

Taking Control: How Institutions Confiscate Control and Re-Shape Self-Image

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In his essay “Sex and Race: The Analogy of Social Control,” William H. Chafe illustrates four “concentric circles of social control” (Chafe: 59). Those circles of social control are exemplified in Erving Goffman’s complementary articles “The Mortified Self” and “The Recalcitrant Self.” This essay will apply Chafe’s framework to Goffman’s writings, and analyze the methods and structure by which total institutions – institutions that have total control over their members’ lives, such as mental hospitals, prisons, and military academies – exert social control.

The first of Chafe’s four circles of social control comprises intimidation and the threat of intimidation. Goffman’s descriptions of life in total institutions demonstrate the damage that this circle of social control can cause. In the form of physical barriers between the outside world and the institution, restricting members’ access to family and friends, creating a schedule for members, and limiting members’ possession of any personal possession, an institution seeks to withdraw a person “from his home world” (Goffman: 56). This exertion of social control results in role dispossession – the process of humiliating oneself and leaving behind one’s persona while exposing one’s most private thoughts and actions to authorities and fellow members within the institution. Goffman refers to role dispossession, as it relates to one’s legal status, as “civil death” – loss of not only the right of mobility but also the right to raise children, pursue education, vote, and be participatory members of society generally (Goffman: 56). There is also a death of the self, as a new member often leaves behind his physical possessions, his name, the privilege of fully private thought, and any tools for differentiating himself from his institutional environment. Further, the authorities of an institution have access to a member’s full history, and will use a person’s past actions and statements to discredit and

deflate his self-image – at diagnostic conferences, Goffman writes, a person “must give wrong answers in order to maintain his self-respect, and then [an attendant] may smile disbelievingly, or say, ‘That’s not the way I heard it’” (Goffman: 65).

In addition to losing physical rights and self-image, a member of a total institution is deprived of access to his own money and the ability to engage in financial transactions. An example of economic domination, this fits into Chafe’s second circle of social control. It is a long-term deprivation, as well, because a member of a total institution loses time that could have been devoted to education or developing employment experience, and having certain total institutions on one’s public record (specifically prison and mental hospitals) can diminish a person’s ability to find rewarding employment even upon re-entry into society at large.

More importantly, a total institution is able to redefine a person’s image of himself, as in Chafe’s third circle of social power. Goffman refers to this process as “trimming” and “programming” (Goffman: 56), a stage of “leaving off” former social roles and “taking on” new institutional roles (Goffman: 57). The ward system of a mental hospital, in which a patient is assigned to a “good” or “bad” ward depending on his most recent behavior in the institution, helps re-shape his self-image. “Assignment to a given ward,” Goffman writes, “is presented not as a reward or punishment, but as an expression of ... his status as a person” (Goffman: 64). The hospital uses this tool to persuade a patient to accept the institution’s view of his self and “set himself up in the business of ‘straightening up’” (Goffman: 66) – much like the achievement ideology in education, the idea here is that by accepting the institution’s image of one’s self, one can learn (or, as Goffman might say, be programmed) to redefine his self and to better adhere

to the social and structural expectations established by the institution. If a patient does not set out to “straighten up,” he may instead choose to resort to increasingly bizarre behavior as his only way to “stand apart from the place accorded him” (Goffman: 83), resulting in access to even fewer resources for standing apart – thus, the “vicious-circle process” (Goffman: 82) also serves to re-shape a patient’s self-image.

Beyond institutional pressures like those described thus far, fellow members of an institution often reinforce the institution’s view of one’s self and promote obedient behavior in the institution. By creating underlives, members of an institution can interact with some degree of autonomy and separation from the institution. The use of ironic nicknames for “especially threatening or unpleasant aspects of the environment” (Goffman: 88) superficially looks like a small rejection of institutional authority, but it also reflects a mutual recognition of the benefits of obedience; presence of such quiet and subtle rebellion proves an exception to the rule of social structure – members accept and acknowledge that they cannot voice their individuality within the structure, so they develop a means of individuation that both fulfills their interpersonal needs and reinforces the ruling structure of the institution.

The concepts outlined in this essay are important to understand because they demonstrate that, whether it is based on race, gender, institutional hierarchy, or other categorizations, the elements of social control that Chafe highlights influence and, to one extent or another, rule every person’s daily life in often subtle and invisible ways. Chafe and Goffman’s works help illuminate social structure, and also provide reason and motivation to carefully look for the influence of social structure and control in our lives.

### Works cited

- Chafe, William H. "Sex and Race: The Analogy of Social Control." *Women and Equality*. New York: Oxford University Press (1977).
- Goffman, Erving. *The Goffman Reader*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, Inc. (1997).