developed in detail in the remaining papers are stated and their place in the broader whole suggested. The second paper, "The Moral Career of the Mental Patient," considers the initial effects of institutionalization on the social relationships the individual possessed before he became an inmate. The third paper, "The Underlife of a Public Institution," is concerned with the attachment the inmate is expected to manifest to his iron home and, in detail, with the way in which inmates can introduce some distance between themselves and these expectations. The final paper, "The Medical Model and Mental Hospitalization," turns attention back to the professional staffs to consider, in the case of mental hospitals, the role of the medical perspective in presenting to the inmate the facts of his situation.
ON THE CHARACTERISTICS
OF TOTAL INSTITUTIONS

1 A shorter version of this paper appears in the Symposium on Preventive and Social Psychiatry, Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, Washington, D.C. (15-17 April 1957), pp. 43-84. The present version is reprinted from The Prison, edited by Donald R. Cressey, copyright © 1961 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.
INTRODUCTION

I

Social establishments—institutions in the everyday sense of that term—are places such as rooms, suites of rooms, buildings, or plants in which activity of a particular kind regularly goes on. In sociology we do not have a very apt way of classifying them. Some establishments, like Grand Central Station, are open to anyone who is decently behaved; others, like the Union League Club of New York or the laboratories at Los Alamos, are felt to be somewhat snippy about who is let in. Some, like shops and post offices, have a few fixed members who provide a service and a continuous flow of members who receive it. Others, like homes and factories, involve a less changing set of participants. Some institutions provide the place for activities from which the individual is felt to draw his social status, however enjoyable or lax these pursuits may be; other institutions, in contrast, provide a place for associations felt to be elective and unserious, calling for a contribution of time left over from more serious demands. In this book another category of institutions is singled out and claimed as a natural and fruitful one because its members appear to have so much in common—so much, in fact, that to learn about one of these institutions we would be well advised to look at the others.
Every institution captures something of the time and interest of its members and provides something of a world for them; in brief, every institution has encompassing tendencies. When we review the different institutions in our Western society, we find some that are encompassing to a degree discontinuously greater than the ones next in line. Their encompassing or total character is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests, or moors. These establishments I am calling total institutions, and it is their general characteristics I want to explore.\(^2\)

The total institutions of our society can be listed in five rough groupings. First, there are institutions established to care for persons felt to be both incapable and harmless; these are the homes for the blind, the aged, the orphaned, and the indigent. Second, there are places established to care for persons felt to be both incapable of looking after themselves and a threat to the community, albeit an unintended one: TB sanitariums, mental hospitals, and leprosaria. A third type of total institution is organized to protect the community against what are felt

\(^2\) The category of total institutions has been pointed out from time to time in the sociological literature under a variety of names, and some of the characteristics of the class have been suggested, most notably perhaps in Howard Rowland’s neglected paper, “Segregated Communities and Mental Health,” in Mental Health Publication of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, No. 9, edited by F. R. Moulton, 1939. A preliminary statement of the present paper is reported in Group Processes, Transactions of the Third (1958) Conference, edited by Bertram Schaffner (New York: Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation, 1957). The term “total” has also been used in its present context in Amitai Etzioni, “The Organizational Structure of ‘Closed’ Educational Institutions in Israel,” Harvard Educational Review, XXVII (1957), p. 115.
to be intentional dangers to it, with the welfare of the persons thus sequestered not the immediate issue: jails, penitentiaries, P.O.W. camps, and concentration camps. Fourth, there are institutions purportedly established the better to pursue some worklike task and justifying themselves only on these instrumental grounds: army barracks, ships, boarding schools, work camps, colonial compounds, and large mansions from the point of view of those who live in the servants' quarters. Finally, there are those establishments designed as retreats from the world even while often serving also as training stations for the religious; examples are abbeys, monasteries, convents, and other cloisters. This classification of total institutions is not neat, exhaustive, nor of immediate analytical use, but it does provide a purely denotative definition of the category as a concrete starting point. By anchoring the initial definition of total institutions in this way, I hope to be able to discuss the general characteristics of the type without becoming tautological.

