Goffman Revisited: Relatives vs. Administrators in Nursing Homes

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ABSTRACT: This case study applies Goffman’s "total institutions" paradigm to a skilled nursing facility and shows that his characterization of relatives as collusive agents in a "betrayal funnel" is more accurate in the prepatient phase than after admission. When they encounter administrative resistance to their suggestions, some relatives become militant reformers. This paper describes ten gatekeeping tactics employed by administrators to neutralize such relatives, and four gatestorming tactics utilized by relatives to affect change. The author concludes that while Goffman’s work is still relevant, his tendency to stereotype total institutions is misleading and his manner of reporting field work obscures the true role of the participant-observer.

The Nursing Home as a Total Institution

I first met Erving Goffman in 1957 at the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Maryland. He was completing his appointment there as a visiting scholar, and I was fresh out of the Army and applying for a job. After being appointed, I was assigned to a team at St. Elizabeth’s hospital where Goffman had done the field work for Asylums. His colleagues at NIMH did not seem to think much of his work, since they perceived him as a social critic rather than a "scientist." I found it exciting, because his approach contrasted sharply with the quantitative emphasis and management bias of most of the sociologists at NIMH.

One aspect of Goffman’s work which I found disturbing, however, was the manner in which he conducted (or reported) his field work. Goffman played the role of a participant observer at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, but from his description in Asylums one might assume that he was observ-
ing his subjects through a one-way mirror, like an experimental psy-
chologist. He himself remains opaque, and there is absolutely no trace
of his presence among those he is observing. What kind of symbolic-
interactionist is he who does not interact with anybody? He seems to
be looking down on his subjects, and his style is lofty and sardonic. This
is neither humanistic nor reflexive sociology.

The current paper continues Goffman’s work on total institutions but
departs from his methodological stance. My report is written as a per-
sonal account and reveals different aspects of a total institution precisely
because of my involvement. Since all fieldwork reports are ultimately
personal, to disguise them as something else is a form of deception. I
believe that our job as social scientists is not to eliminate the observer
effect, but to recognize and work with it, as Heisenberg did in physics.¹

Goffman’s central concept in Asylums is that of the “total institution,”
a concept that continues to be influential.² Nursing homes are among
the most striking examples of total institutions, since (geriatric) inmates
are stripped of their adult competencies and treated like children or in
some cases, like objects. Furthermore, their situation is for the most part
involuntary and they have little hope of leaving the institution alive
except to go to the hospital.³ These structural features may be hidden
in the surface variation of nursing homes. Whereas a good nursing home
looks like a good day care center for children with much activity and
social-emotional support, a bad one looks like a medicalized version of
death row, with patients strapped to their wheelchairs and stripped of
all responsibility for what remains of their lives.

Goffman identified five types of total institutions. The first is designed
for persons considered incapable and harmless (e.g., nursing homes,
schools for the retarded and the blind). The second isolates persons who
are incapable and also pose a threat to the community (e.g., mental hospi-
tals). The third is designed for persons both capable and dangerous (e.g.,
prisons and reformatories). The fourth is intended to accomplish some
“worklike task” (e.g., military encampments). And the fifth is designed
for spiritual retreat (e.g., monasteries and convents).

Despite their differences, all total institutions share the following five
features:

1) Segregation from the outside world;
2) A high degree of regimentation;
3) An elaborate privilege system;
4) Caste-like relations between staff and inmates, and detailed rules
   of deference and demeanor;
5) Techniques for mortifying the inmate and for stripping away the
civilian identity.