Before I attempt to extract a general profile from this list of establishments, I would like to mention one conceptual problem: none of the elements I will describe seems peculiar to total institutions, and none seems to be shared by every one of them; what is distinctive about total institutions is that each exhibits to an intense degree many items in this family of attributes. In speaking of "common characteristics," I will be using this phrase in a way that is restricted but I think logically defensible. At the same time this permits using the method of ideal types, establishing common features with the hope of highlighting significant differences later.

III

A basic social arrangement in modern society is that the individual tends to sleep, play, and work in different
places, with different co-participants, under different authorities, and without an over-all rational plan. The central feature of total institutions can be described as a **breakdown of the barriers** ordinarily separating these three spheres of life. First, all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority. Second, 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. Third, all phases of the day's activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials. Finally, the various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution.

Individually, these features are found in places other than total institutions. For example, our large commercial, industrial, and educational establishments are increasingly providing cafeterias and free-time recreation for their members; use of these extended facilities remains voluntary in many particulars, however, and special care is taken to see that the ordinary line of authority does not extend to them. Similarly, housewives or farm families may have all their major spheres of life within the same fenced-in area, but these persons are not collectively regimented and do not march through the day's activities in the immediate company of a batch of similar others.

The handling of many human needs by the **bureaucratic organization** of whole blocks of people—whether or not this is a necessary or effective means of social organization in the circumstances—is the key fact of total institutions. From this follow certain important implications.

When persons are moved in blocks, they can be super-
vised by personnel whose chief activity is not guidance or periodic inspection (as in many employer-employee relations) but rather surveillance—a seeing to it that everyone does what he has been clearly told is required of him, under conditions where one person’s infraction is likely to stand out in relief against the visible, constantly examined compliance of the others. Which comes first, the large blocks of managed people, or the small supervisory staff, is not here at issue; the point is that each is made for the other.

In total institutions there is a basic split between a large managed group, conveniently called inmates, and a small supervisory staff. Inmates typically live in the institution and have restricted contact with the world outside the walls; staff often operate on an eight-hour day and are socially integrated into the outside world. Each grouping tends to conceive of the other in terms of narrow hostile stereotypes, staff often seeing inmates as bitter, secretive, and untrustworthy, while inmates often see staff as condescending, highhanded, and mean. Staff tends to feel superior and righteous; inmates tend, in some ways at least, to feel inferior, weak, blameworthy, and guilty.

Social mobility between the two strata is grossly restricted; social distance is typically great and often formally prescribed. Even talk across the boundaries may

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8 The binary character of total institutions was pointed out to me by Gregory Bateson, and has been noted in the literature. See, for example, Lloyd E. Ohlin, Sociology and the Field of Corrections (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1956), pp. 14, 20. In those situations where staff are also required to live in, we may expect staff to feel they are suffering special hardships and to have brought home to them a status dependency on life on the inside which they did not expect. See Jane Cassels Record, “The Marine Radioman’s Struggle for Status,” American Journal of Sociology, LXII (1957), p. 359.

be conducted in a special tone of voice, as illustrated in a fictionalized record of an actual sojourn in a mental hospital:

"I tell you what," said Miss Hart when they were crossing the dayroom. "You do everything Miss Davis says. Don't think about it, just do it. You'll get along all right."

As soon as she heard the name Virginia knew what was terrible about Ward One. Miss Davis. "Is she the head nurse?"

"And how," muttered Miss Hart. And then she raised her voice. The nurses had a way of acting as if the patients were unable to hear anything that was not shouted. Frequently they said things in normal voices that the ladies were not supposed to hear; if they had not been nurses you would have said they frequently talked to themselves. "A most competent and efficient person, Miss Davis," announced Miss Hart.⁵

Although some communication between inmates and the staff guarding them is necessary, one of the guard's functions is the control of communication from inmates to higher staff levels. A student of mental hospitals provides an illustration:

Since many of the patients are anxious to see the doctor on his rounds, the attendants must act as mediators between the patients and the physician if the latter is not to be swamped. On Ward 30, it seemed to be generally true that patients without physical symptoms who fell into the two lower privilege groups were almost never permitted to talk to the physician unless Dr. Baker himself asked for them. The persevering, nagging delusional group—

who were termed "worry warts," "nuisances," "bird dogs," in the attendants' slang—often tried to break through the attendant-mediator but were always quite summarily dealt with when they tried.\(^6\)

Just as talk across the boundary is restricted, so, too, is the passage of information, especially information about the staff's plans for inmates. Characteristically, the inmate is excluded from knowledge of the decisions taken regarding his fate. Whether the official grounds are military, as in concealing travel destination from enlisted men, or medical, as in concealing diagnosis, plan of treatment, and approximate length of stay from tuberculosis patients,\(^7\) such exclusion gives staff a special basis of distance from and control over inmates. All these restrictions of contact presumably help to maintain the antagonistic stereotypes.\(^8\) Two different social and cultural worlds develop, jogging alongside each other with points of official contact but little mutual penetration. Significantly, the institutional plant and name come to be identified by both staff and inmates as somehow belonging to staff, so that when either grouping refers to the views or interests of "the institution," by implication they are referring (as I shall also) to the views and concerns of the staff.

The staff-inmate split is one major implication of the bureaucratic management of large blocks of persons; a second pertains to work.


\(^7\) A very full case report on this matter is provided in a chapter titled "Information and the Control of Treatment," in Julius A. Roth's forthcoming monograph on the tuberculosis hospital. His work promises to be a model study of a total institution. Preliminary statements may be found in his articles, "What is an Activity?" *Etc.*, XIV (Autumn 1956), pp. 54-56, and "Ritual and Magic in the Control of Contagion," *American Sociological Review*, XXII (1957), pp. 310-14.

\(^8\) Suggested in Ohlin, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
other smack, and forgot, and another, and moved, and was held by a steadying, almost kindly hand, and another, and my sight was a vision of red and white and pity-coloured flashes.

"You are looking at Mr. Whitbread—what, Behan?"

I gulped and got together my voice and tried again till I got it out. "I, sir, please, sir, I am looking at you, I mean, I am looking at Mr. Whitbread, sir."  

Admission procedures and obedience tests may be elaborated into a form of initiation that has been called "the welcome," where staff or inmates, or both, go out of their way to give the recruit a clear notion of his plight. As part of this rite of passage he may be called by a term such as "fish" or "swab," which tells him that he is merely an inmate, and, what is more, that he has a special low status even in this low group.

The admission procedure can be characterized as a leaving off and a taking on, with the midpoint marked by physical nakedness. Leaving off of course entails a dispossessing of property, important because persons invest self feelings in their possessions. Perhaps the most significant of these possessions is not physical at all, one's full name; whatever one is thereafter called, loss of one's name can be a great curtailment of the self. 

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Once the inmate is stripped of his possessions, at least some replacements must be made by the establishment, but these take the form of standard issue, uniform in character and uniformly distributed. These substitute possessions are clearly marked as really belonging to the institution and in some cases are recalled at regular intervals to be, as it were, disinfected of identifications. With objects that can be used up—for example, pencils—the inmate may be required to return the remnants before obtaining a reissue. Failure to provide inmates with individual lockers and periodic searches and confiscations of accumulated personal property reinforce property dispossession. Religious orders have appreciated the implications for self of such separation from belongings. Inmates may be required to change their cells once a year so as not to become attached to them. The Benedictine Rule is explicit:

For their bedding let a mattress, a blanket, a coverlet, and a pillow suffice. These beds must be frequently inspected by the Abbot, because of private property which may be found therein. If anyone be discovered to have what he has not received from the Abbot, let him be most severely punished. And in order that this vice of private ownership may be completely rooted out, let all things that are necessary be supplied by the Abbot: that is, cowl, tunic, stockings, shoes, girdle, knife, pen, needle, handkerchief, and tablets; so that all plea of necessity may be taken away. And let the Abbot always consider that passage in the Acts of the Apostles: “Distribution was made to each according as anyone had need.”

20 Kogan, op. cit., p. 69.
21 *The Holy Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 55.
One set of the individual's possessions has a special relation to self. The individual ordinarily expects to exert some control over the guise in which he appears before others. For this he needs cosmetic and clothing supplies, tools for applying, arranging, and repairing them, and an accessible, secure place to store these supplies and tools—in short, the individual will need an "identity kit" for the management of his personal front. He will also need access to decoration specialists such as barbers and clothiers.

On admission to a total institution, however, the individual is likely to be stripped of his usual appearance and of the equipment and services by which he maintains it, thus suffering a personal defacement. Clothing, combs, needle and thread, cosmetics, towels, soap, shaving sets, bathing facilities—all these may be taken away or denied him, although some may be kept in inaccessible storage, to be returned if and when he leaves. In the words of St. Benedict's Holy Rule:

Then forthwith he shall, there in the oratory, be divested of his own garments with which he is clothed and be clad in those of the monastery. Those garments of which he is divested shall be placed in the wardrobe, there to be kept, so that if, perchance, he should ever be persuaded by the devil to leave the monastery (which God forbid), he may be stripped of the monastic habit and cast forth.\(^\text{22}\)

As suggested, the institutional issue provided as a substitute for what has been taken away is typically of a "coarse" variety, ill-suited, often old, and the same for large categories of inmates. The impact of this substitution is described in a report on imprisoned prostitutes:

First, there is the shower officer who forces them to undress, takes their own clothes away, sees to it

\(^{22}\) The Holy Rule of Saint Benedict, Ch. 58.
that they take showers and get their prison clothes—one pair of black oxfords with cuban heels, two pairs of much-mended ankle socks, three cotton dresses, two cotton slips, two pairs of panties, and a couple of bras. Practically all the bras are flat and useless. No corsets or girdles are issued.

There is not a sadder sight than some of the obese prisoners who, if nothing else, have been managing to keep themselves looking decent on the outside, confronted by the first sight of themselves in prison issue.23

In addition to personal defacement that comes from being stripped of one's identity kit, there is personal disfigurement that comes from direct and permanent mutilations of the body such as brands or loss of limbs. Although this mortification of the self by way of the body is found in few total institutions, still, loss of a sense of personal safety is common and provides a basis for anxieties about disfigurement. Beatings, shock therapy, or, in mental hospitals, surgery—whatever the intent of staff in providing these services for some inmates—may lead many inmates to feel that they are in an environment that does not guarantee their physical integrity.

At admission, loss of identity equipment can prevent the individual from presenting his usual image of himself to others. After admission, the image of himself he presents is attacked in another way. Given the expressive idiom of a particular civil society, certain movements, postures, and stances will convey lowly images of the individual and be avoided as demeaning. Any regulation, command, or task that forces the individual to adopt

23 John M. Murtagh and Sara Harris, Cast the First Stone (New York: Pocket Books, 1958), pp. 239-40. On mental hospitals see, for example, Kerkhoff, op. cit., p. 10. Ward, op. cit., p. 60, makes the reasonable suggestion that men in our society suffer less defacement in total institutions than do women.
these movements or postures may mortify his self. In total institutions, such physical indignities abound. In mental hospitals, for example, patients may be forced to eat all food with a spoon.\textsuperscript{24} In military prisons, inmates may be required to stand at attention whenever an officer enters the compound.\textsuperscript{25} In religious institutions, there are such classic gestures of penance as the kissing of feet,\textsuperscript{26} and the posture recommended to an erring monk that he

\[\ldots\text{lie prostrate at the door of the oratory in silence; and thus, with his face to the ground and his body prone, let him cast himself at the feet of all as they go forth from the oratory.}\textsuperscript{27}\]

In some penal institutions we find the humiliation of bending over to receive a birching.\textsuperscript{28}

Just as the individual can be required to hold his body in a humiliating pose, so he may have to provide humiliating verbal responses. An important instance of this is the forced deference pattern of total institutions; inmates are often required to punctuate their social interaction with staff by verbal acts of deference, such as saying "sir." Another instance is the necessity to beg, importune, or humbly ask for little things such as a light for a cigarette, a drink of water, or permission to use the telephone.

Corresponding to the indignities of speech and action required of the inmate are the indignities of treatment

\textsuperscript{24} Johnson and Dodds, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 15; for a prison version see Alfred Hassler, \textit{Diary of a Self-Made Convict} (Chicago: Regnery, 1954), p. 33.


\textsuperscript{26} Kathryn Hulme, \textit{The Nun's Story} (London: Muller, 1957), p. 52.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{The Holy Rule of Saint Benedict}, Ch. 44.

\textsuperscript{28} Dendrickson and Thomas, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 76.